

Overview | Crisis and Violence in the Niger Delta as a Creative Resource in Painting

Walter Frederick Oghenerobor Okpogor

For my MFA thesis, I decided to focus on “crisis and *violence in the Niger Delta as a creative resource in painting*. I did so” because I wanted to use art to agitate the Nigerian government and the international community into thinking about the living conditions of people in the Niger Delta and the degradation of the region. Historically, the Niger Delta region has included nine oil- and gas-producing, coastal, southern states in Nigeria. It is the third largest wetland in the world after the Mississippi and the Pantanal regions. Before the discovery of oil in Nigeria in 1956 (before independence), agriculture was the country’s main source of food and foreign exchange. However, the rising oil prices in the year 1973, 1974 and 1979 that caused the Nigerian government to completely divert attention to oil, as an attractive revenue stream that resulted in a large transfer of wealth in Nigeria, at the expense of agriculture. In my research, I focus on the two states that have the majority of the oil wells, and, by extension, the most crises and violence: Delta and Bayelsa. I am a Deltan, although I was raised in the northern region of the country, and I enjoyed the freedom and flexibility of life that people in the North exercise. Soon I relocated to the Niger Delta, I thought the same would have been the elements of truth of my region but found the opposite. I grew up hearing of crisis in the Niger Delta and how, despite the region’s riches, it was under-developed. This was not a reputation that inspired pride. Currently, the Delta has widespread environmental degradation, as well as hazardous health and climatic condition of both the government and the oil companies. But, they do not listen to the cries of the Niger Delta people. Instead, they exploit the region’s resources to enrich their pockets.

My MFA thesis report traces the origins of crisis and violence in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta. In doing so, I explore how crisis in the region has metamorphosed and interrogate its impact on the people, environment, culture, and possibly future of the Niger Delta. I assess the roles of the government, oil

companies, and militant groups in such crisis in order to classify the principle actors and perpetrators. Furthermore, after synthesizing this gathered data, I produced paintings from it. I use these paintings to explore the instrumentality of art in illuminating the menace that crisis and violence have had on people in the Niger Delta. Each painting is embedded with a well-orchestrated analysis of crisis in the Niger Delta. I have divided the project into six chapters. In: the first, I outline context for the problem, and in the second, I review related literatures. In, the third, I describe my pre-studio research and studio experiences, and in the fourth, I examine crisis and violence in the Niger Delta as a creative resource in painting. The fifth chapter includes the main painting project and sketches, and the sixth provides the project's conclusion.

Currently, I am a PhD student and am writing my dissertation, *Shrine as Overlap of the Arts*, and creating artworks about shrines. In the dissertation, I focus on how shrines overlap with the arts in the Niger Delta, and I highlight how shrine activities influence all aspects of contemporary arts. Below, however, I include images from my MFA thesis.



The Execution of Ogoni Four, Oil on Canvas, Two Panels of 2fts x 3fts (3fts x 4fts), 2014

The Execution of Ogoni Four depicts a land flowing with milk and honey and enriched with oil and other mineral resources. The rising sun is circled with blood, and the state's small space of peace is represented in blue. Abstract human figures represent the four Ogoni Chiefs who were killed in what is commonly known as the "Black Ogoni Day." On that day in 1993, these four men were sent to negotiate with the federal Government teams of Nigeria and the oil exploratory companies within the Niger Delta Region on behalf of peace for the Ogoni people but were executed by military personnel dispatched by the government following the negotiations.



The Ogoni Nine, Oil on Canvas, Two Panels of 2fts x 3fts (3fts x 4fts), 2014

The Ogoni Nine depicts the 1995 execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni activists who were accused of trumped-up, treasonable felony charges and then hanged. The government carried out the activists' sentence after accusing them of killing the four Ogoni chiefs who sought peace for their community (as represented in the previous painting). Nigerian authorities did this to stop Saro-Wiwa from challenging the exploitation of Ogoniland by international oil-giant Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). Such a challenge would have sabotaged the government's and SPDC's massive oil revenue receipts. Through this painting, I represent the worst moment in the history of not just the Ogoni people and the Niger Deltans but also Nigeria as a whole. On the left panel, I depict flows of bloodshed and, tears, as well as a dusty cloud. All of the subsequent killings in the Niger Delta gave birth to the next painting, *The Agony of the Niger Delta Women*.



The Agony of the Niger Delta Women, Oil on Canvas, Two Panels of 2fts x 3fts (3fts x 4fts), 2014

In *The Agony of the Niger Delta Women*, I depict the fact that women experience the most agony when crisis and violence occur in the Niger Delta and in Nigeria. In my research, I discovered that women and children are subjected to most of the abusive and violent behavior perpetrated by soldiers, militants, or insurgents. That is why a woman, painted with light blue on the left panel, carries both a child on her back and a gun at her side. She represents other women who fought for justice after government soldiers killed their husbands. On the right panel, a gun and cutlass allude to these government soldiers and militants. Overall, these paintings hint that the rich resources of the Niger Delta land, which may seem like blessings, have actually led the people in the region into abject slavery and poverty.

