

Territorialising Niger Delta conflicts: place and contentious mobilisation

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Abstract

The literature on the Niger Delta conflicts is extensive, featuring various theoretical models and eclectic approaches in the attempt to identify processes that generate the conflicts and ideas about how to reverse them. A good deal of this literature is aspatial, regarding place as mere background against which social events unfold. Therefore, there has been little attempt to explore how place structures the conflicts. This article seeks to bring place into analytical focus. Building on existing literature, it argues for the need to apprehend general processes of conflicts in their entanglement with place-specific characteristics if we are to understand the nature of specific conflicts, and why conflict is not ubiquitous in the region. The paper examines the nexus between (a) changes in a given place, shaped by larger socioeconomic processes, (b) the lived experiences of its inhabitants and the latter's worldviews and (c) sense of place, and (d) interpretive activities. It argues that examining the intersection between such general socioeconomic processes, worldviews and cognitive praxis provides a fuller account of why conflicts emerge where they do in the Niger Delta. The Ogoni conflict is taken as a case study.

Introduction

On 4 January 1993 about 300,000 Ogoni converged, under the auspices of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), to take part in an unprecedented protest march against the State and the Shell oil company (Saro-Wiwa 1995). The Ogoni located their grievances in a skewed federal structure, environmental despoliation and destruction of local livelihoods by the activities of Shell (Saro-Wiwa 1995). Threatened and angered by the MOSOP, the State – actively aided by Shell – harassed and intimidated Ogoni leaders (Ibeanu 2000). In November 1995 the State executed Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders on trumped up charges of masterminding the murder of four prominent pro-government Ogoni chiefs. The judicial murder sparked a wave of international outrage and condemnation (Maier 2000). The sudden death of Nigerian leader Sanni Abacha, and subsequent election of Olusegun Obasanjo in February 1999 ended Nigeria's international isolation and held the promise of a quick and peaceful resolution of the Niger Delta imbroglio.

Contrary to expectations of peace, several militant groups have emerged (Ibeanu 2000). The violent attacks and activities of the militant Movement for

the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) resulted in a roughly 25 percent cut in Nigeria's crude oil production in 2007. Hostage-taking of foreign oil workers, the seizure and destruction of oil installations, and armed confrontations between federal troops and militant groups have become common. It is alleged that the policy sources of grievances and conflicts – such as the Land-Use Act, Petroleum Act and other laws that dispossess and marginalize oil-producing areas – coupled with the operating practices of oil companies, have not yet been adequately addressed by the State nor by the oil companies (Douglas, personal interview 2006).

The Niger Delta has a long history of violent conflicts over environmental resources. The Niger Delta was an important source of slaves for the Europeans from the 15th century. After the abolition of the slave trade, the Delta was unsurpassed in the production of palm oil, which formed the core of the “new” trade (Aghalino 1998: 152). In 1855-56 the Delta exported 25,060 tons of oil, over half the quantity of oil exported from Africa (Aghalino 1998.). Between 1871 and 1879 British firms employed armed boats to penetrate the interior leading to a number of confrontations between Europeans and African middlemen. To gain control of the lucrative hinterland trade, Goldie Taubman, the British consul, unified the competing British firms in the region into the United African Company, successfully eliminating foreign competition from 1877 to 1879 (Dike 1956: 209). The people of the Niger Delta opposed and bitterly resisted the company's rule and attacked the company's factories in Akassa, Patani, Brass, Asaba and Idah. Despite such uprisings, the company's superior firepower kept the locals subdued (Dike 1956).

The more recent conflicts in the region have engaged sustained scholarly attention. Several approaches to the Niger Delta conflicts can be discerned in the literature. One approach sees the conflicts as the outcome of incorrigible greed and the tendency to amass wealth (Reno 2002, 2005; Collier 2001, 2002; Omeje 2006). Another approach emphasises conflicting understanding of what constitutes environmental security (Ibeanu 1997). A third approach sees the Ogoni movement as an attempt to secure greater patronage or a reiteration of spoils politics (Reno 2000, 2005; Watts 2004). A fourth approach locates the conflicts in structural problems such as “internal colonialism”, the “National Question”, and the exploitation and dispossession of minorities (Naanen 1995, Osaghae 1995b, Anikpo 2002 and Ikelegbe 2001). Obi (2006) represents a fifth approach in which the problems of the Ogoni transcend national boundaries to implicate the architecture of global capitalism. While the authors present important insights into the conflicts, little regard has been given to place-specific factors that determine ideational reality, the value of resources, and the power relations that organise such resources (Peluso and Watts 2001).

Conflict over a region's natural resources is a geographic phenomenon (Simmons 2005). Political geographers have long recognised the role of space and place in the emergence of conflict (Miller 1994, Agnew 1987, Pile and Keith 1997). Some social movement scholars have embraced the spatial perspective (Sewell 2001, Martin and Miller 2003, McAdams et al 2001). Space is essential

to the choice of tactics and strategy (Agbonifo 2009) and the construction of frames and identity (Agbonifo 2009, Wolford 2003). The insight has, however, made minimal impact on scholarly engagement with the Niger Delta conflicts. This article moves beyond existing literature on the conflict in two ways. First, it seeks to situate structural conditions in place. Second, the article traces how interpretive activities, partly informed by place, transformed conditions to construct insurgent identities. Building on insights from "resource access literature", "society-rooted politics" and place-sensitive social movement theories, it argues that violent conflict emerges at the intersection between structural conditions, place-specific characteristics and place-informed interpretive activities.

The author uses data collected during a series of English language in-depth interviews with randomly selected members of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, or MOSOP (both active and inactive, male and female), as well as with other movement activists with relevant information to illustrate Ogoni framing activities, and the role of spatial factors in the onset of mobilisation.¹ The rest of the article is presented in four sections. The first section briefly considers dominant explanations of the Niger Delta conflicts. The second section introduces the spatial approach. Section three situates dominant explanations in place, showing how the characteristics of Ogoni as place, and activists' interpretive actions shaped the movement from structures to action. The final section is the summary.

Dominant macro-explanations of Niger Delta conflicts

This section considers several approaches to the Niger Delta conflicts. The approaches are briefly treated under two broad and arbitrary categories: (1) resource availability and (2) society-rooted politics. It is important to point out at the outset that both approaches are convincing at the macro level but they do not explain why individual actors joined the Ogoni movement because they do not actually situate the conflict in place or people. As Wendy Wolford (2008) argues in the case of the Movement of Rural Landless Workers in Brazil, conventional macro explanations mistakenly assume a direct link between broad structural changes and mobilisation. Unable to explain who joined the movement, or did not, and why, conventional approaches remain "thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the subjectivity—the intentions, desires, fears, projects—of the actors engaged in these drama" (Ortner 1995: 190).

¹ Random in-depth interviews were conducted between 2006 and 2009 in both Ogoniland and Port-Harcourt.

1. Resource availability

There are two schools of thought on how resource availability shapes conflict: first, scarcity results in conflict, and second, resource abundance shapes conflict. The scarcity school argues that scarcity occasions conflict as groups contend for access to limited resources. Conflicting environmental security perspectives, environmental degradation, overexploitation of resources, population growth and climate change and population movement are some of the processes posited to engender resource scarcity and precipitate conflict (Ibeanu 1997, Homer-Dixon 1999). The school has been criticised by those who argue that it is precisely resource abundance (alternatively, resource curse) which shapes conflict (LeBillon 2001, Watts 2001). The resource curse literature thus draws a link between resource abundance and conflict. Collier and Hoeffler (2002) argue that there is a correlation between poverty, natural resource abundance and violent conflict. Collier (2001) is convinced that countries dependent on resource exploitation seem to be among the most conflict-ridden countries in the world. Greed has also been emphasised (Collier 2001, 2002; Reno 2002; Watts 2004; Omeje 2006). What circumstances create the context for resource abundance and competition? Failure to explain those contexts of resource abundance and competition by resource curse literature elicits Watts' critique that an approach based on resource determinism de-emphasises politics as an essential explanatory variable (Watts 2004: 53). Taken together, the resource availability or abundance provides insight into the Niger Delta conflicts along the following lines.

The approach reiterates that land is very scarce in the Niger Delta and the little that is useable is treasured, forming "the very basis – spiritual and material – of life in the peasant communities" (Obi 1999). In this region, and particularly in Ogoniland, both the land and rivers are central to all economic, social and domestic activities. Given that about 90 per cent of the total Niger Delta area consists of water, from many centuries in the past, canoes were critical and indispensable to movement, communication and trade. Long-distance commerce required large canoes to convey bulky goods (Kpone-Tonwe 1997: 25). As timber for construction was rare in the Delta (which is a mangrove terrain), canoe-building centres sprung up in areas such as Ko village in Ogoni, which had thick forests and timber. There was a concentration of huge wealth in Ogoniland due to expanding canoe and pot industries and bountiful farm harvests. The accumulation of goods created the problem of storage, and according to Kpone-Tonwe, as a result of this the Ogoni converted their wealth into other forms of wealth: land, permanent tree crops such as palm oil and coconut trees and money. By the 16th century, a class of wealthy men, whose wealth derived from commercial enterprise, had emerged in Ogoniland (Kpone-Tonwe 1997: 131; 34-6).

Until the end of the 19th century, the plain of Ogoniland was densely forested. The fertile plain ensured that Ogoniland became the food basket of the Niger Delta. The Ogoni produced provisions taken on board slave ships (Kpone-Tonwe and Salmons 2002). With population growth and increased demand for

farm produce from the Delta, the early 20th century witnessed the conversion of large areas of forest into farmland. Accelerated population growth increased pressure for farmland such that even the wetter areas of the land were cultivated for quick cassava crops in the dry season, endangering valuable water resources and impoverishing the soils (Kpone-Tonwe and Salmons 2002: 275). With a population of 500,000 people squeezed into 404 square miles, and an estimated population density of 1,250 persons per square mile, the question of land is a very sensitive issue to the Ogoni (Obi 1999). Thus, as Obi argues, land scarcity and environmental degradation are at the core of the struggle in the Niger Delta.

A new current that would exacerbate land scarcity and degradation was introduced with the first oil discovery in 1958 in the Ogoni community, Kegbara Dere. Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), in joint venture partnership with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), Elf and Agip operates five major oil fields and 96 wells, linked to five flow stations in Bomu, Bodo West, Ebubu, Korokoro and Yorla, all Ogoni communities (Banjo 1998). In 1914, the colonial state passed the Mineral Acts declaring sovereignty over mineral resources, empowering the Governor-General to grant licences and leases to British companies and subjects. In 1938, Shell obtained rights to prospect for oil in the entire Nigerian land space. The company later concentrated on an area of high expectation measuring 15,000 square miles and returned the remaining land space to the colonial state. Shell drilled its first oil wells in 1956 and began to export oil in 1958.

It took the postcolonial State nine years after independence to repeal the 1914 Mineral Act and to enact new oil-related legislation. Shell continued to operate freely within the favourable institutional framework crafted by the colonial state almost a decade after independence (Frynas 2000). Even then the 1969 Ordinance was little different from its colonial antecedent (Frynas 2000: 81). Between 1971 and 1990, there was no formal operating agreement between the State and Shell. For two decades, Shell operated within an institutional void and without obligations (Frynas 2000: 89) ostensibly because the Mineral Acts placed responsibility for oil exploitation in the hands of two monopolies: British Petroleum and Royal Dutch Shell. The monopoly rested on their agreement with the colonial State to share oil proceeds 50-50 (Osoba 1987).

The Ogoni celebrated the discovery of oil with excitement and hope (Agbo 2008). The installation of oil facilities generated jobs for unskilled labour and attracted small service sector industrialists, job seekers and other migrants to the region. The processes of urbanisation increased, Ogoniland boomed, and the people were excited. However, as Gaventa (1982) argues in the case of the Appalachian Valley, below the surface of the boom, the legitimacy investors enjoyed and the "momentary Zeitgeist, there was quietly occurring the structuring of inequalities that was to have major long-term impact upon the political economy of the region" (Gaventa 1982: 56). To Otite (1990: 327), the "oil rush" of the early 1970s unleashed rapid land alienation, quickly resulting in mass landlessness. The massive dispossession or "material haemorrhage" that became a characteristic feature of the Niger Delta came about through forcible

expropriation, deceit, corruption and state acquisition (Otite 1990: 332). By the early 1970s, the hope in oil was dashed and in its place, a grim realisation of despoliation settled (Agbonifo 2003). Ogoni leaders resorted to petitioning the State (Saro-Wiwa 1992).

The ecology of Ogoniland has undergone profound changes as a result of oil-related activities (Boele et al. 2001). The estimate of carbon dioxide (CO²) emissions from gas flaring in the Niger Delta stands at about 35 million tonnes annually, the highest annual emission from gas flaring in the world. The large volumes of greenhouse gases released, such as CO² and methane, contribute to global warming (Orubu et al. 2004). The soot released causes acid rain, fouling bodies of water and destroying once fertile farmland. Constant gas flares negatively affect the environment, destroying plant growth and wildlife, and driving away important species. Farmers harvest less returns yearly despite hard work and the Ogoni now must buy food from outside (Amanyie 2001: 18).

2. Society-rooted politics

As if to underscore the fears and vulnerability of the Ogoni, in July 1970, a blowout occurred in the Ogoni town, Dere, where Shell first struck oil in 1958 (Saro-Wiwa 1992). According to one report from Dere, "The blow-out continued day and night for about two months during which we were forbidden to make fire, we could neither cook our meals nor smoke tobacco" (Saro-Wiwa 1992: 72). So severe was the disaster that it destroyed farmlands within a radius of about three miles. Worse still, the blowout occurred during the harvest period, destroying the first fruits after the civil war. Yet not a single relief material was received in Dere, as the victims "were left to swim or sink within their miseries" (Osha 2006: 28). Saro-Wiwa charges that what Shell has done to the Ogoni people, land, streams and atmosphere amounts to genocide, murdering the soul of the Ogoni (Saro-Wiwa 1992: 75).

In a petition addressed to the governor of Rivers State on 25 April 1970, Ogoni leaders alleged that after Ogoni returnees, displaced by the civil war, had been encouraged to till the land to eke out subsistence, Shell-BP caterpillars entered cultivated farmlands and bulldozed several acres of crops (Saro-Wiwa 1992). Prior to the petition, the leaders had shown the governor acres of mangrove swamps destroyed by incessant oil spills, imperilling the livelihood of the poor. Crude oil and mud polluted the once sparkling rivers and streams in Gokana area, leaving the people no alternative source for drinking water. Saro-Wiwa (1992: 47) summed up the Ogoni travails thus: "Our people have been compelled to sacrifice all life-supporting necessities so that the nation may enjoy economic boom".

Shell-BP countered the Ogoni accusation arguing that the charges are inaccurate (Saro-Wiwa 1992: 50-1). Nineteen years after the Bomu blowout some families who were victims of the blowout sued Shell for compensation in *Shell v. Farah*. In March 1988, Shell claimed it had rehabilitated and handed the land over to the plaintiffs and that it had paid compensation for damaged trees,

crops and other elements as well as for land degradation (Frynas 2000). The plaintiffs claimed ignorance of Shell's claims and consequently initiated legal action in 1989. In court, Shell relied on an expert witness (Frynas 2000: 168). The judge awarded the plaintiffs Naira 4,621,307 (US\$29, 924.9) in compensation. Shell appealed the judgment but it failed before the Court of Appeals. However, such expert claims have in some cases helped Shell avoid responsibility for environmental damage (Frynas 2000: 169).

Perhaps as a result of its dominance Shell was unperturbed by the increasing number of conflicts which dogged its operations. Frynas (2000) shows that in the period 1981-86 Shell had 24 compensation claims lodged against it in Nigerian courts. In 1998, the number jumped to more than 500 cases. Most of them were oil-spill related. The rise in the number of lawsuits suggests that compensation arrived at through negotiation and mediation was unsatisfactory, which indicated that negotiation and mediation are inadequate methods for resolving community compensation claims (Frynas 2000.) Shell claims it is a victim of sabotage and has employed the guise of sabotage to escape liability for damage. However Shell has so far failed to take legal action against any suspected saboteurs.

With land degradation and alienation, it was only a matter of time before an underclass emerged whose impoverishment could be tied to the lack of adequate regulation of multinational oil companies and subsequent destruction of the local economy (Agbonifo 2003). Consisting mainly of youths, the underclass bore resentment toward society, which they held responsible for their superfluosity, and were thus willing to listen to activist mobilizers (Saro-Wiwa 1995). Increasingly disenchanted with the educated local leaders the Ogoni youths came to perceive the local elites as men who drink beer while the underclass drinks muddy water (McGreal 1996). The youth accused local elites of taking advantage of young men's wives because they had money to jail their husbands in the event of protest. The same elites were those whose overriding interests lie in government positions and Shell contracts (McGreal 1996).

In 1990, the Ogoni took stock of their condition and realised that they were "faced with environmental degradation, political marginalisation, economic strangulation, slavery and possible extinction" (MOSOP 2004: 2). When, as a result, the Ogoni issued its Bill of Rights and ultimatum to Shell demanding payment of compensation, both the State and Shell ignored the movement (Ibeanu 2000). Following the rise in contentious activities, the State issued a decree, which criminalised any call for autonomy (Ibeanu 2000). On its part, Shell commenced a campaign against the person of Saro-Wiwa, arguing he did not represent the entire Ogoni (Saro-Wiwa 1995). Moreover, the company attempted to impugn the environmental claims of the Ogoni by arguing non-problematicity (Saro-Wiwa 1995).

The Ogoni quest for social justice and equality reflects the broader problem encapsulated in the National Question. The core of the National Question relates to how people are organised, empowered or disempowered (Momoh 2002: 26). Osadolor (2002: 31) argues the National Question arose from the amalgamation

of the Southern and Northern Protectorates in 1914, the subsequent incapacity to transform the complex into national societies and the consequent problem of what to do with the country. Colonialism engendered divisive policies and made little effort to create a united country. Some colonial officials did not believe Nigeria constituted a single country and expressed a lack of faith in the entity they had created (Osadolor 2002: 32). These forces fostered and enforced the feeling or perception of difference, fear and suspicion.

Mistrust persisted even after independence in 1960. Politics degenerated into a struggle for power at the federal level. Possession of the reins of power at the centre assured access to economic survival and benefits as well as other social ends. In their confrontation over sectional goals, rival groups dispensed with self-restraint leading to a series of political crises that resulted in Nigeria's first military coup on 15 January 1966. The ensuing civil war, the outcome of which favoured federalism, did not resolve the National Question but merely imposed unification (Osadolor 2002: 45). The primary source of crisis in the post-war era has been the inequitable distribution of national resources, in which ethnic minorities of the oil-rich Niger Delta question the essence of Nigeria and advocate convening a sovereign national conference to debate continued coexistence (Osadolor 2002: 43-4).

Extant inequalities in the distribution of wealth generate instability and protract the National Question (Anikpo (2002: 66) which, in effect, is about the issue of equity with regard to resource distribution among the various ethnic and class groups that compose Nigeria. Interethnic inequalities and the National Question predate the emergence of oil as a major revenue earner for the country (Obi 2002: 97). The politicisation of interethnic relations, expressed by the National Question, led to the struggle of majority groups to maintain domination at the expense of the minorities. The tendency of the latter was to escape their domination by opting out of a 'contract of perpetuity in inequality', an option the dominant group actively resisted (Obi 2002: 98). Minority fear and protests against majority domination led to establishing the Willink Commission, which failed to address minorities' anxieties (Obi 2002: 99). As a result of minority marginalisation, local elite anger and rural dispossession "exploded" into Ogoni militant nationalism in the 1990s (Okonta 2008: 5).

Okonta draws on history, institutions, and space in order to understand the social basis of Ogoni nationalism. He employs the deconstructive method to argue that Ogoni activists weaved truth claims to further their identity project. He impugns Kpone-Tonwe's account of the origin of the Ogoni, alluding to the scholar's involvement with MOSOP and the timing of the account. Okonta rejects historical truth claims, preferring to place them in tension. In the process, however, he constructs his own truth claims. The approach employed in this article differs from Okonta's in at least three important ways. Given that social movements are subjective phenomena, albeit not without empirical referents, the article is least interested in the veracity or otherwise of Ogoni activists' claims. It accepts the Ogoni movement for what it says it is. To Okonta, Saro-Wiwa's appeal to the interconnection between the Ogoni and otherworldly is a 'constructed'

"environmental theology" (Okonta 2008: 199). This author gives prominence to the force and symbolic, cultural and otherworldly basis of Ogoni beliefs, frames, identity and strategy.

The resource availability approach provides a materialist explanation of the Ogoni conflict, which involves elements of grievances and greed theories. The political economy of conflict argues that both grievances over exploitation and greed to acquire more resources for provincial needs explain why people resort to contentious politics (Gurr 1970; Collier 2001). The society-rooted approach privilege a materialist and provincial explanation of the Ogoni movement, which aligns with the grievances theories founded on the argument that arduous economic conditions, or perceived inequality, compel resistance to unfavourable conditions (Slater 1985). Both the resource scarcity and society-rooted politics perspectives emphasise the critical role played by the movement organisation, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and leadership in the rise of the mobilisation. Assent on institution and leadership reflects the resource mobilisation standpoint, which underlines that the capacity to assemble resources determines whether, and where, a movement forms.

The missing link, place: what is it?

While elements of the resource availability and society-rooted politics explanations provide a basis for understanding the Ogoni movement at the macro-level, they are unable to explain why individual Ogoni decided to join the mobilisation. By ignoring the micromobilisation activities that preceded contention, both approaches draw a direct causal link between macro-structures and mobilisation. They assume that every Ogoni man and woman automatically joined the movement. But as Wolford asserts, the question is not simply why the movement was formed but why specific people decide to join movements in particular places and times. Who joined the movement and why is a spatially precise, actor-oriented question, which requires a deeper understanding of how the movement came into being (Wolford 2003).

While scholars make reference to spatial factors, such as history, the environmental impact of larger socioeconomic processes or belief systems, they hardly emphasise the mediating role such factors play in the onset and nature of the conflict. For instance, Turner and Brownhill (2004) underscore how some groups of women in the Niger Delta used nakedness to critique oil companies, believing the ritual would lead to the demise of the companies. This tactic and set of beliefs are place-based, but the authors are not concerned to show how place motivated or shaped the women's collective action. In the end, one gets the impression that the scholars' aim was to describe a place-based strategy rather than to describe how place shaped the conflict or strategies employed.

Geographers increasingly focus on place and space as mutually constitutive of social movement agency (Oslender 2004). Oslender emphasises the importance of knowing the place where a movement emerges, where the movement activists

live and the meaning which living in that particular place conveys to them. The core of such sensibility is that the "place and the subjectivities, identities and passions that it generates with locals make a difference to the ways in which a movement organises and articulates itself" (Oslender 2004: 958). Bell (1997: 813) refers to those passions as "ghosts". A place is constituted by the ghosts we take to inhabit and possess it; ghosts of the dead and living, individuals and collectives, of others and ourselves.

Agnew (2005: 86) defines place as "the encounter of people with other people and things in space. It refers to how everyday life is inscribed in space and takes on meaning for people and organizations". Agnew disentangles the concept of place thus:

Interwoven in the concept of place ... are three major elements: *locale*, the settings in which social relations are constituted (these can be informal or institutional); *location*, the geographical area encompassing the settings for social interaction as defined by social and economic processes operating at a wider scale; and *sense of place*, the local 'structure of feeling' (Agnew 1987: 28).

Locale refers to the formal and informal arena in which everyday social interactions and relations take place. *Location* captures the physical geographical area and the ways in which economic and political developments, operating on a wider scale, impact on it. The emphasis is "macro-order" effects on a place and "the ways in which certain places are inscribed, affected and subject to the wider workings of economic and political structures that normally originate from outside the area itself" (Oslender 2004: 961). *Sense of place* refers to the ways in which "human experience and imagination appropriate the physical characteristics and qualities of geographical location" (Oslender 2004: 962). It stresses how individuals and communities develop attachment to places through experience, memory and intention. Rather than separate and rigid entities, it is best to consider the three components of place as entangled (Oslender 2004: 963). Accordingly, analyses which ignore one or more of the three components of place hide a vital dimension of place and, thus, fall below the bar as fleshed out by Agnew and employed here.

Some would question the argued collective impact of place given the 'fractious' nature of MOSOP. Indeed, symbolic factors contributed to heightened mobilization and commitment to MOSOP. However, they were not strong enough to make the Chief of Eleme sign the OBR (Saro-Wiwa 1995). Symbolic forces did not translate to equal commitment to MOSOP among the Ogoni either. For instance, B.M. Wifa, an Ogoni and former Attorney-General of Rivers State, declined any public role in the movement even though he embraced the goals of MOSOP (Saro-Wiwa 1995: 104). Moreover, the first president of MOSOP, G.B. Leton and other Ogoni leaders, including Edward Kobani, resigned their position in MOSOP regardless of symbolic ties. How may we explain the variation in members' commitment to MOSOP in light of the spatial claims made here? It has been argued by some that such variation is a function of the feeling that Saro-Wiwa had taken the wrong step by resorting to grassroots mobilization and boycotting elections (Wheeler, Fabig, and Boele, 2002). To Watts (2004) individual political career interest explains why Leton and Kobani

opted out of MOSOP. Despite the uses of such explanations they omit important insights that analysis rooted in the study of identity theory presents.

Sheldon Stryker (2000) asserts that given multiple commitments, sets of relations may overlap in which case the individual multiple commitments will reinforce one another. Whereas they are divergent, they may compete for the actor's allegiance.

If commitments to family, friends, or other groups outside the movement are relatively weak, there will be little competition when movement leaders call for participation even of a demanding, all-encompassing sort. Conversely, however, if commitments to family, friends, or other social units are strong, the potential competitive edge of these units may well be high, in part because these units (more so than movements) are likely to be groups, and group-based expectations are likely to be more insistent, more powerful, than non-group-based expectations (Stryker 2000: 32).

Stryker observes that the collective ascription of the elements of a given identity to all members of a community, fail to yield to separation of the differences among group members. It has the effect of focusing attention entirely on the movement identity which participants share while ignoring other potentially salient external identities of the participants and what impact they may have on the latter's commitment. When a participant is committed to an outside group not directly connected to, or adversarial to, a movement, the dominance of the latter in securing the participants' commitment is threatened (Stryker 2000). Naanen (personal interview 2008) suggests that Ogoni elites who insisted on participating in politics were not solely motivated by personal political career. Rather they were motivated by the belief that by foreclosing the political process, an influential path to political engagement and possibility of resolving the Ogoni issues was being closed. It is also the case, however, that many of the local elites had lucrative clientelist links to both the state and Shell.

When Saro-Wiwa's uncompromising stance demanded unalloyed loyalty from participants, the balance between multiple loyalties, which had hitherto been managed successfully, was thrown in jeopardy. The violence that attended Wilbros' destruction of farms in Ogoniland proved to be the decisive moment for some conservative chiefs to choose which identity was more salient. They disowned MOSOP, and ran away to Port-Harcourt to seek government protection (Kpone-Tonwe, personal interview 2008). Leton and Kobani remained henchmen of the movement at the time. Trouble, however, broke for the duo when MOSOP decided to boycott the 1993 presidential elections. Now Leton was a prominent leader in the Social Democratic Party (SDP) whose presidential flagbearer was the popular Chief Abiola (Saro-Wiwa 1995). Their identity as SDP stalwarts and relationship to the party machinery came into conflict with their identity as MOSOP members. Failing to reconcile the conflict and in the effort to secure the former, they severed their relationship with MOSOP. Elites' prior commitments to the state, Shell and later to the SDP competed with loyalty to MOSOP precisely because both sets of commitments were independent. The process of unification, rather than fractionalisation, was ascendant in the course of mobilisation. The force of internal divisions

overcame unification only at moments when leaders were compelled to choose between two, or more, identities.

Embedding dominant explanations in place

The history of oil exploitation has been one of displacement, production of the socio-physical topography of the Niger Delta, and reproduction of underdevelopment. Had awareness and experience of bio-geophysical displacement been sufficient to mobilise collective action, the Ogoni would have mobilised against the State and Shell following the July 1970 Dere blowout. But they did not. The resource availability and society-rooted politics identify some of the important processes that created the necessary conditions that precipitated conflicts. The explanations are, however, insufficient to understand why conflict occurs in some places and not others. For instance, environmental pollution and socio-political marginalisation as identified in the resource availability and society-rooted politics literatures characterise the minority oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta. Yet, conflict is not ubiquitous in the region.

Environmental degradation and socioeconomic marginalisation provided the precipitating background to mobilisation. Ogoni framing activities rendered those conditions intelligible or visible to ordinary Ogoni which led to the initiation of collective action. Interpretive activities – by means of which perceived reality and experience are transformed to construct new identities, perception and behaviour – are critical to the move from structure or grievances to collective action. In effect, the necessary and sufficient conditions for conflict emerge at the nexus between structural conditions, place and interpretive processes. The task for the article is to emphasise how the rich historical, personality and institutional factors discussed in existing literature, or the politics of MOSOP, was shaped by place. In what follows, the article considers how place shaped Ogoni frames, and vice versa, in the effort to make sense of ongoing changes and the mobilisation of opposition. I have paired location with diagnosis, locale with prognosis, and sense of place with rationale for action for analytic purposes only. In reality, the three dimensions of place are conjoined, and each of them can generate frames; diagnosis, prognosis and rationale for action.

Location and diagnosis

Frame refers to “the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of their world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action” (McAdam et al. 1996: 6). MOSOP (1991) achieved the objective of fashioning shared understanding and motivating collective participation by deploying various frames. Ogoni activists emphasised and utilised the discourses of structural marginalisation and exploitation to articulate the reasons why they mobilised (MOSOP 1991). Below are some

elements of an oppressive frame evident in Ogoni publications (compiled by author):

1. The elites of the majority ethnic groups, their clients from minority groups, the State and Shell compose a federal system, a colonising order.
2. The colonising order serves the interests of those who compose it while exploiting and marginalising the minority oil-bearing communities.
3. The root of the exploitative nature of the federal system lies in its productive, appropriative and distributive systems.
4. The system of exploitation has given rise to numerous problems for oil-bearing communities, including impoverishment, land confiscation and environmental destruction and political marginalisation.
5. The Ogoni environment, which once teemed with wildlife, was the food basket of the region and the abode of Ogoni spirits and deities, has been reduced to a wasteland by an ecological war waged by Shell.
6. MOSOP aims to roll back these problems by repossessing control of Ogoniland, and attacking the roots of Ogoni dispossession.

In the oppressive order frame, the dominant portrayal of Ogoniland is as space controlled and exploited by the State and Shell in ways that utterly ignore local understanding of environment as meaningful place, abode of deities and the source of wellbeing of its inhabitants. The nature of the rule enriches places and actors beyond Ogoni at the expense of the latter. The Ogoni need to repossess control over the environment, benefit from the resources therein and overturn colonial exploitation. Saro-Wiwa (1995) employed a diagnostic frame to attribute causality by asserting that what Shell and Chevron have done to Ogoni environment and community equate with genocide.

The oppressive frame was shaped by place/location. Aware of the difference between contemporary and historical Ogoni, Saro-Wiwa recalled an era in which the Ogoni ruled themselves anticipating the day the Ogoni would repossess the autonomy their ancestors bequeathed to them. Saro-Wiwa realised that the Ogoni and Ogoniland are located in the periphery of a translocal network of relations, including states, global capital and local elites. Within that context, the Ogoni had little control over how its resources are exploited and distributed, and over who benefits from it. Moreover, Ogoniland and its inhabitants could scarcely escape the externalities of oil production. The Ogoni captured its relative powerlessness by frames of "slavery and possible extinction", "domestic colonialism", and "ecological disaster" (Saro-Wiwa 1995: 148). According to Saro-Wiwa (1995), the Ogoni are engaged in a twin war; "35-year-old ecological war", and "a political war of tyranny, oppression and greed". Although nobody is maimed or killed, the war remains devastating in its

impacts. The casualties of the twin war include men, women, children, flora, fauna, the air and water and the land (Saro-Wiwa 1995).

The strategy to internationalise the anti-State and Shell struggle meant drawing distant people and places as allies in the struggle. Keck and Sikkink (1999) argue that transnational advocacy networks are not new in history, and their aim is to bring about a change in the behaviour of centers of authority. Yet Okonta (2008) and Bob (2005) argue that the Ogoni decision to internationalise the struggle was a risky strategy. Moreover, Okonta sees the appeal to the international community as a strategy informed by fear of the possible backlash from the Nigerian state. While both positions are plausible they ignore another equally plausible explanation. MOSOP was embroiled in conflict with Shell, a multinational oil company. The core of the stake of conflict was oil, a global commodity and the source of global capitalist accumulation (Obi 1999). In effect, MOSOP was involved in conflictual relations with a translocal network of actors, including states, global capitalists, and shareholders located in far-flung places, including London, The Hague and other major cities of the world (Saro-Wiwa 1995: 188-189). Advocacy networks have been critical in value-laden debates, particularly where domestic groups are denied channels of redress (Keck and Sikkink (1999). By initiating a translocal network, the Ogoni could take advantage of the benefits of advocacy networks to make its voice heard in global cities, appeal to the conscience of global allies of Shell and the state who otherwise subscribe to human rights, environment and social justice norms, and counter the non-problematique discourses of Shell and the state at the global arena.

Ogoni choices were equally informed by place. Activists utilised local religious beliefs, polluted places and frames to achieve mass mobilisation of Ogoni. Without such a groundswell of self-mobilisation, MOSOP would have had little basis to mobilise international support. Bob (2005) may have been right in his claims that Ogoni strategy was informed by the need for external support. But he fails to give analytical attention to how place shaped such strategies. To mobilise resources, activists may have made decisions based on rational calculation of costs and benefits. Costs and benefits make meaning within particular places. Ben Naanen, former Secretary-General of MOSOP, asserts that MOSOP was made offers of military assistance by insurgent groups outside Nigeria. MOSOP declined the offers because it was aware that given the flat and accessible terrain of Ogoniland, the Nigerian military could over-run it in days (Naanen, personal interview 2008). In effect, a violent strategy was seen as costly within the context of the flat terrain of Ogoni. Moreover, the physical reality of places of pollution in Ogoniland shaped MOSOP's largely peaceful strategy. For instance, by being able to point at places devastated by oil spills, terrain criss-crossed by pipelines and spots of unending gas flares, activists believed they could jolt the conscience of the world, secure international support and mobilise global pressure on the state and Shell to alter their behaviour.

Quayson (1998) draws attention to a spatial dimension of the Ogoni conflict (location) when he argues that the violence that led to the death of four prominent Ogoni chiefs in controversial circumstances should not be blamed on Saro-Wiwa. He asserts that the social context within which the violence occurred was over-determined by the ethos of Nigerian politics:

The Babangida years had seen the perfection of a system of political patronage popularly known as "settlement". Because of this, any one who put themselves up as representatives of their people ran the danger of being accused of being "settled" if they ever showed signs of compromise. And so when the traditional leaders argued that the aggressive politics of Saro-Wiwa would alienate them from political authorities and that they should take a more measured stance, it was easy for them to fall under suspicion of having been bought off. The atmosphere of vilification did not require a Ken Saro-Wiwa as such.

To the scholar, political values operating across the nation space shaped the Ogoni resort to violence against those they perceived as having compromised their struggle.

Locale and prognosis

The dominant macro-explanations of Ogoni conflict emphasises grievances arising from the expropriation of Ogoni oil resources by the central government. While the Ogoni bore the externalities of oil exploitation, they benefitted little from it. However, the experience of exploitation and marginalisation did not automatically motivate participation in the protest movement. Activist leaders deployed a spatial frame, which are frames that underlined the ancient connection between the Ogoni and Ogoniland. Thus, decision to join the protest was spatial in content because it was rooted in cultural understanding of the link between people and place. Locale or everyday social relations shaped Ogoni frames, including the *Miideekor* (landlord's rights) frame. The Ogoni has a five-day week. Deekor is an Ogoni word, which refers to one day in the five-day week. Traditionally the palm wine-tapper may keep the palm wine produced in four out of the five days. However, Carolyn Nagbo emphasises that the remaining day's production belongs to the landowner (Nagbo 2008, personal interview). The one-day-a-week proceeds due the landowner is *miideekor*, which symbolises the relationship between the owner of a palm field and the palm wine-tapper. During the mobilisation of the Ogoni, an ordinary Ogoni woman, Rhoda Komdu Nwinaalee, employed the concept of *miideekor* from the Ogoni cultural repertoire (Alonale-Laka 2002). One can distil elements of the *miideekor* frame from informants' articulation of grievances and activists' publications (compiled by author):

1. The oil resources in Ogoni belong to the Ogoni.
2. It is only right that as the property owner, Ogoni receives a fair share of the resources.
3. However, the State and Shell who are tenants on Ogoni land conspire to deny the Ogoni their due.

4. At the same time, Shell pollutes and confiscates Ogoni land without compensation, and with impunity.
5. This situation is thievery, exploitative and unjust.
6. What the Ogoni demand is a fair share or *miideekor*, not everything.

Applying this cultural frame, the Ogoni defined themselves as owners of Ogoniland and the oil beneath it, casting the State and Shell as the tenants on the land (Saro-Wiwa 1995). What they expected from the latter is their *miideekor* or fair share as landowner. In the cognitive frame, Damgbor Moses (2008, personal interview) argues, *miideekor* is a widely shared word in the vocabulary of the Ogoni people. The frame served to construe the State and Shell as thieves, exploiters and oppressors who deny the Ogoni what belongs to them (Saro-Wiwa 1992).

Ogoni locale or context of daily existence was structured by religious systems and beliefs. The existing religious worldview shaped activists' beliefs and action. Religious belief shaped Saro-Wiwa's decision to sacrifice his resources and life for the struggle. He heard the Voice of Ogoni spirit, a culturally rooted being (MOSOP 2004). The Ogoni expected the arrival of a mythical being, *Wiayor*, who would liberate them from bondage. Saro-Wiwa was largely seen as the *Wiayor* (Kpone-Tonwe 2008, personal interview). Ogoni beliefs in the involvement and sanction of their ancestors and deities fired participants' emotions and commitment to the struggle. Kpalap (2008, personal interview) explains that the Ogoni believed that their ancestors not only supported but also led the struggle. "To be honest with you, every Ogoni believes there is a spiritual touch to everything. The belief in ancestral leadership is a culture of Ogoni". This explains why the Ogoni view anyone or anything, no matter how highly placed, who betray the cause of the struggle with anger and suspicion (Kpalap 2008). Activists' frames articulating Ogoni grievances were, thus, shaped by religious beliefs in the involvement of God and Ogoni deities. Biblical frames which defined the Ogoni condition as unjust and evil and equated it to the condition of Israel in bondage in Egypt were utilised (Saro-Wiwa 1995).

Dominant explanations allude to various material and provincial bases of Ogoni strategies. Reno (2002) cites Saro-Wiwa's personal ambition; Bob (2005) emphasises Saro-Wiwa's risky tendency; Okonta (2008: 178) focuses on the shaping role of personal, institutional and historical factors on activists' strategies. He accuses Saro-Wiwa of hiding "unpalatable truth" and eliding over the historical tension between Eleme and other Ogoni clans. Okonta is concerned with how the "nationality" principle shaped the strategies Saro-Wiwa and other MOSOP leaders chose as they struggled to make MOSOP more effective (Okonta 2008: 196-197). Saro-Wiwa dreamed of a mass organisation and therefore pursued the idea of turning an elitist movement into a mass movement that would speak for all Ogoni (Okonta 2008:194). He claims that the Ogoni national march of 4th January 1993 was Saro-Wiwa's response to waning interest in MOSOP and rising interest in national politics among

powerful elites. By definition, however, social movement engage in public protests (Timothy Doyle 2008). Moreover, through protests activists signal to authorities that the former is "Worthy, United, Numerous, and Committed" (Charles Tilly, 1998).

The impact of the otherworldly on MOSOP strategy has been given scant attention in the literature. That may be the result of the failure to appreciate that gods and spirits co-exist with humans and that being human means being with gods (Chakrabathy 2000). Ogoni activists frequently allude to the role of the gods, ancestors and spirits in their mobilisation. Thus, they emphasise how existing religious belief systems shaped Ogoni strategies (Agbonifo 2009). Saro-Wiwa (1995) provides a religious frame to explain why he initiated the struggle. He claimed the Voice of Ogoni spirit mandated him to liberate the Ogoni and similar people elsewhere. The appeal to spiritual commissioning served as an incentive to the Ogoni who thus believed they would succeed. Similarly, place-specific cultural antecedents shaped grassroots mobilisation strategy. For instance, the idea to make MOSOP an inclusive organisation was championed and culturally legitimated by a committee of Ogoni experts. The committee, formed during the leadership of Leton, revived the idea that historically the Ogoni organised themselves along the lines of the *Yaa* tradition (Kpone-Tonwe 2003). The *Yaa* tradition was all-inclusive and it was the secret of Ogoni autonomy and prosperity in the past (Kpone-Tonwe 2003). Saro-Wiwa successfully applied the principles and methods used by Ogoni secret societies to mobilise his people (Kpone-Tonwe 2002). MOSOP was shaped along the traditional lines of Ogoni youth organisation (personal interview with Kpone-Tonwe 2008) and was similar to the *Yaa* tradition in terms of its grassroots basis and the relationship between Ogoni youths and MOSOP elders (Kpone-Tonwe 2003).

MOSOP took advantage of the everyday routine of the Ogoni, particularly in the mobilisation of Churches in Ogoni. Most Ogoni people had converted to Christianity even if they retain awe for Ogoni deities (Maier). The Churches helped to define the problems confronting the Ogoni as similar to the situation of Israel in Egyptian bondage. Beyond that, they pushed the frame that the Christian God was interested in delivering the Ogoni from bondage just as he delivered the Israelites. The Christians brought this Biblical perspective to bear in their own reality. Thus, MOSOP activists bore their tribulations with equanimity, drawing parallels between such experiences and that of Israel (Saro-Wiwa 1995: 214). Also, they looked to Saro-Wiwa as a replica of the Biblical Moses who led Israel out of Egypt. MOSOP tapped into the everyday religious routine by incorporating the Churches in the movement, holding night vigils, fasting, and services where supplications were made to God for deliverance.

Sense of place and rationale for action

To the Ogoni, rivers and streams do not only provide water for human use or fish and sea food for human enjoyment and survival; 'they are sacred and are bound up intricately with the life of the community, of the entire Ogoni nation' (Kpone-Tonwe and Salmons 2001: 276). As such, Ogoni jealously guarded the integrity of their territory, maintaining with ferocity the independence of their society and honour of their environment against external violation. In that regard, the Ogoni instituted a cultural taboo against intermarriage with neighbours, except the Ibibio. They evolved the *Yaa* tradition; a system of inclusive social organisation that ensured the Ogoni maintained its independence against its more numerous neighbours (Kpone-Tonwe 2003). The land as the material embodiment of the Ogoni lies at the root of Ogoni identity, 'community memory' of their past, present and future, Ogoni prosperity and guidelines for negotiating the world (Livesey 2001: 73).

However after 32 years of oil exploitation, during which Ogoni oil provided the State some US\$30 billion, Ogoniland had become "a land which is, in every sense of the term, an ecological disaster. This is not acceptable" (Saro-Wiwa 1995: 74). Oil development brought Ogoni nothing except a blighted countryside, a land devoid of wildlife, full of carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons, polluted streams, creeks and rivers. As a result, the Ogoni self-sufficiency in food production became a thing of the past. The decimation engendered by oil exploitation elicits Saro-Wiwa's nostalgic dirge for his beloved homeland: "Where are the antelopes, the squirrels, the sacred tortoises, the snails, the lions and tigers which roamed this land?" (Saro-Wiwa 1992: 83). In other words, the ghosts, real and imputed, that constitute the distinctiveness of Ogoniland, and which fostered a sense of attachment or elicited emotions of beauty and joy, was under assault. He contrasts the present with the past:

Growing up in Bori in 1947 (the year the Ogoni won the right to have their own Native Authority from British colonial government), I was privileged to see the Ogoni administering themselves and doing for themselves all those things which would not be done for them while they were administered as a part of other Native Authorities... Ogoni was a blessed land at the time. The fertile alluvial soil of the plain provided a rich harvest of yam, cassava, and vegetable. The pure streams and seas brimmed with fish and other sea food. We lacked for nothing... And I felt proud to be Ogoni. (MOSOP 2004: 35)

The negative balance sheet informs the Ogoni charge:

Shell has waged an ecological war in Ogoni since 1958. An ecological war is highly lethal, the more so as it is unconventional. It is omniscidal in its effect. Human life, flora, fauna, the air, fall at its feet, and finally, the land itself dies. This is violence at its height (MOSOP 2004: 3).

To reverse the possibility of "extinction" and mobilise action against the State and Shell, MOSOP deployed an environmental frame, which resonated with all Ogoni. In the frame, Ogoniland, rivers and forests are not merely resources but co-extensive with community. The environment is the abode of Ogoni ancestors and deities. The decimation of the environment imperils the spiritual basis of Ogoni. Saro-Wiwa employed moral incentive to motivate action against the depredation of Shell even if it meant death (Saro-Wiwa 1989: 256). There is no better way for man to die than facing fear itself in defence of "the ashes of his

fathers" and "temple of his gods". These are powerful evocative phrases, which refer to Ogoni environment and underline the deep connection between Ogoni deities, ancestors, the living and the land.

Apart from providing rationale for collective action, movement activists also frame a vocabulary of motive, which persuades recruits and potential recruits that collective action will produce the desired changes. Traditionally, Ogoni believed that the individual on whom the spirit of revolution rested would succeed in his endeavour. The people believed Saro-Wiwa was the chosen one, and eagerly embraced him (Kpone-Tonwe 2008).

I told the house that what was happening in Ogoniland was a revolution; that in history, a revolution is caused by a "spirit force", which rests on a single individual; that in the case of Ogoni, that individual was Ken Saro-Wiwa; that in a traditional setting, based on my study of Ogoni tradition, what the elders used to do, was to find out the individual on whom this "spirit force" rests. (Kpone-Tonwe 2003: 63)

Customarily, Ogoni people rally around the individual on whom the spirit of revolution rests because he is seen as divinely chosen. Thus, the people eagerly embraced Saro-Wiwa as one sent by God, and whatever he said was taken as the divine will (Kpone-Tonwe, 2008 personal interview). The legitimacy conferred on Saro-Wiwa by the association drawn between his leadership and the supra-human domain was a compelling reason for mass recruitment into the mobilisation (Agbonifo 2003). It contrasts with Okonta's (2008: 205) revisionist explanation – that Ogoni youth and women rewarded Saro-Wiwa with loyalty because he brought them to the mainstream of MOSOP.

A sense of place or belief in the presence of ghosts, deities and gods shaped the strategy of the Ogoni who took advantage of extant spiritual resources by mobilising supra-human actors in their environment. On 4 January 1993, Ogoni elders poured libation and asked Ogoni ancestors to support and bless their struggle. A day earlier, Ogoni people prayed at the grave site of Birabi. Kpalap (2008, personal interview) explains that the Ogoni believe that their ancestors not only supported but also led the struggle. MOSOP held mobilising services in churches, which actively participated in the movement and framed the Ogoni situation as evil and unjust (Saro-Wiwa 1995; Obi 1999). Women embarked on regular fasting and prayer for the deliverance of Ogoni (Kpalap 2006). The involvement of the Church created a powerfully charged spiritual atmosphere where the syncretistic could flourish. In such a context, the Christian God, Ogoni spirit and other deities came together for the Ogoni cause, creating a cocktail of beliefs in the miraculous (Agbonifo 2003). Maier (2000: 105) highlights the power of Ogoni cultural belief system when he argues that although a large number of the Ogoni converted to Christianity, the Ogoni retain awe for the Ogoni spirit. Ogoni leaders employed symbols and texts from different belief systems to mobilise members, thereby providing religious approval for political rebellion against unjust systems (Tschirgi 2007).

Critics may raise questions regarding the determining role of ideational factors given that there is no single Ogoni identity; internal squabbles are rife among Ogoni villages despite attempt to create an Ogoni identity (Isumonah 2004).

Moreover, Isumonah stresses, for identifiable reasons, there was no pan-Ogoni ethnic consciousness, and even though there was an Ogoni Central Union (OCU) in 1945, all Ogoni did not identify with it. Emphasis on the internal divisions within MOSOP is less important than the question of how Ogoni activists built at a point in time one of the most formidable movements in the history of Nigeria despite subsisting differences. It is trite knowledge in social movement scholarship that a social movement is not a unity; rather it is composed of varying and sometimes conflicting elements. Thus, Derrida (1994) argues "You cannot object to a unity simply because it is the result of a process of unification . . . [T]here are no natural unities, only more or less stable processes of unification, some of them solidly established over a long period of time". The absence of pan-Ogoni identity did not imply absence of a worthy platform for a shared worldview, generalised trust and unity of purpose.

To many MOSOP activists, Saro-Wiwa was a reputable leader. The genesis of Saro-Wiwa's reputation dates back to the days immediately after the Nigerian civil war when almost single-handedly he saw to the rehabilitation of displaced Ogoni people (Saro-Wiwa 1995). Later, as Commissioner of Education in Rivers State, he awarded scholarships to Ogoni students, many of whom had become adults by the 1990s (Innocent Barikor 2007). Damgbor Moses (personal interview 2008) asserts:

I believed so much in Saro-Wiwa because he was not poor; he had everything a man needed. Yet, he was not satisfied with the condition of Ogoni people. At a meeting in his home in Bane village one day, we were sweating and people began to fan themselves. I drew his attention to the drama to underline the need for electric fans and a generating set. Ken replied by saying we should all suffer together. He would not instal fans in his house because the people around had no fans. He said a private generator would not supply power to those around him, meanwhile they would suffer the noise pollution occasioned by it. I was touched and vowed I would never leave him and that I would follow the movement to the end.

Informants show that they willingly attended mobilisation meetings when they heard Saro-Wiwa was addressing such meetings. Trust in Saro-Wiwa is distilled by Chief Deemua (personal interview 2008) thus:

Ken was a dynamic leader. We found his "yes" to be yes, and his "no" to be no. We saw he is not a cheater. We have Ogoni sons and daughters in government, but it does not reflect on Ogoni. They do not do anything for the good of Ogoni. Saro-Wiwa was not like that. Wherever he went, he had the betterment of his people in mind.

Here, we find the emergence of trust in the context of mobilization, but which has deep roots in activists' perception of the personality of Saro-Wiwa.

The reputation of historical figures matters too. The new social movement theory emphasises the centrality of cultural elements (Johnston 2002). However, social movement interests in culture, notably the studies of frames, have revolved around its interpretive and instrumental uses (Jansen 2007). There has been less focus on how the past – specifically its historical figures – constitute a critical symbolic resource for groups in contention (Jansen 2007: 958). Saro-Wiwa (1995) appropriated Nigerian nationalist leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, to legitimate his argument for equality of all ethnic

nationalities that composed the country. Moreover, the Ogoni made use of the historical figure, Birabi, a foremost Ogoni nationalist leader. As an ancestor, Ogoni believed he would provide spiritual assistance to the new struggle in continuation of his earthly efforts. In a syncretic context that involved elements of the Christian and traditional religions, activists transformed the dead into a transcendent actor when invocative prayers were made at Birabi's graveyard a day before the 4th January protest (Saro-Wiwa 1995). The use of the historical figure concentrated the belief that spiritual forces were on the side of the Ogoni against the State and Shell. During the visit to Birabi's grave, the passion of everyone present rose and the environment became so charged everyone could feel it; it was as if the Ogoni protest was happening that day (Kpalap 2008, personal interview).

Conclusion

A comprehensive understanding of resource-related conflicts in the Niger Delta need to move beyond the singular focus on macrostructural conditions that constitute the backdrop to the conflicts, and pay deserved attention to the mediatory role of place. While impoverishment, environmental pollution and political marginalisation are commonplace, conflict is not. There is, therefore, the need to understand why conflict emerges where it does. A consideration of the general conditions in their imbrications with place-specific characteristics is called for. The intersection of the general and specific creates the conditions for emergence of the conflicts.

Much of the data presented here are available in the existing literature. However, they have hardly been considered within the framework of place, which asserts that conflict is inherently geographical, that is, structured by the core elements of place; locale, location and sense of place. Thus, the article argues that insights from the resource availability and society-rooted literature provide the precipitating backdrop to the conflict. Place-specific factors, notably the history of struggle and environmental disaster, sense of attachment to place, existing religious worldviews and place-informed framing combined with broad societal conditions, precipitating the emergence of the Ogoni movement.

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