Triangulation, Emotional Reactivity, and Violence in the Niger Delta

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Abstract
The Niger Delta conflict, for many years, was blamed on myriad forces, including greed, economic exploitation, pollution and ecological damage, resource appropriation and distribution disputes, ethno-religious antagonisms, poverty, unemployment, large-scale infrastructural deficits, corruption, militarization of oil producing communities and election processes, sociopolitical marginalization, cultism, and weapons proliferation. While all of these issues are important, they are not nearly as important as the deliberate roles played by high-level social, economic, and political interests who activated violence as a means to secure economic advantage from the delta’s oil industry. This study shines the light on this small, exclusive, and very powerful group whose actions triggered off the violence and yet are at the center of efforts to institute peace including the current disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program. I argue that unless the contributions of these powerful interests are carefully teased out and the structures they have built to advantage themselves from the conflict are dismantled, peace will remain elusive in the Niger Delta.

Keywords
Niger Delta, armed conflict, oil, triangulation

Introduction
Insurgent violence in Nigeria’s Niger Delta region, the heart of Nigeria’s oil production activities, has yet to abate, two decades after hostilities first began and despite numerous attempts by the state and other stakeholders to stop the violence. Although scholars differ on the cause(s) of the violence, there is strong unanimity that the violence has created complex emergencies, including loss of lives, high levels of disease, poverty, socioeconomic disparity, rising gender inequality, educational decline, loss of revenue and income, internal displacement, and many less tangible costs. The adverse consequences of the violence makes the Niger Delta region a “zone of violence” (Keane, 1996), which describes a gradual but precipitous slide into what the U.S. State Department calls “political chaos.” The potential long-term effects of the violence calls into question mechanisms put in place to end the violence and entrench long-lasting peace, including disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR).

Beyond DDR, however, the intractable nature of the violence raises more important questions about the potential causes of the violence. Perhaps, the violence is intractable only because its etiology has not been properly understood or conceptualized by those involved in the conflict. If this is a correct assumption, the application of proven methods like DDR might fail to achieve the results stakeholders expect or desire. As Lund (2009) argues, misapplied intervention, even if timely, may be worse than taking no action at all. The question of cause, therefore, should be central to the design and implementation of any intervention. Unfortunately, this was not the case in the Niger Delta DDR experiment, which spectacularly missed the opportunity to interrogate the host of potential cause(s) of the violence. This failure is in itself, a near catastrophe that potentially sets the stage for a dramatic resurgence of violence.

Without doubt, the Niger Delta violence is complex and multifactorial with myriad potential and interacting risk factors that have been exhaustively examined locally and internationally (see Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Collier, Hoeffler, & Rohner, 2006; Newsom, 2011; Okonta & Douglas, 2003; Watts, 2008; Watts, Okonta, & Kemedi, 2004). Of these, the contribution of powerbrokers who use the authority and instrumentality of the state to sponsor the violence is the least reported and researched; yet, it may be the most important risk factor for insurgency in the Niger Delta. Since 1999, these powerbrokers, sensitive to expanding economic opportunities that privileges those who occupy senior positions in

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government, have targeted peasant youths to play crucial roles in their violent internal struggles to control legitimate and illegitimate opportunities that open from oil extraction. Certainly, a dynamic occurs when peasant youths are drawn into such hostile third-party resource disputes, including feeling “caught in the middle” or “trapped in the center” (Buehler & Welsh, 2009) of feuding powerbrokers. The investigation of this dynamic is crucial especially because youths with chronic socioeconomic deficiencies (illiterate, poor, unemployed, unattached, etc.) are highly vulnerable to triangulation (Okonofua, 2011). At-risk youths are also at higher risk for connecting emotionally and materially to triangulation, to be psychologically impaired by that interaction, and to be violent (Okonofua, 2011). All these suggest that the risk for insurgency is elevated in the presence of comorbid social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental forces (Okonofua, 2011).

The purpose of this study is to contribute hitherto unexamined insights in four ways that enhance understanding of the Niger Delta conflict. First, it facilitates the examination of the specialized effects of triangulation on the involvement of youths in armed conflict, controlling for comorbidity with other important markers of armed conflict. Second, it theorizes the process of triangulation, which neutralizes normative constraints and activates violent impulses against the state and other stakeholders. Third, it uses a generative process mechanism—militants’ emotional reactivity to stakeholders’ resource disputes—to identify youths at greater risk for triangulation and to explain why other youths exposed to the same or similar conditions never become violent. Finally, the study suggests a connection between triangulation, emotional reactivity, and insurgency in which youths’ emotional reactivity to stakeholders’ resource appropriation disputes would partially mediate the association between triangulation and insurgency. This indirect pathway is tempered by socioeconomic conditions such as poverty, unemployment, family, attachment, and education. I draw from triangulation theory in family studies to inform this analysis.

**Theorizing the Etiology of the Niger Delta Conflict**

The five decades of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta has created billions of dollars in revenue for the Nigerian government and billions of dollars in profit for multinational oil corporations (Okonta & Douglas, 2003; Watts, 2008; Watts et al., 2004). It has also created billions of dollars in private wealth held by current and former officials of the Nigerian government who use their positions in government to fleece the state of oil revenue (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2004, 2005; Okonofua, 2011; Okonta & Douglas, 2003; Osaghae, Ikelegbe, Olarinnmoye, & Okhomina, 2007; Watts et al., 2004). Today, due to the violence, several billionaires have been created from the ranks of formerly unemployed young people triangulated into militancy by influential powerbrokers (Newsom, 2011; Okonofua, 2011). At the same time that these important stakeholders are profiting from the Niger Delta oil complex, host communities and peoples continue to suffer the cumulative negative impact of oil production, including pollution, unemployment, poverty, and disease. In a sense, the Niger Delta oil wealth has helped to create two opposing societies, a society of the super-rich and a society of the super-poor. The tensions that have followed this socio-economic bifurcation are such that we can speak of one society smashing into the other (see Massey, 2007) or of escalating “economic violence” (Newsom, 2011). In fact, many theories have been proposed that attempt to explain the Niger Delta conflict as resulting from economic, class, and ethnic antagonisms that are rooted in petrol-capitalism, a mode of economic production that perpetuates the economic dominance of oil. Its system of relations connects production to appropriation but alienate peasants from the appropriation process, ultimately condensing community and individual rights into oil profits and subjugating not just peasant economies, but also their bodies, cultures, and systems of idea.

The first set of theories associates violence with environmental security. Since the 1990s, interest in the environment as a source of political conflict and as the cold war security problematic (Watts et al., 2004) has risen sharply. Interest in these issues peaked after the publication of Tad Homer-Dixon’s (1999) *Environment, Scarcity and Violence*, Robert Kaplan’s (2000) *The Coming Anarchy*, and Michael Klare’s (2001) *Resource Wars*. These works and many others that focus on the environment raise questions concerning environmental degradation, rehabilitation, and conservation. For example, Kaplan in *The Coming Anarchy* argued that “ecodemographic pressures” have created numerous emergencies within African states, including poverty and malnourishment, and these challenges have forced many African societies into acts of violence. In essence, the violence in the Niger Delta results from environmental changes, including oil-induced pollution that have immense negative effects on the local economy. Naanem (1995), Gbadebesin (1997), Eteng (1996, 1997), Okonta and Douglas (2003), and Brown (2006) hold similar positions. By this analysis, Niger Delta militants use violence not only to force environmental rehabilitation and conservation but also as a means of economic subsistence.

A second set of theories focuses on the tension between resources, politics, and civil conflict. Khan (1994), Karl (1997), Coronil (1997), Collier (2000), Watts et al. (2004), and Robinson (2006) examine polities dominated by oil revenue and the mechanisms through which rent-seeking produce what Watts et al. call “petrol regimes.” These petrol regimes sustain both the system of northern hegemony “within a competitive multi-ethnic polity” and a glutinous or “parasitic ruling elite” dependent on oil revenue. Similarly, Collier (2000), Keen (2005), and Reno (2005a) argue that
resource conflicts in Africa do not result from grievances but from greed. The lootability of natural resource wealth, such as oil, engenders intense antagonisms among competing sociopolitical forces where the objective of warfare is not to win, but to create conditions and opportunities to plunder natural resource wealth without the requirement of accountability. Some of these conditions include corruption, the privatization of the state, and the personalization of power, which weaken state institutions permitting warlords to preside over fractious territories. In this sense, grievances are merely ideological constructs by greedy stakeholder’s to legitimate natural resource predation.

A third set of theories links ethnicity to armed conflict (Ijomah, 1988; Mamdani, 2000; Sagay, 2008; Watts et al., 2004). Ijomah (1988), for example, argue that the manner of British colonial statecraft engendered bitter ethnic divisions and conflict that persist to this day. According to him the British forced together “inconsistent cognitive elements” without creating “clear behavioral assertions” that would have minimized ethno-based tensions and forged nationhood. Mamdani (2000) shows how cultural indegeneity became the basis of ethnicity and the specific ways in which ethnicity is invented, reinvented, and mobilized within the arena of oil politics, often provoking violence. Watts et al. (2004) examine local forms of community and ethnic mobilization that are vital aspects of the social relations of oil extraction. How these relations are forged, negotiated, and reconfigured, and their association with locally specific forms of capitalist development has important implications for the violence.

Finally, a set of theories associates oil neither with incumbent politics nor predation proneness but with the link between violent intrastate conflicts and state/corporate enclave politics. Watts et al. (2004) note the striking “lack of local level dynamics . . . and the total invisibility of both transnational oil companies (which typically work in joint ventures with the state) and with the intersection of local politics and petrol-capitalism” (p. 5). Instead of pursuing oil extraction as a source of predation or state military power, they focus on how petrol-capitalism produces particular kinds of enclave economies and governable spaces that are characterized by instability and armed violence.

Although all of these theories are important and help put the conflict in context, they fail to explain how and why despite nearly five decades of resistance to oil production, the conflict in the Niger Delta did not become violent until the last decade. They also fail to explain why violence appears to be tied to the electoral cycle and the overrepresentation of Ijaw youths in militancy especially at a time when their ethnic stock had gained significant national political traction. The answers to these questions suggest very little (if any) support for the grievance model that is predicated on environmental, economic, and political injustice. In fact, inequality (unequal access to economic and social opportunities) does not seem to matter and injustice (pollution, political repression, ethnic and religious divisions, resource control, etc.) appears to have a waning influence in instigating insurgency in the region. Instead of translating to a higher risk of conflict, grievance theories produce what Collier calls “high-pitched discourse or narrative of grievance” and not much else. Finally, the article suggests that instead of focusing single-mindedly, nondialectically on grievance, focus should spread out to examine the contributions of powerbrokers who occupy command positions within the political state and Niger Delta communities and use their influential positions to stoke embers of violence for political and economic gain. It is the zero-sum competition for political and economic access by these gatekeepers that led to the recruitment of peasant youths (today being described as “militants,” “freedom fighters,” and “insurgents”) into insurgent armies. A theory of triangulation illuminates the activities of these important powerbrokers and the mechanisms by which they imbed hapless youths in their struggles to benefit clandestinely from the Niger Delta oil complex.

**Theorizing Triangulation**

Triangulation is a concept popular in family studies and “occurs when two people in a family bring in a third party to dissolve stress, anxiety or tension that exists between them” (Charles, 2001, p. 281). One particular form of triangulation in family studies that directly informs this study occurs when parents involve offspring in their marital conflict. Indicators of a child’s triangulation into parents’ marital conflict includes parents’ attempt to form alliance with the child against the other parent and the child becoming the focus of parents’ attention as a way to deflect attention from themselves (Bell, Bell, & Nakata, 2001; Buehler & Welsh, 2009). The triangulation of children into parents’ marital disputes has negative effects on children. Amato and Afifi (2006) and Jacobvitz, Hazen, Curran, and Hitchens (2004) argue that triangulation violates established boundaries because of its potential to confuse and distress youths when they negotiate between parents at the same time that they manage conflicting loyalties. Bradford et al. (2004) and Miller, Anderson, and Keala (2004) suggest that over time, a child’s involvement in this type of conflict predisposes him or her to intense psychological distress especially anxiety, depression, and withdrawal. Buehler and Welsh (2009) argue that not only are triangulated youths at risk for “internalizing problems,” they are also at risk for “externalizing problems” such as lying, cheating, and disobedience at school.

This idea of triangulation—the involvement of amenable third parties in feuds involving more powerful stakeholders—informs this study. I investigate the etiology of the violence in terms of power relations, which may permit an understanding of the specific character of the violence and its properties. For example, why are insurgents nested within political structures created and controlled by political heavyweights, who also appear to gain most from the violence?
Why is it that in almost all cases, the leaders of militant organizations continue to maintain close ties to serving officials of government, some of whom have direct responsibility for maintaining peace in the region? Also, why is it that in almost all cases, a spike in militant activism is associated with the election cycle? All of these questions suggest that militancy is a hybrid problem produced by influential powerbrokers proximate to the political state as a specific capability to gain advantage over political rivals in their struggle to control the resources of the Niger Delta region. In this context, insurgents are victims of the cyclical political struggle for economic dominance among rival powerbrokers. Just as a child is brought into marital conflict by its parents, so also youths or “militants” are brought into the political struggles of feuding powerbrokers, which becomes the basis for accessing the oil assets of the Niger Delta. These youths, initially ignorant of the true nature of the disputes and/or the artifices of these powerbrokers, take ownership under the increasingly nebulous term militant. The implication of this is that the Niger Delta violence is not necessarily a reasoned, calculated struggle to reverse decades of injustice and underdevelopment, but a specific design by forces that historically have promoted inequity and underdevelopment, to extend their influence.

The involvement of youths in these power disputes is a complex process, which begins when they are recruited from the creeks and are used as paid political supporters at political events. Gradually, over the course of the political cycle, they are transformed into “political thugs” and armed with dangerous weapons such as knives and machetes to pull down structures and posters of rival politicians or derail their movement. When these actions are resisted by rival powerbrokers, they again undergo a transformation, this time as heavily armed “security forces” or “political guards” to protect the assets and persons of their principals. Eventually, when the election cycle ends, these guards transform again into militants seeking soft targets and easy prey (including kidnapping for ransom, crude oil theft, and vandalization), often as the behest of powerbrokers who now occupy positions in government or by vanquished opponents who seek to unseat them. The end result is the complete militarization of the Niger Delta where unemployment becomes the basis for recruiting into the burgeoning militancy enterprise that offers hope to some of the 30 million poor, unemployed, and mostly uneducated youths from the region.

The involvement of youths in these high-stake power disputes are not without attendant social and psychological effects. As the interaction between youths and powerbrokers accelerate, they connect emotionally and materially to the disputes and the resulting violence. This connection or “emotional reactivity” potentially upsets their moral balance, which gets its signification from the collective conscience. This creates confusion and myriad other negative emotions in these youths. As Bowen (1978) emphasizes, “emotional reactivity” affects youths negatively. Davies and Cummings (1994) define emotional reactivity as “chronic elevation of arousal and dysregulation of children’s emotions and behavior, fostering adjustment problems” (p. 390). The theory of emotional security (see Davies & Cummings, 2006) suggests that repeated exposure to marital conflict increases children’s emotional reactivity as well as children’s internalizing problems, including anxiety, fear, and depression. Similarly, the cognitive-contextual framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990) suggests that emotional reactivity is part of an appraisal process through which adolescents come to see marital disputes as self-relevant, negative, and potentially threatening (Buehler & Welsh, 2009). Indicators for emotional reactivity include prolonged feelings of distress, sadness, fear, anger, vigilance, and preoccupation with parent’s marital relationship (Buehler & Welsh, 2009). According to Buehler and Welsh (2009) both emotional security theory (EST) and the cognitive-contextual framework supports Bowen’s theoretical postulation that children’s emotional reactivity is potentially an important generative mechanism through which children process their triangulation into parents’ marital disputes.

The intensity of the interaction between powerbrokers and youths takes huge tolls on youths many of whom begin to exhibit complex behavioral and mental health problems that extend beyond the arena of struggle. Unburdened from the cohesive force of the collective conscience, youths begin to roam free of all systems of restraint and symbolism. This unburdening distorts the sense of community that youths have and creates tension between them and society that may not be easily resolved. However, the emotional sensitivity of insurgents to triangulation may be buffered by the presence of protective moderators. A protective moderator is a neutralizing force that deflects or neutralizes the force of triangulation and grounds youths to the collective moral conscience. In this study, I examine only one protective moderator: youths’ attachment to others (family, friends, and neighbors). A protective moderator in family studies is defined as “individual attributes and cohesive family relationships that reduce the deleterious effects of negative relational risk processes on young adults psychosocial maladjustment” (Buehler & Welsh, 2009, p. 169). In this article, a protective moderator refers to individual attributes and cultural elements such as family, nondeviant friends, education, and gainful employment that grounds the individual to the collective conscience and mitigates the potentially negative effects of triangulation on youths. Where these moderators are present and strong, peasant youths are able to resist pressures to become violent. Where these moderators are weak or absent, the ability of youths to resist the powerful force of triangulation is critically weakened. I hypothesize that the presence of dense support networks would partially buffer the negative consequences of triangulation on Niger Delta youths.
Method

Data

These data are part of a larger study on the impact of DDR on the Niger Delta conflict. The study began in early 2011 and includes qualitative and quantitative data collected over 8 months. The data presented here are drawn from in-depth, face-to-face, semistructured interviews with 10 former and still active leaders of militant groups and 10 secondary data (interviews with individuals directly associated with the conflict or the DDR intervention) obtained from local and international newspapers and journals. Participants were selected from three states in the Niger Delta: Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers. Study participants are either former or still active fighters or are directly involved in the management of the conflict. Seventy percent of participants are ethnic Ijaw, 70% are males, and about 80% represent low to middle socioeconomic status. This reflects the fact that militant activities mainly occur in Ijawland, where most of the nation’s oil wells are located. Also, an overwhelming majority of participants in militant movements are ethnic Ijaws. The 10 in-depth interviews were audio-recorded, and interaction was preceded by signed written informed consent from each participant. The interviews were conducted in English, lasted on average 1 hr and 20 min, and took place at the preferred location of respondents, often their homes. The remaining 10 secondary interviews were already fully transcribed and published in national dailies and journals.

Analytic Strategy

Data analysis followed a theoretical approach to understand the data as part of a process of induction. Many prior works imposed ideas about cause without allowing these causes to emerge from the ground up. Participants in this study presented interpretive frameworks of the etiology of the conflict. Taken in isolation of other factors, each identified cause represents an independent trajectory that by itself tells the story of the Niger Delta violence especially its transformation from protest movements to guerrilla armies. Yet, each narrative represents only a partial narrative. The narrative presented here represents one such narrative among many possible narratives. However, its merit as well as predictive power lies in the fact that the Niger Delta conflict remains intractable despite the deployment of palliatives based on prior conceptualization of cause. Past interventions failed to end the violence because they ignored the most critical element of the violence—powerbrokers proximate to the political state that simultaneously instigate the violence and control the mechanisms and structures to bring about peace. Thus, the predictive power of a theory of triangulation lies in the fact that since 2003, the influence of these powerbrokers has remained strong even though the composition, identity, and character of insurgents have changed, immensely.

Data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously according to qualitative methods recommended by LaRossa (2005). Bogdan and Biklen (1982) define qualitative data analysis as “working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 145). This definition as well as LaRossa’s (2005) step-by-step approach guided the inductive analysis of the qualitative data. Inductive data analysis implies that the critical themes of the research emerge from the data (Patton, 1990). As Hoepfl (1997) suggests, analysis requires some creativity on my part, as the challenge is to “place the raw data into logical, meaningful categories; to examine them in a holistic fashion; and to find a way to communicate this information to others” (p. 55). I was alert to the respondents’ story and established several discursive frames based on their perspectives. This mapping, which results from my “complete immersion” in their stories, ensured that I became part of (not outside of) the research process. This grounded theory approach is a five-stage process beginning with open coding and ending with the crafting of the final narrative (see LaRossa, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Triangulating and Transforming Peasants to Militants

This study finds that the main cause of the Niger Delta violence is triangulation. Triangulation, more than any other factor, explains the rapid transformation of the Niger Delta conflict from a protest movement to a violent insurgency. This finding represents a break from past studies, which mostly blamed the violence on other factors, including pollution, poverty, insurgent greed, unemployment, corruption, cultism, ethnicity, resource deprivation, resource control, proliferation of weapons, and federalism (see Asuni, 2009; Collier, 2007; Collier et al., 2006; Malone & Nitzschke, 2005; Okonta & Douglas, 2003; Watts et al., 2004; Whyte, Alber, & Van Der Geest, 2008). The finding of association between these factors and the violence is not surprising. Historically, violence has been thought to result from grievances especially sociopolitical marginalization, conflict over identity, lack of economic opportunities, and ethnicity. These factors, however, are only marginally applicable to the Niger Delta situation, which suggests that political competition for access to the Niger Delta oil wells is the main motivator of the violence. It is this factor that explains the rapid transformation of the conflict from a placard-carrying, leaf-waving, popular effort for environmental and economic justice to a guerrilla offensive featuring the use of AK-47s and other sophisticated military hardware. Respondents suggested a strong connection between politics and militancy. For example, JS observed that,
The political gladiators in the country with different aims and objectives coerced jobless youths into the conflict by opiumizing them.

By opium is meant the use of nonpermanent, nonlife changing, nonconsequential palliatives to encourage the participation of youths in stakeholder conflict. Another respondent suggested that “youths were recruited for political thuggery and armed by politicians . . . and retired military officers who know the sweetness of crude oil.” This means that the conflict in the Niger Delta is motivated by the desire of influential powerbrokers who occupy the peace infrastructure to profit from the clandestine oil trade. According to one respondent,

Most of the so-called militant generals are glorified errand boys to powerful people in Nigeria who use them to steal crude.

Insurgents, therefore, are victims of the brutal struggle for economic relevance by elements proximate to the political state, where political power provides entry into the clandestine crude oil enterprise. According to a former militant commander,

Let me tell you, for many years we fought someone else’s war. They gave us the guns and the bombs. They mark the targets and tell us when to attack . . . they write the messages that we send to the press to threaten or explain an attack. It is their war that we were fighting . . . All those years; we fought their war thinking that we were fighting for ourselves and our children.

This suggests the existence of an informal set of rules that regulates how insurgency is conducted in the Niger Delta. Following Kenneth Doka’s (1989) conceptualization of disenfranchised grief, these “militancy rules” have the normative force of mores and specify who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom insurgency takes place. They are guidelines for conducting insurgency that emerge out of interactions between militants and powerbrokers and suggest that militants are who they are because of their interactions with powerbrokers, both the actual interactions and cultural expectations regarding these interactions. Cultural expectations, insofar as the Niger Delta is concerned, is the sum of expectations regarding the protection of the cultural, social, economic, and political assets of powerful gatekeepers. These informal rules not just specify who, when, and where insurgency takes place but also supply the motivation and logic for conducting insurgency and for neutralizing society’s efforts to stop it. When internalized, militancy rules define the expectations of powerbrokers as well as their expectations regarding how others would react to militancy. In this sense, these rules become part of the cultural complex within which insurgency takes place. This is important especially because militancy rules are mores, which means that they constitute the normative way for militants to think and act and leaves very little leeway, if any, for militants if they are to continue spiritually, cognitively, socially, and physically with the group. The idea of militancy rules, therefore, should shift emphasis from triangulation as a potential cause of violence, to triangulation as the integral component of the Niger Delta violence and around which all other elements revolve.

The data suggest that the Niger Delta violence was motivated by an intersection of politics and economics. In terms of politics, I find that the desire by politicians to occupy sensitive political positions necessitated the conscription of peasant youths into local militias and the distribution of sophisticated military hardware including assault weapons to youths for the purpose of intimidating political opponents and/or forcefully changing the outcomes of electoral events. Respondents believe that it was this practice that created the first wave of insurgents, initially known as “political thugs” and “area boys.” According to one former commander,

The politicians created militancy from their desire to win elections at any cost. It started in Rivers state where Governor Odili used both Ateke Tom and Asari Dokubo to attack and intimidate political opponents.

During the elections, which were staggered by political office, violence was visited not only on political rivals but also on voters. The Transition Monitoring Group (2003), a national coalition of civil society groups that monitored the elections, described the elections as “characterized by monumental fraud.” It referred to clear incidents of “violence, intimidation, harassment, ballot stealing and stuffing and vote buying” in the Niger Delta. Also, the Environmental Rights Action (ERA; 2003), which monitored the elections in the Niger Delta observed that,

In parts of Rivers and Bayelsa state observed by our monitors, the elections could be characterized as low intensity armed struggle. Weapons and firearms of various types and sophistication were freely used.

Ateke Tom, one of the most visible leaders of the insurgency corroborated the link between insurgency and politics. According to him,

Of course, everyone knows that I worked for the PDP in the first and second coming of the party in Rivers State. There is no one who does not know that I was used to get votes for the party . . . When the election was tough for the party and the areas which I conquered for them were many. I conquered many Kalabari towns, Ogu-bolo, Okrika, Nkoro, Opobo and all those places. They know. The government knows . . . In fact, since I started working with them (government), I have not had peace; it is one problem after the other.

Note his use of the word conquer which means “to defeat or subdue by force, especially by force of arms” or “to
overcome or surmount by physical, mental, or moral force” (The Free Dictionary, 2013).

Despite the strong evidence linking politics to militancy, there is stronger indication that power was sought not as an end but as a means to an end. Power was desired only because it guaranteed access to the vast oil wealth of the Niger Delta, which can be looted by persons who occupy command positions within the political state. It is the desire to control legitimate and illegitimate economic opportunities within the oil complex without the responsibility of accountability that motivated politicians to actively recruit and equip the peasant youths today being described as militants or fighters. According to a former fighter,

Let no one be deceived, it is all about oil. If there is a separation between political power and oil, a lot of Niger Delta politicians will not contest elections and there will be no militancy. Militancy is the child of greedy and corrupt politicians who will stop at nothing to make money for themselves, their families, and their friends. Today, we may be described as militants and tomorrow as political thugs.

This indicates that insurgency in the Niger Delta results from the economic interests of political elites who successfully manipulate sociopolitical discontent and local hardship to force huge economic payouts from the state and oil corporations. While the desire to profit clandestinely from the Niger Delta oil industry is the chemical power of the insurgency, the majority of insurgents gained nothing but empty promises from the masterminds of the violence who continue to occupy prestigious seats in government that are gateways to back-door lucrative oil deals. Ironically, the same people who engineered the violence for profit are loudest in publicly denouncing the violence and espousing peace. For example, one respondent, ER, observed that,

The sad news is that those who fuel the violence are the same people publicly clamoring for peace. They are like rats with long mouths. They bite you, and blow cool air on the injury so that you will not feel the pain. And then, they bite you again . . . The militants are completely at the mercy of these powerful people who play them like koso and smile to the banks whenever there is an attack.

**Emotional Reactivity**

The question is how does triangulation link to the violence? In family studies, Bowen (1978) developed the concept of emotional reactivity to explain how triangulation affects youths. For Bowen, emotional reactivity moderates the interaction between triangulation and violence. My data support this theory. I find that the density of interaction between powerbrokers and youths increases the motivation to participate in violence. As youths continue to invest emotionally in the contests between rival powerbrokers, they begin to manifest signs of internalizing problems, including emotional dissociation from existing cultural systems and crippling emotional detachment from collective symbols of affection, attachment, and solidarity. Moreover, as the cycle is repeated each election cycle without corresponding improvement in the well-being of fighters, they become increasingly disillusioned, confused, frustrated, and angry, and this activates violence outside of political and economic spaces. For example, one respondent observed that the experience of violence was very challenging for militants.

According to him,

It will be difficult to recover from the mental and physical injuries we suffered during the period. We slept in bushes on sand with mosquito all over. We ate whatever we could find. Most times we just go into town, get drinks and hemp and hijack any girl we can find. That’s the only way to cope.

This suggests that emotional reactivity to triangulation dissipates the force of the collective conscience by increasing the sensitivity of youths to more hedonistic impulses such as cravings for drugs, alcohol, sex, and money. Eventually, the profit nexus dissipates personal resistance to collective marginalization and erodes the identity of collective deprivation that historically has been the self-conception of the Niger Deltan. When this happens, a sense of fatalism develops that when active, diminishes all previous conceptions of the self at the same time that it creates a new being—the militant.

The data suggest that not all youths are affected in the same way or to the same extent by triangulation. Youths more at risk are those who lack effective social support systems or networks and skills capable of deflecting or neutralizing all or some of the harmful effects of triangulation. These would include youths who have no parents, youths who have extremely poor parents, and uneducated and unemployed youths desperate for some type of subsistence. As KD (an ex-commander) put it,

It is easy for some youths to be sucked into the whole militancy game. Many of these boys fend for themselves. They have no education . . . They have no rich father or mother or uncle to look up to. Many of them have no parents. The ones who have parents have very poor parents. And in this day and age, money talks and bullshit walks. Their parents cannot influence them because these boys are the breadwinners . . . Through militancy they provide for their parents.

This suggests that within Niger Delta society, certain young people may be more vulnerable to the processes of violence than others. More importantly, I find that the processes of armed violence in these societies are reinforced by structural violence. By structural violence, I mean the series of destructive social and economic policies of the state/
petrol-capital alliance that have completely devastated the physical and sociocultural environment and traumatized local populations. AG’s account illustrates this point:

Our community has been completely devastated by oil production. Our men used to be great farmers and fishermen. But today, they sit outside dilapidated homes wondering where they missed the boat. Look at our young women. All they do now is run after men. They are not interested in marriage . . . Since you have been here, have you seen light or water flowing from taps? Can you honestly breathe this air for 1 week and not get sick? Did you not experience difficulties coming here because of bad roads? Do you see the presence of government or oil companies here? Why will our boys not take to armed robbery or militancy? Why?

AG appears to be saying that Niger Delta peasants suffer so much structural violence that youths begin to reproduce it (in various forms) as survival strategy.

**Ijaw Youths and Militancy**

The data suggest that the overrepresentation of Ijaw youths in militancy is not coincidental; rather, it results from a deliberate effort by influential powerbrokers to frame their predatory character as a combination of socioeconomic and environmental activism and Ijaw ethnic nationalism. This dynamic potentially has muddled the theoretical analysis of the origin of the violence, especially the tendency to associate it with the “Kaiama declaration” of December 11, 1998. For example, Governor D. S. P. Alamieyeseigha of Bayelsa, one of the “godfathers” who respondents suggest gave vocal and material support to the insurgency argues that the “Kaiama declaration of 1998 would continue to serve as an inspiration to the Ijaws in their struggle for the control of their resources” (Oyadongha, 2000). Powerbrokers like Alamieyeseigha are skilled at mobilizing and channeling Ijaw angst over decades of exploitation for their own economic gain. According to one respondent,

Go all over the Niger Delta and you will find that the Ijaws are the ones really involved in militancy. The leaders are using them and lying to them that this is their own time to benefit from the national cake. What cake? What cake? The only ones eating any cake are the Ijaw national leaders . . . Go to Itesekiri land and see whether you will find any Itsekiri person involved in militancy. Don’t they produce oil? Are they not also exposed to the problems of oil production? Is unemployment also not high among their youths? Let the truth be told.

Although Ijaws constitute about 50% of the Niger Delta population, they account for roughly 70% of the militant population. Respondents suggest that this is so because Ijaw youths are susceptible to the antics of their leaders who use their numerical strength within the Niger Delta, their vast natural resource wealth, and their collective experience of deprivation and state repression as specific mechanisms to win political and economic concessions from federal and state governments. The injection of many local Ijaw politicians into national politics and their increasing visibility and faux Ijaw activism endears these leaders to youths. It is not coincidental, therefore, that the rise in militant activism parallels the rise in Ijaw ethnic nationalism, which itself parallels the entry of prominent Ijaws into national politics. All of these events weave delicately together around the loom of powerful elements whose true purpose is to prey on Niger Delta resource wealth. Thus, it is the sensitivity of Ijaw youths to the growing political influence of Ijaw political elite and the elite’s ability to transform this sensitivity to economic capital that explains the significant Ijaw presence in militancy.

**Broker Contradiction and the Proliferation of Militant Groups**

Triangulation works either to eviscerate existing support structures for at-risk youths or utilize the absence of such support structures. This exposes youths to intense psychological (or internalizing) problems, including anxiety, depression, and anger. At first, this advantages the powerful interests behind the conflict. Anxiety, depression, and anger are potent, destructive weapons in the hands of misguided, drugged, and armed youths. This soon changes when victimized youths begin to notice contradictions in their objective living conditions and blame these powerbrokers for creating these conditions. For example, NP observes that,

For a long time, I didn’t know what was happening. They tell us to go out for operation and give us a lot of hemp and alcohol. When we come back, we continue to drink and smoke. We believe we are fighting a just cause. But our leaders know otherwise. We see them with big big men, and then the next minute they tell us attack. After we attack, the same big men will speak grammar condemning us and our leaders tell us nothing . . . One day we rebelled against our leaders and formed our own organization to get what we want.

At this point, violence becomes inimical to the interests of the powerful stakeholders who created this cash cow. Militants begin to roam free of the manipulative restraints of powerbrokers, who also become targets. At first, powerbrokers attempted to regain control through the deployment of the coercive force of the state. When this failed and considering the enormity of the associated loses for themselves, the state, and oil corporations, they hastily constituted the Amnesty Program as a last ditch effort to retain control over errant allies, protect their economic interests within the delta’s oil complex, and profit immensely from the ongoing DDR intervention. In this sense, the DDR intervention and the violence originate from the same source: powerful sociopolitical forces determined to profit from the oil wealth of the Niger Delta.
Discussion

Researchers have long recognized the importance of powerful people in instigating violence, especially in developing countries. Collier (2000), Collier and Hoefler (2004), Keen (2005), and Reno (2005) suggest that resource conflicts in Africa originate not from grievances but from greed. However, in conceptualizing greed (or predation), they focus on the activities of warlords and other individuals (including merchants, arms suppliers, etc.) who directly participate in civil wars and not on individuals who occupy the peace infrastructure and use their positions within such structures to provoke violence for material gain. Moreover, the notion of militancy rules, which supplies not only the “how-to” of insurgency but also its logics, mandates a different type of analysis, one that shifts focus away from warlords (and other marginal figures) to the influential powerbrokers themselves. I suggest that triangulation is not just one of many factors that produced the Niger Delta violence; it is the very milieu within which the violence takes place and it is by means of the militancy rules that different elements within this enterprise get their signification.

The goal of militancy rules is to create structural and cultural conditions for embedding youths into the operational networks of predatory gatekeepers with little opportunities for dissent or resistance. Structurally, militancy rules help to create dense and absorbing social ties, active attachments to and involvement with other militants and their organizations, ritual occasions such as “egbesu” worship that help to cement group identity and strengthen individual feelings of vitality and self-worth, and small and nebulous group formations that enable militant groups to be doubly effective against a static, heavy Nigerian Army (see Brint, 2001). Researchers have examined these four structural conditions and their impact on group social behavior. Dense social ties are associated with conformity to the dominant morality (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Homans, 1950) where militancy rules is the sum total of the morality of triangulators. Moreover, dense and absorbing social ties are also strongly associated with recruitment into collective action networks (Brint, 2001; Galacziewicz, 1984; Gould, 1995; Hodgkinson, 1996). In essence, the “rules” specify the type of youths to be absorbed into militancy (youths who are personally and socially vulnerable) as well as the type and nature of interactions that must take place between militants, powerbrokers, and members of society. As a result of these regulated (and at times supervised) interactions, militants become strongly imbedded into their groups and develop very strong affinity for and trust in other group members. The literature suggests that active attachments to and involvement in institutions (such as churches, schools, voluntary organizations, deviant groups, etc.) have profound effect on trust in others (Almond & Verba, 1963; Brint, 2001; Putnam, 1993). Similarly, participation in militancy provides specific training in the skills and temperament needed to succeed as militants in the same way that participation in community institutions helps people develop civic skills (see Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) and better rapport with authorities (see Lareau, 1987). Finally, this type of bonding is reinforced by participation in ritual occasions where militant groups in the Niger Delta (especially among the Ijaw) claim extraordinary powers and protection from “egbesu,” the Ijaw war goddess. For example, a top militant commander observed that,

Egbesu is the symbol of the goddess in Ijaw land and most parts of the Niger Delta. And Egbesu strictly believes in war. That is our god of war. Egbesu rises up during the war season. Egbesu believes in war. Egbesu is not scared of anybody no matter who you are. We can go in little number and confront crowd that is when you see the power of Egbesu. We believe in Egbesu badly.

Studies show that participation in ritual occasions in the presence of other group members is associated with strengthened sense of identification with group symbols and group identity (see Brint, 2001; Collins, 1988; Mumford, 1970).

Culturally, militancy rules creates impetus for group identification by specifying ways in which the individual shares physical characteristics, expressive style, way of life, or historical experiences with other members of the group. Studies suggest association between social identification and feelings of safety and comfort (Rodriguez, 1982). Social identifications are also associated with a wide range of behavioral commonalities (Bernstein, 1975), recreational and consumption choices (Bourdieu, 1984), and greater or lesser social opportunities (Brint, 2001; Erickson, 1975; Hall, 1983). In this sense, the Niger Delta militant is bonded to other militants by the force of their common experiences first as political thugs, then, as militants and historically by their common experiences of deprivation. Finally, the “rules” invoke a collective pattern of belief—belief in the mission, organization, leadership, goals, outcomes, and benefits. Sociologically, belief is thought to originate from interaction and common interest. However, as Brint (2001) suggests, beliefs in idea systems, moral orders, social groups, and institutions can influence outlooks and behavior independent of interests and interaction. For example, belief dissociated from interests resulting from social location is a strong factor in commitment to political (McKenzie & Silver, 1968) and organizational (Willis, 1979) authorities. For Niger Delta militants, belief in insurgency results from a combination of artifice and economic inducements, rather than from shared experience of injustice, deprivation, and marginalization.

The idea of militancy rules also throws into relief the issue of choice for insurgents. Although it can be argued that Niger Delta youths have agency and can choose (most choose) not to be militant, choices are always made within a social and cultural setting. Youths can choose to resist militancy, but at what costs? If we revisit Bourdieu’s (1980) idea of trajectory, we find that there are few possibilities for Niger Delta militants to escape from the widening space of
violence. Thus, for militants, choice is defined within parameters created by militancy rules, which when internalized becomes part of the self-identity of the militant. The militant can no more ignore these guidelines (or the activities and behaviors they impose) than he can ignore who he has become. Indeed, the peasant youth, especially if he is personally and socially vulnerable (i.e., uneducated, poor, unemployed, lack family support, etc.), is systematically programmed (through the manipulation of contextual factors that alienates him from his community) to inculcate the cultural milieu of militancy such that he comes to have no existence outside of militancy. Although, he may loathe what he does, his powerlessness, his viciousness, and his violently slavish existence, yet, he is compelled by the rules to behave or “maintain” and to hide his true feelings from everyone including himself. According to one former commander, It does not matter what you want. You have to maintain. You may not like what you do or how you do it, but as far as it is an order, you must do it. And for your own sake, when you carry out the order, you must maintain. It does not matter whether you do not enjoy violence. Just maintain.

Insurgents in the Niger Delta were put in conditions of great confusion and distress as they tried to balance conflicting loyalties to feuding powerbrokers. Fighters (and former fighters) in this study reported feeling trapped, confused, distressed, and increasingly ambivalent about their roles as lethal weapons in the armory of feuding powerbrokers. Because triangulation is a system process that conveys not just the necessity for insurgency but also the means and the logics for insurgency, peasant youths, or their transformation, militants are nothing but pawns being played by powerful chess masters. As is characteristic with pawns, the Niger Delta militant is completely expendable because he can be quickly replaced by any of the more than 20 million idle youths in the delta, whose idleness results directly from the machinations of the same gatekeepers whose entrenched class interests produced the Niger Delta condition in the first place.

Certain facts support this thesis. With the convocation of the fourth republic in 1999 and the transfer of power to civilians, the dynamics of protest in the Niger Delta changed dramatically from peaceful protests to militancy. Almost immediately, starting with Asari Dokubo’s Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and Ateke Tom’s Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV), militant groups sprang up all over the delta and especially in such oil powerhouse states like Rivers, Bayelsa, and Delta. The emergence of these groups at a time of landmark political change is not coincidental; they were created as part of the architecture of the new politics, which would depend largely on thugs and gangsters to fill political offices. The new politics would also require a fourth estate of influence peddlers and powerbrokers called “godfathers” to direct field operations and preside over lucrative legitimate and illegitimate oil contracts. In Rivers and Bayelsa states where militancy was borne, the state governors would emerge as “godfathers” and would enlist, equip, and instigate peasant youths to help return favored candidates in federal, state, and local elections through violence. Many unemployed youths were conscripted into political groups as foot soldiers and equipped to do incalculable damage to opposition politicians and parties (Ebienfa, 2012; Ebiri, 2002; ERA, 2003; HRW, 2003, 2004, 2005; Ofiebor, 2004a, 2004b) as prelude to accessing the oil wealth of the region.

Despite the application of DDR since 2009, observers note that the conflict dynamics have not altered significantly. According to Newsom (2011), the “incentives for violence in the region have not changed fundamentally” and there is growing “talk of a large arms build-up like those seen in 2003 and 2007 elections” (p. 2). For Newsom, the primary incentive for violence in the Niger Delta is “crude oil theft” and the mechanism for achieving this is electoral violence. This suggests that powerful stakeholders created militancy not as a means to redress the prevailing negative conditions of oil exploitation and distribution, but as a specific capability to enable rogue politicians prey on the oil assets of the delta. Militants and their organizations continue to exist as artifacts in the structure of economic violence created by powerbrokers to advantage a small network of political elite. Newsom was especially sensitive to this when he observed that Too often, outsiders to the Niger Delta focus on cyclical manifestations of area conflict rather than deeper trends. Since the return of democracy in 1999, the basic cycle of violence in the delta has become loosely tied to the electoral cycle with the worst outbreaks starting in the months after polls close. (p. 3)

Continuing, he observed that Around both the 2003 and 2007 Nigerian elections, the mechanics of violence moved through several discrete phases. Political actors recruited and armed youths in the months before elections. On Election Day, youths used violence and other intimidation to influence the results. Some youths emerge as militants within six to twelve months of polls, and thereafter, new militant violence began to affect oil production, capturing fresh political attention for the delta. A ceasefire or amnesty was declared, typically holding for six months to eighteen months. Afterwards, political attention drifted, and patronage and corruption eroded short-term gains until elections loomed and the cycle reset itself. (Newsom, 2011, p. 3)

The effect of triangulation is dependent on the sensitivity or reactivity of youths to triangulation. This study suggests that some youths are more vulnerable to triangulation than others. At-risk youths lack positive support structures (such as family, jobs, and education) that might absorb some of the
impact of triangulation. Davies and Cummings (1994) define emotional reactivity as “chronic elevation of arousal and dysregulation of children’s emotions and behavior, fostering adjustment problems” (p. 390). With Niger Delta insurgents, emotional reactivity is indicated in their increased use and abuse of substances including alcohol and marijuana, hostility toward social objects including innocent civilians, increasing withdrawal from community and attachment to militant groups, and increasing participation in random acts of violence including sexual abuse, piracy, and kidnapping. All of these are outcomes of their increased exposure to the hostile resource disputes of powerful political forces. The cyclical exposure to third-party conflicts not only increases insurgent’s emotional reactivity but also generates intense confusion, anxiety, and adjustment problems for them. This thesis is consistent with the literature documenting the effect of triangulation on children exposed to marital conflict (see Buchler & Welsh, 2009; Davies & Cummings, 2006; Grych & Fincham, 1990).

At first, the involvement of youths in resource disputes advantages powerful elements within the political state. But as targets increase without corresponding improvement in the welfare of insurgents, they become increasingly disoriented, frustrated, and agitated. Their actions from that moment become dysfunctional and escalate the conflict beyond what is needed to extract huge political and economic concessions and payouts. In some instances, the youths turned against their political sponsors as was the case when Asari Dokubo turned against his erstwhile benefactor, Governor Odili. According to Dokubo,

“My relationship with Rivers State Governor Peter Odili was initially cordial. When my father was sick, Odili gave me money. Odili also bought me a car for me. So they were all shocked when I said the election they claimed to have won was no election . . . The NDPVF was formed after the 2003 elections when the government threatened that they wanted me dead because of my views. I had offered to be a witness at Muhammadu Buhari’s election tribunal hearing. They were shocked that as close as I was to Odili, I would be willing to give evidence against his party’s conduct of the 2003 election in Rivers State. After the election, I fled Port Harcourt and went to the creeks. That signaled the beginning of the armed struggle. The government started attacking my community at Buguma and Ojiam. They sent Ateke Tom to attack the community.

This dysfunction results partly from the inability of triangulated youths to balance the conflicting signals that they receive from their more powerful sponsors and partly from new emergent needs to sublimate violence to their own needs. It is the later that explains the proliferation of armed groups in the Niger Delta, each desperate for benefits that accrue from invoking violence. The manipulative insertion of peasant youths into stakeholder feuds creates conditions for egoism to foster such that the more connected they are to the struggle among stakeholders for political and economic relevance, the more dissatisfied they become with their own economic conditions and the more determined they are to change their economic conditions using any means available. In this sense, militancy did not begin as armed resistance to the excesses of petrol-capital or grievance; instead, militancy is a specific capability designed and deployed in furtherance of the ongoing petrol-capital assault on peaceful Niger Delta communities through allies strategically located within the political state.

Conclusion

The conflict process model of triangulation that I propose in this article does not reject the notion that armed conflicts result from unresolved grievances. Instead, I suggest that triangulation is a much stronger predictor of the violence than any other factor. Triangulation explains how the objective conditions of peasants are manipulated by the same actors who created these objective conditions in the first place. Through a convoluted scheme that sets youth against himself, the hapless peasant is reinvented partly as a criminal or saboteur using violence to profit from the clandestine oil trade, and partly as a hero or martyr determined to resist the bludgeoning of petrol-capital, which has eviscerated the “community” as he knows it. I suggest that triangulation is a powerful metonymic device for economic violence processed through the artful deployment of sensitizing logics that sucks in youths, especially those with personal and social vulnerabilities. Thus, triangulation concatenates the logics of petrol-capitalism, chronic leadership deficits, political corruption and greed, and chronic population-wide economic deficits, and transforms these to violence.

Triangulators through the development and rigid implementation of a set of informal rules usurp and corrode the normal functioning of formal institutions in the Niger Delta including the family, school, and church, in transmitting values to youths. The goal in this practice is to reproduce greed and violence as the core elements of the petrol-capital relations of production. Petrol-capitalism aims to make all but a tiny elite poor, miserable, and expendable. The expendability of the Niger Delta militant is based on the logic of superfluity, wherein his existence is meaningful only to the extent that it can be deployed to the economic advantage of power-brokers. This means that militancy is both a process and a capability that enables gatekeepers seize political power, which when secured links the Niger Delta oil wells to bank accounts in Asia, Europe, and America.

One of the immediate effects of triangulation is the development of identity crisis for youths who are sucked into the militancy project. The identity crisis, following Erik Erikson (1987) has interlocking psychological and sociological aspects in the militant’s conception of self and produces a fatalism that is socially, psychologically, economically, spiritually, and physically devastating. As process, militancy is a sort of iatrogenesis, which is caused by the deliberate
activities of individuals saddled with the responsibility of providing good governance, security, and peace. Instead of providing good governance through the elimination of unfairness, these powerbrokers or “triangulators” are active in limiting freedom and justice and in corrupting and incapacitating individuals, especially youths. Through the use of militancy rules, triangulation reinforces a morbid ruling class that encourages otherwise peaceful communities to take up arms in defense of its members. The essence of youth is consequently diminished by paralyzing nonviolent responses to poverty, unemployment, pollution, and injustice. In this way, militancy is legitimated as the only rational response to injustice and myriad socioeconomic pressures while corrupt and greedy powerbrokers are reinvented as benevolent leaders or saviors and godfathers.

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