



## A MILITARY HISTORY OF INTERGROUP RELATIONS BETWEEN THE IKWERRE AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS IN THE NIGER DELTA

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the military dimensions of intergroup relations between the Ikwerre people and their neighbouring ethnic communities in Nigeria's Niger Delta, with a focus on conflict, defence strategies, and militarized interactions from the precolonial era to the post-independence period. Drawing on oral histories, colonial archives, and secondary literature, the study traces how traditional warfare practices, territorial disputes, and shifting alliances shaped the historical landscape of Ikwerre relations with groups such as the Kalabari, Etche, Ogoni, and Okrika. It explores the transformation of indigenous defence systems under colonial rule, the disruptions caused by the Nigerian Civil War, and the emergence of ethnic militias and youth-led militarization during the oil boom and militant insurgencies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The paper also highlights instances of strategic cooperation and joint security efforts in the face of shared threats. By situating the Ikwerre experience within broader patterns of militarization in the Niger Delta, the study contributes to the military historiography of Nigeria and underscores the enduring link between local security dynamics and inter-ethnic political relations.*

**Keywords:** Niger Delta, Nigeria, Military, Ikwerre, Intergroup Relations, Ikwerre

### Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has long been characterized by a complex tapestry of ethnic identities, intergroup relations, and militarized encounters. Among the various groups that inhabit this volatile geopolitical landscape are the Ikwerre people, located primarily in the heart of Rivers State. Bordered by ethnic communities such as the Kalabari, Etche, Ogoni, and Okrika, the Ikwerre have historically engaged in a variety of interactions with their neighbours, ranging from cooperative alliances to violent conflicts. These interactions have not only shaped local histories but have also influenced broader regional security dynamics. While existing literature on inter-ethnic relations in the Niger Delta tends to focus on contemporary political and economic grievances, particularly those tied to oil exploitation and resource control, less attention has been given to the military-historical dimensions of these relationships. Yet, from precolonial warrior traditions and localized armed disputes to colonial-era security restructuring and post-independence militant insurgencies, military encounters have played a pivotal role in defining how the Ikwerre and their neighbours relate to each other.

This paper explores the historical evolution of intergroup relations involving the Ikwerre from a military history perspective. It examines how patterns of conflict and cooperation were shaped by traditional military structures, colonial pacification policies, civil war dynamics, and the rise of ethnic militias in the late 20th century. Special attention is given to the militarization



of youth movements, the strategic use of alliances, and the state's role in managing or exacerbating local conflicts. The paper seeks to answer the following key questions: First and foremost, how have the Ikwerre traditionally engaged in conflict or defence against neighbouring groups? Secondly, what impact did colonial and post-colonial military structures have on these intergroup relations? Lastly, in what ways have security alliances and militarized actors influenced peace or conflict in the region? By integrating oral histories, archival materials, and scholarly analysis, this study contributes to the growing field of African military history and offers a more nuanced understanding of the role of violence, security, and strategy in shaping ethnic relations in the Niger Delta.

### **Pre-colonial Military Traditions and Conflicts**

The pre-colonial military dynamics among the Ikwerre and their neighbouring communities were deeply embedded within a broader framework of indigenous political organization, territorial identity, and inter-ethnic interaction. Far from being isolated or static, the Ikwerre engaged in complex systems of defence, warfare, and diplomacy that reflected both their geopolitical positioning and their sociocultural evolution over time. These dynamics were shaped not only by local survival imperatives but also by regional currents of migration, commerce, and power negotiation.

Oral traditions trace the ancestry of the Ikwerre people to Akalaka, a reputed Benin royal who migrated east of the Sombreiro River around 1538 CE after a familial dispute in the Benin royal court (Amadi Nna, 1993). Akalaka's lineage gave rise to several groups in the central Niger Delta region—most notably the Ekpeye, Ogba, and Iwhnuruohna (later known as Ikwerre). These communities gradually settled across strategic locations in the Lower Niger region, establishing themselves along crucial trade arteries and ecological frontiers. The Ikwerre, in particular, came to occupy a liminal zone between the Igbo hinterlands to the north and east, and the Ijaw-speaking coastal communities; notably the Kalabari and Nembe, to the south and west (Meruem, 2025). This intermediary position served as both an opportunity and a liability. While it facilitated trade and cultural exchange, it also placed the Ikwerre in frequent contact and sometimes conflict with rival groups over land, access to markets, and political autonomy.

As with many pre-colonial societies in the Niger Delta, military organization among the Ikwerre was primarily decentralized and community-based. Each village or kinship group maintained its own defensive apparatus, typically organized around age-grade systems, secret societies, and warrior guilds. These institutions were responsible not only for territorial defence but also for enforcing internal laws, mediating disputes, and asserting collective identity during inter-community tensions. Warfare was often a localized affair, conducted through ambushes, raids, and ritualized displays of power rather than prolonged campaigns. Nevertheless, the stakes were high, as conflicts could result in the displacement of populations, the destruction of farmlands, or the reconfiguration of trade routes. Alliances and hostilities among neighbouring groups were fluid and frequently renegotiated. Shared ancestry, intermarriage, and commercial ties often acted as buffers against sustained hostilities, while land scarcity, competition over palm produce markets, or acts of ritual violation could spark confrontations. In some cases, the Ikwerre entered into temporary alliances with neighbouring communities, including the Kalabari and the Ogoni, to ward off external threats or to assert territorial claims.



Furthermore, spiritual belief systems played an integral role in both the conduct and justification of war. Warfare was rarely waged without ritual consultation with oracles, deities, and ancestral spirits. Success in battle was often attributed to the favor of protective deities, while defeat could signal ritual impurity or ancestral disapproval. Shrines, war charms, and sacred forests served both symbolic and practical purposes in mobilizing and legitimizing armed resistance. Despite their localized nature, these military traditions reveal a sophisticated understanding of power, territory, and diplomacy in pre-colonial Ikwerre society. They also underscore the community's adaptability in navigating a complex sociopolitical landscape long before colonial conquest and integration into the modern Nigerian state. The legacy of these traditions continues to inform the cultural memory and identity of the Ikwerre people, particularly in ongoing debates about indigeneity, resource control, and political representation in the post-colonial Niger Delta.

### **Warfare and Conflict Among Neighbours**

Although direct documentation of organized military units among the Ikwerre is limited, regional histories and secondary sources provide valuable insight into patterns of conflict and cooperation among neighbouring communities. For example, the Obolo (Andoni) people were known to have engaged in frequent warfare with the Bonny and Ogoni in the precolonial era. Given the geographic proximity and longstanding inter-ethnic interactions within the eastern Niger Delta, it is plausible that similar martial strategies and defensive postures were shared by the Ikwerre and surrounding groups (Favour, 2025). While there is a notable absence of formal militaristic institutions within Ikwerre society, ethnographic studies suggest a tradition of strategic alliances and mutual support during periods of conflict. In certain cases, Ikwerre chiefs and communities were active participants in broader regional warfare. For instance, during confrontations between Okrika or Bonny and the Kalabari, it was recorded that Kalabari chiefs provided arms to their Ikwerre counterparts in Emohua, soliciting their military assistance (Morris, 2025). In another instance, during the Oroije-Eguma-Abali conflict within the Rebisi (Diobu) region, Oroije warriors reportedly sought refuge with Chief George Wowhukanuga of Okrika. This underscores the intricate networks of protection, diplomacy, and martial cooperation that transcended ethnic boundaries (Meruem, 2025).

Colonial-era ethnographic accounts, such as those by Talbot (1932), highlight the syncretic nature of political and spiritual authority in the Niger Delta. Among the Ikwerre and their neighbours, leadership during times of conflict did not typically involve structured military hierarchies. Instead, chiefs, in collaboration with councils of elders and spiritual leaders, played central roles in mobilizing community defence and facilitating conflict resolution. These leaders, while not primarily warriors, exercised significant influence in communal affairs, especially in wartime scenarios. This suggests that precolonial war leadership among the Ikwerre was embedded in broader socio-political institutions rather than in specialized military ranks (Bazza & Korinya, 2020).

### **Colonial Military Policies and their Impact on Ikwerre**

During the colonial period, the British sought to enforce authority in the Niger Delta and broader southern region through military campaigns and structural realignments. Notably,



conflicts such as the Anglo-Aro War (1901–1902) underscored the British approach: deploying superior firepower, including machine guns against indigenous forces, crushing resistance, dismantling traditional institutions, and consolidating control (Anglo-Aro War, 1901–1902). This set the tone for subsequent operations in nearby areas such as those occupied by the Ikwerre, contributing to the erosion of local martial structures. With respect to formation and recruitment into Colonial Forces, in 1914, the Nigeria Regiment was established, merging Northern and Southern Nigeria's colonial troops into a formal auxiliary force under the Royal West African Frontier Force (WAFF) (Nigeria Regiment, 1914–1956) (2025). Recruitment into this cadre reflected strategic selection by the British: favouring groups deemed “martial races” and often sidelining southern ethnicities, including potential candidates from Ikwerre communities (Ejiogu, 2007). This created long-lasting disparities in military representation. Even decades after independence, these recruitment patterns carried on. For instance, by the late 1950s, Hausa and other Northern groups constituted approximately 62% of the Royal Nigerian Army, relegating southern soldiers to minorities; only 36%, a disparity rooted in colonial recruitment policies (The Recruitment Crisis, 1962 memo).

Beyond formal regiments, the British relied heavily on local policing and constabulary structures to maintain order. Prior to WWI, forces such as the Royal Niger Company's constabulary and the Niger Coast Constabulary (Oil Rivers Irregular Force) were established, styling themselves as policing entities, but functioning as military units for suppressing dissent and securing territories (Militarization in British West Africa). These local forces operated around regions including Port Harcourt and its environs, where Ikwerre communities lived, embedding colonial itinerant power in everyday life. This hybrid reliance, combining specialized regiments with local paramilitary policing, effectively dismantled existing Ikwerre local military organization, repurposed or marginalized community defence capacities, and transferred armed authority to colonial control. The colonial administration also disrupted traditional political and communal institutions through practices like indirect rule, redrawing boundaries, and accommodating select chiefs under colonial oversight (Colonial Nigeria military conquest). While this strategy preserved some semblance of indigenous governance, it co-opted authority and eroded autonomous martial leadership among communities like the Ikwerre.

### **Forceful Pacification and the Imposition of Colonial Control**

The British colonizers relied heavily on military campaigns and forceful suppression to assert control across Southern Nigeria. Operations such as the Anglo-Aro War (1901–1902) demonstrated the deployment of superior weaponry, including machine guns to subdue resistance and dismantle indigenous power structures (Wikipedia, Anglo-Aro War). This pattern of militarized pacification would become a template for subjugating neighbouring Niger Delta communities, including the Ikwerre. The British established auxiliary military structures like the Southern Nigeria Regiment, evolving into the Nigeria Regiment in 1914 under the Royal West African Frontier Force (WAFF) (Wikipedia, Nigeria Regiment; Southern Nigeria Regiment). These formations were regionally segmented, with battalions stationed across Northern and Southern commands, including areas proximate to Ikwerre territory (e.g., Calabar) (Duyile, 2005; *The Birth and Formation of the Nigerian Army*).



Colonial policymakers classified Northern ethnic groups (e.g., Hausa-Fulani, Tiv, Kanuri) as the “martial races,” encouraging their enlistment, while discouraging recruitment from southern groups such as the Igbo, Yoruba, and likely the Ikwerre (Nigerian Civil War). E.C. Ejiogu (2011) emphasizes how these colonial recruitment patterns, preserved into the postcolonial period, deeply impacted coup dynamics and the composition of Nigeria’s military state (Ejiogu, 2011).

Data on officer seniority from 1952–1964 further illustrates these imbalances: Igbo representation steadily rose in middle officer ranks, while northerners continued to dominate the lower ranks, shaping evolving ethnic tensions (Scientia Militaria data). After independence, the Nigerian Army remained structured to prioritize internal control and order, rather than conventional warfare training (Nigerian Civil War). Such skewed structures exacerbated regional cleavages, especially during the politically fraught First Republic and the Civil War. Parallel to the military, colonial policing in Southern Nigeria was similarly designed for dominance rather than protection. Early formations such as the Royal Niger Company Constabulary, Niger Coast Constabulary, and later the Nigeria Police Force, were organized primarily for suppressing dissent and maintaining colonial dominance (This Day; Guardian; BBC). The repressive policing culture established during colonial rule marked by brutality, mistrust, and weaponized authority, persisted in postcolonial law enforcement institutions (Omeni, *Nigeria’s harsh police culture*). These colonial military and policing systems fundamentally undercut indigenous defence capacity and skewed the balance of power in Nigeria’s armed institutions:

### **Post-Independence Conflicts and Militarization**

Following Nigeria’s independence in 1960, the inherited colonial military architecture continued to influence national and regional power dynamics. The military remained ethnically skewed, reflecting colonial recruitment biases that favoured Northern groups and marginalized southern minorities like the Ikwerre (Ejiogu, 2007). This imbalance fuelled mistrust between regions and ethnicities, setting the stage for military interventions in governance (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The Nigerian Civil War, or Biafran War, was a pivotal moment for the Ikwerre and neighbouring communities in the Niger Delta. Although primarily involving the Igbo-dominated Eastern Region’s secession attempt, the conflict deeply affected the Niger Delta, where the Ikwerre reside. The war’s militarization intensified local conflicts, as competing ethnic groups aligned with federal or Biafran forces to protect their interests (Achebe, 2012; Ojakorotu, 2008).

The Ikwerre, caught between federal and secessionist forces, experienced significant militarization, with armed militias and local defence groups forming in response to insecurity and state neglect (Okonta & Douglas, 2001). The war also exposed the strategic importance of the Niger Delta’s oil resources, leading to increased federal military presence in the region to secure oil installations (Watts, 2004). Postwar Nigeria saw the emergence of militarized conflicts centred around resource control in the Niger Delta. The discovery and exploitation of oil in Ikwerre land intensified contestations over resource ownership, environmental degradation, and political marginalization (Okonta & Douglas, 2001). The Nigerian state’s



reliance on military solutions to quell unrest entrenched a cycle of violence and militarization (Watts, 2007).

Militant groups such as the Niger Delta Volunteer Force and later the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) emerged, leveraging militarized tactics including sabotage, kidnapping, and attacks on oil infrastructure to demand greater autonomy and resource control (Smith, 2007). The Ikwerre were among the ethnic communities involved, either directly or indirectly, in this militancy (Eze, 2010). Between 1966 and 1999, Nigeria experienced multiple military coups and prolonged military rule, further militarizing the political landscape. The military's dominance entrenched ethnicity as a factor in military promotions and deployments, often exacerbating intergroup tensions (Diamond, 1988). Ikwerre officers, like other minority group members, often faced limitations within the military hierarchy, reinforcing feelings of exclusion (Ejiogu, 2007). The federal military's counterinsurgency campaigns in the Niger Delta frequently led to human rights abuses, with the Ikwerre communities caught in the crossfire between militants and government forces (Human Rights Watch, 1999). These further complicated intergroup relations, as communities navigated between resistance, survival, and collaboration.

Contemporary Militarization and Security Challenges heightened even in the wake of the transition to civilian rule in 1999, since instead of ending militarization in the Niger Delta, periodic outbreaks of violence, community militias, and heavy-handed security responses rather, have perpetuated instability (Obi, 2010). Militarized policing and joint military operations against militant groups often disrupt local economies and social structures among the Ikwerre and neighbouring groups (Amnesty International, 2009). Efforts such as the 2009 amnesty program for militants temporarily reduced violence but failed to address root causes of militarization, including political exclusion and environmental degradation (Watts, 2008). Consequently, militarization remains a defining feature of intergroup relations in the Niger Delta, reflecting ongoing struggles for identity, control, and justice.

### **Strategic Alliances and Security Cooperation**

In response to external threats and internal conflicts, the Ikwerre and their neighbouring communities have historically engaged in strategic alliances aimed at collective security and mutual defence. Pre-colonial military traditions emphasized coalition-building among ethnic groups to resist invasions or raids (Ekechi, 1971). These alliances often took the form of temporary confederations during times of war or persistent external pressure. During colonial times, such alliances were both disrupted and co-opted by British policies that sought to divide and rule, yet local groups adapted by forming informal networks to negotiate security and political leverage (Afigbo, 1981). Following independence and the Nigerian Civil War, the fragmentation of state authority in the Niger Delta region fostered the emergence of ethnic militias and vigilante groups. The Ikwerre, alongside neighbouring groups such as the Ijaw and Ogoni, have sometimes co-operated strategically to safeguard communal interests, especially regarding oil resource control and protection from state or corporate aggression (Okonta & Douglas, 2001).



These alliances, while primarily local and informal, occasionally evolved into more coordinated security efforts during periods of heightened militancy or government crackdowns (Watts, 2007). Intergroup collaboration has facilitated information sharing, joint patrols, and coordinated resistance against external military forces. In recent decades, the Nigerian government has pursued security co-operation initiatives aimed at stabilizing the Niger Delta, involving joint military-police operations and engagement with local community leaders. Programmes such as the Niger Delta Amnesty Initiative (2009) incorporated former militants from various ethnic backgrounds, including the Ikwerre, into formal dialogue and rehabilitation efforts (Amnesty International, 2009). The federal military's collaboration with local vigilante groups, sometimes controversially, reflects a pragmatic approach to security in complex inter-ethnic contexts (Obi, 2010). These alliances have occasionally reduced violence but also risk exacerbating rivalries when not managed inclusively.

Despite these strategic alliances, enduring challenges hinder long-term security co-operation among the Ikwerre and their neighbours. Historical grievances, competition over resource control, and external manipulation often fracture trust (Eze, 2010). Moreover, disparities in political representation and military inclusion continue to shape power dynamics within these alliances. Environmental degradation and economic marginalization further strain relations, complicating joint efforts toward peace and security (Watts, 2004). Addressing these root causes is critical to transforming militarized alliances into sustainable security partnerships.

### **Case Studies of Strategic Alliances and Security Co-operation:**

#### **The 1990s Ogoni-Ikwerre Collaboration Against Oil Exploitation**

In the late 1990s, the Ikwerre and Ogoni peoples, two distinct ethnic groups in the oil-producing Niger Delta, formed a strategic alliance in response to escalating environmental degradation and socio-political marginalization caused by multinational oil companies. Bound by territorial proximity and shared grievances, both communities confronted systemic injustices such as oil spills, gas flaring, loss of livelihoods, and exclusion from oil wealth (Okonta & Douglas, 2001). This alliance was characterized by joint protest actions, grassroots mobilization, and community-based monitoring of oil installations. The two groups worked collaboratively to expose ecological abuses and human rights violations, often submitting joint petitions to international bodies, including Amnesty International and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). Their advocacy culminated in heightened global attention, with the plight of Niger Delta communities increasingly framed within the discourse of environmental justice and indigenous rights (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Despite severe repression, including military raids, arrests, and intimidation campaigns by Nigerian state forces, the Ogoni-Ikwerre partnership marked a turning point in inter-ethnic cooperation. It moved the region away from fragmented resistance towards a more united front anchored in shared ecological, economic, and security concerns.

#### **Post-2000s Developments: From Grassroots Resistance to Legal and Policy Engagement**



In the decades following the 1990s protests, new forms of cooperation emerged between Ogoni, Ikwerre, and other Niger Delta communities. These efforts increasingly moved beyond street-level resistance to embrace legal advocacy, institutional engagement, and regional coalitions. The Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP), initiated in 2016 as a response to the UNEP report on Ogoni land, benefited from sustained pressure not only by Ogoni activists but also by broader regional stakeholders, including Ikwerre civil society organizations, who advocated for transparency and community participation in the clean-up process. Moreover, the formation of umbrella organizations such as the Pan-Niger Delta Forum (PANDEF) created space for sustained dialogue and policy coordination among ethnic nationalities, including the Ikwerre and Ogoni. These bodies have consistently demanded greater fiscal federalism, community ownership of oil resources, and infrastructural investment in affected regions. Though uneven in impact, these coalitions underscore a shift towards institutionalized forms of security cooperation rooted in collective regional identity and strategic negotiation.

In recent years, youth-led climate justice movements in Rivers State; many with roots in Ikwerre and Ogoni communities, have also revived calls for environmental accountability. These movements have harnessed digital platforms, partnered with international NGOs, and used litigation to press for corporate and state responsibility. Notably, in 2022, youth coalitions from both communities staged joint demonstrations calling for expedited action on the UNEP clean-up, better regulation of artisanal refining, and inclusive development planning. From the volatile alliances of the 1990s to the more structured, policy-driven collaborations of the 2000s and beyond, the relationship between the Ogoni and Ikwerre reflects a dynamic model of inter-ethnic strategic alliance in the Niger Delta. While challenges remain, especially in relation to elite capture, state repression, and environmental degradation, these evolving forms of cooperation highlight the potential for community solidarity in confronting shared threats to ecological security and economic sovereignty.

### **Joint Vigilante Patrols in Ikwerre and Neighbouring Communities, Early 2000s**

In the early 2000s, amid escalating militant activities in the Niger Delta, grassroots security responses emerged as communities sought to reclaim a measure of control over their safety. The Ikwerre, along with neighbouring groups such as the Ogoni and other Riverine communities, initiated joint vigilante patrols aimed at countering both insurgent violence and the often oppressive actions of state security forces (Eze, 2010). This period was marked by widespread insecurity, as militant groups, some advocating for resource control, others driven by criminal enterprise, targeted oil installations, kidnapped workers, and clashed with the military. Simultaneously, government security forces were frequently accused of heavy-handedness, arbitrary arrests, and extrajudicial killings, further destabilizing the region (Watts, 2007). In response, local youth organizations and community leaders from Ikwerre, Ogoni, and adjacent areas collaborated to form vigilante groups that conducted coordinated patrols and intelligence-sharing operations. These patrols primarily focused on securing rural villages, oil-bearing communities, and transportation routes from both militant incursions and military raids. Beyond policing functions, the vigilantes also played mediating roles; engaging in ceasefire negotiations, de-escalating inter-communal tensions, and serving as intermediaries between restive youths and government officials.



The joint nature of these patrols fostered a sense of regional solidarity that temporarily reduced localized violence and contributed to more nuanced relationships with external security actors. In certain areas, the presence of these community security networks led to informal agreements with military commanders, whereby vigilantes would provide intelligence in exchange for restraint and protection of civilians. This model of community-based security filled a critical gap left by state institutions and highlighted the importance of locally embedded peacekeeping mechanisms in fragile regions. However, the sustainability of these initiatives was limited by several structural challenges. Rivalries among local militias, political co-optation of vigilante leaders, and competition for control of security-related funding frequently undermined cohesion. Moreover, as state amnesty programs began to absorb or demobilize militants in the late 2000s, many vigilante groups struggled to define their post-conflict roles. Some were dissolved or absorbed into state-sponsored security frameworks, while others were politicized, contributing to election-related violence and eroding their original community-oriented mandate.

Despite these complications, the early 2000s joint vigilante efforts in Ikwerre and neighbouring communities remain a compelling example of grassroots security cooperation in the Niger Delta. They illustrate how local actors when faced with dual threats from insurgency and militarization, can mobilize shared interests, negotiate peace at the micro-level, and temporarily stabilize highly volatile environments. These experiences continue to inform contemporary debates on community policing, civilian security partnerships, and local ownership of peacebuilding processes in Nigeria's oil-producing regions. In the early 2000s, as militant activities intensified in the Niger Delta, Ikwerre youths and neighbouring communities such as the Ikwerre and Ogoni established joint vigilante groups to protect their villages from both militant attacks and excessive military presence (Eze, 2010). These groups conducted coordinated patrols, shared intelligence on suspicious activities, and negotiated ceasefire arrangements locally. This grassroots security cooperation helped reduce localized violence temporarily and fostered a platform for dialogue between communities and government forces. However, challenges remained in sustaining unity amid competing militia interests and political interference (Watts, 2007).

### **The 2009 Niger Delta Amnesty Program: Multi-ethnic Security Cooperation**

The Nigerian government's 2009 Amnesty Program marked a significant turning point in the security and political dynamics of the Niger Delta. Originally conceived as a response to years of armed insurgency, oil pipeline sabotage, and hostage-taking by militant groups, the program provided a conditional pardon to militants who agreed to disarm, undergo rehabilitation, and reintegrate into civilian life. One of the program's less frequently discussed but critical outcomes was its role in fostering multi-ethnic security cooperation among historically divided groups, including the Ikwerre, Ijaw, Ogoni, Itsekiri, Urhobo, and others (Amnesty International, 2009). Prior to the amnesty, inter-ethnic rivalries fueled by competition over oil revenues, land ownership, and political appointments had frequently erupted into violent clashes. However, the shared experience of marginalization and involvement in the militancy provided a platform for former combatants from various ethnic backgrounds to interact in new, cooperative settings. The program's structure facilitated this through joint vocational training



programs, peacebuilding workshops, and community development initiatives, where ex-militants engaged in collaborative efforts that emphasized shared goals over ethnic allegiances.

This intergroup engagement was further supported by dialogue platforms created under the program's peace and reconciliation components. In these forums, former fighters and community leaders were encouraged to discuss grievances, build mutual understanding, and contribute to local strategies for preventing renewed violence. These initiatives helped to reduce long-standing suspicions and encouraged the development of inter-ethnic trust, particularly in urban centres like Port Harcourt, Warri, and Yenagoa, where militant groups had previously operated in segregated and often antagonistic networks (Obi, 2010). Crucially, the amnesty program not only de-escalated armed conflict but also enabled the partial reconfiguration of security cooperation across ethnic lines. Some former combatants were recruited into government-backed security surveillance and pipeline protection units, which, while controversial, represented an effort to integrate grassroots actors into formal security infrastructure. In areas like Emohua (Ikwerre) and Bori (Ogoni), local ex-militants worked alongside counterparts from other ethnic groups to protect oil infrastructure and monitor flashpoints, albeit under tight government oversight.

However, the program's achievements were not without limitations. Beneath the surface of multi-ethnic collaboration, structural grievances over resource control, environmental degradation, and political exclusion persisted. Many communities remained disillusioned with the state's failure to address the root causes of militancy, and the benefits of the amnesty, such as vocational empowerment or economic reintegration, were unevenly distributed. Tensions also emerged around the dominance of certain ethnic groups, particularly the Ijaw, in the implementation and leadership of the program, occasionally reviving old suspicions among smaller ethnic groups like the Ikwerre and Itsekiri. In the years following the initial implementation, the need for sustained conflict management and inter-ethnic dialogue became increasingly evident. While the amnesty program succeeded in disarming thousands and reducing militant activity, its long-term legacy depended on continuous investment in inclusive development, equitable political representation, and mechanisms for grassroots security governance. The 2009 Amnesty Program represents a rare and important case of state-facilitated multi-ethnic security cooperation in the Niger Delta. It provided a framework for bridging historical divides, transforming violent actors into peacebuilders, and laying the groundwork for a more integrated and cooperative regional security environment. However, the fragile nature of these gains underscores the ongoing need for dialogue, reform, and inclusive governance in order to prevent a relapse into intergroup conflict.

### **Continuity and Change in Intergroup Military Relations**

The intergroup military relations among the Ikwerre and their neighbours exhibit notable continuities rooted in pre-colonial and colonial experiences. Traditional alliances for defence against external threats, such as raids and invasions, persisted despite the disruptions of colonial rule (Ekechi, 1971). Even during colonial imposition, informal networks and local militias adapted to changing power dynamics to protect communal interests (Afigbo, 1981). Post-independence militarization reflected these enduring patterns, with ethnic militias and community vigilantes often reverting to historical models of localized defence and alliance-



building (Eze, 2010). The persistence of ethnic identities as organizing principles in military relations has shaped both co-operation and rivalry, underscoring the deeply embedded nature of intergroup security practices. Significant changes have accompanied the evolution of military relations. The scale and sophistication of conflicts have increased, driven by access to modern weaponry, the strategic importance of oil resources, and state militarization (Watts, 2007). Where pre-colonial conflicts were often limited and ritualized, contemporary engagements involve sustained armed militancy, sabotage, and counter-insurgency operations (Okonta & Douglas, 2001).

Furthermore, the role of the state and multinational corporations has transformed intergroup dynamics. The Nigerian military's involvement as a national actor, alongside global economic interests in the Niger Delta, has complicated traditional patterns of alliance and conflict, introducing new dimensions of political economy into military relations (Obi, 2010). While grassroots alliances continue, there is a gradual shift toward more institutionalized forms of security co-operation. Initiatives like the Niger Delta Amnesty Program (2009) represent attempts to formalize peace-building and disarmament across ethnic lines, fostering multi-ethnic dialogue and integration of former militants into mainstream society (Amnesty International, 2009). Additionally, regional and local governments have increasingly engaged in cooperative security frameworks, involving joint patrols and community policing that include diverse ethnic groups (Eze, 2010). These developments suggest a cautious move from fragmented militancy toward structured security collaboration, though challenges remain.

### **Persistent Challenges and Prospects for the Future**

While various peacebuilding efforts, including grassroots alliances and state-led interventions such as the 2009 Amnesty Program, have contributed to a reduction in large-scale violence in the Niger Delta, the region including Ikwerre communities, continues to grapple with persistent structural and socio-political challenges. These unresolved issues threaten the sustainability of past gains and complicate the path toward long-term regional stability.

One of the foremost drivers of continued tension is resource competition, particularly around oil revenues and land ownership. Despite being central to Nigeria's oil economy, many Niger Delta communities remain economically marginalized and environmentally devastated. The paradox of oil wealth amidst local poverty continues to foster resentment, especially in areas like Ikwerre land, where the impact of oil exploration has disrupted traditional livelihoods without adequate compensation or development (Watts, 2004). This economic exclusion is compounded by political marginalization, where certain ethnic groups perceive themselves as underrepresented in state and federal structures. These perceptions often ignite demands for autonomy, greater control over resources, or inclusion in strategic decision-making platforms. Ethnic rivalries, though periodically subdued by cooperative efforts such as joint vigilante patrols or peace dialogues, remain deeply embedded in the socio-political fabric of the region. Historical grievances, contestations over local leadership, and uneven access to government patronage occasionally resurface in the form of violent clashes or rhetorical antagonism undermining fragile coalitions built during moments of crisis (Smith, 2007). Even within multi-ethnic alliances, internal fractures persist, often exploited by political elites seeking to consolidate power or redirect state resources toward ethnically aligned constituencies.



Another significant challenge is environmental degradation, a chronic and largely unresolved issue. In communities such as those in Ikwerre and Ogoni territories, the long-term effects of oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation continue to undermine agricultural and fishing economies, further exacerbating social discontent. Although initiatives like the Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP) were launched in response to environmental crises, criticisms regarding slow implementation, lack of transparency, and limited community involvement highlight the need for more robust environmental governance mechanisms.

### **Pathways for the Future**

Moving forward, the prospects for sustainable peace and security in the Niger Delta, particularly among the Ikwerre and their neighbouring communities depend on a multi-layered approach that combines institutional reform, inclusive development, and locally grounded peacebuilding. First, addressing structural inequalities is essential. This includes not only equitable distribution of oil revenues through mechanisms such as derivation formulas or host community development funds but also broader economic diversification strategies that reduce dependency on the oil economy. Providing alternative livelihoods, particularly for youth, can reduce recruitment into armed groups and promote long-term economic stability. Second, inclusive governance must be prioritized. This involves ensuring that all ethnic groups, including minority communities, have meaningful representation in political decision-making processes at both state and federal levels. Enhancing community participation in development planning, resource allocation, and security oversight will foster greater legitimacy and local ownership of peace initiatives.

Third, the promotion of inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation remains a cornerstone of durable peace. Strengthening local platforms for conflict resolution such as councils of elders, inter-communal peace committees, and religious forums can facilitate early warning and mediation mechanisms that pre-empt violence. These structures should be empowered to work in synergy with state institutions and civil society organizations. Finally, building institutional frameworks that transcend ethnic boundaries is critical to transforming the historically militarized nature of intergroup relations into cooperative security partnerships. This includes the professionalization of local vigilante groups, integration of community policing into national security policy, and development of joint peacebuilding programs across ethnic lines. Regional institutions like the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs must be restructured to function with greater accountability, efficiency, and inter-ethnic sensitivity. The Niger Delta, and Ikwerre communities within it, stand at a crossroads. While significant strides have been made in curbing violence and promoting inter-ethnic collaboration, deep-rooted challenges continue to jeopardize long-term peace. To chart a sustainable path forward, stakeholders must move beyond temporary conflict management and toward transformative peacebuilding—one grounded in justice, inclusion, and cross-ethnic cooperation. Only through such a holistic approach can the legacy of conflict be replaced by a durable culture of peace and shared prosperity.



## Conclusion

The military history of the Ikwerre and their neighbouring communities reveals a complex interplay of continuity and change shaped by pre-colonial traditions, colonial legacies, and post-independence dynamics. Historically, strategic alliances and localized military cooperation served as vital mechanisms for defence and political negotiation, rooted deeply in ethnic identities and communal interests. However, the advent of colonialism and the exploitation of the Niger Delta's oil resources introduced new challenges, transforming military relations into arenas of intensified conflict, state intervention, and resource-driven militancy. Post-independence militarization, characterized by ethnic militias and militarized state responses, further complicated intergroup relations, often exacerbating tensions and undermining trust. Despite these challenges, the emergence of strategic alliances and security co-operation, manifested in joint vigilante groups and government-led amnesty programs, signals potential pathways toward collaborative security frameworks. These efforts underscore the importance of inclusive governance, equitable resource management, and dialogue in mitigating conflict.

Sustainable peace and security in the Niger Delta, particularly among the Ikwerre and their neighbours, hinge on addressing structural inequalities and fostering institutionalized co-operation that transcends ethnic divisions. This paper highlights that while militarized relations have historically dominated intergroup interactions, there remains an opportunity to transform these relations into resilient partnerships grounded in mutual respect and shared security objectives.

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