

Historicising the Phenomenon of Arms Race in the Niger Delta

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Abstract

This paper examines the contemporary origins of an arms race in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria by identifying the old arms race by the Atlantic economy of the pre-colonial period, and a new arms race in a crude oil economy of the post-colonial period to show that its roots in the global economic transitions have become intense in a crude oil economy due to the proliferation of stakeholders. The paper approaches the topic in a historical perspective in the hope that it would contribute to a better understanding of the supply and demand dynamics in the spread of small arms and light weapons in the region.

Keywords: Historicising, Phenomenon, Arms Race, Liberalisation, Niger Delta.

Introduction

Conventional literature on arms race focuses attention on the orthodox perspective of cold war politics or state actors' rivalry especially between the United States of America (USA) and the former Soviet Union. Few among the works include: Chris Brown's *Understanding International Relations* (2001); Joseph Cirincione's *Deadly Arsenals: Tracking Weapons of Mass Destruction* (2002); Norman Palmer and Howard Perkins' *International Relations: The World Community in Transition* (2004); Norman Lowe's *Mastering Modern World History* (2005); Jeremy Black's *Introduction to Global Military History: 1775 to the Present* (2005); Charles Kegley, Jr.'s *World Politics: Trend and Transformation* (2007); and Timothy Nte's *Power Tussle and Collective Security: Sources and Responses to International Conflicts* (2015). Even Cyril Obi's (2009) and Henning Melber's (2009) penetrating discourses on the new scramble by international state actors for African resources and markets fired by "the need for raw materials to fuel industrialisation" and its militarisation did not capture the accompanying 'arms race' involving both state and non-state actors in the Niger Delta, a classic African periphery.

The present work examined Niger Delta 'internal arms races' by regional state and non-state actors (Klare 1999: 16). The Niger Delta is described as the most militarised region of Nigeria with the largest collection of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) (Ukeje 2006: 29). The proliferation of SALW is directly connected to the phenomenon of arms race, which dates back to the incorporation of the region into the world economic nexus beginning with the Atlantic trade from the fifteenth century. The arms race phenomenon is the critical outcome of the scramble for the region's resources. While the Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans originated the arms race, the palm oil economy heightened it, but it assumed a more horrendous scale in the crude oil economy due to the internationalisation of the region's oil theft and smuggling (bunkering) activities, and liberalisation of the markets (legal and illicit) for SALW. This liberalisation resulted from the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the proliferation of terrorist groups with complex international networks and structures, and the nature of contemporary global capitalism characterized by the quest and hunger for crude oil energy resources for industrial power. Petroleum sits at the heart of the ruthless struggles for resource control and clash over natural resources in Nigeria's Niger Delta (Clarke 2007: 185).

The incidence of arms race has an inherent connection with war and conflicts (Nte 2015: 45). Trade and war are intimately-and reciprocally-related to each other, and to the process of capital accumulation (Frank 1978: 214). War and trade alternated with the seasons as the twin characteristics of the Niger Delta region for over five centuries (Dike 1956: 207; Banigo 2008: 50). In much of mercantilist thinking and practice, there cannot be trade without war or war without trade (Goldin and Reinert 2007: 196). However, trade and war represent two contradictory metaphors: factors of prosperity and underdevelopment. Trade is the thesis, while war is the anti-thesis (Asuk 2013: 146). Nineteenth-century Niger Delta witnessed various inter-city-states' conflicts over commercial interests resulting in war, which, in turn, decreased trade and attracted the consuls and gunboats to restore trade (Dike 1956: 99-100; Enemugwem 2000: 108).

The outbreak of war occasioned rivals' mobilisation of resources for its prosecution, formation of alliances, and ascendance of arms race to accumulate weapons (Ukeje 2006: 3). During the Atlantic trade in the enslaved Africans, the Niger Delta was characterised by such rivalries as Elem Kalabari-Bonny, Andoni-Bonny, Okrika-Elem Kalabari, Bille-Elem Kalabari, Nembe-Brass-Elem Kalabari (Dike 1956; Jones 1963; Ejituwu 1991; Abam 1988). Evidently, trade rivalries of the palm oil economy extended to Afro-European episodes (Zezeza 1993: 383), and inter- and intra-city-states and Canoe-Houses with concomitant arms races such as Igbanibo Will-Braide-Amachree in Elem Kalabari in 1879, and Manilla-Annie Pepple war-Canoe Houses in Bonny in 1869 (Anene 1966: 10). Underpinning these rivalries was the phenomenon of arms race for the acquisition of more sophisticated weapons and building of larger armies.

The crude oil economy of the post-colonial era redefined and accentuated its complexity due to an unprecedented proliferation of rivals and liberalisation of black markets for arms warranting Africa's emergence as a "hot zone" (Clarke 2007: 152). According to Paul Collier (2010: 6), "there is an illicit trade in Kalashnikovs that furnishes supplies, and arms races ... that drive demand". The primary objective of this work is to do a historical analysis of the phenomenon of an internal arms race in the Niger Delta.

Analysing the Phenomenon of Arms Race in the Niger Delta

Conventional arms race refers to a competition between two or more parties, especially state actors, to have the best armed force. Each party competes to produce larger numbers of weapons, greater armies, superior military and nuclear technology, etc., in a technological escalation (Lowe 2005: 132-40). Kegley Jr. (2007: 457) defines it as "the build-up of weapons and armed forces by two or more states that threaten each other, with the competition driven by the conviction that gaining a lead is necessary for security". Conventional arms race is usually associated with the ideological rivalry between the US and former Soviet Union and their allies in the age of the Cold War, 1949-1990. Although, international arms race had begun at the turn of the twentieth century and became part of the processes that led to the First World War, 1914-1918 (Nte 2015: 44-5), it had existed in the Niger Delta since the sixteenth century. Yet, few scholars have extended its analysis to include non-state actors (Dike 1956; Klare 1999; Sislin and Pearson 2006; Duquet 2009).

Arms race in the Niger Delta is a radical internalization of the process of a spiralling quest for and stockpiling of arms and ammunitions by regional stakeholders and actors (Klare 1999: 16). Dike (1956: 195) referred to it as "armaments race" with European commercial interests supplying their respective city-states and merchant allies in the Niger Delta with the weapons of war. According to Sislin and Pearson (2006: 142), "arms races ... are mutual and reactive build-ups by two or more sides." The contextualization of contemporary Niger Delta's typology shares Klare's (1999: 16) argument that "the emergence of internal arms races ... is fostered by an immense worldwide abundance of small arms and light weapons".

Complex and interactive phenomena always had inter-related causes. Therefore, arms race in the three time periods of Niger Delta history of pre-colonial, colonial, and the post-colonial could only be convincingly analysed in an integrated form (Abernethy 1988: 5). This discourse is situated in the "radical political economy" connected to Tilly's (2007: 45-75) 'interactive resource control theory of material inequality generation', which draws inspiration from classical Marxist political economy. Its relevance is the factor of unequal control over value-producing resources and the process of exclusion in the exploitation of resources. Therefore, stakeholders would struggle for inclusion for access to and control of the resources and markets in the Niger Delta with all available means and instruments of diplomacy including arms and ammunitions.

More so, 'exclusion directly produces poverty, while poverty generates the forces of violence, leads to conflict traps, and becomes a basis for mobilisation through grievance' (Justino n.d. <http://www.microconflict.eu>). According to the United Kingdom Department for International Development study (2005: 1), 'social exclusion matters because it denies some people the same rights and opportunities that are afforded others in their society'. The struggles for inclusion in the control and exploitation of value-producing resources originated and heightened the phenomenon of internal arms race in the Niger Delta since the sixteenth century.

The radical political economy paradigm also embraces the "causal connections between the logics and dynamics of capitalist growth and specific environmental outcomes", and political ecology to provide a deeper analysis of social phenomena (Peterside 2011: 4). It draws attention to the historical processes of the arms race in the Niger Delta. The social contract theory of small arms as proposed by Okechukwu Ibeanu (2005) is also employed to show that a people who willingly surrendered their rights to self-protection and arms-bearing to the state to provide physical and social security, but retained their right of ownership of weapons, can reclaim such rights to self-help when the state failed in its obligation. The resurgence of arms race in contemporary Niger Delta's crude oil economy suggest the failure of the state to provide social security in the face of a ravaging Black Gold capitalism (Peterside 2011: 4).

The multi-dimensional struggle for the control of Niger Delta resources, at the turn of the twenty-first century, is defined by "ferocious internal" and "informal wars" reflected in the inter- and intra-ethnic crises, inter- and intra-communal conflicts, communities and oil companies, communities versus Federal Government, inter-militia conflicts, insurrection and brazen criminality that engulfed the region (Naanen 2004: 4; Tamuno 2011: 20). The delineation of 'old' and 'new' arms race in this discourse is a matter of 'character' and periodisation: the differences in the nature and character of the phenomenon in the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras. The demarcation between the two is the colonial era during which the government of order, colonial rule, checked the phenomenon. The concept of "old" and "new" is located in the notion of transition in the evolution of global capitalism vis-a-vis the Niger Delta. Duquet (2009: 170) identified a plenitude of non-state actors including political resistance movements, community vigilantes, criminal gangs, and "purely criminal organisations and private security companies that are motivated solely by private gain" that are involved in the multiple conflicts and attendant arms race in the Niger Delta.

The petroleum economy of the post-colonial period dynamically "heightens the centrality of the state as the locus of struggle for resources for personal advancement and group security" (Peterside 2005: 45). Therefore, struggles for the political control of the state transformed the Niger Delta into a captured territory and "a platform under duress" with the state captors excluding and disempowering the supposed captives (Kalu 2008: 173-86). The gruesome militarisation of politics and the "commodification of violence" in the era of democratic rule transformed politics in the region into "a form of war" (Peterside 2005: 45).

The political patrons who generously funded and equipped new private armies with expensive sophisticated weapons rewarded their clients with oil bunkering businesses and thereby heightened the proliferation of militia gangs and warlords, and increased the prospects of arms acquisitions and stockpiling through an unrestrained domestic arms race (Sislin and Pearson 2006: 143). The attendant transformation of the region into a hotbed of violent political contestations that resonated in a hydra-headed complex violent conflicts mostly expressed as local chieftaincy struggles, inter-communal boundary squabbles, and other residual grievances (Naanen 2004: 6). It is this array of social transformations and conflicts that complicated contemporary arms race of the crude oil economy in the Niger Delta.

The Old Arms Race in the Niger Delta

The origin of 'arms race' in the Niger Delta is firmly rooted in the Atlantic economy of the fifteenth century, which occasioned the transition of the traditional family unit from a lineage system to the "war-Canoe House" system as a "military unit" (Horton 1969: 46), or "a compact and well organised trading and fighting corporation" (Jones 1963: 55). In the beginning, Niger Delta merchants procured arms through the process of "arms pushing" by European merchants who deliberately included arms and ammunitions in the assortment of goods as payment for the enslaved to enhance indigenous suppliers' capacity (Inikori 1977: 341; Kalu 1980: 91). However, as the trade became more developed, the increased demand for more enslaved Africans by European merchants, in turn, intensified the competitive demand for weapons by Niger Delta merchant-potentates. The end of the Portuguese era in the sixteenth century and the entry of the Dutch and English heightened the emergent arms race in the seventeenth century.

Firearms became more prominent from the seventeenth century and the arms race in the Niger Delta became frightening with the ascendancy of the English in the second half of the eighteenth century (Hopkins 1973: 110-1). The dominance of Britain critically affected Andoni's position in the trade rivalry by the mid-seventeenth century as Britain supplied Bonny with superior weapons (Cookey 1974: 40; Ejituwu 1991: 71; Boogaart 1992: 382; Okorosaye-Orubite 19/11/2016). Guns and gunpowder represented one-fifth of the total value of trade cargoes that flowed from England to Africa in the eighteenth century (Hopkins 1973:110; Freund 1984: 50). Inikori's (1977: 362) gun-enslaved cycle thesis indicated a strong connexion between guns and the acquisition of enslaved Africans especially through wars and raids, and kidnapping (Northrup 1978: 65-76). Though the organization of the trade in enslaved Africans started as a state affair, the enforcement of royal monopoly through a complicated pattern of licences, contracts and charters resulted in the incorporation of private interests like Awo and Odum from Elem Kalabari (Ryder 1965: 221; Talbot 1969: 239). European merchants supplied arms and ammunitions to the Niger Delta merchants who, in turn, shifted part of the supplies to their hinterland merchants (Inikori 1977: 341).

No statistical figure was obtained for the quantities of guns that entered Andoni, Brass, Elem Kalabari, Bille, Okrika, etc., except Bonny. For the period 1791-2, for instance, 198 Spanish guns, 101 blunderbusses and 1,607 Bonny guns (1,906 guns in all) entered the Bonny side of the *Rio Real* from only one of James Rogers & Co of Bristol vessels, and 3,400 guns in 1792 alone, while the vessel *Jupiter* supplied 1,942 guns in 1792-3 (Inikori 1977: 350-4). The largest quantities of firearms exported from Europe into Africa between 1750 and 1807 entered the Bonny area of the Niger Delta though "the port of arrival may be different from the final destination of the firearms" (Inikori 1977: 351-4). According to Inikori (1977: 350, 354), over five guns were paid per enslaved African by European trading ships at Bonny from 1750. Niger Delta merchants supplied Niger-Benue confluence merchants with big-swivel mounted guns, muskets and guns with prices ranging between 10,000 and 12,000 cowries each (Kolapo 1999: 106). Firearms purchased in this era were used for wars of aggression, raids, hunting for ivory and elephant tusks, "adequate defensive arrangements against ... raids", and for "decoration of habitation" (Inikori 1977: 349-350; Hopkins 1973: 110).

Britain's abrogation of this trade in 1807 and the implementation of commercial transition to the palm oil led to a shift from legal importation of arms to illicit acquisition (smuggling) upon the introduction of British naval squadrons to put an end to the trade and checkmate arms importation. Consequently, Britain became pitched against France and Spain that continued requesting for enslaved Africans and clandestinely supplied arms and ammunitions to Niger Delta merchants. While Britain was arming the gun-boats, Spain and France arming Niger Delta merchants and democratised the competitive processes of supply and acquisition in the nineteenth century (Asuk, 2013: 137). Consuls J. Beecroft, B. Lynslager, and T. J. Hutchinson charged with the responsibility to implement Britain's abolition and commercial transition programmes and the European traders engaged in the so-called 'orderly' trade in palm oil continued to provide the antagonistic groups with weapons of mass destruction (Wariboko 1999: 154; Erekosima et al, 1991: 22).

As late as 1864 when the palm oil trade had been fully developed and the crisis of 'adaptation' following the commercial transition would have been resolved, each Canoe-House in Bonny possessed 2,500 musketeers and the city-state had an "abundance of ammunitions, ships, swivels and carronades ..." (Dike 1956: 107; Hopkins 1973: 124). During the Bonny Civil War of 1869, war canoes carried *howitzers*, and "while Africans did the fighting, the opposing British interests supplied their respective allies with weapons of war. This 'armaments race' intensified the struggle and widened the area of conflict to the tribal interior" (Dike 1956: 195). Jaja's arsenal in the Jaja-Ibeno war of 1881 had a comparable equipage with Nana's *one hundred canoes with five coxswains, each carrying two large cannons, 24 blunderbusses, besides a large number of flint-lock guns* (Kolapo 2007: 90-1).

The arms race became consolidated in the palm oil economy (Ukeje 2006: 12), and completed the shift from "arms pushing" by European merchants to outright requests for arms by the Niger Delta merchants on negotiated terms. The struggle to control palm oil markets became heightened, and trade rivalries and wars assumed ferocious and acute proportions by the 1870s and complicated demarcation disputes over functions and spheres of influence: the Royal Niger Company-Akassa (Hopkins 1973: 155); Bonny-Elem Kalabari (Alagoa & Fombo 1972: 78); Nembe-Brass-Elem Kalabari (Wariboko 2007); Bonny-Opobo (Cookey 1974: 69-70); Elem Kalabari-Okrika (Jones 1963: 148); Bonny-Okrika (Abam 1988: 66); Andoni-Bonny (Alagoa and Fombo 1972: 76-7; Ejituwu 1991: 71); Manila Pepple-Annie Pepple (Dike 1956: 188); and Barboy-Amachree (Jones 1963: 147).

With the intensification of commercial competition and rivalries over export of palm produce, Niger Delta merchants undertook significant technical-military adaptations of European firearms to the canoes. European competitive supplies of arms to Niger Delta coastal merchant-potentates were the outcomes of European houses and Niger Delta city-states' struggles for access to lucrative markets and desire to secure commercial advantages over rivals (Ukeje 2006:12). After the Akassa war of 1895, the retrieved arms and ammunitions included: *106 cannons, 445 blunderbusses with swivel for mounting on war-canoes, a machine gun, 1500 flintlock guns, 14 tons of gunpowder, and 100 case shots of bamboo with iron balls and scrap metals as well as rifles, and percussion guns* (Kalu 1980: 13). The Brass war-canoes that attacked the Royal Niger Company's station at Akassa in 1895 were reportedly fitted with *blunderbusses*, and each canoe carrying a couple of *muzzle-loading* cannons mounted in the bow and stern (Kolapo 2007: 90-1).

At the height of indigenous accumulation and power, Niger Delta coastal merchant-potentates competitively expended huge percentage of their accumulation in the acquisition of arms and ammunition, and possessed armouries of magnificent sizes to enhance their capacity for further exploitation and primitive accumulation (Asuk 2013: 121). For instance, King Karibo Amachree of New Calabar spent about 1,000 Spanish dollars in 1851 and two-times that amount to procure guns of special specifications in 1855 (Wariboko 1999: 154). Similarly, a good percentage of Dublin-Green's guns and cannons in the Bonny-Abonnema war of 1881 were custom-made with Brass from Glasgow, according to his specifications, with his name and the signature of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, on them. The armoury of Inikiiroari Young-Briggs of Abonnema was a magnificent exhibition of the wealth of a very successful merchant-chief and war-canoes director (Keni-Briggs 19/02/2012).

Lack of cooperation among European trading firms who, in pursuit of their economic interests, had consistently thwarted all efforts at stopping the sale of arms and ammunitions to the warring states intensified the rivalries (Wariboko, 1999: 160-1). At the height of his accumulation and power, Nana of Itshekiri could put into the field 20,000 war-boys and 100 war-canoes at the shortest possible notice (Ofonagoro 1979: 145). In a comparative analysis, Nana's capacity to finance 20,000 fighting force appeared to dwarf the Dutch East Indian Company of a worldwide reach with a force of 30,000 soldiers at its peak (Goldin and Reinert 2007: 196).

Each of Nana's war-canoes had 36 paddlers, 5 coxswains, 2 boys to bail water, and a crew of 38, with 2 large cannons, 24 blunderbusses, a large number of flint-lock guns and machetes. Nana went about with a body-guard of between 30 and 40 men armed with Winchesters (Ofonagoro 1979: 145).

At the height of nineteenth-century Niger Delta commercial conflicts, Britain mobilised gunboats from her naval base at Simonstown, South Africa, "to carry out manoeuvres and make naval demonstrations at Opobo, Bonny, and Forcados ... Cable landing stations at Bonny and Brass were similarly placed under heavy guard" (Ofonagoro 1979: 164). The inauguration of British colonial rule was followed by the promulgation of legislations against the importation of firearms into the Niger Delta in 1880, and the Customs Ordinance by the Niger Coast Protectorate banning the importation of rifles, rifled cannons, machine guns, and rifle ammunitions in 1891 (Ukeje 2006: 24-5). These promulgations were followed by the conduct of series of expeditions between 1900 and 1910 (Ofonagoro 1979: 171), which prompted most war-canoes to empty their armouries into the sea. This marked the end of the old arms race in the Niger Delta.

The New Arms Race in the Niger Delta

Hardly did the post-colonial Nigerian-state consolidate itself when it was confronted by an armed insurrection and the declaration of a Niger Delta Republic in 1966 announcing the advent of revolutionary tendencies and the resurgence of arms race between non-state and state actors in the region (Naanen 2004: 5). By the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war in 1967, the opposing parties competed for arms and ammunition from Western countries, former Soviet Union, and China. The escalating revolutionary tendencies associated with the dynamics of the crude oil economy from the early 1990s inaugurated the 'new' arms race in full-scale in the region. In explaining the nexus between Black Gold capitalism and the new arms race, Cyril Obi (2009: 190) noted that "every drop of (crude) oil on land or at the bottom of the ocean everywhere on the planet is being sought to fire the engines of globalised capitalist production, accumulation, and power". The search for this prized resource occasioned "the militarisation of the new scramble in Africa" (Rupiya and Southall 2009: 165).

The crude oil economy became enmeshed in a rash competition that bred a rapacious new arms race in the Niger Delta, a centre of commodity capitalism (Ukiwo 2008: 70-1). The advent of the crude oil economy signalled Nigeria's emergence as a "theatre of fraud" (Peel 2009: xviii), while the virtual exclusion of Niger Delta communities sharpened their revolutionary tendencies and attendant new arms race in the struggle for inclusion and access to the resource (Naanen 2004: 5).

The earliest manifestations of these revolutionary tendencies appeared in the trilateral engagement between Niger Delta communities (Ogoni), oil companies or corporations (SHELL), and country (Nigeria) popularised by the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the 1990s (Tamuno 2011:7). However, the confrontations later complicated into inter-ethnic conflicts: Andoni-Ogoni, Eleme-Okrika, Ogoni-Oyigbo, Ijaw-Itshekiri, Itshekiri-Urhobo with attendant massive acquisitions and stockpiling of arms either for aggression, counter-aggression, retaliatory attacks or self-defence. Beyond the phenomenon of trilateral engagement and inter-communal or ethnic groups rivalries were the intra-communal rivalries and struggles for access to oil rents that manifested in chieftaincy tussles and other residual social conflicts and attendant races for arms by opposing groups.

Perhaps, the post-military Hobbesian and Machiavellian politics to capture and retain state power at the turn of the twenty-first century (Fawole 2005: 149) led to the emergence of militia groups that heightened the intra-communal conflicts. In Okrika, the Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) versus the Bush Boys; in Kalabari, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) versus Greenlanders/Icelanders; in Andoni, Icelanders versus Greenlanders dominated; in Ogoni, Icelanders, Greenlanders, Dey-Well and Dey-Gbam, among others complicated the scenario. The demarcations between political struggle and armed banditry became hazy and blurred (Naagbanton 2010: 10). The successful incorporation of these armed groups into the structures of political parties and their attendant transformation into vehicles for the conferment of political legitimacy on politicians of suspect integrity increased the scale of the arms race (Nwajiaku-Dahou 2007: 335). The Niger Delta became a "jungle of anarchy" with many communities polarised into warring factions clashing over chieftaincy stools in the complex interplay of political and traditional forces in the struggle for oil revenues as in Okrika between the Koniju and Tuboniju, and Ataba (Andoni) between the "Nigerian and Biafran groups".

After the 2003 General elections, political factions armed youth groups to protect themselves and aggress opponents leading to their metamorphosis into actual cult gangs (Ibeanu 2008: 100). By mid-2004, increased proliferation of armed groups heightened the competition for arms in the Niger Delta as between the NDPVF and NDV for control of spheres of influence. The deployment of the Joint Military Task Force under the command of Brigadier Elias Zamani could not moderate the violence and stupendous criminality (Davis 2009: 70). The fracturing of militia groups in 2005 and the formation of new groups by former commanders heightened the demand for weapons and the accentuation of the new arms race (Davis 2009: 142).

The inability of the Nigerian-state to checkmate the proliferation of private armies and the rapacity of the new arms race prompted the Federal Government under President Olusegun Obasanjo to collaborate with the United States to establish a compact on regional security. It prompted the movement of US marines into the Gulf of Guinea in May 2004 and the conduct of joint military exercises of the Nigerian and US Armed Forces from August 2004 (Naanen 2004: 8).

Between October 2004 and June 2005, only about five thousand weapons were returned to the military through a *gun-for-money* deal financed by the Rivers State Government in the bargain to reduce the volume of SALWs in the Niger Delta region (Davis 2009: 71). The Niger Delta new arms race featured prominently in the decision leading to the establishment of the African Command (AFRICOM) by the United States in February 2007 (Kalu 2008: 139). Nevertheless, the arms race continued unabated and the availability of AK-47 rifles in the region increased fivefold between 2005 and 2007 (Duquet 2009: 181).

The emergence of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in late 2005 and its dramatic high profile kidnappings from early 2006 put pressure on the international arms market (Davis 2009: 139-42). Initial MEND's leadership control over arms acquisition (top-down arms acquisition) imposed discipline on the combatants and better coordinate groups' insurgency as well as arms acquisition processes. But the fracturing of MEND and other militia enclaves created a compelling situation for individual combatants to control arms acquisition process (bottom-up acquisition) in the new arms race. The emergent armed groups became opportunistic actors exploring all available methods, diversified their sources, and became less vulnerable to the suppliers. In the new arms race, the militia in the Niger Delta had unrestricted access to multiple sources, better acquisition methods, increased their firepower, and attempted to overwhelm the state actor. By 26th September, 2006, there were more than 312 Commanders of the Ijaw Central Command (or warlords) implying a significant heightening of the arms race. The emerging ability of militia leaders to access funds for purchase of sophisticated weapons independent of their former "godfathers" precipitated the potentials of taking militia activity to a new dimension of criminality harder to dismantle than the hitherto patron-based system.

Duquet (2009: 175) observed that the development of a significant oil theft industry and the resulting battle between rival groups strongly encouraged and intensified the demand, availability, and use of weapons in the Niger Delta ... To benefit from these lucrative oil bunkering activities, the armed groups require an elaborate security and transportation infrastructure ... in turn requiring a sufficient level of weaponry. Oil bunkering groups need to be heavily armed to control the waterways, facilitate the transport of stolen oil, and protect their business interests from rival groups and state security agents deployed to protect oil installations. The simultaneous drop in the relative price of arms due to the rise in these groups' financial means and demand for weapons boosted their arms procurement.

There existed a profound nexus between oil theft (bunkering), proliferation of illegal SALWs, social conflicts and violence in the Niger Delta (Simbine 2006: 54). By 2007, the actors had completed a large arms build-up acquiring a variety of combat technologies and weapons. The new arms race got to a feverish pitch after the General Elections of 2007, but became moderated by President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's unilateral Amnesty Programme of May 2009, and the emergence of Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan from the Niger Delta as Nigeria's President after the death of Yar'Adua in 2010.

The declaration of Amnesty was in recognition of the inability of the Nigerian-state security structure to restore normalcy in the region or overcome the Niger Delta warlords (Peterside et al., 2011: 54). Two of the most prominent warlords in the Niger Delta, Asari Dokubo of the NDPVF and Ateke Tom of the NDV, surrendered over 1000 arms including pistols, military assault rifles, submachine and sniper guns, and over 500 AK47 rifles, and 2000 ammunition in two months (Odungweru 2010: 73). The specific quantity of arms and ammunitions surrendered by Ateke Tom, who had over 5000 boys in his command, could not be ascertained as the security forces were reluctant to divulge any relevant information in this respect (Peterside et al 2011: 287).

The imperfect disarmament processes of the Amnesty programme rather "boosted the arms market since inflated 'take-back' prices ... provided the militia with the necessary monetary funds to purchase newer, better weapons", while a number of government officials in-charge of the programme used the recovered weapons to create their own armed forces, and joined the arms race (Duquet 2009: 175). The communal crises gave those in-charge of the communities' armouries the opportunity to take them over thereby generating intra-communal competition for the acquisition of weapons to grow their stocks. The Amnesty programme guaranteed the award of pipeline surveillance contracts to "ex-militants" and warlords who pretended to surrender arms. This practice occasioned: the transformation of the surveillance contractors into illegal bunkerers; a further fracturing of the militia; and, intensification of arms race for more sophisticated arms to ward off opposing cult groups for the successfully execution of the juicy surveillance jobs (Duquet 2009: 175). The defeat of President Jonathan at the 2015 polls led to the collapse of the Amnesty Programme and the resurgence of the phenomenon.

An array of ex-militant-beneficiaries of the Amnesty programme to acquire skills and access to military technology overseas returned to engage the post-Amnesty Nigerian-state as Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) and deployed state-of-the-art military hardware and tactics in the fray. An important aspect of the State-militia arms race is the naval engagement involving military weapons used for transport and vital life-lines. The Niger Delta militia got its weapons illicitly from the sea and needed to grow the ability to transport arms through the Nigerian military blockades on the sea routes. Thus the militia raced with the military as they acquired fast boats and other means that could get through the military blockades undetected (Duquet 2009). The Nigerian JTF's response was to obtain and deploy weapons for interdiction and gunboats, while it had a shortage of fast boats and could not chase the militia into very shallow waters and difficult creeks. The militia developed their tactics to counter the growing capabilities of the JTF. The JTF initially responded by acquiring and deploying more gunboats, while the militia replied by adding more outboard engines to their craft.

Duquet (2009:169) showed that "the procurement of weapons is crucial for the implementation of the violent activities of insurgency groups". Contemporary processes of arms acquisition in the Niger Delta are not unconnected "to the liberalisation of markets and the emergence of new brokering activities", making the Niger Delta region "awash with arms" (Bourne 2007: 36; Renner 1997: 19).

In a world without barriers, the relationship between local armed actors and international arms markets is smooth so that a new race of private profiteers: arms brokers and transport agents, is easily enhanced thereby populating the globalised illicit or less-than-legal trade (Bourne 2007: 36). In the Niger Delta arms race, both government and the militia procure arms from black market importations (smuggling), raids or hiring, and indigenous production. Niger Delta insurgent groups employed both local procurement and black market importation. Illicit importation became easier as the end of the cold war opened up the floodgates of weapons into the illegal arms market (Sislin and Pearson 2006: 152). More so, like the consuls of the palm oil economy, members of the JTF charged with the responsibility of checkmating illegal arms transactions and bunkering aided the warlords in the acquisition of arms and oil theft for percentage shares of proceeds.

Until 2003, illegal arms flowed from Liberia, Chad, and Niger through border towns like Maigatari, Nguru, and Mallam Falori to the Niger Delta warlords (Davis 2009: 139). International mercenaries of European and US origins and major oil companies supplied Asari's NDPVF sophisticated ammunitions for his oil pipeline surveillance services. Asari's NDPVF also benefitted from rebel networks in Liberia, Republic of Benin, Sierra Leone, Cote d' Ivoire, Togo and Equatorial Guinea in early 2005 (Davis 2009: 139-42). Other international sources of arms and weapons to Niger Delta militia include South Africa, Turkey, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Serbia, and Ukraine while former KGB Major Viktor Anatolevic Bout used his Transavia and fleet of Anatonovs from the Sharjah airfield near Dubai to organise arms shipment from Ukraine. International arms merchants with links in the Niger Delta also included Renal Akhmurov, Leonid Minin, Nigerian-born Eli Calil, and Charles and Henry Okah (Davis and Von Kemedi 2005: 3). After the People Democratic Party's (PDP) electoral victory at the 2003 polls, Dr. Abiye Sekibo, Secretary to Rivers State Government, arranged for direct supplies of arms and ammunitions to Ateke Tom's NDV, now Iceland cult, using Rivers State Government facilities from Asari's sources (Davis 2009: 65).

In the recent past, competitive arms acquisition by the Niger Delta militia, coupled with their determination, contributed to the long-term dangerous escalation of violence and the heightening of ferocious internal and informal wars in the region (Gary and Carl 2003: 23-4; Sislin and Pearson 2006: 154-5). Between 2004 and 2007, intensified violence by the Niger Delta militia prompted the FG's acquisition of military equipments and formation of inter-state alliances to counter growing militia capabilities, and "a spiral of violence and a reactive arms race" (Sislin and Pearson 2006: 154-5). The recent oil boom inevitably fed into the paradox of plenty: state corruption, violent social conflicts, and poverty (Obi 2009: 190). It led to the emergence of contemporary collective responses in the form of ethnic militia, youth associations, community vigilantes, cult groups, and militia gangs to spearhead the politics of identity associated with autonomous resource control in the region (Gore and Pratten 2003: 211-2). These collective responses represented "struggles from bellow" against the "politics of plunder" (Obi 2001: 5-6).

A relatively steady influx of arms and ammunitions allowed the Niger Delta militia to mount increasingly significant anti-government and anti-multinational corporations campaigns. The arms race is at the core of "the process of social and political mobilisation that has transformed the face of Niger Delta politics" (Tuodolo 2008: 114). The massive proliferation of youth armed gangs reflected in equal measure arms race, insurgency, profiteering, and criminality bolstered by the proliferation of arms. The Niger Delta militia maintains a relatively sophisticated financial system to keep the arms pipeline going. In this regard, Asari's testimony of owing his suppliers to the tune of N48 million by September 2004 is revealing (Odungweru 2010: 72). Likewise, the FG, which in 2008, spent over N480 billion in the national budget for the Niger Delta on procurement of arms to protect oil installations and facilities, and not for any kind of development project in the region (Peterside et.al 2011: 55).

Conclusion

Historically, the beginnings of internal arms race in the Niger Delta is rooted in the Atlantic economy. The British colonial rule, as a government of order, briefly checkmated it. With the promulgations of the colonial government against the supplies of arms and ammunitions to Niger Delta merchants by their European allies, the legal arms markets left the stage for smuggling and illicit markets. The old arms race was dominated by the trading City-States and their War-Canoe Houses, whereas the new arms race is dominated by a multiple of actors, which included the Nigerian-State, Multinational Corporations, ethnic groups, communities, chieftaincy factions, militia groups, vigilante and surveillance groups, violence-entrepreneurs, and politicians. In the old arms race, semi-legal arms supplies dominated until the colonial prohibitions, while smuggling and illicit markets held sway in the new arms race. It is difficult to provide any reliable statistical data on arms availability in the Niger Delta since all actors, even the state, in the new arms race got their stocks from the illicit black markets, and would not publicise their stocks.

Obviously, a thin line runs through the old and new arms races: both were prompted by the desire to have access to and control of resources; the phenomenon of gun-boats existed in both the old and new arms races; both were influenced by international capitalist economic dynamics; both old and new arms races involved foreign and local patrons and clients. The internal arms races in the Niger Delta have demonstrated a trend towards a vicious cycle of arms race, arms and militia groups proliferation, escalation of conflicts, sustained insecurity, social conflicts, heightened poverty and underdevelopment. While officialdom prevented the state from regular acquisition of arms, the militia had unfettered access to markets for arms and got their stocks when necessary. The gunboats in both the old and new arms aided the non-state actors in their arms acquisition drives. The old and new arms races in the Niger Delta have had critical impacts on economic and political developments, and implications for inter-group relations and governance in the region.

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