

## **Oil and Emerging Ruling Class in Nigeria's Niger Delta Region**

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### **Abstract**

The history of oil extraction in Nigeria cannot be extricated from the sociocultural, economic, and political life of the people of the Niger Delta region, with its attendant multi-dimensional challenges—extreme poverty, environmental degradation, conflict, and cultural change. As a direct response to the vestiges of oil, there seems to be a dramatic change in the nature and character of the ruling class in the region—from orthodox to neo-ruling class. Interestingly, previous studies have focused largely on resource-related inter- and intra-community conflicts, including the quest for self-determination heralded by militancy. However, this study seeks to examine the historical parallels between oil and the dynamics of the ruling class in the region. It argues that the emerging ruling class is both internal and external and largely connected to the control of oil resources. Pertinently, the social actors in the industry, traditional institutions, politics, and civil society are no longer the orthodox, but rather eccentric neo-actors. The study applies the cyclical theory of social change and a qualitative research design as its theoretical and methodological frameworks. This study concludes that members of the neo-ruling class, who now have access to oil wealth and power—just as the previous or orthodox ruling class had control over palm oil and the commercial waterways—are responsible for underdevelopment, as well as the socio-economic and political dynamics driving social inequalities and unrest. It recommends free, fair, and secure elections; the strengthening of socio-cultural values and norms; and the facilitation of equitable wealth redistribution to ensure sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Oil, Emerging, Ruling Class, Niger Delta Region, Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

The Niger Delta is considered one of the most densely populated areas in Nigeria, with an estimated population of over 31 million people, covering a geographical space of approximately 70,000 square kilometres. The area was first known as the British Oil Rivers Protectorate from 1885 until 1893, when it was enlarged and later became the Niger Coast Protectorate. Afterwards, the core Niger Delta became an integral part of the then Eastern Region of Nigeria, which came into existence in 1951. The Niger Delta region is the delta of the Niger River, sitting directly on the Gulf of Guinea, on the Atlantic Ocean in Nigeria. It is situated within nine coastal southern Nigerian states. Six of these states (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers) are located in the South-South geopolitical zone; one state (Ondo) is from the South-West, and two states (Abia and Imo) are from the South-East geopolitical zones. Historically, the region was known as the Oil Rivers due to its significant palm oil production, which led to the establishment of British officialdom in 1884 in the Gulf of Guinea. This consular presence was primarily aimed

at protecting British interests amid the fragmented politics of the Niger Delta and the genesis of navigation on the Niger River. Fittingly, the Ijo (Ijaws), Ibibio, and Efik fishermen and salt makers controlled the waterways to the interior and developed city-states that flourished from the slave trade.

The Niger Delta's historical, political, socio-economic, and developmental prominence is undeniable when compared to other regions of Nigeria. From the pre-slave trade era to the present, the region's strategic location and vast natural resource endowments, which serves as the mainstay of Nigeria's economy, have consistently placed it at the forefront of national and global discusses. Its proximity to the River Niger and the Atlantic Ocean provides the regions' population an unprecedented access to smallholder fishing and farming, as a predominant occupation. The area has been a hub for trade, commerce, and livelihood activities for many within and for others from distant regions, including Europeans (Alagoa, 1970). Interestingly, the early incursion of European explorers and missionaries exposed the Niger Coast as a fertile trade and commerce hub, attracting sustained interest from foreigners from distant parts of the world.

The Portuguese traders were the first to penetrate the area as mutual trading partners, introducing the region's economy to Europe's capitalist-imperialist system (Dike, 1956). They did not interfere with the trade rights of the indigenous middlemen in the Delta beyond exchanging their European goods for the people's raw materials at the Coast, where they were restricted (Ofonagoro, 1979). However, it wasn't until the 15th century, around 1492, with the discovery of the New World and the subsequent development of the plantation economy, that Europeans changed the nature of their trading activities with the indigenous people from the mere exchange of goods to slave trade (Odeke et al., 2021). Apparently, this heralded an unparalleled change in the character of goods defining the market at that time. As slave trade took center stage as a critical product of commerce, the Niger Delta middlemen were excessively co-opted and corrupted by the Europeans, who supplied arms and numerous material gifts. These exchanges fueled more raids in the hinterlands for slaves to satisfy the plantation labour needs of the Europeans at Sao Tome and Fernando Po (Ejituwu, 2002). Consequently, the middlemen became more influential, impacting the balance of socioeconomic and political power dynamics in the region and signaling the emergence of a new ruling class.

As the plantation economy flourished in the New World and slave labour became vital to Europe, the Niger Delta transformed into a major source of African slaves for the Americas and Europe, functioning as a 'beehive for slave harvests' for over four hundred years (Imbua, 2012). This extensive history of slave trading dramatically changed the socioeconomic and political landscape of the Niger Delta and Africa. Most merchants and chiefs in the region developed strong trading empires with the hinterlands, prospering immensely through their partnership with capitalist-imperialist slave traders. Delta communities, like Grand Bonny, swiftly developed into influential city-states, with the booming slave trade becoming a catalyst for industrial economies in America and Europe. However, a turnaround occurred with the advent of machines, which gradually

replaced slave labour, rendering slave trade economically unviable and unsuitable for the industrial economy, leading to its abolition as an illegal enterprise.

Consequently, palm oil trade replaced the slave trade, again servicing industries in America and Europe for soap manufacturing and machine lubrication. Thus, the economic situation in the Global North became a huge determinant of the livelihoods, well-being, and aspirations of the indigenous people of the Niger Delta, their social relations, and power politics. Often, the asymmetrical power relations among trade partners became toxic, leading to armed conflict. According to Ikime (1968), while European traders aimed for a larger share of the legitimate palm oil trade, they armed local middlemen to usurp the powers of the existing ruling class (chiefs) in the hinterlands to sustain supplies. This condition made the indigenous people susceptible to bitter rivalries, which occasionally escalated into wars that led to balkanization of once influential city-states.

Interestingly, numerous studies have examined the conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta, attributing its origins to environmental degradation, economic marginalisation, political injustice, and social exclusion, often perpetrated by the Federal Government of Nigeria in cahoots with the 'Big Oil' conglomerates. This study builds upon existing research on the 'economy of conflict' (Ikelegbe, 2005; Raimi, 2017) in the region, while drawing significant inspiration from the intellectual contributions of scholars whose works have advanced the understanding of neo-class formations in the Niger Delta. This group of scholars, such as Amadi, Imoh and Obomanu (2016), and Raimi and Boroh (2018), while relying on Ikelegbe's framing of an 'economy of conflict', present a convincing account of the emergence of new class relations in the region. For instance, Amadi et al. (2016) started by identifying one of the critical social actors within this 'emerging social class', referring to them as 'militia capitalists'. Raimi and Boroh (2018) further advanced this discourse by showing how the economy of violence goes beyond creating a militia capitalist class to also provide the enabling social structure for a 'conflict proletariats' or 'conflict labourers' class, who are nested within the enabling social structures of protracted violence. Furthermore, Raimi and Boroh drew attention to a possible 'commodification of violence' as a driver of a self-perpetuating cycle of violence that underpins the economy of conflict in the oil-rich Niger Delta. However, while these works provide a good reference point for the present research, they are mostly static accounts of neo-class formations in the region. They fall short in terms of capturing the historical dynamics and unique role of oil as a key determinant of both past and present class structures in the region. This study, therefore, addresses two major objectives: 1) to investigate the historical nexus between oil, conflict, and social relations; 2) to explore the nature and composition of the emerging ruling class in Nigeria's Niger Delta.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The cyclical theory is central to the analysis of the variables (oil and ruling class) in this study. The theory has been used across disciplines, including history, political science, philosophy,

sociology, and anthropology, to provide a detailed account of the patterns and dynamics of societal transformation. Cyclical theory explains historical events by arguing that institutions, societies and civilizations rise, decline, and fall in cycles. This cycle repeats itself with new institutions or societies emerging from the ruins of the old ones. Several historians and sociologists, including Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee, have contributed to the understanding of cyclical theories of social change. These great thinkers suggest that many great civilizations throughout history have experienced a lifecycle that includes a period of vigorous and innovative growth, a phase of prosperity and material success, followed by another phase of decline and ultimate fall. They suggest that decline is not essentially the end but a natural process that leads to change. This theory examines patterns in history and attempts to explain or understand how current societal trends might fit into the cyclical model of growth and decline. It further suggests that societies follow a similar pattern, helping us understand how societies evolve overtime, proposing that social change is not linear but cyclical. The model is used to analyse and predict future trends in societal development and to inform strategies for managing and mitigating change. Understanding these patterns allows policymakers, scholars, and social actors to make informed decisions that could mitigate societal decline or leverage opportunities for renewal.

The cyclical theory helps to capture how oil shapes the nature and character of the ruling class in Nigeria's Niger Delta. The historical parallels are quite evident, from the earlier palm oil trade to the present exploration and exploitation of crude oil. The palm oil trade dominated the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, oiling the industrial economy of the Global North, causing division and armed conflict at home. This led to the emergence of a new ruling class. This new power elite, consisting of indigenous middlemen involved in palm oil trade and responsible for its export to the Global North, gradually became influential and supplanted the authority of the traditional ruling class. This rise to power gave birth to distinct and sometimes eccentric classes, which emerged as 'canoe houses' or as newly established kingdoms, such as those of King Jaja of Opobo, King Amachree of the Bakana, and Chief Barboy of the Abonnema and Buguma dynasties.

Once again, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a repeat of a similar pattern has unfolded in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Amidst ongoing struggles for environmental justice, resource control, and self-determination, a new ruling class has emerged, one driven by access and control of (crude) oil. These militia leaders, now popularly called ex-agitators or freedom fighters, are challenging and changing the status quo and the power dynamics in the region. They are now gradually making inroads into prominent positions and roles in various spheres of society, including politics, industry, and civil society. Therefore, this theory is very relevant to this study, as it helps spotlight the historical parallels between oil and the emergence of the ruling class in the Niger Delta. In both eras, oil, has been a dominant resource driving the local economy and that of the Global North, influencing the emergence of the ruling class principally through armed violence. Therefore, in the context of this study, the cyclic theory directs our thoughts towards understanding the history and potential pathways of future class formation as shaped by economic entanglements. In recognising the

nature of social change, societies are better prepared for the challenges and underlying opportunities (Goldstein, 2009).

## **Methodology**

The study adopted the desk research approach, relying extensively on secondary data from relevant sources such as periodicals, newspapers, journals, institutional reports, books, and social media feeds, with an emphasis on historical information and supplemented by personal observation. The data gathered were analysed using the thematic approach, which enabled the researcher to develop categories of themes consistent with the study's objectives, while also allowing for a contextual interpretation of the data. It further draws on the cyclical theory as proposed by Oswarld Spengler and Arnorld J. Toynbee to contextualise and deepen the understanding of the role of both palm oil and crude oil in the oscillation of power and class formations in the Niger Delta. The study is limited to examining the influence of oil as a major force in determining the historical trajectory of ruling class formation in Nigeria's Niger Delta. In this context, the Niger Delta comprises of 9 states, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Ondo, and Rivers, located in Southern Nigeria. The study specifically focused on how Oil and power politics in the region shape the nature and character of the ruling class, stressing a historical fact that societal development tends to follow a cyclical, rather than a linear route.

## **Substantive Issues of the Study**

### *Nigeria's Niger Delta Region: Origins of Oil, Conflict, and Social Relations*

Nigeria's Niger Delta is the primary centre of oil production and export. In the past, the region's thriving palm oil trade contributed substantially to the National economy and that of the British colonialist. Back then, agricultural produce was the mainstay of Nigeria's economy: cocoa in the west, groundnut pyramids in the north, and palm oil in south-east. This was before the discovery of crude oil in 1958 in what is now Bayelsa State, located in the Niger Delta region. Retrospectively, about 1558, palm oil was Nigeria's main export commodity, defining its internal power politics. Presently, Palm oil production in Nigeria is still concentrated in the Niger Delta, with smallholder farmers contributing about 80% of the total produce. Nevertheless, despite its historical dominance, Nigeria has become a net importer of palm oil, due to the discovery and focus on crude oil. Domestic production, at 900,000 tons annually, falls short of demand, resulting in a 500,000 tons deficit. This shortfall valued at over 200 billion naira, is now met through imports.

Adesoji (2010) notes that in pre-colonial Nigeria, traditional rulers held tremendous power and exercised considerable influence. Furthermore, Alagoa (1985, p. 77) observed that 'in pre-colonial Nigeria, different political cultures created their own institutions.' Popular traditions present the House heads or chiefs of the delta city-states as virtual despots, and the 'Amanyabos' or kings

were responsible for and catered to the general welfare of the people. Lawal (1989) corroborates this view by noting that in pre-colonial Nigeria, traditional rulers were custodians of power, deriving their executive, legislative, and judicial functions from tradition. Igafe (as cited in Lawal, 1989) notes that the political structure of Benin Kingdom during the pre-colonial era, particularly with reference to the Oba of Benin, was dominated by the Oba's special position. The Oba was central to every activity and organisation of supreme, religious, and civil authority in the land. This special position of the Oba found expression in the physical separation of his settlement or palace (eguse Oba) from the rest of the town and people.

Nonetheless, the end of slavery in 1807 heralded remarkable progress in the palm oil trade as merchants of the Niger Delta city-states swiftly adapted to offering palm oil. This transition was largely driven by an expansive network of waterways with a canoe transport system that offered a more cost-effective and user-friendly transportation than head-loading or cask rolling. The Niger Delta region proved to be a ready-made system for efficient waterways transportation for palm oil. With palm oil playing a cardinal role in driving economic growth and nation-building, the local chiefs who controlled access to the hinterlands where palm oil was produced placed some level of restrictions on seafaring activities. The booming trade became a catalyst for an emerging ruling class—the rise of local influential houses and kingdoms. However, this was not without strong resistance, stemming from the quest to dominate palm oil export trade activities and control the power dynamics in the territory (Esiebo, 2024).

Historically, membership of the ruling class in Nigeria's Niger Delta region is characterised by a more diverse form of leadership styles, such as traditional leadership and grassroots activism. These were largely diverse, fragmented, and driven by access to natural resources, particularly oil-related interests and conflict. The fragmented leadership is evident in the establishment of the war canoe house system. Consequently, the canoe houses became the basis for transacting trade relations, as each house had its markets and thus enjoyed a monopoly. They also served other useful purposes, such as coordinating trade with the interior as well as with foreign traders. Again, in Bonny and similar areas, King Jaja withdrew his House and founded another state, Opobo, in 1870. In Kalabari, the Amachere dynasty broke away to establish the state of Buguma, while their rivals, the Barboy House, further split into two to establish the Abonnema and Bakana kingdoms respectively. For example, the rivalry between the Alali and Pepple royal houses in Bonny kingdom led to a civil war in 1885 and weakened the city-state. The central role of oil in the socioeconomic and political leadership of the region was reinforced by the commercial discovery of oil in 1958 and the boom of the 1970s. The Niger Delta became central to the extractive industry for its vast oil reserves and home to multi-ethnic groups and communities, many of which are burdened by the vestiges of oil extraction (Esiebo, 2024).

Nigeria's Niger Delta has transformed into a focal point of global energy markets and a symbol of contentious sociocultural, political, resource, and environmental rights dislocations. This transition from palm oil to crude oil remains central to the sociocultural, economic, political, and power dynamics of a region blessed with vast oil and gas reserves and multi-ethnic groups, yet

simultaneously embroiled in poverty, environmental degradation, armed conflict, inadequate infrastructure, poor quality social services, and a predatory, extractive ruling class. These communities are poorer, marginalised, and increasingly vulnerable to the sociocultural, economic, and political dynamics of oil governance. Regardless of the perspective, oil defines the high stakes in Nigerian politics and power, especially in the Niger Delta (Omeje, 2006). The ruling class manifests as both internal actors (chiefs, politicians, intelligentsia, businesses, militants, and civil society actors) and external actors (foreign governments, global financial institutions, international development partners, and oil majors). Each have played distinct roles in shaping the emergence of the neo-ruling class in the Niger Delta. The region's centrality to global energy security and its strategic significance in the profit-making calculus of powerful nations in the Global North and transnational corporations cannot be overstated. Importantly, the dire sociocultural and economic conditions in the Niger Delta are traceable to the origins of oil exploitation and the rise of predatory extractive ruling class.

### *Emerging Ruling Class in Nigeria's Niger Delta*

Since the 19th century, the history of the Niger Delta has been marked by the emergence of a ruling class composed of individuals and groups whose access to and control of the region's oil resources also grant them access to socio-political power. This historical interplay between economic and political power relations has been behind the emergence and transformation of the ruling class in the Niger Delta, and indeed, Nigeria. Most importantly, the emergence of the neo-ruling class is significantly shaped by the influence of transnational corporations, the Nigerian government, and other key actors, including community chiefs, other traditional leadership structures, and local social influencers. The origin of this neo-ruling class is deeply rooted in the commercial discovery of oil in 1958. The region is home to major transnational oil companies, including Shell, Chevron, ExxonMobil, and TotalEnergies, which extract oil and gas from the Delta's rich offshore and onshore assets. These oil majors exert significant influence on the leadership structure in the region to sustain their imperialistic control and dominance over the local population.

Historically, the Nigerian government has prioritised the interests of oil companies and powerful social actors, often at the expense of local communities. While oil has been a source of national wealth for Nigeria, the indigenous communities have seen limited benefit from the proceeds, leading to a sense of inequality and social injustice. The ruling class in the Niger Delta can be traced to both local elites and external actors who have capitalized on the region's oil wealth (Okonta and Douglas, 2003). Local elites such as politicians, chiefs, and business figures have become brokers between the government, transnational oil companies, and grassroots communities. According to Frynas (2001) and Raimi (2017), this intermediation provides easy access to contracts, political patronage, and dividends from oil resources that further entrenches their power and class position. The emerging ruling class in Nigeria's Niger Delta reflects new social relations rooted in the economy of conflict, where violent conflict functions as the mode of production, and

the social relations of production are shaped by the dynamics between those who control the means of conflict and the traditional ruling class.

Similarly, the benefit captor behaviour (Raimi and Boroh, 2018) positions and empowers those who control the means of violent conflict. This places them within a socially privileged space from which they manipulate and exploit the economy of conflict, often launching themselves into the community governance structures or the political arena as leaders in their own right, as fittingly captured by Amadi, Imoh and Obomanu (2016). In fact, beyond the submissions of Amadi et al (2016), this study strongly argues that these 'Conflict Capitalists' also hold significant socio-political capital, which often catapults them into positions of community and state leadership, effectively cementing their status as an emerging ruling class.

These elites often use their political influence to secure lucrative contracts, jobs, and compensation deals with transnational corporations, leading to their accumulation of wealth and power. Unlike the northern part of Nigeria, where political power is centralized and influenced by traditional institutions and faith-based groups, the Niger Delta presents a contrast. With the divide-and-rule tendencies of the capitalist transnational corporations that control the oil industry in Nigeria, the troubles created by oil politics in the country became too complex, with no solutions in sight (Odeke et al., 2021). The imperialists triggered new forces and social relations of production without totally annihilating pre-colonial social forces and modes of production, but at the same time articulated them (Asuk, 2011). Internal strife, crisis, and persistent violence in the Niger Delta significantly undermined Nigeria's capacity to meet its crude oil production targets. As the state struggled to contain both intra- and inter-group militancy and conflict, it was ultimately compelled to negotiate power with the emerging ruling class in the region. Given this context, the state responded through several policy initiatives dating as far back as 1957, such as the Willink Commission that was established to investigate the challenges faced by ethnic minorities in the region. The commission noted that the region had been neglected and proposed certain interventions such as the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB). This Board was established in 1996 but was not effective because its headquarters was in Lagos State, very much outside of the Niger Delta (Ajodo-Adebanjoko and Asu, 2013). In 1995, the *Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES)* was created by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) on behalf of its joint partners (NNPC, TotalEnergies, & AGIP). The subsequent increase in oil revenue allocation further increased the stakes in who controls the community governance structures and resulted in increased tension among stakeholders. The narrative demonstrates the extent to which oil politics has influenced the emergence of the ruling class in the Niger Delta region (Amaechi, 2024).

The emerging ruling class in the Niger Delta often includes state and non-state actors who control the socio-political process. This includes elected and appointed public officials (politicians), prominent local business people who control contracts, security firms, and illegal oil activities like bunkering. These non-state actors leverage their financial power to expand their political interests and control key sectors of the region's economy. Another group consists of traditional elites and community gatekeepers such as kings, chiefs, elders, youth, and women leaders, who form the

fulcrum of the emerging ruling class. They collaborate with the political class and transnational oil corporations to negotiate agreements, land rights, and compensation deals.

Fundamentally, the rise of militant groups and the use of force to control oil resources birthed a new subset of the ruling class, those who control the local security apparatus such as community vigilantes and pipeline surveillance contracts. The conspiratorial collaboration among local warlords, politicians, transnational oil corporations, and security agents to protect or seize oil infrastructure enables them to influence the body politic. The historical parallels transcend sociocultural, economic, and political structures as roles are being switched in ways that blur traditionally acceptable lines. A sectoral analysis of this social phenomenon shows that those who have access to oil wealth are those who control the levers of power in the region. According to Chukwu, Enoch, and Ese (2024), Chief Government Owezide Ekpemupolo, also known as Tompolo, the chief executive of Tantita, and Augustine Ogedegbe, are major pipeline surveillance contractors to the government and also influence the politics of constituencies. In the sociocultural space, warlords such as Alhaji Asari Dokubo and Ateke Tom have metamorphosed into government-recognised first and second-class traditional rulers, respectively. They now oversee kingdoms, thereby wielding considerable political capital and control over their subjects, many of whom are ex-agitators. Meanwhile, Victor Ebikabowei, alias Boyloaf; Michael Brakemi Fireman Kpolotor, alias Indiami; Joseph Figbele; Ramsey Umukoro; and Para Ekiye are all engaged in maritime transportation, commerce, large livestock farming, merchandise, general contracting, and are political leaders in their own right.

Nevertheless, others are directly involved in politics, such as Afracanus Ukparasia, also known as Africa, Selekumo Damigo, and Abraham Ingobere, the incumbent Speaker of the Bayelsa State House of Assembly. Ingobere has served as Speaker for two terms and is in his fourth term in the Assembly. Similarly, Gibson Munalayefa represented the Ogbia constituency, the hometown of former President Goodluck Jonathan. Interestingly, the civil society sector is not insulated from these emerging leaders. For example, Reuben Wilson of the ‘Reuben Initiative for Good Leadership and Accountability’, who became a certified pilot through the Presidential Amnesty Programme of the Federal Government, is now a leading figure in Kolokuma, representing the community in the *KEFFES Development Foundation* under the Chevron cluster. Boyloaf, for instance, later became the running mate to Chief Timipre Sylva, a former governor of Bayelsa State, former Minister of State for Petroleum, and governorship candidate of the ruling All Progressive Congress in the 2023 general elections—a clear testimony to how widely the influence of these emerging leaders is spreading across all walks of life (Chukwu et al., 2024). This is a growing list of emerging leaders in the Niger Delta that have historically ascended to prominence by virtue of their control of violent conflict and privileged access to oil resources, mirroring the patterns of class formation during the palm oil era.

Evidently, the Federal Government and ‘Big Oil’ conglomerates initially interfaced with traditional rulership structures for allocating community benefits. However, over time, local elites, businessmen, and militia capitalists sought access and influence within these structures for their

own gain, and sometimes for the communities too. This competition for influence, combined with the divide-and-rule tactics of multinational oil corporations and the state, further exacerbated conflicts. The purveyors of these conflicts also expanded to include youth gangs. This means that in the Niger Delta, those who control the means of violent conflicts (Raimi and Boroh, 2018) usurped and undermined traditional authority, or in some cases, drove the traditional rulers into exile. They then took over community governance structures, particularly the interface with oil companies. Again, this situation closely mimics what transpired during the palm oil boom in the Niger Delta region when middlemen became powerful and broke away from mainstream ruling houses to establish their own war canoe houses, leading to a disruption of traditional social relations and structures.

## Conclusion

Contemporary leadership in the Niger Delta cannot be extricated from access to natural resources. Oil has been a central commercial commodity from the era of slave trade to the palm oil economy, empowering middlemen to the extent that they could disrupt existing traditional leadership structures and establish their own 'war canoe house' system. Palm oil caused the first wave of change in leadership, shifting from the orthodox ruling class to the middlemen as an emerging ruling class. Consequently, the second wave was instigated by the dynamics of the crude oil economy, moving from a well-established traditional ruling class and intelligentsia to a group of acclaimed freedom fighters seeking self-determination and resource control. This study concludes that historically, access to natural resources, specifically oil, is a core factor in determining leadership structures in Nigeria's Niger Delta.

At every historical epoch in the sociocultural, economic, and political development of Nigeria's Niger Delta, oil has played a dominant role in the emergence of its leadership across the board, to the extent that it has become normalised and rationalised by successive generations. While oil has influenced the emergence of this leadership, they are largely responsible for the underdevelopment, socioeconomic, and political dynamics driving social injustice, inequalities, and violent conflict in the region. This assertion is corroborated by the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) *Niger Delta Human Development Report*, which suggests that the region has an 'appalling human development situation summed up in social instability, poor local governance, neglect of infrastructure, lack of access to fundamental services, environmental degradation and extreme economic deprivation' (2006, pp. 15-16). According to Obi (2009), the contradictions in Nigeria's oil-driven political economy loom as far as imagination permits, particularly in the oil-rich yet deprived Niger Delta. To this end, it is evident that old patterns can determine emerging systems, proving that social change and development can be cyclical as opposed to a linear progression within a historical context.

## Recommendations

- I. Transformative leadership: The prevailing leadership recruitment process is not sustainable as it is anchored on access to oil wealth, making it near impossible for those outside the oil-power equation to emerge as leaders in Nigeria's Niger Delta. There has to be a redefinition of the region's political settlement and a deliberate improvement of the electoral process to reflect free, fair, and secure elections.
- II. Value reorientation and political rights education: The conception and implementation of well-conceived social value and norms reorientation programmes by the state and civil society actors, with support from the organised private sector, is crucial. This will socially re-engineer the region, paving the way for a more egalitarian society.
- III. Shift in socioeconomic paradigm: The current socioeconomic system is predatory and exclusive, leaving a greater percentage of the population in privation and unable to reach their aspirations through acceptable societal norms. In order, to create more inclusive and equitable redistribution of wealth, the present capitalist system has to have human considerations to ensure socioeconomic justice and sustainable development.

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