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Chosen Trauma, Emotions and Memory in Movements: The Ogoni and Ijaw in the Niger Delta

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical analysis of 'Chosen Trauma' theory and its applicability to social movement responses to oil resource extractive activities in Nigeria. Volkan's (1985, 1997, 2005) formulations on 'collective calamity of groups' ancestors, defined in terms of shared pains suffered at the hands of an enemy is explored using the case of Ogoni and Ijaw movement activities against the Federal Government and oil companies operating in the Niger Delta. The framing of traumas focuses on the role played by leaders of both groups in their protests against calamitous environmental problems resulting from the activities of oil companies in the region. For the Ogoni, the memory of trauma is adaptive to non-violence while, for the Ijaw it is a fluid construction between non-violence and violence. Volkan's theory is analytically helpful, but at the same time demands refinement to better explain the nuances in these cases.

Keywords

Niger Delta; Chosen Trauma; Environmental Problems; Oil Production

Introduction

How does application to the Niger Delta struggle strengthen or weaken theoretical assumptions underpinning 'chosen trauma' theory? In this paper, we explore this question in relation to two case studies: the leadership of both the Ogoni and Ijaw movements in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The case studies demonstrate that even reparative leaders use collective identity, as they recall chosen traumas and, in the process, they talk about the humiliation suffered by their groups and the exploitation of their group by another group. We examine the means they adopt to deal with their situations and the ways in which they employ different strategies to address their chosen traumas. In what follows, we argue that Volkan's (1985, 1997, 2005) 'chosen trauma' theory does not take this possibility into account as it seems to suggest that either there is a strong identity emphasising 'chosen trauma' and destructive leaders, or reparative leaders who de-emphasise collective identity and therefore de-emphasise 'chosen trauma'. What does 'chosen trauma' refer to in the Ogoni and Ijaw movements? What role does such memory play in the framing of a 'chosen trauma' by the leaderships in the two cases? How do the two sets of leaders preach 'chosen traumas' to their respective supporters? We examine the ways 'chosen trauma' is framed by leaders and how it can lead to either violent or non-violent collective behaviour, an aspect that is yet to be sufficiently discussed by scholars who use the 'chosen trauma' concept. This paper reports on research conducted between 2013 and 2017 in the Niger Delta, it draws on structured, elite interviews with key actors who shaped the two movements[1].

Context for the Study

The Niger Delta is the oil-producing part of Nigeria. The region is also known for its rich gas deposits and several other natural resources. There are over 600 offshore and shore-based oil fields in the region. Despite the huge revenues the government derives from the production of oil and gas in the region, the people of the region have continued to agitate for improved living standards related to basic social amenities such as good roads, access to electricity, health facilities and schools (Osaghae 2008; Mai-Bornu 2020a; Helbert & O'Brien 2020). Often depicted, as the third largest delta area in the world, the Niger Delta is a region of Nigeria defined by the delta of the Niger River. It is an enormous marshland stretching over a large span of territories crisscrossed by springs, rivers, rivulets, and other natural topographical attributes (Anele & Nkpah 2013; Oboreh 2010). Through crude oil extraction and exportation, it is the key provider of over 90 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange income (Ikein 2009). It is home to over 40 ethnicities including the Ogoni and Ijaw (ICG 2006). The extremely close proximity of the communities to the oilfields and pipelines that crisscross their country brings about several associated environmental, health and socioeconomic problems. The glaring economic disadvantage of the oil producing region as against the resources spent for its advancement, has seen massive structural imbalances and is indicative of a productive arena for several forms of grievances and community anger. At the outset of this paper, it is important to be cognizant that the Ogoni and Ijaw share similar lived experiences, but have had very different trajectories and made different choices in engaging their perceived enemies (see also Mai-Bornu 2017, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). Culture plays a crucial binding and social cohesion role among the various dialect communities and was a defining aspect of common identity until crude oil emerged as a source of contestation between the groups as part of an overall structure of agitation within the central Nigerian state.

Wide international attention came to the region in 1995 following the hanging of nine Ogoni environmental activists by the military government of the late General Sani Abacha. Among the persons

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1   Some aspects of this research have been published in articles in 2019, 2020 and a PhD thesis at the University of Bath, 2017. However, the focus of this paper is on the Chosen Trauma theory advanced by Vamik Volkan. A different perspective on trauma, emotions, and memories in the Niger Delta story.

killed was Kenule (Ken) Saro-Wiwa who was the President of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). The global condemnation of the hanging of the activists sparked an intense debate about the environmental, economic and political conditions of oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta (Osaghae 2008; Ukiwo 2007). The Ogoni crisis created an atmosphere for other groups in the region, including the Ijaw Youth Council, to begin to intensively organise against oil companies and the government. The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others by the Nigerian state under the late General Sani Abacha served a significant lesson for the Ijaws who were reminded of the symbolism of the crushing of the early uprising of their predecessors against perceived marginalization and negative impact of an emerging oil economy on the people of the region. The movements' narrative included the neglect and exclusion of the communities from the significant benefits of oil and gas production whilst suffering the destructive impact of the activities of oil companies (Afinotan & Ojakorotu 2009). Regular oil spills in marshes, soil and rivers and continued gas burning caused serious environmental pollution in the communities (Saro-Wiwa 1995). Community profits in the oil and gas sector appear to have been limited to symbolic gifts from the oil companies' corporate social responsibility units. For example, some of the oil majors like Shell gave food items as Christmas gifts and selectively offered contracts to loyal community leaders (Interview 1)[2]. It is important to note that oil and gas resources in Nigeria are legally owned by the Federal Government, however, communities have consistently contested the government's ownership, claiming that ownership rights naturally belong to them. In response to these claims, the Nigerian state established development agencies such as the Ministry of Niger Delta, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and other programmes to respond to the peculiar problems of the region. Unfortunately, corruption and the lack of political will to fully implement programmes and policies in order to reach set goals made the agencies ineffectual.

Theoretical Literature Review

Vamik Volkan (2001, 1997) described the 'collective calamity' of ancestors of groups with the term 'chosen trauma', to mean 'the shared mental representation of a massive trauma that a group's ancestors suffered in the hands of an enemy' (Volkan 2001, p. 79; 1997, p. 48). He argued that the psychological regression of a large group prompts a reactivation of chosen trauma with the tendency for destructive results. Such regressive tendencies within groups enables the urgency of response and shared emotive emphasis on ways traumas are constructed and meanings assigned to events that link the past to the present. Large group leaders emphasise a sense of loss, pain suffered by their groups, concerns and potential, to either continue in a regressed state or to make efforts toward progress (Volkan 2002, p. 457). Volkan's formulations provides a conceptual tool for exploring the significance of memory in the struggle for social change, which contributes well in that direction even in this research, despite known limitations. One striking quality of the theory observed in the study discussed in this paper is its amenability to an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of social movement politics and activities of environmental justice groups. On the whole, Volkan's 'chosen trauma' theory has assisted by complementing studies aimed at promoting concepts that facilitate the understanding of meanings that groups attach to collective experiences and identity (Volkan 1985, p. 219; Bruner 1987; Davis 2002; Hinchman & Hinchman 1997).

Volkan (2001) proposed that 'chosen trauma' introduces a feeling of closure and bounded identity that demarcates a friend from an enemy group. Volkan's theory paints images of loss, pain or helplessness of a group in a past event during a conflict (Volkan 2001). This leads to a shared sense of trauma, which then transforms into a collective memory, and peaks with meanings that push a group into re-examining its

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identity and aspirations (Hirschberger, 2018). Members of groups have a mental picture of a chosen trauma, which they pass to the next generation with emotions of hurt, shame and related defences through leaders.

Group narratives, however, comprise countless frames that translate into meanings based on diverse perspectives. This depends on the story frame employed, and on how a frame fits into broader meta-narratives about identity (Feldman 2001). Volkan (1997) traces how the emotional description of identity situates inherited memory, trans-generationally connected between a past and existing situation, in what he termed as time collapse. Thus,

> 'The interpretations, fantasies, and feelings about a past shared trauma are fused together, weaving the correlation between trauma, memory and emotions. Individuals may 'intellectually separate the past event from the present one, but emotionally the two events are merged' (Volkan 1997).

Volkan notes that group leaders can make unconscious choices, choose consciously to psychologise and mythologise traumas, but they do not consciously choose to be victimised or suffer humiliation (Volkan 1997, 2001). As a process, groups evoke memories of a persecutory incident and assign to it an inordinate quantity of historic and emotional magnitude (Western 2018). In some of his works, Volkan refers to chosen trauma as a conscious choice of leaders for manipulation of large group aggression (see Volkan 1997) and in others as an unconscious choice of the traumatised large group (Volkan 2005). On the one hand, Volkan says chosen trauma is transmitted generationally. On the other hand, he also argues that the way large group leaders frame the memory associated with a past conflict could be different and can lead to different collective behaviours depending on how the chosen trauma itself is framed and preached to the group. We note the suggestion that a chosen trauma is distinctive. The lessons gained, however, can be universal. For instance, Serb elites in the Balkan region have utilised threat narratives to incite a security problem (Chapman 2014). In this case, it appeared like a strategy for waging a war. Slobodan Milosevic used it within the background of the 1389 battle of Kosovo to stir a nationalistic passion as manipulator and mobiliser (Volkan 1997). These genres, put forward by Volkan, offer a means for linking the fundamental meaning structure of a narrative to its construction and acceptance (Jacobs 2001). A picture of tragedy that promoted anticipation of failure was applied. This was also seen as the background into which historical accounts of race, class, and urban space were narrated in the aftershock of the 1992 Los Angeles uprising (Jacobs 2001).

Some interpretations of the concept of 'chosen trauma' have been criticised as prejudiced and not fully consistent (Martirosyan 2014). Volkan himself acknowledges that some have taken exception to the term 'chosen trauma' because groups make a conscious decision to be humiliated or victimised, but he emphasises that large groups also make unconscious choices. Some scholars argue that a 'chosen trauma' leads to renewed violence, whereas, Volkan maintains, leaders behave differently, depending on how a trauma is framed. Western (2018) suggests that leaderships could take on extreme forms as seen in the rise of destructive terrorist networks, or moderate forms, as observed in religious orders and monastic communities, where religious followers take on asceticism and sacrifice worldly pleasures in order to 'do good in the world' (Tariq 2016). This suggests that 'chosen trauma' can be used in different ways. While Volkan himself suggests that leadership plays a crucial role, more understanding about this concept and the role of leadership is needed.

Volkan (1997) advances two kinds of leadership in the theory: reparative, which capitalises on traumatic incidents to rouse group members and solidify identity without harming another group, and the destructive, which exploits an escalation in a sense of victimhood, denigrates a real or imagined enemy and revives dormant ideologies (Tariq 2016; Volkan 1997; Western 2018). Here, Volkan makes two straightforward distinctions between destructive and reparative leaders, because, he suggests, destructive leaders use 'chosen traumas' to create a strong sense of identity (Volkan 1997). He uses the analogy of tents to buttress this. People under tents sometimes do not remember this reality. Individuals do but not always as a collective in

this situation. However, at other times, especially when there is regression (Volkan 2002), destructive leaders emphasise these common tents and emphasise also the fractures and the division vis à vis other groups in other tents or groups in another tent. People tend to see themselves as enemies or friends depending on the tent they stay under concerning those of other groups. Volkan discusses the traits of destructive leaders much more than those of reparative leaders (see Volkan 2002). He shows that reparative leaders de-emphasise this collective identity, allowing people to go back to their individual and family identities. Reparative leaders lead their followers to move beyond 'chosen traumas' and do not strengthen group identity by emphasising them (Volkan 2002). This is not necessarily the case, because reparative leaders also evoke 'chosen traumas' and construct/strengthen their group identity to make claims in the name of the collective group, but they do so through different means and for different purposes. For instance, to achieve legal recognition and rights but not to dehumanise the enemy. Hence, this necessitates more in-depth analyses of the traits and strategies of reparative leaders.

How 'chosen trauma' theory is perceived and framed by the two sets of leaderships in the Niger Delta and thus offering an influential modus for preaching to their followers using both the reparative and destructive narratives was investigated. The study located its exploration in the context of possibly one of the most complex resource-related conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Niger Delta. In this sense, this paper demonstrates that the conscious adoption of Volkan's concept occurs even in groups charting a non-violent course of action, which directly experience traumatic events, and are left feeling victimised by the state and multinational oil companies. In response, the Ogoni and Ijaw leaders drew on mental representations and emotional meanings specific to their groups, expressed however within the contexts of both non-violence and violence. For instance, in the case of India with Gandhi and the Ogoni with Ken Saro-Wiwa, it was peaceful resistance. It has been argued that individuals decide to participate in movements because they correspond with who they are and influences the methods of protest they adopt based on their collective identities (Polletta & Jasper 2001). Polletta and Jasper argue that strategic choices that made movement leaders choose between different forms of courses suggests a deliberate gauging of environmental opportunities and limitations and overlook the basic reality that strategic decisions may be inherently appealing. They mirror 'what we believe, what we are comfortable with, what we like and who we are', to identify who you are is to be positioned in a moral space (Taylor 1989).

Case Study Analysis

The first category of 'chosen traumas' rests with Ogoni leaders such as the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, who persistently reaffirmed the meaning of the land by linking its spiritual and economic importance to the degradation instigated by oil and gas extraction and exploitation (Saro-Wiwa 1992). The Ogoni are located in the easternmost part of the fertile plateau bordering the eastern half of the Niger River Delta in Nigeria (Kpone-Tonwe 1997, p. 1). To the Ogoni, the land is so powerful that they view anything that interrupts the serene nature of the land as exceptionally distasteful, hence accentuating the significance of claiming back their land from exploitation but without the use of force. This profound association with the land suggests that the Ogoni ascribed immense divine status to the environment, trusting it to be the foundation of their communities as well as a habitat of their sacred deities. The Ogoni present themselves as a distinct ethnic group in the Niger Delta, an oppressed minority within a minority as the region is considered within the central Nigerian state. The Ogoni deployed identity and focused on their specific lived conditions, as a distinct nation confronted by enormous economic and political troubles (Okonta 2008). As far back as the 1980s the Ogoni under the leadership of the late Ken Saro-Wiwa started making strong demands on the Nigerian state within the broader context of global discourses on social justice and environmental and human rights (Obi 2009). The awareness of their minority status led the Ogoni leaders to opt for a strategy

of internationalization, by positioning their struggle within internationally acceptable norms acceptable, specifically, those promoted by the United Nations.

The Ijaw construction of 'chosen trauma' fits quite well into a second category. Ijaw is the fourth largest ethnic group with diverse dialect groups and languages within the Nigerian state. Their grievances are based on the severe ecological destruction and perceived inadequate benefit from the oil economy (Watts 2003), as well as the socio-cultural and political relegation of youths, spearheaded in the 1960s by Isaac Adaka Boro (Osha 2006; Watts 2003) from Kaiama in Rivers state. The Ijaw national struggle for self-determination marked the early prominent violent revolt in the region. The late 1990s witnessed the emergence of some moderate youth leaders in the persons of Felix Tuodolo, Isaac Osuoka, T.K. Ogoriba and others, who, mirroring the Ogoni, focused on the wellbeing of the Niger Delta people (Afinotan & Ojakorotu 2009). However, the 2000s saw the emergence of more vocal and radical leaders like Asari Dokubo, Tompolo and Boyloaf, whose leadership style became more direct and confrontational. For these radical leaders, challenging the Federal Government of Nigeria with arms became necessary for the emancipation of the Ijaw from state oppression. Dokubo, for instance, accentuated the decades of oil exploration and poverty accusations at the grassroots level, in which he found cooperative groups of youth in the communities, who were already disenchanted with the establishment, ready to engage in a domain of violence. The fluidity between the employment of violence and non-violence in the Ijaw movement suggests a curious feature that distinguishes between leadership styles in the Niger Delta. Worthy of attention here is that, while the Ogoni focused on international legitimacy for their movement, the Ijaw agenda was not initiated on a pan-Ijaw ethnic platform, as they did not engage internationally, although a few direct engagements were undertaken on individual levels. While in the Ogoni case we are able to identify a strong set of leadership, it is not the same in the Ijaw case.

It is understood that leadership is important in determining whether a potential trauma is transformed into a chosen one and for what purpose. If Volkan's theoretical framework assumes that traumatised groups do not have the emotional means to secure a lasting peace due to constant and intensified level of anxiety (Formosa 2013), then we see groups prepared to react with violence to any threat to its security and, specifically, survival. The emotional, cognitive, and moral association of individuals with a wider community (Polletta & Jasper 2001, p. 285) could be imaginary as an alternative to direct experience. This can be and is conveyed through diverse forms, including narratives and cultural materials. These are the sites that link the micro to the macro, where collective memory is shaped, contested and negotiated (Duckworth 2015). These memories are viewed as resources of identity and legitimacy, creating a connection to the past (Gongaware 2010; Kubal 2008). The collective memory of dehumanization, victimization, fear and hatred becomes a powerful representation and an active means to intensify the ethos of the dominant conflict. The Ogoni and Ijaw leaderships demonstrated how collective memories were used to connect the past to the present and the ways in which these memories functioned as motivational inspiration for group leaders, particularly ethnic groups that identify as economically threatened, and forced to adopt either a violent or non-violent course of action in order to defend their legacies (Kubal 2008).

The 'rally around the leader' phenomenon can indicate chosen trauma, but Duckworth (2015) argues that simply rallying around the leader of one's group, without other indicators, alone probably does not establish the presence of 'chosen trauma'. Using a comparative case studies approach, we illustrate how grievances of the past are preached to groups using two lines of argument. 1) The framing of the narrative of war versus narratives of human rights and peaceful protest. 2) Leaders' actions and symbolism. We argue that a chosen trauma does not lead to a clear-cut path on its own, it depends on how it is mediated, constructed and framed. Therefore, a 'chosen trauma' is constructed, and the way it is framed by leaders is what constitutes a 'chosen trauma'. This paper contributes to resource, development and conflict debates. It offers a deeper and nuanced understanding of how minority ethnic group leaders memorise, frame and construct a 'chosen trauma' that leads to non-violent theorising (peaceful resistance) in the Ogoni case and violent theorising

within the Ijaw movement. Narratives and leadership styles will be used in each empirical section to re-discuss the 'chosen trauma' concept within minority ethnic group movements. The use of primordial narratives amplifies how a group distinguishes itself as a minority within a minority. Narratives as a form of representation, entail a sequence of events, a manner of speaking about the events (as a discourse), and a verbal act in a social transaction extremely sensitive to context (Martin 1986). Specifically, the paper will demonstrate the processes through which the traumas were chosen, theorised and used to mobilise group members in the two cases.

Chosen Trauma: The Ogoni Case

The Ogoni case offered an opportunity to reflect on how trauma, emotion and memory are connected in resource-based conflict. As Ganz and McKenna (2017) wrote, movement leaderships utilise narratives as a technique to accessing, framing and cultivating emotional resources entrenched in collective values, means that are essential to face disputes with resilience, courage and agency (see also Mai-Bornu 2020b). The employment of narrative indicates the motivational values that characterise group and individual identities and the urgent need to act can be experientially articulated as a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now, or public narrative (Ganz 2009, 2011). The book, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*, narrates a traumatic story that leaps up before his eyes in every page, letter and word Saro-Wiwa wrote, having lived through the painful experiences as an Ogoni (Saro-Wiwa 1992, p. 7). Building on the United Nations definition of genocide as 'the commission of acts with intent to destroy a national, ethnic-racial or religious group' (Saro-Wiwa 1992, p. 9), Saro-Wiwa explains the process through which the Ogoni were dehumanised through a wide range of negative emotions toward the group, watching helplessly as they were systematically ground to dust through the combined actions of the Shell Petroleum Development Company, the murderous ethnic majority in Nigeria and the country's military dictatorships (Saro-Wiwa 1992, p. 7). Saro-Wiwa uses the word genocide to describe his views on violations of the rights – political, economic and environmental – of the Ogoni.

The discovery of oil and gas in the country marked a major shift from other sources of international income (Human Rights Watch 1999, p. 6). The emphasis on resource extraction mainly served the interest of a minority group of elites as against the benefit of the ordinary Nigerian citizens (Human Rights Watch 1999, p. 6) and in particular, the oil producing communities. The Nigerian constitution gives the central Nigerian state sole ownership rights over all natural resources including oil and gas. In particular, the Petroleum Act of 1969 cap 350, and the Land Use Act cap 202 (Obulor 2009) are examples of the legislation legitimising the strong hold of the state over resources above and below the land. As a result, the power to engage in discussions with multinational oil companies about when and how oil extraction takes place is beyond the local oil producing communities. The dominant international player in the extraction business in the Delta was Shell, controlling almost a half of the oil and gas resources alongside other national and international companies such as Texaco, Elf, Chevron, Mobil and Agip each playing roles in the business (Obulor 2009). Years of extraction activities carried out by these multinationals had seen distressing effects on the environment through oil spills and gas flaring, which in turn interfered with the sources of livelihood of predominantly farmers and fishermen.

For Saro-Wiwa, oil under Ogoniland belonged to the Ogoni and not the Nigerian state, which is why the state should have paid royalties for extractive activities (see Saro-Wiwa 1993). This exploitation, he claimed, dated back to the colonial era in which Shell-B.P was issued the Oil Mining Licence (OML) (Saro-Wiwa, 1992:24). Saro-Wiwa's point suggested the beginning of the trauma suffered by the Ogoni. The exclusion of the landlords in the various negotiations, discussions and agreements signed between Shell and the state became a memory that upsets the group to this day (see also Mitee, 1999:431). Saro-Wiwa referred to this as the foundation of Ogoni extinction (Saro-Wiwa, 1992:24), which their leaders were not

aware of at that time. The interview with Nbete (27 July 2015) underscored the unceasing activities carried out by multinational oil companies that posed major risks to the health and wellbeing of the communities, but has also ruined Ogoni farms and ecosystems (see also Okonta 2008, p. 3). He cited the example of Shell which controlled the OML 11, situated in Ogoniland, ahead of even the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) (see also Watts 1999, 2003, p. 22). This paved the way for a campaign of non-violent resistance centred on environmental impacts of the activities and the lived experiences of the group that transformed into 'chosen traumas' and memories.

The collective memory of victimization and dehumanization has become a powerful symbol as well as an efficient way to construct the trauma chosen by the Ogoni. Saro-Wiwa used the politics of trauma to represent specific historical events in such a way that these events obtained a desired significance in the groups' collective imaginary (Zembylas 2007) particularly, how they shattered the basic fabric (Hirschberger 2018) of the Ogoni society. Here, Saro-Wiwa had asserted that the attainment of political autonomy as well as the entitlement to expend a significant portion of resources for the advancement of Ogoniland was a moral obligation of all Ogoni, but without the use of violence (Saro-Wiwa 1995a, pp. 74-75). The Ogoni leaders recalled traumatic experiences and painful memories of the past thereby creating a social and political space in which group members could listen and reconstruct memory by perpetuating the pain (Zembylas 2007) of the tragedy that befell their communities.

To Saro-Wiwa, it was none other than the operation of either a true federation in which each ethnic group would have autonomy and be directly responsible for its salvation, a confederation of equal states based on its ethnic groups or the complete disintegration of the country with each ethnic group left to fend for itself. Under Saro-Wiwa's guidance, the options were laid bare to the group; they voted for the autonomy option, deciding to put the Nigerian state to the test (Saro-Wiwa, 1992, p. 93). Saro-Wiwa's autonomy option to the Ogoni was based on the emotion that the tribulations suffered would not end unless they took their fate into their own hands (Saro-Wiwa, 1992, p. 92). Saro-Wiwa took this further by preaching to the Ogoni that issues that centre on their environment and resources were important, they could not be forfeited in any situation or for any replacement (Porat et al. 2016). In this regard, Saro-Wiwa chose historic traumas by framing the question of autonomy in the principles of ethnic autonomy, control of resources and the environment.

The autonomy option sought by Saro-Wiwa saw the framing of the historical Ogoni traumas into a Bill of Rights (OBR) that was ignored by the Nigerian state (Saro-Wiwa, 1992, pp. 92-103). The OBR called attention to how colonisation had served as the precursor to their sufferings starting with the forced administrative division of Opobo 1908-1947, which then snowballed into the discovery, exploration and exploitation of oil resources and a request for political autonomy (Saro-Wiwa 1992). These forms of genocidal violence practiced against weak and defenceless peoples demean the human race (Volkan 1985). In reaching out to the international community, as well as to the Nigerian people, the Ogoni realised the importance of having enemies as well as allies. The OBR exemplifies the deliberate effort by the Ogoni leaders who cling ever more stubbornly to these violations of their rights as producers of the oil which are then interconnected with their experiences of ethnicity, nationality and other identifying circumstances (Volkan 1985). Here, Saro-Wiwa unconsciously expands the concepts of ethnicity and nationality within the context of the Ogoni. As Volkan (1985) suggests, members of the Ogoni ethnic group may be seen to share some step-by-step primal sentiments they experienced over the years.

However, putting the state to the test required rolling out the Ogoni 'chosen trauma' in a systematic process that began with a collective trauma, which transformed into a collective memory, and culminated in a system of meaning that allowed groups to redefine who they are and where they are going (Hirschberger 2018). Collective trauma interconnects the personal, the public, and even the political through lived visualisations of both indirect and direct trauma experiences.

Chosen Trauma: The Ijaw case

Ancestors like Isaac Jasper Boro, and his Ijaw friends, who led the initial Ijaw struggles for resource control in the immediate post-colonial era of the country, are easily remembered as heroes. The crushing of that initial uprising in what has been termed the 'Six Days Revolution' by the Federal Government is well seated in the memories of many men and women from Ijaw land. The symbolic representation of that era is traumatic in many ways. The initial fears of those early leaders of the struggle have happened over time.

The day of 11 December 1998 remains momentous in the history of the Niger Delta. It was the day 500 youths from 40 clans gathered in Kaiama, Bayelsa State, to issue a quit notice to all oil companies operating in the region (Nwajiaku 2005). The articulation of the reasons and demands, expressed in speeches and contained in what is today easily referred to as the 'Kaiama Declaration' provides a lot of insights into the question of chosen trauma, emotions, and social movement activities. Oil was, as it is now, the common enemy (Allen 2012a, 2012b, 2018). Participants spoke with emotion, passion, and determination, and asked the companies to leave the region not later than the end of December 1998.

The Kaiama Declaration attracted a violent response from the Federal Government through the deployment of the military, which led to violence and the killing of several youths. It also led to the formation of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), which became a key platform for activism against the government and the oil companies (Nwajiaku, 2005). The framing of the message both to the government and oil companies was based on emotions about the destructive impact of the oil industry. Pollution of the creeks, rivers, forest and its impact on the livelihoods of local community people, in which the industry had already been implicated in the last few decades in Nigeria was highlighted. What happened in Umuechem, where the military was deployed to terminate peaceful protests by community people against Shell for violating the environment, and the hanging of the founder and leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Ken Saro-Wiwa, and eight other leaders of the movement by the Federal Military Government under the late General Sani Abacha in 1995, were influential traumatic memories. Young people were traumatised by those incidents. The moments of the hanging were the most traumatic experiences, for Ogoni people; and the Ijaw had emotionally concluded that this could well happen to them if nothing was done to undermine the threat and reduce the risks already associated with the oil industry. The framing of the declaration, which also related to a national political and economic context in which ownership rights of oil in the Niger Delta as a whole belonged to the federal government by law, and decisions about exploration, production, and distribution of benefits such as employment and revenues excluded local communities were seen as a violation of human rights. The hanging of the leader of MOSOP and others, sat comfortably in the memories of Ijaw leaders not only to remind them of the evil day but also to start from where Boro left off when he warned about the destructive impact of the emergent oil industry on Ijaw communities and their destinies. Ijaw youths, however, were to take a different approach to non-violence. But as the theory of non-violence would suggest, non-violence attracts the violence of the state.

Thus, the declaration was interpreted by government security and oil companies as threats to the oil establishment, which needed to be crushed with force or contained as soon as possible. Even from the earlier responses of the government in the case of Umuechem and Ogoni, ensuring uninterrupted oil production was seen as a national security issue. It was therefore not surprising that a national security perspective would also inform the government's response with the deployment of the military in search of Ijaw youths they saw as trouble makers and enemies of the country. Going by Volkan's (1985) argument, that enemies and allies serve developmental goals for identity groups, the action of the Ijaw youths through the declaration may be seen as 'chosen trauma', playing out through shared experiences of the impact of the oil industry and the violent response of the state to perceived threats.

The declaration and the violent response by the government contributed emotionally to fuelling the conflict. The protests and demonstrations that took place across Bayelsa State invited thousands of

soldiers under General Abusalami Abubakar's federal government. With several persons dying from the militarisation, the stage became set for further confrontations ([Human Rights Watch 1999](#)). The struggle would intensify from then on, following from the model set by the Ogoni. The Ogoni had issued an Ogoni Bill of Rights, outlining their demands and questioning their political and economic fate with the oil industry and the Nigerian state. The Ijaw leaders were aware of the nature of the aftermath of the declaration and subsequent peaceful protests and demonstrations based on what happened to the people of Ogoni.

The emergence of armed groups in the late 1990s, with members from across the Niger Delta, attacking oil facilities and government security, and taking hostage oil workers, transformed the conflict. The impact on the safety of people and investments in the region was a key concern. Worse, the Nigerian economy came under severe threat from a drastic drop in daily barrels of crude oil production, precisely from 2 million to 700,000 barrels, because it relied on the commodity for the bulk of its national income through revenues and foreign exchange ([Amnesty International 2009](#); [Bamidele 2017](#); [Helbert & O'Brien 2020](#); [Newsom 2011](#); [Ugo & Ukpere 2010](#); [UNDP 2006](#)).

To say that the struggles on the side of the Ijaw strengthen some aspects of the formulations of the 'chosen trauma' theory then makes a lot of sense. The connection with the peoples' shared sense of identity and pain from interacting with the oil establishment and the forces that have shaped decisions in the industry in exclusion of the group was crucial. The emotionality around the loss of means of livelihood and response of the state when grievances were articulated brought about policy changes such as the establishment of special development agencies including the Niger Delta Development Company and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs. At the same time, the government kept coercion or violence as a major approach that escalated the conflict until the economy became the main national security issue as seen in 2009, when the Federal Government initiated an amnesty programme for militants involved in the attack of oil facilities, government security and hostage-taking. The militarisation of the region meant that the safety of the region was at stake and invited more violence.

Conclusion

The central discussion in the paper focuses on [Volkan's (2001)](#) theory of 'chosen trauma', in the context of struggles by two groups in Nigeria's Niger Delta, where oil extraction has caused severe environmental problems to rivers, creeks, mangrove forests, air and soil. The victimhood and non-violent framing of the problems suffered and non-violent agitations that attracted violent response of the Federal Government in the cases of Ogoni and Ijaw communities support the idea of selective pain utilised for a demand on the state and oil companies, which should not necessarily lead to destruction. The destruction that followed through the violence of both groups on the one hand, and the government on the other hand, are signs that the theory provides a partial explanation for the experiences of the Niger Delta groups. Their deployment of collective memory relates to the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other prominent Ogoni people who died due to the actions of angry youths protesting against environmental impacts of oil extraction and lack of development in the community. In the same vein, Ijaw youth leaders under the Ijaw Youth Council deployed the same memory, as a preventive measure, but seriously remembered the initial sacrifices made by Isaac Boro and the resistance he and his team suffered at the hands of the Federal Government, when they expressed fears of marginalization of the Ijaw groups in an emerging political economy of oil production. The paper has discussed these issues to address four inter-related questions.

The analysis shows that, in the case studies described in this paper, oil was an underlying factor in the social and political relations that resulted in chosen trauma. Case studies of the Ogoni and Ijaw communities in the Niger Delta have both negative and positive narrative effects. This is evident in references to non-violent and violent actions and responses by local groups and the government. The

people who serve as examples in the analysis consider oil as much as its impact on their environment as a disturbing problem that has not been completely solved.

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