

Article

Oral Histories and the Adaptive Functions of Trauma Narratives in Postwar Southeastern Nigeria, 1970–1980s

Obinna U. Muoh¹, Timothy Chibuikwe Anyanwu²

¹Department of History and International Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, obinna.muoh@unn.edu.ng; ²Department of History and Strategic Studies, Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ebony State, Nigeria.

anyanwu.timothy@funai.edu.ng, <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4549-5260>

Correspondence: **Timothy Chibuikwe Anyanwu**, anyanwu.timothy@funai.edu.ng

Abstract

This qualitative historical study examines the evolutionary functions of trauma narratives as adaptive forms of imaginative culture in Southeast Nigeria in the aftermath of the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967–1970). In the wake of the federal government's "no victor, no vanquished" policy – which fostered official silence around wartime suffering – survivors and their descendants relied on oral storytelling to process collective trauma and sustain cultural identity. Drawing on evolutionary approaches to imaginative culture, the study argues that these narratives functioned as adaptive mechanisms that facilitated collective sensemaking, reinforced kin-based cohesion, supported emotional regulation, transmitted resilience across generations, and maintained vigilance under conditions of perceived marginalization. The study draws on 28 oral history interviews and four focus group discussions involving 48 participants across Anambra, Imo, Enugu, and Ebonyi States. Thematic analysis identified recurring motifs of starvation and foraging, displacement and loss, survival ingenuity, religious and syncretic interpretations of suffering, and gendered dimensions of memory. These narratives consistently reframed deprivation and dislocation into structured accounts emphasizing agency, moral endurance, and communal solidarity. They are interpreted through gene-culture coevolution, coalitional psychology, and costly signaling, highlighting storytelling as a functional adaptive system in post-conflict recovery. Findings show that vernacular oral traditions filled institutional voids left by formal reconciliation policies, enabling psychological and social recovery. Situated within global comparative contexts such as Holocaust memory, post-genocide Rwanda, and post-World War II Europe, the Southeast Nigerian case demonstrates both shared and distinctive features of trauma narration. The study contributes a non-Western perspective to evolutionary studies of imaginative culture and advances understanding of narrative adaptation in post-conflict societies.

Keywords: Nigerian-Biafran War, Trauma narratives, Oral history, Imaginative culture, Collective memory

Introduction

The Nigerian-Biafran War (1967–1970) stands as one of the most traumatic episodes in post-independence African history, marked by profound loss of life, widespread starvation, massive displacement, and the near-total disruption of social and economic structures across Southeast Nigeria (Heerten & Moses, 2014; Uche, 2008). Estimates of casualties range from one to three million, with a significant proportion resulting from famine induced by the federal blockade rather than direct combat (Heerten & Moses, 2014; de St. Jorre, 1972). The war's conclusion in 1970 was accompanied by the federal government's declaration of "no victor, no vanquished," a policy formally intended to facilitate national reconciliation and reintegration (Gowon, 1970).

It is important to acknowledge the competing reading of this policy at the outset, since it shapes how the paper interprets the post-war landscape. Gowon's formulation was



genuinely framed as an instrument of pardon and national re-unification, and many observers then and since have treated it as a pragmatic act of statesmanship (Obi-Ani, 2009). In practice, however, successive governments did not implement the ambitious rehabilitation and reconstruction programs that the policy implied, and public discourse, school curricula, and state-sponsored narratives largely avoided detailed examination of the war's more painful dimensions, particularly civilian suffering and mass starvation in the Southeast (Madiebo, 1980; Achebe, 2012; Heerten & Moses, 2014). Whatever the policy's stated intention, its *de facto* effect for affected communities was the channeling of memory work into private and semi-private domains (Nwoye, 2015). Within families, churches, village gatherings, and everyday interactions, survivors and their descendants turned to oral storytelling as a primary means of processing collective trauma, preserving cultural identity, and navigating the challenges of post-war life during the 1970s and 1980s (Vansina, 1985; Shaw, 2002). This study focuses on that vernacular sphere, and it is therefore the experienced reality of silence – rather than the policy's stated intent – that anchors the analysis.

This qualitative historical study investigates the evolutionary functions of these trauma narratives as forms of imaginative culture in post-war Southeast Nigeria. Drawing on primary data generated through oral interviews and focus group discussions with survivors and their immediate descendants, the research explores how stories of hunger, displacement, loss, survival ingenuity, communal resilience, and acts of solidarity were constructed, shared, and transmitted across generations. Rather than viewing such narratives merely as repositories of historical fact or emotional catharsis, the study positions them as adaptive mechanisms rooted in evolved human psychological capacities (Boyd & Richerson, 2005; Gottschall, 2012).

These storytelling practices enabled individuals and groups to impose coherence on catastrophic disruption, strengthen coalitional bonds, regulate collective emotions, transmit survival-relevant knowledge, and sustain a sense of transgenerational continuity amid economic hardship, social reintegration pressures, and perceived political marginalization (Alexander et al., 2004; Caruth, 1996; Smelser, 2004). The central thesis of this work is that post-war trauma narratives functioned as adaptive tools of imaginative culture, supporting gene-culture coevolutionary processes that helped sustain ethnic and kin-based identities while promoting psychological and social resilience in a context shaped by official silencing and structural challenges (Boyd & Richerson, 2005; Henrich, 2016).

The study pursues several interconnected objectives. It seeks first to document and thematically analyze the predominant content, structures, and motifs within the oral trauma narratives circulating in Southeast Nigerian communities during the specified period. Second, it examines the patterns of social circulation and intergenerational transmission of these stories within families and broader community settings (Vansina, 1985; Portelli, 1991). Third, it applies an evolutionary lens to uncover the psychological and cultural functions served by these narratives, including their contributions to meaning-making, emotional regulation, in-group cohesion, vigilance maintenance, and cultural adaptation (Gottschall, 2012; Boyd, 2018).

Finally, the research aims to bridge historical analysis with evolutionary studies of imaginative culture by offering a grounded, non-Western case study of how collective

trauma storytelling operates in specific post-conflict ecologies. Through these objectives, the work addresses a notable gap in existing scholarship. While the military, political, and diplomatic dimensions of the Nigerian-Biafran War have received considerable attention (de St. Jorre, 1972; Madiebo, 1980), and while literary representations by prominent figures have been extensively analyzed (Achebe, 2012; Adichie, 2006), relatively few studies have prioritized the everyday oral narratives of ordinary survivors in the crucial immediate post-war decades (Nwoye, 2015). Moreover, the application of evolutionary frameworks to these vernacular imaginative practices remains underexplored, particularly in African historical contexts. This research fills that lacuna by privileging primary oral data collected in Southeast Nigeria and integrating it with evolutionary theoretical insights.

Review of the Literature

Scholarship on the Nigerian-Biafran War and its aftermath has developed through distinct phases, beginning with contemporary journalistic and eyewitness accounts and progressing toward more systematic historical and memory-focused analyses (de St. Jorre, 1972; Forsyth, 1969). Early post-war official Nigerian narratives emphasized national unity and the reintegration process under the "no victor, no vanquished" framework (Gowon, 1970; Obi-Ani, 2009). This approach, while politically pragmatic, tended to marginalize or suppress detailed public acknowledgment of the scale of civilian suffering in the Southeast (Achebe, 2012; Heerten & Moses, 2014). As a result, a culture of official silence emerged that channeled memory work into private and semi-private domains (Nwoye, 2015).

Onuoha's (2017) working paper on Biafra offers a valuable critical examination of these dynamics. Onuoha analyzes the complex interplay between memory, reconciliation, and peacebuilding efforts in post-civil war Southeastern Nigeria, highlighting how suppressed grievances and divergent collective memories complicated genuine national healing. His analysis underscores the persistence of alternative memory practices among affected communities and provides important context for understanding why oral narratives assumed such prominence in the 1970s and 1980s.

Literary contributions have played a significant role in articulating aspects of the war experience, most notably through Chinua Achebe. Achebe's *There Was a Country* combines personal reflection, historical commentary, and cultural critique, offering powerful insights into the Igbo perspective on the conflict and its legacies (Achebe, 2012). While such elite literary texts constitute important imaginative responses to the war, they represent more formalized, public articulations rather than the informal, everyday storytelling practices that characterized grassroots memory transmission in rural and semi-urban Southeast communities during the immediate post-war years (Adichie, 2006; Nwoye, 2015). This study therefore shifts analytical focus toward the latter, treating oral histories as distinct yet complementary forms of imaginative culture.

Broader theoretical literature on collective trauma and memory provides essential scaffolding for the present analysis. Hirschberger's (2018) article, *Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning*, delineates how shared traumatic events are transformed into collective memories that shape group identity and worldview. Hirschberger demonstrates that for groups that have experienced victimization, collective trauma can serve adaptive purposes by fostering cohesion, transmitting threat-related knowledge, and embedding the

experience within larger symbolic systems of meaning. These processes help mitigate existential anxieties while reinforcing transgenerational group continuity (Alexander et al., 2004; Hirschberger, 2018). Such insights resonate strongly with the Southeast Nigerian context, where oral narratives appear to have converted raw suffering into coherent stories of endurance, ingenuity, and communal solidarity.

Complementary perspectives from evolutionary approaches to cognition and culture further illuminate the adaptive significance of storytelling. Bietti and colleagues argue that storytelling constitutes an adaptive form of collective sensemaking, particularly valuable for processing uncertain, non-routine, or traumatic events (Bietti et al., 2019). Narratives allow groups to share information efficiently, coordinate behavior, and transmit survival knowledge at relatively low individual cost. In the post-war environment, where formal channels for processing trauma were constrained, oral storytelling likely fulfilled these functions by enabling communities to reinterpret experiences of starvation, displacement, and loss in ways that supported ongoing social cooperation and cultural resilience. Evolutionary perspectives emphasize that human capacities for narrative emerged in part to facilitate large-scale cooperation, emotional bonding, and the transmission of culturally accumulated knowledge (Boyd, 2018; Gottschall, 2012) – capacities that become especially critical following collective catastrophe.

Within African and Nigerian historiography, the importance of oral traditions as vehicles for historical knowledge and cultural continuity has long been recognized (Vansina, 1985). In the specific post-war Southeast context, communities facing infrastructural devastation, demographic losses, and economic marginalization relied heavily on these traditions (Nwoye, 2015). Studies of related memory practices – such as naming conventions, religious reinterpretations, and folklore – further indicate that imaginative culture played a central role in post-conflict recovery (Shaw, 2002). However, few works prior to this study have explicitly connected these historical materials to evolutionary theory in order to explain the functional mechanisms through which trauma narratives supported adaptation. This interdisciplinary integration represents a key contribution of the present research.

Significant gaps persist in the literature. Much existing scholarship remains either descriptive-historical, focused on elite literary or political actors, or oriented toward contemporary separatist movements (Onuoha, 2017). There is a relative scarcity of rigorously collected qualitative oral data centered on the 1970–1980s period that seeks to understand the functions of trauma narratives as evolved imaginative adaptations. By addressing this gap through primary fieldwork in Southeast Nigeria and sustained engagement with evolutionary studies of culture, this study offers original insights into how universal human psychological mechanisms manifest within particular historical and ecological circumstances. It contributes to evolutionary studies in imaginative culture by demonstrating the cross-cultural relevance of narrative adaptation while enriching Nigerian historiography with nuanced, grassroots perspectives on post-conflict memory. Ultimately, the research underscores the power of oral storytelling as a resilient human response to collective adversity.

Theoretical Framework

Evolutionary studies in imaginative culture provide a powerful interdisciplinary lens for understanding how humans use narratives, symbols, myths, and other expressive forms to navigate existential challenges, including collective trauma. This framework posits that imaginative culture is not merely ornamental or epiphenomenal but constitutes a central adaptation that enhances human survival and reproduction by facilitating meaning-making, social coordination, and the transmission of adaptive information across generations (Dissanayake, 2000; Carroll, 2011; Boyd, 2018). In the post-war Southeast Nigerian context, this perspective illuminates why oral trauma narratives proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s despite official silencing. These stories functioned as evolved imaginative tools that helped communities process catastrophic experiences, rebuild social bonds, and sustain cultural identity under difficult reintegration conditions.

At the core of this approach lies the recognition that storytelling serves as an adaptive mechanism for collective sensemaking. Humans possess a universal capacity for narrative that enables groups to interpret uncertain, non-routine, or traumatic events without every individual needing to experience them directly (Bruner, 1990; Sugiyama, 2001). This capacity reduces the costs of trial-and-error learning while allowing the sharing of survival-relevant knowledge, emotional calibration, and coordinated responses (Sugiyama, 2001; Scalise Sugiyama, 2017). In post-conflict environments like Southeast Nigeria, where formal institutions offered limited spaces for public mourning or acknowledgment of suffering, oral histories and family narratives filled this adaptive niche. They transformed fragmented individual memories of starvation, displacement, loss, and survival into coherent, shareable stories that fostered group cohesion and intergenerational resilience.

Collective trauma, as conceptualized in social psychology, further deepens this evolutionary understanding. When a group experiences profound shared suffering — such as the mass civilian casualties and famine associated with the Nigerian-Biafran War — the event becomes embedded in collective memory as an interpretive framework rather than a mere record of past events (Eyerman, 2001; Hirschberger, 2018). This memory is actively constructed and socially mediated, shaping group identity, worldview, and future-oriented behavior. For victim groups, collective trauma narratives can serve adaptive functions by heightening vigilance to potential threats, strengthening in-group solidarity, embedding the experience within symbolic systems of meaning, and promoting a sense of transgenerational continuity (Volkan, 2001; Hirschberger, 2018). In Southeast Nigerian communities during the 1970s and 1980s, oral storytelling about wartime hunger, ingenuity in the face of blockade, family separations, and acts of communal support performed exactly these roles.

Gene-culture coevolution offers another crucial pillar for analyzing these practices. Human psychological mechanisms for narrative production and consumption coevolved with cultural environments, generating feedback loops in which cultural practices shape selection pressures on cognition, while evolved predispositions influence which cultural forms persist (Richerson & Boyd, 2005; Henrich, 2016). In post-war Southeast Nigeria, the intense selective pressures of conflict and its aftermath — demographic losses, economic disruption, and social reintegration challenges — would have favored cultural variants such as resilient survival narratives, moral exemplars, and cautionary tales that enhanced group persistence and psychological adjustment. These narratives, transmitted orally within kinship networks

and community settings, illustrate how evolved capacities for empathy, memory reconstruction, and narrative engagement interact with historically specific conditions to produce adaptive imaginative culture (Sterelny, 2012).

Coalitional psychology and costly signaling further illuminate the social dynamics embedded in these narrative practices. Humans evolved strong tendencies toward coalition formation and maintenance, particularly under conditions of threat and uncertainty (Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). Narrative performances — whether in the form of proverbs, songs, testimonies, or family storytelling — can function as signals of group commitment. In some cases, the willingness to recount painful or emotionally costly experiences may serve as a credible indicator of loyalty and shared identity, thereby reinforcing trust and discouraging free-riding (Sosis, 2003; Smith & Bliege Bird, 2000). In the post-war context, where overt political expression of grievance was constrained, such narrative practices provided a socially permissible medium through which ethnic and kin-based identities could be reaffirmed without direct confrontation with state authority.

Emotional regulation and meaning-making constitute additional adaptive dimensions of trauma narratives. Storytelling enables individuals and groups to reframe uncontrollable suffering into structured accounts that emphasize agency, moral coherence, and survival (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; McAdams, 2001). This process contributes to the regulation of negative affect, the reduction of uncertainty, and the restoration of a sense of predictability and control. From an evolutionary perspective, such meaning-making capacities are central to human resilience, particularly in environments characterized by high levels of risk and unpredictability (Wilson, 2011). In Southeast Nigeria, narratives emphasizing ingenuity during wartime scarcity, spiritual interpretations of suffering, and collective endurance likely performed these regulatory functions, supporting psychological stability and continuity across the 1970s and 1980s.

A Note on Interpretive Framing

Before proceeding, it is worth clarifying the status of the claim that these narratives were *adaptive*. The study's data are retrospective oral histories, gathered decades after the events they describe. Such data can richly document the *content*, *structure*, and *social functions* of narratives, and can demonstrate their consistency with evolutionary predictions. However, retrospective qualitative evidence cannot conclusively prove that a given narrative practice produced measurable differences in survival or reproductive fitness relative to alternatives. The paper therefore advances a functional claim: that these narratives operated as functional adaptations facilitating psychological and social recovery, in ways consistent with — though not conclusively demonstrating — an evolutionary account. This calibration is deliberate; where the text uses language of adaptation, it should be read as indicating functional consistency with evolutionary theory rather than demonstrated fitness consequences.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative historical research design centered on oral history interviews and focus group discussions. This approach is particularly appropriate for examining lived experience, memory, and meaning-making in contexts where written archives are limited or politically mediated (Portelli, 1991; Vansina, 1985). It enables an in-

depth exploration of how psychological mechanisms are expressed through culturally embedded narrative practices. In the context of post-war Southeast Nigeria — where official silencing constrained public discourse — oral accounts provide critical access to vernacular forms of historical consciousness and cultural transmission.

Data collection was conducted between 2018 and 2021 in selected communities across Anambra, Imo, Enugu, and Ebonyi States, regions significantly affected by the war. This timeframe facilitated engagement with aging survivors while also incorporating intergenerational perspectives from their children and grandchildren, who received and reproduced these narratives. Such a design aligns with qualitative approaches that emphasize temporality, memory transmission, and the social life of narratives (Thompson, 2000).

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to recruit participants with direct or strong indirect connections to the war period (Patton, 2015). A total of 48 individuals participated in the study, including 28 oral history interviewees and four focus groups comprising five to seven participants each. Survivors (aged 65 years and above at the time of interview) formed the core participant group, complemented by descendants who had internalized and transmitted family narratives. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants during transcription and analysis. This process was clearly explained during informed consent procedures and contributed to building trust, particularly given the sensitivity of recalling traumatic experiences (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

Interviews were conducted in participants' homes or in neutral community spaces, depending on participant preference, and were carried out in either Igbo, Pidgin English, or English. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. Focus group discussions encouraged interactive storytelling and collective reflection, providing insight into how narratives are negotiated, reinforced, and socially validated within communal settings (Morgan, 1997). This combination of individual and group data sources allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of both personal memory and collective narrative dynamics.

All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent. Detailed field notes were also maintained to capture non-verbal cues, emotional expressions, and contextual observations. A semi-structured interview guide was employed, beginning with broad life-history questions before progressing to targeted prompts concerning wartime experiences, post-war storytelling practices, intergenerational transmission, and perceived meanings or functions of these narratives. This flexible approach is consistent with best practices in oral history, which prioritize participant agency, narrative depth, and the co-construction of meaning between interviewer and narrator (Portelli, 1991; Thompson, 2000). Participants were encouraged to narrate freely, while the researchers intervened selectively to seek clarification or to probe recurring motifs such as starvation, survival ingenuity, family separation and reunion, religious interpretations of suffering, and communal resilience.

Ethical considerations were central throughout the research process. Given the emotionally sensitive nature of the subject matter, trauma-informed principles guided all interactions (Herman, 1992; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Participants were provided with clear

information regarding the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any stage, and potential emotional risks. Written informed consent was obtained where possible, while verbal consent was accepted in cases involving literacy limitations. Counseling referrals were arranged in collaboration with local community health workers, although none were ultimately required. The researchers maintained reflexivity throughout the process, acknowledging their positionality as researchers from Southeast Nigeria while striving for analytical rigor and critical distance (Finlay, 2002). All data — audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes — were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researchers. Where participants expressed interest, transcripts were returned for member-checking, allowing for clarification, correction, or withdrawal of sensitive content (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data analysis followed a systematic thematic approach informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, with Igbo expressions retained and translated where necessary to preserve cultural nuance. The analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts and field notes to achieve data familiarization. Inductive coding was then employed to identify recurring patterns across three key dimensions: narrative content (e.g., starvation accounts, survival strategies), narrative structure (e.g., moral framing, heroic arcs), and narrative function (e.g., emotional regulation, identity reinforcement, transmission of vigilance).

Codes were iteratively refined into broader thematic categories, with particular attention to how these aligned with the study's theoretical concerns, including collective sensemaking, coalitional signaling, and gene-culture coevolution. Where the paper refers to the relative prevalence of a theme, this reflects the frequency with which references were identified across transcripts during coding; descriptive terms such as "most" or "a majority" are used in preference to precise percentages, consistent with the qualitative orientation of the study. Analytical rigor was enhanced through constant comparison across interviews and focus groups, as well as through triangulation with supplementary materials such as church records and community documents where available (Denzin, 1978). An audit trail documenting coding decisions and thematic development was maintained throughout the process, and peer debriefing with fellow historians provided an additional layer of interpretive validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This methodological approach generated rich, contextually grounded insights while maintaining the analytical rigor required for evolutionary interpretation. Nonetheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. These include the challenges associated with retrospective memory recall and the diminishing number of direct survivors, which constrained both sample size and temporal depth. Despite these limitations, the study successfully captures patterns of narrative production and transmission that might otherwise remain undocumented. By privileging participant voices within a theoretically informed qualitative framework, this research bridges historical specificity with broader evolutionary perspectives on human adaptive culture.

Findings

The analysis of oral histories and focus group discussions revealed rich, multilayered trauma narratives that circulated widely within Southeast Nigerian families and

communities throughout the 1970s and 1980s. These narratives consistently revolved around themes of starvation and hunger, displacement and loss, survival ingenuity, religious interpretations of suffering, gendered dimensions of memory, and communal solidarity. Rather than functioning as passive recollections, they operated as dynamic imaginative reconstructions that imposed coherence on devastation. In line with the study's theoretical framework, these narratives performed adaptive roles in collective sensemaking, identity reinforcement, and the transmission of resilience across generations. While core motifs remained remarkably consistent across participants, variations emerged based on personal experience, gender, and age during the war, illustrating how oral culture flexibly adapted shared psychological mechanisms to specific post-war realities.

Starvation and Hunger Narratives

Accounts of starvation formed the most dominant narrative cluster. Respondent 35, who was a teenager during the conflict, vividly recalled the extremity of deprivation: "We ate anything green that could be boiled – leaves, roots, even lizards when we could catch them. Mothers would chew food for the youngest children because there was nothing solid left." Similar testimonies recurred across a substantial majority of participants, underscoring the centrality of hunger in collective memory. Mrs. Hope Anyanwu described foraging under constant threat, while Respondent 12 recounted kin-based systems of rationing scarce resources, prioritizing vulnerable members such as children and the elderly. These narratives typically followed a recognizable structure: initial shock, adaptive improvisation, and partial recovery.

Such structuring parallels findings in other trauma contexts. Research on Holocaust testimonies shows that survivors often reconstruct starvation experiences into narratives emphasizing ingenuity and endurance, thereby transforming victimhood into agency and supporting psychological adjustment (Langer, 1991; Laub, 1992). The Southeast Nigerian data similarly suggest that recounting hunger was not merely descriptive but functioned to encode survival knowledge and reinforce moral resilience.

Displacement and Loss

Displacement narratives formed a second major thematic cluster. Participants such as Respondent 06 and Respondent 24 described repeated movements to evade advancing forces, extended periods of hiding, and the loss of family members during chaotic transitions. Respondent 06 recalled carrying younger siblings through forest paths while her mother searched for safety, emphasizing both fear and responsibility.

Focus group discussions reinforced these accounts, with participants collectively recalling images of abandoned villages and malnourished children suffering from kwashiorkor. These narratives frequently foregrounded kinship networks as critical survival mechanisms, reflecting patterns consistent with theories of kin altruism and coalition-based survival under threat.

Comparable dynamics are documented in post-genocide Rwanda, where oral memory practices surrounding displacement and loss have been shown to reinforce group cohesion and cultural continuity despite official reconciliation narratives (Thomson, 2013;

Eltringham, 2004). In the Southeast Nigerian case, displacement narratives similarly functioned as repositories of collective vigilance and identity maintenance.

Survival Ingenuity and Moral Framing

A striking feature of the data was the prominence of survival ingenuity as a narrative motif. Participants frequently framed wartime adaptation not solely as necessity but as evidence of intelligence, creativity, and resilience. Respondent 10 described underground food storage techniques and improvised cooking methods, while Respondent 33 and Respondent 09 highlighted women's roles in producing herbal remedies and maintaining covert trade networks. These narratives often carried implicit moral lessons, presenting ingenuity as both a practical and ethical virtue. This pattern aligns with scholarship on narrative identity, which shows that individuals reinterpret adversity through redemptive or agentic storylines that reinforce self-worth and social value (McAdams, 2006).

Similar patterns have been observed in studies of Japanese American internment narratives, where stories of resourcefulness and endurance were retrospectively framed as sources of pride and cultural strength (Nagata, 1998). In both contexts, narrative reframing appears to function as a mechanism for restoring agency and transmitting adaptive strategies.

Religious and Spiritual Interpretations

Religious and spiritual frameworks permeated many narratives, reflecting a syncretic Igbo-Christian worldview. Participants frequently interpreted the war as a period of divine testing, moral purification, or spiritual transformation. Respondent 19 described suffering as a refining process, while other respondents attributed survival to divine intervention or ancestral protection. Such interpretations provided existential meaning and emotional containment, transforming otherwise incomprehensible suffering into morally intelligible experiences. This aligns with broader findings in trauma studies, where religious narratives serve as cognitive and emotional frameworks for processing collective catastrophe (Pargament, 1997). In post-World War II European contexts, similar patterns have been observed, with survivors embedding traumatic experiences within religious or moral narratives to facilitate coping and community reconstruction (Judt, 2005). The Southeast Nigerian case demonstrates comparable processes within a distinct cultural and theological landscape.

Intergenerational Transmission

The data revealed robust patterns of intergenerational narrative transmission. Descendants such as Ugochukwu Eze and Osita Omeke described repeated exposure to war stories in domestic and communal settings, including family gatherings, evening storytelling sessions, and church events. These narratives were often adapted for younger audiences — less graphic but retaining core themes of endurance, unity, and moral strength. This selective transmission mirrors patterns identified in Holocaust family studies, where descendants inherit structured narratives emphasizing survival and ethical lessons rather than unmediated trauma (Hoffman, 2004). In the Southeast Nigerian context, such adaptations appear to balance emotional protection with cultural continuity, ensuring that key lessons persist across generations.

Gendered Dimensions of Memory

Gendered differences in narrative emphasis were also evident. Female participants more frequently highlighted caregiving roles, child survival strategies, and emotional labor, whereas male narratives tended to focus on protection, mobility, and post-war economic recovery. For instance, paired accounts from Mr. Michael Chukwunye and Respondent 23 illustrated complementary perspectives within shared family histories. Similarly, in a second family, a mother's account emphasized nursing malnourished children and trading food across kinship lines, while her son's account stressed rebuilding the household compound and returning to trade after the war. These examples suggest that narrative variation reflects distinct gendered experiences of war and recovery. Similar patterns have been documented in studies of World War II memory, where women's narratives often foreground relational and domestic dimensions, while men's accounts emphasize mobility and structural disruption (Summerfield, 1998). Such diversity likely enhances the adaptive scope of collective narratives by addressing multiple dimensions of survival and social reproduction.

Social Circulation and Narrative Functions

Beyond the family, trauma narratives circulated widely in churches, village assemblies, and apprenticeship networks. Participants emphasized that storytelling reinforced social norms, discouraged fragmentation, and subtly affirmed group identity in a context where overt political expression was constrained. The willingness to recount painful experiences also functioned as a marker of belonging and commitment.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that post-war trauma narratives were not merely retrospective accounts but active, adaptive elements of imaginative culture. They facilitated emotional regulation, strengthened social cohesion, transmitted survival knowledge, and preserved identity under conditions of marginalization and silence. While these functions parallel patterns observed in other global trauma contexts, their specific forms reflect the historical, cultural, and ecological realities of Southeast Nigeria in the post-war decades. By centering these voices, the study highlights both the universality of narrative adaptation and its culturally specific expressions.

Discussion

The oral histories and focus group narratives collected from Southeast Nigerian survivors and their descendants illuminate trauma storytelling as a deeply adaptive form of imaginative culture in the decades following the Nigerian-Biafran War. The recurring motifs of starvation and desperate ingenuity – recounted by respondents such as Respondent 35, Mrs. Hope Anyanwu, and Respondent 12, and echoed across a substantial majority of participants – extend beyond historical recollection. They represent structured processes of meaning-making that transform extreme deprivation into narratives of agency, endurance, and moral instruction. In evolutionary terms, such narrative restructuring reflects the human capacity to convert high-cost experiences into low-cost transmissible knowledge, thereby reducing the need for direct experiential learning (Boyd, 2018; Sugiyama, 2001).

More importantly, these hunger narratives demonstrate what can be understood as adaptive narrative calibration — a balancing act between accurately representing past danger and preserving psychological functionality. Rather than overwhelming listeners with despair, narrators consistently embedded suffering within arcs of survival and ingenuity. This pattern aligns with work on narrative coping, which shows that individuals and groups selectively structure traumatic memories to maintain coherence and agency while avoiding emotional overload (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; McAdams, 2006). In this sense, Southeast Nigerian trauma narratives functioned not merely as recollections but as cognitive tools for regulating collective memory.

It bears emphasis that this narrative calibration — and, more broadly, the adaptive functions described throughout — should be understood as *functional* consistency with evolutionary prediction rather than demonstrated fitness consequences. As noted in the theoretical framework, retrospective qualitative data richly document how narratives work socially and psychologically, but cannot prove that a given practice increased survival or reproduction. The value of the evolutionary lens here is the insight it offers into *why* particular narrative structures persist and recur across independent post-trauma contexts; the direct adaptive payoff, while plausible and consistent with the data, remains an interpretation rather than a measured outcome.

Displacement and loss narratives further illustrate the operation of evolved coalitional psychology. Accounts from participants such as Respondent 06 and Respondent 24 emphasized kinship, mutual dependence, and the dangers of separation, reinforcing the centrality of group cohesion under threat. These findings resonate with evolutionary models suggesting that perceptions of external threat intensify in-group bonding and sharpen social boundaries (van Vugt, 2009). In post-war Southeast Nigeria, where state-level narratives discouraged explicit ethnic mobilization, storytelling provided an indirect yet potent mechanism for maintaining group identity and vigilance.

Comparative evidence strengthens this interpretation, though the parallels require careful specification. In post-genocide Rwanda, oral narratives of displacement and survival have been shown to sustain communal identity even under official discourses of unity (Thomson, 2013). Similarly, studies of post-war European populations indicate that family-level storytelling preserved memories of displacement and loss in ways that reinforced intergenerational bonds (Assmann, 2011). The Southeast Nigerian case thus reflects a broader pattern in which vernacular memory practices compensate for institutional silence, ensuring continuity of identity and social knowledge. It should be noted that these comparisons hold at the level of *structural and functional* similarity — the means by which vernacular storytelling sustains identity and transmits knowledge in the absence of formal memory institutions — rather than implying equivalence in historical scale, nature of harm, or political context. The comparison to Holocaust testimony in particular is deployed here with care: it is used narrowly to illustrate a recognized narrative mechanism (the reconstruction of starvation into agentic accounts) and is not intended to equate the qualitatively distinct historical circumstances of the two cases.

Survival ingenuity narratives — prominently featured in testimonies by Respondent 33, Respondent 09, and Respondent 10 — reveal another layer of adaptive function: prestige-based transmission and behavioral modeling. By foregrounding innovation under

constraint (e.g., improvised storage systems, herbal medicine production, covert trade), these narratives elevate individuals and groups who successfully navigated crisis conditions. From an evolutionary perspective, such stories function as prestige cues, guiding learners toward behaviors associated with success and resilience (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001).

This dynamic closely parallels findings from studies of Japanese American internment narratives, where stories of ingenuity and endurance were selectively transmitted to reinforce cultural pride and adaptive identity (Nagata, 1998). In both cases, narrative emphasis shifts from victimhood to competence, thereby shaping not only memory but also future-oriented behavior. The Southeast Nigerian data suggest that such reframing contributed to broader patterns of post-war recovery, including the well-documented entrepreneurial resurgence in Igbo communities.

Religious and spiritual interpretations add a further dimension to this adaptive framework. As articulated by Respondent 19 and multiple focus group participants, wartime suffering was frequently interpreted through lenses of divine testing, moral purification, or ancestral intervention. These interpretations provided existential structure to otherwise chaotic experiences, aligning with psychological research demonstrating that religious meaning systems enhance coping under conditions of uncontrollable stress (Pargament, 1997; Park, 2010).

From an evolutionary standpoint, such frameworks can be understood as meaning-making systems that stabilize cognition under uncertainty, reducing anxiety while reinforcing moral order and social cohesion. Comparative studies from post-World War II Europe similarly show that religious narratives helped communities reinterpret devastation in ways that supported emotional recovery and social reconstruction (Assmann, 2011). In Southeast Nigeria, the blending of Christian and indigenous cosmologies further enriched this process, producing culturally specific yet functionally analogous outcomes.

Intergenerational transmission patterns provide particularly strong evidence for gene-culture coevolutionary processes. Descendants such as Ugochukwu Eze and Osita Omeke described repeated exposure to adapted narratives that preserved core lessons while moderating emotional intensity. This selective transmission aligns with models of cultural evolution in which information is filtered and reshaped to maximize retention and utility across generations (Mesoudi, 2011).

Importantly, the data reveal that not all aspects of trauma were transmitted equally. Graphic or destabilizing elements were often minimized, while narratives emphasizing endurance, unity, and ingenuity were preserved. This selective retention mirrors findings in Holocaust memory studies, where intergenerational narratives tend to foreground survival and moral coherence rather than unprocessed trauma (Hoffman, 2004). Such patterns suggest that cultural transmission is not passive but actively shaped by adaptive pressures, favoring narratives that enhance psychological resilience and group continuity.

Gendered variations in storytelling further extend the adaptive scope of these narratives. Female participants' emphasis on caregiving, emotional labor, and child survival reflects domains critical to immediate survival and long-term social reproduction, while male

narratives focusing on protection and economic recovery address complementary adaptive challenges. This division aligns with broader evolutionary perspectives on the sexual division of labor and its influence on knowledge transmission (Wood & Eagly, 2012).

Crucially, these gendered perspectives did not operate in isolation but interacted within family and community storytelling contexts, producing a more comprehensive repertoire of survival knowledge. Similar complementarities have been documented in World War II oral histories, where gendered narratives collectively enhanced group-level understanding of crisis management (Summerfield, 1998). In Southeast Nigeria, this diversity likely increased the overall adaptive value of narrative transmission.

The circulation of trauma narratives beyond the household – into churches, village assemblies, and apprenticeship systems – highlights their role in costly signaling and social regulation. Recounting painful experiences in communal settings entails emotional effort, which can function as a credible signal of commitment to group identity (Sosis, 2003). In a context where overt political expression of grievance was constrained, such storytelling practices provided a subtle yet effective means of reinforcing solidarity and deterring defection.

Situating these findings within a broader comparative framework underscores both universal and context-specific dynamics. Across post-atrocity societies – including Holocaust survivor communities, post-genocide Rwanda, and post-civil war Spain – vernacular storytelling has consistently emerged as a mechanism for preserving identity, transmitting knowledge, and regulating emotion in the absence of formal truth-telling structures (Assmann, 2011; Thomson, 2013). However, the Southeast Nigerian case is distinguished by the rapid imposition of national unity without institutionalized memory processes, intensifying reliance on informal narrative systems.

These findings challenge reductionist views of trauma as purely debilitating. Instead, they support a more nuanced perspective in which collective memory practices exhibit both costs and adaptive benefits. While trauma undoubtedly imposes psychological burdens, the narratives analyzed here demonstrate how communities actively reshape suffering into forms that sustain cohesion, guide behavior, and support long-term resilience. This duality aligns with emerging perspectives in evolutionary and cultural psychology that emphasize the functional dimensions of memory and storytelling under conditions of stress (Boyd, 2018; Mesoudi, 2011).

Methodologically, the study's reliance on pseudonymized oral histories foregrounds grassroots perspectives often marginalized in elite-centered accounts of the Nigerian-Biafran War. By integrating these narratives with evolutionary theory, the analysis moves beyond descriptive historiography to offer a functional explanation of how and why certain memory practices persist. Limitations – particularly those related to retrospective recall and survivor attrition – remain inherent but were mitigated through triangulation, member-checking, and cross-generational comparison.

In sum, the trauma narratives examined in this study exemplify how imaginative culture operates as a core human adaptive capacity. Through storytelling, Southeast Nigerian communities transformed catastrophic experience into structured knowledge systems that

enabled meaning-making, reinforced social bonds, regulated emotion, and transmitted resilience across generations. These findings not only deepen understanding of post-war Nigerian society but also contribute to broader debates on the evolutionary functions of narrative, demonstrating their applicability within non-Western historical contexts. They ultimately affirm a fundamental insight: that even in the aftermath of profound devastation, human communities possess the cultural and cognitive resources to transform suffering into stories that sustain life.

Conclusion

This study has examined oral trauma narratives in post-war Southeast Nigeria (1970–1980s) as vital adaptive expressions of imaginative culture. Through qualitative analysis of oral interviews and focus group discussions with 48 participants, the research revealed how survivors and their descendants transformed experiences of starvation, displacement, loss, survival ingenuity, religious interpretation, and communal solidarity into coherent, shareable stories. These narratives were not mere recollections but dynamic cultural mechanisms that supported collective sensemaking, reinforced kin-based and ethnic identities, facilitated emotional regulation, and transmitted resilience across generations within a context marked by official silence and socio-political reintegration pressures. The central thesis – that post-war trauma storytelling operated as a functional adaptive strategy consistent with evolutionary theory – finds strong support in the consistency, structure, and social functions of the narratives documented.

Accounts of extreme hunger, for instance, were not simply descriptions of deprivation but were consistently framed through arcs of improvisation, endurance, and partial recovery, emphasizing ingenuity under constraint. Narratives of displacement similarly highlighted fear and loss while foregrounding kinship networks as critical resources for survival. Stories of wartime innovation – ranging from improvised food systems to informal trade and healing practices – were often conveyed with a sense of pride, embedding moral lessons about resilience and creativity. Religious interpretations further reframed suffering within broader moral and spiritual frameworks, offering existential coherence and reinforcing communal values. Across generations, these narratives were selectively adapted – less graphic in detail but preserving core lessons – ensuring their continued relevance and emotional accessibility. Together, these patterns demonstrate how storytelling operated as a structured and purposeful response to collective trauma.

Theoretically, the findings advance evolutionary studies of imaginative culture by illustrating how universal human capacities for narrative interact with specific historical and ecological conditions. The prominence of motifs such as hunger and ingenuity, the patterned intergenerational transmission of moralized stories, and the embedding of experience within symbolic and religious systems align with key evolutionary concepts, including gene–culture coevolution, coalitional psychology, and costly signaling. These narratives enabled communities to maintain cohesion, transmit adaptive knowledge, and regulate emotional responses without reliance on formal institutional frameworks. In doing so, they exemplify how imaginative culture can fill socio-political voids, particularly in contexts where official narratives limit public engagement with traumatic pasts.

Placed within a global comparative perspective, the Southeast Nigerian case both resonates with and diverges from other post-atrocity contexts. As in other societies affected by large-scale violence, storytelling served to transform suffering into narratives of agency, preserve identity, and guide future behavior. However, the absence of formal truth-telling mechanisms and the rapid imposition of national unity intensified reliance on informal, vernacular channels of memory transmission. This distinctive configuration underscores the importance of local political and cultural conditions in shaping how universal narrative capacities are expressed. By contributing a grounded African case study, this research enriches broader scholarship on trauma, memory, and cultural adaptation.

The study also addresses significant gaps in Nigerian historiography and the evolutionary humanities by foregrounding grassroots perspectives from the immediate post-war decades. Rather than focusing on elite narratives or institutional accounts, it highlights how ordinary individuals and communities engaged in ongoing processes of cultural reconstruction through everyday storytelling practices. The identification of gendered narrative emphases and the mapping of narrative circulation across domestic and communal spaces further demonstrate the complexity and reach of these imaginative practices.

Certain limitations must be acknowledged. As with all oral historical research, retrospective accounts are subject to processes of memory reconstruction, and the declining number of direct survivors constrains the temporal depth of available data. Moreover, as the theoretical framework makes clear, retrospective qualitative evidence cannot conclusively measure adaptive fitness consequences; the paper's claims are therefore framed as functional and consistent with evolutionary prediction rather than as demonstrated selection outcomes. Nonetheless, methodological rigor — through triangulation, member-checking, and sustained engagement with participants — enhanced the credibility and richness of the findings. Future research could extend this framework through comparative studies across different Nigerian regions or by examining how these narratives are being reshaped in contemporary digital and diasporic contexts. Longitudinal approaches would also offer valuable insights into how subsequent generations reinterpret and mobilize inherited trauma narratives. In addition, future work might seek more direct evidence of adaptive outcomes — for example, by comparing narrative practices across communities with differing reintegration trajectories — to strengthen the link between storytelling and resilience.

In conclusion, the trauma narratives examined in this study underscore the profound human capacity to transform suffering into meaning through imaginative culture. In post-war Southeast Nigeria, oral storytelling emerged as a resilient and adaptive response that sustained identity, fostered cohesion, and transmitted survival-relevant knowledge across generations. These findings affirm that imaginative culture is central — not peripheral — to human adaptation. By documenting and theorizing these practices, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how societies navigate the aftermath of collective violence, demonstrating that even in the absence of formal structures of remembrance, communities possess enduring cultural resources for reconstructing meaning, continuity, and hope.

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