Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni Struggle and the Aesthetics of Spectacle

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In many of his writings, Ken Saro-Wiwa, the slain Nigerian dissident writer and minority rights activist, shows a consistent preoccupation with the burdens and anxieties of minority citizenship in a multi-ethnic state. In Nigeria's vast political and cultural landscape, Saro-Wiwa's Ogoni are an endangered peasant community in the South Eastern tip of the Niger Delta region—a region where for half a century, the oil drilling activities of transnational companies have spawned horrendous social and cultural death. In some of his texts, namely, *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1985), *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (1989), *Prisoners of Jebs* (1989), *Pita Dumbrok's Prison* (1991), etc., Saro-Wiwa uses a miscellany of figural modalities such as irony and sarcasm, repudiation and contradiction, as well as revision, anger and satire to expose and challenge the tyranny of Nigeria's nationalist modernity.

But as he observes in his detention diary *A Month and a Day* (1995), literature's corrosive impact on the psychology of tyranny particularly in Africa can be painfully slow as rulers choose to ignore writers, knowing that the majority of the people are unable to read and write. To press his message home and to invite attention to the particular urgencies of his society, then, Saro-Wiwa believes that the writer must also be an intellectual man of action who must be involved in mass movements. As Saro-Wiwa puts it, the writer

> must establish direct contact with the people and resort to the strength of African literature—oratory in the tongue. For the word is power and more powerful is it when expressed in common currency. That is why a writer who takes part in mass organizations will deliver his message more effectively than one who only writes waiting for time to work its literary wonders. (*A Month and a Day* 81)

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL SEPTEMBER 2010 SEPTEMBRE RCLC
0319–051x/10/37.3/297

From 1990, after his literary and other imaginative arguments for a new grammar of citizenship had failed to alter the scale of dominant morality in Nigeria, Ken Saro-Wiwa tries to reterritorialize his narrative to the grassroots as a way of galvanizing communal support and participation. A milestone of this phase of his activism was the formation in 1990 of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) a community-based mass mobilization organization aimed at galvanizing the Ogoni to resist in a non-violent way, the continued denigration of their environment by the oil conglomerate Shell, and to demand justice and fair representation in the Nigerian state.

As a mass movement, MOSOP itself was an umbrella body to several other social and cultural formations throughout the Ogoni Kingdom. Some of these include: Federation of Ogoni Women Association (FOWA), National Youth Council of Ogoni People (NYCOP), Ogoni Students Union (OSU), Council of Ogoni Churches (COC), Ogoni Teachers Union (OTU), Conference of Ogoni Traditional Rulers (COTRA), and Council of Ogoni Professionals (COP). Under the platform of MOSOP, Ken Saro-Wiwa and the leadership hierarchy composed a document called the *Ogoni Bill of Rights*, where they catalogue the many deprivations of Ogoni as an oil-bearing community, and demand reparations from the Nigerian state and Shell (Saro-Wiwa 1995: 67-70). Key demands in the *Ogoni Bill of Rights* include (a) the political control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people, (b) the right to control and use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development, (c) adequate and direct representation as of right in all Nigerian institutions, and (d) the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation. This document was forwarded to the Nigerian government, and ignored. Subsequently, MOSOP under Saro-Wiwa organizes protests, vigils, demonstrations, election boycotts, and organization of seminars, mass enlightenment campaigns, local and international media campaigns, composition of petitions to the United Nations Organization, and campaigns for the review of the Nigerian constitution.

In this paper, I examine how the Ogoni use demonstrations, boycotts, petitions, etc, as counter-narrative forms possessing "a formative energy in the dynamic of history" (Sfez: 1999, Colin Caret: 2003). Since demonstrations and protest marches help to collectivize the people and serve to canalize diverse oppositional sentiments, I will interpret these forms as elemental sites of popular sovereignty. Further, since the law is frequently used by the Nigerian state to legitimize and naturalize its repression of minority communities, I examine how dissenting groups transgress and de-legalize the law in their pursuit of a more egalitarian modernity. Throughout this paper, I use what I shall term the *aesthetics of spectacle*—a cardinal tenet of the theatre, as the main interpretive idiom to examine how Ogoni communal refusal is mobilized against a national and transnational technology of oppression.

In general terms, the act of spectacle (from *specere,* "to see") involves the act of putting things on display, of letting things be seen. But as a feature of representational politics particularly in its oppositional forms, spectacle acquires a more semantic

and insurrectional weight by pointing to a refusal to conceal a social plight or, quite simply, a dramatic declaration of dissent. In their tussles with dominant modes of power, marginal narratives frequently resort to the strategy of spectacle as a way of dramatizing deeply sedimented grievances in the open arena of discursive relations. Since dominant discourses tend mainly to suppress the representation of marginal experiences from popular knowledge, minoritarian narratives try to overcome their suppression through a dramatic display of refusal. In this way, narratives such as carnivals, riots and demonstrations and rallies, boycotts, voice votes, public nudity, suicide bombing, and walk-outs when used counter-discursively, emerge as ways of spectacularizing grievance and protest.

In the Niger Delta of Nigeria where the denial of the right to resource and ecological control is the tonic force behind various acts of dissidence, the peoples' protests frequently take the form of *carnival*. Carnivals are forms of melodrama staged mainly to mock and undermine dominant notions and practices, and the value structures that energize them. Always rich in mimicry, pretence, imitation and disguise, carnivals function as a jovial formalization of dissent. Among the Ogoni, the Ogoni Day carnival held annually on January 4th is the most important date in the community's agitational calendar, with over 300,000 Ogoni men, women and children participating in the first Ogoni Day carnival in 1993. A month later, on 27th February of the same year, thousands of Ogoni converged at the launch of the One Naira Ogoni Survival Fund (ONUSUF) where ordinary Ogoni publicly demonstrated their commitment by donating the token sum of one Naira (the Nigerian currency) to the communal struggle.

During these carnivals, which are these paradoxical moments of painful jubilation among the Ogoni, all differences of class, age, status, gender and education are momentarily suspended. Here, the clown and the reveler may interact and play with the wise, the rich with the poor in the community, as oppositional bonds and networks are strengthened and concretized. In the songs and speeches given during this momentary rebirth of culture, the power of the state to frustrate the aspirations of a people is mocked as the oppressed try to reaffirm their humanity through the oxymoronic idiom of playful seriousness. All the energetic drumming, stumping, singing and masquerading that characterize such carnivals may be seen as acts of cultural assertion by a community faced with cultural extinction. But they are also part of the broad Ogonian hymnology of resistance. The Ogoni folk song "*Aaken, aaken, Ogoni aaken*" (Arise, arise, Ogoni Arise), sung at almost every such gathering clearly illustrates this point.

In his influential study on the insurrectionary merits of the carnival as a site of popular sovereignty, Mikhail Bakhtin (1965) points to its de-hierarchizing power, the ability of the people during carnival both to parody and abrogate the immutable codes and ordinances of official and dominant power. As Bakhtin puts it, "While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject to its own laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (7). The carnival, Bakhtin writes,

"was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (10).

In Ogoni, many popular anti-authoritarian events such as the annual Ogoni Day carnival are celebrated with passion and pageantry in a way that suggests a communal yearning for an alternative utopia. During these carnivals, the community itself tends to emerge as a differentiated habitat of power in which the totalizing powers of the state are triumphantly overruled. An Ogoni participant in one such gathering once told this writer with ungrammatical finality: "They cannot fit to kill Ogoni today. They cannot fit to kill Ogoni tomorrow. Ogoni will remain here forever, because this is our land."[2] The logic of the carnival, then, was to perform and spectacularize this communal determination to outlive all odds. In his address to the mammoth carnival of the Ogoni in 1993 at the Ogoni Survival Fund launch during which an unprecedented seven hundred thousand Naira (N700, 000) was raised, Ken Saro-Wiwa expressed similar sentiments on the resilience of the Ogoni counter-narrative, when he said:

> we are witnessing the birth of a new phenomenon, the decision of a small group of people that they will not tolerate their dehumanization even by people of the same colour of skin. And that all the guns in the world, the casuistry of dictatorship and the threat of death and imprisonment cannot deter a people determined to secure their God-given rights and protect their inheritance. (*A Month and a Day* 151)

But if the struggle to save the land and protect its sanctity was framed in such absolute terms by the community, it is because in Ogoni as in most communities in the Delta, the land is often seen as the location of life or as an ancient inheritance. Indeed here, the land is also viewed as an integral part of the community's spiritual ecology and is accordingly worshipped. Thus, the destruction of the land can only mean the death of culture—the sentencing of the community to collective spiritual perdition. In such a context, communal resistance whenever it occurs tends to ossify into an epic, life-and-death struggle.

From its beginnings, the Ogoni struggle had been conceived in line with the Gandhian principle of non-violence. This meant that like all non-violent narratives, this was a communal struggle propelled only by the sheer power of its moral argument and the creativity of its methods of engagement. The challenge was to find the appropriate mechanism through which the people's sentiments may be expressed. In choosing the technique of spectacle among others, Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni hoped to etch the Ogoni plight indelibly on the national memory. Through melodrama, playful ruse, demonstrations and other forms of theatre, they sought to compel both the State and transnational capital into a new moral contract with the Ogoni community, a contract in which justice and equity emerge as the organizing tenets of material relations.

In addition to the annual carnivals of protest, then, the Ogoni also use street marches and *riots* as part of their attempt to reclaim their control of the environment and to protect their sacred grooves from the ravages of oil exploitation. The riots

were staged sporadically near Shell's production sites all over Ogoniland in order to protest against the latest toxic spills from Shell's production pipelines; or even in Port Harcourt, the oil metropolis, where they protest particular instances of injustice such as the arrests of community leaders. But as the state became more brutal and repressive of dissent, particularly in the early and mid 1990's during Nigeria's darkest moments of military rule, the Ogoni became even more defiant in their demonstrations and riots.

A watershed moment in these riots happened in April 1993 when Shell's attempt to lay oil pipelines across village farms and living premises in the Ogoni community of Biara was resisted by a crowd of protesting women and youth who waived mainly palm twigs and sang struggle songs. Despite the killings and arrests of some protesters by state forces, thousands of Ogoni protesters massed at Biara, forcing Shell to abandon its projects and quit Ogoni land.

Now, although riots and demonstrations are sometimes viewed by official discourses as acts of lawlessness which must be suppressed or dispersed, it is in fact possible to cognize these forms of social expression as processes through which perceptions of power are dramatized by individuals and groups operating within a social milieu. As social acts, demonstrations typically ripen into discursive practices once they relate in one way or another to the dominant order of power. If they are used against the grain of hegemonic thought, as in our context, then demonstrations emerge as a tactic of disidentification because they open new frontiers of action foreclosed by dominant thought processes.

In his brilliant study of the purposes of riots and revolts by African Americans in the United States of America, Falaiye (2003: 145-57) makes the point that rather than be seen as mere acts of lawlessness and criminality, riots may be understood as part of the discourses of resistance used by racially and economically marginalized groups to register their rejection of the legitimacy of a system that decentres and dehumanizes them. Through riots and other acts of civil disobedience, Falaiye argues, "The entire value structure, which supports property rights over human rights, which sanctions the intolerable conditions in which black people have been forced to live, is questioned" (147).

But demonstrations function as forms of narrative practice in yet another sense: more than any other form, it is these practices that generate the spectacle through which we actually see and hear the many micro-stories of a people's disenchantment with the dominant order of things. Indeed riots may be understood as acts of narration because they speak of a people's disaffection; as the demonstrators converge we could almost feel a critical synthesis of social anger. As more and more people pour onto the streets to join in the procession of the oppressed, demonstrators are able to transfigure individualist anger and deprivation into a communal and even transcommunal energy. And as they dramatize their grievances, we witness the formation of a new organism of sovereignty outside the dominant politics of subjugation.

Under Nigeria's draconian laws, all land and mineral resources wherever they may be located are owned by a central authority—the State—which is then tightly controlled by a tiny, often unaccountable cabal. Through their surrogates across the land, they are able to create an illusion of governmentality. By appealing incessantly to notions of nationalism, the state hopes to deaden the impulse for active citizenship and to seduce its citizens into passivity and subjection, in thrall to the "nation". Thanks to its vast structures of power, particularly its armed forces, the state imposes a uniformity of perception around practices agreeable and in harmony with the ideas of the dominant groups which hold and exercise power within it.

The ability of such discourse to persuade or coarse fragmentary groups across vast swathes of territory "where practices would otherwise be conditioned by narratives, discourses and theories deriving from greatly different interpretive traditions to diverse regional experience" is what Richard Peet calls a narrative's *hegemonic extent* (2002: 28-54). (See also Terdiman 1985, Marais 2001, 2002: 313-317).

But the disidentificatory practices enacted by groups such as the Ogoni are significant because they rupture the state's nationalist homology, by pointing to a dissimilar nucleus of radical citizenship within the "nation". Through their acts of refusal, they create a different discursive territory in which an alternative rhetoric of nationhood is thinkable. This rhetoric is anchored on the hinges of liberty, cultural freedom and the respect for community property rights. It is a rhetoric that refuses to be subservient to the totalizing assumptions of the state, but recognizes the masses of the people as the authentic base of popular sovereignty. When the Ogoni chant "*Aaken, aaken, Ogoni aaken*" (Arise, arise, Ogoni Arise), therefore, we see a community forging its own signs of communal citizenship in a land of counter-myth, outside the master signs of the nation.

But even in other practical terms, the Ogoni have tried to step away from the state's rituals of power. On June 12 1993 the Ogoni took a historic decision to boycott a national election—the only community in Nigeria to do so. In an interview before the elections, Ken Saro-Wiwa as leader of MOSOP justified the decision for the boycott in these words:

> I don't see any taking part at all. They (the Ogoni) will be foolish to do it. Why go to vote for somebody who is going to oppress and ruin you. The 1989 constitution is a complete disaster. With all the amendments, even the structure of the country is wrong. What has Nigeria got to offer the Ogoni people except death under the 1989 constitution? ("We Will Defend")

Whenever they are organized, elections have always served as one of the strategic processes by which a state may legitimize its powers. Therefore to participate in an electoral process is to partake in a critical ritual of power, and to accept to be obedient to that power. But to boycott a process is to refuse that process and all its underlying assumptions.

As a narrative of refusal, boycotts are often used by dissenting individuals and groups to inscribe disaffection and resistance. In his 1959 campaign for the economic

ostracization of Apartheid South Africa for example, Julius Nyerere, as the president of the Tanganyika Africa Union, canvassed for a global boycott of all South African goods. "Can we honestly condemn a system and at the same time employ it to produce goods which we buy and enjoy with a clear conscience?" Nyerere asked. For Nyerere, boycotting South African goods was the only way in which "we can give meaning to our abhorrence of the system" (Nyerere, "On the Boycott").

In discursive relations between individuals and groups, therefore, boycott can serve as a marker of *interractional rupture,* a signifier of discontinuity. Used in a political context by dissenting groups such as the Ogoni, boycott functions as what I must call a *modality of mockery* because it disrupts the smooth synchronicity of the state's hegemonic practices and renders them strategically and hopelessly incomplete. In taking the oath of office, the winners in the elections would swear to obey and protect the constitution, but the Ogoni were against the spirit and letters of a law which suppresses and disinherits them. By standing away from the state's hierachizing practices, then, the Ogoni were able to cast a symbolic vote *against* the state.

But now, it must be noted that the mobilization of the Ogoni as a counter-narrative community by Ken Saro-Wiwa and other leaders was never itself unproblematic. From time to time, certain ideological and tactical cleavages have emerged within the counter-narrative project as the struggle took a more revolutionary turn. The first problem in this regard, of course, was that of communal authority.

Ogoni is a gerontocratic and "traditional" society where leadership was naturally expected from traditional chiefs, as well as from older and therefore "wiser" individuals. The emergence of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), a mass organization driven mainly by youthful and radical energy, clearly undermined this traditional ontology of power. The result was always a teleological tension between the "traditionalists" who favoured a more measured if compromising approach, and the more radical elements who chose a radical oppositional modality of engagement with Shell and the Nigerian state.

Indeed as tension grew stronger within MOSOP itself, G.B. Leton, the inaugural president of the movement resigned his position over disagreements on the decision to boycott national elections in 1993. G.B. Leton and some MOSOP leaders such as Edward Kobani had reputations as mainstream politicians, and so wanted the Ogoni to participate in an integrationist way in national politics. According to Saro-Wiwa, both leaders had also supported Shell's laying of a highly contentious oil pipeline network across the local land (*A Month and a Day* 174). Indeed on several occasions elite factions of the Ogoni community purported to be have been encouraged by the state had issued statements ruinous to the reputation of MOSOP. Shell itself had eagerly used these factional statements in its international campaigns to stigmatize Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP, and to try to demonstrate the incoherence of the Ogoni narrative (*A Month and a Day* 158-163).

It is striking that Ken Saro-Wiwa was tried and eventually executed by the State, on the charge of inciting the public lynching of four Ogoni elders with whom he

often strategically disagreed. Until his death, Saro-Wiwa strongly denied these allegations. But if as Wole Soyinka (1996: 151-2) says, the State ("the common enemy" is the term he uses) was itself complicit in the deaths of the four Ogoni elders, then it is would seem that the tussles within MOSOP among other factors provided the para-text for that complicity. Frequent personality clashes among MOSOP leaders, notably between Saro-Wiwa, Kobani, Leton, Albert Badey, and others, also served to exacerbate the tension within the movement.

But besides the ideological cleavages within MOSOP, the life and public personality of Ken Saro-Wiwa reveal even profounder contradictions. Saro-Wiwa was not always an anti-establishment critic, for he had worked with various military regimes in Nigeria, even holding high political positions. In the heat of the Nigerian civil war, Saro-Wiwa was appointed the Sole Administrator of the strategic oil port of Bonny by the Federal military government headed by Yakubu Gowon. Perhaps Saro-Wiwa's appointment speaks more to his closeness to the military and political hierarchy of the time than to any other consideration. As Sole Administrator he reported and accounted not to the people and leaders of Bonny, but to the unelected junta in Lagos.

When the Diete-Spiff military administration took over in the newly created Rivers State from 1968, Saro-Wiwa was again appointed to key cabinet positions. In fact, Saro-Wiwa was between 1968-73 civil commissioner for such ministries as Works, Land and Transport; Education, and Information, Culture and Home Affairs, respectively. Similarly, during the infamous Ibrahim Babangida military era, Ken Saro-Wiwa was again appointed the national director of the Directorate of Mass Mobilization for Self Reliance, Social Justice and Economic Recovery (MAMSER). His main duty during this period was to mobilize Nigerians to support the policies of what was regarded as one of the most profligate and brutal military regimes in Nigeria. Saro-Wiwa later resigned his post. But given this background, it seems obvious that formally or informally Ken Saro-Wiwa was close to the same structures of power against which he was later to struggle.

How can such dissonances and complicities within Ogoni as a counter-narrative community be interpreted? In what ways do such complexities challenge our understanding of the nature of narratives of opposition? Here, Tejumola Olaniyan's observation elsewhere is cogent when he notes that in social movements "there is always complicity, for the ground of resistance is veritably impure" (1992: 47-55). In a similar way, James Ogude (1998: 33-34) has pointed out that even within such resistance groups as the Mau-Mau in Kenya, it was possible to find conflicting tendencies within its discursive structures.

It is possible, therefore, to interpret the conflicting perspectives of the leadership of MOSOP on the question of boycott as reflecting the dialectical tension between the regressive and progressive elements within the counter-narrative project itself. These tussles were over what specific narrative protocol to adopt in relation to hegemony. The popular adoption of the motion to boycott the national election in 1993 even in the face of opposition from nationalist politicians within MOSOP under-

lines the resilience of the progressive forces within the movement. Similarly, if, as Frantz Fanon suggests, a community's traditions become "fundamentally unstable and are shot through by centrifugal tendencies" in moments of mass struggles, then the toppling of the traditional ontology of authority in Ogoni by MOSOP as a mass movement represents an attempt to fling open new frontiers of popular sovereignty within Ogoni as a civic entity (Fanon: 1966: 180).

But the contradictions exhibited by MOSOP and its leaders also prove that oppositional discourses can, on a closer look, be astonishingly many-voiced and multi-directional. As they negotiate their relations with dominant systems of power, these discourses seem to embody an occult capacity to affirm and negate, as well as to locate and re-locate their discursive positions all at different moments in time. This is why in his study cited earlier, Bakhtin alerts us to the organic ambivalence that is the stamp of carnival laughter, pointing always to the unnerving contradictoriness that forms its very core. Carnival laughter, Bakhtin says, is "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival" (12). This may also be why narratives of resistance tend sometimes to bear stains of connivance with the same dominant power which they seek to dethrone.

For example, in spite of MOSOP's strong mobilizational abilities and ideological attraction, there were in fact many individuals within the Ogoni community who remained radically indifferent to the Movement and its structures, preferring instead to operate against the State from the darkness of their own anonymity. They use everyday forms of resistance such as rumour-mongering, myth-making, tax evasion, disrespect for the State's symbols—its flag, its anthems and institutions, etc. But there were yet others (called the "Vultures" in Ogoni agitational lingo) who simply consorted with the State and the oil consortiums against the interests of the community, in their quest for personal advantage.

For Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni community, then, the power relationship with the State was similar to what Foucault calls "agonism"—a sort of complex interplay between the " the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom" (2003: 139). Despite its various ambiguous contacts with dominant state power, the Ogoni community proves ultimately unwilling to relinquish its most elemental freedoms.[3]

Now if, as we have seen, Saro-Wiwa and other MOSOP leaders were effective in mobilizing the Ogoni in their arduous struggle against the discourses of oppression; they were even more effective in shaping national and international opinion on the plight of the Ogoni. The local and international facets of the campaign fed and reinforced each other, with the former often framing and shaping the approach and dimension of the latter. Within Nigeria, the Ogoni case so eloquently canvassed by Ken Saro-Wiwa in the most conspicuous public arenas, helped to re-ignite the interest of pro-democracy and human rights activists on the problems of minority citizenship in a multi-ethnic state. In the context of decades of successive military regimes and the attendant unfreedoms in Nigeria, the Ogoni rebellion emerged in

the 1990s as a veritable site in which all shades of activists could converge to formulate and canvass a new grammar of citizenship in a democratic and egalitarian state.

In placing the Ogoni case in the Nigerian public domain, Ken Saro-Wiwa had to rely on his access to the popular media where he had a reputation as a trenchant political columnist with *The Punch, The Vanguard* and the *Sunday Times* newspapers. He was also a successful screen and television producer. Indeed the unprecedented success of his television situation comedy, *Basi and Co.*, which ran on national television for a record of five years (1985-90), and had an estimated viewing audience of 30 million, made Saro-Wiwa a household name and established his reputation in the arena of cultural production. To present the Ogoni plight, Saro-Wiwa had to seize the opportunity afforded by his access to the print media to address and reach a wider audience, while drawing from his screen production experience to achieve graphic force and visibility for the Ogoni in print. As he was to later recall in his detention memoir:

> The newspaper column widened my reading audience and spread my ideas to a considerable extent. Week after week, I made sure that the name Ogoni appeared before the eyes of the readers. It was a television technique designed to leave the name indelibly in their minds. Sometimes I would deliberately provoke readers or fly a kite in the acerbic and political column. And I invariably got the sort of reaction I expected (*A Month and a Day* 65).

But here again, Saro-Wiwa's conscious use of a television technique even in his print media campaigns for the rights of his community reinforces the notion that the Ogoni struggle was carefully imagined as one to be conducted within the aesthetic realm of spectacle.

Even as it took on the world stage in the early 1990s following the persecution of its leaders by the Nigerian state, the Ogoni struggle continued to be expressed through the technique of spectacle. Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP became actively involved in the activities of such transnational advocacy platforms as the Ethnic Minority Rights Organization of Africa (EMIROAF), and the Unrepresented Peoples Organization (UNPO). While EMIROAF promotes the human and ecological rights of indigenous groups in Africa, the Geneva-based UNPO champions the cause of marginalized and endangered communities across the world. As bodies such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Bodyshop, PEN International, etc, joined the Ogoni campaign, the story of the struggle of a Nigerian minority community demanding environmental justice became a regular feature in such Western news media as the *New York Times, Newsweek, Time* magazine, Cable News Network (CNN), the British Channel 4 and many others.

Finally, when Ken Saro-Wiwa and his other eight compatriots were hanged after a sham trial by the Nigerian military junta, on November 10, 1995, one of the images projected by the media around the world was the haunting spectacle of Saro-Wiwa addressing a grim-faced crowd of the Ogoni at a public square. This was a fitting tribute to a man and a community who, in their momentous tussles with the discourses

of oppression, used only the most effective tools in the storehouse of the theatre in their arguments for the freedom and dignity of man.

In a 1993 interview with *The News* magazine in Nigeria, two years before his death, Ken Saro-Wiwa expressed what he believed to be the transnational signification of the Ogoni struggle within a globalized vision of oppression. He said:

> I am recreating the Ogoni people, first and foremost, to come to the realization of what they have always been which British colonization tried to take away from them. So my effort is very intellectual. It is backed by theories and ideas which will, in fact, matter to the rest of Africa in the course of time. ("They Are Killing")

It is necessary, in concluding, to examine the place and significance of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni within the corpus of dissident culturalist discourse in Africa and beyond.

Firstly, the ability of Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP to link and transfigure localized struggles for environmental justice into a transnational narrative of social change is increasingly acknowledged by critics as a seminal epistemological shift in the arena of cultural and identity politics. For example, Biodun Jeyifo contends that the broad and unambiguous global support for the Ogoni cause proves that "the basic unit for conceiving the most oppressed, the most down-trodden as a social aggregate is no longer the nation-state; rather, it is what we might call the true communities of suffering and resistance". For Jeyifo, the Ogoni narrative marks a "political-ideological seismic shift in the struggles of the late 20th century for political, cultural, economic and ecological survival of most of the people of our common earth" (XXIV: 1998).

Similarly, in a study on the cultural and environmental politics of Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP, Susan Comfort (2002: 229-246) suggests that because the Ogoni struggle was defined in terms of "indigenous" identity in a way that connects it to other oppressed ethnic identities elsewhere, it feeds into the "political goals that include resistance to global maldevelopment." Comfort makes the point that "Indeed, the Ogoni are now regularly featured as anti-globalization icons by the left media in the West." This view converges with Jeyifo's argument that until the appearance of Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP on the scene of identity politics in Nigeria, ethnically framed liberation movements had hardly inspired widespread endorsement, known as they were for their secessionist and exclusivist rhetoric. As Jeyifo puts it:

> It is thus the supreme achievement of Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP that they have shaken off this ideological odium and have given unquestionable moral and ideological force to their insistence on the specific plight of the Ogoni while at the same time recognizing that the Ogoni are not alone, that other communities and individuals also suffer from the same chain of linked local, national, and global exploitative and repressive forces (xxv).

But the intervention of Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP in dissident discourse is seminal in yet another sense. While many other dissident movements tend mainly to be classist formations adopting a top-down elitist strategy, the Ogoni movement was

a holistic communal narrative consolidated by horizontal alliances rooted in the common Ogoni folk community itself. As the Movement's decisions and strategies must be ratified at every point by the common Ogoni peasantry who supply its vital energy, class stratifications within the movement were blurred and Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP leaders were themselves no more than moral carriers of a communal mandate.

In other words, Ken Saro-Wiwa's cultural argument for ecological and social justice was valid only because it was intricately linked to the Ogoni folk imaginary of communal ecological rights. Saro-Wiwa himself admits this when he conveys his impression of the people's reaction to his speech at a public rally:

> From the reaction of the sea of faces down below, you would have thought that I had been lecturing them for years. Indeed, on reflection, I now realize what happened. I was not telling this people anything they had not known. I had only given voice to the facts they had harboured in their hearts for years but which they dared not express for fear of the expected reprisals which they knew the Nigerian state would not hesitate to visit on them (*A Month and a Day* 103).

It was appropriate then that until his death, Ken Saro-Wiwa always thought of himself only in symbolic messengerial terms as the "spokesman" of the Ogoni people—a kind of moral steward called to active communal duty.

The particular mettle of Ken Saro-Wiwa's activism, therefore, lay not merely in its ability to straddle the false chasm between theoretical dissidence and practical resistance; by mobilizing a community through carnivals, demonstrations and other popular forms of protests such as we have seen, Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP were able to elevate the question of environmental sanctity to the status of a communal cultural manifesto. And because they chose the strategy of spectacle to publicize and protest their plight, always linking this with the plights of others elsewhere, the Ogoni were able to galvanize the moral comradeship of other groups and communities around the world.

The challenge is for other communities of the world to continue the struggle—the struggle to reconstruct the often neglected connection between the state of the natural ecology and the health of our common cultural life.

Endnotes

1. Dr Austin Tam-George is Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Research at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa.

2. Interview by the writer at the Ogoni Day celebration at Bori, Ogoni, January 4th 2005.

3. For an opposite perspective on the nature of power relations between the ordinary people and the State in postcolonial Africa, see Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*, particularly chapter 3, pp. 102-141. For a brilliant critique of Mbembe's own views, see Jeremy Weate's "Achille Mbembe and the Postcolony: Going Beyond the Text."

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