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Ken Saro-Wiwa's Africana Womanist Vision of Environmental Justice

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Abstract

My paper examines the feminist poetics of Ken Saro-Wiwa's methodology of protest. Utilizing a gendered pathos, Saro-Wiwa evoked the female body as a metaphor, signaling a connection between the colonization of the land, indigenous peoples, and women in his speech. In the organization of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), he also utilized traditional West African systems that valued a complementary Africana womanist vision of community. In addition, the demonstration he is most remembered for is distinctly patterned after traditional West African female methods of protest. During the 1990's, already as an established writer, Saro-Wiwa honed his gift with script to create a powerful, resonating call to action for Ogoni residents who were victims of a new form of imperialism in the name of oil in the Niger Delta region. His methods inspired worldwide human rights and environmental activism.

By now, the much-publicized Ogoni struggle to attain Human Rights in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of southeast Nigeria is linked with the iconic image of Ken Saro-Wiwa. Albeit controversial at times, Saro-Wiwa has come to represent the battle of the oppressed in the name of oil. A literary renaissance man, before his hanging death at the hands of the corrupt Abacha military regime,

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Saro-Wiwa had published or produced poetry, plays, short-story collections, essays, political treatises, children's stories, folklore and even a television series. His literary and popular work is best known for utilizing farce in order to satirize contemptible social conditions as a result of colonial and neocolonial infiltration. Scholars such as Mary Harvan (1997) have also observed his usage of folkloric elements in his literary and political works, celebrating pan-Ogoni nationalism and decrying the corruption of indigenous and ethnic minorities' autonomy through the decimation of the natural environment. Harvan has also noted his usage of oration, repetition, slogans, morals, multiple narrative voices, and Ogoni folklore archetypes. Furthermore, in recent years, theorists have begun to acknowledge the seemingly ecological feminist politics in his protests. However, his work more appropriately represents Africana womanist thought. His politics, an emulsion of communally-oriented, gendered, spiritual and environmentally conscious poetics are much in line with Africana womanism.

To many westerners, Saro-Wiwa's valuation and essentialized embodiment of the environment would suggest an ecological feminist perspective. Nonetheless, to label Ken Saro-Wiwa an ecological feminist would be a misnomer, a reductionist misappropriation of a complex traditional African cosmological scheme. In his attempts to resist what he called, "indigenous colonialism" and "environmental genocide," Saro-Wiwa created a uniquely Africana womanist rhetoric of protest. By evoking the female body through his speech and mass demonstration, Saro-Wiwa's rhetorical strategy inspired a regional issue to become an international one. This reading does not suggest that Saro-Wiwa spoke *for* her, but rather *through* her. In his poetics, he utilized the "female" body in two distinct ways: in one sense, the female body became a metaphor for environmental and cultural genocide. In another sense, the peaceful mass demonstration he is best known for, culminating on January 4, 1993, was clearly derived from cultural gender-specific methods. In sum, what marks Saro-Wiwa as an Africana womanist is his communally oriented redeployment of traditional Africana resistance methods.

An Africana Womanist Notion of Justice

Clenora Hudson-Weems has been credited for developing Alice Walker's nascent vision of Womanist politics into the fully articulated theoretical notion of Africana womanism in *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. According to Hudson-Weems (1993, pp. 154-155):

> The Africana womanist is 1) self-namer; 2) a self-definer; 3) family-centered; 4) genuine in sisterhood; 5) strong; 6) in concert with the Africana man in struggle; 7) whole; 8) authentic; 9) a flexible role player; 10) respected; 11) recognized; 12) spiritual; 13) male compatible; 14) respectful of elders; 15) adaptable; 16) ambitious; 17) mothering; and 18) nurturing.

Furthermore, "It is grounded in African culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women" (1993, pp.154-155).

Later, Hudson-Weems (2005) addressed the "flip side of the coin" with her discussion of the role of men. She argued the need for a "concerted struggle with both Black men and women together aiming at eradicating their shared oppression" (138). Ken Saro-Wiwa's resistance methods can be thought of as such. Saro-Wiwa's body of work suggests that traditional African cosmological spirituality and concern for community, rather than western agonist and masculine concerns, matches Hudson-Weems's vision of Africana womanism.

Part I: Embodiment Of Mother

Africana womanism is grounded in faithful adherence to traditional pre-colonial customs that empowered individuals through the family locus. The Ogoni, like many African ethnic groups, traditionally extend their notions of family to include the environment. In 1992, Ken Saro-Wiwa published *Genocide in Nigeria*, a direct plea to the international community to intervene on behalf of the Ogoni in their plight to oust multi-national corporations and the Nigerian

government in the oil-rich Niger Delta region. In *Genocide in Nigeria* he rhetorically embodied the land:

> The land is a god and worshipped as such… "Tradition" in Ogoni means in the local tongue (*doonu kuneke*) the honouring of the land (earth, soil, water). . . . In some cases, [earth, soil, water] are deified, and erring human action can desecrate them and therefore bring disaster upon the people who are regarded as custodian. . . . The Ogoni ancients knew that the land which was their inheritance was rich farmland. . . They did everything to preserve this rich inheritance. (1992, pp.12-14)

The environment is a live, breathing organism—a matriarchal entity in the sense that it can both inherit and disinherit descendents. The land is an agent; its decisions are dependent on the actions of its inheritors. The land is vulnerable, yet powerful. While it is vulnerable to destructive aids, the land has the power to "bring disaster on its people." Interestingly, rather than advocating modernist patriarchal notions of productivity through harnessing and controlling the land in order to exploit her resources, Saro-Wiwa has advocated for his readers to beckon to the earth's needs. In this sense, like the Africana womanist directive, while it is mother earth's duty to provide the fruits for nourishment, through her body, the child's job is to take care of earth.

If the earth can be thought of as a spiritual, yet physical embodiment of motherhood, the human woman is only an extension of a larger network of mothers. However, this network of mothers occupies a distinct space, the interstice between the mind and body, encompassing the "whole" being as Africana womanism advocates. The Ogoni as a whole depend on fishing, farming, and trading for sustenance, but the Ogoni movement, foremost, focuses on the detrimental impact on women and children. Women, and children as an extension of mothers, become the most victimized of victims.

Scholars like Diana Barikor-Wiwa (1997, October 31), sister-in-law to Saro-Wiwa and Tracey Longo (1996, March) have argued that, whereas men could escape by migrating to urban areas, women and children could not, and as a result, suffered the most. In Barikor-

Wiwa's words, "Traditionally, when an Ogoni woman gets married, her husband is required to give her a piece of land to farm. It is from this farm that she feeds her family and grows food for sale in order to buy other staples." As a result, women, rather than men, become the bearers of Ogoni tradition. By highlighting the connection between women and the earth, Saro-Wiwa made the symbol of the raped and pillaged earth synonymous with the rape and pillage of women. When Saro-Wiwa talked of oil being the blood of the land, this blood symbolically represented the blood of women. The scarred and bleeding landscape is the scarred and bleeding body of a woman.

Furthermore, using "gendered class analysis" Terisa Turner (1997) has critically delineated the exclusion and victimization of women. She theorized about the corrupt collusion between elite male chiefs, the Nigerian government, and colonizers, who later became neo-colonizers during the modernization period. In essence, under Turner's analysis, the unwaged labor power of women, as the primary farmers and traders in many communities, has been exploited to meet the ends of local, national, and international profiteers in a system she has described as the "male deal." This close link between labor, production, and bodies, puts women at the very center of debates about land use. Women become the direct targets of the environment's exploitation, while men are indirectly affected. Colonial traditional practices changed communal resources to male resources, thereby reducing women's efficacy as agents.

It is important to note that victimization is not gender-exclusive; rather, the hierarchical system is dually class-oriented. Even in her analysis of this patriarchal collusion, men, individually, do not fare well. In particular, uneducated farmers, young men, and boys, who do not have the political clout, wealth, or education to leave the traditional lands, are also victims of patriarchy.

Part II: Communally-Concerted Movement

Even as men are also victims within the "male deal," females became the chief body politic emblematic of this violence in its slogans and the formation of the movement. Nonetheless, the Ogoni move-

ment has never been exclusively female, or even feminist. Instead, the system behind the rhetoric of a female body politic enables men to become fighters in the movement, seeing themselves foremost as sons and second as males. According to Barikor-Wiwa

> "a lot of the movement was based on stories he [Ken Saro-Wiwa] had collected over the years about what the women complained about . . . So we supported Ken, the feminists. Ken was very well supported because he was very furious about [the erosion of] women's rights." Saro-Wiwa had been finding out about the impact of the oil industry by asking farming women, "because when the community is based on agriculture it [oil] affects its culture, it affects its traditions, it affects its language. It affects everything about the community. So when that basis is completely eroded, there is nothing left." (as cited in Turner, 1997, http://www.uoguelph.ca/~terisatu/Counterplanning/c3.htm)

In effect, men like Ken Saro-Wiwa umbilically retain a connection to their indigenous identity through the presence of their mothers' reverberating voices. Saro-Wiwa embodies the women's experience through the process of storytelling. Temporarily, he and other males, occupy the bodies of females. Stories enable subjectivities to undergo transfer, allowing for the possibility of the victim to become the oppressor and the oppressor to become the victim.

For Ogonis, this transfer happened first through men like Saro-Wiwa, who witnessed the suffering that local village women faced through the stories they shared with him. Subsumed by this new female identity, through the process of storytelling, Saro-Wiwa's identification point became that of a witness. Like Saro-Wiwa, men returned from the urban landscapes in an effort to save their "mother"land. Those who were still in Ogoniland, witnessing the devastation firsthand, became mobilized as "sons"—extensions of their mothers—bound to their motherland, Ogoniland. Only secondarily did they view themselves as "males"—independent, autonomous beings. Through the process of becoming "sons," rather than unattached voyeurs, these men became firsthand witnesses, firsthand victims, and ultimately, firsthand fighters. For many, Ken Saro-Wiwa ushered this homecoming.

For many Ogonis, "homecoming" was not fully realized until January 4th, 1993. Ken Saro-Wiwa utilized traditional gender-specific resistance methods throughout his campaigns, but he is most celebrated for organizing this 1993 protest. When over 300,000 Ogoni men, women, and children organized to protest Shell-BP and the Nigerian government's corrupt actions, demonstrators sang, dance, and spoke, rather than advocating violence. Community, rather than war, became the chief method for voicing concerns and affecting change, and their physical bodies became their weaponry.

This is due in part to traditional structures that created spaces to maintain the complementary balance of powers between men and women. In most traditional West African cultures gender roles are neutral and complementary. To Oyeronke Olajuba (2004, p. 42), who has extensively researched traditional Western African systems of cosmology and language, both pre- and post-colonial, unlike many Western linguistic systems, there is "no pronoun for sexual distinction." According to Olajuba, this is evidence that traditional pre-colonial Nigerian notions of power were quite different from the Western customs that developed during colonization. There was no hierarchical notion of male and female, for instance. Hierarchy was often dependent on seniority, rather than gender. "This neutral complementarity is here taken to refer not to equality or parity but to cooperation and specified areas of control for the female as well as the male" (2004, p. 43). Similarly, the Ogoni language, Eleme, is gender-neutral (Good 7).

Cooperation between men and women began during pre-colonial and colonial periods when women's councils and advocacy groups in what is now called Nigeria were a force to be reckoned with. Chaired by women, these councils would advocate on behalf of women who were abused or mistreated by their husbands or other men in the community. Collectively, these women's associations would offer council or exact punishment when abuses were reported. For example, the women in the village would collectively stop cooking for their husbands or withhold sex until demands were met.

In other circumstances, women would storm compounds, holding men "hostage" by refusing to let them leave, using dance and song to

demonstrate their grievances. Judith Hannah (1990) has described the importance of the body as a weapon in her article on Nigerian women's movements. According to Hanna, historically, dance has been a powerful political and apolitical tool, as well as a representation of cultural identity. In villages, women danced at ceremonies to celebrate births, deaths, religious celebrations, community events, and harvests. The body issued its power through the instrument of dance. In a "shame-oriented society," dance is often the "ultimate means of social control." According to Heather Turcotte (2002, p. 7), in what she has called "spirit movements," women would dance en mass to publicly ridicule corrupt community members. Accompanied with satirical songs, these protests defamed culprits.

The most well-known example is the "Women's War of 1929" in which tens of thousands of Igbo women from the Niger Delta region, protested unfair tax laws imposed by colonial officials. The decreased revenue effectively oppressed women's potency in economic, as well, as socio-political arenas. Using dance, song, and nakedness, women resisted the silencing rhetoric of the patriarchal colonial regime.

It should be no surprise that women played a vast role in the organization of the 1993 demonstration. Utilizing traditional structures that empowered communities through complementary men's and women's councils, Saro-Wiwa organized and led the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1993. An umbrella organization, MOSOP is made up of nine units, including a unit for women, Federation of Ogoni Women's Associations (FOWA) and National Youth Council of the Ogoni People (NYCOP), for Ogoni youth, (many of whom were the discontented boys who have become the armed militants in the post-Saro-Wiwa days) (Barikor-Wiwa, 1997 October 31).

In concluding, it is important to address specific points of contention that may surface in response to my analysis. Just as Saro-Wiwa risked essentializing through his notions of a united Ogoni, I realize that I risk essentializing through this rhetorical inquiry. However, I do so in order to signal the connection between physical bodies, minds, environmental landscapes, and capital. Saro-Wiwa champi-

oned a unifying movement in order to address the direct and indirect concerns of people within his region. Likewise, re-imagining the poetics of his protest through an Africana womanist lens enables readers to locate the interstice between tradition and modernity. Cross-culturally, cross-spatially, and cross-temporally, the female body has always occupied this space, paradoxically envisioned as a site for both endless opportunity and repression.

The Africana womanist revaluation of the woman, in cooperation with the male, mobilized communities in an effort to fight their shared oppression. The profound effect of integrating traditional gender-specific methods for resistance and usage of the symbolic female body in concert with male members of the community ushered in an era of international response. Groups such as International Pen and environmental and human rights groups like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and even the Sierra Club advocated on the behalf of the Ogoni and other minorities and indigenous groups in the Niger Delta region. And while some may argue that the Africana womanist label does not fully engage in the distinctly indigenous ecological aspect of Ogoni culture, Ken Saro-Wiwa's poetics and resistance methods demonstrate that he had the interests of his compatriot Africana women at heart.

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