WHO CONTROLS WARRI? HOW ETHNICITY BECAME VOLATILE IN THE WESTERN NIGER DELTA (1928–52)

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WHO CONTROLS WARRI? HOW ETHNICITY BECAME VOLATILE IN THE WESTERN NIGER DELTA (1928–52)*

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Abstract

The battle over who controls Warri has been underway for several generations. The most violent eruption of this struggle occurred between 1997 and 1999. This article traces the history of this struggle to the colonial period, during a time of administrative restructuring called reorganization, which began in 1928. Contrary to the recent popular and scholarly understanding of the Warri crisis as an outcome of crude oil politics, I argue that British colonial state intervention set in motion a deadly, ethnicized struggle over political and material resources, which has only been exacerbated by the zero-sum politics of the crude oil economy.

Key Words

Nigeria, West Africa, colonial administration, ethnicity, politics, taxation, violence.

Warri, a historic port town in the western Niger Delta, is now the capital city of Delta State in Southern Nigeria. In March 1997, the military government of Nigeria, under General Sani Abacha, decided to relocate the headquarters of the Warri South Local Government Council from an Ijaw community (Ogbe-Ijoh) to the neighboring Itsekiri community (Ogidigbe), setting off a series of violent clashes over the course of seven weeks. The Ijaw political elite wanted to remain in control of the southern part of Warri. The local Ijaw community resented the government's move, which effectively gave the Itsekiri elite, their long-time rivals, more political control of the city.[1] Control of local territory in Warri granted access to the revenue remittances from crude oil extraction in the region. The clashes following this government move displaced hundreds of people and many died. By 1999, the violence spread to neighboring towns and communities, including neighboring Urhobo communities who also had long-standing disputes with the Itsekiri over land and political power in the city.[2]

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1 O. Ikime, *Niger Delta Rivalry: Itsekiri-Urhobo Relations and the European Presence 1884–1936* (New York, 1969); T. A. Imobighe et al., *Conflict and Instability in the Niger Delta: the Warri Case* (Abuja, 2002).

2 J. Jukwey, 'Nigeria risks Ogoni-type crisis in tribal feud', *Reuters*, 27 Apr. 1997; 'Warri peace talks', *West Africa* (London) 19–25 May 1997; Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, NGA32676.E, *Nigeria: the Conflict Between Itsekiri and Ijaw Ethnic Groups in Warri, Delta Region (March 1997–September 1999)*, 14 Sept. 1999, (http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ad6864.html), accessed 13 Nov. 2013.

Why were the stakes so high that the question of who controls the local government in one section of a single city became a deadly struggle? Moreover, why did Warri's various communities use violence against each other, rather than aiming it directly at the government? If we take a longer view of this city, we see that this was not the first time the government arbitrarily redrew local government boundaries without local consensus. Nor was it the first time the communities in Warri reacted violently to this type of intervention. In fact, successive governments in Nigeria, from the colonial period to the present, have strategically exploited the very local and contentious battle over communal claims to indigeneity, and therefore authority over local government affairs in Warri. Claims to indigeneity conformed to the rules of ethnicized communal politics that have become customary in Nigeria. In the 1990s, dictator Sani Abacha's government sought out local allies (the Itsekiri elite) in the face of mounting opposition from a beleaguered Ijaw community, which was becoming increasingly militant against environmental abuse by multinational oil corporations in collaboration with the Nigerian government.[3] In this case, the government used the Itsekiri community to marginalize an oppositional constituency in order to maintain the flow of crude oil.

The sense of historical injustice, shared equally among the ethnic communities occupying Warri city and the surrounding region, predates the flow of crude oil, however. This high stakes zero sum politics between the Itsekiri community and its neighbors – the Urhobo and Ijaw communities – reaches back to the colonial period, when British colonial officials struggled to discipline these communities into discrete tax-paying units. In the process of formally incorporating them into the colonial economy during the 1930s, British officials set off a deadly contest over who controlled Warri, which was then the capital city of Warri Province in the Southern Protectorate of Nigeria. In the context of interwar colonial development policy, control of this city brought increased access to coveted political and material resources.

The popular and scholarly literature on the crisis in Warri explains it as one about who benefits from crude oil wealth.[4] This may now be the case, but we must be careful to understand oil as a fuel that is both figuratively and actually propelling long-standing tensions over access and allocation of political resources, not just economic resources in a highly contested space. The two are inextricably linked. I offer a historical analysis to explain

3 We must also keep in mind that the 'Ogoni Nine', including well-known playwright and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, were executed by Abacha's regime because of their resistance against the Royal Dutch/Shell Corporation. J. G. Frynas, *Oil in Nigeria: Conflict and Litigation Between Oil Companies and Village Communities* (London, 2000); M. Watts, 'Blood oil: the anatomy of petro-insurgency in the Niger Delta', *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology*, 52 (2008), 18–38.

4 I. Okonta and O. Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil in the Niger Delta* (San Francisco, 2001); C. Obi, 'Oil and conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta region: between the barrel and the trigger', *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 1:2 (2014), 147–53; Watts, 'Blood oil'. For a representation of media discourse on this subject, see R. Efebakpo, 'Violence threatens Warri elections', *BBC News* (London), 4 May 2003, (http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/2918959.stm), accessed 21 Jan. 2015; D. Isaacs, 'Troops maintain calm in Niger Delta', *BBC News*, 21 Aug. 2003, (http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/3169277.stm), accessed 21 Jan. 2015; S. Sengupta and N. Banerjee, 'A nation at war: oil; Nigerian strife, little noticed, is latest threat to flow of oil', *New York Times* (New York), 22 Mar. 2003, (http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/22/business/nation-war-oil-nigerian-strife-little-noticed-latest-threat-flow-oil.html), accessed 21 Jan. 2015.

this fraught relationship. The reorganization of Warri Province between 1928 and 1938 represents a critical chapter in this political dynamic, and it illustrates the very local mechanics of colonial state formation. In particular, the process of reorganization politicized ethnicity to the extent that it would inform Warri politics in the following decades. Ethnicity became increasingly politicized through a process of redistricting, where taxation and development resources for municipal improvements flowed along communal channels. Redistricting required systematic ethnic categorization and new hierarchies (often arbitrary and sometimes ahistorical). This in turn led to increased competition between ethnic communities.

This study contributes to the growing scholarship on empires by providing a view of how empires were experienced locally, and especially on the margins.[5] Reorganization happened within the context of a regional economic crisis and interwar colonial development policy. The ensuing struggle over who could claim authority over Warri highlights the uncertainty and variability of formal incorporation into the colony, especially as the colonial state attempted to extract more resources while also seeking to transform African communities into discrete, rational, and governable entities. This process, in its variability and unevenness, contradicted one of the overarching aims of native administration, as it was expressed in British colonial development policy at the time: the evolution toward progressive, yet organic local governments.[6] Ultimately, reorganization did not achieve a coherent native administration policy in Warri Province. This study contributes to the growing scholarship on colonial state formation, and it supports the view that it was not a well-planned, or well-funded process, especially in economically marginal areas.[7] The imperative to raise tax revenue – to ensure the colonies paid for themselves – underpinned the native administrative structure at the heart of indirect rule in Nigeria. Warri Province provides an excellent case to view the long-term consequences of this colonial imperative.

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5 Much has been done since Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper called for more historical analyses of the relationship between the centers of empires and their peripheries in their introductory essay, A. Stoler and F. Cooper, 'Between metropole and colony: rethinking a research agenda', in Cooper and Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997), 1–57. This call has provided a deeper understanding of the broad networks and connectivity of empires, exemplified by works inspired by Alan Lester's, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London, 2001) and 'Imperial circuits and networks: geographies of the British Empire', *History Compass*, 4:1 (2006), 124–41. In the other direction, scholars like Gregory Mann have dug deeply into local and imperial archives to look at how imperial laws and policies played out in the colonies: G. Mann, 'What was the *Indigénat*? The "Empire of Law" in French West Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 50:3 (2009), 331–53. See also a recent article by F. Richard, 'Hesitant geographies of power: the materiality of colonial rule in the Siin (Senegal), 1850–1960', *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 13:1 (2013), 54–79.

6 M. Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (London, 1937).

7 S. Berry, 'Hegemony on a shoestring: indirect rule and access to agricultural land', *Journal of the International Africa Institute*, 62:3 (1992), 327–55; B. Bush and J. Maltby, 'Taxation in West Africa: transforming the colonial subject into the "governable person"', *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 15 (2004), 5–34; F. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: the Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996); E. Frankema 'Colonial taxation and government spending in British Africa, 1880–1940: maximizing revenue or minimizing effort?', *Explorations in Economic History*, 48 (2011), 136–49; A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, 'The thin white line: the size of the British colonial service in Africa', *African Affairs*, 79:314 (1980), 25–44.

Warri Province, located on the western edge of the palm-producing zone in the Southern Protectorate of Nigeria, was an integral part of the Atlantic trade in vegetable oils through much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The colonial government administered it much like the eastern provinces, in part due to its participation in the palm oil economy. Moreover, the heterogeneous communities of Warri Province lacked the political hierarchy of their Yoruba and Edo neighbors to their west, causing colonial officials to treat them as outlying, derivative communities that were more similar in character to their eastern counterparts than to their western neighbors.[8] Sir Malcolm Hailey summed it up correctly in 1951, in his comprehensive study of British native administration: 'This Province, with four Divisions, has characteristics resembling those of the Eastern rather than those of the Western Region.'[9]

Warri Province, like its eastern counterparts, was not formally administered as part of the colony until the late 1920s when the governor of Nigeria, Graeme Thomson, insisted on introducing a new taxation ordinance: the Native Revenue Ordinance of 1927. Before this, appointed chiefs, or warrant chiefs as they were called, had applied an older Native Authority Ordinance (1916) through a loose system of native courts after Nigeria was amalgamated into a single colony in 1914. However, the colonial state did not evenly apply or enforce the 1916 ordinance. A decade of abuse and corruption within the native courts and especially among the warrant chiefs, made local communities distrustful of any new native administrative schemes. Moreover, the 1927 Native Revenue Ordinance came in the midst of an economic crisis that had been underway for more than a decade. This crisis had several contributing factors: the destabilization of the First World War on the price of commodities like palm oil; the British economic policy of trusteeship in their colonies further depressing the price of palm produce coming from West Africa (Malaysia had begun to surpass West African production and sales in the 1920s); and a global economic depression after the First World War. Local palm oil producers were smarting from more than a decade of volatile prices.[10]

In response to the new tax policy communities throughout Warri Province staged a series of protests and an effective boycott in 1927. Officials assessing these events correctly understood them as being symptomatic of the larger economic crisis in the palm belt. The boycott also forced British officials to confront their ignorance about the communities

8 In the early anthropological scholarship of this area, Warri communities were considered derivative of their Edo counterparts in neighboring Benin Province, and even the Edo people were considered distant cousins to their Yoruba neighbors further west. R. E. Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria* (London, 1964); J. U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin* (Ibadan, 1968); P. A. Igbafe, *Benin under British Administration: the Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom, 1897–1938* (Atlantic Highlands, 1979); and for a more critical perspective see I. Okpewho, *Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity* (Bloomington, 1998).

9 *Native Administration in the British African Territories, Part III* (London, 1951), 122.

10 A. Hinds, 'Government policy and the Nigerian palm oil export industry, 1939–49', *The Journal of African History*, 38:3 (1997), 459–78; S. Martin, *Palm Oil and Protest: an Economic History of the Ngwa Region, South-Eastern Nigeria, 1800–1980* (Cambridge, 1988); D. Meredith, 'Government and the decline of the Nigerian oil-palm export industry, 1919–1939', *The Journal of African History*, 25:3 (1984), 311–29; G. Thomson, 'Some problems of administration and development in Nigeria', *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 26:104 (1927), 305–14. On the depression more generally, see M. Ochonu, *Colonial Meltdown: Northern Nigeria in the Great Depression* (Athens, 2009).

in the Western Niger Delta.[11] Furthermore, the 1927 Boycott led directly to the intense ten-year reorganization process that followed, aimed at making this region more legible to colonial administrators and articulating a rational scheme of taxation.

Given its treatment in the contemporary literature, it is difficult to determine when and where Warri Province was included in official discussion and application of broad colonial policies. After the tax riots and boycott colonial officials continued to view this area, along with its eastern counterparts, as an anomaly in the broad scheme of indirect rule throughout the colonial period. The historiography on indirect rule in the Niger Delta reflects this treatment, and gives primacy to the northern and western provinces, which were the earliest targets of Frederick Lugard, who was governor of Nigeria when it amalgamated into a single colony in 1914. The northern caliphates and the urban and entrepreneurial Yoruba kingdoms provided enough structure and hierarchy to facilitate the imposition of indirect rule in those regions.[12] Alternatively, the early scholarship on the eastern provinces viewed them as prime cases of 'statelessness' at best, or exemplifications of backwardness at worst, due to their lack of formal chieftaincy.[13] Because of this reputation, the eastern provinces received a good amount of administrative labor, especially in terms of research, in an effort to solve the problem of adapting indirect rule. Hailey's above quote is typical of how Warri and its surrounding area were perceived as the colonial state sought to establish control.

The scant ethnographic literature that exists on the communities in Warri Province through the colonial period mirrors the contemporary historiography of this region. The major ethnographies of Southern Nigeria did not thoroughly treat Warri Province as a discrete place of focus in their studies, and when they did, the identifying terminology they used was imprecise. These studies were also informed by outdated, vague precolonial accounts of European traders and early missionaries from as far back as the sixteenth century.[14] A passionate local historiography of Warri lives alongside the more formalized scholarship on indirect rule. These authors are native to this region, and it is clear from the arc of their discourse that they have a stake in the longstanding debate over who claims ownership of Warri. For example, J. O. S. Ayomike's *A History of Warri* provides a rich

11 I treat the 1927 boycott and its place within a broader regional resistance to colonial integration more fully in my dissertation, 'Making minorities: the Western Niger Delta in colonial Nigeria, 1927–1960', (unpublished PhD thesis, New York University, 2012). For documents dealing with the anti-tax disturbances in Warri Province, see British National Archive (BNA) CO 583/154/4, *Disturbances at Sapele in Warri Province*, 1927; Ibadan National Archive (INA) War Prof 3/9-201/27, *Annual Report, Warri Province: 1927*; INA CSO 26/27999, *A Broad Scheme for the Reorganization of Warri Province on Tribal Lines* (Lagos, 1930).

12 F. D. Lugard, *Report by Sir F. D. Lugard on the Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria, and Administration, 1912–1919* (London, 1920); Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh, 1922); W. M. Hailey, *An African Survey: a Study of Problems Arising in Africa South of the Sahara* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1945). For Yoruba chieftaincy structures, see J. A. Atanda, *The New Oyo Empire: Indirect Rule and change in Western Nigeria, 1894–1934* (London, 1973) and O. Vaughan, *Nigerian Chiefs: Traditional Power in Modern Politics, 1890s–1990s* (Rochester, NY, 2000).

13 M. Perham, *Native Administration*, 21. On Indirect Rule in Eastern Nigeria see A. E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891–1929* (London, 1972); H. A. Gailey, *The Road to Aba: a Study of British Administrative Policy in Eastern Nigeria* (New York, 1970).

14 J. W. Hubbard, *The Sobo of the Niger Delta* (Zaria, 1948); G. I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers; a Study of Political Development in Eastern Nigeria* (London, 1963); A. G. Leonard, *The Lower Niger and its Tribes* (London, 1906); P. A. Talbot, *The People of Southern Nigeria; a Sketch of their History, Ethnology and Languages, with an Abstract of the 1921 Census* (London, 1926).

local history that positions the Itsekiri people as foundational to the story of the city. And Peter Ekeh's *History of the Urhobo People of Niger Delta*, an edited volume with contributions from other Urhobo scholars, makes a similar argument on behalf of the Urhobo.[15]

In addition to the varied, uneven historiography of Warri, administrative ethnographies, maps, and policy directives produced between 1928 and 1938, which included very detailed, local data – including interviews and surveys – tracking this process, were destroyed in an electrical fire in 1944.[16] Therefore, I have had to rely largely on official regional and provincial annual reports and commentary. These have been preserved in the Ibadan National Archives, as well as the British National Archives. While other scholars have relied on these provincial records, few have probed deeply into the reorganization effort itself to investigate its effect on inter-communal relations during this early period. Granular details might be lost, but it is possible to see the critical elements in the reorganization process. First, it is clear that the colonial state did not fully understand how Warri communities were organized, and this ignorance informed their initial approach to the reorganization effort, which was to reform a broken warrant chieftaincy system. Second, we can see that reorganization policy was heavily constrained by a lack of funding from the Colonial Office. Thus, taxation was a constant preoccupation among district officers and residents. Third, we can get a sense of how African subjects interpreted the new taxation and redistricting process, which was not at all in line with how officials expected them to respond. In the final analysis, British officials and African elites alike tried to use the reorganization process to impose their conceptions of how authority should be articulated and organized.

The following pages will first focus on how the colonial state responded to the palm oil economic crisis with a political solution: a general reorganization on the basis of a formalized administration under the prevailing model of indirect rule. Next, I will show how Africans understood and responded to reorganization, especially in the way they took advantage of the political opportunities offered by redistricting to consolidate communal identity and power. In the context of interwar colonial development policy, newly formed districts and divisions entered into fierce competition over resources, both political and economic, by leveraging ethnic claims of indigeneity to territory within Warri. The third section will cover the first overt struggle over the question of who could claim ownership and control of Warri – the Olu crisis – and how this struggle led to one of the first eruptions of violence coming out of this new political order. The concluding section will rest on how

15 J. O. S. Ayomike, *A History of Warri* (Benin City, 1988); Ayomike et al., *Warri: a Focus on the Itsekiri* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2009); P. Ekeh, *Warri City and British Colonial Rule in Western Niger Delta* (Buffalo, NY, 2004); Ekeh (ed.), *History of the Urhobo People of Niger Delta* (Buffalo, 2007); O. Ikime, *Niger Delta Rivalry: Itsekiri-Urhobo Relations and the European Presence 1884–1936* (New York, 1969).

16 Nigeria, *Annual Report on the Western Provinces of Nigeria for the Year 1944* (Lagos, 1945), 17. This fire destroyed most of the district office and treasury papers, as well as irreplaceable local maps and the early reports of the Resident's office. The fire may have also destroyed local census data, as well as the detailed ethnographic data that went into the more than 300 intelligence reports collected in this region. I did interview several Urhobo, Itsekiri, and Ijaw subjects in the field in 2007; however, none of them were either alive or old enough to remember the politics of the 1920s through the 1940s. What I could glean from these conversations indicates how local tensions have become matters of fact, and are perceived as primordial. They could not, unfortunately, help me recreate how local men and women either participated or perceived the changes that took place in the early half of the twentieth century in Warri.

this question, established during the reorganization period, became a defining feature of Warri politics in the decades following, playing a big role in how local elites participated in regional and national politics.

REORGANIZATION: 1928–38

The 'anti-government movement', as officials termed the 1927 Boycott, involved all the communities in the major townships of the province, including Warri, Sapele, Effurun, Burutu, and Ebrohimi.[17] These were urban, ethnically heterogeneous towns and cities that synchronized their efforts in protest. Farmers who owned the palm plantations in Warri Province, who tended to be ethnically Urhobo, worked with creek and river pilots who were mostly Ijaw, and traders – Itsekiri and Urhobo – to coordinate the successful boycott. This cooperation is important to highlight, because we know from the reports that internal divisions, including anxieties over land and succession disputes between prominent families did exist among the Itsekiri, and between the Itsekiri and Urhobo communities prior to the boycott. However, these internal disputes did not stop the Itsekiri communities from participating in the boycott alongside their Ijaw and Urhobo neighbors in 1927. In other words, these ethnic communities, and the identities attached to them, coexisted and were interdependent in a fluid political economy centered on palm oil production and trade. The Warri Boycott offers a solid precedent of alliance between these communities, which goes against the now-common appraisal of intercommunal hostility in Warri. These communities were clearly able to set internal differences aside in the midst of a shared economic crisis, and a shared enemy – the colonial state. In the years following the boycott, as a result of the reorganization process, this cooperative relationship disintegrated. As ethnicity became increasingly politicized through redistricting, anxieties over land and proprietorship increased, breaking down any previous spirit of cooperation. Paying attention to the details of reorganization helps to explain the significance of ethnicity as an organizing principle in colonial policymaking, in terms of both political and economic development. Ethnicity was not a fixed organizational category in the minds of British officials, however, nor was it the primary form of political organization among local communities prior to formal colonization. It was produced out of the attempt to manage and incorporate heterogeneous communities into the colonial economy over time.

Following the 1927 trade boycott, officials set out to organize the communities of Warri Province into discrete, taxable units. They also wanted to prevent future uprisings. However, they knew very little about these communities. In 1929 the deputy governor, Sir Frank Baddeley, complained that the incompleteness and inaccuracy of the maps of Warri Province led to near complete ignorance among administrative officers about the people contained in this region: 'Travelling has been far too much confined to a procession from Court to Court, and many villages lying off the beaten track have not been visited for years.' In an official acknowledgement of neglect and lack of control, he dubbed Warri Province 'the Cinderella' Province, in relation to its neighbors.[18]

17 BNA CO 583/158/14, J. E. W. Flood on Baddeley's Report, *Disturbances in Warri Province*, Apr. 1928.
18 BNA CO 583/158/14, Baddeley, *Disturbances in Warri Province*, Mar. 1928.

Based on this assessment, British officials made a considerable effort to trace the cause of the boycott in order to prevent it from happening again, as well as to find a more workable way to incorporate this region into the rest of the colony. They first determined that a slack and incompetent local administration provided the opening for the uprisings to occur. Secondly, they needed to reform the warrant chief and native court systems in accordance with what they identified as traditional institutions of authority – the clan and village group. Finally, the uprising reinforced British policies against land alienation: 'It shows once more that it is very dangerous to do anything which may give rise to a "hands off the land" movement in West Africa and also points to the need for closer administration of the remoter Provinces in the Protectorate of Nigeria.'[19] All indications pointed to the need for more administrative control at the local level, the imperative of reorganization.

Reorganization began with a systematic effort to gather knowledge about the communities in this region, through mapping and ethnographic fieldwork. In this endeavor, the men on the ground – district officers, and often, local missionaries – played a primary role, carrying out the 'officializing procedures' of the colonial state.[20] Despite this intense effort, reorganizing space and hierarchies of authority was a highly uneven process, and in some places it was very rudimentary. Areas with dense, urban populations garnered more administrative resources than rural outposts, which were often left with thin administrative coverage, supplemented by other forms of colonial management (that is, missionaries or trading corporations). Taxation remittances mirrored this unevenness: economic development in the form of roads, schools, and social services came to rural outposts slowly, if at all. Taxation and reorganization played out in the context of tightly constrained interwar colonial development policy.[21] In 1932, W. E. Hunt, acting lieutenant-governor of the Southern Provinces (a major player in the 1927 Boycott) wrote: 'From 1914 onwards the definite objective was the development and extension of indirect rule and its essential corollary, direct taxation, throughout the Southern Provinces, but progress was severely handicapped by the war.'[22] Stretched for resources after the First World War, England relied on its colonies more than ever to pay off its debts and rebuild. Colonial development policy, as it was articulated in the Colonial Development Act of 1929, insisted

19 BNA CO 583/158/14, J. E. W. Flood on Baddeley's Report, 1–2.

20 B. S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton, 1996), 3. Between 1928 and 1938, British officials gathered 367 Intelligence Reports on clans and village groups throughout Southern Nigeria. For more scholarship on the imperial effort to gather intelligence in order to govern, see C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 2000). Jeffrey Stone has distinguished colonial map-making procedures from more scientific cartographic methods. Such data collection, both geographic and ethnographic, was often crude and amateur: J. Stone, 'Imperialism, colonialism and cartography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series*, 13:1 (1988), 59–61. Talbot's census, carried out just before the boycott started, was used at the beginning of reorganization, to assist in the initial collection of taxes, as well as for the collection of ethnographic data. Percy Talbot was the Resident in charge of Warri Province when the boycott began, but he was actually absent through its duration. John Hubbard, a CMS missionary, published the only other major work of ethnography for this region. He collected his rudimentary geographical data by crude, but remarkable methods, given the terrain and lack of resources at his disposal.

21 M. Havinden and D. Meredith, *Colonialism and Development: Britain and its Tropical Colonies, 1850–1960* (London, 1993).

22 Nigeria, *Annual Report on the Southern Provinces of Nigeria for the Year 1932* (Lagos, 1933), 1.

that colonies pay for themselves; hence, the increased focus on taxation enforcement in the mid-1920s.[23] In this way, the war also disrupted colonial economies, causing unrest and boycotts throughout the empire. There was a slow restart at the close of the 1920s, but the Depression in the early 1930s further handicapped development initiatives in the colonies. These events made the reorganization process more tenuous in Warri Province. In the broader scheme of Nigerian colonial development, British officials considered this province a rural outpost, so towns and villages beyond the capital city of Warri received even fewer development resources. As the following pages show, this unevenness and constraint profoundly informed how African subjects participated in the reorganization process.[24]

How did subjects in Warri Province understand and respond to reorganization and its attendant taxation scheme? Propaganda proclaiming the benefits of taxation accompanied official communication: those who paid taxes would see better roads, schools would be built, post offices and waterworks installed. The more communities paid in collective taxes, the more benefits they would receive. This propaganda provided incentive for people to pay. It also inadvertently encouraged communities to consolidate into more homogenous ethnic enclaves, contained in separate districts, so that each community could maximize these benefits over time.[25] This played out very clearly in and around the town of Warri.

As colonial officials began gathering knowledge, Africans controlled what information to give, and managed who spoke on behalf of the communities being mapped. Local elites – warrant chiefs, village elders, and titled men – are most visible in the historical record. However, we have some evidence that their constituents challenged their authority. In the aftermath of protests in Sapele, a prominent Urhobo trader and warrant chief, called Oshue, expressed to the resident his fear of being flogged by his people if he enforced taxation immediately.[26] Officials also indicated Dore Numa, an Itsekiri leader and ally to the British, lacked legitimate authority to speak for all Itsekiri at the time.[27] As previously noted, protesters did not merely focus on taxation; farmers, palm oil producers (who were mostly women), and traders more precisely opposed the arbitrary authority of the warrant chiefs, who were appointed by the state. Despite their efforts, the men and women who participated in the uprisings were not present in negotiating the reorganization process. Only council members, titled men, a few young educated men, and warrant chiefs actively participated in the reorganization effort. These elite men had a real stake in colonial power.[28]

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23 G. C. Abbott, 'A re-examination of the 1929 Colonial Development Act', *The Economic History Review*, 24:1 (1971), 68–81; D. Meredith, 'The British government and colonial economic policy, 1919–39', *Economic History Review*, 28:3 (1975), 484–99.

24 Kirk-Greene, 'The thin white line'; Berry, 'Hegemony on a shoestring', 332. For a contemporary account of this unevenness in action, see Hailey, *An African Survey*, 428–9.

25 A. I. Nwabughuogu, 'The role of propaganda in the development of Indirect Rule in Nigeria, 1890–1929', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 14:1 (1981), 65–92.

26 CO 583/154/4, Baddeley, 20 Oct. 1927.

27 CO 583/154/4, Baddeley, 16 Nov. 1927.

28 I take my cue from Olufemi Vaughan's insightful study of Yoruba chieftaincy in his book, *Nigerian Chiefs*. Even though Yoruba chieftaincy was well articulated before British colonization, the institution never the

Despite long-standing local resentment toward the warrant chief system, officials decided to reform it rather than do away with it completely. The more than 300 intelligence reports collected in the Niger Delta supported this approach. Officials believed their investigations would lead to the discovery of organic internal organizational structures on which to hang this new native administration.[29] While the uproar against the warrant chiefs forced the colonial government to reconsider their viability, colonial officials nevertheless insisted on going forward with it. They intended to reform it according to, what they conceived in their imaginations to be local traditions of authority. Legitimate claims of authority would be rewarded with new titles, and the ultimate prize was to gain paramount chieftaincy as 'Sole Native Authority'. All would operate within the structure of a reformed provincial and local native court system, where British legal code would stand with (if elevated above) local customary law.

The language of 'tradition' was often used to mask a very British preoccupation with what constituted authority among African societies. The Colonial Office also had clear ideas of how they wanted authority organized in order to comply with the new taxation policies. Informed by their own traditions of monarchy and absolute power, it was sometimes difficult for them to reconcile the concept of communal or collective rule via the council with their imperative to collect taxes.[30] They found 'tribe' to be an understandable, useable concept through which they could gain a foothold in the local political and cultural landscape. Stretched for resources, they had to co-opt local categories in order to govern these vast provinces more effectively.[31] Once they determined to gather ethnographic information, it had to be organized into a workable hierarchy – clan, village group, division, district – that could then be taxed and governed.[32] They went to considerable lengths, often scouring the oral tradition to find paramount rulers. Sometimes they easily found one (for example, the Obi of Aboh) and sometimes they did not. In cases where they did find a monarchic tradition, they tried to determine the extent of the ruler's authority in surrounding villages and townships.[33] In those places without a paramount chief,

less had to contend with official tampering to meet the imperatives of indirect rule. At the center of Vaughan's argument is an acknowledgement of creativity on the part of the local elite to maintain power and create new forms of prestige.

29 CO 583/158/14, Flood.

30 John Darwin provides a compelling exploration of how local traditions and ethnicity could be forged out of this very specific experience of articulating local control in imperial space. He suggests that inventing traditions and fixing ethnicity had deeper implications than mere control over local populations: '... empire created distinctive kinds of ethnicity, not just by promoting a "tame" indigeneity, but by subsuming local sources of meaning in a new supra-local identity. This "imperial ethnicity" existed "at home" in the metropole, where it had to compete (in the British case) with other versions of English- or Britishness. But its real field of influence lay in the overseas empire.' J. Darwin, 'Empire and ethnicity', *Nations and Nationalism*, 16:3 (2010), 386–7.

31 C. A. Bayly's detailed study of this approach toward knowledge gathering and cooptation provides useful insights on how the British developed a systematic approach to intelligence gathering within their empire in *Empire and Information*. Bayly does make it clear, however, that knowledge production relied heavily on the cooperation (and manipulation) of local informants, who also had a stake in asserting control within a shifting political terrain during colonization.

32 For explicit definitions of each of these governing units in Warri Province see, for example, INA CSO 26/27999, *Intelligence Report on the Agbadu Clan, Warri Province* (*c.* 1932).

33 See, for example, INA CSO 26/3 (File no. 28903), *An Intelligence Report on the Federated Sobo-Aboh Village Groups of the Ase Creek*. This document reveals the challenge of ascertaining authority in a heterogeneous

they tried to nudge local communities to create them by identifying 'Big Houses' – prominent trading houses that had long been in the business of extracting and managing a large labor force to produce palm oil – to take up paramount authority.[34] This preoccupation was strikingly displayed with the reinstallation of the *Olu* (paramount chieftaincy) title among the Itsekiri people. The last Olu died in 1848, and there was no single authority among the Itsekiri since then due to a series of succession disputes.[35] As we will see below, the British made every effort to reinstitute the title, in order to conform to their own logic of hierarchy.

Martin Chanock's work on British colonial Central Africa shows that this type of political intervention was not arbitrarily imposed, nor was it accepted wholesale by local elites. Thomas Spear has also noted in his thorough survey on the limits of British control that authority was highly contested, and it was shaped by the constraints of the colonial economy. Local elites – titled men and council members – made full use of the opening provided by the colonial state, to set the parameters of what was customary, and therefore had critical input on the channels through which local subjects could make claims on the state for resources. On the other hand, the colonial state, through provincial courts and legal codes, provided alternative structures for their constituents to contest chiefly authority, especially in cases of abuse. Indirect rule thus existed in a climate of tension, with room for variation and manipulation throughout the colonial period. It was not capable of fully meeting the political needs of either the British, local elites, or common men and women. In the decade following the new taxation policy, a political culture emerged in Warri, formed on tenuous ground, where different actors in the changing political economy infused the categories of 'chief' and 'tribe' with various meanings. In other words, these terms became politicized.[36]

A major consequence of reorganization was the emergence of increasingly rigid, ethnicized political units through which colonial development policies eventually articulated, and through which claims on the colonial state were made. Of the five provinces yet to be formally restructured under indirect rule, Warri Province was the first, beginning in 1928. In the annual report for that year Lieutenant Governor U. F. H. Ruxton wrote that the Yoruba provinces, where taxation had begun in 1916, were 'fully organized', receiving a 70 per cent remittance of the tax revenue collected for local development initiatives. In contrast, the other 'five provinces [Warri, and the provinces to the east of the Niger River] where native administrations were only first formed in 1916, great strides were made' in the implementation of the new tax system.[37]

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zone. The Obi of Aboh did claim sovereignty over mixed Urhobo, Ijaw, and Igbo settlements in this division, but his claim was tentative, and was built on a long history of dissent against his authority in the surrounding areas. This is apparent throughout the report. Despite this, the British included these dissenting communities within the Obi of Aboh's jurisdiction.

34 E. J. Alagoa, *The Small Brave City-State: a History of the Nembe-Brass in the Niger Delta* (Madison, WI, 1964); K. O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885* (Oxford, 1956).

35 Ikime, *Merchant Prince*, 39–42.

36 M. Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: the Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge, 1985); T. Spear, 'Neo-traditionalism and the limits of invention in British colonial Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 44:1 (2003), 15–16.

37 Nigeria, *Annual Report on the Southern Provinces of Nigeria for the Year1928* (Lagos, 1929), 4.

In addition to gathering intelligence, the Colonial Office invested heavily in rebuilding the native court system. Native courts were often the first targets of protest. These courts were foundational to local British administration: regulating local trade, building infrastructure (using various legal techniques to recruit cheap, often forced labor to build roads and bridges), and managing prisons (a small but significant source of colonial revenue up until reorganization).[38] Rudimentary native councils initially extended from these native courts to form the native administrative structure needed for tax collection and local development projects.[39] Over time, however, native court or council members who officials deemed to have 'natural qualifications', or who possessed 'traditional claim to their judicial positions' would replace previously appointed members through death or misconduct.[40] Native authority, then, remained arbitrarily imposed by the colonial state despite the claim that reorganization would restore natural authority in the new system.

W. E. Hunt, Secretary for the Southern Provinces, in the process of gathering intelligence, observed that ethnic consciousness on the clan level was stronger than at first believed in this region, and he intended to capitalize on this, especially between the Itsekiri and the Urhobos, whom he identified as ringleaders in the boycott.[41] Hunt tried to use the internal nodes of each community to build an external administrative structure, and he insisted on doing so along ethnic lines. This began a process of reinforcing ethnic identification as a means of administrative, and eventually political organization – the creation of ethnicized interest groups. This effectively undermined any prior pan-Delta consciousness, as was evident in the boycott. Lieutenant Governor Baddeley supported these recommendations, implementing a series of administrative reforms centered on the native court system to fit a 'truly indigenous' native administration. However, the emphasis would shift away from the language of 'warrant chiefs' by vesting local elders and titled men with 'legitimate' authority. Where possible they would support claims to paramount chieftaincy, as we will see in the case of the Olu of the Itsekiri in Warri below.[42] A community with a paramount chief, with the added weight of a tradition of his authority – as in the case of the Olu – gained political and economic favor with the colonial administration. However, making such a claim of authority was difficult in such a heterogeneous ethnic environment like the Niger Delta.

The intensity of this process produced some tangible consequences for relations between the communities in this area, especially between the Itsekiri and the Urhobo living in the capital city, Warri. As local elites began to implement the new taxation scheme, they began to discern the benefits of having cohesive group identities, and the need for concentrated pockets of power in titles and land. This was a critical period of ethnic formation for

38 S. Berry, 'Hegemony', 33; D. Killingray, 'The maintenance of law and order in British colonial Africa', *African Affairs*, 85:340 (1986), 411–37. See also K. Akurang-Parry, 'Colonial forced labor policies for road-building in Southern Ghana', *African Economic History*, 28 (2000), 1–25; M. Mason, 'Working on the Railway', in R. Cohen et al. (eds.), *African Labor History* (Beverly Hills, 1978), 56–79.

39 Nigeria, *Annual Report* (1929), 63.

40 Nigeria, *Annual Report on the Southern Provinces of Nigeria for the Year 1929* (Lagos, 1930), 3–4.

41 CO 583/158/14, Hunt, 10 Jan. 1928, 42–3.

42 *Ibid*. 47.

Warri communities, and it would shape their actions over the following decade. If taxation was a primary rationale for implementing native administration throughout the colony, it also activated civic units. Farmers, traders, and market women immediately linked taxation with representation, opening the possibility for making collective claims on state services like roads, schools, water works, and postal service. As noted in an intelligence report on the Aboh district, the reorganization process motivated people to unite into increasingly homogenous political units in order to more effectively make claims on the colonial state, which favored easily discernible ethnic communities: 'There is a general consciousness in each community of being "strays".' This originally bound the differing elements in each village into a unity for purposes of self-preservation amidst strong united neighboring villages. '*With the recent renewed interest in Clan unities that has been aroused with Intelligence inquiries in the Province, a similar bond is forming between the three Village Groups.*'[43] I emphasize this last sentence to demonstrate that it was the process of inquiry itself that stoked anxieties over community survival and encouraged increased ethnic articulation and consolidation. It is on this very local, provincial level that colonial development policy worked itself out. In the reciprocal exchange between taxpayers and the colonial state an African political landscape emerged.

As the above excerpt indicates, the reorganization process was an important instrument of political education for Niger Delta communities, galvanizing them fairly quickly around new, increasingly consolidated political identities that were rooted in ethnicity. Africans in this region became politicized at all levels: chiefs, clerks, traders, and wage-earning young men and women. However, the idiom of ethnicity also circumscribed this emerging political space, limiting how Africans could make claims on their local representatives and on the colonial state for development resources. Instead of asking for infrastructural development and social services on the basis of being taxpaying subjects, they made these claims as ethnicized interest groups.

THE STRUGGLE FOR WARRI

What follows is a discussion of how discrepancies in the logic of redistricting revealed more about British preoccupations with hierarchy than it did about how well they understood their African subjects. Land ownership, as in other parts of Southern Nigeria, was collectively held, and land tenure was vested in local chiefs. It will become apparent that land tenure, which was not a site of struggle among Warri communities prior to reorganization, became a bitter point of contention, especially within the city of Warri, as a result of the British imperative to install paramount chiefs wherever they could.

Warri Province was divided into three divisions in 1928: Warri, Kwale, and Brass. Warri Division contained three districts – Warri, Sapele, and Forcados – each treated administratively as divisions due to their dense populations. Warri District, the most populous, included the provincial capital – the city of Warri. Officials intended to break up Warri District into subdistricts according to the various ethnic communities inhabiting the city, but it would take administrators some time to sort out such a blended, heterogeneous

43 INA CSO 26/3 (File no. 28903), emphasis added.

space.[44] In 1933, the subdivision names changed to reflect the ethnic communities contained in them: a joint Jekri-Sobo (Itsekiri-Urhobo) Division, a Sobo-Isoko (Urhobo-Isoko) Division, and a Western Ijaw Division.[45] Officials characterized 1930 and 1931 as years of trial and error, but ultimately they viewed the reorganization of Warri Province as a success. Ironically, the report held up Warri Province as the 'best example of the passing of the old order with its arbitrary administrative boundaries and its "chiefs" appointed with scant regard to native custom.'[46] None of these districts existed before; nor did many of the chieftaincy titles, which began to proliferate in the years following. This was not a restoration; it was a creation.

Discrete ethnic communities determined autonomous treasuries, and therefore how far public money could go in a given area. Local councils developed a keen interest in controlling their own treasuries by the early 1930s. This played out dramatically between the Itsekiri and Urhobo communities within the provincial capital, Warri, where in 1932, at the start of implementing the reorganization plan, officials decided to form a shared 'Jekri-Sobo' (Itsekiri-Urhobo) division. This went against the logic applied to most of the other divisions in the province where a division more or less contained a single ethnic community. The resident of Warri, R. H. Shelton, justified this arrangement by identifying the 'peculiar relationship existing between the Jekri and Sobo'. He assumed that some of the Urhobo clans were 'under Jekri influence' through marriage and proximity. He also concluded the Itsekiri were more advanced because they once had an Olu, even though this title was defunct for almost a century.

The Jekri-Sobo Division maintained a shared treasury, but the clan councils and native courts remained separate. Furthermore, those Urhobo clans supposedly beyond Itsekiri influence, who lived outside the city limits, maintained separate treasuries, councils, and courts. Shelton did acknowledge the problem this arrangement created: 'The drawback to this solution is that it may tend to divide the Sobo Clans into two sharply defined groups instead of ultimately leading them towards a fusion of all Sobo Clans under one Native Administration.'[47] This was a clear contradiction to a major goal of reorganization: discrete, authentic 'tribal' units. It also indicates the complicated nature of categorizing densely populated, heterogeneous communities. Finally, it demonstrates the British preoccupation with paramount or monarchical structures, even when such traditions had been dormant in practise for generations.

The consequences of this contradiction in the reorganization policy for Warri came almost immediately in 1933. The Itsekiri and Urhobo communities within Warri began to struggle over land through a series of court cases. Conflicts over land existed prior to reorganization, but they became more frequent and urgent through the reorganization process. Shelton reported: 'The Jekri and Sobo Native Authorities have been sitting on a powder magazine, which has constantly threatened to blow up and cause confusion to both. The powder in this case is represented by land. Large tracts of land now occupied

44 Nigeria, *Annual Report for the Year 1935* (Lagos, 1936).
45 The Urhobo and Isoko people are very similar in terms of language and customs.
46 Nigeria, *Annual Report for the Year 1932* (Lagos, 1933), 2.
47 Nigeria, *Annual Report for the Year 1933* (Lagos, 1934), 64–5.

by Sobos are claimed by Jekris by virtue of their ancient domination over the Sobos.'[48] Quickly, this issue of land became a central feature of Itsekiri-Urhobo relations within Warri. Possibly, over time, Urhobo farmers encroached on land originally claimed by the Itsekiri; and there were no formal claims on this land until reorganization started, when demarcation and identification of individual administrative districts pressed the question of who owned what.

I would suggest that *who* actually claimed the land previously is less important than *why* and *how* it became important at this particular juncture. Control over land came under direct control of paramount chiefs, and it directly impacted how much revenue could be generated through rents and taxation. Unfortunately, the archive has nearly been emptied of the files documenting land disputes during this period. This is in part because so many of these cases were used in subsequent, increasingly intense court struggles in the decades following independence.[49]

Shelton reported a temporary settlement of this dispute: the European firm in this area (the United Africa Company) paid a third of the rent to the Itsekiri and the remaining two-thirds to the Urhobo. It is not clear why the settlement was resolved in this manner. If the Itsekiri had not pushed their claim, would the Urhobo have received the full lease payment? And, why did the Itsekiri not receive the whole payment if their claim to historical superiority and indigeneity was salient?

Yet another contradiction extended from this arrangement: the Itsekiri share of the rent would be paid into a newly created 'Olu Fund', which was to be administered by British and Itsekiri councilmen as Trustees for the collective benefit of the Itsekiri people.[50] Here was a separate fund for the Itsekiri, separate even from the shared treasury arrangement. Since there was no Olu at the time, the British intended to re-establish this title at a future date. The British viewed the pre-existence of an Olu as the natural order of things in this area, regardless of how long the title had been defunct. Their position tacitly supported the Itsekiri claim of over-lordship toward the Urhobo within at least the city of Warri, and this is confirmed in Shelton's following reflection:

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48 *Ibid.* 65.

49 I am grateful to the pre-eminent local Itsekiri scholar, J. O. S. Ayomike (19 June 2007), who gave me an extended interview, which provided much needed insight on the title and land disputes between the Itsekiri and the Urhobo communities, as well as the complicated dynamics within the Itsekiri community itself. I was unable to locate any of the original treaty and land title documents he referred to in this interview, however. Even though they are listed in the catalogue at the Ibadan National Archive, they were missing. I spoke to a lawyer I met at the National Archive, Sam Ikporukpo (Apr. 2007) who was himself engaged in a land dispute on behalf of the Ijaw community in 2007. He confirmed that a lot of the documents had indeed been taken from the archive to litigate ongoing land claims in Warri. He provided me with photocopies from the Ibadan National Archive referring to land disputes between the Ijaw and the Itsekiri communities, especially over Ogbe-Ijoh, and none of them refer to any documented evidence of land titles for most of the area around Warri prior to 1928. J. O. S. Ayomike, *A History of Warri* (Benin City: Ilupeju Press, 1988); *Benin and Warri: Meeting Points in History: the Itsekiri Perspective* (Warri: Mayomi Publishers, 1993); *The Ijaw in Warri: a Study in Ethnography* (Benin City: Mayomi Publishers, 1990). Ayomike has published a number of other works, mostly focused on the history of Warri and the intercommunity tensions associated with this city.

50 Nigeria, *Annual Report for the Year 1933*, 65–6.

> Had the tribe [the Itsekiris] had its own treasury instead of being fused with the Sobos the rents would have been paid into it and the need for an Olu Fund would have disappeared. It is interesting to record that the Trustees have recently become the Defendant Respondents in an important action over land with a section of the Sobos, and the case is now awaiting a hearing before the Privy Council. On the result of this action will depend the future relations between the Jekris and the Sobos.[51]

This situation illustrates Sara Berry's insightful observation about the invention of African traditions:

> Colonial 'inventions' of African tradition ... served not so much to define the shape of the colonial social order as to provoke a series of debates over the meaning and application of tradition which in turn shaped struggles over authority and access to resources.[52]

The Itsekiri claim to supremacy and land illustrates Berry's argument precisely. The question over who had primal claim to Warri was never fully settled by the Privy Council, and it would re-emerge again and again in the following decades.

Both the Itsekiri and the Urhobo leaders understood that larger communities had greater access to tax and development resources, and the ongoing claims to land and jurisdiction between the Itsekiri and their neighbors bear this out. British preference for paramount chieftaincy also intensified the scramble for authority and power. The colonial government reinstated the Olu title in 1936 with Ginuwa II. That year the Jekri-Sobo Native Administration split into two separate administrative units (the Itsekiri Native Administration and the Western Sobo Native Administration), with separate treasuries the following year. They were, however, still contained within the same division – the Jekri-Sobo division, which was not formally split until 1949 into separate, independent divisions.[53] This split further politicized these ethnic identities. Both the Itsekiri and the Urhobo, once disconnected from the shared treasury in Warri, struggled to consolidate neighboring clans and councils into larger, more homogenous communities. Furthermore, the installation of the Olu informed similar moves by the Ijaw and Kwale Igbo communities in Warri Province to request more redistricting toward the amalgamation of all Ijaw and Western Delta Igbo communities. The British speculated that the consolidation of the Itsekiri and Urhobo clans as stronger, more homogeneous ethnic groups influenced these requests.

Political elites were beginning to make use of the economic and political benefits of ethnic consolidation. Councils were not only scrambling to consolidate their ethnic enclaves, they also scrambled for more authority and power. Ethnic consolidation however, never

51 *Ibid.*

52 Berry, 'Hegemony', 328.

53 Note the change from 'Jekri' to 'Itsekiri' in the record. There was also a section of Urhobos included as part of the Benin Native Administration in 1932, which were reincorporated as part of the Western Sobo Native Administration in this 1936 re-districting. In order to accomplish this move, the British agreed to an annual payment of rent and a portion of forestry royalties paid to the Benin Native Administration's treasury; yet another complication of the notion of discrete, taxable, ethnic units. Nigeria, *Annual Report, 1937* (Lagos, 1938), 67. The later, formal divisional split, led by the efforts of the Urhobo Progress Union, is treated in P. C. Lloyd, 'Ethnicity and the structure of inequality in a Nigerian town in the mid-1950s', in A. Cohen (ed.), *Urban Ethnicity* (London, 1974), 223–50.

ended, because the city of Warri and the larger province was never organized into neatly discrete ethnic enclaves. These had always been mixed, fluid communities. Moreover, newly ascribed native authorities, or paramount chiefs, increasingly claimed power and control over perceived ethnic majorities within recently articulated districts. Newly created paramount chieftaincy titles began to proliferate among communities where none existed before. For example, by the 1940s, the titles of *Ovie* and *Otota*, high titular distinctions among Urhobo men prior to reorganization where held up as equivalent titles to the Itsekiri's *Olu* title.[54] As part of the reorganization process the colonial state instituted an annual meeting of provincial chiefs in the western region. Paramount chiefs from each province would meet to hear the policy initiatives and administrative changes of the governor and other high British officials. It was a forum for these chiefs – allies in colonial governance – to air their requests and grievances as well.[55] Paramount chiefs enjoyed the benefits of higher government salaries and a greater share of tax remittances than their lesser counterparts. This acted as an incentive for those chiefs in attendance to consolidate more authority and increase their wealth.

The Annual Report for Urhobo Division in 1944 reflects this trend. In that year a vote was taken to promote a prominent chief on the Urhobo Divisional Council. Here is what the district officer wrote about it:

> It has been recorded that some members appear to forget that they are representatives of the people of the Division as a whole, and are inclined to make proposals … in accord with their private whims and the interests of certain Councillors [*sic*] but are not in the best interest of the Division as a whole.[56]

He recounted an instance in which the native council unanimously passed a salary increase for an Urhobo Chief in Warri Division, along with a new title, which would give him the semblance of an Oba, 'a procedure which would be entirely out of keeping with the democratic traditions and practices of the Urhobos even if it could be afforded'. He immediately connected this move to the increased display of opulence demonstrated by the higher salaried Obas in the newly organized regional Conference of Chiefs.[57] The report went on to cite dissension among several clans in this division, as well as other instances where councils made similar moves to install *Ovies* and *Ototas* among the Urhobos.[58]

The scramble for power in Warri was intense and unwavering, and the British were powerless to slow the momentum. There were too many inconsistencies in their policy. From the late 1930s into the 1940s, reorganization promoted what the British began calling a 'federation movement' among the 'atomic societies' of Warri Province.[59] While the British encouraged 'federation', they were careful to insist that such a process not be forced,

54 A. Salubi, 'The origins of Sapele Township', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2:1 (1960), 135; INA War Prof 369, vol. I, *Urhobo Division Annual Report*, 1944.

55 INA War Prof 85, vol. I, *Conference of Chiefs, Western Province, 1944–45*.

56 *Urhobo Division Annual Report*, 1944.

57 INA WP 369, vol. I, Warri Province, *Urhobo Division, Annual Report, 1944* (1944).

58 See also the resuscitation of the title 'Orodje' the Okpe equivalent of *Ovie*, the titular head or paramount chief among the Okpe Urhobos in Sapele. This title was brought back in 1945. Salubi, 'Origins', 135.

59 Nigeria, *Annual Report for the Year 1944* (Lagos, 1945), 68. See more positive references and appraisals of 'federation' in the annual reports for 1940 (14–15), 1941 (5), 1942 (4), and 1943 (4).

but rather be a natural product of the *reorganization* process.[60] Incongruent with their initial effort to demarcate clearly bounded ethnic units, they encouraged a process that would move in the opposite direction – the creation of larger, consolidated ethnic constituencies, a process that went well beyond the initial reorganization program. Chieftains, headmen, and voluntary associations, in seeing the remunerative benefits of consolidation, worked to argue for their own ethnic enclaves, invoking and even creating traditions to support their claims. Ethnic consolidation was anything but organic. It was the product of social engineering, where the logic of ethnicity, or 'tribalism' informed consolidation and hierarchy.

Funding for development provided a big economic incentive for ethnic consolidation. More funds from tax revenues would flow back to the community coffers, to be used for municipal projects. For example, in October 1937, with an increase in tax remuneration from 50 to 60 per cent, the Sobo Division council decided to use the money to begin construction on a long-needed road connecting Ughelli (the heart of the division, which was largely Urhobo) to Warri, the capital of the province.[61] Obviously, this would facilitate Urhobo trading activity, and increase the wealth of the community as a whole. Here is an example of an explicit economic incentive for organizing into larger, more cohesive ethnic communities. As native councils became the local manifestations of the colonial state, they also channeled local subjects' claims on the state for much-needed resources. Since native councils were more or less organized on the basis of ethnic affiliation, the political process of claim making also became ethnicized. Urhobo chiefs, traders, and market women in this instance sought to meet their collective economic interests by channeling tax and development resources through their local council. Men and women made their claims through petitions directed through ethnic voluntary associations or on behalf of trade unions to the native councils, or to the local resident or district officer. These petitions would then be considered against the tax revenues collected for that province, and against the feasibility of providing new municipal services within the broader context of the colonial development fund.[62]

The critical points to be learned from the Itsekiri-Urhobo case are: (1) the joint division was an exception to the rule in how British officials went about determining taxable units and treasuries, and this exception was fueled by their own attachment to monarchy and chiefly authority; and (2) Urhobo pressure to have their own separate division played into British expectations of their African subjects to be 'tribal'. Taking a deeper look, however, the Urhobo community's motivation for splitting was not 'tribal' at its base; it was pragmatically conditioned on the allocation of economic and political resources, which was becoming increasingly tied to ethnic affiliation. The Urhobo in Warri sought to get a fair position within the new political system, which allocated resources according to

60 Nigeria, *Annual Report for the Year 1943* (Lagos, 1944), 4.

61 Nigeria, *Annual Report for the Year 1937* (Lagos, 1938), 69.

62 See, for example, INA WP/2/146.F, *Development Loans Policy (General)*, 1950; INA WP/2/146.F, *Development Loans – General – Policy Instructions, Volume III,* 1955. There are numerous files in the Ibadan National Archives for Warri Province that contain petition files made by ethnic associations, as well as local entrepreneurs for development grants and loans. Most of these petitions were made either with the endorsement of local native councils, or directly to the local colonial administrator.

ethnically organized political units. Remaining in a joint division with the Itsekiri would have kept them at a disadvantage to other, more cohesive communities. Reorganization articulated and crystallized an ethnicized political process.

LOCAL TENSIONS EXPLODE: THE *OLU* CRISIS

We will now look at how this new competition gained critical mass in Warri, the capital of the Province, toward the end of the reorganization process. The question over who could claim control over Warri intensified as the colonial government continued to show a preference for titled chieftaincy by insisting on reinstalling an Olu for the Itsekiri people. Olu Ginuwa II took advantage of this official endorsement and became bolder with his claim to power over time. When he was installed in 1936, he proposed a title change from 'Olu of Itsekiri' to 'Olu of Warri'. The non-Itsekiri communities in Warri vehemently opposed this title change, because it implicitly imposed his authority over all other Warri communities. In the interest of peace, the British asked the Itsekiri council to keep the original title, and they eventually agreed.[63] However, the question of the Olu's title, and more importantly the implication of its jurisdiction, was not settled at this juncture. Ginuwa's bid for power became more pronounced after the passage of the Native Authority Ordinance of 1943 and his use (and abuse) of the term 'Sole Native Authority' of a given township, as it was defined in the language of the ordinance. The resident of Warri found it 'necessary to remind the Olu that he [had] no inherent right nor any authority to regard himself as a divinely appointed autocrat'.[64] At the same time, the Urhobo and Itsekiri communities in Sapele continued to draw out the land rents case, which had begun in the early years of reorganization. The competition over land and authority in Warri Province intensely continued through the 1940s.[65]

The Olu maintained his campaign to consolidate his power through successive, cautious colonial administrations in Warri, focusing on land and rent cases, most of which he lost. Resistance to the Olu also gained momentum and force over time, erupting in a series of market and trade boycotts launched by non-Itsekiri communities opposed to the perceived ascendance of the Itsekiri as a favored group in the eyes of the colonial state. From 1950 through 1952, fragments of these disputes are evident in the record. In 1950 the Association of Market women (a multiethnic group of women – Itsekiri, Ijaw, Urhobo, Igbo), having suffered enough loss in revenue from an Ijaw fishermen's boycott against Itsekiri women, appealed to the resident of Warri Province to pressure the fishermen to end the boycott in the spirit of good neighborliness and restore healthy trade.[66] In

63 INA War Prof 1/WP 86, vol. I, *Olu of Warri: Proposed Change of Title, c.* 1944.

64 INA War Prof 1/WP 369, vol. I, *Urhobo Division Annual Report*, 1944.

65 J. Jackson [Acting Judge at Warri], *Itsekiri Land Claims in Sapele and the Jackson Judgment*, Suit No. W/37/1941 (1942), (http://www.waado.org/CulturalUnits/Okpe/sapele_lands/jackson_judgement.htm), accessed 11 Nov. 2011; *West African Court of Appeal Judgment on 'Itsekiri Appeal against the Jackson Judgment on Sapele Lands*', Suit No. W/37/1941 (1943), (http://www.waado.org/CulturalUnits/Okpe/sapele_lands/WACA_judgement.html), accessed 11 Nov. 2011.

66 INA WP2 235, vol. II, Association of Marketing Women to the Resident of Warri, *Annual Report for Warri Province*, 8 Dec. 1950.

Burutu and Forcados in 1951 another Ijaw boycott erupted, protesting the claims of Itsekiri overlordship of these townships.[67] Later that year a group of Itsekiri chiefs employed a prominent lawyer, Arthur Prest (who was also Itsekiri) to represent them in their claim over Burutu and Forcados townships. Prest, in support of the chiefs' claim wrote: 'It is an incontrovertible fact that the Itsekiris opened up this part of the country and it was they who founded Forcados, Burutu and the surrounding villages where they placed their slaves to fish, cut palm nuts, etc.'[68] These cases further fueled the animosity against the Olu and his Itsekiri constituents.

By 1952, these disputes grew among Urhobo, Ijaw, and Isoko communities in Warri Division into a broad resistance to Itsekiri political power. As nationalist politics ramped up in the colony after the Second World War, nationalist elites sought local allies to build regional constituencies. In the Western Region, the dominant, governing Action Group Party (which itself was primarily identified with the Yoruba majority in the Western Region) allied with the local Itsekiri-based Warri National Union. In an effort to cement this alliance, the Action Group finally granted the Olu's request to change his title from 'Olu of Itsekiri' to 'Olu of Warri'. Riots broke out immediately in response to this decision among non-Itsekiris both in Warri and the surrounding townships. This time, it went beyond the obstruction of trade to forced occupation of Itsekiri homes and damage to Itsekiri property. At the height of the crisis, approximately 500 police were dispatched to Warri to contain the uprising.[69] The chiefs in and around Warri, as well as the various unions and local parties, including the Urhobo Progressive Union, formally petitioned the governor and the secretary of state to reverse the title-change decision, to no avail.[70]

Protests continued through 1953, and the British authorities up until that point were reluctant to intervene on the Action Group's decision to change the Olu's title. However, the violence and animosity escalated to such a point that British authorities held hearings among non-Itsekiri groups to air their grievances. In these hearings it is clear British authorities did not take these grievances seriously. R. L. Bowen, resident of Warri at the time wrote:

i. Urhobo and Itsekiris are not only neighbors but are in many instances close blood relations. Many an Itsekiri has an Urhobo [wife] and vice versa.
ii. Recent incidents of rioting and looting among Urhobos and Itsekiri, resulting from an harmless decision as the change in the title of Oba of Itsekiris to Olu of Warri, are vehemently deplored.
iii. It is to be hoped that before long, reason will prevail not sentiment, and the Urhobos, Ijaws and Itsekiris will live in harmony and friendliness.[71]

67 INA WP2 235, vol. II, Chief S. K. Gabice to the Resident of Warri, 13 Apr. 1951.
68 INA WP2 235, vol. II, Arthur Prest to the District Officer, Itsekiri Division (Warri), 3 Apr. 1951.
69 'Tribal disturbances in Nigeria', *Daily Times* (15 Sept. 1952). See also INA Ijaw (W) 4, W. I. 145, *Urhobo-Itsekiri Unrest Concerning Title of Olu of Warri; Change in Title of Province*, 3 Oct. 1952.
70 BNA CO 554/708, *Chieftainship Dispute in Warri Province, Nigeria, c.* 1952.
71 INA Ministry of Local Government, Western Region (MLG), *Un-Numbered Series Papers Re: Title of Olu of Warri*, 20 Jan. 1953.

British officials were confident that the crisis would blow over, and that people would get used to the Olu's authority. Non-Itsekiri communities could not ignore the implications. By including the word 'Warri' in the Olu's title, non-Itsekiri communities feared the government had affirmed the Olu's claim to paramount authority not only in Warri, but also in the province as a whole; and that all other chiefs in Warri Province would be subject to his rule. This led the Ijaw leaders to make a more forceful argument about the meaning and origin of the name 'Warri', which they claimed was originally an Ijaw word. This argument would gather momentum with time, as claimants on either side mobilized trade documents, historical maps, and treaty records to prove their claim to authority. At the core was the most sensitive issue of land ownership and the Olu's claim to the town of Warri, and key areas of land along the Forcados River and Burutu Township. These grievances had been cultivated over two decades. The Action Group-led government decided to change the name of Warri Province to 'Delta Province' (but kept 'Warri' in the Olu's title) in an effort to find compromise and appease all Warri constituents.[72] It would not appease the Urhobo and Ijaw communities residing in Warri Division.

While chiefly support in the Western Region grew after the Action Group party's decision to back the Olu's claim, this move further alienated the minority communities in the Western region. It galvanized local opposition to the Olu to get firmly behind the Action Group's rival political party, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) – a party that was more popular in the Eastern provinces. This shared opposition among the Urhobos, Ijaws, and Western Igbos worked to strengthen a local minority sensibility among Warri elites, which would eventually inform a separatist movement in the 1950s, just before Nigeria's independence.[73]

CONCLUSION

Reorganization formally came to a close in 1938 in a general state of flux, and although it was technically closed as a state project, redistricting and ethnic consolidation continued through the 1940s and 1950s. Hailey wrote this assessment in 1938:

> The initial result of the reorganization has been to stimulate an almost competitive assertion of group consciousness; it is clear that, if the large number of minor authorities now recognized are to develop into effective organs of local government, consolidation or federation must take place, and there are already some indications that, when once the spirit of group consciousness has been satisfied, the process of consolidation need not present grave difficulties.[74]

Paramount chiefs in Warri seized their newly granted power to direct local development projects and acquire prestige among increasingly ethnicized constituents. However, they continued to struggle over administrative boundaries and authority. The Itsekiris intensified their claims over the city, and their efforts to elevate the new Olu as 'Sole Native

72 'Nigerian province re-named: sequel to tribal dispute', *Daily Times* (13 Oct. 1952). See also INA Ijaw (W) 4, W.I. 145; and BNA CO 554/708, Letter from Acting Governor of Nigeria to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, *Disturbances in Warri Province*, 14 Oct. 1952.

73 I address the growth of minority politics in the context of Nigerian decolonization in 'Making minorities'.

74 Hailey, *African Survey*, 425.

Authority'. The Urhobo and Ijaw communities in and around Warri continued to press for more consolidation among their own communities in response to Itsekiri claims through the local courts and through newly forged political parties as they gained fluency in the language of civil participation in the colonial political landscape. Ethnicity had become a core component of civil participation.

Ironically, the process of ethnic consolidation led to more fragmentation of Warri province into politicized enclaves competing for scarce resources and political power in the region. This competition would have a tragic effect on local communities, which had previously coexisted peacefully in this region. Today, the problem is not oil. Oil only exacerbates an already toxic environment of distrust and vexation. British colonial state intervention set in motion a deadly, ethnicized zero-sum political culture in Warri. Instead of constructing imperial subjects, or perhaps even citizens, through their taxation and reorganization effort, they insisted on keeping Africans 'tribal'. This focus on ethnic affiliation worked to keep civil participation narrowly focused on the local and subregional level, so that when subsequent nationalist and then national governments took over control of the state, these communities remained focused on how local power provided access to centralized power.

This form of political participation has become characteristic of the Nigerian political landscape, and is not unique to the Niger Delta. However, the very unique processes of late colonial incorporation and intense intervention have made politics a very high stakes game in Warri. Violence continues to erupt in this city with each election cycle, as communities jostle for access to local and regional power. The riots of the 1940s and 1950s have echoed in subsequent decades, under military and civilian governments, and erupted most violently in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This zero-sum political game is most evident in the ethnically heterogeneous zones that lie between the major regions of the North, West, and East. As Nigeria moved toward independence in 1960 each of these zones, which contained minority ethnic communities experienced similar reorganization processes. Their heterogeneity and hyper-local political focus complicated the constitutional process, which emphasized ethnic majority rule, thwarting attempts at making truly national political parties.

This study shows the very local process of building what became a national political culture based on ethnic constituencies in Nigeria. There are many studies on Nigerian federalism, and they do look at ethnicity as a major element in the national political landscape. However, few studies look at how localized ethnic political communities developed; or, how local concerns over access to central colonial authority informed who gained political power and authority, and how these local tensions would bloom into more intense rivalries. The story of Warri provides a good case for studying the link between local and national politics in Nigeria. Crude oil has only worked to heighten historical political tensions that have their roots in the colonial past.