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THE CURSE OF BLACK GOLD: POLITICAL MARGINALISATION AND RESOURCE CONTROL IN URHOBOLAND, 1958-2024

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Abstract
The paper explores the socio-political effects of crude oil drilling in Urhoboland between 1958 and 2024 through paradoxical lens that combines everyday political stagnation with an abundance of petroleum wealth. The article adopts a qualitative historical research design to investigate how oil extraction has impacted Urhoboland's political development over the past 60 years using archival sources, oral interviews with stakeholders from five oil-producing communities, and pertinent secondary data. The findings show a systemic structure of marginalisation, exploitation, and exclusion that manifests itself in four distinct areas: the petroleum sector's exclusion from governance; the unequal distribution of oil revenue through the erosion of the derivation principle; the manipulation of ethnic identities by state and corporate actors for their own purposes; the militarisation and criminalisation of lawful protest; and the transformation of traditional institutions. The article argues that Urhoboland's structural marginalisation in Nigerian politics is neither accidental nor natural, as it is maintained by deliberate choices made as early as the Petroleum Decree (1969), which gave the federal government ownership of all petroleum resources. The Petroleum Industry Act of 2021 and the Land Use Act of 1978 both support this legal foundation, which structurally establishes a political economy of extraction through absence. By showing how the centralisation of oil profits has weakened Urhobo political autonomy, divided resistance through ethnic manipulation, and delegitimised the Nigerian state in the eyes of oil-producing communities. The results have consequences for the fight for resource control, fiscal federalism, and the political mobilisation of communities that produce oil to demand justice, equity, and fairness.

Keywords: Urhoboland, Oil and Gas Exploration, Political Exclusion, Control of Resources, Derivation Principle

Introduction
The political, economic, and social landscape of Urhoboland was significantly altered when crude oil was found in Kokori in 1958. Just before Nigeria got independence in 1960, oil started to overtake agriculture as the country's principal source of wealth; hence, this finding was essential. Nigeria became one of Africa's main oil producers by the 1970s, and the Niger Delta became a hub for oil exploitation. At the center of this shift were the Urhobo people, who resided in the oil-rich Western Niger Delta in what is now Delta State.

Despite this richness, oil extraction in Urhoboland has created a paradox: copious resources coexist with endemic poverty, environmental degradation, and political marginalisation. This situation is typical of bigger patterns in the Niger Delta, where experts say that Nigeria's federal structure, which gives central authorities jurisdiction over oil resources, is the main cause of the crisis rather than regional difficulties. Historically, these policies have disadvantaged individuals who produce oil and hindered the region from controlling its own resources. The Niger Delta crisis, which is defined by underdevelopment, organised crime, violence, and environmental degradation, continues to be a significant problem in Nigeria. Despite their essential role in this convoluted environment, the Urhobo people have scarcely ever directly addressed these structural challenges.

Observably, they have suffered from the terrible effects of oil pollution, such as environmental degradation, economic hardship, social conflict, and political isolation. Yet, their experiences have gotten less academic attention than those of other Niger Delta communities like the Ijaw and Ogoni. Because of different forms of discrimination, the Urhobo people have been excluded from Nigeria’s controversial oil wealth, even though they generate over 40% of the revenue. First, they have long been excluded from decision-making in the petroleum sector, which has led to policies that do not reflect their interests and has placed them in a position of extraction without representation. Second, the way oil revenues are split has denied the Urhobo their rightful portion. The derivation concept, which formerly granted oil-producing regions 50% of income in the 1950s, has declined to what Darah terms "13 percent derivation, 87 percent deprivation" today. The Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) of 2021 makes things worse by paying only 3% to host communities and setting aside 30% of proceeds for oil development in Northern Nigeria. Third, state and corporate players have utilised divide-and-rule strategies, using ethnic identities to cause strife among the Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, and others. This is demonstrated in the awarding of lucrative oil pipeline surveillance contracts to non-Urhobo individuals, which has raised tensions and threatens regional stability. Fourth, the federal government’s approach to Urhobo complaints has usually been to employ force and classify legitimate protests as illegal, converting Urhoboland into a "sacrifice zone" where normal legal safeguards are suspended. Fifth, oil development has transformed local administration, generating new power structures that have undercut traditional authority and separated communities. Despite these obstacles, there is little academic research on Urhoboland’s political experience, as most studies focus on the Niger Delta as a whole or on other ethnic groups. This study tries to bridge that gap by closely evaluating the political implications of oil development in Urhoboland from 1958 to 2024.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The paper utilises four complementary theoretical frameworks to examine the political implications of oil drilling in Urhoboland. The foundational rentier state theory, created by Beblawi and Luciani (1987), provides a guiding paradigm for understanding how reliance on

oil rents impacts state-society relations. Rentier states obtain large income from external sources such as oil or mineral rights, hence reducing dependency on taxation and diminishing political accountability. In Nigeria, oil earnings have constituted over 80% of government income for decades, establishing a rentier state typified by poor accountability, centralised authority, and distributional politics that discourage productive economic activities. Federal appropriation of oil rents has institutionally crippled oil-producing communities, leaving them unable to successfully demand accountability or political autonomy. The absence of robust taxation structures that would push politicians to involve citizens has conditioned the state to operate on oil rents, leaving Urhobo communities with little direct control over those who centralise oil earnings.

Complementing this approach is resource curse theory, commonly known as the paradox of abundance (Karl, 1997), which explains how natural resource richness can contribute to underdevelopment and political instability. Resource-rich countries tend to experience slower economic growth, increased corruption, and more autocratic rule compared to resource-poor states. In Nigeria, the resource curse emerges through the crowding out of productive sectors, oil revenue volatility, weak institutional development, and elite concentration of power and wealth. At the sub-regional level, Urhoboland demonstrates the mortality paradox of extreme underdevelopment despite plenty. Despite generating enormous income for the Nigerian state, Urhobo communities experience prolonged poverty, environmental degradation, and political exclusion—classic signs of the resource curse as wealth flows outward and costs concentrate locally (Obi, 2010). Revenue volatility has increased these vulnerabilities, creating boom-and-bust cycles that undermine long-term development planning and sustain dependency.

The political economy of extraction framework (Watts, 2004) further elucidates the politics of resource extraction and its local-level repercussions. This perspective highlights the relationship between extraction and exclusion, the externalisation of environmental and social costs, and the formation of what researchers name "sacrifice zones"—areas where communities incur the difficulties of extraction while reaping few benefits. Oil exploitation has caused political marginalisation in Urhoboland, enabling governmental and corporate players to benefit while continuing pollution, displacement, and livelihood disruption. The corporate-state-community interaction in the Niger Delta is rooted in fundamental structural inequalities, strengthened by the 1969 Petroleum Decree, which placed all mineral ownership in the federal government, essentially dispossessing local communities of control over their resources.

A fourth analytical lens is historical institutionalism (Pierson, 2004), which highlights how past events and institutions impact present results through path dependency. Once established, institutional choices constrain future alternatives and generate self-reinforcing patterns that are difficult to change. Nigeria's colonial history of centralised petroleum governance, cemented through successive regimes, produced exclusionary policies. The 1969

Petroleum Decree launched a key juncture that disenfranchised Urhoboland politically, a trajectory exacerbated by later legislation including the Land Use Act of 1978, which prevented Urhobo communities from meaningful participation in decisions impacting their lives and livelihoods.

The literature on oil politics in Nigeria has thoroughly documented revenue centralisation and its governance effects. Scholars such as Frynas (2000), Omoweh (2005), Obi (2010), and Watts (2004) highlight how litigation, conflict, and dispossession have typified oil development in the Niger Delta. The degradation of the derivation principle—from 50% in the 1950s to 13% currently—reflects dwindling political influence for oil-producing communities within Nigerian federalism. Delta State and other oil-producing states have been reduced to fiscal dependents on monthly contributions from the Federation Account. Political marginalisation is further addressed in studies on minority rights and resource control agitations (Ekeh, 1998, 2007; Darah, 2017; Igbuzor, 2019). Ekeh's foundational research on Urhobo history and culture provides crucial context for understanding Urhobo responses to oil development, while Darah's articulation of resource control ideas has been central to Urhobo activism. The Willink Commission of 1957-58 attempted to alleviate minority worries, but its recommendations were mostly ignored, prompting decades of protest.

Chronicles of resistance described in the literature demonstrate a continuum from constitutional activism and peaceful protests to militant insurgency, and more recently to transnational litigation and digital agitation (Ikelegbe, 2005; Obi, 2010; Okafor, 2011; Ebiede, 2018). However, considerable gaps remain. While qualitative studies abound, few focus explicitly on the Urhobo experience, with much attention dedicated to bigger ethnic groupings such as the Ijaw and Ogoni. Moreover, while environmental and socio-economic repercussions have received considerable scholarly attention, the political implications of oil extraction have been comparatively overlooked, with no longitudinal research encompassing more than six decades. This paper tries to overcome these gaps by giving a detailed historical political analysis of oil drilling in Urhoboland from 1958 to 2024.

Historical Analysis: The Rise of Urhobo Political Economy

Before crude oil discovery, Urhoboland held sophisticated indigenous governing structures built over centuries. At the summit of traditional governance was the Ovie (King), who served as both spiritual and political leader of his clan or kingdom, and ruled with the approval and input of a council of chiefs representing all lineages. Urhobo political life concentrated on kinship, lineage, and communal decision-making, with the extended family as the main unit of social order. Land tenure was communal, with clans collectively holding land while individuals maintained usufructuary rights. The age-grade system regulated social society, with males passing through hierarchical age grades, each conferring certain rights and obligations. Women played key economic roles, participated in numerous associations, and exercised agency within the patriarchal system through familial and community networks. The Urhobo justice system stressed restoring social harmony through restorative

measures derived from customary rules, elder wisdom, and taboos, with mediation and bargaining as common conflict resolution approaches.

British colonial rule from the late nineteenth century made dramatic changes to Urhobo political and economic life. The introduction of indirect rule altered or integrated pre-existing traditional structures to match colonial administrative systems, producing new divisions that brought communities under colonial control. The local court system substituted conventional legal procedures, while colonial economic policies pushed cash cropping—particularly rubber and palm oil—for export markets, commercialising the Urhobo economy and integrating the region into worldwide trade networks. Early land reforms, beginning with the 1914 Land Ordinance and following mineral ordinances, established legal tools via which colonial and post-colonial states would take oil resources. Colonial invasion and new taxation systems forced a gradual transition from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture, but often placed economic difficulties on Urhobo farmers having to adjust to market economy demands. Christian missionaries provided alternate worldviews and Western education, progressively weakening old governmental authority and belief systems.

The 1958 discovery of crude oil in Kokori, followed by Nigeria's independence in 1960, irreversibly changed Urhobo political economy. Early oil exploration provided new economic opportunities and problems, affecting traditional livelihoods while generating pathways for wealth accumulation and changing elite power relations. The period from independence until the 1969 Petroleum Decree represented Nigeria's transition as it established federal sovereignty over petroleum resources. The 1969 Decree, enacted during the Civil War, constituted a watershed point for Urhoboland, transferring control of all petroleum resources to the federal government and dispossessing Urhobo communities of sovereignty over their land and natural resources. This legal system, mostly intact until now, provided the foundation for the political marginalisation Urhoboland would undergo in coming decades. From its beginning, Nigeria's oil legislative structure was designed to centralise political power at the federal level and systematically exclude oil-producing communities from meaningful participation in decisions impacting their lives, environment, and economic prospects.

The centralisation of oil earnings, intensified after 1969, substantially affected Urhoboland's political economy. The derivation principle—which had guaranteed regions a portion of earnings from resources extracted in their territory—was progressively eroded, reducing from 50% under the 1963 Constitution to 5% in 1970, eventually ending at 13% since 1999. This drop mirrored the weakening political influence of oil-producing communities inside the Nigerian federation. As federal authority over oil earnings extended, Urhobo villages found themselves relegated to powerless "hosts," generating tremendous wealth for the Nigerian state while enduring the social and environmental costs of extraction. The transition from 50% to 13% derivation was not only a fiscal adjustment but a significant political reconfiguration that entrenched processes of exclusion, marginalisation, and exploitation. The

accumulation of oil wealth created Nigeria as a classic rentier state, typified by weak accountability, corruption, and distributional fights at the expense of constructive economic operations. This centralisation essentially oppressed Urhobo communities, systematically preventing people from enjoying returns from extraction while compelling them to endure its catastrophic social and environmental effects.

Exclusion from Petroleum Sector Governance and the Politics of Derivation

The legislative architecture of exclusion that has marginalised Urhobo people from participatory governance in the petroleum sector began with colonial legislation, maintained by successive post-independence governments. The Petroleum Decree of 1969, enacted during the Civil War, stands as the foundational instrument of dispossession, establishing exclusive federal control over all petroleum resources and stripping Urhobo communities of sovereignty over their land and resources (Frynas, 2000). This legal system, mostly intact today, was purposefully constructed to entrench federal power while excluding oil-producing communities from real participation in choices impacting their lives, environment, and livelihoods. Subsequent law perpetuated this discriminatory practice, with the Land Use Act of 1978 vesting all land in state governors, thereby reducing communities to tenants on their native territories. Even the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) 2021, ostensibly a reform, continues to marginalise host communities by providing only 3% of oil earnings to them while dedicating 30% of profits for frontier development in Northern Nigeria (Omene, 2021). Scholar Otive Igbuzor characterises this constellation of rules as "structural violence," subjecting oil-producing regions to everlasting misery while benefiting political elites elsewhere.

The absence of Urhobo people from the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited (NNPCL) and its strategic business units constitutes a fundamental denial of participatory democracy. Despite producing about ten percent of Nigeria's total oil production from over 350 oil wells, fifteen flow stations, and twelve oil and gas fields, Urhobo participation in important appointments remains small (Ejeben & Egbi, 2026). This exclusion extends beyond NNPCL subsidiaries and regulatory agencies, including the Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC) and the Nigerian Midstream and Downstream Petroleum Regulatory Authority (NMDPRA). The Urhobo Ethnicity Nationality Oil and Gas Producing Communities (UROGAN) has documented how Urhobo professionals are systematically excluded from management positions, with "casualisation" becoming the norm for Urhobo workers in an industry extracting wealth from their ancestral territory (Ejeben & Egbi, 2026). This absence of representation guarantees that decisions impacting Urhobo communities are taken without Urhobo involvement or scrutiny, continuing a colonial dynamic of extraction without representation. Imuere (2020) contends this institutionalised marginalisation is a purposeful strategy of political co-optation, ensuring petroleum policies favour federal elites and foreign oil companies to the detriment of host populations.

The historical evolution of the derivation principle reflects the changing balance of power between the federal government and oil-producing regions (Frynas, 2000; Omoweh, 2005). In the 1950s and 1960s, derivation guaranteed oil-producing areas 50% of earnings from resources extracted in their jurisdiction, reflecting the federal structure of Nigeria's constitutional framework (Suberu, 2001; Imuere, 2021). However, the political economics of oil has been marked by the progressive erosion of this principle, hastened by the 1969 Petroleum Decree and centralisation of oil earnings (Frynas, 2000; Omoweh, 2005). By the 1970s, derivation had been cut to 5%, and with the 1999 Constitution, it was set at 13%—a level unchanged despite constant opposition (Suberu, 2001; Darah, 2017). This erosion reflects the weakening political strength of oil-producing communities, as federal authority over oil earnings extended and groups like the Urhobo lost capacity to demand equitable remuneration (Imuere, 2021; Igbuzor, 2022). The reduction to 13% created what scholar Gordini Darah (2017) famously termed "13 percent derivation, 87 percent deprivation"—capturing the fundamental inequity where oil-producing communities receive a small fraction of revenues while bearing the full burden of environmental degradation, social disruption, and economic dislocation (Darah, 2017; Ariye & Abenabe, 2024). The fiscal vulnerability of Delta State on federal allocations has systematically damaged Urhobo communities' capability to devise autonomous development strategies or respond effectively to local objectives (Imuere, 2021; Igbuzor, 2022). As the federal government collects the great bulk of oil earnings, state and local governments are confined to fiscal dependence on monthly Federation Account allocations—weakening accountability, increasing corruption, and perpetuating underdevelopment (Frynas, 2000; Omoweh, 2005).

The Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) of 2021, despite being promoted as substantial reform, continued and aggravated existing disparities. The UPU condemned the Act's allocation of only 3% of oil revenues to host communities as "a continuation of decades of injustice to the people of the Niger Delta," particularly given that the Act designated 30% of profits for frontier exploration in Northern Nigeria—rewarding non-oil-producing regions while host communities that have borne extraction costs for decades receive minimal compensation (Omene, 2021; Imuere, 2024). The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), established to address regional underdevelopment, has been hobbled by corruption and political manipulation, failing to achieve genuine development (Ibaba, 2005; Frynas, 2000). In response, Urhobo agitation for increased derivation has grown, with the demand for a minimum of 20% becoming a uniting political platform (Darah, 2017; Omene, 2021). However, successive administrations have resisted demands for increased derivation, causing some activists to pursue alternate measures including litigation, international campaigning, and direct action (Ebiede, 2018; Okafor, 2011).

Ethnic Manipulation, Militarization, and the Criminalization of Protest

Ethnic identity has profoundly affected the political environment of the Niger Delta, impacting inter-community interactions and access to oil revenue (Ekeh, 2007; Igbuzor,

2020). The region comprises numerous ethnic nations, including Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Isoko, and Ogoni, each holding distinct histories and political aspirations (Ekeh, 1998; Omoweh, 2005). The discovery of oil profoundly impacted inter-ethnic relations, since competition for oil profits and contracts became important (Frynas, 2000; Omoweh, 2005). Ethnic politics strengthened, with groups rallying along ethnic lines to seek recognition and a portion of oil revenue (Ekeh, 2007; Igbuzor, 2020). State and corporate actors have deliberately exploited these identities through divide-and-rule techniques, employing resource allocation, employment, and contract awards to purposely separate ethnic communities (Frynas, 2000; Omoweh, 2005). The Urhobo Progress Union criticized the Petroleum Industry Act's definition of host communities, which conflates oil-bearing with pipeline-bearing communities, as "a device, first to set up communities against themselves within our region... an old device of divide and rule colonialist strategy" (Omene, 2021). Pipeline monitoring contracts further highlight this exploitation by strengthening specific ethnic entrepreneurs as local proxies for state and corporate objectives (Imuere, 2022). When contracts were awarded to Tantita Security Services Limited, owned by Ijaw former militant leader Government Ekpemupolo (Tompolo), Urhobo groups protested that "the Federal Government cannot award benefits only to Tompolo and the Ijaw while leaving Urhobo with the pains" (Committee for Transparency and Good Governance, 2025). The ethnicisation of oil contracts constitutes a purposeful technique of political co-optation, ensuring that grievances are articulated in ethnic rather than unified regional terms, thereby inhibiting the creation of a coherent Niger Delta movement (Igbuzor, 2020; Ekeh, 2007).

Nigeria's response to community complaints has been characterised by the militarisation of oil-producing areas, which has serious repercussions for human rights and governance in Urhoboland. In order to maintain extractive operations, scholars have conceptualised oil-producing communities as "sacrifice zones"—areas where social and environmental costs are externalised, and regular legal protections are eliminated (Watts, 2004; Igbuzor, 2019). Operating under a mandate that effectively reframed host communities as potential threats to oil production rather than citizens entitled to state protection, the Joint Military Task Force (JTF), which was founded in the 1990s to protect oil infrastructure, established a permanent presence in the Niger Delta (Igbuzor, 2019). According to recorded evidence, JTF operations have used severe tactics that have resulted in human rights violations and civilian casualties (Amnesty International, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2005). For example, 37 civilians were reportedly slain in Urhobo communities during "Operation Salvage" in 1990, a Nigerian Army action purportedly designed to defend oil infrastructure (Amnesty International, 1991). According to multiple reports, there is a culture of impunity surrounding security operations, with violators of human rights rarely incurring legal penalties. This normalises violence against civilians and makes justice unachievable (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Amnesty International, 2004). Community activists and protestors are routinely labelled as militants or criminals due to this militarised environment, which has criminalised peaceful dissent (Igbuzor, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2007). Such categorisation produces a circle of repression and reaction by undermining nonviolent activism and pushing communities into

more aggressive forms of resistance (Okonta & Douglas, 2001; Ikelegbe, 2005). This trend was critically described by environmental activist Nnimmo Bassey (1999, p. 77), who remarked that state interventions "offer bandaids for bullet wounds while continuing to fire the gun"—a metaphor for token development initiatives' failure to address the underlying causes of conflict.

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The Transformation of Traditional Governance Institutions

Prior to the discovery of crude oil, Urhoboland maintained a complex traditional governance structure that evolved over generations to manage community affairs, mediate conflicts, and uphold social cohesiveness. The Ovie functioned as both the political and spiritual leader of each clan or kingdom, assisted by a council of chiefs representing multiple lineages. The age-grade system organised social order, with males rising through hierarchical grades that granted certain rights and obligations. Kinship and lineage underlay social and political order, with extended families functioning as the primary unit. Communal decision-making was fundamental to Urhobo governance, as councils of elders discussed community concerns and administered customary justice. Traditional Urhobo justice stressed repair, stressing societal harmony via mediation and discussion. Although this system repeated some hierarchies and exclusions, it enabled responsible governance and collaborative action that perpetuated Urhobo communities across generations.

The introduction of oil firms and the Nigerian state's assumption of exclusive sovereignty over petroleum resources created new sources of power and patronage that destabilised traditional governance institutions. Traditional councils were sidelined or co-opted, while new institutions—Community Development Committees (CDCs), youth associations, and women's groups—emerged to fight for access to oil profits and corporate social responsibility

benefits. Rather than promoting democratic government, these organisations became sites of fierce competition, since control over community representation allowed access to oil-derived patronage. This proliferation divided authority, producing conflicting claims to representation and leadership. Chieftaincy disputes erupted, community organisations became factionalised, and traditional rulers, whose power stemmed from lineage and community consent, found their legitimacy challenged by young leaders and CDC chairpersons supported by oil revenue.

The rise of a new "oil elite" further disrupted traditional government institutions. Individuals who amassed fortune through oil contracts, political ties, or compensation payments broke established hierarchies and evaded customary accountability processes. Rather than originating from chieftaincy lines, this new class changed ethnic identity into a mechanism for acquiring oil resources. Competition for oil-related benefits caused violent tensions within and between communities, while oil income and corporate social responsibility funding were often transferred from community benefit to individual profit. Traditional systems assuring responsible leadership were undercut by the influx of oil wealth, as new elites acted outside traditional institutions of accountability, intensifying elite capture and community disempowerment.

These developments have drastically weakened societal cohesion. Fragmentation into competing factions reduced collective action capability and negotiation leverage vis-à-vis the state and oil companies. Traditional institutions were bypassed for externally engineered structures, while cultural preservation suffered as oil wealth and attendant corruption eroded away traditional customs and values. This shift creates a sort of "institutional violence" that undermines community cohesion and suffocates collective action capability. Rebuilding traditional governance institutions, enhancing accountability, and depoliticising power structures are vital for restoring community control over development decisions. This entails addressing the structural imbalances that have warped traditional governance, particularly the centralisation of oil revenues and the uneven distribution of oil-related benefits.

Resource Control Agitation and Constitutional Politics

Early efforts to obtain control over resources in Urhoboland began with official engagement with national institutions. Urhobo leaders exploited their roles in national assemblies to resist the centralisation of resource wealth. In the 1977 constitutional discussions, Chief T.E.A. Salubi gave a furious speech, claiming, "no nation can attain prosperity while impoverishing the source of its wealth systematically" (National Assembly discussions, Vol. XII, 1977, p. 894). His arguments, based on a rigorous assessment of the discrepancy between what Urhoboland provided and what it received, were among the first thorough challenges to federal control of resources (Omene, 2021). In 1979, Senator Fred Brume and his colleagues pushed to restore the 25% derivation principle, but their ideas were blocked by northern and western delegates, revealing the structural hurdles to resource control in national politics (Constitutional Conference Records, 1979). In 1980, the Urhobo Progress Union delivered a

statement to the federal government, requesting 50% derivation revenue and underlining the neglect of oil-producing areas (UPU statement, 1980/Delta State Archives, p. 12). The paper included photos that compared filthy rivers to well-maintained oil infrastructure and asked, "Whose Development is Financed by Oil?" (UPU Memo, 1980/Delta State Archives, p. 34). Scholar Peter Ekeh (1983) labelled this the "Urhobo paradox": a strong affinity to state structures but a refusal to embrace their exploitative actions. As constitutional initiatives achieved little change, opposition movements became more aggressive in the late 1980s and 1990s. Chevron security records observed that protests progressed from peaceful petitions to occupying facilities (Chevron Security records, Warri Office, 1995). The 1994 Ovu occupation demonstrated new levels of organisation, with youth leaders shutting down 35 wells in the Otorogu field and building up a media centre (Urhobo Voice, May 8-22, 1994). This 21-day demonstration cost Chevron nearly $1.5 million per day in missed production and sought measures like job quotas, environmental trust funds, and community monitoring of pipeline maintenance (Ovu Community Manifesto, 1994/Warri Public Library). By 1995, at least twelve Urhobo youth groups functioned outside official structures, pointing to a crisis of legitimacy and a more extreme resistance (Delta State Security Reports, 1995-1997). The state responded with both violence and empty promises, as evidenced in the 1990 "Operation Salvage," which led to 37 civilian deaths (Amnesty International, 1991), and the 1992 'Urhobo Oil Areas Development Board,' which lacked genuine funding (Midwest State Gazette, 1992). Nnimmo Bassey (1999, p. 77) described this strategy as offering "bandaids for bullet wounds while continuing to fire the rifle." The Ogoni struggle, ending with the 1995 execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, illustrated both the perils and opportunities of advocacy, prompting Urhobo activists to employ mass mobilisation and frame their demands as environmental human rights problems (Okonta & Douglas, 2001). The 1998 Kaiama Declaration by Ijaw youth underlined the unified appeal for resource management (Ijaw Youth Council, 1998). Urhobo campaigning has concentrated on raising derivation from 13% to at least 20%, a political demand for increased autonomy and self-determination (Darah, 2017). The UPU maintains that "the pre-conditions for peace and progress of any society is equity, fairness, justice, acknowledgement of, recognition and respect for diversity" (Omene, 2021). Calls for resource control reject the centralised system of Nigeria's oil state and advocate federalism and local decision-making (Igbuzor, 2023). The history of exclusion in Urhoboland demonstrates a trend from colonial times to date, with laws like the 1969 Petroleum Decree, Land Use Act of 1978, and Petroleum Industry Act 2021 supporting these patterns (Frynas, 2000; Imuere, 2019; Omene, 2021). This marginalisation is built into Nigeria's oil state, not created by any single regime (Karl, 1997; Watts, 2004). The "paradox of plenty" is clear: a region rich in resources but confronting persistent underdevelopment, poverty, and political isolation (Ariye & Abenabe, 2024; Imuere, 2025). State and corporate players have hampered opposition by dividing communities and co-opting elites, making it hard to establish a united movement (Igbuzor, 2020; Imuere, 2022). Despite these hurdles, Urhobo communities have exhibited great agency through petitions, protests, and international legal action (Ebiede, 2018; Okafor, 2011). Their fight for resource control shows how communities can organise, resist, and demand accountability, offering lessons for

governance and development as Nigeria faces new energy challenges (Imuere, 2024; Ariye & Abenabe, 2024).

Conclusion

This article from the foregoing analysed the political implications of crude oil exploration in Urhoboland from 1958 to 2024, demonstrating a systematic pattern of exclusion, marginalisation, and exploitation that has continued throughout six decades. The findings reveal that Urhobo communities have been systematically excluded from petroleum industry governance, with low representation in the Nigerian National Petroleum Company and regulatory agencies. Inequitable revenue allocation, indicated by the degradation of the derivation principle from 50% to 13%, has caused what scholar Gordini Darah (2017) labelled "13 percent derivation, 87 percent deprivation." The manipulation of ethnic identities through divide-and-rule techniques has fractured resistance, while the militarisation of oil-producing towns and criminalisation of dissent have transformed Urhoboland into a "sacrifice zone" where normal legal rights are suspended. Traditional governance institutions have been fundamentally transformed, with new sources of patronage destabilising authority structures and weakening community cohesion. Despite these hurdles, Urhobo communities have exhibited extraordinary endurance, expanding resistance from constitutional advocacy through petitions and nonviolent protests to militancy and current techniques of international litigation and internet activism.

The core claim is that Urhoboland's political marginalisation is structural, anchored in purposeful policy choices back to the colonial past and sustained through succeeding governments. The 1969 Petroleum Decree established the legislative architecture of exclusion, reinforced by the Land Use Act of 1978 and the Petroleum Industry Act of 2021. This paradigm has stripped Urhobo communities of sovereignty over their land, producing a political economy of extraction without representation. Addressing these impacts requires fundamental restructuring of Nigeria's fiscal federalism, increased derivation to at least 20%, inclusive representation of Urhobo communities in petroleum sector governance, enforcement of local content provisions, and genuine commitment to community participation in decision-making. Legal reforms should include reconsideration of the 1969 Petroleum Decree and the Land Use Act, adjustment of the Petroleum Industry Act's host community provisions, and constitutional reform to reinforce federalism and preserve community rights to natural resources. Institutional changes should enhance the Niger Delta Development Commission, promote transparent methods for revenue distribution, empower community institutions to manage their own development, and protect traditional governance systems from the distorting impacts of oil patronage.

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