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Memories of the Ogoni Tragedy

Sanya Osha

The 17th edition of the Lagos Book and Art Festival (LABAF) commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight compatriots over three long days in November 2015. The event whose theme was entitled, 'Texts of Self-Determination' - a reference to the Ogoni quest for semi-autonomy- had elaborate readings of his work, discussions of books by various other authors on his life and work, more discussions of books on Nigeria and the events that led to Saro-Wiwa's unfortunate fate and a host of varied cultural activities involving poetry, dance and music. Sometimes, it felt like too much within a short period of time. There was even a couple of literary competitions, one for the best review of a literary work by Saro-Wiwa and the other by school children honing their writing skills.

Kezia Jones, a Paris-based Nigerian musician thrilled the audience on the opening night with a mix of deft guitar work accompanied by a troupe of dancers who deployed modern and traditional moves in the same breath. There wasn't much singing in the act but there was a lot of ceremonial invocations of life and creativity. Beautiful Nubia, a Canadian-based Nigerian artiste also employed dancers as the main spice of his performance. His dancers were earthly, vigorous and rather quite Afro-beat-cum highlife influenced. There was even a string ensemble that offered a diet of deceptively subdued tunes that was nonetheless impressive for its stark contrast to the heated sessions that occurred earlier in the day. Indeed there was music aplenty each night after the discussion panels had concluded.

Saro-Wiwa possessed all the romantic and leadership qualities to change the course of Nigerian history and not just the Ogoni cause which was informed by a basically ethnonationalist drive. Saro-Wiwa decided to wage his struggle during a dire epoch in Nigeria's political history. The June 12 presidential election crisis of 1993 was at its height.

Moshood K.O. Abiola had won the elections but was refused his mandate by a selfish cabal headed by the then military ruler of the country, General Ibrahim Babangida. Rather than swear in the winner of the polls, Babangida elected to hand over power to Ernest Shonekan, a former CEO of United African Company (UAC), a multinational corporation with strong colonial antecedents. On the evening Shonekan was delivering his acceptance speech, a huge fly kept buzzing around his head as if it were fecal matter. Shonekan was widely viewed in the West of the country as a betrayer of the broad-based Nigerian democratic cause. He looked weak, ineffectual and spoke in an unvarying and often annoying monotone that appeared to expose a lack of confidence. In just four months, he was duly ousted from power by the gloved fist behind the throne: General Sani Abacha.

Abacha was meant to have retired along with his erstwhile boss, Babangida but it was decided it was better that he remained behind so as to conceal the skeletons and dirty linen of the previous rulers of the country. As they say, never trust anyone with power. Abacha turned out to be probably the worst monster to have ruled the country. Serving the country was least of his concerns. He merely wanted to gorge himself on the intoxicating spoils of power and nothing else. His public demeanor was inscrutable; taciturn, dour and largely undemonstrative. His eyes remained mostly hidden and his lips barely moved. It was hard to fathom what he was thinking behind those dark sunglasses. But his

feudal attitude seemed to disclose one thing; all Nigerians lived at his mercy and he was prepared to wield the big stick to prove the point. And he did often have to prove the point.

He established an elite corps of personal bodyguards headed by the redoubtable Major Mustapha who terrorised and brutalised everyone that crossed him. Distinguished men who were old enough to be his father were reduced to weeping emotional wrecks in short order. Mustapha couldn't impress himself enough with his inexhaustible capacity for torture. Illustrious professors were reduced to begging for their sanity and lives. A particular infamous crack shot, Sergeant Rogers grew to prominence in Mustapha's elite corps. Rogers is notorious for having slain the gallant and sartorially elegant Kudirat Abiola, the wife of the then detained politician in broad daylight.

All radical political figures were either to be co-opted or eliminated by the regime. Foremost amongst those murdered was Alfred Rewane who was dispatched of in his twilight years. A few supposed radicals such as Ebenezer Babatope and Olu Onagoruwa joined the Abacha cabinet as ministers and destroyed all their democratic credentials in one stroke. The real radicals were forced to flee abroad for safety.

Abacha indeed became Nigeria's worst imaginable nightmare. He behaved like a child capable at any moment of the most infernal tantrum; one that meant the power over life and death. He held on to the levers of power like an infant might have clutched bars of candy and wasn't prepared to let go until all his perceived enemies were dead and buried. His viciousness and oddity hasn't yet been successfully captured in fiction for the mere reason that he exceeds the bounds of the imagination and thus leaves it sorely inadequate.

The only artist capable of depicting and satirising this psychological oddity was Fela Anikulapo-Kuti who was well into decline when Abacha took on the reigns of power. Kuti was already ill and slowly dying. Abacha's anti-drug czar, General Bamayi sent his goons to Kuti's residence to have him arrested and handcuffed. Kuti was then paraded before TV cameras, his grey streaked mane wildly unkempt, looking as gaunt as a skeleton and unusually withdrawn. Insiders of the Kuti empire claim this single act of brutal insensitivity more than anything else hastened his death. He died less than a year later.

Bamayi, the spineless general who had ordered the gross violation of the global icon grinned with a ridiculous gap-toothed mouth over his supposed victory. Abacha and his henchmen were unabashedly anti-culture and civilisation; they were out to kill, maim and destroy because that was what was required to rule and hold onto power. It was this unbridled lust for power that created one of Africa's most devastating dictators.

It took a great deal of courage to confront Abacha knowing that it could only mean one thing; certain death. Apart from the radical activists who spoke out against Abacha's inhumanity, mention ought to be also made of the role played by what was left of the independent press.

The independent press was certainly responsible for the myths that built Abacha into a veritable figure of terror. Abacha wasn't interested in rarified notions of public relations; he had no public relations machinery worth mentioning to burnish his image. Indeed, it could be said that he had no understanding of the concept let alone its utility. Within this obvious gap the independent press stepped in.

Abacha emerged as an autocrat who was reckless and whimsical. The state had been hijacked by an unfeeling despot who was in turn ruled by caprice, veniality and unpredictable rage. He held cabinet meetings with ministers individually and not collectively so as to employ the divide-and-rule tactic to maximum effect. Also, he held most of his meetings at night and matters of state languished unattended to. The country tethered on the brink of absolute administrative collapse while he continued to siphon the contents of the national fiscus at rate hitherto unknown.

Petroleum which is the country's main source of foreign exchange was controlled by Abacha and his circle of cronies. At one point, he was responsible for the importation of a brand of oil that smelled highly toxic. Dwellers of congested cities groaned and held their breaths as the reek suffocated everyone. In a country awash with natural gas and oil, long queues emerged at gas stations that lasted for weeks. Motorists took to passing nights at the stations waiting for elusive fuel. An exorbitant black market flourished as a result of the artificially created scarcity. Abacha couldn't be bothered by the muted complaints of the citizenry. Instead, he took to flying in call-girls without travel documents from Asia. He had also become a Viagra addict on account of his insatiable appetites.

When Abacha died mysteriously in 1998, he was rumored to have been indulging his favorite pastime even though his first wife had provided him with almost a dozen children. Abacha was the most unreal anomaly that could happen to any nation. The only suitable comparison to him is Mobutu Sese Seko of what used to be called Zaire. The two despots rather than manage their countries plundered them relentlessly. Zaire, now called the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is yet to recover from the prolonged plunder orchestrated by the Mobutu regime. Mobutuism, survives after the fall and eventual demise of Mobutu; it has become a way of life, a systemic form of nation-wide dissolution that has resulted in warlordism, and chronic conflict and violence that are self-replicating. These kinds of violence and disintegration were also evident in parts of Nigeria.

It was within this scenario of sociopolitical malaise that Saro-Wiwa launched his project of ethnic self-determination. Abacha reduced the country to a pariah nation when he hanged Saro-Wiwa and the eight others. Nigeria was immediately suspended from the Commonwealth of Nations. The country lost friends, goodwill and considerable standing among the comity of nations and its people suffered immeasurably as a result of this precipitous fall in status. A state that exhibited such a fragrant disregard for human life, democracy and human decency just couldn't be taken seriously and the only figures to counter this unenviable reputation were its artists of global stature.

Under the Abacha regime, the country was slowly being suffocated by despair, paranoia and the airless claustrophobia engendered by ruthless police state. Saro-Wiwa's severest crime was having the courage to dare this state. His death paradoxically was a fervent burst of life amid the zombie-like existence to which many Nigerians had been reduced. His death was the final wail of indomitability in the face of apparent ceaseless and mindless tyranny; a tyranny that subsequently disgorged its tyrant of value and humanity. Abacha stands for a curse everyone struggles to forget while Saro-Wiwa has been transformed into a hero whose promise all and sundry jostle to realise. The despot's currency is death which causes his irredeemable disappearance while his victim is eventually resurrected by the same death that ends his earthly sojourn.

The Ogoni crisis which reached its peak in Nigeria in the 1990s has divided all the major stakeholders in the conflict. In this case, the major stakeholders are the Nigerian state, the multinational petroleum concerns, the Ogoni community (along with other oil-bearing communities in

the Niger Delta) and the rest of the Nigerian populace. These merely refer to the broad-level stakeholders but there are undoubtedly other important ramifications within the classificatory parameters just mentioned. For instance, within the Ogoni community there are divisions along the lines of those who are pro-government and those who uphold an opposing stance. These divisions run deep and define the more subtle contours of conflict amongst the Ogoni people.

Due to the fact that the major stakeholders of the conflict are unable to reach a consensus as to problem-solving approaches, there have been incessant outbreaks of violence in the Niger Delta region where Ogoni communities are to be found. In this regard, the major policy problem is what approach may be adopted to halt the seemingly unending tide of violence? The oil wealth produced by communities such as the Ogoni is perhaps the glue that holds the Nigerian federation together. The state understands this and this is why it gives knee-jerk responses to any conflict emerging from the Niger Delta. It needs the wealth to keep the various organs of the state apparatus functioning and to prevent the entire nation from grinding to a halt. As such, it has not been absolutely clear to itself about how to keep functioning on the resources provided by petroleum with little or no conflict from the communities that produce them. A large part of this lack of clarity stems from a sense of anxiety. The state often hesitates when it confronts the question: Can the Nigerian state survive without the oil wealth produced by the aggrieved petroleum generating communities?

The major source of conflict between the Ogoni people and the oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta generally on the one hand, and the Nigerian state on the other, is the inability to agree upon an acceptable revenue allocation formula between the two major stakeholders. Nigeria is a federation made up of at least two hundred and fifty ethnicities who often feel distanced from the state. The state is not always viewed as an impartial arbiter and defender of the common good as it is historically an extension of the colonial apparatus. The Nigerian state has also been deformed by decades of military rule and at other instances civilian mismanagement.

Oil wealth, as a result, has been mismanaged and looted by government functionaries and their collaborators in various sectors of society. Of course, the Nigerian state even when admitting to its deplorable history is unwilling to yield to the demands of the oil-producing communities and so the cycle of violence continues. It is not enough to label the youth of the Niger Delta as outright criminals even though there is widespread criminality occurring in the area.

It is important to admit that there has been a dire mismanagement of oil wealth by representatives of the Nigerian state who often work in collusion with multinational actors. It is also important to note that ethnicity rather than being mobilised as a rich source of diversity and been deployed by myopic powerbrokers as a chancre of divisiveness. As noted one of the major sources of conflict is the lack of a mutually acceptable revenue allocation formula. This factor generates other problems of its own such as failure to deliver basic amenities of life to the oil-producing communities in view of the stupendous oil wealth they generate.

The areas suffer from overcrowding, poor roads and transportation networks, inadequate medical facilities and educational institutions among other drawbacks. All these further fuel the grievances of the people in those communities. Criminally-minded people in turn exploit these grievances with acts of lawlessness that are conducted on the pretense that they are lashing out against decades of impunity on the part of the Nigerian state. They claim that that the state is incompetent, partial and corrupt and has consequently lost the moral high ground by which to act in accordance with their interests.

The activities of these criminal actors often manage to infiltrate those of legitimate social activists working for the improvement of living conditions in the Niger Delta. In other words, illegal armed gangs can be found alongside legitimate social movements ostensibly campaigning for a similar set of social concerns. Sometimes this blurs the demarcation between illegality and proper conduct. This blurring in turn impairs the lens through which policymakers dealing with the Niger Delta perceive the crisis. Armed gangs masquerade as social activists in kidnapping foreign workers of multinational oil concerns and ask for large sums in foreign currency. They issue death threats if their illegal monetary demands are not met. Gun-running is widespread in the region thereby contributing to the general state of insecurity. Subsequently, the incidence of armed banditry is spreading well beyond the oil-producing communities in the south. It is rapidly being transformed into an instrument to pursue and gain political power in other parts of the country. Part of this is as a result of a prevailing culture of impunity in the oil-producing communities.

The common view proffered by the Nigerian state is that indigenes of Ogoni land and the other oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta have a tendency towards lawlessness and are bent on undermining the Nigerian nation. They are seen as secessionists and outright rebels. But is this an entirely correct view? Not quite. The Nigerian state cannot be judged as an impartial player in the conflict. Its evolution from a colonial state to a *rentier* one ought to be addressed from a broader historical canvas than is often employed.

In periods of chronic military dictatorship, the state became transformed into an instrument of oppression just as it was during the colonial era. Beginning from the colonial era, grievances in Ogoni land had been mounting. The state had no adequate mechanisms in place to assuage those grievances. Even the historical context of those myriad grievances is equally important. Indigenes of Ogoni land are quite small as a minor ethnicity when compared to other major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Hausa-Fulani political elites which have largely dominated the seat of power are usually viewed with mistrust and deemed to be insensitive to the plight of the inhabitants of the oil-producing minorities. The Igbo, another major eastern Nigerian ethnic group are also viewed with suspicion by the oil-producing minorities.

During the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), the Igbo as an ethnic group intended to secede from the Nigerian nation taking along with them virtually all the oil-producing minorities in southern Nigeria where most of the petroleum resources of the country are concentrated. Ken Saro-Wiwa claimed that oil was the major cause of the civil war. In many respects, he was correct. Oil-producing communities such as the Ogoni people are thus sandwiched between a number of major ethnic groups that did not appear to understand or appreciate their plight.

This created a siege mentality in Ogoni land as well as a persecution complex amongst its indigenes. Never did the Nigerian state up to the moment of the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight compatriots on November 10 1995, devise a cogent strategy to address this siege mentality which afflicted the Ogoni people. Instead it resorted to the militarisation of the territory and employed forceful measures in quelling demonstrations and dissent. Of course, this only worsened the prevailing siege mentality and persecution complex in Ogoni land and other similar communities. This in turn created the space for lawless actors in those communities to move in and begin to act under a variety of social concerns: resource control and allocation, equitable federalisation, environmental consciousness and cultural and political self-determination.

Sectors of the state-controlled media often tried to portray both lawless and law abiding inhabitants of Ogoni land unpalatably. They were simply construed as rebels bent on truncating the pan-Nigerian project. When embarking on researching and writing my book on the crisis entitled *Ken Saro-Wiwa's Shadow: Politics, Nationalism and the Ogoni Protest Movement*, I attempted to examine the various historical strands behind this popular façade. I posed the questions; Who are the Ogoni people? What are their psychological complexes? What are their problems? How do they live in comparison to other Nigerians? What are their fears and expectations?

I also posed the following questions relating to the Nigerian state: What are the historical antecedents of the Nigerian state? Can it be said to be impartial given the fact that it monopolises the instruments of force and controls the mechanisms of governance? How sincere was its drive towards democracy? These are some of the questions I posed regarding the Nigerian state to give the ongoing conflict in Ogoni land and the Niger Delta generally a deeper historical context. They, hopefully, provide alternative ways of viewing the problem.

I delved into various theories of conflict management and resolution. I consulted theories dealing with the problems of managing complex multi-ethnic societies. I also surveyed processes of truth and reconciliation in nations (such as South Africa and Chile) undergoing elaborate rituals of social healing. I realised it was unhelpful for the Nigerian state to maintain the guise of an impartial party in the ongoing conflict. It required rigorous critique and reconstruction after decades of militarism. If oil-producing territories such as Ogoni land needed to be demilitarised so did the state's approaches to conflict management. I went on to argue that entire sectors of Nigerian society needed to be demilitarised including civil society itself.

Indeed many civil society institutions, cultures and practices had become tainted with militarism and were in urgent need of transformation to meet the imperatives of democracy. Demilitarisation cannot thus be confined to state policies alone or the forcefully administered oil-producing territories. It is a process that must pervade the whole of Nigerian society including other African nations that have similar historical experiences. In addition to the demilitarisation of the polity, it is important to keep all channels of dialogue open between the aggrieved oil-producing communities and the Nigerian state. The employment of force by either of the parties has only contributed to the spiraling of the conflict. In recent times, the Nigerian state called for amnesty for armed rebels willing to lay down arms. This is a step in the right direction and confirms the long term effectiveness of dialogue and a non-militarist approach.

I also advocated the adoption of democracy and democratic practices for a number of reasons. First, the channels of dialogue are freer and more vibrant under democracy. Second, governmental accountability is more open to public scrutiny under democratic rule. Finally, the use of force becomes more glaringly anachronistic and perhaps more morally reprehensible. These are some of the measures, conditions and views I advocated during the height of crisis when Nigeria was still within the clutches of military rule.

Much has changed about the situation of the insurgents since the death of Saro-Wiwa. With the Niger Delta flush with money and arms, rebels and criminals now have more bargaining power and some observers claim they have the sort of capacity to cause mayhem on the scale of say Boko Haram. The only thing not to have changed is the anger the indigenes of the region feel towards the Nigerian

nation which many claim is a ticking time bomb. It would appear that disaffection and rebellion have become attractive career options for youth ostracised by decades of social and economic exclusion, neglect and abuse which from the point of view of building a cohesive country are certainly of not much use. As a result of the activities of the rebellious youth in the region, the notion of ‘the boys’ has changed drastically from its colonial meaning of third class subjects or natives, as the case may be, to a category of men who ‘run things in the streets’, who are, as it were, solidly in charge.

The city of Lagos twenty years after Saro-Wiwa has changed considerably. It has rebounded with its customary vibrancy, élan and flair. The move of establishing Abuja as the federal capital rather than Lagos sucked a measure of life out of the latter. The military elite and their civilian bureaucrats absconded to the interiors of the country carrying along with them a large portion of its federal wealth yet Lagos has managed to thrive and retain its imaginative vigour in an almost miraculous style. When the city decided to honour the memory of Saro-Wiwa, it did so with its customary aplomb and distinction. A range of participants were involved; high school kids, poets, artists, musicians and lovers of the arts were all there. The spirit of resistance Saro-Wiwa embodied was evident in the manner the city chose to remember the departed hero underlining the fact that with or without state support self-sufficiency and resilience were all that are needed to fashion a worthwhile existence.

Jahman Anikulapo and Toyin Akinosho of the Lagos Book and Art Festival led the team that organised the commemoration of Saro-Wiwa which turned out to be a success as there was a little something for everyone within the crowds that graced the occasion. Each night, there were different genres of music; highlife, Afrobeat, classical, reggae, funk, Afropop, rock and urban contemporary. The event ran from morning until past midnight during a couple of days and it did indeed feel, at moments, a trifle too much to digest all at once. Anikulapo and Akinosho counter such misgivings saying, “this is a festival” and one cannot but agree that in the spirit of fiesta, it was very much a remarkable feast of riotous creativity.

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