Preserving the Future through the Past: Unveiling the Role of Collective Memory in Conflict-Affected Communities

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Abstract

Existing migration studies have neglected immobility and primarily focused on non-violent settings like IDP and refugee camps. However, in Africa's Sahel region, characterised by violent conflicts between nomadic Fulani herders and sedentary farmers, little is known about the factors that influence and sustain immobility among conflict-affected communities. This paper examines the immobility experiences of farmers in conflict-affected communities in Nigeria, exploring why they choose to remain in their villages despite a lack of support from security agencies against non-state actor invasions. Conducted in May 2022, the study employs reflexive thematic analysis on data from 54 participants in Benue and Nasarawa states, Nigeria. Findings underscore the role of collective memory in shaping households' attachment to ancestral land and their adoption of immobility for its preservation. By addressing neglected factors in immobility within conflict-affected communities, this research contributes to the literature, emphasising the importance of understanding collective memory and its implications for contemporary behaviours. The paper highlights the significant impact of collective memory on immobility and stresses the implications of neglecting measures that address the collective memories of aggrieved groups on the peaceful resolution of eco-violence in the Middle Belt.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Immobility, Nigeria, Eco-violence, Fulani herders, Middle Belt.

Introduction

This paper examines the influence of collective memory on the decision of communities to stay put in conflict-affected areas within the Middle Belt. It aims to answer the question: How does collective memory impact immobility in the Middle Belt? Addressing this question involves exploring the factors that contribute to and sustain immobility.

This paper addresses an existing gap in research by exploring the connection between collective memory and immobility within conflict-affected communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt. Although previous studies have elucidated the causes, implications, and persisting conflicts between nomadic Fulani herders and sedentary farmers (Ajala, 2020; Vanger and Nwosu, 2020; Ele, 2020; Sule, 2020; Olumba *et al.*, 2022; Ojo, 2023), they have overlooked the role of collective memory in influencing immobility. Moreover, most immobility research has concentrated on cross-border movements rather than internal dynamics within Nigeria, particularly those residing within conflict-affected communities. In existing mobility studies within Nigeria, the emphasis has been on exploring the experiences of individuals displaced to IDP camps, those coexisting with hostile entities such as Boko Haram, and others aligning with security apparatus to sustain their immobility in their native villages (Kamta, Schilling and Scheffran, 2020; Olojo, 2020; Agbiboa, 2021, 2022; Higazi, 2022). This paper employs the concept of collective memory to fill a significant research gap by capturing key factors influencing household immobility within Nigeria's Middle Belt region. This study addresses the dearth of information concerning community members who opt for immobility within conflict-afflicted areas without security force support, offering a comprehensive exploration of how collective memory shapes this preference.

This paper asserts that collective memory fundamentally supports claims to ancestral lands, thus influencing the decision to stay put, especially in conflict-affected communities. Additionally, it elucidates the role of collective memory in distinguishing between 'native' and 'settler' citizenship within Nigeria's socio-political landscape. This paper contributes to the literature by introducing an innovative perspective on the role of collective memory in influencing immobility in conflict-affected communities, particularly within the Nigerian

context. It underscores the influence of collective memory on immobility preference, enriching our comprehension of the migratory processes in conflict-affected communities. Moreso, the paper enhances our understanding of citizenship dynamics in Nigeria.

This paper proceeds as follows, it first provides a review of the extant literature on eco-violence and immobility in north-central Nigeria, commonly known as the Middle Belt. It then explains the data collection and analysis methods employed, followed by an introduction to the concept of collective memory, emphasising its applicability and significance in the Nigerian context. Subsequently, the paper explores the influence of collective memory on community members' immobility preferences and the implications of these findings, culminating in the conclusion.

Eco-violence and Immobility in North Central Nigeria

Recently, the conflict between nomadic Fulani herders and sedentary farmers over water and land resources, referred to as eco-violence (Olumba *et al.*, 2022), has intensified (Olumba, 2022b; Ojo, 2023).

Figure 1: Nigerian map depicting security threats within the geopolitical regions
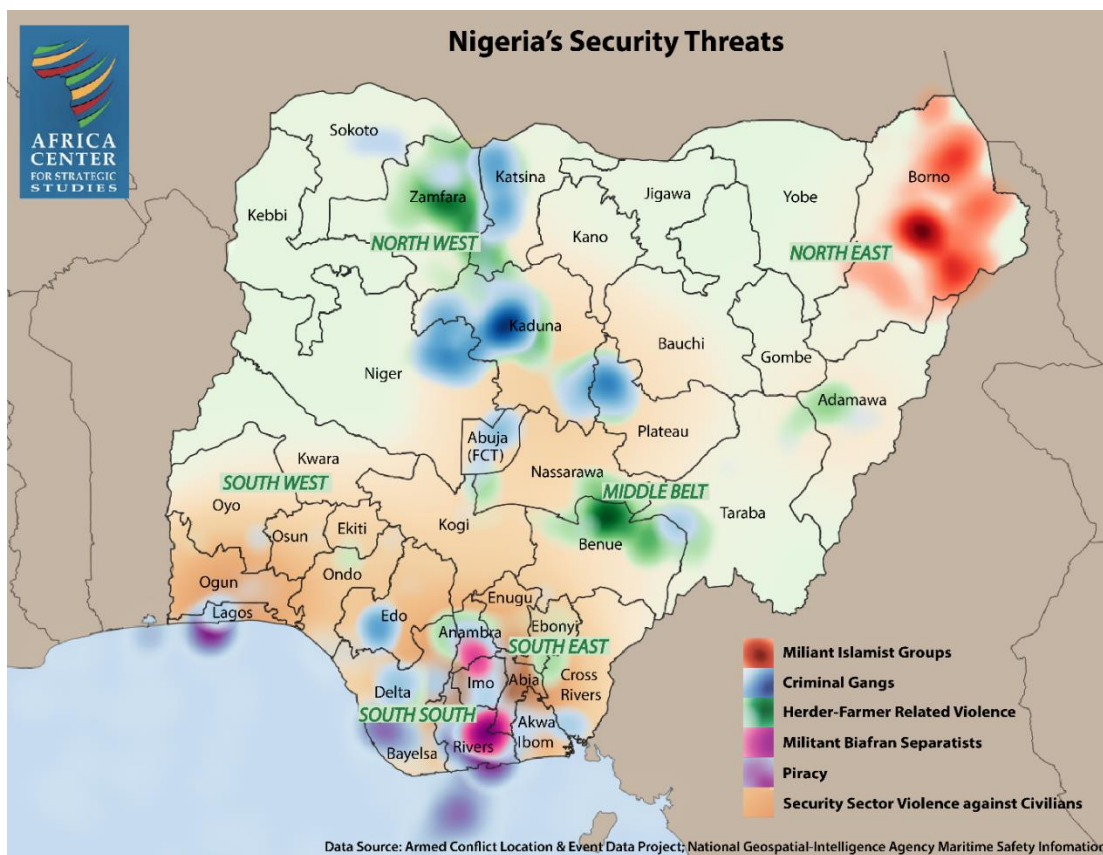
Source: (Duerksen, 2021)

Extant literature identifies many causes for these violent conflicts, including resource scarcity, migration, adverse climatic conditions, encroachment on farms, and denial of access to grazing opportunities (Kuusaana and Bukari, 2015; Olaniyan, 2015; Sule, 2021). Whereas others state that it is political failures, changes to the political opportunity structure, elite corruption, existence of ungoverned spaces and ethnoreligious discriminations (Ajala, 2020; Mbih, 2020; Ojo, 2020; Olumba, 2022b), and failure of policies are as a result of inadequate community participation in policy formulation (Ojo, 2023).

Research on immobility among Nigerians, particularly those within Nigeria, is lacking. Most studies instead focus on the experiences of Nigerians who have relocated abroad. Immobility refers to the habitual residence in a particular location over time; it can span an individual's lifetime or generations and applies to internal and international environments (Schewel, 2020, p. 329). Drawing from the literature and, in particular, the concept of 'second state of immobility', which refers to people who have succeeded in travelling to a new destination but yet are trapped in the new country (Haugen, 2012, p. 66); there are two stages of immobility as Nigerians experience it. The *first stage of immobility* refers to the type of immobility that people experience at home or within the national borders of their country. It could be immobility at the IDP camps, the host community or home (Ogbozor, 2016; Kamta, Schilling and Scheffran, 2020; Shehu and Abba, 2020; Yikwab and Tade, 2021).

Whereas the 'second state of immobility' (Haugen, 2012), could be described as the immobility experiences of people outside the borders of their country of nativity or usual place of abode, who are yet to reach their optimal destination. It could be described as the immobility within the continent of Africa or 'diaspora immobility' outside the African continent (Haugen, 2012; Ahrens, 2013; Veale and Andres, 2014; Antwi Bosiakoh, 2019; Berriane, 2020; Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020; Iranzo, 2021). In the context of crisis migration, immobility involves precarious circumstances and exposure to perilous situations (Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020; Iranzo, 2021). Crisis migration denotes the mobility or immobility of individuals influenced by substantial social, political, economic, and environmental stresses and events that threaten or impair their well-being (Martin, Weerasinghe and Taylor, 2013; McAdam, 2013; Salas-Wright *et al.*, 2021; Vos *et al.*, 2021).

This paper focuses on the *first stage of immobility*. Within the borders of Nigeria in the context of crisis migration, the literature have accounted for two types of immobility: those who negotiate to live in conflict and those who live in conflict with the support of the security forces.

The first group are some community members, despite desiring to stay, find themselves negotiating to live amid internal conflict; they conform to the rules of non-state actors controlling these communities, paying taxes to preserve their ability to stay put (de Montclos, 2020; Kamta, Schilling and Scheffran, 2020; Olojo, 2020; Higazi, 2022; Samuel, 2022), essentially buying their immobility capacities to stay put during the conflict. Immobility, or 'stay-put' capacities, refers to the strategies and strengths that individuals utilise to remain in their communities and contribute to resilience processes instead of fleeing during violent conflicts or disasters. The Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP) imposes taxation on farmers, fishermen, and herders instead of raiding them (Higazi, 2022, p. 165), allowing them to live in their communities within their contested territories.

The second group consists of individuals who employ firearms to maintain immobility. Extant research highlights communities collaborating with police and military forces to combat terrorists and bandits (Higazi, 2016; Agbiboa, 2018; Lar, 2019; Olojo, 2020). These arrangements involve joint operations between Nigerian security forces and vigilante groups such as the Yamaltu Security Committee, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), and Yan Banga, aimed at combating Boko Haram and other violent non-state actors (Lar, 2019; Olojo, 2020). These collaborations contribute to preserving immobility capacities, preventing communities from being displaced by belligerent actors. Although scholarly studies within this group are needed, the most precarious situation is faced by those who use firearms to maintain their immobility within their communities, all while enduring conflict without the support of security forces. Despite the need for scholarly studies within this group, the most critical situation is faced by those maintaining immobility in their communities using firearms, enduring conflict without security forces' support. This paper emerges from a study focused on these groups.

The colonial experiences of Africans, and the consequences of these events such events have been argued to be shaping conflicts in Africa (Davidheiser and Luna, 2008; Onwuzuruigbo, 2013; Ochonu, 2014; Maiangwa, 2017; Olumba, 2023). Others contend that ethnoreligious fears and accumulated prejudices in the Middle Belt promote the continuation of violent disputes over water and agricultural resources (Ostien, 2009; Higazi, 2016, p. 370). Since pre-colonial times, elite disputes and family narratives have consistently intensified hostilities and moulded collective memories, perpetuating eco-violence (Olumba, 2023). Despite these scholarly contributions, insufficient attention has been devoted to exploring how the portrayal of past events in the present evokes emotions that contribute to the continuation of eco-violence in the Middle Belt, except for a few studies (Ostien, 2009; Higazi, 2016; Olumba, 2023).

Thus, a more in-depth examination is necessary to understand the impact of collective memory on communities' decisions to remain in conflict-affected areas in the Middle Belt, an area that has received insufficient attention. This region is the epicentre of eco-violence in Nigeria (Olumba, 2022b), making the exploration of collective memory's effects on its people's lived experiences critical.

Data Collection among the Invisibles

The foundation of this paper lies in focus group discussions conducted across five focus groups and two mini-focus groups, engaging a total of 54 respondents in Benue and Nasarawa states, Nigeria, as well as secondary data from published peer-reviewed articles. Data collection was conducted not in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, as is common among social scientists (Bakewell, 2008, p. 442; Chatty and Marfleet, 2013, p. 8), but within conflict-affected communities, thereby providing unique and valuable insights into the phenomenon studied. Therefore, this paper also fills a knowledge gap by shedding light on the experiences of groups often overlooked in migration studies: those living outside refugee camps or internally displaced persons (IDP) camps; these communities or individuals, commonly referred to as the 'invisibles' in migration studies camps (Lubkemann, 2008, p. 456; Giordano *et al.*, 2019; Regasa and Lietaert, 2022; Xiang *et al.*, 2022), were the main focus of this paper.

While the collected data did not explicitly address collective memory, the analysis employed latent-level thematic approach data (Braun *et al.*, 2019, p. 852; Braun and Clarke, 2021; Campbell *et al.*, 2021), which allows for a profound interpretation that transcends the explicit statements of respondents and findings from secondary sources. Four focus group discussions were held in Benue State, two each among 'native' residents and displaced persons of the O community. Similarly, in Nasarawa State, one focus group discussion occurred in the IG community, which was reoccupied after a post-conflict resolution. Each session lasted an average of one hour for the main groups and approximately thirty minutes for the mini-focus groups.

Prior to each session, participants were rigorously screened following the Screening Interview and Distress Protocol (Draucker, Martsolf and Poole, 2009), approved by the Ethics Committee of the Royal Holloway, University of London. This process involved obtaining their informed consent after briefing them about the study's procedure, preventing those who would have had emotional breakdowns during the focus group from participating, and validating that the

participants were conversant in pidgin English, the chosen language for the study. Security measures were undertaken to anonymise all study locations, mitigating potential risks to the participants, except in a few instances where anonymisation was unnecessary. The thoughtful combination of primary focus group discussions and secondary data facilitated a deep understanding of collective memory and their decision to remain in the communities, despite the eco-violence in the Middle Belt.

Preserving the Future through the Past

> Many symbolic and historic locations in a city are rarely visited by its inhabitants, however they may be sought out by tourists. But a threat to destroy these places will evoke a strong reaction, even from those who have never seen, and perhaps never will see, them. The survival of these unvisited, hearsay settings conveys a sense of security and continuity. A portion of the past has been saved as being good, and this promises that the future will so save the present (Lynch, 1972, p. 40).

The quote above explains the profound connection between inhabitants or those claiming ownership of a location, the value they ascribe to it, and the vigorous reactions that could emerge from potential threats to its preservation. In other words, this statement underscores the notions of collective memory, efforts to safeguard communal heritage, individuals' strong responses to perceived risks to the security and continuity of this heritage, and the complex connection between the past, present, and future in influencing collective behaviour. The values in the quote will be the focus of the subsequent section, which explores collective memory in the Nigerian context using secondary and empirical (focus group) data.

In the literature, the nature of memory is a subject for debate since it is alternatively viewed as an individual and a communal activity, shared but profoundly private (Kearney, 2013, p. 133). Memory is neither history nor characterised by perspective of time; whilst history is defined by the analysis of archival documents and artefacts, memory is 'from within' (Verovšek, 2020, p. 210). Memory, whether individual or collective, is an unreliable source for valid historical accounts due to its susceptibility to manipulation (Nora, 1989; Noa and Yigal, 1996). Thus, access to history and memory of the past is limited (Araújo and Santos, 2009, p. 79) and neither historical truth nor spontaneous memory exists in their entirety (Araújo and Santos, 2009, p.

77). Memories are formed via the articulation of shared histories through commemorative acts (Kearney, 2013, p.133).

While, '... popular history is often a collective memory of conflicts against other groups' (Liu and Hilton, 2005, p. 550). Conflict and memory are two sides of the same coin that mutually reinforce one another; conflicts profoundly imprint the memories of both individuals and groups, whereas memory brings the past into the present, bringing with it old scars, grudges, resentments, hatreds, and emotions of revenge (Wagoner and Brescó, 2016, p. 3). Consequently, conflicts engender memories that, in turn, reinforce the cognitive re-enactment of such conflicts, thereby exacerbating and spawning additional conflicts that frequently manifest as non-normative collective actions. Narratives of insecurity, indignity, and humiliation, which constitute a significant part of history, can be passed down through families, educators, and experiences (Becker 2019, 107). Additionally, memory can function as a catalyst to reinforce individuals' combativeness (Shakkour, 2022). In this regard, the evocation of collective memory may pay tribute to the deceased and inspire the community to persevere in their struggle against adversaries (Bar-Tal, 2014). Furthermore, collective memory is leveraged for various purposes, such as the development of legal frameworks (Cohn, 2017, p. 26) and conveyed through musical compositions to increase awareness and galvanise support for the re-establishment of Biafra (Eze, 2023, pp. 41–42).

As individuals create new personal pasts, so do nations construct new collective histories (Lowenthal, 1975, p. 33) to fulfil diverse intentions, which may encompass the pursuit of peaceful Aims or the advancement of aggressive interests and collective actions (Kelman, 1999; Bar-Tal, 2003; Misztal, 2010; Villamil, 2021). *Collective actions* are those actions undertaken by members of a group acting as representatives of the group to improve their collective conditions, which may adhere to or violate societal norms; they may be *normative* or *non-normative* and may include actions such as violent or nonviolent protests, violent conflicts, or dialogue; non-normative actions are violent in nature (Wright, Taylor and Moghaddam, 1990, p. 995; Adam-Troian *et al.*, 2021, p. 561). Though not everything is remembered, selective remembering and forgetting serve certain purposes (Jovchelovitch, 2012, p. 444); in essence, 'the past is not only selectively seen, altered, and saved, it inspires emulation in the likeness of the present'(Lowenthal, 1975, p. 32). Hence, this act of 'remembering' transcends mere selective engagement; it intends to draw upon the past memories to lend credibility and

corroboration to present-day behaviours and actions (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 77; Villamil, 2021, p. 400).

Collective memory is viewed as a social representation of the past, explaining how people's shared memories are shaped not only within the social groups and social frameworks to which they belong but also in opposition to the social groups and social frameworks to which they do not consider themselves to be members (Obradovíc, 2016, p. 13). It entails a society's publicly accessible symbols or the shared individual memories of community members transmitted through historical representation that influences their collective identity and behaviour (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 77; Misztal, 2010, p. 28; Hirst, Yamashiro and Coman, 2018, p. 439; Villamil, 2021, p. 413). According to Glassberg (1996, p. 10), individual recollection holds significant importance, as it is derived from group communication and reflects the collective memory of the community; however, 'more useful is the scholarship investigating how individual memories of the past are established and confirmed through dialogue with others'. Thus, the concept of collective memory represents a particular community's history, whether factual or fabricated; this history constitutes a collection of shared recollections among individuals belonging to that community, which are transmitted and retained as a group memory moulds their collective identity and behaviour (Glassberg, 1996a; Misztal, 2010; Obradovíc, 2016; Hirst, Yamashiro and Coman, 2018; Villamil, 2021).

There are three approaches to the formation of collective memory: Primordialism, Constructivism and Instrumentalism (Wang, 2018, p. 12). According to the primordialism viewpoint, collective memory is shaped by innate bonds linked to familial relationships, language, and shared historical experiences that are transmitted and received across successive generations (Wang, 2018, p. 12). The Constructivist perspective contends that collective memory is a socially constructed phenomenon and is created by reinterpreting historical events to align with contemporary ideas; in this view, ethnicity and identity are perceived as social constructions; in contrast, instrumentalism focuses on the motives behind ethnic mobilisation, and argues that collective memory is used as a means by local groups and individuals to pursue their interests and objectives (Wang, 2018, p. 13). The formation and dissemination of collective memories vary depending on the perspective adopted. Primordialism perspectives rely on family tales and folkloric narratives, whereas constructivism approaches utilise print capitalism, institutionalised education, and social media, whereas instrumentalism approaches rely on sanctioned narratives, propaganda, and formalised education to propagate collective memories (Wang, 2018, p. 14).

Aligning with Kerney's (2013, p. 133) position, the present paper asserts that the notion of memory arises from a dual process operating at both individual and communal levels, in which personal and social choices determine the selection, preservation, and manifestation of significant experiences within the prevailing social landscape. Through the analysis of contextual realities in Nigeria and the integration of insights derived from research conducted in settings exhibiting comparable conditions, the conceptualisation of collective memory will be further developed to encompass the interconnectedness of the past, present, and future while also capturing the distinct local manifestations of this phenomenon. Wang (2018, p. 14) posits that the three approaches for constructing collective memory are interrelated and not entirely separate. The following section explores the use of these three approaches in forming collective memory in Nigeria, with particular attention paid to the analysis facilitated by concepts such as 'materialised memory' and 'cultural memoryscape'.

An apt exemplification of the instrumentalism approach in the formation of collective memory in Nigeria can be found in the following quote. Citing the *Parrot* of October 12, 1960, Iyekekpolo (2020, p. 757) refers to Sir Ahmadu Bello[1] (1910–1966), who contended that:

> The new nation called Nigeria should be an estate of our great grandfather, Uthman Dan Fodio. We must ruthlessly prevent a change of power. We use the minorities in the north as willing tools, and the south, as conquered territory and never allow them to rule over us, and never allow them to have control over their future.

In essence, Sir Bello asserted that Nigeria was a venture belonging to his lineage and should be maintained by using the northern minorities – referring to the Middle Belt ethnic groups – as compliant workers to ensure the subordination of the southern regions and their resources. Politicians manipulate collective memory to secure political leverage by portraying the past in contemporary contexts (Yoder, 2019). It is discernible that Sir Bello drew upon the successful Fulani jihad of 1804, which established the Sokoto Caliphate and other such historical events to inspire and motivate his kin, particularly the Fulani leaders in Northern Nigeria, to exert influence over Nigeria's future trajectory in order to preserve their interests, albeit at the

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[1] Sir Bello was no ordinary Fulani or Nigerian; he was both a political and religious leader. He was the Premier of the defunct Northern Nigeria region and the *Sardauna of Sokoto* (Falola and Heaton, 2008). He was also the great-great-grandson of Uthman dan Fodio – the founder of the Sokoto caliphate – (Nwabara, 1963), the great-grandson of Sultan Muhammed Bello (Buba, 2018, p. 6) and a knight of the British Empire. Sultan Bello was the author of the *Infakul MLAsuri*.

expense of other ethnic groups. He was not only socially representing the past (Obradovíc, 2016, p. 13) but also emotionally anchoring it in the present (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 77; Obradović, 2019, p. 2) and future (Szpunar and Szpunar, 2016; de Saint-Laurent and Obradović, 2019, p. 9; Chu, 2022) with the explicit intent of shaping ethnic relations within the new country called Nigeria.

On the other hand, it is imperative to consider the historical and political context of Sir Ahmadu Bello's comments, even though they may seem divisive; during this period, the country known as Nigeria was emerging and not yet independent. As Lasswell (1958, p. 132) posits, 'political life, in the narrowest sense of the word, is a life of conflict, and presupposes men who can bring themselves into active relationship to their surroundings'. In light of this, his statement may be interpreted as a call for unity and protection for his people in the North; he may have been reacting to emergent conflicts in the new country and attempting to maintain a proactive stance.

Due to some of his derogatory speeches, Sir Bello, whom Hausa-Fulani Muslims in Northern Nigeria highly regard, is viewed as divisive by many non-Muslim Northerners and the vast majority of Southern Nigerians. Annually on January 15, 'Armed Forces Remembrance Day' is observed to honour Nigerian soldiers who died in the two world wars and the Nigeria-Biafra war[2], but this commemoration also prolongs the emotional anguish of an avoidable civil war (Magaji, 2017). This date coincides with the assassination of Sir Bello and the acceptance of Biafran forces' defeat by federal troops, marking the civil war's end (Magaji, 2017). Commemoration and remembrance are necessary, but it matters what and why we do it.

Claims indicate an ongoing political hegemony of the Fulani ethnic group in Nigeria, which has persisted since the colonial period and is characterised by a governance structure marked by nepotism, partiality, and inefficiency, which favours the members of the Fulani and Hausa ethnic groups (Ochonu, 2014; Alozieuwa, 2016; Alumona and Okoli, 2021), which may be viewed as a manifestation of Sir Bello's quote above.

The case of Sir Bello highlights how, in Nigeria, political figures and state institutions use events, speeches, official narratives, and propaganda to advance interests that can occasionally be parochial and primordial, consequently impacting the formation, preservation, and

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[2] 'Emphasis here is on soldiers, not the millions of non-combatant casualties, especially civilians who died during needless Nigerian civil war. The civilian victims will have to wait for an imaginative government in the future to carve out a date to remember them' (Magaji, 2017). Most civilians were mainly over 3 million Biafrans killed by Nigerian soldiers or starved to death.

transmission of collective memories. This example conforms to the instrumentalism and constructivism approaches concerning creating and disseminating collective memories. Creating and propagating collective memory in Nigeria is not solely the prerogative of political actors and institutions, as communal and familial resources at the community level also play a significant role. The following section presents examples of how community-level creation, transmission, and utilisation of collective memories occur in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, indigeneity is primarily determined by ancestral lineage and primordial affiliations rather than by place of birth or residency (Higazi, 2016; Bamidele, 2018; Mang and Ehrhardt, 2018). The practice of classifying persons in Nigeria as either indigene or as settlers of a particular location is a contentious issue (Higazi, 2016; Bamidele, 2018; Mang and Ehrhardt, 2018). In Nigeria, a notable discrepancy exists within the citizenship framework, delineating citizens either as indigenes or settlers (Bamidele, 2018, p. 55). Indigeneship can be claimed through familial lineage – the 'natives' – or issuance of an 'Indigeneship certificate' by local authorities, but the lack of a legal framework, including the constitution, leads to an uncertain decision-making process without established criteria (Higazi, 2016, p. 370; Bamidele, 2018, p. 55; Mang and Ehrhardt, 2018, p. 468).

> Indigeneship (or the synonym indigeneity) is the status of being a "native,"
> or "son of the soil," in a particular locality in Nigeria, where it grants the
> holder the ability to claim historical belonging in contrast to "settlers" who
> originate elsewhere (Mang and Ehrhardt, 2018, p. 334).

In essence, to be recognised as an indigene, one must be able to identify a location as one's 'original land,' where one's ancestors can be traced; on the other hand, a settler, even if born in a particular area, is viewed as a temporary dweller who may return to their 'home' (Bamidele, 2018, p. 55). Hence, despite long-term occupancy spanning numerous generations, the Fulani and Hausa people are not recognised as indigenous in the Middle Belt (Higazi, 2016, p. 370). The practice mentioned above is not just discriminatory and also one of the catalysts for eco-violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt region.

The idea of indigeneship in Nigeria is one of the outcomes of the country's colonial experience (Bamidele, 2018, 2022; Mang and Ehrhardt, 2018; Ochonu, 2018; Maiangwa, 2020). However, Mang and Ehrhardt (2018, p. 467) notes that indigeneship has been incorporated into specific legal frameworks in Nigeria; for example, Section 147 (3) of the Federal Character requires that ministers appointed by the President must be indigenes of the state they represent. This

practice highlights the formalisation of indigeneship as a prerequisite for political appointments in the country.

During the focus group session with community members from the EH community in Nasarawa State who had been displaced and then returned to their community, one respondent emphasised that being designated as a *igira* while being an IDP was a crucial factor in his decision to return to his native land, EH.

> Moderator: Did you have any issues with the community?
>
> #7-EggNas-M: We cannot deny that we never experienced disagreement as human beings; we had some small problems with them.
>
> Moderator: What kind of problem?
>
> #7-EggNas-M: A problem of getting tired of supporting someone.
>
> Moderator: Is there anything else wrong?
>
> #5-EggNas-M: When we went to Lafia, some Lafia people were calling us *igira* (some people interjected to indicate that it meant stranger or non-native). When they called us that, it made us sad, and that brought some problems.

The term *igira* is a derogatory label used to describe strangers or those perceived to be non-natives within that vicinity. It indicates that, despite their Nigerian citizenship, the GD people who fled the EH village were mere immigrants or strangers in any community other than their own. As earlier stated, in Nigeria, a person is considered a native of a community only if they can demonstrate patrilineal ancestry that can be traced back to that specific community and share the same kinship, history, ethnicity, and language with the majority of its inhabitants (Bamidele, 2018; Mang and Ehrhardt, 2018). So, regardless of how many generations an individual's ancestors might have lived in a particular area, they cannot claim indigenous status in the EH community if their father's ancestry is not connected to the community's predominant inhabitants. Likewise, GD persons who migrate from EH to other villages will always be classified as *igira* outside their community.

One's status as a 'native', indigene, or settler in Nigeria determines whether they are granted or denied access to social, economic, and political opportunities within specific regions or government institutions (Bamidele, 2018; Mang and Ehrhardt, 2018, p. 475). As a result, being

categorised as an *igira*[3] in Nigeria carries substantial negative repercussions, making it difficult for persons displaced from their 'native' land abruptly or forcibly to survive outside their community. This predicament may prompt individuals to strive towards avoiding an *igira* classification by exhibiting resilience and perseverance. A significant number of individuals in Nigeria opt to become 'strangers' by choice when they voluntarily relocate from their community in search of better opportunities to other locations. However, it is important to distinguish their situation from those who are forcibly displaced and subsequently classified as *igira*. The latter's situation is significantly more challenging and warrants a different consideration.

In Nigeria, people preserve and propagate indigeneity by disseminating both constructed and valid familial histories and recollections; this process aligns with the primordialism and constructivism approaches to forming collective memory (Wang, 2018, p. 12). The materialisation of these memories is upheld through habitual residence within communities or 'cultural memoryscapes' transmitted across previous generations, with a conscious effort to ensure the transfer of such cultural heritage to subsequent generations.

According to Basu (2002, 2013), the term 'cultural memoryscape' refers to the multiple sites of memory (places that hold memories) interconnected through certain associational logics, such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, or geographical affiliations. These sites of memory can include tangible objects, such as written records and photographs, and intangible aspects, such as oral histories, traditions, and landscapes (Basu, 2013, p. 130). On the other hand, according to Dyke (2019, p. 212), Buchli and Lucas (2001, p. 13) argued that materialised memory pertains to the creation of tangible artefacts that embody or represent ideas and narratives that are typically communicated through discourse or written text; nonetheless, Dyke (2019) stated that this is not always successful. In contrast, research has demonstrated how collective memories may be materialised (Aasman, Fickers and Wachelder, 2018; Kreisslová and Nosková, 2019; Saad, 2019; Sesma, 2022).

Numerous authors have presented various instances and incidents of materialized memories in Aasman, Fickers and Wachelder (2018), highlighting the role of analogue and digital

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[3] The term 'igira' is not the sole designation for non-indigenous individuals in Nigeria; however, it is used by the GD people.

technologies in preserving memories for friends, families, strangers, and future generations. Slootweg (2018, p. 209) asserts in one of the chapters:

> The home mode was thoroughly integrated in the everyday "homemaking" and "memory practices" of family life on the move. The family explicitly used video to capture their lived experiences and making their home abroad, in order subsequently to communicate via television their mediations to family and friends left behind in the Netherlands.

In this context, a VHS camcorder functioned as an instrument for materializing memories, rendering them tangible for others to appreciate and inherit, thereby transforming the lived experiences into a lasting artifact.

Kreisslová and Nosková (2019) research concerned the materialised memories of displaced Germans. As stated in Kreisslová and Nosková (2019, p. 180) article, the following assertions were put forth:

> Still, Nelly has encountered materialized memories of "home". She mentions photographs, a plan of the whole village, which was drawn by her grandfather, the porcelain that her grandmother is now sorting, because she is moving to a smaller apartment, a costume chain.

Thus, to embody the memories that pertain to the concept of 'home', it is possible to create a material representation of the intangible and discursive narratives by utilising a diverse range of physical objects. These objects may take the form of photographs, maps of a village, and other related artefacts, among others. Such creations represent the act of materialising memory. Similarly, Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson (2006, p. 153) stated that the peoples of Hopi and Hisatsinom are known to materialise their memories.

> The importance of physical evidence of the past was underscored when elder Perry Tsadiasi saw several ground stone artifacts and commented, "Maybe the people who lived here left these behind so the archaeologists know they were here. . . . People leave these things so people later can remember they were here. . . . It's a *memory piece*" (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson, 2006, p. 153 italics in original).

To put it differently, those individuals left material objects or physical evidence from the past, which would serve as a memory or a story about them for future generations.

Sesma (2022) provides a concise explanation of the concept of 'materialised memory' and 'cultural memoryscape,' which enriches our comprehension of the employment of collective memory within the Nigerian context.

> the term "materializing memory" to represent the act of piecing together object, story, space. It is the process by which personal and collective memories become linked to objects or specific spaces through a variety of mechanisms, such as personal recall, storytelling, public commemoration, or (re)use of valued artifacts of the past. Materializing memory on a particular landscape creates a memoryscape that links the past and the present through material and social interactions (Sesma, 2022, p. 26).

In the above quote, the concepts of 'materialised memory' and 'memoryscape' were employed to elucidate how past or collective memories are rendered tangible within a landscape. Consequently, these landscapes transform into 'memoryscapes' that connect the past and the present.

Building upon prior research and the traditional practice of transmitting narratives, indigeneity, communal land, and other resources within family units in Nigeria's Middle Belt and South-eastern regions, *materialising memory* can be described as involving the assembling and connecting personal and collective memories to objects, places, and spaces; this act is achieved through sharing past narratives, participating in public commemorations, and recounting personal experiences (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson, 2006; Dyke, 2019; Kreisslová and Nosková, 2019; Saad, 2019; Sesma, 2022). These materialised memories are subsequently transmitted to others to preserve the emotions, life experiences, sentiments, and affections that individuals or groups harbour for the place, space, or people at risk of being lost or eroded over time. The underlying objective of such an undertaking is to ensure the enduring preservation of these emotions by rendering them into tangible and material forms. Materialising memory within a specific landscape creates a memoryscape, which establishes a link between past and present through material and social interactions (Sesma, 2022, p. 26). This memoryscape may serve as a 'memory piece' upon which individuals can actualise their lifescape or village life.

Integrating the three approaches Aimed at generating collective memory, along with the meanings associated with the 'cultural memoryscape[4]' or materialised memories among the

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[4] The term 'memoryscape' has consistently been presented as a single word in the literature.

varied Nigerian communities, creates a better understanding of the concept of collective memory in the context of Nigeria. This integration also provides insights into how people perceive the past, present and future landscapes and their social relations.

Thus, *collective memory in the Nigerian context entails creating and disseminating materialised memories of places, spaces, objects, and cultures by social groups and families, their leaders, or institutions to secure the continuity of these memories within a 'cultural memoryscape' – sites holding memories*. A prominent example is the landscape of communities, including their communal land ('cultural memoryscape') and who and how it should be accessed. This memoryscape which is a by-product of the process of materialising memory (Sesma, 2022, p. 26), has the potential to function as a 'memory piece' on which communities can actualise their lifescape or village life. Basu (2013, p. 130) observes that the memoryscape encompasses the physical landscape. As previously mentioned, Sesma (2022, p. 26) asserts that landscapes transform into memoryscapes' when memories are materialised within them.

In Nigeria, collective memory contributes to community members' preference to stay put in their communities, which is the primary focus of this study.

In Nigeria, land and indigeneity exert considerable impact on the development and dissemination of collective memory, while concurrently, collective memory serves as the foundation for conserving and perpetuating ideas around the ownership of communal land and people's identity. Consequently, land and indigeneity can be regarded as *materialised memories* due to the role played by historical narratives and oral family recollections, which are transmitted or constructed to preserve and perpetuate ideas surrounding them. It is crucial to underscore that, within the Nigerian context, land and indigeneity have been contentious issues, sparking violent conflicts for over a century. Nevertheless, their connections and implications in creating and disseminating collective memory must be explored and acknowledged.

Families in the Middle Belt region pass down communal land, identity, significant landmarks, and oral history within a specific spatial and geographical context, materialising memories and establishing 'memoryscapes' that connect the past to the present, shaping the anticipated future. Within these 'memoryscapes', Nigerian citizenship becomes irrelevant, as primordial beliefs and inherited memories, which determine who is considered a 'native' or 'settler', exert the most significant influence, governing access and denial to specific opportunities. Thus, collective memory in the Nigerian context enables two types of citizens: the 'native' and the

'settler'. This situation has implications for people's staying behaviours and the intractable turmoil witnessed in the Middle Belt.

Thus, in the Nigerian context, this landscape, upon which the communal land is situated, serves as the site where memories are materialised and made tangible – to become *memory pieces*. The preservation of this particular *memory piece* holds such great significance that individuals are prepared to lay down their lives in order to ensure its safeguarding and continuity. This intense commitment to preserving this *memory piece* underscores community members' deep-seated connection and affinity for their land and reflects the critical role that memories play in shaping collective identities and peoples' relationships with their cultural traditions and spaces.

This contextualised notion of collective memory accurately captures the character of collective memory as perceived and experienced by the community members in the O and EH communities, underscoring its significant impact on their collective actions and identity. To secure their present and future *lifescapes*, they use collective memories of the past to assert ownership over ancestral lands, which become materialised memories, treasured 'memory pieces' that they are determined to keep by any means necessary. By choosing to remain, they strive to preserve their immobility, protect their ancestral lands, and secure their inheritance for future generations.

The Role of Collective Memory in Shaping Immobility in the Middle Belt

The Agatu local government area has gained notoriety due to the 'Agatu Massacres'. This term refers to a series of violent assaults by alleged herder militias over multiple days across different communities within the area, leading to the deaths of over 500 sedentary farmers (Jimoh, 2016; Mayah, 2016; Uwazuruike, 2020). The 'Agatu Massacres' is a poignant example of a recent incident similar to what the sedentary farmers experienced during the colonial period and in other eras. In line with the tenets of the resilience-accessibility framework, the killing serves as a vulnerability factor that impacts the subsequent collective actions of the two social groups, giving rise to events whose stories are shared among them.

For over a century, the Agatu people have striven to protect their ancestral land against external threats (Ochonu, 2014, p. 120). However, narratives of 'outsiders' trying to usurp their land have solidified their determination to retain control. This sentiment was frequently expressed during the focus group discussions with community members, as depicted in the following statement by a respondent from the O community:

> #9-OIU-M: This land is where I was born, and this is my father's land. Wherever I run to, I will become a stranger and may become destitute. Until then, I have been a sustainable person. Why should I become a beggar with my family? I will rather stay if it means to die; let me die. If I die in my house for what belongs to me, let me die. This is why I did not flee. If they want to kill me, let them kill me.

This quote exemplifies the firm conviction of the respondents about their inherent right to their 'ancestral land' and their readiness to make ultimate sacrifices for its protection; it underscores the role of collective memory in driving immobility in conflict-affected communities, even without state support. The O community members chose immobility despite the persisting eco-violence in their community. The respondent's profound attachment to their birthplace, referred to as 'my father's land', embodies the intrinsic relationship between people's identity and location. Thus familial narratives and memories of the community members, created within the 'memoryscape' known as communal land, propels their decision to stay put despite the impending danger. This motivation to stay put is not only driven by an aversion to becoming a stranger or destitute elsewhere; fundamentally, it stems from the perceived value of preserving memories, both past and future, tied to their collective identity and communal land, for '… the past is used not just to give meaning to the present, but also to the future' (de Saint-Laurent and Obradović, 2019, p. 9).

In addition, the respondent's willingness to endanger their life reflects the community's emphasis on preserving their materialised memories and cultural continuity over individual safety. This willingness highlights the role of collective memory in fostering resistance amidst conflict. If belligerent actors persist in their intent, the continuous attacks will only fuel the community members' resistance, thus prolonging the conflict. Scenarios like this are among the factors fuelling the persistence of eco-violence (Olumba, 2023). Their acceptance of potential death underscores the weight of preserving a collective identity tied to their land. Therefore, collective memory reinforces the immobility capacities of the O community members, prompting defence over flight. This readiness to risk death, instead of relinquishing familial and cultural ties, profoundly emphasises the influence of collective memory on their decision to remain.

Similarly, a focus group in the EH community, IG, Nasarawa State, revealed the GD people's displacement by the EO people following a violent clash from 2012 to 2013 over land disputes.

Remarkably, after a three-year displacement period, the GD community managed to return to their community from displacement. Given the challenges in resolving land ownership conflicts in Nigeria, examining how the GD people achieved this reintegration following an extended displacement duration was particularly intriguing. The following excerpts reveal how they did it:

> Moderator: How was the crisis resolved?

> #7-EggNas-M: After we fled, we called ourselves together, owing to the fact that we did not fight anyone but people came and displaced us, killing our people and burning our properties. We reported this to the government, but nothing was done. We agreed to return and fight. They [EO people] told us that we should not come back to this land. We gathered ourselves, organised ourselves, and agreed to go to our community to fight. We also agreed that if we did not live in our community, no one else would either. We came in the night and faced them, but we did not kill anybody, and they ran away. Knowing that the Ombutse cult[5], whom they had invited in a previous fight, was no longer available and the EO people did not fight as they used to, they agreed to a peace talk with us. Their elders searched for our elders, they apologised, and we resolved it.

> Moderator: Was the conflict resolved without external support?

> #7-EggNas-M: Yes, that was how we resolved it – without external support.

The remark made by the GD man emphasises the pivotal role of their conviction regarding land ownership as well as the influence of their memories of residing there in their efforts to recover their ancestral territory. He conveyed that they were determined that no one else would reside there if they could not inhabit the community bequeathed to them by their ancestors (memory piece). If not for the materialised memories left in the EH community and the objects and landscape ingrained in the consciousness of those who fled, they might not have been able to establish the strong social cohesion that facilitated their return and reintegration.

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[5] The Ombutse (also known as Ombatse) cult group was known for their use of voodoo and had a reputation for being a feared group of men (Alozieuwa, 2016). Their notoriety gained national attention when they beheaded more than 60 individuals, including police officers and operatives of the Directorate of State Security (special forces) who were part of a 13-truck convoy sent by the government to dislodge them from their shrine (Tukur, 2013).

The respondent further explained that the GD people were driven to take action due to the government's inability to address the underlying land disputes, precipitating the attack orchestrated by the EO people. This assault led to a considerable loss of life and the displacement of the GD community; consequently, they perceived they had a justifiable rationale for initiating a counter-attack to regain their communal land. Thus, that was why and how they were able to regain and preserve their ancestral land. When he claimed in the quote (#7-EggNas-M) that nobody was killed, I was sceptical because there were numerous reports on the internet about killings in the EH community during that time. In a research study conducted in 2017, Mcdougal, Hagerty and Dowd (2018) identified the 'EH Communal Militia' as one of the key participants in the conflict commonly referred to as the 'farmer-pastoralist conflict', now more accurately characterised as eco-violence. Thus, the O and GD people firmly believe in their obligation to recover and safeguard their ancestral territory. In pursuit of this Aim, they engaged in additional eco-violence with the EO people.

In the absence of Ombutse[6] support, the EO people were vanquished, allowing the GD people to return to the EH community. This situation fosters a cycle of eco-violence and contributes to the enduring nature of violent land conflicts. The GD people's steadfast determination to regain control over their ancestral lands exemplifies the extent to which they were prepared to take risks to preserve their community, their ancestral land and, most notably, maintain their staying behaviour. Furthermore, it signifies an effort to conserve a 'memory piece' that has been passed down and must be protected to ensure its perpetuation. The successful return from displacement to the EH community marked a transition for them from being *igira* (strangers) and IDPs to fully integrated community members – a feat necessitating significant risks and perseverance. Fulfilling these objectives was an obligation to the GD community and their ancestors. While it may have clashed with some individuals' interests, their efforts were motivated by the aspiration to achieve a collective goal benefiting the broader GD community.

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[6] The Ombutse's involvement in violent conflicts in Nasarawa state extended beyond the EO versus GD conflict. The Ombutse group has engaged in a contestation for political supremacy concerning the EO population, contesting the prevailing authority of the Hausa-Fulani people within the state's political landscape (Alozieuwa, 2016). Alozieuwa, (2016) ascribes the enduring hegemony of the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group to the inability of other factions to amalgamate their political assets and calls for a more proactive strategy by the Nigerian government to address the conflict, disputing the notion that the conflict is merely a localised occurrence.

Analysing the O and GD communities using the resilience-accessibility framework shows that collective memory serves as both a 'retain' factor, 'internal boosts' and 'internal constraints,' fostering their pursuit of immobility. For the GD people, it impacted their desire to reclaim their communal land and re-establish their active immobility status. Additionally, the efforts of the GD people to enhance social cohesion during their displacement can be perceived as 'internal boosts', utilising their psychosocial connections to facilitate an attack (a 'protective' factor to alleviate their circumstances as IDPs and counteract potential vulnerability factors arising from their retaliatory actions) to regain their communal land and re-establish their desired staying behaviour and lifescape. Ultimately, this would lead to the GD people regaining their identity as community members and shedding their label as *igira*. Furthermore, it can be posited that the GD people reside in an ungoverned space where individuals resort to self-help and violence to address their grievances without government intervention or involvement.

According to the resilience-accessibility framework, it is essential to examine how they utilised or did not utilise their resilience capacities, agency, and access to resources (community capitals) to navigate vulnerability factors like violent conflicts and a lack of government support to comprehend the migratory experiences of both communities. The O community used their agency to stay put, sustaining this desire through resources like youth, weapons, and voodoo, which strengthened their resilience capacities and allowed them to withstand adversity. Their collective memories further reinforced their claims to communal land. The GD people's migratory experiences can be explained similarly: despite their preference for immobility and accessibility to some resources, they were displaced due to low resilience capacities. To return to their village, they mobilised their resources, increased their resilience, and initiated a successful counterattack due to their strong social cohesion. Additionally, collective memory supported their efforts to reclaim their community and obtain access to its resources. Also, according to the resilience-accessibility framework, the response, or absence thereof, from government agencies such as the police and military are influenced by the agency and circumstances of community members. In this instance, it also affects how locations and the state are perceived as unsafe, ungoverned spaces indicative of a failing state.

Their community represents a 'cultural memoryscape' to them, or a site that embodies their memories, providing access to their social networks, lifescapes, and opportunities for living out their lives. Consequently, collective memory played a considerable role in shaping their strategies to reclaim and maintain their immobility. For numerous respondents in communities within Benue and Nasarawa states, staying in their village held great importance, while

displacement evoked a longing for their previous village life. They reminisced about the scenery, food, and people that constituted their daily experiences in the village, a process that reinforced their desire to reclaim their community and sustain their immobility. The following excerpt provides a glimpse into their perspective on this matter:

> #6-EggNas-M: Like my colleague has just said, we are fishermen, and I enjoy eating fish. While there, no one gave me fish to eat, but here, I simply take my hook and go to the river and find fish to eat freely.
>
> Moderator: During the conflict, were the river and fish part of the things that caused the conflict?
>
> #6-EggNas-M: Yes, of course.
>
> Moderator: So you were fighting over fish and the river as well?
>
> #6-EggNas-M: Yes.
>
> Moderator: When you fled from EH, what were you missing?
>
> #6-EggNas-M: One was my fish and properties.
>
> #7-EggNas-M: I missed my farming because outside I did not get any plot to farm on while living outside the community.
>
> Moderator: Why did you run?
>
> (Long pause)
>
> #7-EggNas-M: I ran to save my life.
>
> #8-EggNas-M: I fled to save my life and family. You cannot duplicate your life.

When analysed semantically, the respondents' comments simply reflect the advantages of residing in their villages. However, this statement carries a deeper meaning that extends beyond resource scarcity and emphasises the significance of land ownership. In Nigeria, identity issues are closely intertwined with land ownership concerns (Asiyanbola, 2010, p. 63). Primordial connections to land are paramount, often excluding those without ancestral ties (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014, p. 85; Emmanuel Terngu Vanger and Nwosu, 2020, p. 35). As such, In Nigeria, land evokes a sense of personal and community identity as it serves as an essential element

within each local community (Uchendu, 1979); its ownership plays a vital role in local communities (Uchendu, 1979; Onwuzuruigbo, 2013; Okoli and Atelhe, 2014), particularly in the Middle Belt region, where farming and fishing are prevalent (Olumba *et al.*, 2022; Ojo, 2023).

Farming and fishing provide families with opportunities for interaction, storytelling, and the transmission of narratives across generations. Thus, the communal land serves as a 'memoryscape'[7], holding memories and acting as a shared space for narratives and the materialisation of memories. According to Glassberg (1996, p. 17) 'historical consciousness and place consciousness are inextricably intertwined; we attach histories to places, and the environmental value we attach to a place comes largely through the memories and historical associations we have with it'. Hence, history and place are intricately connected, demonstrating that the identities of community members and their history are deeply intertwined with their land. 'Here the 'soil' figures as the basis of distinctive mores and folkways' (Williams and Smith, 1983, p. 505). In other words, the 'soil' or communal land is the foundation for distinct social norms and cultural practices.

Therefore, when the respondents expressed the disadvantage of displacement, which entailed losing access to farmland and fishing grounds, their statements captured the significance of physical resources and the deep connection between their lives, identities, and access to land ownership. It also highlighted the loss of connection to their community, where they believed they had better opportunities to access necessary resources, landscapes, and people following their preferences. Thus, regaining access to these vital elements of their 'memoryscapes'[8] – communal land – and way of life became of utmost importance to them, to the extent that they were willing to fight to reclaim them. Hence, collective memory empowers their immobility

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[7] Materialising memory involves connecting personal and collective memories to objects, places, and spaces; it is achieved through sharing narratives, participating in commemorations, and recounting personal experiences (Kreisslová and Nosková, 2019; Saad, 2019; Sesma, 2022). Materialising memory within a specific landscape creates a memoryscape that links the past and present through the material and social interactions (Sesma, 2022).

[8] Materialising memory involves connecting personal and collective memories to objects, places, and spaces; it is achieved through sharing narratives, participating in commemorations, and recounting personal experiences (Kreisslová and Nosková, 2019; Saad, 2019; Sesma, 2022). Materialising memory within a specific landscape creates a memoryscape that links the past and present through the material and social interactions (Sesma, 2022, p. 26).

capacities, enabling them to claim land ownership and emboldening their determination to regain it.

Primordial narratives and tendencies shape collective memories, which, in turn, influence narratives and the formation of identities. These primordial identities, in particular, play a significant role in shaping claims to land ownership within local communities (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014; Emmanuel Terngu Vanger and Nwosu, 2020) and the quest to retain and regain it (Umejesi, 2015, p. 12). This idea aligns with the contextualised understanding of collective memory in Nigeria, involving creating and disseminating materialised memories of places, spaces, objects, and cultures by families/groups, leaders, or institutions with the goal of safeguarding and maintaining the security and continuity of these memories and lifescapes within a 'cultural memoryscape' or communal land. Thus, their comments about land and fish transcend semantic understanding, encompassing latent aspects such as collective memories, identity and land ownership. These factors were the driving forces that led the GD community to fight to reclaim their communal land.

In a similar vein, the comments made by respondents in the EH community in Nasarawa paralleled those expressed by displaced men in the O community.

> Moderator: What is the disadvantage of fleeing?
>
> #6-OIU-M-IDP: No matter how you live here, you cannot have the same comfort that you get when living in your community. Here we do not have access to the volume of land that I was used to; you can only rent a small portion because we do not have enough money to buy land, and therefore you will not have enough to produce. unlike in my village, where I have a vast amount of land to farm on freely. The disadvantage is that being here is not better than living in my village, which is our land. That is the disadvantage.
>
> #9-OIU-M-IDP: In our village, we have enough access to fish to eat, whereas here it is scarce. In addition, in our village, the land is more fertile than the land here, and as such, the farm produce is not good enough. The disadvantage is that as we are here, there is no fish and scarcity of everything.
>
> #?-OIU-M-IDP: There are not enough lands to rent and farm on, unlike in our village, where we have enough land to farm on.

Consequently, contrasting memories of their lived experiences in their villages with their current predicament motivates their desire to return. In this context, recollections of life in their village, including activities like fishing and farming tied to their communal land (memory piece), play a crucial role in their quest to regain immobility. It is vital to note that memory '... has an inherently normative flavour, and thus it influences groups' conduct' (Misztal, 2010, p. 29). '... here [that] the effect of violence is mediated by the social context, which facilitates the creation of collective memories and their translation into political preferences and *behavior*' (Villamil, 2021, p. 413, italics added).

Hence, experiences of violence foster collective memories. These memories subsequently affect non-normative collective behaviour and actions, which has significant implications for collective identities and boundaries (Misztal, 2010, p. 28), as well as influencing people's collective perception of their nation and land, its connection to their identity, and their within-group behaviour (Olumba, 2022a, p. 10). This understanding aligns with observations across all study locations.

As a result, the accounts of historical conflicts and subsequent grievances, viewed as collective memories, act as catalysts for the staying behaviour of community members in conflict-affected communities. Preserving ancestral land is achieved by deploying 'protective' factors, including voodoo practices, the weaponisation of social networks, and the strategy of 'fleeing in order to return'. The drive to safeguard ancestral land is rooted in the collective memories of the communities, making it essential for community members to stay put in order to preserve the land. In the O community, defending their ancestral land was attainable only through a preference for active immobility and the perpetuation of steadfast resistance, ultimately leading to the persistence of eco-violence. On the other hand, for the GD people, the combination of their collective memories, strong social cohesion, and desire to retake their ancestral land spurred a counter-attack that allowed them to reclaim their ancient territory and achieve their desired immobility – active immobility.

The findings reveal that the collective memories of the community members in the study locations were instrumental in their efforts to either recover their ancestral homes and re-establish their immobility, as experienced by the GD people, or to maintain initiatives aimed at safeguarding and preserving their ancestral land, thus supporting their active immobility, as demonstrated by the inhabitants of O. These pursuits to regain or sustain control over ancestral land, which sustains their desired immobility, also resulted in the persistence of eco-violence

among the conflicting parties. This study addressed the concerns raised by scholars (Esparza *et al.*, 2020; Marston, 2020; Braithwaite, Cox and Ghosn, 2021; Masullo, 2021, p. 889) regarding the neglected factors influencing and sustaining immobility in conflict-affected communities. This novel approach offers a fresh perspective on the factors that influence and sustain immobility among community members in ungoverned spaces affected by eco-violence. By analysing their commitment to preserving ancestral lands and maintaining continual residence in their communities, we can better understand the role of collective immobility in shaping immobility and how it contributes to the persistence of eco-violence.

The implications of collective memory in the Middle Belt

Implications arising from the complex interplay of collective memory, immobility, and eco-violence underscore the need for effective policy strategies in Nigeria. Policies must address historical injustices and regulate the influence of collective memory on collective behaviour, thereby addressing eco-violence and residents' preferred staying behaviours. The influence of collective memory on preserving and safeguarding communal land and identity in Nigeria enables two types of citizens: natives and settlers; lived experiences related to these efforts shape the generation and propagation of collective memory.

The oversight of collective memory's role in past policy actions to resolve eco-violence in Nigeria highlights the need for a paradigm shift for the better. Addressing historical grievances should extend from the colonial and post-colonial periods to the present, encompassing policies implemented during the military era and today. The potential negative impact on the efficacy of existing measures may stem from overlooking the connection between collective memory, immobility, and eco-violence in policy-making and implementation. The disconnect between collective memory, the pursuit of immobility, and eco-violence in policy formation and intervention initiatives, for instance, sheds light on the inadequacies of measures such as 'RUGA' (Ele, 2020; Ojo, 2023), open-grazing prohibition laws (Sule, 2020; Akinkuotu, 2021), and the re-establishment of grazing routes for herders (Okoli and Ogayi, 2018; Gever, 2019) in mitigating eco-violence in the Middle Belt.

Conclusion

The paper reveals that creating and sharing collective memory facilitates claims to ancestral communal lands, shaping identity formation and the desire to stay put and retain ancestral lands.

These factors contribute to the desire for continual residence in a particular location among the community members to preserve the collective identity, ties, and lifescapes. It also identifies collective memory in the Nigerian context as an enabler of two citizenship types: the 'native' and the 'settler'.

The paper addressed an essential gap in the extant literature by focusing on the role of collective memory in influencing the immobility preferences of communities in conflict-affected areas and the persistence of eco-violence in the Middle Belt. The paper elucidates the crucial role of collective memory in shaping the pursuit of and connection to ancestral land and affinities among communities in the Middle Belt; this quest, in turn, informs the adoption of immobility as a strategic measure to preserve and conserve the ancestral land and lifescape.

Additionally, the paper highlights the significant function of collective memory in perpetuating eco-violence within Nigeria's Middle Belt region. As communities persistently interpret contemporary events in light of their historical experiences, collective memory becomes increasingly significant in shaping present-day claims and actions; consequently, the potential for intensifying eco-violence within the Middle Belt region amplifies.

Further studies are necessary to understand better the complexities at the intersection of immobility, collective memory, and eco-violence, particularly in the context of crisis migration. These studies should specifically consider the role of collective memory in conflicts between nomadic Fulani herders and sedentary farmers across the Sahel region.

The central inference derived from our current comprehension of the role of collective memory on immobility preferences suggests that strategies aimed at resolving eco-violence ought to encompass initiatives that engage with collective memories amongst the contending groups, given that these memories compel individuals to remain within their communities.

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