Leadership struggle and conflict in the Niger Delta, Nigeria: focus on warri south local government area of delta state, 2011-2018

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ABSTRACT
The continued incidence of leadership struggle, brazen conflict, abject poverty, gross economic backwardness and total underdevelopment, as it is the case in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria, remains a great source of worry and concern among scholars. The gravity of the above problematic situation has made many Nigerians to keep pondering whether the discovery and exploration of oil is a blessing or a curse to our country, Nigeria. It is against this backdrop that the study is poised to interrogate leadership struggle and conflict in the Niger Delta, Nigeria with particular focus on Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State, 2011-2018. In terms of methodology the study adopted the time-series research design within the explanatory framework of Resource Curse theory. For data collection, this research relied heavily on documentary method, while data collected were logically and textually analyzed using the textual (content) analysis method. The study reveals that conflict in the area stems more from the claim of original ownership of Warri land and ethnic divide among the people of the area. The Itsekiri people and the Ijaws have plunged themselves in intense leadership struggle cum power tussle over the
territory as well as inordinate quest for resource control in the area. Also, the general untold hardship, hunger, poverty and lack of adequate socio-economic infrastructures, as the attendant consequences of oil exploration in the area, were implicated for the incessant conflicts. The study therefore recommends, among others, that leadership/power zoning strategy should be more practicable. On the other hand, the government at different levels and the oil companies operating in the area must be proactive and show greater concern/commitment to the environmental condition of the people in order to ensure real human and infrastructural development of the region.

**Keywords:** leadership struggles, conflict and conflict resolution, resource control, poverty, underdevelopment.

1 **INTRODUCTION**

Since independence in 1960, insecurity has been a feature of the Nigerian State as conflicts in different parts of the country have continued to make life insecure. In the Niger Delta, particularly the Warri area of Delta State, violence has been the bane of the region due to incessant conflicts. Even from the pre-colonial period, the region has witnessed a series of conflicts, which had their roots, initially in the protest against injustice, and in recent years in the quest for resource control (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2017:p1). In Warri, the agitation and/or claim of who are the original owners of Warri kingdom among the ethnic groups of the area (Ijaws, Itsekiri, Urhobo) remains a continuous source conflict in the area. The federal government, on her part, has made several efforts to resolve conflict in the region, but all to no avail. Even the 2009 amnesty that was declared by the Yar’adua/Jonathan administration and could be said provided only a temporal succor as the there has been pockets of crises and conflicts, even after the amnesty declaration. According to Ajodo-Adebanjoko (2017:p1) seven years down the line, there is renewed militancy in the region and effort is once again geared towards finding lasting peace, especially in the Warri region of Delta State. As a matter of fact, the incessant reoccurrence of conflict and/or crises in the Niger Delta in general and Warri area of Delta State in particular goes along way to show that the Federal Government’s approach to resolving conflict in the region has not been successful because it has not adequately addressed the issues that gave rise to the conflict, and because of its emphasis on the use of force. It is against this backdrop that the study is poised to interrogate leadership struggle and conflict in the Niger Delta, Nigeria with particular focus on Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State, 2011-2018.

2 **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS**

2.1 **LEADERSHIP**

Leadership has been defined in so many ways and as a result, it has become almost an impossibility to come up with a single definition that is acceptable to scholars of various divides. Leadership has been defined as a necessary phenomenon in political field (Okaneme, 2017, p.114). Okaneme further conceived
leadership as the capacity in a person or in a group of persons to inspire confidence and thereby regard for himself or themselves to guide and govern the followers. According to Graig (2005) leadership is defined as a social influence process in which the leader seeks the voluntary participation of subordinates in an effort to reach organizational goals. While Robert et al. (2004) affirms that leadership involves a complex interaction among the leader, the followers, and the situation. Transformational leadership is inward looking and conscious of the benefits that its society can derive from the international environment. It takes the responsibility of the national or local problem depending on the layer of leadership; deploys skill, knowledge imagination and energy to solution to most problems and assists followers to realize their hidden and untapped capabilities. The transformational leader is always physically present to monitor projects at sites. He also receives report from the subordinates to ensure that policies and projects are implemented according to designs and specification. This style of leadership relegates corruption to the background, and brings sanity, transparency and accountability to the fore. This is the legacy of transformation left by transformational leaders in many countries of the World (Ukaegbu, 2010). Omolayo (2005) describes leadership as an essential oil that keeps the wheel of government working without any difficulty. According to him, leadership makes the difference between success and failure in a country. It involves giving direction to citizens who are the critical assets of the nation.

Leadership cuts across all strata of society with the attempt to make a person lead others as agents. That is, leaders are supposed to be agents of their followers (Oguntola-Laguda, 2015:p.223). Describing the attributes of a leader, Julius Nyerere explained that:

When you are selected to lead your fellowmen, it does not mean that you know everything better than the followers. It does not mean that you are more intelligent than the followers (Nyerere, 1998: p.79). The submission of Nyerere points to the fact that leaders are selected (or elected) and the position does not make knowledge exclusive to them. Therefore, the effectiveness of a leader could be measured by the social change that emerges from their interaction with the followers by intent and by the satisfaction of their needs and expectations.

It shows that leadership and followership have a mutual relationship based on needs, aspiration and values (Burns, 1978: p.4). It further shows that leadership transcends the struggle for and the holding of power, it is more about the use of such a position to the benefit of the followership.

Also, in the process of selection or election, the followers are capable of ‘choice’ among available aspirants and their programmes.

Three types of leadership have often been identified by scholars (Burns, 1978: p.120); these are transactional, transforming and moral leaderships. Transactional leadership affords leaders the opportunity to approach the followers to exchange one thing for another. For example, jobs for votes, subsidies from corporate bodies for campaign contributions, food items for votes, etc. Transforming
leadership acknowledges the needs and demands of followers and seeks to satisfy them through stimulation. The moral leader seeks to promote and produce social change through the enforcement of moral codes on the followers. Although many political actors in Nigeria often laid claim to the first two models of leadership, the situation in the country points to the contrary. The model of leadership is transactional to my mind. This explains why political actors appropriate religious images, symbols and ritual spaces to negotiate for votes during their campaign. From the above, we can submit that leadership is a concept which seeks to examine the process and means for the acquisition of power, to lead and mobilise the followership in all strata of society, perhaps to engender socio-cultural development and political actions.

Leadership power, and the struggle towards achieving it, has in recent times become intense globally. This is primarily because of the values attached to it and the uses to which it is often put. Millions of people are reported to have been killed, maimed or assassinated by those struggling to acquire power (Oguntola-Laguda, 2015:p.224). Max Weber also explains power and the struggle inherent to it as:

The probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests (Weber quoted in Dahl, 1968:p.406).

Weber suggests that power is a necessity in society. However, the struggle for power has made imperative the interaction between leadership and followership, making it a part of the system of ‘social causation’. Burns explains power as follows:

Power is a process in which power holders, possessing certain motives and goals, have the capacity to secure changes in the behaviour of a respondent [human or animal and in the environment] by utilizing resources to their power base including factors of skill, relative to the target of their power wielding and necessary to secure such changes (Burns, 1978, p.13).

Leadership struggle or the struggle for power has assumed fatal and fraudulent dimensions universally. This is often based on the motive of the power seekers. These include wielding power to pursue recognition, prestige, glory, social control, economic wherewithal, novelty and excitement, as well as exhibiting assumed skills, knowledge and the ability to stimulate their own capacities and master the environment.

2.2 CONFLICT

The term conflict is derived from the Latin word *confligere* which is translated ‘to clash or engage in a fight,’ a confrontation between two or more actors (Miller, 2005). According to Udegbunam (2017:p.26) conflict also refers to a clash of values, choices, and interests within an individual, between two or groups or between states. Conflict could be intra or interpersonal, intra or intergroup, intra or international, and global. Conflict is inevitable in social interactions. It is on this premise that many
scholars would argue that conflict is intrinsically neutral (neither positive nor negative) but handling could make it either constructive or destructive. Where it is negative then it becomes harmful to the society and therefore needs to be resolved, transformed or managed. Conflicts do not occur in a vacuum. There are as numerous causes of conflicts as there are conflicts. Each conflict is unique thus requires a careful analysis to enhance understanding. Causes of conflicts are generally classified into four categories. Conflicts caused as a result of resources. These resources could be tangible such as money, gold or oil and intangible such as struggle for power or respect. Conflict could as be caused by values. Values in themselves do not cause conflict but the defence of one’s value against another may lead to conflict. For instance, most religious conflict and violence are as a result of clash of religious values. Usually clash of values is as a result of disrespect for other people’s values or beliefs. Conflict could also be caused by communication gap within and among groups. This is predominant in interpersonal or family conflicts. Improper communication, poor listening, noise, and ambiguous messages could lead to communication breakdown which in turn may degenerate to conflict. And then conflict could also be caused by psychological needs. This is when there is a misperception of the other person and the denial of the quest to meet psychological needs (Udegbunam, 2017: p.26).

2.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF WARRI AND LEADERSHIP STRUGGLES

According to oral history, which was passed from one generation of Ijaws in Ogbe-Ijoh to another generation, the name “Warri” is a corrupted version of the Ijaw word, “Wari”, which means house, and was founded by an Ijaw man named Ewein, a great hunter and fisherman (Brisibe, etal, 2016). In 1906, with the rapid growth in trading activities, the British acquired Ogbe-Ijoh village (an Ijaw community) in order to develop it as “whites only” residential area and headquarters of her Warri Province Administration. The people of Ogbe-Ijoh were resettled on the Ogbe-Ijoh market and the British signed a 99 years lease with the Ogbe-Ijohs. However, the Ijaws felt humiliated by the forced eviction and the handling of the land acquisition. The then Governor of Benin River, a British political agent who handled the acquisition and ejection of the Ijaws was Chief Doru (Dogho) Numa, an Itsekiri man. The above incident probably marked the beginning of the bad blood between the Ijaws of Warri and the Itsekiris. Upon completion of their offices, the British named the new headquarters Warri Township and since then Ogbe-Ijoh officially became known as Warri Township. Even then, the Colonial government granted all leases to individuals and corporate entities in the name of Ogbe-Ijoh. Today, the name Warri Township covers other nearby villages including the Government Reservation Area - GRA, Elders town, Market road and the portion of lands specified in the Warri Township Plan No. 1. By contrast, Ode-Itsekiri, the ancestral homeland of the Itsekiris, is an Island community several kilometers away from Warri
metropolis. As a reminder, Ode-Itsekiri is part of the ‘Seikiri’ that was eventually given to their ancestor, Iginua.

With regard to the ancestral homeland of the Itsekiris, history has it that, *Iginua (Ginuwa)* the ancestor of the Itsekiris was a disowned son of Oba Olua of Benin. As a result, in 1480 Iginua was sent away from his home in Benin City and wandered to an unspecified location in the swampy forest regions around the Benin River. By a stroke of fate, he was picked up by the Ijaws of that region in their evil-forest referred to as ‘Seikiri’. The Ijaws, in their usual act of kindness provided transportation to Iginua and his entourage, numbering about seventy people, all men, across the river to the Ijaws homeland of *Amatu*. This is the settlement where Iginua and his entourage underwent their first rehabilitation. Around this wandering band formed the embryonic Itsekiri Kingdom and not Warri Kingdom. The settlement at Ode-Itsekiri, the ancestral homeland of Itsekiris occurred at about 1520AD. Iginua and his entourage haven been picked up in that portion of the forest known to the Ijaws as ‘evil-land’ were aptly named by the Ijaws as “Seikiri-Otu”, meaning people from the ‘evil-land’. ‘Sei’, in Ijaw language means ‘evil’, ‘kiri’ means land, while ‘Otu’ means ‘people’. With the passage of time, Seikiri-Otu became adulterated to Itsekiri by the non-indigenes, but the Ijaws to-date, still maintain the usage of Seikiri-Otu in reference to the descendants of Iginua. Thus, Itsekiri, is not a derivative of either an Edo (Bini) or Yoruba language, but of an Ijaw word that underwent an innocent transformation. It is a sad commentary that, today the descendants of Iginua are claiming ownership of the territories of their benefactors – Warri, with utter disregard to the magnanimity of their hosts. How ungrateful could one be?

Ever before Nigeria's independence in 1960 there have been tensions surrounding the arrangements for the government of the region surrounding Warri, the second most important oil town in Nigeria after Port Harcourt (Ikime, 1969; Imobighe, Bassey & Asuni, 2002). Warri itself, the largest town (though not the capital) of Delta State, is claimed as their homeland by three ethnic groups: the Itsekiri, the Urhobo, and the Ijaw. The Itsekiri, a small ethnic group of a few hundred thousand people whose language is related to Yoruba (one of Nigeria's largest ethnic groups), also live in villages spread out along the Benin and Escravos Rivers into the mangrove forest riverine areas towards the Atlantic Ocean. The Urhobo, a much larger group numbering some millions related to the Edo-speaking people of Benin City, live in Warri town and to the north, on land. To the south and east, also in the swampy riverine areas, are members of the Western Ijaw, part of the perhaps ten million-strong Ijaw ethnic group, the largest of the Niger Delta, spread out over several states.

The question of the "ownership" of Warri has been in dispute for decades – since well before independence – and is the subject of heated debate in the Nigerian courts and media as well as in the homes of Warri. It forms the core argument in the presentation of the various ethnic groups as to the underlying causes of the violent conflicts and crises in Warri. Closely linked to the question of
"ownership" is that of representation in the formal structures of government, both at local government and state level. Delta State was created in 1991, with several others, by the military regime of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida. Both Ijaw and Urhobo see the current dispensation in the state, in which Itsekiri dominate government structures in the three Warri local government areas (LGAs), Warri North, Warri South, and Warri South West, as unfair. They complain that this dominance means that the Itsekiri and their traditional leader, the Olu of Warri (itself a contested title, having been changed in 1952 from the Olu of Itsekiri), benefit disproportionately from government resources – both at the level of government contracts and appointments, and, for example, when it comes to obtaining "certificates of origin" in order to obtain government bursaries for higher education. Control of government structures also brings other benefits, notably a greater amount of contact with the oil companies, which may lead to the award of valuable contracts. Among the demands of the Ijaw and Urhobo are the creation of new wards and local government areas which they believe would ensure that their ethnic groups are more effectively represented (Imobighe, Bassey & Asuni, 2002).

The above history of perpetual dominance of the Itsekiris in the leadership and outright claims of ownership of Warri, constitute the remote cause of conflict in the area. However, the Human Rights Watch takes no position on who the "true indigenes" of Warri are, or on the creation of wards or local government areas. However, the long term peace of Delta State clearly depends in part on the resolution of these political issues in a manner that ensures equitable representation of all those living in the state regardless of origin. Above all, the process of arriving at a final arrangement must be seen to be fair. The concept of "indigene" is in itself problematic as all those concerned are Nigerians, and should have equal rights in relation to the government of the state where they live (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

3 METHODOLOGY

In terms of methodology the study adopted the time-series research design within the explanatory framework of Resource Curse theory. For data collection, this research relied heavily on documentary method, while data collected were logically and textually analyzed using the textual (content) analysis method.

3.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

The paper adopted Resource Curse theory. The Resource Curse theory was introduced by Richard Auty in 1993. The Resource Curse refers to the phenomenon of worse economic performance in resource-abundant countries comparing to resource-poor countries (Auty, 1993, p.1). The idea that resources might be more of an economic curse than a blessing began to emerge in debates in the 1950s and 1960s about the economic problems of low and middle-income countries. The term resource curse was first used by
Richard Auty in 1993 to describe how countries rich in mineral resources were unable to use that wealth to boost their economies and how, counter-intuitively, these countries had lower economic growth than countries without an abundance of natural resources. An influential study by Jeffrey Sachs and Andrew Warner found a strong correlation between natural resource abundance and poor economic growth.

For many years resource abundant countries such as Nigeria, DR Congo, Venezuela and others were experiencing low economic growth and living standards. While Asian Tiger economies with hardly any natural resources like Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan were experiencing miraculous economic growth and achieved high living standards. The phenomenon of worse economic performance of resource abundant countries comparing to countries with fewer natural resources has given rise to a concept of the Resource curse. This concept was introduced by Richard Auty in 1993, and has since been used by some prominent scholars, e.g., Sachs & Warner (1997, 2001), Lane & Tornell (1999), Mehlum, Moene and Torvik (2006)). Resource curse theory argues that:

The resource curse occurs as a country begins to focus all of its production means on a single industry, such as mining, and neglects investment in other major sectors. Economic diversification may be delayed or neglected by the authorities in the light of the temporarily high profits that can be obtained from limited natural resources (Kenny, 2010).

The resource curse, also known as the paradox of plenty, refers to the paradox that countries with an abundance of natural resources (such as fossil fuels and certain minerals), tend to have less economic growth, less democracy, and worse development outcomes than countries with fewer natural resources. Experience shows that economies with low supply of natural resources have had to deal with limited resources and this situation has pushed them to seek alternative development paths. Those routes to growth and development were based in productive activities rather than in extractive activities. The theory proposes that where there are plenty of resources and things seem to be going well for a country, authorities, population, institutions, etc., become complacent. This, indeed, is one of the problems Nigeria, and the Niger Delta in particular is facing today.

As an economic phenomenon associated with the abundance of natural resources in certain countries, the theory summarizes a paradox that those naturally gifted resource countries do not always develop and grow their economies. It is ordinarily expected that if a country has a significant resource allocation, it should use them to their advantage. However, this has not always been the case in many countries with large reserves of resources. In fact, some studies reveal that such resource abundance has been pernicious to countries who own them. It is the meaning of what is termed the “resource curse”. Resource curse theory argues that the curse comes not in the resources as such, but in the use made of them and the conditions of the country, its people, institutions, and authorities that have received and manage the plenty resources.
Evidence accumulated over the years leaves little room for doubting the existence of a ‘resource curse’. Countries heavily dependent on natural resources – geographically concentrated resources like hard-rock minerals, oil, and gas – have performed worse, in both economic and political terms, than countries without the apparent ‘benefit’ of such natural endowments. (Arellano-Yanguas, 2008).

One important illustration of the theory in development economics is that natural resource abundant economies often grow more slowly than economies without substantial resources. For instance, growth losers, such as Nigeria, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Angola, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela, are all resource-rich, while the Asian tigers: Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, are all resource-poor. On average resource, abundant countries lag behind countries with fewer resources. Yet we should not jump to the conclusion that all resource rich countries are cursed. Many “growth winners” such as Botswana, Canada, Australia, Chile, and Norway are rich in resources. Consequently Venezuela (like Nigeria) lost much of its agricultural sector due to its resource wealth. Thus, the theory observes that countries endowed with a rich source of natural resources can struggle to make effective use of these and often end up with low levels of economic development than countries with low levels of natural resources. There are various other reasons put forward to explain this resource curse, such as corruption, appreciation in the exchange rate, foreign ownership and conflict.

The theory further postulates that a country with strong natural resources will invariably concentrate in the production and export of this natural resource, without any plan to diversify the economy to ensure proper economic growth and real development. Thus, the theory establishes a negative correlation between resource abundance and rates of economic growth. The abundance of raw materials can adversely affect political and economic structures.

The resource curse theory thus explains why the three ethnic groups in the area – the Urhobos, Itsekiris and Ijaws in Warri abandoned the agricultural sector (especially fishing), which formed the mainstay of Nigerian economy prior the discovery of crude oil in Nigeria, and enmeshed themselves in a crazy leadership struggle over who controls the area and the resources therein.

3.2 WARRI CRISES AND ITS CONSEQUENCES ON THE AREA

Warri crisis is perhaps one of the most discussed, debated, reported and misreported issues in contemporary Nigeria. The plethora of versions, perspectives and expositions put forward range from the ridiculous, the mundane to the frequent emotionally-warped accounts of the contending parties. Very seldom are attempts made to present the true facts of the story either by way of a historically and ethnographically valid analysis of the root cause(s) of the Warri debacle or a well-reasoned presentation of recent crises events (Jabini, 2003). Much has been reported by the Nigerian press which concentrated mainly on surface-reporting of specific crises as they unfold and adducing vague or very highly
marginal reasons (oil bunkering, illiteracy, unemployment and underdevelopment) as plausible causes for the crises. For example, no mention is made of such historic facts as the crowning of the Itsekiri monarch as “Olu of Itsekiri” in 1936 by the British and the later controversial conversion of that title to “Olu of Warri” by the Action Group government of the Western Region in 1952. Nor has there been mention of the various commissions of inquiry previously instituted to look into the crises.

Perhaps, one way of deciphering the truth about the Warri intractable conflict is by carefully examining the ownership claims of the contending parties; the Ijaw, the Itsekiri and the Urhobo. The Urhobo and Ijaw claims to Warri show strong affinity as far as they relate to claims of indigenousness to the portions of Warri occupied by them. For example, the Urhobo of Warri restrict their claims to the lands occupied by the Agbassa and Okere Urhobo communities in Warri metropolis (i.e, Urhobo areas constitute almost all of Warri town). The Ijaw claims relate to the dispersed settlements and towns of the Ogbe-Ijoh, Isaba, Gbaramatu and Egbema clans all of which are in the main, located in the oil-rich Warri local governments of Warri South-West and Warri North. Thus, there is and has always been a traditional separation of these ethnic groups just as the comparatively recent governmental, political and fiscal unity enforced in favour of the Itsekiri by the Federal Government is at the core of the Warri problem.

It will be important here to highlight the distinction between Warri metropolis (where the Urhobo co-habit with the Itsekiri) and what is referred to as ‘Greater Warri.’ While the former relates to the city of Warri in Warri South local government area, the latter is and will be used here to refer to the combined territories of the present Warri South, Warri South-West and Warri North local government areas (Jabini, 2003). The distinction between Warri and ‘Greater Warri’ is pertinent, as uniformed readers tend to see the Warri crisis as a struggle for Warri City which the Itsekiris now claim complete ownership to. The all-important question: “Who owns Warri” or more precisely ‘does one ethnic group own ‘Greater Warri’. We can begin right now to ask ourselves; is it empirically sound to suggest that this large expanse of land was devoid of any human habitation before the migration of the Itsekiri to the Warri area? Beyond the façade of court victories by the Itsekiri in colonial courts almost entirely populated by Itsekiri clerks and interpreters, is there verifiable ethnographic and anthropological evidence to support the claim that the Itsekiri settlements in the Warri area predate those of the Ijaw and Urhobo? Sometimes, ownership claims ought to and should transcend questionable legal victories to historical and cultural proofs and artifacts.

To this effect, the totality of the Itsekiri claims appears to be more of rent-seeking and influence-peddling. They are quick to cry foul when commissions of enquiry, headed by eminent jurists, are set up to look into the Warri problem. It is, either they refuse to attend commission sittings and/or they stifle the findings and recommendations of such commission, which in almost every case, have exposed the hollowness of the Itsekiri claims. A genuine owner would definitely want to be the first to tell his story in
any forum not the one to refrain from stating his case or obstructing such a process. Therefore, rather than this eternal imperialistic assignment to confiscate other people’s territories, the Itsekiris should seek to develop the areas allocated to them at their migration by the Ijaws of Warri. In fact, Itsekiri land will be the envy of other Nigerians if a fraction of the resources and energies devoted to the unnecessary domineering, wasteful and completely false struggle for a Warri Empire is devoted in developing the very area allocated to them by their by the Ijaws (Jabini, 2003).

Furthermore, in order to concretely unravel some of the mystery surrounding the immediate causes of the Warri crisis and remote incidents that served as precursors to the present day unrest in Warri and her environs as earlier showcased in the historical background section of this study, Brisibe, etal (2016) presented more historical facts, that were not based on isolated frivolous court judgements, but authentic verifiable evidence that identified the true owners of Warri; the ancestral homeland of the Itsekiris; the making of Warri metropolis; early administration in Warri; the Itsekiris political intrigues; conflicts/crises showdowns; and peace initiatives so far on warri crises. According to them, in the pre-independence elections, Ijaws and Urhobos voted for late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe’s National Council of Nigeria and the Camerouns, NCNC, while the Itsekiris voted for late Chief Obafemi Awolowo’s Action Group, AG. Fortunately, for the Itsekiris, AG won the election in the Western Region and that marked the rise of Itsekiri political dominance. With their new political allies in AG, the Itsekiris mounted pressure on Chief Awolowo to create chieftaincy titles among the Itsekiris to reflect monopoly of lineage in Warri and also to establish a communal land trust for the Itsekiris. Not to be perceived as been ungrateful to the Itsekiris for their support at the polls, Chief Awolowo succumbed to the pressure to elevate the status of the Olu of Itsekiri in par with other traditional rulers. Such as, Olu of Ibadan, Oba of Lagos, Ooni of Ife, Oba of Benin etc., whose titles reflect overlordship over territories. In 1952, the Itsekiri people’s dream came true when the title of Olu of Itsekiri was changed to Olu of Warri. This prompted the 1952 riot of Warri which was marked by loss of lives and property. Despite the far reaching implication of the title, Olu of Warri, and the influence of the Itsekiris, the Government of Western Region of Nigeria under the leadership of late Chief Obafemi Awolowo made provision for the exclusion of the Ijaws of Warri from the authority of the Olu of Warri. The legal provision is contained in the Western Region of Nigeria “Chiefs Law of 1957 Cap 19” now applicable in Delta State. The Chiefs Law of 1957 Cap 19 states: “The Olu of Warri is the prescribed authority of the Warri Division”, thereby, excluding people from Egbeama, Gbaramatu and Ogbe-Ijoh Council Areas. Over the years, these autonomous Ijaw councils have been gerrymandered into Itsekiri districts, through the evil genius of the Itsekiris in collaboration with those in the Federal Government bent on depriving the Ijaws off their oil wealth. Today, the Ijaws of Warri no longer control or have an autonomous council they can call theirs. As of 1998, Delta State Traditional Councils of Chiefs includes the Pere of Egbeama, the Pere of Ogbe-Ijoh, and the Olu of Warri as members. Traditionally,
Obaship, Pereship and Ovieship are tied to the lands. As such, each of these five Traditional Rulers in Warri area has exclusive authority and overlordship over the lands they occupy. Ironically, the land in Warri, on which the Olu of Warri’s only palace is built, is privately owned. Leased to Wilson Gbesimi Emiko (Erejuwa 11) by Omagbemi for the Ewelofu of Ekurede-Itsekiri. In essence, the Olu of Warri, the Traditional Ruler of the Itsekiris whose ancestral homeland is Ode-Itsekiri, is a Ruler in exile and had to administer by remote control from Warri. It is therefore quite unsettling that the Itsekiris would continue in their path of self-delusion about ownership of Warri.

It is important to note here that the bane of the crisis in Warri is rooted in the unyielding desire or insatiable appetite of the Itsekiris to dominate or oppress other ethnic groups in Warri, particularly, the Ijaws and the Urhobos. Several efforts have been made to checkmate the aristocratic Itsekiris’ ‘apartheid mentality’ but the Olu of Warri and the entire Itsekiri have continued to politically maneuver the other ethnic groups in Warri.’ Below are few examples of Olu of Warri and the Itsekiris political maneuvers: In 1976, there were twelve councils in Warri Local Government Area of then Bendel State. Six of these were Itsekiris, four were Urhobos and two Ijaws. For the council chairman position, an election is required among the twelve councilors. Worse still, the Itsekiris subsequently engineered, at the Federal Government level, the transfer of one of the councilors representing an Ijaw constituency, Tsekelewu to Ondo State. Thus, Tsekelewu, a major oil-producing community was transferred out of Delta (then Bendel State) State, merely to satisfy the ambitions of the Itsekiris. Further, the Federal Government, in 1991, under General I. B. Babangida’s administration approved the creation of Neinbe Local Government Council for the Ijaws of Gbaramatu Clan, with Headquarters at Oporoza. But, prior to the announcement, the Olu of Warri with his aristocratic Itsekiris employed their usual modus operandi to effect the relocation of the headquarters to Koko, an Itsekiri community, and renamed it Warri North LGC. The Federal Government upon realizing the unfairness and injustice to the Ijaws, ordered that, the Ijaws of Gbaramatu, Ogbe-Ijoh and Isaba Clans be transferred back to Warri South Local Council. The Itsekiris acting true to their nature, manipulated themselves into the two council chairmen position in Warri South and Warri North LC. All these political and legal maneuvers effectively shut-out the three Ijaw Clans from participating in the affairs of the two local Councils, Warri North and South. Finally, in October 1996, the Federal Government created Warri South Local Government Area, with headquarters at Ogbe-Ijoh, an Ijaw community. This development, of course, did not go down well with the Itsekiris, whose inordinate desire to dominate the Ijaws and rule them perpetually had just been violated by the provision for self-determination to the Ijaws. The situation was particularly troubling to the Olu of Warri because most of the oil produced in Warri Local Government is in the Ijaw-speaking areas. Therefore, it did not take long before the Olu exercised his influence with Lt. General J. T. Oseni (rtd), then Minister of Federal Capital Territory, Abuja and Lt. General Oladipo Diya (rtd), then Chief of General Staff to remove without
justification, the headquarters from Ogbe-Ijoh to Ogidegben, an Itsekiri village. This was the last straw that broke the proverbial camel’s back for the continued crises in Warri. The Ijaws under the leadership of Chief E. K. Clark protested vehemently to the State and Federal Government about the injustice, oppression and humiliation perpetrated on the Ijaws of Warri (Nwachokor, Uchendu, & Ijomone (2019).

The Itsekiri aristocrats, on their part, in a show of force, unlatched a bunch of murderous Itsekiri thugs, who rained terror on Ijaws in Sapele, Benin River, Koko etc., on March 14, 1997. Their victims were innocent old men, women and children who are oblivious to the events in Warri. Some of the victims are: Moses Odibo, a former councilor, Chief W. M. Kin, President, Ogbinbiri District Customary Court, On March 22, some Ijaw youths in a bid to draw attention of the Federal Government’s to the plight of Ijaws of Warri block the waterways between Escravos and Warri with fishing net. In addition, the Ijaw youths also shut down six flow station belonging to Shell Petroleum Development Company and held about 100 workers hostage, later release unharmed. Shortly, after this incident, the Itsekiri thugs embarked on coordinated attacks on prominent Ijaw leaders in Warri. These incidents marked the beginning of mayhem in Warri and her environs. The Ijaws of Warri, assumed a self-defense posture, a recognized and acceptable survival mechanism. There have been consistent gruesome killings in Warri incessant crises. See Table 1 below.

Table 1 Yearly trend of unlawful homicides in Warri, Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>36 (5.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>36 (5.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>55 (8.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>7 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>28 (4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>26 (3.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>49 (7.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>42 (6.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>79 (11.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>57 (8.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>61 (9.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>94 (13.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>71 (10.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>33 (4.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>674 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nwachokor, Uchendu, & Ijomone (2019).

Violence stemming from Group Grievance has been elevated in the Warri South and Warri South West Local Government Areas of Delta State in recent years. As outlined in Figure 1 below, there was a spike in fatalities in the first half of 2014. According to news reports as of April, renewed violence has broken out after a brief lull. The fatalities reported since 2014 are underpinned by incidents of inter-
communal clashes, intra-communal clashes, and group based political tensions in the run-up to the 2015 elections. In Figure 1 and 2 below incidents of communal tension are tallied (Blyth, 2015:p.3). A brief illustration in incidents during the Jan-Mar 2015 period appears to have been broken by recent events.

**Figure 1: Fatalities from Incidents of Group Grievance**

![Fatalities from Incidents of Group Grievance](image1)

**Figure 1: Reported violent fatalities in Warri South and Warri South West 2011 - 2015, Nigeria Watch data http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/ using a query of ACLED and Nigeria Watch sources.**

**Figure 2: Trends in Tension and Violence**

![Trends in Tension and Violence](image2)

**Figure 2: Reported incidents in Warri South and Warri South West 2014-2015, Nigeria Watch and ACLED data http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/**

Update: April 2015 Violence

The ongoing violent crises results in socio-economic pressures which have contributed to conflict risk in the area. These include high unemployment, displaced community members, poverty, and crime, as well as governance challenges linked to corruption and illegal oil bunkering.
Figure 3: The Four Conflict Dimensions

Source: Brisibe, et al., 2016

Sadly, this recent turnout of events in the Niger Delta, and Warri in particular, have began to enact the memorable words of the late President of the United States of America, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, that, “those who make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable” (Brisibe, et al., 2016). Hence the need for all the stakeholders in the Niger Delta to help arrest this dangerous trend which the intractable conflict has assumed in Warri.

As a matter of fact, each of the recent crises in Warri brought with it a commission of inquiry. The final reports in these commissions often exude a common theme as a panacea for peace in the region. Arthur Mbanefo’s Panel of 1996 recommended, among other things, the creation of Egbema LGA with headquarters at Ogbinbiri, while Justice Nnaemeka-Agu’s Commission, called for the creation of LGA along ethnic lines. None of these reports, by the nature of their recommendations, were welcomed by the Itsekiris. It was therefore no surprise that, the Olu of Warri went all-out to block the sitting of Justice Idoko’s commission of inquiry, appointed shortly after the Warri crisis in March of 1997. All these compels one to ask, why the arrogance and proclivity by the Itsekiris on the matter of Warri ownership. How else could one explain the Itsekiris outright rejection of the various commissions’ reports on Warri crisis, than a sheer display of adamancy and arrogated leadership position which the Itsekiris has imposed on real owners of Warri.

4 FINDINGS
❖ The study reveals that conflict in the area stems more from the claim of original ownership of Warri land and ethnic divide among the people of the area.
❖ The Itsekiri people and the Ijaws have plunged themselves in intense leadership struggle cum power tussle over the territory as well as inordinate quest for resource control in the area.
❖ The study discovers that the constantly conflicting ethnic groups lacks the political will to ensure good leadership in Warri North Local Government Area of Delta State. A political will is the compelling force for sound leadership quality, the ability to do what is right, what is relevant and what is attainable within the context of patriotic nationalism. Political will very often means personal or group sacrifices. It
implies the ability to implement policies that have a nationalistic important and relevant without allowing pockets of interest to detract from what should naturally be of national benefit.

❖ Also, the general untold hardship, hunger, poverty and lack of adequate socio-economic infrastructures, as the attendant consequences of oil exploration in the area, were implicated for the incessant conflicts.

5 CONCLUSION

In light of the overwhelming antecedent facts, any recipe for an enduring solution to the Warri crisis must contain an ingredient of, the Itsekiris embracing a policy of mutual respect for the Ijaws and the Urhobos. Similarly, Itsekiris must reciprocate genuine reconciliation overtures from their neighbors. It does not serve the interest of peace for the Itsekiris to constantly frustrate meaningful initiatives, simply because it does not fit into the agendas of the power intoxicated Itsekiri aristocrats. To plant the seed of mutual respect, progressive Itsekiris must begin the process of reconscientizing themselves towards a peaceful embrace of other ethnic groups in Warri and re-educate generations of Itsekiris who have been systematically indoctrinated to hate the Ijaws and the Urhobos for reasons none other than to satisfy the selfish egos of the Olu and his associates. Hopefully, that should bring them to terms with the vital inseparable and undeniable Ijaw link in their migration history to Warri rather than the orchestrated grand design of the Itsekiris to keep the Ijaw ethnic nationality in bondage while they plunder our oil and gas wealth. Importantly, for true peace to reign in Warri, the Itsekiris must abandon their politically repressive agenda on her neighbors and lastly, desist forthwith from their provocative encroachment on Ijaw lands. Proper scrutiny, in the present day, of those Itsekiri documents that aided in the favorable legal verdicts, that they are so vocal about, will surely fail the credibility test, now that their romance with the Colonial British agents is no longer viable. So, the constant invocation of those questionable favorable court judgements, as proof of ownership of Warri cannot erase or re-write the historical origin of the Itsekiris. Therefore, it was noted that manipulated legal victories, irrespective of their numerical strength, cannot change the status of the Itsekiris as mere tenants of the Ijaws of Warri.

Therefore, in this pursuit to unravel the reason behind the incessant conflict and/or crisis in Warri, it is the submission of this paper that greater reliance be placed on easily verifiable ethnographic and anthropological evidence(s) rather than on a series of court victories obtained from colonial courts or citations from Itsekiri and pro-Itsekiri historians, and scholars. Most importantly, the findings of any commission constituted to resolve the Warri problem must be made public and implemented within a reasonable short time frame as to prevent the recurrent problem of non-implementation or outright disappearance of findings and recommendations on Warri crisis as it was the case with the Idoko and Mbanefo commissions.
RECOMMENDATIONS

➢ In order to ensure a lasting solution to the lingering Warri crises and to end the age-long agitation for the original owners of Warri, the study therefore recommends that greater reliance be placed on easily verifiable ethnographic and anthropological evidence(s) rather than on a series of court victories obtained from colonial courts or citations from Itsekiri and pro-Itsekiri historians.

➢ The long term peace in Warri, Delta State clearly depends in part on the resolution of these political issues in a manner that ensures equitable representation of all those living in the state regardless of origin. As a result, leadership/power zoning strategy should be a more considerable option in the area. And their political leaders must develop the political will to lead aright no matter the ethnic group they are coming from. A political will is the compelling force for sound leadership quality, the ability to do what is right, what is relevant and what is attainable within the context of patriotic nationalism.

➢ As a corollary of the above, the political will of leaders is best demonstrated in personal or group sacrifices to ensure good leadership. It implies the ability to implement policies that have a nationalistic (societal/general) importance and relevant without allowing pockets of interest to detract from what should naturally be of national/societal benefit.

➢ On the other hand, the government at different levels and the oil companies operating in the area must be proactive and show greater concern/commitment to the environmental condition of the people in order to ensure real human and infrastructural development of the region.
REFERENCES


