"Dis Nigeria Sef": Ken Saro-Wiwa as the Poet Who Wasn't

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Three years after the execution of Nigerian author and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, a seemingly insignificant detail in the media’s coverage of the event remains troubling: the use of the term "poet" to describe Saro-Wiwa, particularly in much of the television and radio coverage. Certainly Saro-Wiwa was a poet, but his contributions to Nigerian poetry were minimal; especially when compared to his literary achievements in other areas: as a novelist, newspaper columnist, publisher, and writer of the popular Nigerian situation comedy "Basi & Co." that for six years was enjoyed by an audience of over thirty million.

Why then was Saro-Wiwa presented to Americans as a prototypical Nigerian poet? It could be argued that the label "poet" always confers to the troublesome postcolonial writer a set of assumed political values: among them literary universality, nonviolence, and economic disengagement. As a poet for the purposes of the broadcast media, Saro-Wiwa would then become even more patently innocent of the crimes with which he was accused; while as a prose writer the improbability of his complicity in the deaths of his political rivals in Ogoniland still had to be debated in the pages of Harper’s Magazine and The New Yorker. Or, to put it in terms of the media in question, perhaps a regime that killed poets obviously deserved more international condemnation than a regime that killed television writers.

However the label "poet" was probably attached to Saro-Wiwa for far more pragmatic reasons. Saro-Wiwa’s short lyric poems were more easily smuggled out of prison than his longer works, they came to the attention of the international news media
more readily than his posthumously published prison memoir and novel (by Penguin), and, most importantly, because of their brevity could be easily appended to pleas from human rights organizations, particularly those based on the Internet.

But to say that Saro-Wiwa may be a minor Nigerian poet does not necessarily mean that his poetry is unimportant in the study of contemporary Nigerian poetics for at least three reasons. First, Saro-Wiwa’s work challenges simplistic assumptions about the role of traditional oral literature in contemporary Nigerian literature. Second, his poems like those of J.P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo render the Nigerian Civil War as a founding literary event. For Saro-Wiwa the central drama in his nation’s poetry is civil war, not decolonization, and he chooses his political metaphors accordingly. Finally, because the poems exist in the context of international discourse about human rights (a discourse that ultimately failed Saro-Wiwa), they dramatize the debate among African literary figures about the use of English as a world language in a way profoundly different from either Chinua Achebe the globalist or Ngugi wa Thiong’o the localist.

Saro-Wiwa leaves a complicated literary legacy and one that is as inextricable from his television writing as it is from his environmental activism. Rather than sentimentalize African oral culture and uncritically assume the position of the griot as singer and storyteller, his writing was literally mediated by television. He even wrote that his task as a writer addressing a group of readers was to give name recognition to his native Ogoni people: "It was a television technique, designed to leave the name indelibly in their minds." However, somewhat disingenuously perhaps, Saro-Wiwa also made the argument that his television work represented an extension of West African oral traditions. As his
title of short stories adapted from the series indicates (Basi and Company: A Modern African Folktale), he defended the situation comedy format as an extension of traditional storytelling. So if his sit-com offered one-dimensional stock characters, unchanging and incapable of moral drama, such characters weren't necessarily imports from the West and the devices of television comedy could be seen as ultimately closer to "African narrative methods" than "the European novel with its flashbacks, psychological analyses and progressive development of character."³ Of course, at about the same time, Nobel Prize winning fellow Nigerian Wole Soyinka was showing his genteel contempt for contemporary media and Mandela's Earth is full of Soyinka's cultural clichés about television.⁴

In Saro-Wiwa's work the distance between the genres of poetry and television writing is not necessarily maintained. By the time he writes "A Walk in the Prison Yard" the condensed space of the situation comedy has become the condensed space of the prison and the stock characters are just as ridiculous and clearly delineated:

You, Private, just how many children
Do you have and how much do you earn?
The Captain's dirty whores came last night
To see the tall anthropophagite,
Swooped like vultures on my dinner
Emptied the pot and broke the china
...
The mad Major drove in yesterday
Picking a prostitute on the way
He spent a long time wagging his tail

In the other section of the jail

Furthermore, even though the poem is written from the point of view of a prisoner serving a lengthy sentence, the events all take place in the Aristotelian twenty-four hour time frame of the typical sitcom.

Although Soyinka defended Saro-Wiwa during his detention and expressed his outrage to the world community after his execution, in many ways the two men represented radically different approaches to Nigerian literature, especially with regard to their treatment of internal warfare. Soyinka writes:

I find no poetry in slaughter fields,

No lyric grace; redemptive passion, no.

Only that which came and went, as others --

The blaze of empires, salvation's ashes,

The crunch of cinders in time's cul-de-sac.

If Soyinka equates poetry with "lyric grace" and "redemptive passion" the chaotic Biafran civil war of 1966 to 1970 could never be his subject, even though it was a crucial literary event for other poets and not only motivated Saro-Wiwa's Songs in a Time of War (1985), but also J.P. Clark's Casualties (1970) and the work of martyred Biafran poet Christopher Okigbo.

In comparison with works by Clark and Okigbo, Saro-Wiwa's Songs in a Time of War has been criticized for its superficiality and contrivances. But when compared to Soyinka, a poem like "Ogale -- An Evacuated Town" offers a dramatic counterpoint to the literary niceties of the Nobel Prize winner:
A lone lean dog
Scrounging for food
Reaps human skulls
In a shallow gutter

The town itself is not a vaunted symbol of abstract conquest like Soyinka's metaphysical ashes and cinders, but is rather squalidly personified by Saro-Wiwa:

For Ogale out in the dreary rain
Her legs apart like a cheap prostitute
Exposed, utterly exposed.

Ogale is a ravished woman.

It is a landscape that Saro-Wiwa's narrator returns to in his better known Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English: "Many of the villages that I always see when I am driving to the front or returning to our camp in the hospital school are all empty … And all the houses have fall down or just ready to fall down because the bullet have made hole in the roof and the rain have entered the house and there is nobody to take care of anything at all."\(^8\)

As a member of a small ethnic group on oil rich lands, which had a history of mistreatment from the Nigerian Federal government, Saro-Wiwa had a natural sympathy for the Biafran rebels, but in the war itself he evaluated the Ogoni position realistically as a choice between "existing as one of 200 or so ethnic groups in Nigeria or as one of 50 or so ethnic groups in secessionist Biafra"\(^9\) and consequently chose the Federal side. But in “Epitaph for Biafra" Saro-Wiwa shows his ambivalence:

They will play at Rebels
And Vandals
Fill the nation with blood
And scandal.

Then they will return as agents
And angels
Laughing and weeping and begging
For minor mercies.

The Biafran rebels are transformed into "agents" and "angels," two terms that are not necessarily mutually exclusive, if the paranoia of Joseph Conrad and the visionary ecstasy of William Blake are both accepted as influences from the West on Nigerian literature.

Elsewhere Saro-Wiwa more explicitly shows the influence of what he calls "my bard Blake" and Blake's diction serves as a model for a poetry that reaches beyond the upper strata of an educated elite. This is important because the problem of inter-class communication may lie the heart of the wider debate in postcolonial studies about the use of English as a world language. Chinua Achebe, in his position as the patriarch of Nigerian literature, has argued that the use of English by Nigerian writers allows them to "speak of African experience in a world-wide language." In answer to Achebe and to Nigerian poet Gabriel Okara, Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o has charged that since language serves two purposes -- as a repository of culture and as a means for communication -- the use of English propagates colonial cultural values and makes communication outside the elite classes impossible.
Saro-Wiwa would seem to support Achebe and Okara in "The Language of African Literature: A Writer's Testimony" by claiming that "African literature is written in several languages, including the extra African languages of English, French, and Portuguese." However, while he makes what would seem to be a reactionary argument for the use of "standard" English rather than Africanized variants, he does so in defense of inter-class communication and a broader definition of Nigerian literary culture:

With regard to English, I have heard it said those who write in English should adopt a domesticated "African" variety of it. I myself have experimented with the three varieties of English spoken and written in Nigeria: pidgin, "rotten," and standard. I have used them in poetry, short stories, essays, drama, and the novel. I have tried them out in print, on stage, on the radio, and with television comedy. That which carries best and which is most popular is standard English, expressed simply and lucidly. It communicates and expresses thoughts and ideas perfectly.

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The earlier Songs in Time of War, however, ends with a long poem in dialect, one of Saro-Wiwa's "experiments," "This Nigeria Sef" which states the problem differently:

Oder people dey speak one language
Your own come pass two hundred:
Sanu, ekaro, deeyira, tank you, doo
kakifo, nonsense, you no go fit take one!
Nigeria, you too like borrow borrow
You borrow money, cloth you dey borrow
You borrow motor, you borrow aeroplane
You borrow chop, you borrow drink
Sote y you borrow anoder man language
Begin confuse am with your confusion
Anytin you borrow you go confuse am to nonsense
Idiot debtor, wetin you go do
When de owners go come take dem tings?

If the borrowing of English is simply in keeping with Nigeria's status as a debtor nation, what moral judgement is being passed on the use of English by the general population?

At his death Saro-Wiwa was reportedly working on a novel in his native Khana and may have ultimately embraced Thiong'o's position, but the drama of his arrest, trial, and execution suggests reasons to use English as a world language that are more crassly political and more obviously related to personal survival in the turbulent culture of Nigeria in the mid nineteen-nineties than the literary tone of the debate would suggest. The use of a native language assumes no threat of oppression to the writer by anything other than the remnants of traditional colonial powers. By writing in a world language Saro-Wiwa was able to draw international attention to the plight of the Ogoni people and his own dire circumstances when he was charged with the murder of four Ogoni elders. But Saro-Wiwa's show trial and subsequent execution and the failure of English speaking literary culture to save him, even at the Auckland conference, may have proved Thiong'o right. Even as the political climate changes again with Soyinka returning to Nigeria as a cultural hero, the promise of a new period of Nigerian literary activity is problematized by Saro-Wiwa's poetic legacy.
Of course Saro-Wiwa did publish his own collection of folktales translated from his native Khana, but he prefaced it with the following reservations: "The pre-literate society which these tales indicate is certainly gone; the Ogoni still fish and farm but their lives are ringed around today, not by spirits but by oil wells and gas flares, and the harsh crudity of Nigerian politics which threatens their very survival as a people." See Ken Saro-Wiwa, The Singing Anthil: Ogoni Folk Tales (Lagos: Saros, 1991)


Mandela's Earth p. 51.


Ken Saro-Wiwa, A Month and a Day 50.