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The chief, the youth and the plantation: communal politics in southern Nigeria*

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ABSTRACT

In August 2006 the chief of Udo, a small town in Edo State, Nigeria, was deposed and the town taken over by the 'youth'. This event presents the classic fall of a 'big man' who had lost support, but also involved long-standing chieftaincy rivalries, electoral competition in the run up to the 2007 elections, and conflict over a nearby oil palm and rubber plantation. Through an examination of Udo's crisis, this paper engages with three key questions concerning contemporary communal politics in southern Nigeria: the manifestations of patrimonial power and resistance to it; the meaning and role of 'youth'; and the impact of expatriate capital.

INTRODUCTION

Udo is a small historic town situated on the edge of Okomu Forest Reserve in Edo State in southern Nigeria. When I conducted my doctoral fieldwork there between 2001 and 2003, it was a peaceful and prospering place, with two large oil palm and rubber plantations nearby.[1] When I returned in August 2006, however, its chief, the Uwangue N'Udo, had been deposed and the town taken over by the 'youth', a group of younger chiefs and their supporters.[2] It was the first time that a chief had been deposed in this manner in Udo, but similar takeovers of community leadership by 'youth' have occurred elsewhere in Nigeria in recent years, in particular

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in the Niger Delta (see Watts 2004). This paper examines the Uwangue N'Udo's deposition and the events leading to it, which involved long-standing chieftaincy rivalries and electoral competition in the run up to the 2007 elections, as well as mounting conflict over one of the plantations. It illustrates communal politics and resource conflict in contemporary Nigeria, relating in particular to the nature of patrimonial power and resistance to it, the role of 'youth', and the impact of expatriate capital.

Firstly, then, the paper is concerned with the manifestations of patrimonial power and its contestations in a small town setting. In Nigeria as elsewhere in West Africa, many rural communities are still effectively governed by chiefs, just as more high-ranking traditional rulers such as the Oba of Benin continue to be recognised and play an important role in Nigerian political life (Nolte 2002; Vaughan 2000, 2004). Notionally independent, electoral and chieftaincy politics are, in practice, deeply intertwined: traditional chiefs are routinely involved in party politics, and the award and acquisition of chieftaincy titles are important political tools (Fisiy & Goheen 1998). In this context, patrimonialism, patron–client relationships and 'big man' politics have thrived and permeated all levels of government, taking many different forms. For example, since the return to civilian rule in 1999 'godfatherism', whereby powerful patrons sponsor candidates and seek to determine the outcome of elections, has become deeply entrenched in electoral politics (Sklar *et al.* 2006). At the same time, Nigeria's prolonged economic crisis in the aftermath of the oil boom of the 1970s has put a severe strain on patrons' existing modes of accumulation and redistribution, as rent-seeking through state funds has become more difficult. As Peter Lewis (1996) has argued, economic decline brought about a shift 'from prebendalism to predation', and has given rise to a new 'politics of plunder' (Gore & Pratten 2003), with patrons employing increasingly predatory means of accumulation.

Due to such developments in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, the recent literature on African politics has been dominated by gloomy analyses of 'the criminalisation of the state' (Bayart *et al.* 1999) and 'warlord politics' (Reno 1998). However, ideas of legitimacy and accountability play a much more significant role in African political life than such negative assessments acknowledge (Mustapha 2002). Patrimonial power itself derives its legitimacy from reciprocity and trust, and patrons who fail to redistribute resources and provide security to their clients can and do fall from power (Bayart 1993; Chabal & Daloz 1999; Lentz 1998; Pitcher *et al.* 2009). The ways in which ordinary people seek to hold patrons and governments to account are the subject of a number of recent studies, including Hagberg's (2002) analysis of *trop c'est trop*, a widespread popular

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'struggle against impunity' in Burkina Faso, and Kelsall's (2003) examination of indigenous and imported ideas of accountability in northern Tanzania. Within Nigeria, Pratten (2006: 710) has shown how Annang vigilante groups in Akwa Ibom State 'contest power through complex and ambiguous conceptions of accountability'. The most prominent recent case demonstrating the limits of patronage politics in Nigeria has been the appointment of the Action Congress (AC) candidate Oshiomhole in 2008 as governor of Edo State, after the initial appointment of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate Osunbor in the immediate wake of the 2007 elections had been declared invalid. This has been widely celebrated as the victory of the people over 'godfatherism' (*PM News* 2008).

In practice, of course, the rejection of one 'big man' may be in favour of another, and is often shaped by political rivalries and factional conflict, an intrinsic feature of patronage politics (Sandbrook 1972). But such political rivalries themselves can serve to keep the worst abuses or failings of patrimonial power in check by presenting people with some choices of leaders, and can complement rather than replace popular political activism. This paper demonstrates this through an examination of recent events at Udo. It shows how the Uwangue's increasingly predatory governing style eventually led to his rejection by the Udo community – the classic fall of the 'big man' – but also how underlying chieftaincy rivalries and electoral politics in the run up to the 2007 elections played into the crisis.

Related to this, a second theme of this paper is the role of 'youth' in Udo's conflict. Historically, the term 'youth' has been used in Africa to denote both actual age and a political category, referring to those without political power (Durham 2000). Whilst there is a long history of youth activism and politics in Nigeria (Fourchard 2008; Last 2005; Nolte 2004; Peel 1983), youth vigilante groups, militias and political associations have proliferated in recent years. Their societal role, however, is often ambiguous, and opinions diverge as to whether they are 'vanguards' or 'vandals' (Abbink & van Kessel 2005), 'masterminds' or 'tools' (Last 2005). According to a number of recent studies, youth vigilante groups have emerged as a popular response to the insecurity and economic hardships of the 'politics of plunder', attempting to provide order and security where the state is failing to do so (Gore & Pratten 2003; Harnischfeger 2003; Meagher 2007; Pratten 2006, 2008). The Annang vigilante groups in Akwa Ibom State already mentioned above, for example, guard villages at night, monitor local government expenditure and check the award of compensation payments to chiefs (Pratten 2006). Other youth organisations go further and reject existing local governments altogether, portraying themselves as political liberators who fight for

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democracy and social justice, and against corruption and misrule (e.g. Ukiwo 2007).

However, youth groups' rejection of the old guard is often ambivalent and incomplete; as Pratten (2006: 720) writes, 'they challenge clientelism and yet demand cooption'. In fact, many initiatives that are genuinely youth-led to start with, such as the Bakassi Boys vigilante group, often end up captured by powerful patrons (Gore & Pratten 2003; Ifeka 2000; Meagher 2007). It therefore seems questionable whether youth have really become 'masterminds', and have not rather remained 'tools' for elite manipulation. Eberlein (2006) and Reno (2002) are even more sceptical about youth movements. They argue that these are themselves the main perpetrators of violence and predation: rather than fighting for social justice they are merely struggling for their own share of patronage, preying on the very communities that they claim to protect. In his account of the takeover of Nembe town in 1999 by the militant youth organisation Isongoforo, Watts (2004: 63–5) describes how they became deeply unpopular and were eventually overthrown by a 'people's revolution', resulting in the return of Barigha-Amage as High Chief of Nembe. Rule by his 'cultural group' Isenasawo/Teme was then characterised by even worse terror and violence.

Just as Watts refers to Isongoforo as 'mafioso', so managers at the local oil palm plantation called Udo's new chiefs a 'mafia'. Moreover, throughout the crisis young men were themselves the main perpetrators of violence and predation, whilst the Uwangue's downfall was in part orchestrated by powerful patrons. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that the 'youth' led and brought together a genuine popular uprising against the Uwangue. This paper seeks to tease out the multiple roles of 'youth' in the conflict – which are closely linked to the ambiguous uses of the word – and also to argue that 'youth' presents the main expression of popular resistance to the excesses of patrimonial rule.

Finally, Udo's crisis also provides insights into the effects of expatriate capital and resource extraction on communal politics. There is a large literature on the impact of oil extraction on local communities in the Niger Delta, where competition over access to jobs and other resources has created communal conflict and violence, and where youth liberation movements are prominent (Groves 2009; Omeje 2005, 2006; Ukiwo 2007; Watts 1999, 2004). As Watts (2004) shows, Isongoforo's rise to power at Nembe occurred precisely because of Shell's presence: with growing armed conflict between youth groups for access to Shell, Isongoforo were given 'stand-by' payments by the companies and hired for protection purposes, making them increasingly powerful. Watts argues that these

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developments are intrinsic to petro-capitalism and the resource-curse of crude oil, yet there are other, non-oil, expatriate companies and projects in southern Nigeria, which have triggered dynamics of violence and competition quite similar to those in the Niger Delta. Ifeka (2000), for example, describes how her NGO in Cross River State became the target for a small youth group taking charge of the building and seeking financial rewards. At Udo, too, conflicts around the two expatriate-managed plantations are strikingly similar to those around the oil companies in the Niger Delta. The Udo plantations, in particular the Okomu Oil Palm Company (OOPC), have become the object of fierce competition for resources by both Edo and Ijaw speaking people living in the area, which has led the plantations to become deeply embroiled in local politics. This paper explores their impact on the local political economy and how some of the policies pursued by OOPC's expatriate management in its interaction with the community fed into existing political rivalries, thus contributing to Udo's political crisis.

In order to understand the events of 2006 in their wider historical context, the paper begins with a brief outline of Udo's and the region's history. It then describes the town and its relations to the Okomu Plantation during my first visits between 2001 and 2003, when there was relative stability and peace, before looking at the events that led to the downfall of the Uwangue in 2006. The conclusion returns to the themes outlined above, reflecting on the contributions of this case to our understanding of communal politics in Nigeria.

UDO HISTORY

The town of Udo is situated 45 km north-west of Benin City, in Ovia South-West Local Government Area (LGA) of Edo State, on the northern border of Okomu Forest Reserve (Map 1). Along the rivers and creeks in the southern and western parts of Okomu Reserve there are many settlements predominantly by Ijaw-speaking peoples who have traditionally been fishermen and women, the largest one being Nikrowa on the Osse River. Udo itself, however, is an Edo town of some antiquity and historic importance in Benin history. Founded at about the same time as Benin City – or even before, as its inhabitants claim – it was once one of its greatest rivals, with several wars being fought between Udo and Benin City (Ezele 2002; Imafidon 1987). Its former size can be ascertained by the large ancient moat and earth wall (*iya*) surrounding it, circumscribing an area larger than the town's present extent and second in size only to those of Benin City (Darling 1984). There is also ecological evidence that a large

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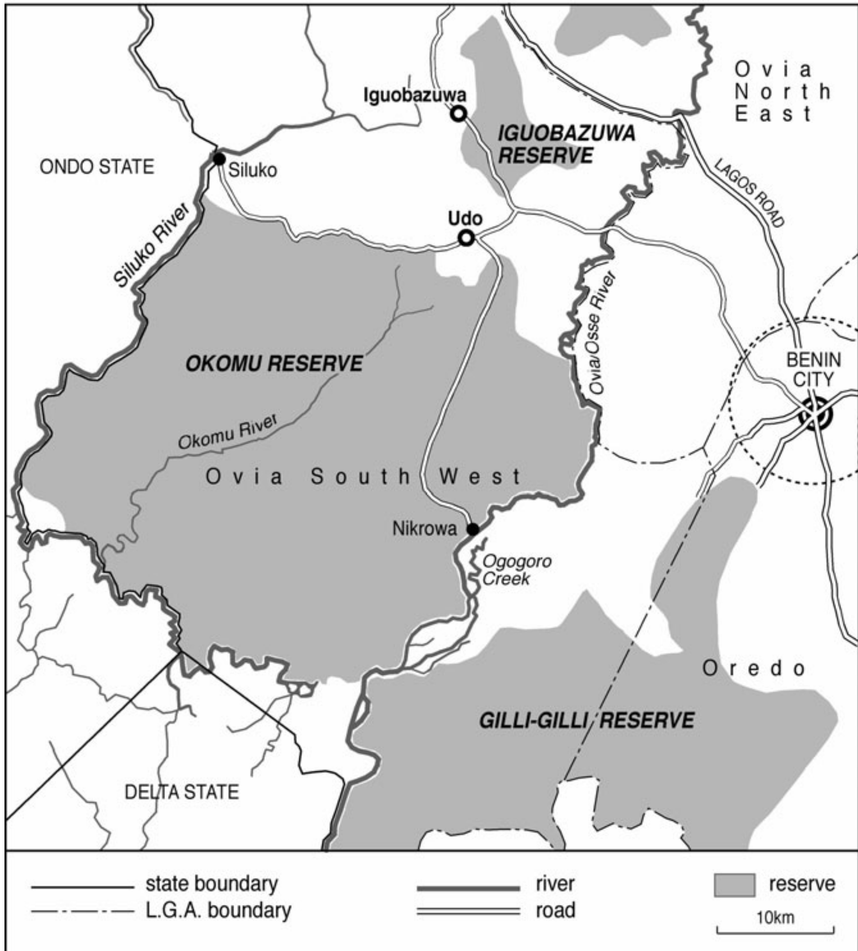

MAP 1

Okomu Reserve in Edo State, southern Nigeria. *Source*: Drawn by Hazel Lintott, 2005, after the author's draft sketches based on a combination of hand-drawn maps of Okomu Reserve and the area I obtained from the Nigerian Conservation Foundation.

area around Udo was once farmed, including much of Okomu Reserve that is now covered in forest (Jones 1956; White & Oates 1999). After an earlier defeat by Benin, in the late fifteenth century Udo was ruled by Aruaran, who had been appointed by his father Oba Ozolua as Enogie (prince) of Udo, whilst Aruaran's brother Esigie was Oba of Benin. Ozolua may have intended a transfer of the seat of power from Benin to Udo, for – according to Udo historians – he ordered a range of Benin chiefs to

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accompany Aruaran to Udo, where the same *idumu* (town quarters) and *otu* (guilds) were set up as in Benin (Ezele 2002). War broke out between Udo and Benin, by the end of which Aruaran drowned in a lake and Udo was again defeated. The historic importance of this victory for Benin is reflected in several Benin festivals commemorating the event each year (Ben-Amos 1995; Darling 1984; Imafidon 1987).

Following its defeat many Udo inhabitants fled, and the town was much reduced in size. However, its unusual position in the Benin kingdom continued to be recognised. Udo remained in control over the whole of Iyekovia, the area west of Ovia River, and received tribute from Ovia villages. It was also decreed that, in memory of the terrible war between Aruaran and Esigie, Udo should never again be ruled by an Enogie; instead, it was to be ruled by the Iyase N'Udo, the Iyase being the most powerful town chief in Benin City. In Benin there are three groups of chiefs: the Uzama (king makers), led by the Oliha, the Eghaevbo N'Ore (town chiefs), headed by the Iyase, and the Eghaevbe N'Ogbe (palace chiefs), headed by the Uwangue (Bradbury 1973a; Egharevba 1968; Eweka 1992). The Uzama titles are the oldest and inherited, whilst town and palace titles were created later and are awarded by the Oba. On a much smaller scale these chieftaincy structures are replicated at Udo, with each town quarter headed by a different title holder (Eweka 1992; Ezele 2002; Marshall 1939). Whilst all are ultimately subject to the Oba of Benin, these structures continue to reflect Udo's early importance and rivalry to Benin City.

In this slightly unusual way, Udo has long been fully integrated into the Benin kingdom and its patrimonial structures of government over towns and villages. However, alongside these patrimonial structures there is an even older tradition of gerontocratic rule in the Benin kingdom, particularly in rural areas (Bradbury 1973a, 1973b). Many Benin villages do not have appointed Benin chiefs but are governed by village elders, the *edion*, headed by the oldest man in the village, the *odionwere*. Even in villages and towns that do have Benin chiefs, the *edion* often play an important role in government. Furthermore, their male inhabitants are organised into age grades similar to many others throughout West Africa. Traditionally, the *iroghae* (youth) were charged with menial tasks such as village maintenance and carrying the Oba's tribute to Benin; the *ighele* (adult men) were warriors in times of war and otherwise had policing and more skilled communal functions; and the *edion* made community decisions, settled disputes and allocated farm land. Boys were initiated into the *iroghae* on reaching puberty, but the transition into subsequent grades was more fluid and depended as much on achievement and public esteem as on age

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itself (Bradbury 1973b: 130–1). Overall, Bradbury sees patrimonialism and gerontocracy in the Benin kingdom as 'two opposed yet complementary' conceptions of authority in Benin political culture (Bradbury 1973a: 129). However, the interplay between patrimonial and gerontocratic power varied from place to place; in Udo, gerontocratic rule was rather weak due to its highly developed title system. The *edion* were integrated into its council of chiefs and had little independent power. As in Benin City, there were also only two age grades, *ighele* and *edion* (Marshall 1939: 10). Nevertheless, as elsewhere, there was a long established division between elders and young men, with boys and young men responsible for overall village maintenance and security. At the same time, there were distinctions between more senior and junior title holders (Pullen 1939: 2).

Throughout the colonial period, Udo retained its regional importance but still had few inhabitants. It slowly began to grow from the 1960s, with various people from other parts of Nigeria settling in the town, apparently including some whose ancestors had been amongst those fleeing Udo after its defeat by Oba Esigie (Ezele 2003 int.). Over time its chieftaincy structures were slowly expanded, some titles being awarded by Udo rulers and not necessarily recognised by Benin (Eweka 1992: 98). At the same time, there were administrative changes, as throughout Nigeria, with the creation of Edo State and Ovia South-West L.G.A. in 1991. Ovia South-West L.G.A.'s headquarters are not in Udo but in Iguobazuwa – historically a slave settlement, as claimed by Udo chiefs, many of whom clearly felt resentment that Udo had not become headquarters. Ovia South-West L.G.A. today contains ten wards, four of which are in the Udo area, one in Udo town itself. Ijaw-speaking people in the southern parts of Okomu Reserve, however, only have one ward, Ofunama, just as in general they have been marginalised in Edo politics and resource allocation. This has been one of the reasons for the emergence of Ijaw youth movements such as the Egbema Ijaw Liberation Movement (EILM), who have campaigned for greater political recognition and their own local government area. Ijaw youth groups have also been involved in various confrontations with both plantations in Okomu Reserve, and there are on-going clashes between Ijaw and Edo-speaking settlements in the south of Okomu Reserve. Until recently these were the main political conflicts in the area; Udo itself was comparatively calm.

THE UWANGUE IN CHARGE

During my first stays between December 2001 and February 2003, Udo seemed to be a peaceful town that was rapidly growing and developing,

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with a population of about 15,000 people.[3] Its rapid growth was largely based on its location on the northern border of Okomu Forest Reserve. The reserve provided access to relatively large amounts of farmland through the Taungya system, an agro-forestry method whereby reserve land was allocated to farmers who plant food crops and then tree seedlings. Since tree planting gradually ceased from the 1970s onwards, Taungya has essentially become a system of land allocation, which has brought many farmers from other parts of Edo State and beyond to the area (Hellermann 2007). There was also extensive plantain and cocoa farming in the reserve, both of which were transported and marketed through Udo. Most important, however, were the two large plantations in Udo's vicinity, the Osse River Rubber Estates Ltd (ORREL) and the Okomu Oil Palm Company (OOPC). ORREL was founded in 1965 as a state-managed rubber plantation, but was taken over by Michelin Ltd in 1981, which still manages it today as one of its four rubber plantations in southern Nigeria. Here, however, I will focus on the role of the OOPC, the larger of the two plantations.

OOPC was founded in 1976, as part of an initiative under the Third National Development Plan of 1975–80 to try to revive Nigeria's flagging cash crop production. Palm oil was a particular concern, and the Nigerian government commissioned Socfinco, a Belgian firm of agricultural management consultants, to undertake a study of the rehabilitation possibilities for oil palm in January 1976 (Egbon 1990). Okomu Reserve was amongst four areas identified as suitable for the establishment of large-scale plantations, and a 16,000 ha plantation was started in the western parts of the reserve.[4] Originally state-owned, it was privatised and taken over by Socfinco in 1990. In the late 1990s it started to produce palm oil and to become increasingly profitable, and in 2001 it acquired an extra 6,000 ha in the eastern parts of the reserve. By this stage, it had a permanent workforce of about 1,300, but also employed over 3,000 day labourers: without social security, housing or pensions, these were cheaper and could be hired seasonally. Most of the permanent workers – from Calabar, Ibo, Delta and Yoruba areas as well as Edo State (OOPC manager 1 2002 int.) – lived in accommodation on the plantation, but a large number of casual labourers lived in Udo. These workers included local people but also many who had come from elsewhere and were renting rooms in Udo. In addition, in 2000 OOPC tarred the road going through Udo to the plantation. This made access to Udo from Benin City and surrounding villages much easier and attracted more traders and businesspeople as well as farmers to the town. Contact between Udo and the plantation increased, enabling OOPC workers to visit Udo's market and shops more

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frequently than before. Udo's market and transport business flourished, and many new houses and shops were built. OOPC was also involved in some community development projects: it dug some boreholes, provided maintenance for the town generator, and made donations to the health care centre and the library.

The town was then ruled by the Uwangue N'Udo, who resided at his palace in Ogbe (palace) quarter together with some of his wives and children. On any normal day, one would find the Uwangue's secretary, a few chiefs and sometimes the Uwangue himself sitting on the porch or under a large shade tree just outside the palace. There would be a constant stream of people coming and going with various requests, reporting disputes, or 'summoned' to the palace following allegations against them by others. There would also always be some of the Uwangue's 'boys' – his sons, relatives and other young men resident in Ogbe quarter – pulling up and driving off in second-hand cars. Different chiefs also presided over the other quarters of Udo town. The Oliha N'Udo, for example, had his own palace in Oliha quarter, where Oliha residents dropped in with problems and complaints, or to pay Chief Oliha for the plots of land he was selling and renting in his quarter. In contrast to Ogbe quarter, Oliha quarter, at the eastern end of Udo, was rapidly expanding, and it was clear that the Oliha made handsome profits by selling and renting land to 'strangers' and allowing them to build houses. However, he also claimed that he was developing his quarter in the wish to restore Udo to its former greatness. He and other chiefs were very aware of Udo's historical importance, and were now trying to restore the town to what it had once been. As the town expanded, former quarters and shrines that had reverted to bush since Udo's defeat by Benin in the sixteenth century – surveyed and mapped by the archaeologist Patrick Darling (1984) – were now being reactivated, and new streets again given the names of Benin City streets.[5] Of course, it is because of present-day ambitions that much is being made of Udo's former glory, so this naming may be more 'invented tradition' than true restoration. At any rate, the Oliha took a very active interest in the development of his quarter, often driving around in his old Mercedes and checking on building work and road maintenance.

Overall, Udo's development was coordinated by the Udo Community Development Association (UCDA), which met every eight days at the Uwangue's palace to discuss community matters. It included Udo's chiefs, chiefs and *edionwere* of surrounding villages, the Udo ward councillor and various other local government representatives. It also included a youth association, which the youngest men belonged to. In addition to traditional duties such as village maintenance and security, young men were

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now also responsible for manning road blocks on the main road going through the town. Plantain and timber lorries coming from the forest reserve, palm oil, crude oil and other lorries passing through on their way to and from OOPC – all had to pay stipulated fees which varied according to the value of their cargo. At the end of each month, the money collected was passed on to the Uwangue. Some of it paid the monthly salaries of Local Government employees based in Udo, whilst the rest went to the Uwangue and the community, and was supposed to be used for community development. The youths at the road blocks had a certain amount of discretion and tended not to declare all the vehicles passing through, especially at night. But on the whole, chiefs and elders were in control.

With the town stable and developing, its inhabitants, both strangers and indigenes, generally thought of Udo as a good place to live in. However, the political situation in Udo was already then strained and the relationship between Udo and the plantations was more complex and charged than it seemed on the surface. For a start, the Uwangue was not, as such, the proper ruler of Udo. As mentioned above, Udo is traditionally ruled by an Iyase N'Udo. Whilst an Iyase N'Udo is appointed by the Oba, they have for some generations all come from the same family. The last Iyase N'Udo, however, William Aguononwau Udobor – who had acquired the title in 1994 after a protracted contest between himself and four other members of his family (Ezele 2006 int.) – had come into conflict with the Oba of Benin in 1999. On the basis of Udo's historical rivalry with Benin City and its special status within the Benin kingdom, he purportedly rejected his subordination to the Oba and openly challenged him. Along with other Edo chiefs he sought membership in the Council of Traditional Rulers, of which until then only the Oba was a member (Osaghae 2004). This meant he claimed for himself the stipends from Udo and the villages traditionally under Udo in the Ovia South-West L.G.A., including its headquarters, Iguobazuwa (Ezele 2006 int.; Osehobo n.d.). The Oba consequently declared him an enemy of the Oba (*oghion Oba*)[6] and formally ostracised him for seven years, stripping him of all his powers. He could not, however, remove his title from him, as Benin titles are awarded for life. Instead, he appointed a younger brother of the Iyase, Edokpolor Udobor, as the Uwangue N'Udo, and put him in charge of Udo. The newly installed Uwangue, like his brothers, had previously mainly lived in Benin City, and now took up residence in a new palace in Ogbe quarter. The Iyase remained in his own palace but was now officially barred from making any public appearances and receiving visitors. His attempts to resolve the issue with the Oba were unsuccessful, but there were people in Udo community who wanted him to be reinstalled (Osehobo n.d.).

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The Uwangue, in the meantime, was said to be 'leaving no stone unturned to ensure he remain[ed] in power at Udo' (*ibid.*). One part of his strategy was to build a close relationship with the OOPC, a relationship which was of mutual benefit. For the plantation, it was strategically important to have the support of the leader of Udo in order to strengthen its position in the region. As mentioned above, both OOPC and ORREL had problems with Ijaw youth groups from the southern and western parts of the Okomu Reserve, who frequently campaigned against the plantations on the grounds that they had taken land that belonged to Ijaw people. They had begun adopting similar strategies to those of Ijaw youth groups in the Niger Delta for obtaining compensation payments, including the kidnapping of managers at both plantations. In March 2001, for example, Ijaw youth kidnapped several European managers at OOPC and demanded a ₦50m ransom. In this and other similar situations the plantation management sought the help of the Uwangue (Secretary to Uwangue 2002 int.), and in general benefited from having a strong regional supporter in its confrontational relations with Ijaw communities. This also applied to the OOPC management's relations with its workers, in particular the unions. Since anti-union regulations were abolished in 1999, trade unions have become more powerful again in Nigeria, and at OOPC the union had assumed an active and prominent role. In the summer of 2003, for example, there was a prolonged strike at the plantation which resulted in the enforced dismissal of an unpopular European manager (OOPC manager 2's wife 2003 int.), and only came to an end when the Uwangue negotiated between management and the union. In general, the Uwangue frequently played a mediating role in disputes between managers and workers at the plantation.

But perhaps the main reason why it was important for the plantation to foster good relations with Udo was that the town was situated on its only proper access route, which made it vulnerable and dependent on Udo's good will. During the building of the plantation in the 1970s, for example, people from Udo blocked the road for several weeks, which considerably delayed construction and increased costs (OOPC manager 3 2003 int.). Now, under the Uwangue, OOPC vehicles still had to pay high taxes at road blocks, much higher than other vehicles, but they were generally allowed to pass through. Managers at OOPC were grateful to the Uwangue, whom they generally described as a 'very reasonable and nice man', 'very good to work with' (OOPC managers 2 & 3 2002 int.).

In return, OOPC remunerated the Uwangue and other Udo people in ways going far beyond its official community development contributions. It gave the Uwangue generous monthly allocations of palm oil, which he

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distributed amongst other Udo chiefs who sold it commercially. The plantation also strategically awarded various outsourcing contracts, which, with the plantation's rising profits, had become increasingly desirable and much sought after. The Uwangue himself had been put in charge of 'security' at the newly acquired land in the east of the reserve, which gave him access to vehicles and other resources. Ostensibly their task was to prevent illegal logging, but in practice managers at Okomu were quite aware that this arrangement helped the Uwangue to reap further profits from logging (*ibid.*). In addition, OOPC had recently made a man from Udo personnel manager at the plantation, which meant he was able to secure jobs for some local people, in particular friends of the Uwangue.

However, the Uwangue was not the only local person who had great influence at Okomu. Less visible but perhaps even more important was D. A. 'Pa' Ogbomo, a rich local businessman. Ogbomo and the Uwangue are said to have been rivals since the 1970s, when Ogbomo was assistant manager and the Uwangue driver in the same company. Ogbomo reputedly owned a lot of the land OOPC occupied (OOPC manager 2 2003 int.), and was a member of its board of directors. This position provided him with numerous sources of income and much power both at the company and in Udo. Most importantly, he was heavily involved in local government and PDP party politics, and was a 'godfather' to the Chairman of Ovia South-West L.G.A., whom he had helped to get elected in 2003.

In general, there was already then much competition over OOPC's jobs, contracts and other perks. At the plantation, managers complained that Udo people were trying to take over the plantation (*ibid.*), whilst in Udo they complained that not enough was being done to help Udo community through the repair of boreholes and the distribution of jobs (Secretary to the Uwangue 2003 int.). All this meant that relations between Udo and OOPC were highly charged. Every day, the waiting room at the managing director's office was filled with various chiefs and other people wishing to gain contracts or jobs, petitioning particular causes, or complaining about unfair treatment. The director – at this time a Scottish man who had spent many years managing different plantations in Africa – found himself deeply embroiled in local politics (OOPC managing director 1 2001 int.). On a smaller scale this situation was mirrored at ORREL, which also experienced Ijaw kidnapping attempts and needed Udo's support.[7] They distributed firewood to chiefs and fostered special relationships by awarding contracts, in this case mostly with the Oliha, whose palace is situated on the eastern side of Udo and is the closest to ORREL. Overall, the dynamics that had developed between Udo and

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both plantations bear a striking resemblance to those between oil companies and local communities in the Niger Delta. Here, too, jobs, contracts and other perks are highly sought after, and it is a common practice for oil companies to give security contracts to local communities (Omeje 2004; Onishi 1999). In 2002, the situation in Udo was not volatile as in the Delta; however, this changed by the time I returned in August 2006, when I found the Uwangue deposed and 'the youth' in charge.

THE UWANGUE'S DOWNFALL

Several factors contributed to rising tension and the Uwangue's downfall. The possibilities of work and contracts at the plantations had continued to attract people to Udo, including many younger people returning to their home town from Benin City. There were therefore more young men around, many of whom did not have regular sources of income and could be mobilised in Udo's political rivalries. Already during the 2003 elections there were violent clashes in which the Uwangue was indirectly involved; at this stage, he was supporting the opposition party, the Action Congress (AC). In early 2005, the Iyase began to make more sustained attempts to come back to power, and there were violent confrontations between his supporters and those of the Uwangue (Darling pers. comm. 2005). The Iyase's moves may have alerted the Uwangue to the insecurity of his position, and the need to devise strategies to secure wealth and power in the future. In the run up to the 2007 elections, this time supporting the PDP, the Uwangue began to sponsor one of his sons to stand as a candidate in the 2006 PDP primaries for a position in the Ovia South-West local government. In this way, he sought to establish himself as a rival godfather to Pa Ogbomo (Udo inhabitant 2 2006 int.). At the same time, he was said to have 'a lot of enemies' (*ibid.*), who had to be paid off. Altogether, the Uwangue needed considerable sums of money, and adopted increasingly predatory means in order to acquire it. He began to keep a growing proportion of the money collected at road blocks for himself, rather than using it for community development, and gradually stopped redistributing OOPC's palm oil allocations to other chiefs. According to people in Udo he became 'selfish' and 'greedy', and 'started eating alone' (Udo inhabitants 1–4 2006 ints.).

He also sought to exert greater control over contracts with OOPC, which had become ever more important for the local economy. Since 2002, OOPC had increased its palm oil production year on year and invested in better processing facilities, which had led to much higher output and profits. It had also started planting rubber, just when world

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rubber prices were rising rapidly after a five-year slump (Rubber Association n.d.), and by 2006 rubber had become another profitable source of income for OOPC. Accompanying this economic expansion, there were important contractual changes in the employment of non-permanent labour at the plantations. In 2000, Nigerian trade unions started a campaign led by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) against the illegal use of casual labour. In 2002, a series of ILO-facilitated meetings were held between the NLC and the Nigeria Employer's Consultative Association (NECA), at which NECA agreed to put a halt to the use of casual labour (NLC 2003). The agreement affected OOPC, but instead of making its day labourers permanent, the plantation switched to a contract system, whereby they would hire contractors in charge of groups of labourers. This kind of contract labour is still illegal under the Nigerian Labour Act but is increasingly widespread, not just in Nigeria but in plantations throughout the world (e.g. Lee & Sivananthiran 1996). In 2006, about 80% of labour at OOPC was secured through contracts (OOPC manager 5 2006 int.). Managers at the plantation were enthusiastic about this new scheme, which they thought stimulated enterprise and created opportunities for those who became contractors (*ibid.*), but in Udo many people claimed they preferred the previous system of day labour. They resented contractors taking a share of the money and underpaying them (Udo inhabitant 1 2006 int.), and some pointed out that, through contracting, OOPC continued to absolve itself of any responsibility for workers' medical care or social security, and to underpay workers (Aragua 2006 int.). The growing number of contracting opportunities also increased competition between potential contractors, and gave the Uwangue further opportunities to make money. He took most contracts for himself and claimed a percentage of the profits of any contracts going to other people in Udo. This was bitterly resented by many people in Udo, in particular those seeking contracts for themselves.

The Uwangue's behaviour was, in part, encouraged by the plantation itself. The then managing director, a Belgian who had taken over after the troubles in 2003, had fostered an even closer relationship with the Uwangue in order to secure his support. In principle this was a sensible strategy for the plantation, as there were increasing attacks by Ijaw youth activists. In 2004, for example, Ijaw youths again kidnapped an OOPC manager and the Uwangue negotiated his release (*Vanguard* 10.5.2004). But in doing so, he alienated important Udo personas such as Pa Ogbomo, who increasingly 'couldn't do what he wanted to do' (OOPC manager 5 2006 int.). In supporting the Uwangue to this degree, moreover, the director contributed to the Uwangue's increasingly high-handed behaviour,

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even towards the plantation itself. The youths at Udo road blocks began making higher demands on vehicles on their way to and from OOPC, frequently holding them up for many hours. In 2006, plantation managers claimed that on average their vehicles had to pay ₦12,000 (£50 in 2006) every time they passed through Udo (OOPC manager 4 2006 int.). Udo youths also began to carry out more direct attacks on managers and contractors. For example, a Yoruba man working in finance was kidnapped and only released after OOPC paid a large ransom. Not all these attacks were necessarily initiated or sanctioned by the Uwangue; there were road blocks by the Uwangue's boys but also by young men from other quarters of Udo. Still, it seems likely that the Uwangue benefited from at least some of the money extorted in this way, and could in turn make more demands from the plantation for the resources necessary to control the youths. Such predatory tactics affected not only OOPC vehicles but also other commercial vehicles and increasingly even individuals living in the area. At one point, the Uwangue decreed that all individuals travelling on Udo's roads had to pay ₦500 each time they passed through. He also suddenly demanded payments of ₦6,000 from all the women who had stalls at Udo market. When they refused to pay, his boys destroyed their stalls (Aragua 2006 int.).

There was therefore rising resentment against the Uwangue at all levels of society. The population as a whole suffered from his increasingly violent rule, and many were frustrated by control over contracts and their inability to gain access to Okomu jobs and contracts. Udo chiefs widely condemned him for starting to 'eat alone', and failing to redistribute palm oil allocations and other spoils (Ezele 2006 int.). At OOPC, too, there was much protest against the close relationship between its managing director and the Uwangue. Most importantly, Pa Ogbomo saw his position both at OOPC and in Udo threatened: at the plantation its director restricted his powers, whilst in Udo the Uwangue's attempt to launch his own candidate challenged Ogbomo's candidate for the PDP primaries. At the same time, the Iyase continued his campaign for his reinstallment. It was now seven years since his suspension by the Oba, and it was supposed to be up for review.

Things came to a head in April 2006, when fights broke out between Ogbe youths and those of Igbesamwan quarter. Allegedly, the girlfriend of a young man from Igbesamwan quarter had started seeing someone from Ogbe quarter when her boyfriend had gone to Benin City. Upon discovering this Igbesamwan youths attacked and beat up the Ogbe boy. In retaliation, Ogbe youths went to Igbesamwan quarter and burned several cars and houses. One of the houses burnt, however, belonged to the

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vice-chairman of Ovia South-West LGA, indicating that this attack was motivated by rather more than just boyfriend rivalries. This event triggered a crisis, bringing even all those chiefs usually resident in Benin City to Udo. From this point onwards, there was serious agitation for the removal of the Uwangue. As people in Udo told me, 'the atrocities were too many' (Udo inhabitant 2 2006 int.). Troubles then also spilled over to OOPC. At the end of May, some of the Uwangue's boys beat up other youths working at the palm oil mill. Neither the personnel officer nor the managing director intervened, which plantation workers widely interpreted as a further sign that the director was 'in the pocket of the Uwangue' (OOPC mananger 5 2006 int.). In early June, a strike was called at OOPC, and on Monday 12 June, workers stormed the managing director's house. Now that the Uwangue's influence was rapidly waning, the director found he could not call on anyone to help him. In panic, he fled through a window and was forced to leave the plantation immediately (*ibid.*).

This in turn weakened the position of the Uwangue and the campaign against him, steered in the background by Pa Ogbomo and probably also the Iyase, gained momentum. A large meeting was held in Udo, at which Chief Oliha and a few others argued that the Uwangue simply needed a stern warning 'to cool down' (Aragua 2006 int.), but most people insisted that he had to leave. They decided to write a petition to the Oba calling for his removal, which was signed by about a hundred people and taken to the Oba's palace in Benin City on Friday 23 June. I was told that a 'vast crowd' of people from Udo, 'almost 2,000', 'over 50 cars', including men, women, children and 'even strangers', all came to the palace together, to show how much they wanted the Uwangue to go (Udo inhabitants 2006 ints.). The Oba, however – fearing a return of the Iyase N'Udo and wanting to keep the Uwangue in power – claimed that the crowd was too large and refused to see them. Disgruntled, the people returned to Udo and more serious rioting started, which brought forty mobile police to the town. The riots culminated a week later, when a fake burial of the Uwangue was staged. People paraded through the streets of Udo dressed in black and carrying a coffin, and this 'burying alive' signalled that he was no longer accepted as leader (Udo inhabitants 2006 ints.). In his stead, the 'youth' took charge of the town.

The 'youth' here had several meanings. On the one hand, it referred to the young men of Udo, who played a prominent role in the takeover and new control of the town. They had rejected the UCDA's youth association and formed a new association, the Youth Forum, which included young men from all quarters apart from Ogbe. But the actual new leadership of

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the town was a faction of younger chiefs, who were also referred to as 'the youth'. This was led by Chief Nosa Aragua, the Eghobamien N'Udo. In his early forties, he was working in the transport business and in charge of the largest motor park in Udo. Whilst managers at OOPC spoke of him and his supporters as a 'mafia', Aragua (2006 int.) described himself and his supporters as 'the popular side', and as the new leadership that the people of Udo had chosen after rejecting the Uwangue.

This new leadership of Udo was based at Aragua's house. Here a number of chiefs and young men gathered every day, including some of the same chiefs who used to be in front of the Uwangue's palace, with similar comings and goings as before. The Uwangue, meanwhile, was more or less imprisoned in his palace, just as the Iyase was before in his, and nobody was allowed to visit him. Chief Oliha described to me how, in defiance of these orders, he went to the Uwangue's palace but on his way back was attacked and almost killed – he survived only because of his 'medicine', he claimed. The Oliha, too, because of his on-going pleas to obey the Oba's orders and support of the Uwangue, was effectively ostracised. A much visited chief before, he was now alone at his palace and deeply unsettled by the recent turn of events at Udo. Like Aragua, he saw developments at Udo as a popular youth uprising, saying that 'the youths of Udo all joined together, even the ones of Oliha quarter … now our children are not keeping mute, they are speaking up and making demands'. But he did not see these developments as positive, deploring that youths now didn't respect chiefs anymore: 'all the chiefs now stay in their houses, there are no meetings … there is no government, the youths are in control' (Ezele 2006 int.). In different ways, therefore, both Aragua and the Oliha deliberately blurred the distinctions between the different categories of 'youth'. Chief Aragua and his supporters did so in order to justify the takeover of the town as a popular uprising by younger people, and Chief Oliha in order to condemn it as the deplorable rise to power of the young.

For the people of Udo and surrounding villages the situation had temporarily improved, in that they did not have to pay charges and could pass through Udo more freely (Udo inhabitant 1 2006 int.). Chief Aragua (2006 int.) pointed out that contracts were now more fairly distributed, reaching the 'grass-roots', where before they had gone only to the Uwangue. With the exception of older chiefs like the Oliha, people generally claimed they preferred the present regime to the last months under the Uwangue, since his 'harassment and wickedness had just become too much' (Udo inhabitant 2 2006 int.). Overall, there was relative calm during my stay in Udo in August 2006. However, the atmosphere was tense, and youths

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continued to extort large amounts of money from OOPC vehicles at road blocks, holding these up for several hours and in one instance taking a motorbike from a contractor, which the company eventually bought back.

The calm did not last long, as fighting between the Uwangue's supporters and the Youth Forum resumed in the last week of August. In October, violent conflict broke out again and several people were killed in gunfights, the first fatalities in the conflict (OOPC manager 5 pers. comm. 2006; *Vanguard* 23/28.12.2006). The Uwangue fled from Udo, but in December Oba Erediauwa ordered him to return in order to 'ensure that peace returns to the area' (*Vanguard* 23/28.12.2006). When he arrived in Udo, however, he was met with large street protests. According to a newspaper report (*ibid.* 28.12.2006), youths and chiefs alike attributed all of the town's recent troubles to the Uwangue's 'high-handedness' and claimed that since his departure, the community had been peaceful. They were determined that he should not return, because the 'inability of the Uwangue to handle the situation properly led to his total rejection by the people of Udo', and urged the Oba to give them another representative. The Oba, however, refused to do so; in the mean time, the Iyase N'Udo passed away. Eventually, in 2008, the Uwangue was reinstalled as chief of Udo but himself died in early 2009. Udo is now ruled by the Eribo N'Udo, an Udo chief who was chosen by the people of Udo themselves (Udo inhabitant pers. comm. 2009). Whether his rule will be permanent, however, remains to be seen.

At OOPC, in the mean time, troubles have also continued. There have been various changes of managing director, and the latest, a South African, was again almost forced to leave by workers' protests in August and September 2008. Ijaw youth groups have continued to stage kidnapping attempts: in April 2007, for example, they repeatedly tried to kidnap the managing director, destroying many houses and cars in the process (OOPC man 5 pers. comm. 2006). Consequently, the plantation hired 150 soldiers for its protection, who are now permanently stationed at the plantation and in frequent confrontation with Ijaw communities. In 2008 Ijaw representatives demanded that the newly elected governor of Edo State, Oshiomhole, intervene on their behalf and protect them against harassment from the plantation's security agents (*Vanguard* 18.11.2008). Udo, too, continues to be involved in the plantation's internal politics; for example, some Udo groups supported a campaign in 2008 for the director's removal (*Nigerian Observer* 9.9.2008).

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What, then, do events at Udo tell us about developments in contemporary Nigeria – about patrimonial politics and popular responses, the role of 'youth', and the impact of expatriate capital? To begin with the latter here, the Okomu Oil Palm Plantation was central to mounting conflict at Udo. As its profitability grew it became the object of fierce competition, with many people seeking access to its resources through jobs, contracts or extortion. In this atmosphere, the Uwangue's attempts to control contracts and increase his share of profits met with growing resentment from all segments of Udo society. But Udo's conflict and the overall rise in predatory practices were also fostered by OOPC itself. Although not directly responsible for the crisis, it contributed to it by giving such exclusive support to the Uwangue, whose 'high-handedness' was in part based on the knowledge of this support. Its switch to contract labour further heightened tensions and divisions, as it provided the Uwangue with additional avenues to gain profits from OOPC and increased competition between potential contractors. Moreover, its invariable payment at road blocks encouraged extortion practices. OOPC is not alone in this: multinational oil companies in the Niger Delta, too, are embroiled in local conflicts not just because of the high stakes they present, but also because of the particular ways in which they interact with local communities, often supporting the most predatory segments of society (Groves 2009).

In this context, the Uwangue increasingly abused his position and accumulated resources. Needing funds to pay off enemies and to sponsor his own candidate for the Udo ward councillorship in the 2006 PDP primaries, he sought total control over contracts with OOPC and ceased distributing palm oil shares to other chiefs, whilst also profiting from the rising payments demanded at road blocks from OOPC and other vehicles. At one point all individuals passing through Udo were charged at road blocks and payments were demanded from market women, enforced through increasing violence by the Uwangue's 'boys'. These developments demonstrate that the 'politics of plunder' and the predatory practices they involve have also emerged in more rural settings, away from the Niger Delta and urban hotspots. At the same time, Udo's crisis demonstrates the fierce competition that characterised the run-up to the 2007 elections and especially the 2006 PDP primaries.[8] In particular, it shows how 'godfatherism' has become an established practice even in local government politics, and how deeply involved traditional rulers are in these processes.

But equally, the Uwangue's ousting shows the ways in which abuses of patrimonial power are locally contested and kept in check. When he stopped distributing palm oil allocations and sought to control contracts,

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people resented the fact that he had starting 'eating alone' – a metaphor widely used in West Africa's 'politics of the belly' (Bayart 1993). When the Uwangue's boys became increasingly violent, destroying market stalls, burning houses and fighting other youths, Udo citizens felt the 'atrocities were too much'. Because of these shortcomings as a patrimonial ruler – failing to redistribute resources and provide security – it was a popular decision that the Uwangue should be removed. Of course, the movement against him was shaped and steered by rival 'big men': the influential Pa Ogbomo, protecting his own economic and political interests, and the Iyase N'Udo, seeking to become ruler of Udo again. In this respect, the events at Udo stand in a tradition of historical conflicts between Udo and Benin, with the Iyase N'Udo wishing to assert himself against the Oba. His is one of many on-going challenges by different title holders against the Oba, who continuously has to reassert his paramount rule.[9] Given the ubiquity of such factional rivalries, it is inevitable that they emerge in communal conflicts such as at Udo; however, this does not mean that such conflicts are solely factional and instigated by rivalling patrons. As the case of Udo demonstrates, even whilst rival 'big men' were involved, the Uwangue's overthrow resulted from a popular movement against him. Ultimately, it was because of his perceived failings as a ruler that he was challenged, held to account, and removed, all through the mobilisation of a large number of Udo inhabitants.

What role, then, did 'youth' play in these developments? Udo's case shows that the term 'youth' can be used simultaneously to refer to different groups within one community and can mean different things; and that, moreover, the ambiguities resulting from these multiple uses are deliberately exploited for a number of purposes. 'Youth', firstly, referred simply to young men – the Uwangue's boys of Ogbe quarter and the boys of other quarters. Secondly, the term 'youth' was used to refer to Aragua and his fellow junior chiefs who took control of Udo after the Uwangue's disposal, a group quite distinct from the young men or boys of Udo. And finally, 'youth' was also used to describe the overall revolt against the Uwangue. Those who viewed these events negatively, such as Chief Oliha, used the term pejoratively, equating it with young, unruly men on the street, spreading terror and violence with an unprecedented disregard for tradition and gerontocratic rule. Chief Aragua and his supporters, however, whilst also describing the revolt against the Uwangue as one by the 'youth', used the term in a much more positive way, as representing the overall will of the people, 'the popular side'.

With such different groups labelled with the same term, it is unsurprising that the 'youth' plays multiple roles, as vanguards and vandals,

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masterminds and tools. On the one hand, the Uwangue's boys were working for their patron and, moreover, as the main perpetrators of violence, enacting his predatory rule by manning road blocks, demanding extortions and burning market stalls. On the other hand, it was the 'youth' who represented the uprising against the Uwangue, and who took over the leadership of the town. Even if there were again patrons in the background, the young chiefs assuming power had agency and popular support. The disposal of the Uwangue here was quite different in nature from the takeover of Nembe town by Isongoforo (Watts 2004). Rather than a militant group with outside sponsors, here 'youth' was the overall banner under which popular resistance to the Uwangue formed.

It is this political role of 'youth' that, in conclusion, needs to be emphasised. In the absence of formal election processes and democratic institutions of community government, ordinary people are forced to resort to a range of other means to gain some control over their rulers and curtail the abuses of patrimonial power. At Udo, initial protest against the Uwangue was not violent or disregarding of existing institutions; on the contrary, it began with a petition to the Oba and it was only when he refused to listen to it that the 'youth' took to the street. These protests were to some extent orchestrated by the elite, but nevertheless expressed genuine popular dissatisfaction and agency. 'Youth', with all its multiple roles and meanings, and despite the ever present manipulations of rivalling patrons, presents the main expression of resistance against the worst abuses of patrimonial power in Nigeria; it is as 'youth' that ordinary people seek accountable rulers where other opportunities for democratic involvement are missing.

NOTES

1. I stayed in Udo and Okomu Reserve from November 2001 to April 2002, and from October 2002 to February 2003. My doctoral research (on forest policy and landscape change) was funded by an ESRC/NERC doctoral research grant.

2. This research visit was funded by a British Academy small research grant, and was conducted during a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellowship.

3. This was an estimate by the secretary to the Uwangue N'Udo in October 2002.

4. The other three were located at Ayip-Eku in Cross River State, Ore-Irele in Ondo State and Ihechioma in Imo State.

5. For example College Road and Uzama Street in Oliha quarter.

6. I am grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers for mentioning this term.

7. According to Chief Oliha, around 1999 the Michelin Managing Director fled from the workers at the plantations, who wanted to kill him because he had been too harsh. He took refuge in Chief Oliha's house for about two weeks (Ezele 2003 int.).

8. As John Gana, the director of Jerry Gana's campaign for the presidency, said in an interview at the time: 'Everybody knows that when you win the primary of PDP as a councillor, chairman, governor, legislator or president, you are home and dry. You have a big machine behind you to garner in the votes and ensure that you win. So, that is why there is so much in-fighting' (*Daily Sun* 8.10.2006).

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9. The best-known conflict here is between the Oba and the Esama of Benin, the father of the former governor of Edo State, Lucky Igbinedion. This conflict also has deep historical roots.

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