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A cultural perspective on the cycle of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria

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Abstract: Violent conflicts act as disincentives for sustainable socioeconomic development in conflict-prone societies, especially in the Global South. Existing studies focus largely on economic, political, and social triggers of violent conflicts; cultural factors, while important, are often not considered. This paper undertakes a case study of the Niger Delta region, Nigeria, to investigate the importance of cultural factors in the cycle of violence. Analysing field data collected in conflict-impacted communities of the region, I argue that an interplay of political, social, economic, and environmental drivers has engendered violent conflicts, and society's permissiveness regarding violent behaviour in the guise of the 'Niger Delta struggle' has created a latent culture of violence, reflected in the emergence of new cultural norms that support and encourage violent behaviour. These norms shape individual and collective interpretations of the struggle for self-determination against structural violence meted out by the Nigerian state through militarization and the economy of violence created by the 'struggle'. Violent conflicts have increasingly become a means to achieve socially desirable goals (e.g., wealth, political power, status) as society rewards violent actors with social goods. This has created a cycle of violence as these rewards are an incentive for new entrants while violence is increasingly part of the material and non-material aspects of culture.

Key words: violent culture, permissive norms, conflict values, cycle of violence, Niger Delta

JEL classification: D74, D91, E26, Q34

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1 Introduction

Violent conflicts have for decades remained a puzzling concern for scholars, governments, and international development agencies owing to their debilitating effects on sustainable development. In regions affected by violent conflicts, access to essential services such as education and healthcare is impacted, and conflicts also result in population displacement, loss of livelihoods, poverty, and destruction of critical infrastructure. Due to the multifarious threats that violent conflicts pose to the sustainable development of societies, scholars have focused largely on what social, political, and economic factors trigger and sustain such conflicts. Most prominently, studies have implicated economic triggers of conflicts such as poverty and underdevelopment (Collier et al. 2023). Others have focused on grievance-related social triggers of conflict, such as social exclusion and inequality (Nafziger and Auvinen 2003). Some scholars have attempted to provide explanations for social violence by drawing on insights from political economy theory. For instance, Fox and Hoelscher (2010), drawing linkages between political-institutional, socioeconomic, and socio-demographic factors, demonstrate that hybrid political regimes, political-institutional volatility, poverty, inequality, and ethnic diversity are associated with higher rates of social violence. Collier et al. (2003) have argued that distributive and environmental injustice in countries that rely heavily on the extraction of natural resources such as gold, diamonds, and oil are disproportionately prone to violent conflicts. Violent conflicts in extractive contexts usually manifest in continuous distributive struggle/coercion between and among the elite coalitions (political class) and warlords (militias) (Besouw et al. 2016). While it is imperative to provide theoretical and empirical perspectives on unending cycles of violent conflict in societies, existing studies, as highlighted above, have focused largely on political, economic, and social factors, with limited consideration of cultural drivers and effects. The paucity of studies on cultural factors relating to violent conflicts may be partly a result of difficulties in identifying such factors in large-scale cross-country studies. Hence, this paper undertakes a case study of the Niger Delta to investigate the importance of cultural factors in the cycle of violence.

Nigeria's Niger Delta region has drawn significant attention from scholars due to protracted violent conflicts over the last two decades. The region rose to economic prominence in the country as a result of the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantities in the late 1950s and the oil boom of the subsequent decades. Despite the significant contributions of oil and gas exploration to the Nigerian economy, the Niger Delta region which hosts the oil industry has remained a theatre of conflicts, characterized by armed violence and youth restiveness (Joab-Peterside et al. 2021). This often results in loss of lives and properties and damage to critical national infrastructure, undermining the sustainable economic, social, political, and cultural development of the region (Igbani et al. 2017). While the Nigerian government has over the years pursued developmentalism as a panacea for peace-building in the region, bodies and programmes such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the Federal Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, and the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) have failed to curb persistent violent conflict in the region. The question that has remained puzzling to scholars and policy-makers is why violent conflicts persist in the Niger Delta despite several interventions by the Nigerian state. Divergent perspectives have been advanced, including by those who have attributed the unending cycle of violence to social exclusion and corruption (Ebiede et al. 2020), or to widespread environmental malfeasance and socioeconomic poverty in the region (Ering et al. 2013; Imongan and Ikelegbe 2016). A more critical perspective on the discourse is provided by political economy analysts who have proposed the 'commodification of violence' argument in the region (Joab-Peterside and Zalik 2009; Raimi and Boroh 2018). These scholars have opined that the response of the Nigerian government and international oil companies (IOCs) to youth militancy through developmentalism and the amnesty programme have latently created an economy of conflict in the region (Ikelegbe

2005). These scholars submit that the act of rewarding ex-combatants with economic and political benefits has promoted benefit captor behaviour (Raimi 2017), resulting in the emergence of a new class of wealthy and powerful warlords or militia capitalists (Amadi et al. 2016). This situation has created a violent mode of production characterized by the competitive struggle between conflict actors to capture benefits from the state and IOCs (Raimi 2017), thereby incentivizing violent behaviour in the region (Raimi and Boroh 2018). The political economy theorists have advanced the thesis that the creation of the economy of conflict and the prebendal political structure wherein the political class patronizes violent actors accounts for the re-emergence of violent conflicts in the post-amnesty era. While there is a convergence among these theorists that the implementation of the PAP unintendedly created an economy of conflict in the region, the political economy approach is largely insufficient in providing explanations for protracted conflicts of this nature. This is because this approach fails to recognize non-economic and non-political incentives for violent behaviour, especially socio-cultural forces which promote and sustain violence.

This study therefore provides new insights on the Niger Delta debacle, as it examines the cycle-of-violence debate through a cultural lens which has been overlooked by previous studies. It contributes to scholarship on the cultural dimensions of violent behaviour and conflicts—a perspective which has been less emphasized by the existing literature. Drawing on analytical expositions of the culture-of-violence theory, this paper first demonstrates how economic and political drivers of conflict produce and reinforce cultural norms, values, and attitudes that are permissive with regard to violent behaviour. Second, it shows how emergent cultural norms and values in turn provide the necessary incentives for a protracted cycle of violence to persist, drawing on evidence from the Niger Delta region. My central argument in this study is that the long history of violence in the Niger Delta region which created the conflict economy has enabled the emergence of new cultural norms that eulogize violent behaviour and consciously make it not just permissible but culturally worthwhile. As I will show in subsequent sections of the paper, these permissive cultural norms and values sustain the economy of conflict through the social learning and internalization of violent behaviours. In the next section, I explored the changing nature of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta, followed by a description of the theoretical and methodological framework for the paper. After this, relying on analysis of field-based data, I demonstrate how emergent material and non-material cultural production incentivizes violent conflicts in the Niger Delta region.

2 The Niger Delta conflict: from struggle for resource control to criminal violence

Historically, the Niger Delta struggle was characterized by non-violent resistance expressed mostly through peaceful community protests against environmental degradation and marginalization. These agitations in their earliest form found expression in the 1990s through non-violent resistance movements led by the MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People) and the IYC (Ijaw Youth Congress). Protracted conflict in the region is linked to the struggle for crude oil resource control and agitation for self-determination by ethnic nationalities (Ibaba 2008; Obi 2010). There is a consensus among scholars that the marginalization and alienation of the Niger Delta people by IOCs and the Nigerian government, coupled with widespread underdevelopment, poverty, and environmental degradation, served as an enabling factor, allowing agitations and conflicts to thrive in the region (Ebiede 2011; Joab-Peterside 2007).

The response of the Nigerian state and IOCs to this non-violent resistance mainly took the form of state repression and deployment of the Nigerian military and other state security agencies to maintain the status quo. This situation resulted in the militarization of the Niger Delta region by the Nigerian state as a means of ensuring total submission to the dictates of the unfavourable

conditions the people are faced with (Joab-Peterside 2007; Oluyemi 2020). The killing of the Ogoni-born environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders by the Nigerian government in 1995 became the turning point for the Niger Delta struggle (Ebienfa 2011). This resulted in the rise of a general perception that the non-violent approach was ineffective, as it meant that the region was negotiating from a weak position, hence the de-legitimatization of the approach (Owolabi and Okwechime 2007). By 1998, uproar had emerged in the region following the Kiama Declaration of the IYC, in which it committed to achieving 'resource control by any means', thereby ushering in a violent approach to the struggle by means of youth insurgency and militancy.

The early 2000s saw a new wave of agitation characterized by armed resistance against the Nigerian state and IOCs perpetrated by ethnic militia groups. This era of youth insurgency coincided with the proliferation of criminal cult gangs (Joab-Peterside and Zalik 2009), which subsequently have become key conflict actors in the region in more recent times (Jack and Tokpo 2021). The militancy era witnessed the emergence of prominent militia groups—among others the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) led by Alhaji Mujahid Asari Dokubo and Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) led by Ateke Tom, who perpetrated acts of sabotage against critical oil and gas infrastructure in the region as well as kidnappings of foreign expatriates. The emergence of the Movement of the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) led by Henry Okah and Government Ekpemupolo, alias Tompolo, further escalated the crisis. By 2009, youth insurgency in the region had reached its zenith, as the destruction of critical oil infrastructure, crude oil theft, and incessant kidnapping of expatriate oil workers were commonplace. To avoid a total collapse of the Nigerian oil industry due to dwindling production capacity caused by this militancy, the government of Nigeria granted pardons to armed militant groups from the region.

The PAP was established with a threefold mandate of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of combatants into civil society (Ebiede et al. 2020). Subsequently, the amnesty and cash-for-arms programmes became popular and were replicated by state governments in the region to mitigate localized armed conflicts, especially cult-related violence (Nwaogu et al. 2019). The relative peace secured through the PAP, however, became threatened by 2016, when a new militant group named the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) emerged and resumed hostilities in the region. Since then, small cells of militant camps and cult groups have proliferated in the creeks and communities of the Niger Delta, perpetrating illegal oil bunkering and sea piracy among other forms of violent criminality.

A decade into the implementation of the PAP, the Niger Delta region is besieged by emergent forms of violent conflict perpetrated by new actors who undermine the peace-building efforts of the amnesty programme. Besides militancy, which has reduced significantly over the last decade, recent studies have identified sea piracy, kidnapping, illegal oil bunkering, artisanal refining, cultism, armed robbery, political violence, drug trafficking, and herder–farmer conflicts as contemporary forms of conflict in the region (Joab-Peterside et al. 2021). These emerging trends in violent conflict have continued to pose a threat to sustainable peace-building in the region (Igbani et al. 2020), thereby generating debate over the efficacy of the PAP. Most prominent among these insecurity issues is the menace of sea piracy, which has accounted for significant loss of lives and properties in coastal communities of the Niger Delta. The International Chamber of Commerce's International Maritime Bureau, in its latest global report (ICC-IMB 2023), indicated an increase in the number of reported sea piracy and kidnapping incidents in the Gulf of Guinea (GOG) in 2023. The report recorded 22 piracy incidents, with 54 crew taken hostage, 14 kidnapped, and two injured. Militants from the Niger Delta are reported to be key perpetrators of sea piracy and kidnapping in the GOG (Bell et al. 2021; UNODC 2021).

Furthermore, the menaces of cultism, kidnapping, illegal oil bunkering, and artisanal refining have taken root in local communities across the Niger Delta region, contributing significantly to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and general insecurity. These criminal activities tend to ground socioeconomic endeavours (Ogele et al. 2020). A 2015 joint report by the Fund for Peace (TFFP), Partnership Initiative for Niger Delta (PIND), and the Niger Delta Partnership Initiative (NDPI) revealed that fatalities due to cult-related violence rose from 50 in 2009 to more than 100 in 2015 in Rivers state alone (TFFP et al. 2015). Similarly, a separate 2015 report by TFFP suggested that incidents of armed violent conflicts in the state rose from 40 in 2010 to 60 in 2015 (TFFP 2015). Amnesty International (2020) also indicated a rise in cult-related killings in Rivers state, with at least 60 people killed in ten months in the Khana and Gokana local government areas (LGAs) in 2019. This is further corroborated by Joab-Peterside et al. (2021), who report endemic cult violence in Khana, Gokana, Emouha, Ikwerre, and Ogba-Egbama-Ndoni LGAs.

The metamorphosis of the Niger Delta conflict from a legitimate struggle for resource control to violent criminality is attributed to, among other factors, the ill-conceived PAP, which has failed to arrest hostilities in the region. The cash-for-arms policy which enriched key militants created a benefit captor syndrome that encouraged hitherto peaceful individuals to take up arms in order to secure amnesty deals or oil rents from oil companies. The recurrent state of violent conflict in the Niger Delta is hence driven by the need for individuals and groups to cash in on the conflict economy to derive economic, political, and cultural gains. This observation supports the position of Ebiede et al. (2020) that the exclusion of non-violent actors from the peace-building process predisposes them to engage in violent behaviour.

3 A cultural theory of violence: what role does culture play in violent conflicts?

Cultural explanations of violence have emerged as an alternative to mainstream psychological and biological theories of violence. They tend to provide explanations for the concept of violence as a social problem rather than an individual problem, relying on the observation that violence is unevenly distributed within and between societies. Cultural theorists of crime posit that violence emerges mostly from social inequalities in society, e.g. among marginalized groups, poor and racialized neighbourhoods, and so on. They argue that criminal violence among poor and marginalized groups is a result of the emergence of pro-violent norms, in opposition to dominant middle-class norms. The leading proponents of this theory, Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967), in their 'subculture of violence' thesis, explain the context within which a subculture of violence emerges and how it is perpetuated.

Central to the culture-of-violence theory is the concept of cultural norms and values which influence behavioural patterns in society. Cultural and social norms are the dos and don'ts of a society, acting as a guide to behavioural expectations by prescribing rules of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Cultural norms are maintained and perpetuated by the preference for reciprocal conformity among individuals, as well as the threat of social disapproval or punishment for non-conformists (Durlauf and Blume 2008). Cultural and social norms hence influence individual behaviour, including violent behaviour, by protecting against violence, or encourage the use of it. Studies have shown that cultural norms vary widely across societies, and some of these norms encourage violent behaviour, for instance as a method of resolving conflict or achieving desirable goals (Champion and Durant 2011), socialization in childhood through the use of corporal punishment (Lansford and Dodge 2008), early exposure to domestic and communal violence (Abrahams and Jewkes 2005; Brookmeyer et al. 2005), or endorsement of violent behaviour through the media as popular culture (Johnson et al. 2002).

The culture-of-violence theory strongly argues that violent behaviour is a social phenomenon which is embedded in cultural and social norms prevalent in a society, learned and socially transmitted to the members of that society. Demonstrating this, Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) emphasize that violence occurs and persists in a society or within a group because the values and norms of that group are more permissive of violence. They further argue that the prevalent cultural norms in this context, whether violent or non-violent, can be unearthed by observing the social values in the group, as the latter sustain the former through rewarding conformity and penalizing non-conformity.

In view of the above, the culture-of-violence theory holds that violence occurs and is perpetuated in society depending on how a society sanctions violent behaviour. In other words, when the cultural norms and values of a society are permissive with regard to violent behaviour, violence becomes a pervasive behavioural pattern in that society. This is most evident in the impoverished and marginalized Niger Delta region of Nigeria, where violence is commonplace and has been encouraged and sustained by collective approval of armed struggle as a means of attaining goals of self-determination and resource control. Furthermore, the Niger Delta struggle as described in the introductory section of this paper has unintendedly left the region highly militarized, with state and non-state actors competing for the rewards for engaging in violence. The failure of the Nigerian state and local traditional institutions to sanction violent behaviour in the region has created permissive norms that encourage violence. These norms have been sustained by social values that reward violent behaviour, as violent actors are granted desirable economic, political, and social rewards in the form of amnesty packages, lucrative oil pipeline surveillance contracts, chieftaincy titles, and ascension to traditional and political offices. This situation therefore creates a cycle of violence in the Niger Delta region as the permissive culture of violence enables the social transmission of violent behaviour to younger generations, who now view violence as a means of achieving socially desirable goals. Based on the themes that emerged from interviews undertaken as part of this study, the following sections demonstrate how a culture of violence has emerged in the Niger Delta and how this has incentivized the cycle of violence in the region.

4 Materials and methods

This section provides methodological insights into the approach adopted while conducting the study in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta, the epicentre of violent conflicts in the region. I adopted the qualitative research design for data collection and analysis: this approach is best suited to this research as it provides the opportunity to document people's lived experiences, through which we can understand the context of social actions and draw meanings based on individual's constructions of their lives (Bruner 2009). Furthermore, the qualitative research design as espoused by Gade (2020) and Shesterinina (2016) is well suited to micro studies of conflict, such as the case study this research is focused on. My interlocutors were purposively selected based on their knowledge of the subject matter, as conflict actors, analysts, or community representatives. A total of 28 unstructured oral interviews were conducted with stakeholders, including four ex-militants (all male, under 50 years of age), six traditional rulers (all male, over 50), five security operatives (all male, under 50), five civil society actors (three male and two female, 35–55), five state-level politicians, (all male, over 50) and three gang members (all male, under 35). In addition, three focus group discussions (FGDs) composed of seven participants each were conducted with three categories of community-based groups, including the Community Development Committee (CDC) group (all male, 35–55 years of age), youth group (all male, 25–40), and women group (all female, 40–70). The utilization of oral interviews and FGDs enabled me to record my interlocutors' experiences, opinions, attitudes, and motivations regarding violent conflicts in their communities. The interviews were conducted at agreed locations and times most convenient to

my interlocutors, and their consent was secured for interviews to be recorded. The aim of conducting three different FGDs with people of the same demographic characteristics was to observe the cultural peculiarities of communities, as gender and age restrictions could bias responses if divergent categories of stakeholders were put together in the same group. The interviews and FGDs were transcribed and coded, and the thematic analysis technique was utilized to generate themes of meaning from the field interviews. Thematic analysis is 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). It involves the identification of themes of meaning through careful reading and rereading of transcribed data. The steps in thematic analysis, according to Dawadi (2020), involve the process of familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, theme categorization, and theme mapping. Adopting this process, I conducted a reiterative reading of the interview transcripts to generate data codes, which culminated in the development of themes of meaning and finally the mapping of these themes to establish relationships between them. In addition to this, the observational technique was utilized to draw inferences regarding permissive cultural norms and values, as well as aspects of material and non-material culture such as indigenous music, visual arts, and theatrical productions, that incentivize violent behaviour in the region. These diverse forms of cultural production were observed and the meanings that community members attached to them were used to draw inferences with regard to their relationship with prevalent violent behaviour in the communities.

5 Collective approval of militancy and emergent violent norms in the Niger Delta

The first analytical theme that emerged from the data demonstrates how collective approval of militancy led to the emergence of violent cultural norms in the region. Feelings of socioeconomic, political, and environmental marginalization and alienation in the region generated widespread discontent. The rise of youth militancy tended to provide succour to a majority of the people in the region who felt powerless and helpless. With strong demands for resource ownership and control, self-determination, and equitable distribution of the oil wealth emanating from the region, the militants were mostly perceived as 'freedom fighters'. Interviewees demonstrated this permissive attitude towards militancy as most argued that the militancy era provided the Niger Delta with much-needed local and international attention. The greatest outcome of the insurgency was seen to be the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan as president of Nigeria from 2010 to 2015. This generally held perception was reflected in the FGDs:

> The Niger Delta freedom fighters are the voice of the oppressed and poor who the Nigerian government and multinational companies have marginalized and subjugated for decades. The boys have brought the struggle of our people to limelight and today the world know about the Niger Delta.[1]

This narrative implies collective approval of militancy in the region as the most effective response to decades of marginalization, alienation, and state repression. Communities provided support for militant groups as youths volunteered in their thousands to supposedly fight for the emancipation of the region. The widespread approval of and support for militancy across the region provided social legitimacy to violent behaviour, as evident in the proliferation of arms and the emergence of illegal oil bunkering and artisanal refining as means of securing local participation in the oil industry. Violence in this context became part of everyday life, resulting in the emergence of norms that encouraged rather than sanctioning violent behaviour. With the social legitimization of violent

[1] FGD with women of Ekeremor community, Bayelsa state, June 2021.

behaviour in the name of the 'Niger Delta struggle', communities in the region over time developed attitudes and norms that are permissive to violent behaviour, with the notion that violence was a means for securing the greater good of the region. The popular cliché used to rationalize and socially legitimize the emergent violent norms according to my interlocutors was the notion that:

> [The] Nigerian government only understands the language of violence: when we are peaceful, they take us for granted. If you look at the considerable development the Niger Delta has been able to benefit from the government it is because of the struggle of the Niger Delta youth.[2]

6 Heroizing the militant: violent representations in indigenous popular culture

The second analytical theme that emerged from the interviews demonstrates how public perceptions and the reputation of the militant mediate violent outcomes in the region. The persona of the militant as freedom fighter generates awe, respect, and strong admiration among kin and community members. Akin to the legend of Robin Hood, the militant is venerated as the protector of the poor, weak, and marginalized, who fights the tyranny of the oppressors—in this case the Nigerian government and IOCs. The militant is perceived as the emancipator of their people and as such enjoys community support; their legitimacy is derived from the strength they draw from their people. The community sings about their exploits and victories, they become a model of the true 'son of the soil' and they are rewarded with the highest honours in the land. In many communities across the Niger Delta, militants and conflict actors are awarded the highest ceremonial titles in their communities, while some have penetrated traditional institutions as well as mainstream political space as leaders in their communities.

The above describes the heroization of militant agitators which has become a common phenomenon in most parts of the Niger Delta region. The act of heroization, according to most of my interlocutors, places premium value on the use of violence as a means to acquire socially desirable goals.

> We have observed that over the years, our brothers and freedom fighters have become big men, so wealthy and rich, we sing their praises in our communities and see them as heroes. This has, however, become a motivation for younger ones to become violent in the community, as they now see violence as a means of achieving wealth and popularity.[3]

This practice provides the enabling social context for the cycle of violence to continue as militant agitators increasingly become 'reference groups' for other would-be violent actors. Decrying this situation, His Royal Majesty King Bubaraye Dakolo, Ibenanaowei of Ekpetiama Kingdom, Bayelsa state. had this to say:

> As a King, I am the custodian of the traditions and customs of my people, and I watch over my kingdom. While the agitations of the Niger Delta youths are genuinely a result of decades of marginalization and environmental degradation, the militancy struggle also created unintended consequences as a result of the increasing militarization of our communities and villages. Violence is increasingly

[2] FGD with youths of Buguma community, Rivers state, July 2021.

[3] FGD with CDC, Nembe community, Bayelsa state, July 2021.

> becoming normalized in our communities; we live with it every day either from the Nigerian military or the rogue gangs who want to cash into the violent economy.[4]

In the course of conducting the fieldwork, I observed a situation where younger men in the communities rely on the achievements of militant agitators as standards for their own level of success. The social, economic, and political rewards accruing to notable militants become incentives for would-be violent actors to buy into the violent economy. A respondent who is a member of a cult gang and also an operator of an illegal petroleum refinery expressed this view during the interview:

> You see this game we play, despite the risks involved, the benefits outweigh the risks. Just one surveillance or escort contract can change my life. I look at our forebears who started this struggle like Tompolo, Ateke and Asari [and] I would [like to] be like them someday. I will have my place in this game no matter how long it takes.[5]

Hence, the values and norms of violence are stored and represented in diverse forms of material and non-material culture which are popular with the people. In this light, popular culture becomes a medium through which violent behaviour is legitimized and internalized. The study participants identified several dimensions of popular culture through which militants are venerated and the culture of violence is entrenched.

Figure 1: Sculpture depicting an armed militant as a freedom fighter

Source: author's copyright, picture taken at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

[4] Interview with His Royal Majesty King Bubaraye Dakolo, Ekpetiama Kingdom, Bayelsa state, June 2021.

[5] Interview with Iceland gang member, Port Harcourt, Rivers state, July 2021.

A prominent approach to heroizing violent actors and their exploits is the representation of the youth insurgency through the visual arts. For instance, Figure 1 shows a sculpture of an arms-bearing Niger Delta militant who is supposedly perceived and venerated as a freedom fighter. Several of these types of monuments and sculptures are stationed in public spaces to reflect the relevance of armed struggle in the course of self-determination in the Niger Delta.

Other dimensions of popular culture through which violent militant agitators are venerated and heroized include the mass media, movies/theatre, and songs. Music is a popular medium for the heroizing of militant leaders in the Niger Delta. Prominent musicians, especially those of Ijaw extraction, sing popular praises to militants, eulogizing their exploits and deeds.[6] For instance, the following excerpts are verses from popular songs about militant leaders in the Niger Delta.

Barrister Smooth, 'Tom Ateke'

… Tom Ateke I greet you

There is every reason to greet you

Looking from a father angle, he acts as a father

Tom Ateke from a mother's angle, he acts as a mother

He also acts as a brother, He acts as Izon freedom fighter

Don Odi says Tom, you too much

Ayelala says Tom, you too much

Ogbomudia says Tom, you too much

Timi Alaibe confirms Tom, you too much

The father of Izon youths, Tom, I greet you.

Tom, you are a father, Abuja Daddy, Lion of Judea

Osama Bin Laden, King of Niger Delta …

King Robert Ebizimor, 'Tompolo (GOC)'

… Government Ekpemupolo (Tompolo)

The Ijaw nation is celebrating because of you

That's why the Ijaw nation call you GOC

The Niger Delta calls you GOC

We are praying for you

The Ijaw nation is praying for you

Our great man, we are praying for you. Abule, praying for you

G.O. C You have made the young and old rejoice

You have made the young and old have a good life …

[6] Interview with F.D. Fyneface, CSO actor, Port Harcourt, Rivers state, July 2021.

As revealed by the lyrics of the songs presented above, the heroization of militant leaders through several forms of artistic production and cultural representation demonstrates the permissible norms and values that have emerged which support and legitimize the cycle of violent behaviour in the region.

7 Rewarding violence: From political economy of violence to a culture of violence

Conflict analysts and observers converge on the fact that violent conflicts have become endemic in the Niger Delta despite the implementation of the PAP in the region.

> A decade into the implementation of the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP), violent conflicts are still present in the Niger Delta region. New conflict actors in guise of militants, sea pirates, cultists and oil bunkerers have sprung up across the nooks and crannies of the Delta perpetrating several forms of violent criminalities.[7]

New forms of violent conflict have emerged over the last decade as a ripple effect of the militant youth uprising in the early 2000s. The militancy era enabled arms proliferation in the region, which promoted other forms of violent criminality such as cultism, drug trafficking, sea piracy, armed robbery, kidnapping, oil theft, and artisanal refining, among others (Jack and Tokpo 2021; Joab-Peterside et al. 2021). The capacity of the actors in these divergent forms of conflict to influence violent outcomes is a measure of the amount of power they wield within their domain. Many analysts and scholars have relied on the political economy approach in providing explanations for the unending cycle of violence in the region. Ikelegbe (2005) developed the economy-of-conflict thesis to demonstrate how the militancy era ushered in a violent economic system. This economy is characterized by a violent mode of production (Raimi 2017) where those who own and control the means and instruments of violence, often referred to as militia capitalists (Amadi et al. 2016), are engaged in a competitive struggle to capture socially desirable goods in society. The conflict economy is thereby sustained by state patronage through the initiation of cash-for-arms amnesty programmes by the Nigerian government as well as the awarding of security/surveillance contracts by oil multinationals, thereby unintendedly commodifying violence in the region (Joab-Peterside and Zalik 2008; Raimi and Boroh 2018). This, according to one of my interlocutors,[8] implies that violence has increasingly become a valuable commodity in the region as a means through which desirable political, economic, and social goals can be attained, as demonstrated in Table 1.

[7] Interview with State Security Service (SSS) officer, Yenagoa, Bayelsa state, June 2021.

[8] Interview with political actor, Port Harcourt, Rivers state, July 2021.

Table 1: Rewards and patronage of erstwhile militants as enablers of the cycle of violence

Militant agitators	Economic rewards	Political rewards	Socio-cultural rewards
Alhaji Asari Dokubo	Despite openly rejecting the PAP deal in 2019, he was awarded a pipeline security contract in Rivers state worth US$10 million a year by the federal government (Hinshaw 2012) The NDDC in 2012 awarded a contract to his company, King Amachree Royal Academy Ltd, to construct the Bie-Ama Junction Ring Road, in Borokiri, Port Harcourt, Rivers state		Currently holds the traditional title of Edi Abali 1 of Kalabari Kingdom, Rivers state
Government 'Tompolo' Ekpemukpolo	The federal government in 2012 awarded his company Global West Specialist Agency a contract to supply 20 patrol vessels for the use of Nigeria's military for coastal surveillance In August 2022, the federal government awarded him a pipeline surveillance contract worth US$8.8 million monthly	Political godfather and king-maker in Delta state	High chief in Gbaramatu Kingdom and high priest of the Bini-Ebi Madinorbo Deity in Ogulah Kingdom, Delta state
King Ateke Tom	The NDDC in 2010 awarded his company Se-Kuro Nig Ltd the internal road contracts in Okochiri, in 2011 the Ilamooku road in Okrika, and in 2012 the Chief Alex Wele/Isi-Apa Ogologo in Obio Akpor LGA Also received pipeline security contract worth US$1.6 million		Amayanabo of Okochiri Kingdom, Rivers state Sekuro 1 of the Niger Delta
Hon. Farah Dagogo	Secured oil and gas pipeline surveillance and security contracts worth US$3.3 million at the Cawthorne Channel, Rivers state	Member representing Degema/Bonny constituency in the Federal House of Representatives	
Selky Torughedi (Young Shall Grow)	The NDDC in 2012 awarded his company S.S. Selky Nig Ltd a contract to construct Obeakpu internal road in Ohaji/Egbema LGA, Imo state		Paramount ruler of Azuzuama Kingdom, Southern Ijaw LGA, Bayelsa state
Ebikabowei Victor Ben (Boyloaf)	The NDDC in 2010 awarded the G-Tek road in Yenagoa LGA to his company Bensam Nig Ltd	Active politician, in 2014 was appointed head of maritime security taskforce in Bayelsa state by the administration led by Governor Seriake Dickson	-
Sobomabo Jackrich (Egberipapa)	Secured oil and gas pipeline surveillance and security contracts worth US$580,645 at the Cawthorne Channel, Rivers state	Active politician and former Caretaker Committee chair of Asari-Toru LGA, Rivers state	Currently a high chief in his native Kalabari Kingdom, Rivers state Convener of the Kengema Unity Forum (KUF)—a socio-cultural and ethnic organization

Hon. Granville Tekenari Wellington	The NDDC in 2010 awarded him two road contracts in Borikiri, Port Harcourt through his company Teksharries Global Servicers Ltd	A serving State House of Assembly member representing Asari-Toru 1 constituency (People's Democratic Party, PDP), Rivers state	
Joshua MacIver	-	Active politician and former Caretaker Committee chair of Southern Ijaw LGA, Bayelsa state	
Tonye Adoki Smart	The NDDC in 2012 awarded his company T-Mie Adoki Nigeria Ltd a contract for 1 km of the Mikikwu/Omuaria/Omunwei link road, Ikwerre LGA, Rivers state	A serving State House of Assembly member representing Port Harcourt 2 constituency (PDP), Rivers state	
Solomon Ndigbara (Osama Bin Laden)	The NDDC awarded a 1 km stretch of Bori Road in 2010 and Kono Road in 2012, both in Khana LGA, Rivers state, to his company Gbenesolos Nigeria Ltd Also received pipeline security contract worth US$1.7 million		Currently a high chief in his native Ogoni land, Rivers state

Note: values converted from Nigerian naira to US dollars using official rate of $1 to N155 as at 2010.

Source: author's compilation based on data from Hinshaw (2012) and SDN (2018, 2021).

The situation described in Table 1 has severe implications for stability and peace-building in the region, corroborating the work of Ebiede and Nyianyaana (2022), who noted that conflict actors such as militants and leaders of cult gangs instrument violence to attain political power and economic resources within their communities. The approaches which the Nigerian state and IOCs have relied on to resolve the Niger Delta militant conflict by means of cash-for-arms amnesty deals and surveillance contracts to ex-militants while edging out non-violent actors from such rewards continues to narrow the possibilities for lasting peace, as it has the potential to incentivize the cycle of violence. This is so because while the amnesty programme has ushered in a new class of wealthy conflict bourgeoisie, the non-violent members of society who continuously experience social, economic, and political exclusion are pushed to adopt violence as a means of realizing socially desirable goals of wealth, prestige, and power (Ebiede et al. 2020; Raimi and Boroh 2018). In light of the above, the act of rewarding conflict actors rather than sanctioning violent behaviour promotes a culture of violence. The cultural permission accorded to conflict actors through the skewed reward systems described above sustains the conflict economy. This inadvertently creates a value system which supports violence as a means of achieving socially desirable goals.

8 Conclusion

This paper has examined the role that culture plays in sustaining and escalating cycles of violence in societies. Based on the analysis, it has identified specific cultural constructs embedded in material and non-material cultural production in the context of resource conflicts in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. The study has shown that economic, political, and social conditions do not always in themselves trigger violent conflicts, but rather culture plays a more fundamental role in moderating behavioural responses (violent versus peaceful actions) to these conditions. This suggests a

limitation of the political-economy and economies-of-violence perspectives advanced by scholars such as Besouw et al. (2016), Collier et al. (2003), Fox and Hoelscher (2010), and others.

As demonstrated in this study, based on the Niger Delta experience, cultural constructs that incentivize violent behaviour include material and non-material cultural productions such as songs, folktales, artistic expression, and so on which eulogize violent figures as cultural heroes. These in turn create cultural norms and values that become permissive with regard to violent behaviour, wherein violence is rewarded with socioeconomic, political, and cultural benefits as has been the case with militant agitators in the Niger Delta. This provides insights as to why, despite the implementation of the PAP, violent conflicts persist in the region. The cultural perspective on the unending cycle of violent conflicts hence provides an alternative perspective from which to analyse violent conflicts to mainstream political economy approaches which fail to consider cultural drivers. The paper, drawing on evidence from the case study of the Niger Delta, has established that increasing general acceptance of emergent cultural norms that legitimize violence through a reward system that allows violent actors to achieve socially desirable goals such as status, wealth, and political power provides incentives for hitherto peaceful individuals to imbibe the culture of violence. In conclusion, the findings of this study have implications for conflict managers and governments, who need to envisage and identify specific cultural constructs that could sustain or promote violent behaviour while designing conflict management and post-conflict policies.

Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that to reverse the cycle of violence, the pervasive culture of violence needs to be replaced with a culture of non-violence wherein violence is sanctioned and peaceful behaviour rewarded by society. This can be achieved through the mass reorientation of youths in affected societies to encourage them to eschew violent behaviour. In addition, national governments in conflict-affected societies should incentivize peaceful behaviour by rewarding peace-building actors with relevant socio-political and economic benefits, while sanctioning violent behaviour by apprehending and prosecuting perpetrators of criminal violence.

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