

***Violence and Sacral Conservation: The Co-production  
of norms in the Oil Rich Niger-Delta***

**By**

**Iwebunor Okwechime**

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

[bokwechime@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bokwechime@yahoo.co.uk)

and

**Akin Iwilade**

University of Edinburgh

[a.iwilade@ed.ac.uk](mailto:a.iwilade@ed.ac.uk)

How are norms about environmental conservation produced in contentious oil extractive contexts? Both the academic literature and popular writing on the Delta often focus, and rightly so, on the ways the oil industry negatively impacts on the material and cultural environment. These material changes in the environment tend to generate subtle shifts in norms about how to preserve, protect, or otherwise use nature. By focusing however on the irresponsible behaviour of oil multinationals, the literature often misses key ways through which oil-bearing communities co-produce these new norms about nature, and how this co-production process maps onto both logics of resistance and collaboration. This paper will focus on teasing out the subtle ways in which supposedly marginalized communities are able to co-produce norms about nature in ways that respond to the long-term damage being caused by the oil industry. It focuses on ideas about sacred sites, what they mean, and the new imaginaries of preservation that are being conceptualized in response to new oil produced realities in the Delta environment. How do these sacral obligations produce new norms about conservation? how do supposedly opposed categories such as beleaguered oil-bearing communities and multinational oil companies co-produce these norms? How are the needs of environmental preservation balanced with the imperatives of accessing the huge resources that accrue from oil extraction? What can these processes of norm co-production tell us about how to think about power relations within the governance of natural resources? We draw specifically on the sacral politics of conservation within Ijaw societies of the western Niger Delta. Here, we focus on tracing- through oral biographies, archival work –the emotive histories of the material environment in Ijaw communities located in Bayelsa state. Here, we explore shifts in conservation norms within areas directly impacted by the oil industry, for instance through the presence of major infrastructure like oil flow stations and compare this to Ijaw communities without major oil infrastructure. The idea is to see how baseline sacral imaginations are being impacted by direct and sustained encounters with the oil industry, and to use that to better understand the political action that results thereof. We also use other sources such as cultural art, and music to think through these shifts.