

CHAPTER SIX

Drumming in the Rain: The Ogoni Struggle and the Creativity of the Crowd

“In Ogoni the people come first, and we sometimes lead from behind”.

– Ledum Mittee, President of MOSOP¹⁰.

From 1990, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s writings were ousted by his other discursive practices on behalf of the Ogoni people. Some of such activities include the formation in 1990 of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) a grassroots mass mobilization organization with the aim of galvanizing the Ogoni to resist in a non-violent way, the continued denigration of their environment by Shell and to demand justice and fair representation in the Nigerian state. MOSOP itself is 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).

¹⁰ Personal interview on January 6th, 2005.

Under the platform of MOSOP, Ken Saro-Wiwa and the leadership hierarchy compose a document called *Ogoni Bill of Rights*, where they catalogue the many deprivations of the Ogoni as an oil-bearing community, and demand reparations from the Nigerian state and Shell (See: Ken 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 degradation¹¹. This document is forwarded to the Nigerian government, and ignored. Subsequently, MOSOP under Saro-Wiwa organizes protests, vigils, demonstrations, election boycotts, organization of seminars, mass enlightenment campaigns, local and international media campaigns, sending of petitions to the United Nations Organization, calling for the review of the Nigerian constitution, etc.

As social acts and events, demonstrations, meetings, boycotts and carnivals, etc, typically ripen into discursive practices once they relate in one way or the other to the prevailing order of power in any specific social context. In other words, as forms of social expression it is possible to cognize these processes as ways in which perceptions of power may be expressed and concretized by individuals or groups operating within a social milieu.

¹¹ See Appendix (4) for the Ogoni Bill of Rights.

In this chapter therefore, I examine how the Ogoni use demonstrations, meetings, boycotts, carnivals and walk outs, etc, as counter-narrative forms possessing “a formative energy in the dynamic of history” (Sfez: 1999). 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, if the law is frequently used by the State to legitimize and naturalize its repression of minority communities, then I will examine how dissenting groups transgress and de-legalize the law in their pursuit of a more egalitarian modernity.

Finally, using the case of the Ogoni, I will argue that whenever the oppressed gather in the postcolony, they do so not necessarily to celebrate their “mutual zombification” with the oppressor as the scholar Achille Mbembe encourages us to believe (Mbembe:2001). Here, as I will show, they gather to confront the “obesity” of the state, and to attempt to re-assert the power of the people. Throughout this chapter I argue that like the Ogoni, marginal narratives can survive the malignant terror of hegemonic discourses only through the formation of oppositional networks and alliances rooted in the crowd of the disaffected and the disinherited.

In text after text as our discussion so far makes clear, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s preoccupation as a writer has been to interrogate the idea of a nation that excludes and subjugates the aspirations of its minority communities. He has used such expressive modalities as irony and sarcasm, repudiation and contradiction, revision and anomaly,

anger and humour to confront the impertinences 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, the writer must also be an intellectual man of action who must be involved in mass movements. As Saro-Wiwa puts:

He 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).

Using the auspices of MOSOP then, Ken Saro-Wiwa tries to re-territorialize his narrative to the grassroots as a way of galvanizing communal support and participation. Here, Saro-Wiwa's resort to the formation of mass-based social organizations as the bulwark of his counter-hegemonic discourse is in line with Dominic Strinati's (1995) view that the revolutionary forces must take civil society first before they can take the state, through the building of a coalition of oppositional groups. In his bid to collectivize the Ogoni through mass

demonstrations, boycotts and other forms of communal refusal, Saro-Wiwa aims to create a differentiated habitat of power in which subjugated groups may reclaim their voice and reassert their humanity. By gathering and acting *en masse*, it seems, the radical energy of the oppressed is reanimated and the fire of communal resistance is restoked.

As discursive practices, *demonstrations* and rallies are forms of theatre which may serve a duality of purposes: they may be employed either in support of a prevailing rhetoric or cause of action, or used in opposition to it. When used counter-discursively, demonstrations emerge as a technique of disidentification because they help to open new and critical frontiers of thought and action unimagined by dominant thought processes. Thus Gerard Sfez cited earlier is right when he recognizes that a demonstration “creates a balance of forces rather than repeating or reflecting one”. But beyond that, demonstrations also function as social vectors through which popular grievances and anger are expressed and dramatized. As more and more people emerge from the dark corners and hidden alleys of society and literally pour onto the streets to join in the long procession of the oppressed, demonstrators are able to transfigure individualist anger and deprivation into a communal and even trans-communal energy¹².

¹² See Appendix (4) for sample images of Ogoni street protests and rallies (called “Green Walk” to underline the ecological character of the protests).

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 interesting point that rather than the criminal activities that official narratives typically term them to be, 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 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).

Among the communities of the Niger Delta in Nigeria where life is precarious due to deliberate state policy of neglect, where the people are denied their property rights and the local ecology is randomly charred by the practices of transnational companies who prospect for oil, resistance frequently takes the form of mass action. But these collective responses serve different purposes all at once. For example, when there is an oil spill in any community in the Delta, Shell’s standard response when it chooses at all to act was always to isolate the affected community for “talks” while leaving out other closely contiguous communities which may have been impacted either through air pollution or through the region’s many interlinking waterways. But by *bonding* together in collective protests, these communities are able to overcome the rigid isolationism of transnational capitalism. In other words, as they rally around their common fate, the oppressed

communities are in the words of Edward Said “breaking the enforced rigidity that kept human beings as slaves to tyrannical outsiders” (1993:326).

Thus through a synthesis of anger, dissident groups and communities even if geographically apart are able to speak one “language” – the language of refusal. Not surprisingly then, we find that among the Ogoni as in other minority communities in the Delta, regular “meetings” are called either by MOSOP leaders, community heads or by NYCOP the radical youth body. The word “*meeting*” in the Delta, unlike in other parts of Nigeria, is as an important oppositional maxim. It carries a semantic and insurrectionary weight well in excess of its more quotidian use in places like Abuja, the seat of power, where elements of the ruling elite may “meet” to share the spoils of office and power. But among the agitating groups in the Delta, a meeting invokes a different imagery precisely because it is a political as well as a counter-narrative gathering. A call for a meeting is often a clarion call for the disinherited to gather in order to collectively compose and hammer out a common symphony of insurrection. For the oppressed, to meet, in short, is to form a new organism of sovereignty outside the dominant illicit politics of subjugation.

But in oppositional terms, meetings function in yet another way. In communities where the traditional leadership is lax, indifferent or perceived to be corrupt, these meetings have served as platforms where new and radical leaders emerge to

replace traditional hierarchies of power and influence. Through these meetings therefore, an effective, protean and mobile network of activists is formed. As a result even when certain individuals are detained, forced underground or even killed, the work of communal resistance is in fact deepened rather than weakened. But sometimes the different centres of power in a community – different because approaches, attitudes and understandings of leaders may differ – can raise the spectre of conflict in the community.

Here, the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP leaders is particularly exemplary. Ogoni is a gerontocratic and “traditional” society where leadership is naturally expected from traditional chiefs, as well as from older and therefore “wiser” individuals. The emergence of 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 the tension grew louder within MOSOP the counter-narrative body itself, G.B Leton, the inaugural president of the movement resigns his position over disagreements on the decision to boycott national elections in 1993. G. B. Leton and some MOSOP leaders like 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 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 subsequently hanged by the state, on the charge of inciting the public lynching of the four Ogoni elders. Until his death, Saro-Wiwa strongly denied these allegations. But if as Wole Soyinka (1996:151-152) says, the state ("the common enemy" is the term he uses) was itself complicit in the deaths of the four Ogoni elders, then it 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 tension within the movement. These dissensions and complicities represent tensions within Ogoni as a counter-narrative community.

But besides the ideological cleavages within MOSOP, the life and career of Ken Saro-Wiwa reveal even profounder contradictions. Saro-Wiwa was not always an anti-establishment critic, for he had consorted with various military regimes in Nigeria, even holding high political positions. His appointment as the administrator of the strategic oil port of Bonny by the Gowon military government during the civil war speaks more to his closeness to the military and political hierarchy of the time than to any other consideration. It is needless to say that as sole administrator he reported and accounted not to the people and leaders of Bonny, but to the unelected junta in Lagos.

When the Diète-Spiff military administration took root 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. He was thereafter sacked. Similarly, during the infamous Ibrahim Babangida military era, Ken Saro-Wiwa was again appointed the national director in 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 and antics of what was in effect one of the most profligate and brutal military regimes in Nigeria. Saro-Wiwa later resigned his post.

Throughout his public career, Ken Saro-Wiwa carefully cultivated and retained his close personal relationship with some of Nigeria's power elite, including its top military brass. For example, General Sani Abacha the man who ordered the judicial killing of the writer was only two decades earlier a close residential neighbour and friend of Saro-Wiwa during his time as cabinet official in the Diere-Spiff government in Rivers State. Nearly a decade after his killing, it took another old friend of Saro-Wiwa, the former military ruler General Olusegun Obasanjo (now back as civilian president), to authorize the release of Saro-Wiwa's remains to his family for reburial.

Given this background, it seems obvious that formally or informally Ken Saro-Wiwa was close to the same structures of power which he was later to struggle against. It is perhaps therefore not unfair to say that Saro-Wiwa's activist practices took firm footing only when he was clearly out of favour in mainstream politics. Indeed, this has led some of his harshest critics to charge Saro-Wiwa of vainglory and even of political opportunism (See: Daminabo, 2005: 158).

But as we have noted earlier in the first chapter, the terrain of resistance is an enormously dynamic and complex one which frequently spawns its own set of contradictions. Thus it is not unusual to notice that here and there, even champions of counter-narrative projects sometimes bear stains of connivance with the same dominant power which they seek to dethrone. This means that oppositional

discourses can, on a closer look, be astonishingly many-voiced and multi-directional – affirming and negating, constructing and dismantling all at different moments in time.

Yet the interplay of different cognitive forces within the field of opposition such as we have seen among MOSOP leaders demonstrate that an intensely imagined enterprise of resistance is never guided by unreasoned dogmata. Rather, it enables us to see that oppositional narratives are constantly self-interrogating and self-auditing discourses which while canvassing the logic of difference in the *outer* world, also dramatize signs of perceptual diversity *within* their fold. Viewed in this way, even the presence of connivance within the counter-narrative body must strike us as unsurprising, for it serves to test the resilience of the organizing ethos of the oppositional body.

Clearly, then, it is possible to view the epistemic tension within the leadership of MOSOP on the question of boycott and other issues as reflecting the progressive and regressive forces at work within the counter-narrative project itself. These tussles are over what specific narrative protocol to adopt in relation to hegemony. The popular adoption of the motion to boycott the election even in the face of opposition from nationalist politicians within MOSOP underlines the resilience of the progressive forces within the movement.

Whenever they are organized, elections serve as one of the strategic processes by which a state may naturalize and legitimize its powers. To participate in an electoral process is to partake of a critical ritual of power, and to accept to be subservient to that power. But to *boycott* a process is to refuse that process and all its underlying assumptions. On June 12 1993 the Ogoni chose to boycott a national election. In an interview before the elections, Ken Saro-Wiwa justifies the decision for the boycott in these words:

I don't see any taking part at all. They 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?¹³

The origins of the first use of boycott as a technique of avoidance and refusal is difficult if not impossible to trace, since this is a technique that could have been adopted by an individual even in the remotest context of a household conflict, in the earliest of times. However the technique was employed to telling effect in 1830 by the National Negro Convention when it mobilized for the boycott of goods produced by dehumanized Black slaves in the New World. There are many

¹³ See: Ken Saro-Wiwa's interview entitled: "We will defend our oil with our blood" in *Tell Magazine* (Nigeria) 8 February 1993.

more such instances of the use of this technique in history¹⁴ but the term itself was first coined in 1880 after Charles C. Boycott an English land agent in Ireland who was ostracized for refusing to reduce rents. In the course of time and events, whether in commerce, politics, industrial or even in international relations, boycott has gained both appeal and potency as a modality of objection.

As a narrative of refusal, boycott is often used by dissenting individuals and groups to inscribe disaffection and resistance. For example, in his 1959 campaign for the economic ostracization of Apartheid South Africa for its racial ideology which subjugates the majority of the native black population there, Julius Nyerere, as the president of the Tanganyika Africa Union, called for an African and 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”¹⁵.

In discursive relations between individuals, groups and nations 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 within the nation, boycott emerges as a counter-discursive maneuver aimed at limiting and de-

¹⁴ See: <http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Boycott>

¹⁵ See: “On the boycott of South Africa” by Julius Nyerere at: <http://www.africasource.com/voi/nyerere.htm>.

legitimizing the power of the state. Indeed here, as a subversive gesture, boycott functions as a *modality of mockery* on the totalizing sovereignty of the state because it disrupts the smooth synchronicity of the state's hegemonic practices and renders it strategically and hopelessly incomplete.

But there is yet another sense in which the technique of boycott fractures official narratives in a subjugative context. Throughout his writerly and other discursive activities on behalf of the Ogoni people, Ken Saro-Wiwa consistently calls attention to the deformity of the Nigerian state, the excesses of its insensitive and decadent political elite, and to the state's "slick alliance" with transnational oil interests to exploit her own citizens. In his address to a crowd of the Ogoni on the occasion of the first Ogoni day celebrations timed to coincide with the United Nations Day for Indigenous Peoples on the 4th of January 1993, Saro-Wiwa had lamented thus:

For the Nigerian government to usurp the resources of the Ogoni and legalize such theft by military decree is armed robbery. To deny the Ogoni the right to self-determination and impose on them the status of slaves in their country is morally indefensible (1995:131).

This plaintive lamentation coming only months to Nigeria's general elections sets the tone for the boycott of the process.

Now, all too often, some contemporary understandings of the configurations of power in the African public space have tended to emphasize the impregnability of official state power, and the supposed eagerness of the common people to participate in the very processes that oppress them. For example, while articulating his notion of “intimacy of tyranny” as a feature of the relations of power in the African postcolony, Achille Mbembe (2001) has suggested that in Africa the powerful and those they oppress are entangled in process of conviviality and connivance. Citing the everyday practices of ordinary people and interpreting these as sites of conviviality with domination, Mbembe encourages us to “ watch the myriad ways in which ordinary people guide, deceive, and toy with power instead of confronting it directly” (P.128). Mbembe uses the term “mutual zombification” to characterize the connivance between the dominant and those they “apparently” dominate. This process of zombification, according to him, robs both of their vitality and renders them impotent (Mbembe, 104).

While Mbembe’s perspective may be useful in explaining the complexities and liturgies of power in the African postcolonial context, his discussion clearly demeans resistance to oppression as a cardinal touchstone of power relations in the postcolony. And this, I suggest, is a grave analytic error. As we have noted earlier, the dialectic of domination and resistance is an extremely dynamic and ever-changing process, marked often by spectacular reverses and heroic moments of

triumph. Whether we speak of the anti-colonial struggles to defeat and dismantle racial segregation in South Africa, or the heroic identitarian struggles waged even now by the Ogoni and other minority Niger Delta communities in the Nigerian postcolony, we see a vibrant and dominant impulse for resistance against domination.

Mbembe's notion of zombification seems to suggest that all postcolonial power relations ultimately grind to some kind of a moral impasse. This view is neither supported by reality nor by history. As I argue throughout this discussion, rather than impotence in the face of oppression, the unprecedented heroism dramatized by the Ogoni struggle confirms Edward Said's assertion that in the struggles for freedom, "nationalist culture has been sometimes dramatically outpaced by a fertile culture of resistance whose core is energetic insurgency" (1993:322; see also, Jeremy Weate, 2003:27-41).

The narratives of refusal enacted by such dissident groups as the Ogoni in Nigeria are important because they point to a dissimilar nucleus of radical citizenship where errant power is prohibited from running amok, disrupting the lives of the very people it is supposed to protect. By refusing to partake of the state's rituals of power, then, the Ogoni were not only making a political point, but one with a deeper discursive resonance. If Nigeria was a morally and organically deformed

state, the Ogoni boycott of the state's electoral process was meant to serve as a meta-commentary on that deformity.

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 hierarchizing practices, the Ogoni were able to cast a symbolic vote *against* the state and were thus unwilling to participate in any process of "mutual zombification" with the state. As the vanguard of the struggle, it falls to the Ogoni youth to enforce the boycott in Ogoni. As Saro-Wiwa tells us:

I also learnt that Ogoni youth in various locations physically stopped the movement of ballot boxes, and also of some politicians such as Edward Kobani who was forced to remain indoors throughout period of voting. Some young men even stopped election materials from being delivered by the electoral commission, turning back vehicles which carried such materials (1995:181).

Paradoxically, the state annuls the presidential election, the most significant in the series, and thus *votes* against itself. The state's self-negating practice of annulment validates the Ogoni faithlessness in the system. But as the state re-arranges its hierarchies – the military leader Ibrahim Babangida quits office amid protests over

the annulment, and another dictator General Sani Abacha assumes office after a sham interregnum – we see the resilience of the state as a self-recreating hegemonic institution.

The Ogoni and the Aesthetics of Spectacle:

Now as our discussion so far makes evident, although the Ogoni and other minority communities of the Niger Delta remain physically and territorially within the Nigerian state, it is also true that these communities are dissident imaginative territories. This is so because in spite of the state's repressive practices against them, individuals, groups and communities within the region seem in fact to intensify their search for an alternative imaginary of the nation in which there is equity, cultural freedom and the respect for communal property rights. But as they conduct their struggle for a more egalitarian modernity, these communities operate critically within the aesthetic realm of spectacle.

I define the *aesthetics of spectacle* as the need in marginal discourses to showcase and dramatize deeply sedimented grievances in the open arena of discursive relations. Since dominant narratives employ what we might call the *strategy of concealment*, an attempt to conceal from public view the embarrassing plight of life in the margins, marginal discourses strive to overcome this concealment by organizing and narrativizing their plight within the open domain of social awareness. If the strategy of concealment is marked by cant, evasion and duplicity,

the logic of spectacle is to *undress* the harsh particularities of life in the margins and to demand *redress*. In this way, narratives such as demonstrations, rallies, boycotts, voice votes, public nudity, suicide bombing, etc, when used counter-discursively, may be understood forms of drama and as ways of *spectacularizing* grievance and protest.

In the Niger Delta of Nigeria, the denial of the right to resource and ecological control is the tonic force behind spectacular acts of dissidence. Whether it is the case of the 300,000 Ogoni who marched in protest and communal self-assertion in 1993, or it is the case of one individual, Orlando Al Omieh, who climbed Shell's communication mast at the Forcados terminal at Warri, Nigeria, to protest the company's pollution of his community's ecology; these communities are spectacularizing their rejection of Nigeria's petro-dollar modernity and its social and cultural deaths¹⁶.

In a similar way, when on the 27th February, 1993, thousands of Ogoni gathered at the launch of the One Naira Ogoni Survival Fund (ONUSUF) where each Ogoni man, woman and child donates the token sum of one Naira to the struggle, we see a community spectacularizing its determination and commitment to the struggle. All the energetic drumming and dancing, and the singing and masquarading that

¹⁶ See: "Man climbs Shell's mast in suicide bid" at:
http://www.vanguardngr.com/articles/2002/niger_delta/nd210082005.html

we see at such demonstrations may well be 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.

Indeed whenever the Ogoni gather in order to publicly assert their humanity and denounce the forces of stasis, their gathering frequently takes the form of *carnival*. Carnivals are forms of melodrama staged mainly to mock and undermine dominant thought and value structures. Usually rich in mimicry, pretence, imitation and disguise, carnivals function as a playful formalization of protest.

And so during these carnivals among the Ogonis, all differences of class, age, status, gender and education are flung aside. Here, the clown and the reveler may laugh with the wise, the rich with the poor, as oppositional bonds and networks are strengthened and concretized. In song after song and speech after speech, during this momentary rebirth of culture, the power of the state to incarcerate the aspirations of a people is mocked as the oppressed try to seize back their destiny through the oxymoronic idiom of playful seriousness. Despite their long and systematic oppression, the Ogoni use these carnivals to renew their spirit and to regain their faith. While sounds of the drums and the cymbals provide music for

the dancing crowd, they also serve to *charm* and gorgonize the people to remain and to participate within the collectivity of resistance.¹⁷

In his influential study on the insurrectionary merits of the carnival as a site of popular sovereignty, M.M Bakhtin (1965) points to its de-hierarchizing power, the ability of the people during carnival both to parody and tear down the immortal curtains 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.” (P.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” (P.10).

Among the Ogoni, the annual January 4th Ogoni Day carnival is celebrated with epic almost Dionysian intensity. An Ogoni participant in one such gathering once told me 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”¹⁸. The logic of the carnival, then, was to dramatize and spectacularize this communal determination to outlive all odds. In his address to a mammoth carnival of the Ogoni in 1993 on the occasion of the Ogoni Survival Fund launch during which an unprecedented Seven hundred thousand Naira (#700,000) was

¹⁷ See images at an Ogoni Day carnival in Appendix (5)

¹⁸ Personal interview at the Ogoni Day celebration at Bori, Ogoni, January, 4th 2005.

raised, Ken Saro-Wiwa expresses similar sentiments on the occult resilience of the Ogoni counter-narrative, in these words:

...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).

Now, we have seen earlier how boycott may function as a discourse of opposition. But even when individuals or representatives of disaffected communities decide to participate in certain processes in order to canvass their demands and try to win overdue concessions, they may yet withdraw their presence through a *walk out* at any moment of an unyielding and intransigent process. The walk out is parliamentary tactic used by members of parliament who are strongly opposed to the direction of parliamentary debate on a specific subject, by leaving (or working out) of the parliamentary chambers in protest.

This technique was used recently in Nigeria when representatives of the Niger Delta region staged a walk out from a Political Reform Conference convened by the state ostensibly to debate and redefine the terms for a new Nigerian

nationhood. But when the Delta representatives, including the Ogoni MOSOP, insist on the right of oil communities to control their natural resources and environment, the conference ends in a dramatic stalemate. In the events that followed, the conference loses its credibility when the representatives of the Delta region walked out and refused to endorse its recommendations. Interestingly, the state's angry response was to characterize walk-outs as being "no longer fashionable in contemporary politics"¹⁹.

Here, it is important to note that the potency of oppositional narratives such as demonstrations, boycotts and walk-outs reside not in their putative fashionability in "contemporary politics" but, crucially, in the manner in which these practices function to dramatize the grievances and refusal of those who choose to adopt them. Indeed, as it frequently occurs, a technique long abandoned and rejected by hegemonic discourses may be repossessed and invested with fresh revolutionary power by marginal narratives as they conduct their agonistic tussles with dominant narratives of power. Simon Gikandi (1991:22) clearly alludes to this reversionary technique adopted by marginal narratives when he says:

The power of a form...does not solely lie in its claim to be original, but in its irruption of the already written discourse. It uses a borrowed instrument

¹⁹ See "S/South delegates accuse Kukah of bias at confab at: http://www.vanguardngr.com/articles/2002/niger_delta/nd219082005.html

which the dominant culture has discarded because it was supposed to have outlived its usefulness – is bent around and used against the culture which produced it.

In our particular context, the call by the Delta representatives for resource and ecological control is in fact also a call for a new morality of citizenship in a “nation” where they have so long been subjugated. Their demands are consistent with the impulse in marginal discourses to demand for justice in the face of oppression. Indeed the logic of *justitia omnibus* – justice for all – is seen here as one of the central tenets of all subjugated narratives. One of the representatives to the conference summarizes this logic perfectly, I think, when he expresses the desire of the peoples of the Delta in an interview:

On the whole, we want to feel equal to every other sector of the six geopolitical zones, we want to feel we are not second class citizens; we want to have a sense of belonging in the project called Nigeria. These are what we are advocating for²⁰.

But when even these minimum expectations became a subject of acrimonious debate among the delegates at the state conference, a walk-out had to be staged as

²⁰ See: “ Why we want to manage our resources, by Horsfall at: <http://odili.net/news/source/2005/apr/20/407.html>

a way of demonstrating their rejection of the oppression of what seemed clear to them to be a neocolonial state.

In addition to its multifarious processes such as periodic elections, conferences and talk shops, its annual budgets, etc, the state uses the law as the principal instrument by which it regulates its activities and legitimizes its power. Through the laws contained in its constitution, the state is able to define the parameters of social conduct and specify the weight of sanction that must be applied in the event of transgressions. The constitution of any state is therefore the embodiment of the rules, codes and conventions governing the interacting and conflicting social forces in society.

But the law is also a discourse through which power is legitimated by hegemonic groups in their relations with marginal groups. Once it advances one interest over another, the law ceases to be an impartial arbiter but functions as a strategic discourse serving to energize and naturalize the structures of domination of individuals and weaker groups in social situations.

In an incisive study, Gunther Teubner (1989:782) makes the point that rather than reflect the vast heterogeneous discourses of a society, the law may sometimes serve as a “specialized discourse” capable of manufacturing its own set of realities. Teubner states specifically that:

In the dynamics of social evolution... the law becomes autonomous from general social communication. It develops into a closed communicative network that produces not only legal acts as its elements and legal rules as its structure, but legal construction of reality as well... The legal discourse invents and deals with a juridical 'hyperreality' that has lost contact with the realities of everyday life and at the same time superimposes new realities to everyday life (742).

I have already referred in our introductory chapter to the study by Sally Falk Moore (1998: 126-151) in which the cases of Ken Saro-Wiwa and that of S.M. Otieno in Kenya are cited as examples of how the state can manipulate the law to serve its oppressive purposes. Following Teubner, Moore acknowledges that,

The politicized courts of repressive regimes are useful to governments precisely because of the formal capacity of law to limit that which it will take official cognizance, to define its own version of reality. Law may generate some of its most creative power from its self-definition as a closed and autonomous system, but that very capacity may be used for deeply immoral purposes (132).

In Nigeria, the law is perhaps the single most draconian instrument used by the state to repress and disinherit oil-bearing communities of their rights to their environment and natural resources. Some of these expropriative legislations such as the Petroleum Act of 1969 and the offshore oil and Revenue Act of 1971 and their various amendments and mutations, basically deny communities ownership rights to oil minerals located in their lands²¹. For the Ogoni and other peoples of the Niger Delta, these laws impose what Gikandi has in another context called “zones of prohibition” (1991:49). A zone of prohibition in our context refers to a terrain – the Nigerian state – replete with discursive barricades which function to regulate and forbid ideologies and aspirations which are contradictory to the dominant ideology. Through its laws, the “nation” attempts to criminalize and incarcerate disidentificatory practices instigated by marginal narratives operating within it.

But as they organize their opposition against the repressive order of the state, dissident communities such as the Ogoni realize that the first problematic that they must confront are the laws of the state. They know that they could not possibly reject the moral deformity of the state and still accept the totalitarian immorality of its laws. Generally in the Delta region, the oppositional responses to the draconian laws range from calls for the review of the constitution and the abrogation of all

²¹For a list of these expropriative laws and the debates around them, See: *Daily Independent Online*: “Resource Control Debate: Yadudu Vs Douglas” at: <http://odili.net/news/source/2005/apr/20/408.html>

expropriative laws, to actual practices geared toward breaking the laws. In the ferment of agitation, the law itself is “de-legalized” and its capacity to deter the people’s aspirations is challenged.

Throughout his campaigns for the rights of the Ogoni, Ken Saro-Wiwa always called attention to the repressive laws that hold minority communities in bondage. He consistently questioned the morality of a national constitution which neither recognizes nor protects minority rights and aspirations. Even where a semblance of these rights are expressed in the laws, item 19 of the *Ogoni Bill of Rights* laments that “successive Federal administrations have trampled on every minority rights enshrined in the Nigerian constitution to the detriment of the Ogoni and have, by administrative structuring and other noxious acts transferred Ogoni wealth to other parts of the republic.” When calls for the review of the laws as well as the oppressive policies of the state failed, Ken Saro-Wiwa leads the Ogoni in mass demonstrations. In his public address on the launch of the Ogoni Survival Fund in 1993 he declares in parenthesis that the Ogoni “are quite prepared to defy (the) constitution when necessary and to face the consequences of such defiance” (*A Month and a Day*: 149).

On occasion, yet another vocal spokesman of the region has expressed a similar sentiment about the inability of the law to stop the people’s agitation, in these words:

So, all I am saying is that if you make a law that there should be no resource control, does that law touch our minds? Does it stop us from our agitation? No. Resource control is part of federalism. There is no way anybody can divorce it from true federalism. We cannot run away from it that is why I said if you make an enactment, a new decree, whatever you do, it will not stop us from talking about and insisting on resource control²².

Now, to break the law is to unseat a strategic part of a society's hyper-reality, and to defy its many sanctionary powers. By defying the law, the radical objector tries to jolt society into a new moral awakening in order that it may be able to see the law through the optic of its unjustness, and so make an urgent amend. Rather than the adamant troublemakers that official narratives imagine them to be, radical activists and objectors often emerge in the long run of history to be society's aptest defenders of the common good.

To illustrate this point we need only to turn to the illustrious example of Martin Luther King Jr, one of the greatest defenders of the freedom and dignity of man in history. As the leader of American civil rights movement in the 1960s, King had led mass rallies and boycotts around America to protest the racist and segregationist laws which demeaned and relegated Blacks to the backbench of the

²². See: Supreme court, N. Assembly can't stop resource control – Clark at: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/articles/2002/cover/august05/23082005/f223082005.html>

American society. In Birmingham in 1963, King and his colleagues were arrested and imprisoned for acting in breach of the local assembly laws. But in a letter smuggled out of his Birmingham prison, King justifies the decision of Black civil rights movements to break the tablets of America's racist and segregationist ordinances in these words:

I submit that an individual who breaks the law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest regard for the law²³.

Clearly, for King and the civil rights movement an unjust law was an unfit law. By acting in breach of the law, they sought to invite attention to its unjustness.

In a similar way, as we have seen, the Ogoni chose as an act of defiance to boycott a national election because they wanted to deny legitimacy to the President who would swear to protect the laws. For spearheading the boycott, Ken Saro-Wiwa and some of his Ogoni compatriots are arrested and detained by the military authorities. But the Ogoni became even more defiant, clashing more frequently with the police and organizing more dramatic and increasingly fatal demonstrations. Saro-Wiwa himself captures this spirit of defiance in his detention

²³ See: "A letter from Birmingham Prison" by Martin Luther King Jr. at: <http://www.nobelprizes.com/nobel/peace/MLL-jail.html>

diary *A Month and a Day*, when he says: “To die fighting to right the wrong would be the greatest gift of life! Yes, the gift of life... the designers of the iniquitous system be shamed. My spirit would not be broken” (P.19).

In April 1993, Shell’s attempt to lay pipeline across village farms and living premises in the Ogoni community of Biara, was resisted by a crowd of protesting women and youth who waved mainly palm leaves and sang Ogoni struggle songs. In spite of the killing and maiming of some of the protesters by armed soldiers who had been invited by Shell to protect their operations, the protest actually intensified the next day as thousands of protesters massed at Biara thus forcing Shell to abandon its projects and quit Ogoni land.

If the Biara incident was an affirmation of a people’s power, it also marked a watershed moment in the Ogoni struggle. By forcing Shell out of Ogoniland, the Ogoni are able to gain respite for the local ecology for the first time since 1958 when oil was discovered in their land. In one of his prison letters to his son, Saro-Wiwa sums up the determination of the Ogoni to resist Shell’s environmental malpractices in these words:

I doubt that Shell can resume oil activities in Ogoni whether I am alive or dead, in or out of prison. The majority of the Ogoni have accepted the MOSOP idea and adversity has taught them to be courageous. It’s

wonderful that they have withstood all the brutality for so long and are still holding out (Ken Wiwa, 1998:133).

True to his prognosis, a decade after the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa Shell's many attempts to re-enter Ogoni territory have been strongly resisted by the Ogoni led by MOSOP. Although the loss of a charismatic leader like Saro-Wiwa has led to a perceptible lull in MOSOP and its activities, his killing by the state has not changed the critical decision of the Ogoni to control their land and environment, and Shell still remains at the core of the agitational jurisdiction of the Ogoni. Clearly then, by galvanizing the Ogoni through demonstrations and other forms of mass action, Saro-Wiwa proves the notion that when used counter-discursively demonstrations have a capacity to "shatter the very element of law" (Sfez: 1999, see also Colin Caret, 2003).

Now, if Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP leaders were effective in the mobilization of the Ogoni in their arduous struggle against the discourses of oppression, they were even more effective in shaping national and international opinion and response to the plight of the Ogoni. The local and international facets of the campaign feed and reinforce each other, with the former often framing and shaping the approach and dimension of the latter. Within Nigeria, the Ogoni case so eloquently and persuasively articulated by Ken Saro-Wiwa in the most conspicuous public arenas, helped to re-ignite and refocus the interest and attention of pro-democracy and

human rights activists on the anxieties 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 then, Saro-Wiwa seizes 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 the visibility of Ogoni in print²⁴. As he was to later recall in his detention memoir:

²⁴ After the death of Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP continues to use the popular idiom to communicate the plight of the Ogoni to a wider audience. A particularly effective technique possessing graphic force is the “MOSOP Season’s Greeting Card” which shows a blazing conflagration caused by a Shell oil pipe-line blow-out in an Ogoni community in 2001. Complimenting the visual power of the card is the message: “Wishing you a clearer, safer and sustainable environment this festive period and beyond”. See sample of the “Greeting Card” in Appendix (6).

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)

In the fight and struggle for an egalitarian society, the tenacity and audaciousness of the Nigerian media in the 1990s was perhaps matched only by the ruthlessness of the military juntas of the time. And so even at the risk of clampdowns or instant proscriptions, progressive newspaper and magazine editors continued to provide platform for the articulation of the Ogoni cause through their interviews with Ken Saro-Wiwa. Consequently, the more the plight of the Ogoni was processed to a wider audience through the popular media, the more their struggle itself became a trans-ethnic idiom through which a new and radical praxis of national peoplehood was articulated.

Indeed in imagining and conducting the Ogoni campaign, Ken Saro-Wiwa always envisioned its transnational domino effect. He knows that although it may be an endangered minority community, Ogoni was also part of a larger humanity and that ultimately questions of equity, cultural freedom and ecological justice can and

do have global resonance. Thus at every turn of his campaign, and at public events whether in Ogoni, Benin city, Lagos, Abuja and elsewhere, Saro-Wiwa consistently calls on all oppressed minority communities in the Niger Delta and the rest of Nigeria to struggle for their rights and to reclaim their humanity. For example, in his address during the public launch of his books in Lagos in 1991, the tenor of his message was familiar:

We must end immediately the oppression of minority ethnic groups and free all Nigerians to express themselves and develop their cultures, their languages and their political systems using their resources as best they may ...Oil pollution is a great menace to the Nigerian environment. I wish to warn that the harm being done to the environment of the Niger River Delta must be ameliorated by the oil companies which prospect for oil there, the degradation of the ecosystem must end and the dehumanization of the inhabitants of the areas must cease and restitution be made for the past wrong (*A Month and a Day*: 83-4).

Saro-Wiwa then calls upon “all minority groups in Nigeria to follow the example of the Ogoni people and demand their rights to political autonomy and freedom in Nigeria” (*A Month and a Day*: 87).

Two years later in 1993, in an interview with *The News* magazine in Nigeria, Saro-Wiwa states what he believes to be the transnational signification of the Ogoni struggle within a globalized vision of oppression. He says: “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.”²⁵ Placing the Ogoni experience within this broader rubric of global politics of subjugation, Saro-Wiwa in a public speech the same year compares the plight of the Ogoni to those of the native aborigines of Australia, and the Maori of New Zealand, saying:

Contrary to the belief that there are no indigenous people in black Africa, our research has shown that the fate of such groups as the Zangon Kataf and Ogoni in Nigeria is, in essence, not different from those of the Aborigines of Australia, the Maori of New Zealand and the Indians of North and South America. Their common history is that of the usurpation of their land and resources, the destruction of their culture and the eventual decimation of the people. Indigenous people often do not realize what is happening to them until it is too late. More often than not, they are the victims of greedy outsiders. EMIROAF will continue to mobilize and represent the interest of all indigenous people on the African continent. It is

²⁵ See Ken Saro-Wiwa’s interview entitled “They are killing my people” in *The News Magazine* (Nigeria) 17 May 1993.

in this regard that we have undertaken to publicize the fate of the Ogoni people in Nigeria (*A Month and a Day*: 131).

But if the plight of the Ogoni must “matter” to the rest of the humanity as Saro-Wiwa says, then the challenge was to link localized grievances and aspirations to globalized networks of advocacy. As the state becomes increasingly draconian and repressive of dissent, and Ogoni agitators are hounded and killed or thrown into detention centres, Ogoni activists led by Ken Saro-Wiwa begin to look more and more to those globalized networks as platforms for publicizing the Ogoni struggle and to gain international attention and sympathy. This was a signal step in the Ogoni struggle because the Ogoni were looking beyond the rigid parapet of Nigeria’s sovereignty in their quest for equity and justice. An addendum to the original Ogoni Bill of Rights authorizing MOSOP leaders to reach out to a wider transnational audience takes a categorical and more insistent tone:

Now, therefore, while reaffirming our wish to remain a part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, we hereby authorize the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) to make representation, for as long as these injustices continue, to the United Nations Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, the European Community and all international

bodies which have a role to play in the preservation of our nationality...(*A Month and a Day*: 90).

From this point on, 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 Network News (CNN), the British Channel 4 and many others.

In 1992, while addressing the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Population, Ken Saro-Wiwa declares:

The Ogoni are faced by a powerful combination of forces far and near, driven by greed and cold statistics. Only the international community acting with compassion and a sense of responsibility to the human race, can avert

the catastrophe which is about to overtake the Ogoni (*A Month and a Day*: 98).

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 wide 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” (1998: XXIV).

Similarly, in a brilliant study of the cultural and environmental politics of Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP, Susan Comfort (2002: 229-246) suggests that because the Ogoni struggle is 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 antiglobalization 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, 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 signals a Copernican shift in dissident culturalist discourse in yet another sense. While many other dissident movements tend mainly to be classist formations adopting a top-down elitist strategy, the Ogoni movement is 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 are blurred and Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP leaders are themselves no more than moral carriers of a communal mandate. In other words, Ken Saro-Wiwa's cultural argument for ecological and social justice is valid only

because it is 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 is 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. Indeed, here, Saro-Wiwa's role is consistent with the view of Richard Peet (2002:28-54) who notes that often within counter-hegemonic projects, service “takes the form of radical academics or liberal professionals converting popular emotion, anger, poems, songs, testimonies, and assertions, often based in residual resentment, into rationalized policy prescriptions, press releases, books, and scholarly articles of an emergent alternative”(P.30). Following Peet, it is easy to see why Ken Saro-Wiwa while serving as the spokesman of the Ogoni counter-narrative, also functioned as

its most astute arrowhead – expressing its anxieties and canvassing its dreams from text to text, representing its ideals in the most conspicuous arenas and, in the end, dying for those ideals.

Now it is important to note that although the Ogoni struggle was a non-violent movement modeled, as Ben Naneen tells us, on the non-violent struggles of the Black civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States of America, we have in fact seen spectacular episodes of violence occur (See: Naneen, 1995: 46-78). At every turn in the campaign, Ken Saro-Wiwa himself harped repeatedly on the non-violent character of the Ogoni counter-discourse. In one of the many public gatherings in Ogoni, on the occasion of the Kagote Club Annual Luncheon in 1990 where he addressed the crowd on the imperatives of the struggle, Saro-Wiwa had said:

This is not, I repeat, NOT a call to violent action. We have a moral claim over Nigeria. This moral claim arises as much from the murder of 30,000 Ogoni people during the civil war by Ojukwu's followers as the usurpation of US thirty billion dollars worth of our oil and the destruction of our ecology amounting to the same sum. Our strength derives from this moral advantage and that is what we have to press home (*A Month and a Day*: 75).

How then can we explain that despite these commitments to non-violence, public lynching and massacres did in fact happen and that Ken Saro-Wiwa was himself finally killed in an extremely gory and violent manner?

Here, it is possible to contend that because the tripartite discursive relations involving the Ogoni, transnational oil interests and the Nigerian state was one so irrevocably steeped in the discourse of violence, Ken Saro-Wiwa was in no position to guarantee non-violence in all its cosmic totality. If Shell exploits oil resources for well over half a century in the Niger Delta reaping billions of dollars, destroys the environment and exercises no social responsibility towards the communities whose temporal and sacred places are savagely desecrated, then surely this was an act of violence which could only excite a violent and acrimonious reaction from the communities. This is so because once they are forged within an epistemic economy of pain, deprivation and death, counter-discourses have little choice but to dramatize traits of violence as they negotiate their relations with discourses of power.

Richard Peet cited earlier refers precisely to this dialectic of violence when he points out that oppositional narratives are punctuated by episodes of violence because these discourses “fundamentally derive from the collective wills of desperate peoples, from the experiences of the poor and downtrodden, from the pangs of hunger and the anguished cries of children, from the loss of respect

during the death of culture” (35). But when as in Nigeria, the state which should protect its most vulnerable communities was itself so morally deformed as to forge an illicit comradeship with transnational capitalism, then a tragic triad of violence is formed. Here, the observation of Human Rights Watch expressed in its 1999 report on the character of violence in the Niger Delta is as important as it is revealing. It says:

...Virtually every oil producing community has experienced an incident along the following lines. Community members stage a protest demanding compensation for oil company activities ... in response, members of the Mobile police or other security forces come to the scene, the security forces carry out indiscriminate beatings, arrests and detention; the protest is then abandoned... in virtually every community there have been occasions on which the paramilitary mobile police, the regular police, or the army have beaten, detained, or individuals who have called for compensation for oil damage, whether youths, women, children, or traditional leaders... (11).

In a similar vein, Festus Iyayi (2000: 151-178) points specifically to the active involvement of the Nigerian state in the violence in the region when he says: “What is significant about the strategy of violence is that the oil companies and the Nigerian state are jointly involved in it (165). Iyayi’s study carefully illustrates the array of complicities between transnational capital and the Nigerian state in the

creation of siege and death in the Niger Delta. Through their roles they emerge as the original forces of stasis, violence and death.

Viewed in this way, therefore, all the unceasing pollution of the Ogoni environment, the radical emergence of MOSOP, the mob lynching of the prominent Ogoni elders, the incessant proxy wars between the Ogoni and the Ndoki and Okrika communities in 1994 in which thousands of lives perished, the cyclical process of arrest and release, re-arrest and torture and killing of Ogoni agitators by the state – all these can only be understood as tragic dramas enacted within the triadic discourse of violence. Clearly, then, despite his passionate and insistent commitment to the Gandhian ideal of non-violence, Ken Saro-Wiwa could never have guaranteed this ideal for it was only a matter of time before he was himself caught in the vortex of violence.

Indeed throughout the turns and turbulence of his life, Ken Saro-Wiwa remained acutely aware that as an Ogoni minority writer and activist he was doomed to live and move within an aesthetic morphology of death; or else how can we explain the many scattered halos of death and premonitions of death in his writings? Why, otherwise, was the Ogoni counter-narrative imagined and expressed in strictly dystopian terms? As I will show in the closing sections of this work, so achingly preeminent and ubiquitous was the halo of death around the Ogoni narrative that at his most momentous hour, Ken Saro-Wiwa had no choice but to appropriate death

itself as his final and most potent counter-discursive maneuver against the discourses of power.