

John Ghazvinian
UNTAPPED
The Scramble
For
Africa's Oil

Harcourt Inc.

Introduction

*As bright colors that denote and dominate the heavens,
We CHARGE the clouds!
The winds! The rains!
We ensure the fertility of Mama Afrikah!*

IT WAS EARLY in the evening, still the hour of terrines and spritzers and stiff hand bakes. But for Chigomezgo Miriam Gondwe, an irrepressibly sensual young spoken-word performer from Malawi, there was no reason to hold back.

*In. her womb, hopes are raised to create opportunities!
The time is ideal for us to emerge
To view with these once-tortured eyes
The delight on her anxious and excited face!*

Gondwe, who describes herself as an "ethno-urban hip-hop soul poetess" was clothed in a sunflower-yellow traditional African dress and head wrap, and was spitting sizzle and brimstone, with a look of raw, sexual ecstasy on her face not unbecoming of someone seized by the Rapture. She had appeared out of nowhere on the stage at the Coca-Cola Dome in the Johannesburg suburb of North Riding, and now she was spiritedly reciting some of her work in front of around 3500 assembled conference delegates.

*All of our stories, individual and collective
Are born of the African dawn.*

*So continue to strive, mah Aff-ree-KAH/
And hold on to your pride
And Africa's sun shall never set on your greatness
mah Aff-ree-KAH
Africa's sun shall NOT set!*

To their considerable credit, the ocean of mostly gray, suited, mustachioed men from every corner of the globe were trying hard not to look disconcerted by this unexpectedly fierce display of sistah-hood. It was (and could only have been) the official opening ceremony of the 18th World Petroleum Congress, a massive working pow-wow and lavish spectacle held once every three years and generally described as "the Olympic Games of the petroleum industry." The moniker is an apt one, as, when it comes to sheer pomp and pageantry, there is nothing else quite like it in the world of hydrocarbons and petrochemicals. At the 17th Congress, held in 2002 in Rio, delegates had partied to samba music late into the night, as their Brazilian hosts passed the ceremonial flag to South Africa. Since it takes in all aspects of the oil business, from global politics to finance to geophysics, the WPC has evolved into far and away the most important date on the industry's calendar, a rare opportunity for Gulf sheikhs in flowing robes to dine and dance with Venezuelan socialists in between discussions of lateral-drilling technology, international fiscal-compliance regimes, and the Caspian Miocene shelf. Possibly the only thing missing from the festivities is a sandaled runner carrying a perpetual flame.

In the years since the first Congress was held in London in 1933, the choice of venue has often acted as a reflection of profound changes within the international petroleum industry. When the WPC was created, motorcars were seen as toys for the mega-wealthy, coal was still king, and oil exploration felt like a cutting-edge industry poised to supply the fuel of the future. No one had heard of "peak oil", OPEC or Hugo Chavez, and most of today's oil-rich nations were still colonies and protectorates administered by Britain and France. BP, or British Petroleum, was still known as Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The world of oil, like virtually everything else, revolved around London. But in the decades that followed, the WPC would hold court in such upstart industry hubs as Mexico City (1967), Houston (1982), and Calgary (2000).

In September 2005 the traveling circus had come to Johannesburg, the first time in its seventy-two-year history that the WPC convened in Africa. The decision to do so was being touted as a nod to the continent's growing importance as an oil-producing region, and the savvy South African hosts were not about to overlook an opportunity to milk the Afrikah angle for everything it was worth.

The evening had begun with delegates being dropped off by the busload in front of the Dome. We had sashayed along the red carpet as a grinning Soweto steel band played their hearts out from just behind the velvet rope. Inside, another traditional African band played on stage as delegates searched for their tables. Fifty-foot banners hung from the rafters, with messages like "African Dawn—World Energy Solutions Created in Africa" and "We welcome you with African pride to the 18th World Petroleum Congress." A gigantic display marked with a PetroSA logo was suspended from the ceiling, a reminder that the South African oil company would be picking up the tab for the evening's festivities.

As the first course arrived---a trio of terrines made with smoked salmon, Kabeljou, smoked snoek, and angelfish--the interior of the Dome went pitch-black. Two enormous video screens suspended over the stage came to life, showing a dramatic montage of classical African scenes, set to a stirring, primordial drum-driven sound tracks that could only be described as Afro-electronica. "THE PULSE ...OF AFRICA!" bellowed a baritone Voice of God, with a reverberation that made the terrines wobble. Sprawling savannahs, lush forests, and hissing leopards flashed by on the screen as the music played on and the Voice continued to rumble, backed up by the occasional thumping of kettledrums. Glistening fish leaped out of virgin rivers, women beamed over their meager wares at rustic markets, Tuareg tribesmen beckoned across rippling sand dunes. Children laughed as they pulled wooden wheelie toys on strings. It was like a prelude to Armageddon scripted by *National Geographic*.

Sweating, shirtless steel drummers now appeared on spotlighted podiums next to each of our tables, gyrating and banging away on their drums with a limber adolescent energy. Images of oil refineries and deepwater drilling platforms jumped from the screen as runners with flowing kitelike banners began sprinting between our tables. The Voice began reciting a poem about wind and dreams.

"THE TIME HAS COME TO LET OUR LIGHT SHINE," boomed the Voice. More half-naked men appeared, this time performing a warrior dance. The other journalists at my table munched away at their terrines, not about to let any impending apocalypse get in the way of a

free meal. "BEHOLD THE RISING OF A NEW DAWN - AN *AFRICAN* DAWN - WITH RAYS OF LIGHT HERALDING ENERGY'S FUTURE," thundered the Voice. "ENERGY ... IS IN THE BEAUTY AND POWER THAT IS AFRICA. THE WEALTH AND RESOURCES IN THE EARTH BENEATH OUR FEET." This was clearly a reference to Africa's oil wealth, but to keep things subtle, cheetahs leaped across verdant grasslands and scooters sped down bustling city streets on the video screens.

"THIS IS OUR TIME. THIS ... IS OUR ... AFRICA," the Voice proclaimed, as the music and the video montage built to a climax. I looked to the stage, half-expecting a cloud of smoke and the arrival of an African messiah, flanked by live panthers. Instead, the spotlight went up on a band of singing women draped in South African flags. Then Chigo Gondwe came onstage and began reciting her Afro-positive performance poetry, backed up by a little gentle undulating from the women. After a few more poems, and a little more undulating, the opening medley drew to a close as fireworks shot out from the front of the stage.

It was a tough act to follow, but Desiderio Costa, the Angolan petroleum minister, didn't do himself any favors with his poor, halting English as he read from a prepared speech he clearly hadn't written or even rehearsed. Angola was a cosponsor-along with Nigeria, Libya, and Algeria (Africa's four biggest oil and gas producers) - of the 18th WPC, and Costa's speech was followed by equally anodyne performances by officials from the other three countries. By the time the Libyan took to the stage, most delegates were slumped in the seats and had settled into idle chitchat about the chicken in saffron basil sauce that sat in front of them.

Salvation came in the form of Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's dynamic president, whose role was to declare the WPC officially open. Mbeki gave an eloquent speech about the dangers of Afro-pessimism drawing on Duke Ellington and W. B. Yeats, and warning against the complacency of what he called "mood indigo," before slipping off, by his own admission, to a jazz club on the other side of Johannesburg. A special performance by the South African sensation Umo rounded out the evening's festivities, and the only thing left was to bring out the desserts.

And it has to be said that the evening would not have been the same without the desserts. The organizers had decided to give us each a little chocolate mousse and sponge cake carefully molded into the shape of Africa. It was hard not to admire the culinary artistry involved, but as I looked round the Dome, I wondered: was I the only one to pick up on the symbolism of 3,500 drunken oil executives devouring the Dark Continent, bite after dribbling, chocolaty bite?

The mood of manufactured Afro-positivity was fresh in the a the next morning as the Congress got under way in Sandton City, in an upmarket business park, hotel, and shopping center in Johannesburg's wealthy northern suburbs. The opening plenary session was called "The African Perspective," and made it clear, in case anyone had missed the point the night before, that Africa was ready for the international oil industry's embrace. And as if this wasn't enough, on the third night of the Congress we were all invited to Gold Reef City, a gold-rush heritage theme park on the south side of Johannesburg, for "Africa Night," sponsored by South African Airways. SAA had rented out the park for the night, and laid on dozens of traditional performers from all corners of Africa, along with traditional foods representing each of Africa's

oil producing countries -- Nigerian jollof rice, Angolan *calulu de peixe*, and so on-all topped off with a giant Lindt chocolate fountain for dipping desserts.

By the end of the five-day Congress, only a red-assed baboon could have failed to appreciate the take-home message to the international oil industry. *Africa: Come and get it.*

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As if they ever really needed an invitation.

The WPC could have skipped the jollof rice and the steel bands and the live fireworks. These days, herds of stampeding wildebeest couldn't keep the international oil industry away from Africa. Since the early 1990S, advances in deepwater-drilling technology and attractive contractual terms have helped turn Africa into the world's last true EI Dorado - a place where exploration blocks the size of France can still be picked up at an auction, and host governments lack either the experience or the technical capacity to impose burdensome constraints on drilling activity. For years Africa suffered from its image as a bad place to do business-racked by instability, corruption, and political violence-and in many ways, it still does. But as the world has begun to run out of big new oil bonanzas, the industry's appetite for risk has grown considerably.

You can see it in on board the fleet of MD-ITS that leave the tarmac in Houston a couple times a week, bound for destinations with names exotic to the Texan ear, like Luanda and Malabo. Operated by World Airways and nicknamed the "Houston Express," the nonstop flights are open only to members of something called the US-Africa Energy Association, and seats start at \$5,915 for business class. They rarely go empty.

You can see it, too, in Paris, where Air France runs its nonstop private "Dedicate" service to an ever-growing number of African cities and encourages regular travelers to join its "Petroleum Club" take advantage of "exclusive services for the oil and gas industry." And you could see it in Johannesburg at the WPC, where country presentations from Nigeria and Angola were so heaving with spectators that most delegates were reduced to peering in from hallway outside.

Since 1990 alone, the petroleum industry has invested more than \$20 billion in exploration and production activity in Africa. A further \$50 billion will be spent between now and the end of the decade, largest investment in the continent's history-and around one-third of it will come from the United States. Three of the world's largest oil companies-the British-Dutch consortium Shell, France's Total, and America's Chevron - are spending 15 percent, 30 percent, and 50 percent respectively of their global exploration and production budgets in Africa. Chevron alone is in the process of rolling out \$20 billion in African projects over a five-year period.

The overwhelming majority of this new drilling activity has taken place in the so-called "deep water" and the "ultradeep" of the Gulf of Guinea, the roughly 90-degree bend along the west coast of Africa that can best be visualized as the continent's "armpit." Its littoral zone passes through the territorial waters of a dozen countries, from Ivory Coast in the northwest down to Angola in the south, and a good deal of its geology shares the characteristics that have made

Nigeria a prolific producer for decades. Indeed, a number of unexpectedly product fields have been discovered in the Gulf over the past decade. But although the Gulf of Guinea has lately been sub-Saharan Africa's most exciting region for the oil industry, it is hardly the only "prospective" part of the continent (to borrow the industry term). The parched semideserts of southern Chad and southern Sudan have recently added hundreds of thousands of barrels a day to global markets, and a growing chorus of voices is now touting the East African margin as the industry's "next big thing."

But be it east or west, jungle or desert, it is a safe bet that where the drillers go, the politicians, strategists, and lobbyists are not far behind. Washington in particular has taken a keen interest in Africa's growing significance as an oil-producing region since the headline discoveries of the late 1990s. In December 2000, the National Intelligence Council, an internal CIA think tank, published a report in which it declared unambiguously that sub-Saharan Africa "will play an increasing role in global energy markets," and predicted that the region would provide 25 percent of North American oil imports by 2015, up from the 15 percent or so at the time. (This would put Africa well ahead of Saudi Arabia as a source of oil for the United States.) In May 2001 a controversial and fairly secretive energy task force put together by U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney declared in its report: "West Africa is expected to be one of the fastest-growing sources of oil and gas for the American market."

In the following months, a group of congressmen, lobbyists, and defense strategists came together under the umbrella of the African Oil Policy Initiative Group, and began preaching the message that the Gulf of Guinea was the new Persian Gulf, and that it should become a strategic priority for the United States, even to the point of requiring an expanded military presence. A series of well-placed articles in the American media followed, some breathlessly announcing the inauguration of a new Middle East off the shores of Africa. Before long, the influential Center for Strategic and International Studies had chimed in with a couple of reports, its most recent, in July 2005, claiming, "an exceptional mix of U.S. interests is at play in West Africa's Gulf of Guinea."

During these years, a number of prominent lawmakers in Washington began getting excited about the possibility of shifting some of America's oil dependence from the Middle East to Africa. One former senior official charged with African affairs recalls Kansas Senator Brownback rushing up to him one afternoon in October 2002, positively glowing with excitement. "What do you think about bases in Africa?" Brownback asked. "Wouldn't that be great?"

But does Africa measure up to the hype? After all, the entire continent is believed to contain, at best, 10 percent of the world's proven oil reserves, making it a minnow swimming in an ocean of seasoned shale. Africa is unlikely ever to "replace" the Middle East or any other major oil-producing region. So why the song and dance? Why all the goose bumps? Why do so many influential people in Washington let themselves get so carried away when they talk about African oil?

The answer has very little to do with geology. Africa's significance as an oil "play," to borrow the industry lingo, lies beyond number of barrels that mayor may not be buried under its cretaceous rock. Instead, what makes the African oil boom interesting to energy security strategists

in both Washington and Europe (and, increasingly, Beijing) is a series of serendipitous and unrelated factors that together, tell a story of unfolding opportunity.

To begin with, one of the more attractive attributes of Africa's boom is the quality of the oil itself. The variety of crude found in Gulf of Guinea is known in industry parlance as "light" and "sweet", meaning it is viscous and low in sulfur, and therefore easier and cheaper to refine than, say, Middle Eastern crude, which tends to be lacking in lower hydrocarbons and is therefore very "sticky." This is particularly appealing to American and European refineries, which have to contend with strict environmental regulations that make it difficult to refine heavier and sourer varieties of crude without running up costs that make the entire proposition worthless.

Then there is the geographic accident of Africa's being almost entirely surrounded by water, which significantly cuts transport-related costs and risks. The Gulf of Guinea, in particular, is well positioned to allow speedy transport to the major trading ports of Europe and North America. Existing sea-lanes can be used for quick, cheap delivery, so there is no need to worry about the Suez Canal, for instance, or to build expensive pipelines through unpredictable countries. This may seem a minor point, until you look at Central Asia, where the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, stretching from Azerbaijan through Georgia and into Turkey, and intended to deliver Caspian crude into the Mediterranean, had to navigate a minefield of Middle East politics, antiglobalization protests, and red tape before it could be opened. African oil faces none of those issues. It is simply loaded onto a tanker at the point of production and begins its smooth, unmolested journey on the high seas, arriving just days later in Shreveport, Southampton, or Le Havre.

A third advantage, from the perspective of the oil companies, is that Africa offers a tremendously favorable contractual environment. Unlike in, say, Saudi Arabia, where the state-owned oil company Saudi Aramco has a monopoly on the exploration, production, and distribution of the country's crude oil, most sub-Saharan African countries operate on the basis of so-called production-sharing agreements, or PSAs. In these arrangements, a foreign oil company is awarded a license to look for petroleum on the condition that it assume the up-front costs of exploration and production. If oil is discovered in that block, the oil company will share the revenues with the host government, but only *after* its initial costs have been recouped. PSAs are generally offered to impoverished countries that would never be able to amass either the technical expertise or the billions in capital investment required to drill for oil themselves. For the oil company, a relatively small up-front investment can quickly turn into untold billions in profits.

Yet another strategic benefit, particularly from the perspective of American politicians, is that, until recently, with the exception Nigeria, none of the oil-producing countries of sub-Saharan Africa had belonged to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).^{*} Thus they have not been subject to the strict limits on output OPEC imposes on its members in an attempt to keep the price of oil artificially high. The more non-OPEC oil that comes onto the global market, the more difficult it becomes for OPEC countries to sell their crude at high prices, and the lower the overall price of oil. Put more simply, if new reserves are discovered in Venezuela, they have very little effect on the price of oil because Venezuela's OPEC

commitment will not allow it to increase its output very much. But if new reserves are discovered in Gabon, it means more cheap oil for everybody.

But probably the most attractive of all the attributes of Africa's oil boom, for Western governments and oil companies alike, is that virtually all the big discoveries of recent years have been made off shore, in deepwater reserves that are often many miles from populated land. This means that even if a civil war or violent insurrection breaks out onshore (always a concern in Africa), the oil company can continue to pump out oil with little likelihood of sabotage, banditry, or nationalist fervor getting in the way. Given the hundreds of thousands of barrels of Nigerian crude that are lost every year as a result of fighting, community protests, and organized crime, this is something the industry gets rather excited about.

Finally, there is the sheer speed of growth in African oil production, and the fact that Africa is one of the world's last underexplored regions. In a world used to hearing that there are no more big oil discoveries out there, and few truly untapped reserves to look forward to the ferocious pace and scale of Africa's oil boom has proved a bracing tonic. One-third of the world's new oil discoveries since the year 2000 have taken place in Africa. Of the 8 billion barrels of new oil reserves discovered in 2001, 7 billion were found there. In the years between 2005 and 2010, 20 percent of the world's new production capacity is expected to come from Africa. And there is now an almost contagious feeling in the oil industry that no one really knows just how much oil might be there, since no one's ever really bothered to check.

Footnote. In January 2007, Angola became the first new member of OPEC in over thirty years, and Sudan is expected to join late in 2007. Gabon withdrew from the organization in 1995

All these factors add up to a convincing value proposition: African oil is cheaper, safer, and more accessible than its competitors are, and there seems to be more of it every day. And, though Africa may not be able to compete with the Persian Gulf at the level of proven reserves, it has just enough up its sleeve to make it a potential "swing" region-an oil province that can kick in just enough production to keep markets calm when supplies elsewhere in the world are unpredictable. Diversification of the oil supply has been a goal - even an obsession-in the United States since the Arab oil embargo of the 1970s. Successive U.S. administrations have understood that if the world is overly reliant on two or three hot spots for its energy security, there is a greater risk of supply disruptions and price volatility. And for obvious reasons, the effort to distribute America's energy security portfolio across multiple nodes has taken on a new urgency since September 11, 2001. In his State of the Union address in January 2006, President Bush said he wanted to reduce America's dependence on Middle East crude by 75 percent by 2025.

Some of the more evangelical proponents of African oil have argued that here, at last, is the longed-for "clean break" - the chance to detach the fortunes of America once and for all from Middle East crude. For several decades, the United States and other Western governments made controversial compromises with despotic rulers across the Middle East, from the Shah of Iran to the House of Saud, in an effort to keep the oil flowing. Western petrodollars turned nomadic tribes into wealthy emirates, with scant concern for democracy or human rights. American support for undemocratic and unaccountable governments bred great resentment across the region, the consequences of which the entire world is now coming to grips with. This time, in Africa, these advocates say, we have a chance to start fresh and "get it right."

But how do we know African oil really represents a good-bye to all that? In many ways the situation in Africa is far more difficult, complex, and dangerous than the situation in the Middle East. Africa is filled with so-called "failed" states, or states that teeter perpetually on the edge of failure, one disputed election away from outright conflagration. Illicit arms are traded across fluid, largely fictional borders, national sovereignty is little more than a collection of flags and anthems, ethnic tribalism is alive and well, and angry militias have already turned to stealing crude oil as a way to keep themselves in business. According to the National Maritime Institute, the Gulf of Guinea is the world's second-most-dangerous waterway.

Some feel that in searching for an alternative to the volatile politics of the Middle East, Washington strategists have focused on a constellation of far more troubled and impoverished nations, from Angola to Sao Tome. According to this narrative, as the international media spotlight has stayed trained on Iraq and the Middle East, an unholy alliance has quietly formed between think tanks, oil-industry lobbyists, PR firms, and entrepreneurial businessmen, all keen to rebrand and reposition corrupt and often violent regimes as benevolent and important new allies of the West. Human-rights campaigners warn that many of the fatal compromises that were made with undemocratic and unpopular rulers in the Middle East are being repeated all over Africa, with potentially catastrophic consequences. In the worst case, control of oil revenue has sparked violent conflicts, with already bitter divisions exacerbated by the promise of untold riches for the victor.

But it is not just the usual amen chorus of humanitarian Chicken Littles and louche, *bien pensant* urban intellectuals who have sounded alarm bells over the African oil boom. Hard-nosed economists, too, are skeptical. A growing body of evidence suggests that oil, far from being a blessing to African countries, is a curse. Without exception, every developing country where oil has been discovered has seen its standard of living decline and its people suffer, while its less-well-endowed neighbors have gone on to (relative) prosperity. Scholars have dubbed this phenomenon, which depends on a curious matrix of economic and sociological responses to a sudden influx of petroleum money, the "paradox of plenty" or the "resource curse." Inevitably, little of the oil wealth ever makes its way to those who need it most. One of the great scandals of the African oil boom, for example, is that it has produced far more jobs in the United States and Europe than it ever will in Africa. Only about 5 percent of the billions and billions invested in African petroleum projects every year is spent *in Africa*. Oil exploration is by its nature capital-intensive rather than labor-intensive, meaning that most investment goes to developing and operating expensive and sophisticated hardware, such as the multimillion-dollar floating production, storage, and offloading vessels (FPSOs) that have popped up along the African coastline. What little labor is needed is generally of the skilled variety, and international oil companies have scant incentive to train an indigenous workforce when flying in expatriate engineers and technicians is cheaper and simpler. Offshore oil exploration is, in the parlance of economists, perhaps the ultimate "enclave industry."

As more African economies become dependent on their oil revenues, the stakes for finding ways to beat the resource curse have never been higher. Oil and gas are already Africa's largest export category, three and a half times greater than all others put together. Extractive industries (i.e., oil, gas, and mining) accounted for more than 50 percent of African exports and 65 percent of foreign direct investment in Africa in the 1990s. The American charity Catholic

Relief Services "conservatively" estimates that \$200 billion in oil revenue will flow into the coffers of African governments over the next decade. All this, it is argued, makes it more important than ever for African governments to "get it right" and ensure that oil is allowed be a blessing rather than a curse for their long-suffering people.

Others, of course, prefer to see Africa's oil boom as simply centuries-old story of foreign exploitation and the subjection of Africa's people at the mercy of voracious commercial interests - second great "Scramble for Africa," after the original carve-up of the African continent by European colonial powers in the late nineteenth century. Virtually everywhere in Africa today, Chinese, Malaysian, French, Australian, and American firms can be seen jockeying for position, trying to snap up exploration acreage in an undignified rush that seems to grow more ruthless by the day. And the chess game among oil companies is inevitably echoed in the foreign ministries, the world's great powers. France, China, and the United States are engaged in an intensifying competition for influence among the oil-producing nations of Africa. China, especially, has shown that it is prepared to plunk down large cash incentives in the form of loan guarantees in exchange for lucrative oil concessions from African countries.

So who are we to believe? The committed evangelists who tell us African oil can be a catalyst for the continent's development as well as a crucial source of Western energy security? The constructive critics who stress the importance of sound fiscal management and revenue transparency, and warn of the dangers of runaway oil bonanzas? Or, the Afro-pessimists who say that experience has taught us that rapacious foreigners motivated by their interests in extractive industries will only stand in the way of Africa's development? In the long run, we all know that simply drilling for oil in a faraway country without thinking about the consequences of our inevitable involvement in its internal politics is not a recipe for stability, or even for the energy security we so badly crave. That is a lesson we have probably learned from the Middle East. But does that mean we should think of Africa's booming oil production as fundamentally a blessing disguised as a curse or a curse disguised as a blessing?

It is not a question with an easy answer, nor one that lends itself to glib polemics about "blood and oil." It is, however, a question that cries out for an answer, or at least a sensible debate. For every day that goes by without such a debate is another day that MD-IIS land on tropical tarmacs, another day for FPSOs to load their precious cargoes, another day of Africans becoming frustrated by their misery and suffering as they watch their leaders line their pockets with oil money, and another missed opportunity to stop matters from falling into the wrong hands.

CHAPTER I THE ONSHORE EFFECT

"I BET YOU DON'T dare touch the salad."

It was my first week in Africa, and I must have looked every inch the amateur because I was being teased mercilessly.

"It's fine, you know. It's not going to make you sick. Not like the salads you get in London."

I was at lunch with Adwoa Edun, a Ghanaian-born, half-British owner of a Lagos bookshop who also happens to be married to a senior politician in the Lagos State government. Between lashings of gentle mockery, she was giving me her perspective as an expatriate African who had made Nigeria an adopted homeland.

"Nigerians have a tolerance level that is beyond any I have ever seen," she said. "You know, living in Nigeria, there are so many times when I have thought to myself, okay, this is it, Adwoa. We are going to have to pack our bags now. Where are we going to go? But then every time, the country just somehow muddles through."

Sooner or later, every expatriate conversation about Nigeria comes around to some version of this conclusion - that here is a country with an unparalleled knack for survival, an almost inspiring ability to lurch from crisis to crisis, even to the point of what to outside eyes resembles anarchy, before retreating from the brink and sliding back into a low-intensity seethe.

Most such conversations then turn to the subject of oil, and the volatile politics of the Niger Delta. Ours was no exception. Adwoa had no special expertise on the matter, but I had declared my intention to visit the Delta, so she agreed to give me a little friendly advice. She took my pen and notepad, and drew three large dots about an inch apart, which she labeled "Benin City," "Sapele," and "Warri." Bisecting Sapele, she drew a pair of faint wavy lines. On the Benin side of the wavy lines, she wrote PEACE. On the Warri side: TROUBLE.

"Living in Lagos," she said, "this is all we ever really know about the Delta. That if you head southeast, there is only so far you can go before you start to run into trouble."

"Trouble," in my limited experience, is a word people use when they are trying not to say "war." Growing up, I heard the conflict in Northern Ireland described by successive British governments as "the Troubles," before it was finally put to a peace process. It's one of those words, like "inclement" or "unhygienic," all middle-class and squeamish, that masks the true extent of the lurking horror. It's the kind of word that stops a conversation before it starts to get awkward; that signals, with a flick of the eyebrow and the tapping of a pen, that no more questions will be entertained today, thank you very much. "There's been some trouble," to the foreign journalist in Africa, generally means the shit has hit the fan.

By anyone's definition, the Niger Delta today is a place of troubles. Gangs of teenagers cruise the creeks and swamps in speedboats, bristling with automatic weapons. Oil is sucked out

of pipelines under cover of night and sold on the black market to raise money for rival warlords. Foreign oil workers are routinely kidnapped and held for ransom. Flow stations and other oil installations are attacked and vandalized, and a general climate of impunity infects the most mundane of interactions.

Trying to untangle-much less convey-the complexities and contours of the troubles in the Niger Delta could easily become the work of a lifetime; but, as with most human conflict, its causes can be boiled down to money, land, and ethnic rivalry. The Niger Delta is made up of nine states, 185 local government areas, and a population of 27 million. It has forty ethnic groups speaking 250 dialects spread across 5,000 to 6,000 communities and covers an area of 27,000 square miles. This makes for one of the highest population densities in the world, with annual population growth estimated at 3 percent. About 1500 of those communities play host to oil-company operations of one kind or another. Thousands of miles of pipelines crisscross the mangrove creeks of the Delta, broken up by occasional flares that send roaring orange flames into the already hot, humidity. Modern air-conditioned facilities sit cheek by jowl with primitive fishing villages made of mud and straw, surrounded with razor wire; armed guards trained to be on the lookout for local troublemakers is - and always has been-a recipe for disaster.

The problem, in a nutshell, is that for fifty years, foreign oil companies have conducted some of the world's most sophisticated exploration and production operations, using millions of dollars' worth of imported ultramodern equipment, against a backdrop of Stone Age squalor. They have extracted hundreds of millions of barrels of oil, which has been sold on the international market for hundreds of billions of dollars, but the people of the Niger Delta have seen virtually none of the benefits. While successive military regimes have used the proceeds to buy mansions in Mayfair or build castles in the sand in the faraway capital of Abuja, many in the Delta live as their ancestors would have done hundreds, even thousands of years ago- in hand built huts of mud and straw. And though the Delta produces 100 percent of the nation's oil and gas, its people survive with no electricity or clean running water. Education is patchy, with one secondary school for every 14,000 people. There are few public services available in the Delta, and those that do exist are difficult to reach because there are no roads. Seeing a doctor can mean traveling for hours boat through the creeks.

Occasionally, oil has been spilled into those creeks, * and fishing communities disrupted, dislocated, or plunged into violent conflict with one another over compensation payments.

*In October 2006, the World Wildlife Fund reported that up to 1.5 million tons of oil has been spilled in the Delta over the past fifty years - the equivalent of one *Exxon Valdez* disaster every twelve months

When the people of the Delta have tried to protest, they have been bought off, set against one another, or shot at. The rampant criminality, lawlessness, and youth unrest that have plagued the Delta as a result are perhaps technically "troubles" rather than active warfare, of the kind that makes the evening news and furrows brows at dinner parties. But to those who eke out a meager living in the sweltering, isolated fishing villages in the swamps and estuaries of the Delta, caught between the security forces hired by international oil companies to guard their multimillion-dollar networks of pipelines and flow stations, the roving bands of angry ethnic militias

determined to disrupt their operations, and the soldiers and special police units of the Nigerian state-all sides armed to the teeth-the distinction is largely academic. On a good day, they will push off into the morning mist in their hollowed-out wooden pirogues and return in the evening with a few sickly-looking croaker and catfish that they will dry in the sun for another day.

On a bad day, they might not come back at all. Even the most conservative estimates of the death toll-perhaps a thousand people every year-nudge it into the category of "high intensity conflict," alongside such better-known hot spots as Chechnya and Colombia. In March 200) the Niger Delta's seemingly intractable problems had become so severe that it prompted the U.S. National Intelligence Council to identify the "outright collapse of Nigeria" as one of the most significant "downside risks" threatening the stability of all of sub-Saharan Africa in coming years.

The largest denomination of banknote in Nigeria is the 500-naira note, worth (at press time) a little under \$4. On its front is a portrait of Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Igbo nationalist leader who helped broker Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960. On the reverse is a picture of an oil derrick. Both images are a reminder of a time when Nigeria seemed to stand on top of the world-sure of itself, confident about its future, and firmly in control of its destiny. It was the of African liberation, when it felt as if a new country was being born every few weeks, its heroes brimming with promises about life without the yoke of colonialism. Nigeria, with an enormous population sitting on some of the world's largest hydrocarbon deposits, seems poised to become an African superpower.

Along the way, though, something went terribly wrong. The country's overall economy has shrunk and the standard of living of its 130 million people declined steadily since independence, to the point where the World Bank now ranks Nigeria as one of the world's twenty poorest countries. Today, in a country that pumps more than 2 million barrels of oil a day and has the distinction of being the world's seventh-largest oil producer, 57 percent of the people live on less than \$1 a day. And that percentage rises to 70 percent in the Desert. Even gasoline, which should be cheap and plentiful, is instead almost entirely imported from abroad at great cost, thanks to the near-total collapse of Nigeria's refineries.

Endless cycles of debt and crippling hyperinflation have turned everyday life for Nigeria's citizens into a painful battle for survival. There was a time when 500 naira would have seemed an enormous amount of money to almost any Nigerian, trading for around \$2,000 on the currency markets. Today that 500-naira note, with the picture of Azikiwe and the oil derrick, rarely covers a cab fare. The grubby disintegrating brown banknotes are stuffed into glove compartments across the country like the piles of loose change that they are.

Any discussion of African oil has to start in Nigeria - not only because it is far and away Africa's largest oil producer, but also because it has Africa's longest and most exhaustive experience with international oil exploration. Oil is woven into the fabric of the nation's forty-six-year history in much the way that the faces of its liberation heroes are woven into its banknotes. However, rather than becomes a shining beacon to its less-experienced neighbors, a kind of living, breathing African oil university writing the textbook as it went along.

Nigeria instead became a case study in the sort of chaos and destruction that an oil boom can wreak on an otherwise promising nation. Across the continent, the word "Nigeria" has become shorthand for what everyone wants to avoid when they drill for oil in Africa—a synonym for "troubles."

How did things get so bad? How did a country that at one point provided more oil to the United States than did Saudi Arabia allow that very oil to become an accessory to its slow and steady unraveling? How did a lush, swampy river delta home to quiet tribes of fishermen in wooden boats become the scene of a conflict so violent and unpredictable that neither multinational petroleum companies nor one of Africa's most powerful armies seems capable of contending with it? How - to borrow a phrase from one of Nigeria's most famous novelists, Chinua Achebe - did "things fall apart"?

In 1900, the *Economist* criticized the British government's decision to annex the Niger Delta, calling it "a malarious swamp, which will cost several times the actual worth of its product." The "product" the newspaper referred to was not crude oil but palm oil, which was then prized both as a machine lubricant for the factories of the Industrial Revolution and as a base material for the manufacture of soap, candles, and margarine. The *Economist* could never have predicted that, a century later, the malarial swamp would have generated more than \$300 billion in revenue from a very different kind of oil. But the sentiment proved to be prescient. In 1865 the British government, acting under pressure from Liverpool palm-oil traders who feared having to share their lucrative African trade with French and German rivals, had declared the Delta a British protectorate, eventually known as the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. The use of the term "protectorate" was not accidental. The various kingdoms of the Delta had "agreed"—often in rather dubious circumstances that involved bits of paper they scarcely understood - to allow the Royal Navy to be responsible for their collective security; in effect, ensuring that no other European country could do business with them. Strictly speaking, they were unequal trading partners under foreign military protection, never "colonies."

In the decades that followed, the vast Muslim caliphates north of the Benue River - which enjoyed strong cultural, religious, and mercantile ties to North Africa and the Arabian peninsula and historically had little to do with the Delta kingdoms to their south - were "subdued" by the British, who, in recognition of their hierarchical more scientifically advanced civilization, granted them an unusual amount of autonomy under the umbrella of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria. In 1914 the southern and northern Protectorates were brought together with the Lagos Colony to the west (which had been set up primarily as a forestry concession), and the three were all amalgamated into what a British governor's wife had once suggested could be called "Nigeria."

The Protectorate of Southern Nigeria had been dominated by the Igbo (or Ibo), a 15 million-strong tribe of yam and cassava farmers who maintained uneasy relations with the Delta's dozens of minority tribes (at least one of which, the Ijaw, had sold them into slavery the better part of a century). In the north, the mostly Muslim Hausa held sway - while Lagos and the Southwest belonged mostly to the Yoruba. After independence, the prevailing assumption was that in the interest of national stability, the three regions would find ways to share major

government positions between them. This informal arrangement soon became known as the "federal character principle."

In fact, Nigerian politics since 1960 could be described as an uneasy, loveless *menage a trois* between the three majority tribes, each of which believes the other two are: working in cahoots against it, with the country's 200 - plus minority tribes feel left on the sidelines to fight for their survival as the big three divvy up the spoils of the country. To make matters more complicated, each majority tribe regularly forges political alliances with minority tribes in other parts of the country, playing on their frustrations to strengthen its position and appear "patriotic" and pan-Nigerian, while undermining its majority rivals in their own backyards. In a perverse way, though, this system of ethnic horse-trading has kept Nigeria together over the years. In the 1960s Nigerians learned the hard way that ethnic separatism, although seductive, could lead only to death and destruction in a state as balkanized as the newly independent republic.

The first rumblings of trouble in the Niger Delta began in 1966, when the Ijaw, one of Nigeria's largest minority tribes, realized they were sitting on a gold mine. In 1956, in the Ijaw village of Oloibiri, Shell had discovered oil, and Nigeria's output soon soared to more than 400,000 barrels per day, much of it extracted from the swamps and creeks of Ijaw country. Already resentful of Igbo dominance in the southeast, but keenly aware that the Northerner-dominated government in Lagos (then the national capital) was unlikely to use oil revenues for the benefit of the Ijaw, Isaac Boro and Nottingham Dick, two idealistic young radicals, founded the Niger Delta Volunteer Service in February 1966 and declared the Delta an independent Ijaw republic. The provisional "government" of Ijawland pronounced all oil contracts null and void, ordered oil companies to negotiate directly with the new republic, and told all non-Ijaws to register with the NDVS within twenty-four hours. The NDVS managed to capture Yenagoa, the area's largest city, before the Nigerian army moved in, using pontoon boats on loan from Shell. The fledgling republic was quickly quashed, but Isaac Boro went down in Ijaw history as a hero who had fought the Nigerian state on behalf of his people. From the perspective of the federal government, a dangerous precedent had been set.

The three years that followed were the most tumultuous and painful in Nigerian history. The Biafran war of 1967-70, touched off when the Igbo declared an independent Republic of Biafra in the southeast of Nigeria, was the world's first televised African tragedy and the beginning of the end for the euphoric Afro-optimism of the 1960s. For months, the world watched footage of starving children as the Igbo claimed (not without a little hyperbole) that the Nigerian state was perpetrating a "genocide" against them. According to some estimates, two million people died during the war, the majority from disease and hunger. There are many reasons why the Biafran Republic was unable to break away from the Nigerian federation, but it didn't help that the Igbo were never able to rely on the support of important southeastern minorities, such as the Ijaw, who knew all too well that they would suffer a far worse fate in an independent, Igbo-dominated Biafra.

The Biafra episode effectively scuppered for decades any hot headed talk of secession and ethnic separatism. Though frustration with the federal government continued to mount among the Niger Delta minorities in the 1970s and 1980s, few protests ever reached the point of violent standoff between activists and Nigerian troops. Disaffected local youths who did decide

to cause trouble often failed to elicit support from their own communities, who preferred to keep their heads down and focus on survival. No one in Nigeria had the stomach for another Biafra.

These were also the years in which international oil companies uninterested in longterm cohabitation with the local communities, unsure of how to achieve it-made it their unofficial practice to pass off village chiefs to ensure local youths did not disrupt their operations. This approach seemed to work for a while, but ultimately succeeded only in creating violent disputes between neighboring, villages vying for oil-company handouts, not to mention ugly contests for the suddenly lucrative title of village chief. Centuries-old traditions turned into naked money grabs, as traditional rulers simply pocketed oil-company handouts and proved unable to contain angry youth. Exasperated, the oil companies turned to the youths themselves, offering them "ghost jobs" - which required nothing more from them than a promise not to attack oil installations. They were generally paid to stay at home.

Little by little, foreign oil companies found themselves trapped in the twisted but irrefutable logic of it all, internalizing its assumption, and learning to accept-sometimes reluctantly and sometimes willingly - a degree of moral compromise as part of the price of do business in Nigeria. The Nigerian government, for its part, keenly aware of the importance of oil revenue to its own survival, maintained an iron grip on power and an attitude to law and order that made the oil companies look like gormless pantywaists. It was, in effect, a carrot-and-stick approach that kept the Delta quiet in these years. On the one hand, the somber specter of a bloody Biafra-style war of attrition lurked as a powerful deterrent against any large-scale organized uprising; while, on the other hand, rampant bribery ensured that the people of the Delta understood that capitulation carried its own rewards. Trapped between the Scylla of moral bankruptcy and the Charybdis of ethnic cleansing, only the most stubborn of ideologues talked of the rights of their people. The Delta lapsed into an uneasy equilibrium.

By the beginning of the 1990s, however, the situation was getting out of hand again. In the 1990 "massacre" at Umuechem, scores of people from the Etche tribe were allegedly killed by Nigeria's infamous Mopol (Mobile Police) forces-nicknamed "Kill and Go" for their lack of interest in kid-glove policing. On October 29, Shell managers, who had heard word of an "impending attack" on their operations near Umuechem, asked the Rivers State Police Commissioner to send antiriot police to protect their facilities. The "attack" turned out to be a peaceful protest outside the Shell installation, but the requested Mopol unit opened fire on villagers, most of whom scattered into the surrounding bush. For good measure, the police returned just before dawn the next morning and slaughtered those villagers they found returning from the bush. According to Amnesty International, 495 houses were damaged or set on fire and 80 people killed. The subsequent judicial inquiry, in a display of independence rarely seen during the military regime of the time, ruled the police had shown "a reckless disregard for lives and property."

It was a pattern that would be repeated throughout the Delta in the 1990s. Years of compromise and stagnation would give way to spasms of anger. Shell, or one of the other major oil companies operating in the area, would find itself the target of demonstration and would seek the protection of the Nigerian authorities. And such protection would arrive in the form of overenthusiastic, underpaid youth soldiers- some of them from tribes with a history of animosity

toward the offending parties-commanded by officers who had received a wink and nudge from higher-ups suggesting that the community should be made to pay for their audacity.

Again and again, in village after village, the same sorry scene would be acted out, as military junta met defenseless citizen in carnivalesque sprees of violence and retribution that would invariably leave bodies of sons and grandmothers writhing in the mud. Every time, the guns would fall silent, and the fishermen would go back to the creeks. And every time, international human-rights organizations would issue obligatory condemnations. Occasionally, they would write more detailed reports, filled with chilling details about the level of brutality involved, but still few outside Nigeria took notice of degenerating situation in the Delta.

Then along came Ken.

In a region of small, overlooked minorities, the Ogoni were one of the smallest and most overlooked. The entirety of what the more militant Ogoni would refer to as "Ogoniland" is only 400 square miles in area, with at most 500,000 people - a negligible presence in a country of 130 million. But by the early 1990S, Shell's ninety or more wells had pumped over 600 million barrels of oil out from under Ogoniland, and that oil had sold for billions of dollars on the global market. As early as 1970, six Ogoni chiefs had written to the governor of Rivers State, asking for a greater share of oil revenue and addressing of environmental damages caused by oil xploration. The letter had gone unanswered.

In late 1992, a group calling itself the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) issued a thirty-day ultimatum demanding that the company either pay back-rents and damage compensation to the communities affected by its operations or prepare leave Ogoniland for good. MOSOP was led by the charismatic Ken Saro-Wiwa, a journalist, novelist, and soap-opera scriptwriter with a knack for attracting publicity. Earlier that year, Saro-Wiwa had traveled to Europe, where he had made contact with prominent social and environmental activists such as Body Shop founder and CEO Anita Roddick. When the MOSOP ultimatum expired in January 1993, 300,000 Ogoni staged a peaceful demonstration that went off largely without incident. Shell's managers in London and The Hague realized they had a problem on their hands.

Three months later, in April, employees of the American pipeline company Willbros, under contract to Shell, were confronted outside the village of Biara by a group of Ogoni farmers who demanded that they desist from their work. Nigerian army troops quickly arrived on the scene and began shooting at the activists, killing one and injuring eleven. Shell subsequently announced that it had been forced to suspend its activities in the area because of public hostility-an admission that sent a ripple of dramatic tension throughout Nigeria and raised the specter of "another Biafra." The parliament in Ahuja branded MOSOP a secessionist and treasonous movement, and banned it.

During the year that followed, increasingly violent clashes – some of them between Ogoni and neighboring tribes, secretly provoked by the Nigerian army - left hundreds of Ogoni villagers dead. All the while, Shell itched to return to work in the fields it had abandoned after the Willbros episode. Finally, in May 1994, events came to a head when a meeting of Ogoni leaders was disrupted by a mob that appeared out of nowhere and murdered four of the tribal chiefs. Ken Saro-Wiwa, who most observers now agree was nowhere near the meeting, was

arrested and later charged with the murders, along with eight other MOSOP activists. In a series of secret meetings held at the home of Saro-Wiwa's brother, Owens Wiwa, in July 1995, Shell's then-chief executive for Nigeria, Brian Anderson, offered to intercede with the authorities on the nine men's behalf, on the condition that MOSOP end its campaign and put out a press release absolving the company of responsibility for environmental damage in Ogoni land. The Wiwas flatly refused to hand Shell the PR victory it wanted so badly, and on November 10, 1995, following a trial that observers condemned as a farce, the Ogoni Nine were hanged from a gallows at Port Harcourt. The news was greeted with shock and disbelief by the international coalition of activists that had flocked to the Ogoni cause over the previous two years. British Prime Minister John Major described the execution as a "judicial murder," and Nigeria was immediately suspended from the Commonwealth.

By the late 1990s, things in the Delta had spiraled steadily out of control. The peaceful, disciplined protest movement put together by the Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP had been replaced by a far more spontaneous and confrontational style of activism that viewed criminality and vandalism as justifiable weapons in a guerrilla war against the Nigerian state. Gangs of disaffected youths saw no shame in occupying flow stations, sabotaging pipelines, and kidnapping - or even killing-foreign oil workers. The most desperate took to vandalizing pipelines in the hopes that the subsequent oil spill would result in a compensation check for their villages. And, for the first time, there emerged organized syndicates whose stock-in-trade was tapping into the production line and stealing crude oil to sell on the black market - a practice that has since come to be known as "illegal bunking." By 2003 an estimated 200,000 barrels of oil was disappearing every day in Nigeria, causing a loss to the national treasury of some \$100 million a week.

Perhaps the most worrying development, however, was that, increasingly, disenfranchised communities were spending less time on confrontations with oil-company security personnel or Nigerian soldiers, and more time clashing with one another. At issue, generally was the right to be recognized by international oil companies as "oil-producing community." Over the years, villagers had seen such a designation carried with it an intoxicating raft of privilege. Every time an oil company wanted to drill in a new patch of the Delta, international law and its own corporate guidelines would require it to undertake a social and environmental impact assessment to determine potential disruption to the local community. The company would be expected to meet with community leaders and listen to grievances after operations had begun. There would have to be an effort to provide jobs to local youth. And if there was ever an oil spill, the company would have to pay compensation.

In a region that national politicians had neglected and exploited for decades, locals understood all too well that the white men with the drills were their last, best hope for the development they had expected the oil wealth to bring. With their whizbang technology and can-do corporate spirit, the oil companies came to be seen as a surrogate for the state. It was a role they neither relished nor were particularly qualified to perform. In the marshy tidal waters of the Delta, where human settlement patterns have tended to follow the catches of fishermen, village boundaries have never been clearly defined by local authorities. Inevitably, oil companies' attempts to identify and deal with community representatives fell foul of territorial disputes. Such disputes are nothing new to the Delta, but traditionally they have been over fishing rights.

When the stakes became thousands of dollars in oil company handouts, the results were predictable. In March 1997, when the headquarters of a local government area in Warri was moved from an Ijaw town to an Itsekiri town, bloody riots broke out. In 2003 the dispute reignited, and the ensuing violence left nearly one thousand people dead. Chevron was forced to shut down its operations at the nearby Escravos terminal, with the result that 800,000 barrels of oil a day- one-third of Nigeria's output-was taken off the international markets for several months.

The Ijaw have always been the largest ethnic group directly affected by oil exploration in the Delta, so it is no surprise that, in the years after Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged, the mantle of resistance passed back to the Ijaw. Inspired by the outpouring of international sympathy that a tiny ethnic group like the Ogoni had been able to muster, the much more populous and much more radicalized, began to organize. On December 11, 1998, Ijaw leaders gathered in Kaiama and, in an echo of the Ogoni ultimatum of six years earlier declared that all oil companies were to leave by December 30, "passing the resolution of the issue of resource ownership and control of the Ijaw area of the Niger Delta." When December 30 came around, security forces fired on Ijaw youth seeking to implement the terms of the Kaiama Declaration in the Bayelsa State capital, Yenagoa. A one-week state of emergency was declared as Nigerian troops and youth fought running battles throughout Bayelsa.

The tragedy of the Niger Delta story is that it could be seen through the eyes of anyone of the many Delta minorities affected by oil production. Urhobo, Ijaw, Etche, Itsekiri, Ogoni, Edo, Efik – have some version of the sorry tale to tell. When I visited Niger in January 2005, however, the Ijaw community of Kula was in the red. A few weeks earlier, angry that Shell's and Chevron's promised development projects had not been fulfilled, thousands of Kula villagers had occupied the companies' flow stations in the area, shut in 120,000 barrels of oil a day. The protesters had refused to leave until a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed, clear guarantees of compensation and infrastructure projects for the community.

Over the years, MoU s have become standard operating procedure for international oil companies and local communities, who know dealing with each other directly is infinitely preferable to leaving things to the Nigerian government. Unfortunately, MoUs are, by nature, informal documents, outlining generally agreed-upon principles, and rarely amount to much more than a handful of promises such as financing the construction of boreholes or clinics – made by an oil company in exchange for a peaceful operating environment. Routinely, when communities feel promises are not being met to take over flow stations or otherwise sabotage operations in an attempt to draw attention to the problem.

After several weeks of shut-in production in Kula in December 2004, the dispute had been resolved thanks to some heavy-handed intervention by the Rivers State governor (and probably some money thrown at the village chief), but tensions were still running high. Kula elders were threatening to make life hell for Shell and Chevron, and no one doubted the potential for violence.

And so it only made sense to pay a visit to Kula. Nearly everyone who visits the Delta begins by flying into Port Harcourt, the unofficial oil capital of Nigeria. There are daily flights

from London, Paris, and Houston, as well as dozens a day from Lagos and Abuja. Outside the airport, fleets of gleaming, air-conditioned SUVs, their engines purring in the stifling heat, sit waiting to receive sweating politicians and oil-industry personnel as they work their way out of the screaming chaos of the arrivals hall. The flight from Lagos takes about an hour and I had been told by everyone that it was the only reasonable way to make the trip-that, despite Nigeria's appalling civil-aviation safety record,* trying to go by land would be a mark of total insanity.

But I was determined not to fly. I kept thinking of the wavy lines Adwoa had drawn on my notepad between Benin City and Warri, and it seemed a shame to traverse them from thousands of feet in the air. I wanted to know what "trouble" looked like on the ground. And so, at seven o'clock one sweltering morning, along with eight other passengers and mountains of luggage, I piled into the back of a decrepit early-1980s Peugeot 504 operated by the Edo State government.

Note: Within just a few weeks in late 2005, three embarrassing accidents claimed the lives of more than 200 people in Nigeria. One plane burned for hours on the runway at Port Harcourt because the airport had no functioning fire engines, killing over 100 people. Another flight crashed and killed 117, and it took authorities fifteen hours to find the crash site. In a third incident, an Air France jet plowed into several head of cattle that had strayed onto the runway in Port Harcourt. The offending livestock were quickly scooped up by airport employees who made an impromptu barbecue from the carcasses.

It took about two hours for the quorum of passengers to turn up and longer for them to buy their tickets, check out the roadworthiness of the car, and make official their commitment to the journey, during which time we early birds sat sweating into the mangled wooden benches and loose springs left from the vehicle's once-plush vinyl seats. Every ten or twenty seconds, an arm would reach through an open window and dangle tampons or sausage rolls or bicycle chains front of my face, holding them there until I could firmly refuse the offer.

With the car filled, it looked like we were ready to go - but not before obtaining a sort of insurance. A heavily perspiring preacher appeared at the open door with an open Bible pressed against his lips the edges of its crinkly pages turned a rich dark brown from years spittle. At the top of his lungs, and at the breakneck speed of a horse race announcer, he prayed for all our souls: *"Lord in the name of the holy savior Jesus Christ we pray for these passengers we pray for you to deliver them safely to their destinations we pray for their luggage and for you to protect them and let them survive the journey we pray for the driver and ask that you watch over him and the other drivers on the road we pray for the car he is driving and pray for its engine and its suspension and gears and axles and ask you to watch over it we pray for the condition of the road."* And on and on until every potential hazard of the journey ahead had been accounted for and cleared with the Almighty. After we had muttered a dutiful "amen," the preacher slammed the door and we were off.

Traveling by road in Africa is never a relaxing experience, but the journey into the Delta from Lagos literally bleeds with misery. Waves of human suffering lap against the edges of the road, periodically splattered back into place like stagnant puddles under the wheels of passing cars. Dystopian landscapes flashed by the windows like the pages of a demented Dr. Seuss book, or an Old Testament catalog of ordeals. Heaps of burning garbage, some as tall as buildings, sent flames and smoke and swirling ash into the already stifling air of the car. Lepers wrapped in bandages - ostracized from their villages and unable to obtain work- rushed up to passing cars,

waving crude handmade flags to warn of potholes, in the hope that motorists would fling loose change at them before they got too close. As for the road it was little more than an endless stretch of stray boulders, man-sized craters, and rivers of open sewage, punctuated every few hundred yards by semiofficial "roadblocks"- generally just two rubber tires a pile of sticks, and a pair of policemen wielding mangrove branches and shaking down motorists for loose change.

Swerving violently to avoid potholes and oncoming trucks, our driver popped a gospel tape into the cassette deck, and began humming along quietly. The fashionably dressed woman in her early twenties sitting next to me looked up from her book and led the others in a gentle rendition of the hymn "I Know Jesus Is My Savior." About an hour into the revival session when our little improvised traveling choir had transformed into a boisterous, clapping octet,.

By the time I was dropped off in front of my hotel in Port Harcourt, both legs were asleep, and I was sporting several bruises from the elbows, door handles, and luggage buckles that had been pressed into my flesh as the car dropped in and out of craters most Western SUV-drivers wouldn't dare tackle. A journey of 350 miles – approximately the distance from New York to Boston- had taken two full days. As the car pulled away in a clatter of loose bodywork and a pillow of black exhaust, I caught sight of the Edo Lines slogan pasted onto its windshield: "Jesus, lead us."

The Son of God, I soon discovered, was in high demand in Port Harcourt. Nigeria, like most of Africa, is deeply religious, but in the Delta, the charismatic evangelical brand of Pentacostal Christianity, much of it imported from the United States, has been particularly successful at finding adherents. In some parts of Port Harcourt, every other building seems to be a church-or rather, a "ministry" – and every few hours you hear clapping hands and peals of boisterous worship.

And it 's not hard to see why messages of miracle and redemption have found a ready audience. Here, where the overwhelming majority of people have nothing, epic helpings of a highly visible wealth have been bestowed on poor neighbors and friends seemingly overnight. In a more meritocratic corner of the world, the poor might believe they're poor because they haven't worked hard enough. In the Delta, though, where there is little connection between hard work, fabulous wealth, it is much easier for the poor to believe they're poor because they haven't *prayed* hard enough. Here, TV sets seem perpetually tuned to American game shows where somebody's always winning a new car, or to evangelical broadcasts where grinning American women with big hair and plastic cheeks are praying for our souls.

If Abuja, Nigeria's purpose-built federal capital district, is like Washington, and Lagos, its manic and multicultural commercial hub, its New York, then Port Harcourt must be Nigeria's Houston. A tangle of fading expressways and overpasses that sprang up during the oil boom of the 1970s, the town is surrounded for miles by giant natural-gas flares and billboards flogging holy salvation. It's a small and rough-hewn town, a place of hustlers and hawkers and white men in SUVs, where the neighborhoods bear such exotic names as "Travel Amadi Layout," "GRA phase II," and "D/ Line." And, in a country that has become famous around the world as a nerve center for husterism and scams both felonious and petty, Port Harcourt's fine confidence men have come up with what must be the mother of frauds: "selling" houses that don't belong to them. All over town, nervous homeowners have resorted to painting THIS HOUSE IS NOT FOR

SALE on their exterior walls, as a warning to hapless househunters who might otherwise find themselves being given a guided tour of the premises while the owners are away.

Yet despite the ostentatious wealth of a lucky few, the city is unmistakably poor - desperately, grindingly poor. The hundreds of thousands of people who flocked to Port Harcourt during the oil boom-turning it from a city of 200,000 to one of 1.1 million within a few years-have been joined on the streets by thousands more young people from all over the Delta who continue to treat "Potako" as a default destination when all else has failed. The Delta's youngest and brightest run alongside moving cars on the expressway, in the suffocating tropical heat, in the hopes that someone will roll down a window and buy a pen or a phone card or some AA batteries off them, before one of the legions of legless panhandlers has had a chance to bang on the car door. It's not a place to spend your honeymoon.

Kula, like much of Ijaw country, is not reachable by road. A people whose destiny has been tied to tidal fishing for centuries, the Ijaw live on top of steamy, spongelike mangrove swamps that rarely climb to more than three or four feet above sea level. They live precariously at the best of times, in mud and straw huts that seem to hover over the water. A patch of rough weather at sea can wash away a village in a matter of hours. Picture an African Louisiana without a levee.

And, like much of Ijaw country, Kula is nowadays considered unsafe territory for a white man traveling alone, thanks to increased militant activity and widespread anger at foreign oil companies. Even if you managed to negotiate a reasonable rate for boat hire, the warning goes, you would have a hard time convincing village youth that you were not an oil-company worker and should not be taken hostage. Only a few weeks before my visit, a foreign journalist using an inexperienced guide had been kidnapped and held in the creeks for several hours. I was painfully aware, therefore, that I would need a guide I could count on. Someone with some real star power, who knew the creeks like the back of his hand. Someone who spoke the local tongue, who knew how to sweet-talk an armed militia, and who wouldn't lose his cool in a sticky situation. It took a few phone calls to pin him down to a meeting, but with a little persistence, I was soon face to face with just such a man: the one and only Felix Tuodolo.

In the late 1990s, Tuodolo had founded the Ijaw Youth Council vanguard of radicalized youth that he had tried to channel into a constructive, coordinated advocacy network along the lines of MOSOP. It had made him one of the most respected and credible voices change among the Ijaw. Now in his mid-twenties and studying for Ph.D. in conflict studies at Liverpool University, Tuodolo was back in Port Harcourt on winter break, and asked me to meet him in the lobby of the Presidential Hotel.

"The lobby of the Presidential Hotel" is itself a timeless African cliché - the kind of place immortalized in Graham Greene novels and James Bond films, where figures with many zeros are whispering over glasses of Chivas Regal, and diplomats' wives come to get their hair done. Sit in one of its leather armchairs for more than a few minutes and you will be treated to a nickelodeon of passing kingmakers and rogues, from cabinet ministers to wildcatters, UN technocrats, foreign correspondents. It's the kind of place journalists can come and take care of

all their interviews in the course of an afternoon over a steady succession of scotch-and-sodas and delicate insinuations. The kind of place some people never leave.

As I sat staring blankly at the farrago of Louis Vuitton cases and quiet pinstripe handshakes silhouetted against the lobby's automatic doors - on the other side of which a conveyor belt of taxis and chauffeured cars unloaded their self-important cargo at what seemed perfectly timed intervals of forty-five seconds-I began to wonder if Felix was ever going to turn up. Then, from behind me, I heard an ironic voice declare majestically, "The president emeritus of the Ijaw Youth Council!" to peals of laughter and the enthusiastic slap-slap, a round of athletic handshakes. I turned to find a slim young man tight white T-shirt and wire-frame spectacles grinning modestly trying to swat away his fame.

When the adulation had subsided, Felix and I withdrew to the bar and tried to have a conversation, but we were constantly interrupted by calls to his cell phone from young activists asking him to take sides in various disagreements. Then, as I started to explain my work, a group of young men approached and launched into what seemed like a plaintive-sounding speech in Ijaw that ended with Felix reluctantly giving them a little money. More phone calls and more handshakes followed, and an exasperated Tuodolo finally asked me just to meet him the next morning for a trip into Kula. He would, he assured me, make all the necessary arrangements.

The road from Port Harcourt leads south, inevitably, toward the sprawling mouth of the Niger Delta. And as it insinuates its way through thick forests of coconut palms, it passes the usual heaps of acrid garbage smoldering in all their tear-jerking glory. But here, going south from Port Harcourt, the road also takes on several forms of punctuation unique to the Delta. First there are the fences and barriers of the international oil companies, each painted in the companies' signature colors and accompanied by rusted but still-menacing signs that warn against unauthorized entry. Then there are the small wooden shacks staffed by young men selling glass bottles of black-market fuel, under the noses of the oil companies. And everywhere, everywhere, are the election posters for Rivers State governor Peter Odili, considered by many one of the world's most corrupt politicians. Sporting a broad-brimmed white trilby hat and walking stick, Odili beams out over the misery like a grinning T. J. Eckleburg, framed by the caption "The Portrait of a Performer."

After about an hour, the road peters out in a place called Abonema, at which point only watercraft can continue the journey. Felix had me wait in the car while he negotiated the boat hire. "If they see a white man," he said, "they will double the price, and you won't get them to budge."

The "speedboat" we ended up with was a simple fiberglass hull with a sputtering outboard motor strapped to its stern, but it hugged every curve as if on a racetrack, as we whizzed through channels of water at a good thirty to forty knots, slowing down only to avoid capsizing the delicate wooden pirogues paddled by fishermen, or when Felix and the driver disagreed about the best route to take. Listening to these detailed arguments over exactly which clump of mangrove trees was which, I was faintly embarrassed that the only visual aide memoire I found at all meaningful were the occasional pipelines and flow stations and pressure valves

belonging to the oil companies. My own vernacular. Without them, and without my guides, it might have taken me years to find my way back to Abonema.

Like mice in a giant watery maze, we traveled a good twenty-five miles in anything but a straight line. Every time we sped along a broad boulevardlike waterway flanked by mangrove trees and I thought things looked easy, the driver would swerve violently into what appeared to be a riverbank but turned out to be a "shortcut," and we would blast our way through a dense alleyway of water no wider than the boat itself. The motor failed every few minutes, and then we would sit waiting for the driver to repair it, overcome by - to me - completely alien absence of noise. Even the quietest places on earth have some sort of ambient sound-a rustling wind, chirping bird, the distant hum of fluorescent lights. But here, in the deathly humid air of the Delta, when the engine failed, and the waves stopped lapping, there was total silence-like a pitch-black blindness of the earth.

After an hour and a half, I noticed a village of mud huts, skirted by a black, grimy beach that appeared to be blanketed with several inches of garbage. As our boat drew near, a constellation of small faces looked up and paused. Faint shouts of excitement could be heard, and a crowd of young men quickly gathered along the wooden landing pier, staring with apprehension at the white man approaching in the speedboat.

The driver tied up the boat, and a dozen children ran down to see if we had any luggage they could carry. A sign on the pier welcomed us to the "Kula Kingdom." Felix introduced himself and a ripple of recognition fanned across the crowd. The chief of the kingdom was away in Port Harcourt, so we were welcomed by Nye Morine, who described himself as "coordinator of Ekulama Houses," and allowed us entry into the village after a little ceremonial negotiation with Felix, but not before letting it be known in his loudest English, "We are still suffering. Shell, Chevron have done nothing. Nothing!"

We were led up the dark staircase of a roofless, disintegrated concrete building, where we sat in a ring of plastic chairs as the men gathered around to have their say. Victor Solomon, an articulate thirty-two-year-old who described himself as a "youth leader," did most of the talking, while others nodded and prodded and whispered in his ear. It was not the first time the men of Kula had entertained the press.

"We are still suffering, look how we are suffering" was their refrain, and I was going to hear it several dozen more times during the course of the conversation. I asked about the flow station they had taken over. "The government has persuaded us in different ways to open the station," they said. "Finally, they persuaded us with the military to open it. They told us, if we don't open it, they will open it for us." There was no need to explain what that meant.

A well-rehearsed list of grievances followed:

"Forty-three years, what do you see? People dying of starvation, hunger, illness. The CLOs [Community Liaison Officers sent by the oil companies] and the managers connive to steal our compensation. When there is a spill, they give us 35 naira [about 25 cents] per net." "There is not one Kula person working for Shell. There are people in Kula with master's degrees, Ph. Ds - we even have some who have gone abroad. There is not one Kula person working for Shell. Not one."

"We are suffering," mumbled the Greek chorus. "Look how we are suffering."

"The minute you go near a facility, they come out with guns. So you don't even have a right to demand anything from them." In 1997, Victor claimed, he was shot in the leg by the Nigerian navy on orders from Shell, after he tried to protest an oil spill.

"We have no local government."

"When I was a child, you could see fish."

"See how we are suffering."

A thin, intense-looking man named Otonye Lucky Alalibo appeared abruptly from the back of the room and handed me a letter certifying his graduation from a Shell-sponsored "Youths Training Scheme" in Bakery and Confectionery. It was dated 1997, when Lucky was still a "youth," and he said he had heard nothing since. The letter was slightly soiled and creased, but had obviously been treated with great care during its eight years in the jungle - a black and-white reminder of dreams deferred. It praised him for being, among other things, "well-behaved."

It was back to Victor: "Shell have leased this land, our grandfathers' land, for forty-six years, and they haven't paid even ten kobo in rent," the symbolic sum being worth around one-fifteenth of an American cent.

Tubotamola Pokubo, who called himself vice president of the Kula Youth, returned to the issue of the fishing nets, pointing out, "When there is a spill, Shell pay 400 naira [about \$3.00] for a bundle of nets. A new bundle costs thousands [of naira]. They pay five naira [around four cents] a yard." Referring to the takeover of the flow station, Pokubo added, "Tell Shell to take very good care of this community, or next time we are going to blow it up. We need the White [i.e., the white man] from Shell to come here for himself."

We walked around the village, a crowd of twenty young men staying uncomfortably close. When we walked, they walked. When we stopped, they stopped. I felt a bit like a spoonful of honey being waved back and forth among bees. Yellow and red oil drums painted with the Shell logo lay scattered about, some being used as work surfaces or storage containers by the women. One woman cleaned fish from a tray swarming with flies, throwing the fish into a bucket of brown water. She told me she sometimes barely made 1,000 naira a day.

In a nearby shack a hollowed-out old man sat in the dark, his eyes bulging as he whittled silently. He looked frightened by the crowd. A young man next to me piped up to say it was his father, and that he was making paddles for canoes.

They took us next to a woman weaving "fish cards" - plate-sized straw paddles to which fish are attached for drying in the sun. The woman said it took her ten minutes to make each one, which she might then sell for two naira (about one and a half cents). On a good day, she said, she could make a hundred fish cards. The men showed me a flight of stairs that went nowhere, ending after the sixth or seventh step. They belonged to the first brick house in the village, built in 1973, which was now little more than a hollow rampart of crumbling masonry. I was surprised to hear someone still lived in it; in fact, it was a prized dwelling, for a big man.

A smiling, good-natured young man named James Sunday showed me the wood and straw house next door, where he lived. A cobra had recently made its way into the house and killed his brother. "We are fighting for our rights," James said earnestly. "To get our human rights." I later learned he meant fighting literally, as he had joined the forces of the Ijaw warlord Dokubo Asari a few months earlier, when Asari had declared war on the Nigerian state and sent

the price of oil up by \$2 a barrel on the international market. Ijaws believe the god Egbesu protects them from the firepower of the Nigerian military. James told me, "We wear charms and amulets that make us bulletproof."

They showed me the "community toilets," which were two wooden stalls perched above a stretch of open water. Then they showed me the "sandfill" they said had been promised by Shell, which they claimed was a job half done, and could not be built on because it would wash away in the rainy season. I looked over to see Felix crying.

We began walking to the "hospital," which they said had two or three nurses but no doctor. The nearest doctor was back in Abonem. As we walked, a soft-spoken young man named Ajemina Daniel grabbed my arm and informed me that it had been decided that this was the year they would destroy the flow station if their demands were not met. I asked if they were not worried about the navy guards with their guns. Not at all, he said. "We will consult our gods."

I was shown the Kula Women's Development Center, with two words "Fashion and Desiner" painted over one door. It had been opened last year, but apparently stayed open for only two months. I was told that the money from Shell that had been supposed to come every month had stopped coming.

They showed me a drinking well, filled with thick brown opaque water. To prove the point, they lowered a dirty yellow plastic bucket then passed it round and drank from it. They offered it to me, but I refused.

Ajemina Daniel approached again. He showed me his license to be a quartermaster, which he had obtained when he was twenty-one. He was now thirty and said he had never worked. He began to grow angry, and clearly wanted my attention. "My grandmother died three years ago, and she is still in the mortuary in Port Harcourt. I have no money to bury her. I am so angry. I wish you weren't a journalist; I would have kidnapped you and held you here. I am so angry; I am ready to sacrifice my life. I don't care if they kill me."

Felix injected a little capital into the Kula economy by buying two *piti* (a sort of tamale made of mashed corn and plantain), which he fished out of a slimy bucket. He offered me one but I declined, though they did look nice. James laughed sympathetically and said, "You know they are not well prepared." Several men joked that if I had been with Chevron or Shell, they would have insisted I eat them.

We passed on to what they told me was a bathing pond – its water was jet black-and began to walk back to the jetty. I noticed a lone generator hooked up to a stereo blasting reggae. An older man, his breath reeking of alcohol, rushed up to ask if I was with Chevron or Shell. I explained that I was a journalist, but he seemed unsatisfied with the response, and asked if I was a journalist with Chevron or Shell. James informed me that he wanted to "cause me harm" if I was.

As we prepared to leave, amid a blizzard of grinning requests for money, I noticed that this tiny village kingdom had not one but three jetties, all right next to one another. When I asked about this, it was explained to me that the one to which we had tied our boat had been built in 1982 by Shell; another had been started in 1989 by OMPADEC (Oil and Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission, the military regime's short-lived attempt at addressing the grievances of the Delta), but had never been finished; the third had been erected in 2004 by Shell, but not officially put into commission. Like the clinic without a doctor, the schoolroom without teachers, and the women's center that quickly lost its funding, these jetties were emblematic of the compulsive, reactive Band-Aid approach to the Niger Delta's problems. Every

so often, a community would grow restless and noisy, so someone from the government or the oil company would throw them a bone in the form of a schoolroom or a borehole or a jetty. And then, just as quickly, the villagers would be forgotten and left to return to weaving fish cards and squabbling over cash handouts.

For years, the holding pattern worked, at least according to its own perverse logic. Conflict simmered throughout the Delta, but it followed a template that was easy to understand: suffering, frustration, protest, organized uprising, violent crackdown, Memorandum of Understanding, token development project, discreet cash handout, return to suffering. Year after year, the same tired set pieces were acted out, with only the cast of characters changing, a sort of rotating repertory of protests and pipelines and white men arriving in helicopters.

Then, in the late 1990S, people started getting creative.

In 1993 seven cases of "pipeline vandalization" were officially recorded in the Niger Delta. A couple seemed politically motivated, a couple seemed attempts to elicit cleanup contracts from the resulting spills. The reasons for the others were unclear. In 1996 the number of pipelines vandalized was 33, and in 1998 the figure had risen to 57. Still, most cases were treated as outcomes of economic disputes or simple sabotage meant to score political points. In 1999, though, a whopping 497 instances of pipeline vandalism were recorded, and in the following year there were over 600. Suddenly oil companies had to deal with a threat to their operations that was more complicated than a few kids getting carried away. The culprits were not just damaging company property, they were stealing crude oil and selling it on the black market. By 2004 Nigeria was losing as much as 200,000 barrels of crude oil a day-nearly 10 percent of its output. An influential newsletter called what was happening in the Delta "theft on an industrial scale."

The practice, known as "illegal bunkering" (in its legal form, bunkering is the act of loading fuel onto a large ship's on-deck fuel bunker), involves tapping into a pipeline, filling plastic jerry cans with crude oil, and taking the oil away in speedboats to waiting barges, which in turn sell the oil to large oceangoing tankers, which then sell it to refineries in neighboring countries such as Ivory Coast, at a considerable profit.

This is not a job for amateurs. Multinational oil companies tend not to invest in pipelines that can be sliced through with an ordinary hacksaw. Typically, bunkerers focus their efforts on "manifolds," where multiple feeder pipelines are joined by bolts and welding that can be compromised with a certain amount of patience and the right equipment. To make sure a bunkering operation is successful, the valves must be opened to allow for maximum pressure, manifolds must be pried apart and welded back together quickly and cleanly, and everyone has to know that they're not going to be shot at by security guards in the process. From beginning to end, it's a process lubricated by official complicity and petty bribery. "No illegal bunkering would take place without the technical support of SPDC," says Sofiri Joab-Peterside, a sociologist at Port Harcourt's Centre for Advanced Social Studies, referring to Shell's subsidiary in Nigeria. "Most of these are [indigenous] contract staff, with no benefits, they are paid so little. They are so disgruntled that they become very willing allies." Before a ship is loaded with illegally bunkered crude, its owners will have "settled" the relevant security forces, the exact sum depending on the size of the vessel. For big barges, the Commanding Officer can expect as much as 2 million naira (about \$15,000), the Base Intelligence Officer 1 million naira, and the Officer in Charge 500,000 naira.

In recent years, the federal government has made what appears to be a genuine effort to get illegal bunkering under control, but in doing so has only drawn attention to how entrenched the problem is at the highest echelons of the Nigerian political landscape. In late 2003 the *MT African Pride*, a Nigerian tanker vessel, was intercepted at sea near Shell's Forcados oil-export terminal, carrying some 11,000 barrels of unauthorized crude in its bunkers. Its thirteen Russian crew were arrested and the ship seized by the Nigerian navy, but several months later, in August 2004, it emerged that the *African Pride* had somehow disappeared from custody. For reasons unclear, the Russians had been allowed back on board mere days after their arrest, and the 11,000 barrels of crude had somehow been transferred to another ship and replaced in the *African Pride's* bunkers with 11,000 barrels of seawater. Two of Nigeria's highest-ranking rear admirals were subsequently court-martialed and sacked for their role in the ship's disappearance. For many Nigerians high-profile cases such as this are proof that illegal bunkering has morphed from an activity enjoyed by frustrated youth looking for easy money into a professional industry managed by tightly organized, heavily armed syndicates of bunkering Mafiosi. At the very top of this Nigerian Cosa Nostra, it is widely believed, sit some of the country's most senior politicians.

Although ever-growing numbers of the Delta's residents are in some way involved with a bunkering mafia, few are willing to speak with foreign journalists and even fewer to serve as guides to those wanting to watch bunkering activities up close. After all, the sudden approach of a speedboat carrying a stranger with a notepad or a camera toward a manifold being pried apart by a group of young men with AK-47s, surrounded by jerry cans filled with highly flammable liquid, is unlikely to end happily. However, in Port Harcourt, "Nelson," a quiet and sincere young Ijaw from Oluasiri, was willing to see what he could do for me.

We met over a 7UP in the bar of my hotel, where he told me conventional crude oil bunkering was yesterday's news. The mafiosi who controlled it kept the lion's share of the profit and used the disenchanting local youth only for labor. "Not everyone could partake in it," Nelson said. "It was exclusively a game for rich people." In spring 2004 a more pervasive, and far more dangerous practice- which Nelson called "local bunkering"- had emerged.

In an effort to reclaim bunkering from the bunkerers, Nelson's community had turned their attention away from the crude oil and toward a lower-hanging fruit: natural gas. Enterprising youth had discovered the Shell gas pipeline going through Oluasiri, laid deep at the bottom of the riverbed. They had hired teams of divers to drill holes at three different points along the gas pipeline and attach hoses to the boreholes. Where the hoses came up to the surface, valves had been attached to control the flow of gas coming from the pipeline. The product that comes out of those valves is a volatile substance that is not quite crude oil and not quite kerosene (which is what crude turns into when the gas has been distilled out of it), but something in between that still has a lot of gas in it. The bunkerers let it sit for two or three days until it turns into kerosene, which is then sold to villagers for use as a cooking fuel. This bootleg kerosene is not as pure as what is sold legally, and when people put it in their stoves, it can explode and kill them. But it costs a fraction of what it otherwise would, and provides a handsome income for the unemployed youths of the area.

But the youths haven't been content to dash a bit of kerosene to the womenfolk, or distribute it in nearby villages. They have begun selling the product to black-market petroleum marketers, who take it to the larger provincial towns in the Delta such as Mbiama and Yenagoa. Some bunkered kerosene from Oluasiri has made it as far as Warri and even neighboring Cameroon. Many youths have also become involved in "trucking," a practice whereby tanker trucks half-filled with refined fuel stop off on their way to deliver to filling stations and top up

their tankers with a little bunkered kerosene. The diluted product is then sold to unsuspecting gas stations for the price of regular unleaded.

"Crude oil is no longer marketable," said Nelson. "The federal government has done a lot to put a stop to that. So now we have this local bunkering. And unlike with crude oil, now *everybody* is involved. Shell staff, security guards, *everyone*." A note of despair was audible in his voice as he told me how an organized-crime racket had become a game for women and children. "Almost everybody has become a petrol dealer now. People come night and day to fill up their cans." Nelson was a civil servant, working part-time toward a master's degree in social studies. In his research, he was looking at the social dynamics behind why people in the Delta have turned to illegal bunkering. But as time went on and he watched his less-educated friends get rich overnight, this budding academic was finding it harder to keep a bright line between student and subject. "My friends keep encouraging me to get involved, and I have been tempted." He looked down into his 7UP, clearly weighing how much more he wanted to say. "In fact," he said finally, his face filling with shame, "I am now also making some arrangements to join in."

Nelson explained how an operation's overhead costs break down. The divers are paid 1.5 million naira to dive down and connect a hose to the gas pipeline - generally, they have worked for Shell previously as contract laborers and laid the pipe themselves, so they know exactly where it is and can exact a steep fee for this expertise. Shell security operatives have to be bought off as well, so they will warn the bunkerers if soldiers or police approach as part of a crackdown. Another 1 million naira a month is typically given to the Shell employee responsible for operating the valves, so he will keep the pressure up on the pipeline. Just before Christmas, when pipeline pressure tends to be low, local contractors working for Shell had demanded 4 million naira from the community to keep the pressure up. The bunkerers had not been able to raise the funds, so Oluasiri had had a lean Christmas.

"If you are not corrupt, your family will curse you, your community will curse you, your wife will curse you," Nelson said with resignation, and more than a hint of self-justification. "Corruption is now the name of the game."

The really dangerous work, however, falls to the three or four area boys who "own" each of the loading points. After a while, the boys start to look pale and unhealthy from days spent inhaling natural gas at close quarters. Not to mention that the slightest spark even if from two bits of metal rubbing against each other-can set off an almighty explosion that will be heard and seen for miles around. This happens with alarming frequency, and many young men have been killed stealing oil. In May 2006 more than two hundred people lost their lives when a pipeline outside Lagos burst into flames in the early-morning hours. Investigations showed hundreds of jerry cans lined up near the site of the explosion, an indication that locals had come under cover of night to collect fuel from the damaged pipeline.

But grisly stories like this don't deter anyone in the Delta. "Each of them is four million or five million naira richer than he would be otherwise," said Nelson, putting on his sociologist's hat. "How can you tell them to stop? How can you even talk to them? A civil servant makes 18,000 naira a month, and you have a young boy making 1 million naira a month. Today, even if you give these boys a free scholarship to go and study in America, they wouldn't go."

Nelson agreed to meet me the next morning for another trip into the creeks. He promised nothing, but said we could probably pay a discreet visit to Ijaw-kiri, an illicit trading post for stolen crude and gas.

The trip to Ijaw-kiri began much as the trip to Kula had begun: with a long, bumpy drive. This time, though, it was to Ogbia, a backwater teeming with garbage and stray dogs. On the way we passed the town of Mbiama, a major entrepot for the bunkering business. Along the riverbank, next to a bridge, a dozen tanker trucks were parked in a row, apparently unattended. At night, they would be loaded with bunkered fuel from speedboats.

Once in Ogbia, Nelson and I hired a decrepit-looking speedboat and clambered aboard. After an hour of darting and diving through the creeks, we arrived at Ijaw-kiri, which seemed the usual collection of a dozen straw and concrete huts, not unlike Kula. But in Kula, I had been greeted by proud village elders and curious children. Here, I landed to find a makeshift terrace with plastic tables and chairs, and something resembling a pinball machine, a rudimentary version of the contraptions seen on *The Price Is Right*. I was told it was called "lucky game" and that people played it for money. Four fat, sweating teenage girls giggled and beckoned me from behind a corner, calling out "*oyibo*" (a Nigerian nickname for white man). They were there to service the local lads who worked in the bunkering business, helping them to unload their newfound cash as quickly as they had acquired it. Ijaw-kiri was the Oluasiri area's very own Las Vegas—a little mud-and-wattle sin city buried deep in the jungle and owing its existence to the trade in stolen oil.

Nelson had me sit on the terrace while he went to negotiate on my behalf. A resentful-looking girl came up to my table and stared at me until I realized she was waiting to take my order. I asked for a Fanta and a warm orange soda was brought out. Just a few hundred yards away, and clearly visible, was the giant Soku gas terminal run by Shell, its exhaust stack spitting a tall orange flare. While I waited speedboat pulled up and five soldiers in combat fatigues clamber onto the jetty, rifles dangled carelessly over shoulders. They seem uninterested in me, the nervous-looking *oyibo* with no good reason be there, sipping Fanta on plastic lawn furniture. Instead, they duck in and out of each hut, collecting their hush money, demanding soft drinks, and generally existing in a cloud of high-fives and abdomen busting guffaws. Nelson came back and said he wasn't having much luck. We moved to another concrete-and-tin shack a few yards away. More plastic lawn furniture, more rounds of Fanta. It became apparent that virtually no one lived in Ijaw-kiri and that every house was actually a bar. Eventually, a thin, withered-looking man emerged and, after a few words in Ijaw with Nelson, agreed to talk.

He was thirty-six, and a timber dealer by trade. In the dry season when times were good, he could make as much as 100,000 naira (almost \$800) a month. In the rainy season, he made nothing. By local standards, it was not bad money, enough to keep his wife and seven children from starving. But he thought his timber-dealing days were probably behind him now. In the past three or four weeks, he had become involved in a far more lucrative trade.

"Three years ago, I started seeing people improving their lives he told me, speaking in Ijaw with Nelson translating. His lack of comfort in English, Nigeria's official language, was a sign that he had had more than a few years of primary-school education. "I began watch so I could learn the ins and outs." He explained that he worked in a team of ten to fifteen people, who together netted between 80,000 and 100,000 naira (around \$600-\$800) a day. On a good day, though, the figure could be ten times that, enough to give each member of

missing page

boys with no jobs, no access to schools, and almost certainly no real future ahead of them have been rounded up and organized into gangs and militias that inevitably clash with authorities and with one another.

During election campaigns, particularly those of 2003, many of these armed gangs have been hired by state and local politicians looking to intimidate communities into voting for them. Many expect the 2007 election season to see a return to the use of such armed militias by political campaigns. Leaving aside what it means for the future of a young democracy to have elections fought down the barrel of a gun, no one seems to have thought seriously about what the gangs would do after the elections were over. After the 2003 campaign, most Niger Delta militants felt their illegal activities—from bunkering to arms smuggling—had been given a veneer of legitimacy, not to mention impunity, by the powers that be. Some gangs became enlisted in the already fiercely divisive contests for village chieftancies - channeled into supporting one side or the other in the battle for the spoils of local power. But many also felt that they had brought certain politicians to power, and that these people owed them something in return—something more than a little cash and a condescending off-you-go. When such rewards were not forthcoming, they grew more resentful.

Had it not been for a rather breathtaking series of events in September 2004, though, the world might never have seen just how serious the problem of armed gangs in the Niger Delta had become. A fairly obscure youth militia calling itself the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force blasted its way into the international headlines that month when its leader, the charismatic Mujahid Dokubo Asari, declared "all-out war" on the Nigerian state and threatened to shut down the country's crude-oil production. As part of what it called "Operation Locust Feast," the NDPVF demanded that all oil companies evacuate their personnel from the Delta, or prepare to engage in fully fledged armed combat.

There was more than a little irony to the posturing and the militancy, of course. Asari and the NDPVF virtually owed their existence to Rivers State Governor Peter Odili. In 2001, threatened by the growing success and moral legitimacy of Felix Tuodolo's Ijaw Youth Council, Odili had engineered a split in its leadership - pitting Asari against the original founders. Asari assumed control of the group, as in the 2003 elections proved to be a loyal ally of Odili, helping him be reelected. But Odili soon dropped Asari, who returned to illegal bunkering as a way to pay for weapons for his boys.

By August 2004, the NDPVF had begun clashing with a rival gang, the Niger Delta Vigilante, led by Ateke Tom and hired by Odili to keep Asari in check. Dozens of people were killed and Port Harcourt paralyzed by the violence. In September, aware that he had been completely abandoned by his onetime patron in the State House. Asari told his boys the battle was on. In the space of few weeks, small youth militia that had started life as an illegal bunkering ring that transformed itself into a rebel movement claiming 2,000 fighters and bent on bringing the oil production of the world's seventh-largest producer to a standstill.

The reaction of the Nigerian government, the international companies, and the global petroleum markets was as predictable as it was swift. Shell immediately evacuated two hundred staff from Ijaw country. The price of oil spiked over \$50 a barrel for the first time in history. And the Nigerian government dispatched helicopter gunships to Port Harcourt to shell NDPVF positions in the outlying village of Tombia. Two hundred forty people were reported missing and witnesses spoke of the fighting as "something they had seen only during the Biafra war." President Olusegun Obasanjo found him: under intense pressure from an oil-hungry United

States to bring the matter to a quick resolution and, incredibly, invited Asari to the presidential palace at Aso Rock, just outside Abuja.

To have been a fly on the wall at the Aso Rock meeting would have been to take a front-row seat at the near-total unraveling of Niger state and society. For here, behind closed doors, was a scene that made a mockery not only of the amour propre and sovereign self-regard - one of Africa's most important nations, but also of the African tradition of deference to one's elders and leaders. Here was Olusegun Obasanjo, sixty-nine years of age, three-time president of his country, active at the highest levels of Nigerian politics since the early 1970s, and a decorated Biafra War hero to boot, being lectured on history and politics by an Ijaw youth leader who days before had been crawling through the creeks with a leaf tied to his forehead to ward against evil spirits. "I could crush you," the president is said to have shouted at Asari at one point during the negotiations. Between them-according to press reports-sat a stern-faced American official making sure that no one got crushed and everyone knew the score.

And the score was Crazy Ethnic Militants 1, Federal Government of Nigeria 0. Obasanjo ordered Asari to sell the NDPVF's weapons to the state and desist from armed struggle in exchange for blanket amnesty and a promise that Asari and the NDPVF would not be targeted by Nigerian troops, as well as an undisclosed sum of money believed to be worth several million dollars (notionally described as payment for surrendered weapons). After days of being chased through the creeks by Nigerian soldiers, Asari and his boys were suddenly given a large amount of money and told they were free to go, as long as they agreed to behave themselves and stop threatening the oil supply to the outside world. It was an extraordinary piece of capitulation on the part of an African head of state with the international stature of Obasanjo, and one that he was unlikely to forget in a hurry.

The oil companies returned to work and the price of crude returned to its previous level. Many Ijaw privately felt that Asari had betrayed their cause, that he had been bought off by Obasanjo and the Americans in Abuja, or that he was simply an opportunist and a fanatic. But in a sign of the profound deficit in true leadership among the peoples of the Delta, publicly at least, Asari quickly became a liberation hero for the Ijaw. Moreover, the NDPVF had simply handed over a few AK-47s to the federal government in exchange for money that would no doubt be spent on more AK-47s, and gone back into the creeks to prepare for round two. The episode had put the authorities in a weak and exposed light, and Ijaw nationalist feeling on strengthened.

Obasanjo bided his time, no doubt sure it would not be long before Asari returned to his mischief. Sure enough, the *casus belli* the president was looking for came in September 2005, when in an interview with a local newspaper Asari called for the dissolution of Nigeria as a unitary state. Asari was swiftly arrested by federal marshals, and taken to Abuja, where he was arraigned on five counts of treason against the Nigerian nation. Asari turned up to the courthouse in a defiant mood, wearing a white T-shirt that read "Self-determination and resource control: any means necessary," which he replaced, once in the courtroom, with a black NDPVF shirt.

When I caught up with Dokubo Asari in April 2005, it was during the lull in his battle against the federal government - just a few months after his Aso Rock meeting with Obasanjo and a few months before his arrest. He had come out of the creeks to take up residence in a palatial home in Port Harcourt, and was giving audiences to representatives of international media. Two conspicuously unarmed boys in a white air-conditioned van took me to Asari's home.

On arrival, I could see why so many Ijaw felt Asari had been bought off by Obasanjo. In the driveway of the compound sat two gleaming Lincoln Navigators, obviously kitted out with

every available option and accessory. Two dozen boys sat in a circle in front of the SUVs while Asari lectured them in Ijaw. I was led inside, unnoticed by the warlord, and asked to wait in the frosty comfort of the house's reception lounge. I settled quickly into one of the overstuffed leather sofas, and became absorbed in the Will Smith movie that was showing on a cinema-sized plasma-screen TV. Asari, the eldest son of a high-court judge, often tells journalists that he is "proud to have been raised with a silver spoon in my mouth," and insists that all his wealth is inherited rather than the result of any devil's bargain with Obasanjo, or the ill-gotten gains of illegal bunkering. Whatever the truth, it was hard to escape the conclusion that his Port Harcourt headquarters was more like one of Mobutu's palaces than a combatant command bunker for the revolution.

Over the better part of an hour, various people drifted in and out of the lounge, ignoring both me and the Will Smith movie. Asari's voice could be heard outside, growing occasionally tetchy and sanctimonious, occasionally quiet and sincere. Eventually I walked into the adjoining NDPVF office to inquire when Asari might be ready to receive me. Apparently the fearless leader was not aware I was waiting for him, because when the young apparatchik went outside to check for me, I heard Asari respond with a petulant "Aww, why you have to bother me like this so late in the day?" A few minutes later, Asari strode into the office wearing a bright orange Texas Longhorns jersey with a giant "4" on it. It struck me as a slightly lazy choice of outfit for a committed anti-imperialist who claims Nelson Mandela and Che Guevara as heroes and has in the past praised Osama bin Laden for standing up to the "arrogance of the West." To be fair to the commandante, though, I had turned up at his home unannounced, so I could hardly expect full combat fatigues or traditional African dress. Asari looked me up and down and I started to introduce myself. "You look like an Arab," he interrupted. "Are you a Jew?" I explained that I was Iranian by background, and he seemed vaguely reassured. He began telling me about his two trips to Iran and how he was once on very friendly terms with the Iranian embassy in Nigeria. "But they have all capitulated now." There was a distant disappointment in his voice.

I was dying to press him on what he meant by this, but could sense that our time together was limited and so made an effort to stay on topic. Why, I asked, had he launched Operation Locust Feast in September? "We were forced into it by the State," he replied curtly. Had the NDPVF really disarmed? "Yes, but getting arms back is very easy," he said dismissively. "If circumstances call for it, if the government decides to fight us, then we will rearm." This much, at least, was hard to argue with. Rumor had it the federal government had paid the NDPVF \$1,000 for each AK-47 they had relinquished last year - though the weapon rarely costs more than \$200 on the black market. It was practically an invitation to rearm.

Only when I put it to him that he had been bribed into quiescence by the Nigerian authorities did Asari come to life. "They bought me off?" he asked, leaning forward and locking eyes. "They bought me off? What moral right do you have? I am one of the most critical people of the government of Nigeria. People can go ahead and say whatever they like. They were not involved with me. We were doing the talking and doing the fighting." He grabbed a framed photograph off his desk and thrust it in my face. It showed him in the bush in full warlord pose - all lumpen grimace and low-slung AKs, complete with belts of ammunition crisscrossing his unbuttoned chest, Rambo style. "Do you think it's easy to walk around carrying arms like that for nine months?"

We were interrupted by a few of the boys from outside, who urgently wanted Asari to settle a dispute over money. Asari invited them in and lapsed into an Ijaw monologue, punctuated by operatic flourishes in English, presumably for my benefit. "With everything I have

I will fight the Nigerian state until they come to their senses" words that seemed particularly calculated to chill. And then, a moment later, "Tell the SSS* - send a message up to Ahuja that if they try to kill me and they fail, it will be mayhem. Oh, the mayhem! I will no longer fight them in the creeks. I will fight them in Lagos and Abuja and Port Harcourt!"

After forty-five minutes of this, I must have looked fidgety, because Asari abruptly shifted gears and started telling the boys an anecdote peppered with enough English that I could follow along. It had to do with Governor Peter Odili - Asari's onetime patron now turned nemesis. During a recent drive through the Delta, the governor's car had run low on fuel miles from the nearest legitimate filling station, forcing Odili's driver to buy fuel from one of the boys alongside the road. But everywhere the car pulled over, the governor was warned that he was about to buy what has become known in the Delta as "Asari fuel" and he had to drive sheepishly away to avoid the awkward publicity of being seen indirectly funding the activities of the NDPVF.

Note *The Nigerian intelligence service.

Asari rolled himself into a great ball of wheezing guffaws as he told this anecdote, slapping his fist on the table and letting his eyes fill with tears at every mention of "Asari fuel." The assembled boys chuckled politely, but seemed far less amused by the story than the great mujahid.

The anecdote might have been entirely apocryphal, and was not likely to be verified by anyone at the State House in Port Harcourt. But it seemed a little uncharitable for the boys not to be rolling on the floor with laughter along with their leader. After all, few would dispute the fact that in many parts of the Delta today anyone who runs out of fuel will be hard pressed to refill with anything other than illegally bunkered product. And when a state governor is forced to buy Asari fuel, you know the situation has reached a farcical extreme.

However, few of the Delta's disgruntled youth see anything remotely comical about the epidemic proportions the illegal bunkering trade has taken on. Instead, most consider it a deadly serious game of chicken with the Nigerian state-a desperate *cri de coeur* from a lost generation that sees no other way to claim its hydrocarbon birthright. Everywhere you go in the Delta, you will hear the same story. Whether Ijaw or Itsekiri, Ogoni or Edo, lean and angry youths will look you straight in the eye if you ask them about illegal bunkering and tell you, "Resource control begins here." It is a slogan for a generation.

"Resource control" is a thorny issue for Nigeria, one that threatens the very unity of the country. In a nation where many people see themselves as Efik or Ibibio first and Nigerian second, it is very difficult to tell someone who is sitting on top of billions of dollars of petroleum wealth that his windfall must be shared with two hundred other ethnic groups-especially when the immediate needs of his own community appear so pressing.

But to understand why "resource control" is such an emotional concept in the Delta, it is important to go back to the early years the independent republic, just before the Biafra War. The first two constitutions of independent Nigeria (and the only ones to be freely negotiated by democratically elected representatives at constitutional conferences) - those of 1960 and 1963- divided the country into three regions (North, West, and East) and encouraged friendly competition among the regions based on their natural resources. For the North, this meant developing cotton and groundnut industries and processing of hides; the West focused on cocoa,

rubber, timber, and palm oil; and the East set about exploiting palm oil and petroleum. Each region was required to give the federal government 50 percent of royalties and rent from any mining activities it undertook, but was free to invest the rest as it saw fit. Nigeria was governed as a loose federation of three semiautonomous and largely self-sufficient regions much as it had been by the British.

After the devastating experience of the Biafra War, however, everything changed. The military junta that had assumed power as the war broke out, now rudely awakened to the dangers inherent in allowing three powerful regions to develop under its nose, set about creating a far more centralized state - one in which revenue distribution became a key function of federal, rather than regional, authorities. In 1969 Parliament passed the Petroleum Act, making all oil discovered in Nigeria the sole possession of the federal government, which would distribute revenue to the regions from a central fund. Then a presidential decree in 1975 raised the federal government take of oil revenue from 50 percent to 80 percent, right in the middle of the boom years. Three years later, the Land Use Decree gave all land-ownership rights to state governors (who were then military appointees), mandating that any land not already owned by the federal government would thenceforth be "vested" in the state governor for the benefit of "all Nigerians." Previously land had been owned communally with customary law determined by traditional rulers and clan chiefs. The decree meant that the state governor could now legally expropriate land for oil and mining concessions, and the affected communities had no legal right to question the entry of an oil company onto communal land. They would not even be entitled to compensation for the use of their land; any payments would go to the governor's office. Finally, in 1979, when the military ceded power back to a civilian government, its leaders made sure the country's new constitution enshrined the principle that natural resources from underground did not belong to the landowner. By the time the generals ended their decade-long stint in power, the federal oil grab was complete and etched in stone. The three regions had been replaced by twelve highly emasculated states* and any suggestion of "another Biafra" had been decisively crushed for years to come.

Nigeria's second experience with civilian rule was even more short-lived than the first. In 1983, after four short years, the elected government of Shehu Shagari was overthrown by a military junta, and one as indifferent to the Delta's grievances as any that had gone before. In 1982 Shagari had created a special derivation fund for oil producing communities, drawn from a ring-fenced 5 percent of federal oil revenue. This money was promptly embezzled by state governors throughout the 1980s, and it was not until the Umuechem massacre of 1990 that the federal government realized that it had a problem it could no longer ignore. It set up the Oil and Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) to administer the 1.5 percent derivation fund, raising the percentage to 3 percent in 1992. OMPADEC was initially headed by Albert Horsfall, an SSS agent who was accused by a government report of operating OMPADEC's \$95 million budget like a private fiefdom. But in one of those extraordinary ironies that sees observers smacking their foreheads and exclaiming, "Only in Nigeria!" the man who wrote the report, Eric Opia, himself a politician close to President Sani Abacha replaced Horsfall at the helm of OMPADEC and proceeded to embezzle \$200 million before being removed for "gross financial misappropriations."

In 1999, when Nigeria made yet another transition to civilian rule, the newly elected president, Olusegun Obasanjo, replaced OMPADEC with the Niger Delta Development Corporation (NDDC) and increased the derivation fund for oil-producing communities to 13 percent (of which 15 percent would go directly to the NDDC, the remainder of its budget coming

from oil-company contributions and the federal account). The NDDC has proven markedly less corrupt and incompetent than its predecessor, but remains accused of being bloated and unnecessary bureaucracy.

As the problems with OMPADEC and the NDDC show, the Delta's difficulties cannot be spirited away with a simple injection of cash. Finances at the state and local level are run in a manner that encourages graft by obscuring how money gets spent. The governors tend to exert very tight control over state budgets. In some states even a 20,000 naira (\$150) expenditure requires the governor's signature. Most activists have discovered that in this operating environment, any oil revenue that *does* make it back into the Delta from the federal government quickly gets swallowed up by the voracious appetites of their "elected" leaders in state and local government. The politicians spend it on ostentatious white-elephant projects, waste on official cars and perks of office or, worse, salt it away into foreign bank accounts.

With few exceptions, Nigeria's state governors are holdovers from the period of military rule-political appointees who were elected for popular approval in the highly flawed national elections in 1999 and 2003. Though they initially remained loyal to their political bosses in Abuja, many have now formed their own power bases (often using militia support) and cultivate their independence from the national leadership of the ruling People's Democratic Party. Given the obvious material benefits to them, the governors from the nine oil-producing states have become overnight converts to the cause of "resource control" and are among the most vocal proponents of an increase in the federal derivation fund from the current 13 percent to something reflecting the 50 percent of oil and mining revenues that the regions were allowed to keep in the 1960s.

Just how far the Delta's governors were willing to go in defending their newfound principles became apparent in early 2005, when, in an effort to resolve many of the issues left unaddressed by the transition to democracy in 1999, President Obasanjo convened a special four-month "national dialogue" in Abuja to which he invited stakeholders from all sectors and regions of Nigerian society. Activists had been calling for years for a "Sovereign National Conference," a sort of first-principles meeting to reconsider both the constitution and the very idea of Nigeria as a unified nation. Obasanjo's "Confab," as it was called, was a compromise measure—there was to be no talk of breaking up the country, but all other ideas could be put on the table. But the Confab immediately ran into a minefield over the question of resource control, with delegates from the southern oil states insisting on a return to the original 50 percent derivation principle of the 1960s. When a suggestion of 18 percent was put forward, the southern delegates, led by the governors, countered with a "final offer" of 25 percent, then walked out of the meeting during its final days when their demand was not met.

For many of the Delta's delegates, 25 percent represented a genuine line in the sand, a figure that could not be lowered without bringing dishonor to the years of violent struggle under the banner of "resource control" that had claimed the lives of so many of their bravest young men. They were grateful for the heavyweight support of their governors, but few were naive enough to believe it represented anything other than naked opportunism. As Patterson Ogon, one of the original activists of the Ijaw Youth Council, put it to me as we sat on the floor of his house one sticky Saturday morning, watching his family sweat through a fourth straight day without electricity, "Those people never wanted democracy. They tried to stop it. And now they are reaping the benefits."

When it comes to corrupt governors reaping the benefits, few can claim the level of expertise of Governor Diepreye Alamieyesegha of Bayelsa State. London is a favorite

destination for looted Nigerian cash; some of the most exclusive addresses in Kensington, Knightsbridge, and Mayfair can be traced to members of the Nigerian political elite. So few were tremendously surprised when the Metropolitan Police arrested Alamieyesegha in September 2005, during one of his frequent visits to London, and charged him with three counts of money laundering. Alamieyesegha was already suspected by British and Nigerian authorities of stealing millions of dollars in cash from Bayelsa and using it to buy an oil refinery in Ecuador as well as several homes in London, California, and South Africa. A British judge released the governor on bail, but forced him to surrender his passport, in order to prevent him from returning to Nigeria, where acting governors are immune from prosecution. Weeks later, however: Alamieyesegha shocked both British authorities and most of Nigeria, when he turned up in Yenagoa, the Bayelsa State capital, and told a crowd of cheering supporters, "I cannot tell you how I was brought here. It is a mystery. All the glory goes to God." According to press reports, Alamieyesegha had procured a fake passport and slipped himself through Heathrow Airport dressed as a woman.

Alamieyesegha was later impeached, but the entire saga is emblematic of the Niger Delta conundrum. Bayelsa is one of the smallest of Nigeria's thirty-six states as well as one of its newest, but it produces 30 percent of the country's oil. Its former governor is, to put it delicately, someone with a not-inconsiderable international investment portfolio, who during his time in office treated Bayelsa as a contiguous part of his global real-estate empire. In 2005 the state budget set aside \$8.5 million to construct official residences for the governor and his deputy, along with more than \$2 million for furnishings and luxury appointments. All this is in addition to the \$25 million already spent on the governor's mansion since 2002. (The fence alone cost \$5.7 million.) Alamieyesegha was once a close ally of President Obasanjo and a loyal PDP member. But in recent years he has grown closer to Obasanjo's vice president, Atiku Abubakar, with whom Obasanjo has been falling out openly, and many believe Alamieyesegha's legal troubles are part of a mounting assault on Atiku's power base by the president. Obasanjo was so incensed by Alamieyesegha's disappearing act at Heathrow that he wrote a personal letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair asking for an explanation of the fiasco. But these millions have not been enough for Governor Alam. So there he was at the National Confab in April 2005, sticking up for the people of Bayelsa, and making a "principled" stand for his 25 percent.

As of late 2006, 33 of Nigeria's 36 state governors were under investigation for corruption, money laundering, or other financial crimes. Local governments, controlled almost entirely by the state governors, are merely another stop along the gravy train. And as for the tribal chiefs and traditional rulers, they are renowned for spending their oil company handouts and "compensation" awards On the "five Gs": guns, girls, gold, gin, and grass. After years of watching their patrimony squandered in this way, a large percentage of the Delta's population feels abandoned by both national and local politicians, and has settled on illegal bunkering as the most direct way to ensure that they benefit from their own oil wealth. The trouble is that what started as activism has become an industry. In the words of one activist, "It is becoming increasingly difficult to separate greed from grievance." Moreover, what started as an act of political defiance has helped entrench the powers that be. Profits from the trade in looted crude have either amassed to corrupt politicians from all over Nigeria, or been used to buy weapons and form the militias that are exploited by corrupt local politicians and traditional rulers desperate to keep themselves in power (and close to the opportunities for self-enrichment). Given this steady erosion in the ability of the people of the Niger Delta to control their own resources, it is perhaps understandable that the 1960s have taken on a mythical status among Delta activists. So revered have these years become, so heady the nostalgia for the days before

centralized control of petroleum resources, that many activists now insist that *genuine* resource control can never be achieved under the present system-that only a return to the "true federalism" practiced by the founding fathers of the nation (and before that by that British colonial masters) can guarantee a fair distribution of oil wealth for the people of the Delta.

This genuflection at the altar of "true federalism" has taken on the status of a sort of unofficial religion in the Delta in recent years - precarious memory to begin with, elevated into a political rallying cry and romanticized to within an inch of its life. The exact extent to which Nigeria can be said to have been a "true" federation is subject to debate, especially among northern and western Nigerians who have far less to gain from resource control. Many in the North question bitterly the analogy made to the way they are permitted to keep the profits from their cotton industry, pointing out that it takes effort to grow cotton, whereas there is no effort involved in inviting foreign oil companies to extract petroleum. They argue that natural resources belonging to the nation as a whole, that affected communities should be compensated for environmental damage caused by oil exploration, but not receive any special derivation funds beyond that compensation.

"What is true federalism?" asked one northern intellectual and businessman I met in Lagos. "Ask these people what true federalism would look like in the Constitution and they can't tell you. Is it just about resource control? All the oil in Norway is in the North Sea - Does the North Sea region control all the resources? Is that how it works? Even the British didn't operate resources that way. How do you think Lagos was built? You see, there is this romanticization of the First Republic, of something that never existed. No, sorry, true federalism is a banal and superficial argument. You don't build a country based on one principle, which is the sharing of money."

This appeal to national unity and the fundamentals of nation building is common in rebuttals to southern arguments about true federalism. Especially in the North, where bloody intercommunal and interfaith rioting has often broken out in response to efforts by some state legislatures to impose strict Islamic sharia law, the experience of federalism has been largely negative. Many feel that the sharia crisis is a perfect demonstration of how Nigeria's real problem is actually an *excess* of federalism. They argue that in a more tightly centralized federation, states would not have the power to unleash ethnic hostility or spark religious tensions in that way.

And ultimately, as both the international oil companies and the Nigerian government are fond of pointing out, all the rhetoric over resource control and true federalism ignores the fact that Nigeria's enormous population means the nation is not quite as oil-rich as everyone thinks. Oil brings more than \$10 billion into the Nigerian treasury every year, but divided between 130 million people, that is less than 25 cents per person per day. Even if 100 percent of oil revenue stayed in the Delta-an extremist proposition put forward only by the Asaris of this world-it would not make anybody rich overnight, except possibly the state and local politicians in control of the windfall. In the end, most sensible observers feel the problem is not simply resource control, but *equitable* distribution of resource revenues. Today in Nigeria, 80 percent of oil and gas revenue accrues to just 1 percent of the population. What this means in real terms is that virtually everybody in the Delta scrambles to get by in shantytowns built of driftwood and corrugated zinc, watching their children die of preventable diseases, while their corrupt leaders whiz past behind the tinted windows of air-conditioned BMWs.

"The Niger Delta man, the Ogoni man, the Ijaw man, is as far from the Yoruba man or the Hausa man culturally, linguistically, and even physically, as Spain is from Norway, or as Portugal is from England."

I was back in Lagos. After spending weeks in the Delta looking for the face of "trouble," I had decided to cross back over the wavy lines into the cocoon of peace and tranquility I had left behind. Not that anyone in their right mind would ordinarily describe Lagos that way: One of the world's largest cities with a population of at least 15 million people (experts have long ago given up on an accurate census), Lagos is a noisy and thickly polluted diorama of struggle and desperation in which even the dogs seem mildly possessed. It is a place so anarchic that it is not unheard-of for the police force and army to stage deadly street battles over who has the right to extort bribes in a particular neighborhood.

But if you've just come from the Delta, there seems a pleasing predictability to the madness here—a reassuring tendency for disputes to collapse in on themselves rather than ripple out across creeks and communities; the probably universal ability of city dwellers to shrug off the screaming disintegration of daily life.

I had dropped in on a conference of social and environmental NGOs at the Lagos Airport Hotel, where I had had the good fortune to bump into an old man whose heart was full. He was Alfred Ilenre, an active and well-respected Edo elder and the head of EMIROA, the Ethnic and Minority Rights Organization of Africa, and he was giving me his version of Nigeria 101. Dressed in a long, unadorned white *agbada* that swallowed up his sinewy features, Ilenre was doing his best to speak slowly and choose his words carefully, so that even a Western naïf like me could understand.

"So you see," he croaked magisterially, "the problem is that the only thing the federal government ever did was to give the oil companies a map of Nigeria and say, 'Go and find oil there.' In the local communities, they knew nothing of this. All they knew is that one day they see a white man come. They see him come with three black men, and start digging. And they ask them what they are doing, and the white man shows them a piece of paper from Abuja. This piece of paper means nothing to them, but the white man says it's a piece of paper that says he is allowed to dig in the backyard of my house. It says nothing about whether this might be our ancestral home.

"So of course, inevitably, the people get angry. Lagos and Abuja could be New York or London to these people. You have in the Niger Delta people who are illiterate, who have lived eighty years and never even been to Lagos. Some have never even been more than five miles from their village, or as far as Port Harcourt. And all they know is that you're coming with technology to distort their peace, their serenity, and their survival. And Shell says to them, 'If you want compensation, go to Lagos, go to Abuja.' But these people don't know Lagos, they don't know Abuja. So they hold *you* responsible. They say, 'White man, we don't know what is happening, but we hold you responsible.' "

I felt the time had come to visit the white man, and to let the white man have his say.

The e-mail, when it finally arrived, came from Shell headquarters in London. It informed me that Chris Finlayson, chairman of Shell's Africa division, had agreed to meet me on Monday at 9:00 A.M., at his office on the top floor of Shell's imposing high-rise on the Lagos waterfront. Anywhere else in the world, this would have been perfectly reasonable, particularly coming from the top executive at a large corporation. In Lagos, however, it was a sadistic request. Many cities suffer severe and perpetual gridlock, but in Lagos the inability of traffic to move more than a few inches per hour during rush hour has reached comical proportions. Throughout my time in Lagos, morning appointments with Nigerians had been scheduled for 10:00 or 11:00 A.M., with

a tacit understanding that arriving at any point before lunch was acceptable. But it was London calling now, and Monday 9:00 A.M. it would be.

I had been employing a "fixer" in Lagos—a BBC freelancer named Sam Olukoya, who in turn had arranged for a young man with a car to drive us from appointment to appointment. Until now, our days had got off to a late start, as the driver would have to drive across Lagos to pick up Sam before driving down to Victoria Island to meet me at my hotel. They always spent a couple of hours in morning traffic before arriving, late, hot, and frustrated. When I stressed to Sam how important it was that we be on time for my Monday-morning appointment with Chris Finlayson, he sucked his teeth and sighed. The only way to make that happen, he said, would be to have the driver sleep at his house the night before. They would set off together at 6:00 A.M. They should arrive comfortably at my hotel by 8:30 A.M. leaving plenty of time for the ten-minute drive to the waterfront. I seemed an extreme solution, but Sam was insistent. He did not want to let me down.

Monday morning 8:30 came and, just as I had feared would be the case, I was standing outside my hotel sweating through my suit. With my right thumb, I had perfected a pattern of button touches on my cell phone that was letting me redial Sam's number seven times minute. Of course, there was no way I was going to get through, as everyone else in Lagos with somewhere to be would be doing the same thing. At the best of times, Nigeria's shiny new mobile-phone networks are a hit-or-miss affair, but at peak times, the country reverts to the state of communication paralysis it was in until five years ago, when asking for an appointment with someone meant getting a member of your staff - if you were lucky enough to have a staff - to drive across town with your diary and find out when the other person might be free.

Finally, at 8:55 A.M., the car honked from a distance and I ran over and climbed in. "There was an accident on the bridge." Sam sounded genuinely crestfallen by the spectacular failure of his best-laid plans. "We have been on the road since before 6:00 A.M." And looking at the thousands of cars squeezed together on the expressway like pieces of a snugly fitting jigsaw puzzle, I believed him.

Suddenly - and without a hint of aggression on his placid adolescent face - our driver nudged several motorcyclists with his bumper to clear a wedge of space between two trucks loaded with hay; honked and pushed his way through the roundabout, making a goat and several women balancing plates of oranges on their heads jump out of the way; and tore off on an open path toward the waterfront, delivering us, miraculously, in front of Shell H Q at 9:00 A.M. on the dot.

My relief at arriving on time dissipated quickly when I realized how many layers of security I would have to go through. I suppose I should have known that one doesn't pull up with a screeching halt in a clapped-out old Mercedes billowing exhaust and run out in a sweaty huff demanding to see the chairman of Shell's Africa division. But the ballet of sign-in sheets and swipe cards I was asked to perform was a parody of procedural overenthusiasm. Finally, at 9:10 A.M., as I sat in the second of two entrance lobbies, a man emerged from the elevator to take me to the public-relations suite. After a byzantine ride that had us going up to the sixteenth floor and then back down two flights by a staircase and around to a separate wing of the building, I was dropped off in an open-plan office where several Nigerian staff were sitting quietly at their desks.

One of them looked up at me, then looked sternly at his watch.

"Are you Mr. John?" he asked sourly.

"Yes, that's me," I puffed impatiently, trying to sound important enough that I might be able to dispense with formalities and be led straight to Finlayson's office.

"You have kept me waiting," he said.

"Yes, I'm terribly sorry." I began rehearsing the story about the accident on the bridge, annoyed that the PR flack was making me later by the minute.

"Well, that's all right, you are here now," came the curt reply. "So tell me, how can I be of help?"

I was thrown by the question, which sounded like an invitation to start an interview.

Surely this Nigerian man in the open-plan office wasn't ... ? No.

"Um, I'm here for my appointment with Chris Finlayson," I said.

"Yes, I am Chris Finlayson," he replied impatiently. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh! You're ... Oh, um "

And just like that, it was all over. Even before it had begun. Sure, the interview would probably still go ahead, and I would run through my list of lovingly prepared questions. But the bottom line was that I had turned up fifteen minutes late, and immediately let slip a giant, silent racist fart. Anything I said now would only draw more attention to it. I had to pretend it had never happened, and hope no one would notice. After all, I had known since I was eight that whoever smelt it dealt it.

As I stood there frozen, trying to think of the right face-saving platitude, a mischievous grin spread slowly and evenly across the black face my mind had begun to accept was Chris Finlayson's. The deep, dark eyes twinkled. "I'll take you up to his office," he said, as he handed me his business card and slapped me gently on the shoulder. *Bisi Ojediran, Head of Corporate Communication and Media*. I could hear the woman behind me desperately suppressing a chuckle.

By the time I walked into Chris Finlayson's office, it was 9:20 A.M. and the crisp gray suit I had put on that morning was a blotched body glove of perspiration. Between the Darwinian exercise of Lagos rush-hour traffic, the carnivalesque maze of lobbies and handlers and bar codes of Shell Tower, and the cognitive ambush of Bisi Ojediran, I was in a state of disheveled apology and near-total disarmament – my weapons surrendered, my troops demobilized, and my generals ready to sue for peace on almost any terms. As my shoes sank into the plush pink carpet of Finlayson's office, as my sweat glands contracted sharply in the bracing air-conditioning, and as I glanced out of the large windows at a sweeping panorama of Lagos, I registered a lesson that would come to serve me well in Africa: The best kind of psychological warfare is the kind you never saw coming.

As if to reinforce the point, Finlayson was faultlessly charming and not the least bit irked by my late arrival. Heavysset and ponderous, with a bushy goatee, Finlayson chose his words carefully and gave the impression of someone who genuinely believed them. He began by telling me with some pride that Shell had recently moved its entire Africa staff from The Hague to Africa, "on the principle that we want to run Africa *from* Africa." We then talked a little about Shell's future in Nigeria from a commercial perspective, and he spoke in excited terms about the company's offshore Bonga concession, "an area with great promise." I wanted to take this as a subtle admission that Nigerian onshore drilling was becoming too dangerous for Shell to depend on in the long term, but this was probably unfair- at 225 ,000 barrels a day, Bonga was clearly going to be one of the company's biggest new developments.

We turned next to the thornier questions of Niger Delta politics, and Shell's role in stoking the anger of the communities in which it operated. Here, Finlayson was anxious to paint a picture of slow-but steady improvement. "It is true that, up to the period of the return of democracy [1999], the Niger Delta has certainly been starved of government funding," he admitted. "But this is a position that changed six years ago If you look at the new constitution, if you look at the funding that goes to people in the Niger Delta through government on a per capita basis, it's now ten times what a person in Kano State [in the North] receives. So this whole - as they call it here 'resource control' debate really very much comes down to the fundamental questions now of the existence of Nigeria. How much of the revenues should be kept for the oil-producing states and how much are justifiably spent in the rest of the country?"

It was the standard argument made by Nigerian politicians in the face of demands for greater resource control in the Delta: If you say the percentage of money from oil exploration that we are letting you keep is not enough, then you are forcing us to question your commitment to Nigeria as a unified nation. If you accept that you are Nigerian, if you claim you are not looking for another Biafra War, then you must be prepared to share the wealth with your fellow citizens, wherever in Nigeria they live. Past a certain point, carping about "resource control" and "true federalism" becomes irreconcilable with Nigerian patriotism.

Next, Finlayson ran through some of the international oil industry's favorite facts and figures, chief among them that 70 percent of Shell Nigeria's employees are from the Niger Delta, that 90 percent of total exploration and production revenues accrue to the Nigerian government (by far the highest percentage in Africa), and that in addition to their corporate taxes and an \$80 million annual contribution to the NDDC, Shell gives a significant amount to community development projects every year. He insisted that to do any more would be to tread on the toes of the Nigerian government and its responsibility to its citizens.

"To what extent should an international oil company make the decisions about development aid for the government?" he asked, adding quickly, "This isn't simply saying, 'It's not our fault' and standing away from it. But there is a genuine moral dilemma there. Should we set ourselves in the position of saying we know better or we have more democratic right than the government does to decide who gets development aid? That's the balance. In the end, the primary agent of development in any government should be the government - particularly, I would suggest, as you come into a democratic government with reasonable legitimacy, with a high proportion of the revenues. Rather than saying, 'We'll up our costs so we can give more money out directly,' we're saying, 'No, our duty is to minimize our costs, meet our social obligations to the community, pay the maximum tax to the government under the terms of the treaty, and then it is up to the elected representatives of the people to decide how to spend the money.'"

This is an argument for which NGOs and activists have little patience. They point out that the oil industry is the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, and that a highly symbiotic relationship exists between oil companies-especially Shell-and Nigeria's politicians. For decade after decade, Nigeria was ruled by a succession of military regimes, each of which came to power by overthrowing its predecessor in a coup, and many of which treated the Nigerian state's contracts with multinational oil companies as a license to print money for themselves and their families. Foreign oil companies operating in Nigeria went out of their way not to rock the boat, cozying up to corrupt dictators and asking for-and getting-brutal military protection every time they felt their facilities were threatened by protesters. For years, the closest thing they had to a long-term strategy of community relations was an unofficial policy of paying off those communities to let them work in peace. NGOs and activists argue that the oil industry possesses the ability to

influence government policy and should not shy away from the country's problems. Shell and other multinationals counter that, as individual companies, they cannot pressure government too much without risking losing out to other companies on competitive concession rights; and that even if Western companies presented a unified front in favor of a better deal for the Delta, there is nothing to prevent such concessions going to, say, the Chinese.

Finlayson also insisted that Shell was no longer in the business of paying bribes to communities in exchange for a peaceful working environment. "We have clear rules now that say no cash payments to communities unless there is a genuine service that is provided and no so-called ghost workers. Those have been practices that have taken place in the past. We've stopped them. It's tough stopping them, but we're bringing that in right across the industry."

I asked him about the recent problems with Kula, a community that had never really given Shell problems in the past, and asked why he thought it was, if things were improving in the Delta, that Kula had started acting up. He admitted, "With over eight hundred communities, you cannot personally look after each one. The risk is that you look only at the communities that give you problems." Given the industry's history with ghost jobs and hush money, a cynic might conclude the problem with Kula was that no one had bothered to buy its quiescence recently.

My final question for Finlayson had to do with Shell's future in Nigeria. The company had recently commissioned a confidential risk assessment survey from a consulting firm called WAC Global Services, and WAC's final report had been leaked to the press, much to the embarrassment of Shell. Among other things, the WAC report concluded that it was "clear" that Shell "is part of Niger Delta conflict dynamics and that its social license to operate is fast eroding." WAC warned that if things did not improve, Shell would not be able to operate in the Delta "beyond 2008" without violating its own business principles. The suggestion that Royal Dutch Shell, one of the world's largest oil companies, might have to beat a hasty and ignominious retreat from one of its most lucrative and long-standing reserves, had arched the eyebrows of petroleum industry analysts around the world.

Finlayson said he actually agreed with 95 percent of what was in the report, but that he respectfully disagreed with the report's overall tone of pessimism and saw leaving Nigeria as a sort of doomsday scenario, conceivable but ultimately unlikely. Reading the ninety-three-page WAC report, it is hard to see exactly which 5 percent Finlayson might have disagreed with, as it is a wall-to-wall catalog of bad news, dire predictions, and damning condemnations of the company's past business practices in the Niger Delta. Among other things, it accuses Shell of a "quick-fix, reactive, and divisive approach to community engagement," and describes the company's conflict-management initiatives as "limited in scope, under-resourced, [and] undermined by lack of coordination, coherence, and analysis." It finds "a lucrative political economy of war in the region" that it says is "worsening and will deeply entrench conflicts."

Finlayson's response seemed a quiet acknowledgment that there was a limit to how much even a topflight oil executive could spin a bad situation. In fact, during the time I was in Nigeria, it was possible to detect in several of the supermajors a growing willingness to say, "Look, we know we've made a lot of mistakes and we've been burned; but, honestly, at this point we're not quite sure what we can do to make this thing work." There was a certain bluntness, a modest attempt at transparency where once there had been only defensiveness and secrecy. Shell had not only made Finlayson available to me on short notice, but had also spent a day flying me around in one of its expensive helicopters, paying drop-in visits to the Bonny and Soku facilities and a community-agriculture center that it was funding in Ogoniland. Chevron, meanwhile, had taken out two-page ads in Nigerian newspapers, acknowledging in rather unambiguous language the

sins of the past and announcing a new approach to community relations - a so-called "Global MoU" to supersede all previous MoUs signed with host communities. The divisive concept of "host communities" was to be scrapped, in fact, and replaced by more formalized and geographically inclusive "Regional Development Councils." In an impressive act of corporate humility, Chevron admitted in the ads that its approach to the Delta in the past had been "inadequate, expensive, and divisive."

But it was hard to escape the conclusion that the mea culpas and the self-flagellations might all be too little, too late. There are people of genuine goodwill working for the oil companies, many of whom are determined to find a way to earn that elusive and much talked-about "SLO" (social license to operate) that makes it possible for their employees to work in peace in the Delta. But increasingly alongside good intentions and innovative approaches to community and media relations, there is also a mood of resignation and gathering despair, a feeling that things may have gone too far, too deep, in a way that no amount of goodwill can turn around. "The Pope himself could not fix things now" was the way one activist described the situation of the Delta to me. "He would just be corrupted or killed or co-opted by one group or another. Today, every little boy in Nigeria is talking about 'big money,' not hard work. People are assassinating one another to become local councillors. How can you turn something like that around?"

And indeed, throughout 2005 and 2006, the situation in the Niger Delta continued to deteriorate. After Asari's arrest in late 2005, the NDPVF appeared to lose momentum. But it was quickly replaced by another Ijaw group, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), that demanded the immediate release of Asari as well as Governor Alamaseyeiegha (who by then had been impeached) and rearrested by allies of Obasanjo). MEND appeared to incorporate many former NDPVF fighters and swore to be even more ruthless and uncompromising than its predecessors. In January 2006 MEND burst into the headlines when it kidnapped four Shell employees and held them for nineteen days before releasing them on "humanitarian grounds." In February nine oil workers were kidnapped in the Delta and a crude-oil pipeline owned and operated by Shell blown up. In May eight more hostages, most of them American, British, and Canadian, were taken and released quickly, as were five South Koreans a few days later. In August alone, nineteen foreigners were kidnapped. By the end of 2006, the number of oil workers taken hostage in the Delta stood at over seventy, a grim new record for the region.

In one particularly shocking incident in August 2006, gunmen burst into a nightclub popular with expats and began shooting into the air. Four foreigners were abducted in front of bewildered security guards and driven away. As the year wore on and the 2007 election season got into full swing, it became increasingly hard to maintain the illusion that the Delta was a safe place for oil companies to send their employees. Expatriates in Port Harcourt began commuting to work in the mornings with armed police escorts, and placemats at a bar popular with expats carried the advice: "Eat a lot. Fat people are harder to kidnap."

Instances of pipeline vandalism also increased. In October 2005 a pipeline fire in Delta State killed about sixty people. In December armed men in speedboats dynamited a Shell pipeline in the Opobo Channel. In January 2006 a pipeline attack from the Brass Creek fields to the Forcados terminal forced Shell to cancel its delivery commitments to the end of February. Additional attacks in February extended the force majeure indefinitely. By October 2006, the little kingdom of Kula that I had visited had grown restive again, and taken over the local flow station, just as they had promised me they would. Throughout most of 2006, in fact, some

600,000 barrels of oil a day-25 percent of Nigeria's output-was shut in, thanks to militant activity in the Delta.

And all this in a country that once had so much hope, a country that oil was going to make powerful and prosperous beyond its wildest dreams. The story was never supposed to end this way.

In fact, it has now become apparent to just about everyone in Nigeria that oil, far from delivering Nigeria's citizens into a Valhalla of wealth and prosperity, far from creating a sort of African Saudi Arabia where the world's poorest and most dispossessed are catapulted into a whizzy tomorrowland of roads and factories and spotless hospitals, has brought only a spectacular and grotesque form of wealth and ostentation for a lucky few and a steady decline in the overall health of the nation's economy. In 1960, when the British handed over the keys to a new generation of indigenous idealists, the country was nearly self-sufficient in food, and agriculture accounted for 97 percent of export revenue. Whether it was cocoa or yams groundnuts, Nigeria was an African breadbasket, feeding both its citizens and those of other countries. And when the oil boom kicked it seemed that there was no stopping Nigeria. From 1965 to 1975, the federal government's annual revenue spiked nearly tenfold, from \$2 million to \$2.5 billion, with 82 percent of that new wealth accounted for by oil- an astonishing economic miracle that, on paper at least, made Nigeria the world's thirtieth-richest country and should have been the cause for national celebration.

Instead, as the oil boom stuffed the government's coffers, the country's agricultural base saw the bottom fall out. From 1970 to 1982, production of cocoa fell 43 percent, that of rubber fell 29 percent, cotton 65 percent, and groundnuts 64 percent. Nigeria was quickly ensnared in a seemingly endless cycle of national debt, which was accompanied by a spectacular collapse in the living standards of its citizens. The percentage of Nigerians living in poverty went from 28 percent in 1980 to 66 percent in 1996. Average annual income, which in 1980 was \$800 per person, today stands at a mere \$300. And of course, throughout these years, the seeds of discontent and anger were sown in the Delta-seeds that by the 1990s and early 2000s had sprouted into a thick forest of murder, kidnapping, organized crude oil smuggling, and violent gang warfare.

On the cultural and political front, it has been much the sad story. In the 1970s Nigerians came to see their country as a budding African powerhouse, an attitude that has proven resilient and led many neighboring countries to resent Nigerians for their perceived arrogance and sense of superiority. Nigeria became a champion of the antiapartheid cause, and hosted the Festival of African Arts and Culture (Festac) in 1977. A booming middle class found it could afford cars and televisions for the first time, and start up businesses. There was even talk of Nigeria developing nuclear power and creating African high command.

By the 1990s, however, Nigeria had become just another African basket case, its fall from grace rendered all the more dramatic by its onetime ambitions. Throughout the world, Nigerian travelers were treated with suspicion and contempt, assumed to be drug runners, money launderers, and subjected to humiliating searches and questioning at airports. Signs went up in security lounges in the United States warning international air travelers that the Lagos airport did not meet basic safety and security standards. The venal regime of General Abacha, who salted away billions in foreign banks and had people executed for their environmental activism, drew scorn and ridicule in all corners, until the man himself finally expired in 1998 - fittingly enough, in the arms of two Indian prostitutes.

Talk to the average Nigerian, and he will be quick to blame the country's leaders for this fiasco, convinced that if only the country had been a bit luckier, if only she had been blessed with "better leadership" - the kind that knew how to manage an oil windfall for the benefit of all - then things might have turned out very differently.

Talk to economists, and you will hear a very different message. They will tell you that what has happened in Nigeria is the result of an almost-insurmountable confluence of structural changes that nearly always accompanies a resource boom in a Third World country. They will remind you that there is a name for this phenomenon. It is called the "curse of oil," and it can take many forms. In Nigeria, where most oil exploration takes place onshore, the oil curse has taken the form of dramatic political violence and hostility among communities, oil companies, and government authorities, making oil companies keen to explore Africa's more-peaceful offshore potential. However, as we will see in coming chapters, the curse of oil is a hydra-headed monster, and can have far more subtle sociological and economic manifestations. And as a dozen or so African countries begin to experience little oil booms of their own, they will be watching closely the experience the behemoth Nigeria, and asking themselves if they, too, will be so unlucky.