

‘Writing Dangerously’: Tributes and Reflections in an Age of Terror

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“...the very existence of the African writer is a political statement.”¹

For three days in September 2013, Africa and the rest of the world were seized with trepidation as they watched with horror, the callous seizure and senseless massacre of innocent people including children at the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, by the group known as as-Shabaab, a Somali militant group. By the time the effect of the rude shock had sunk in, news also got out that one of Africa’s most celebrated writers, and Ghana’s leading poet and novelist, Kofi Awoonor, was a victim of the horrible attack. He was in Kenya to address the gathering of writers at the Storymoja Hays Festival. While I still imagine today, as always, what must be going through the slain writer’s mind as he entered into the Shopping Mall with his son on that fateful day, I recall what Achebe said in one of his collection of essays, “I believe that in our situation, the greater danger lies not in remembering but in forgetting, in pretending that slogans are the same as truth; and that [since we are always] prone to self-deception, [we] stand in great needs of reminders.”² And for us to survive as a people, Achebe continued, “[we must] remind ourselves constantly of the things that happened and how we felt when they were happening.”³ In this reflection, I intend to do more than to remind us of certain things that happened in the past and which define some aspects of our contemporary existence as a people and nation, but to also underline the fact of the urgent need for us never to forget the sacrifice of my subjects.

Much earlier in another article, Achebe had paid glowing tribute to Awoonor, especially for the Ghanaian writer’s ability to render with palpable clarity through his novels and poetry, what cannot be called a restatement of merely the “malingering purposelessness,” but also a calculated and systematic “failure of the African independence.”⁴

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1. Louis James, “The Protest Tradition” *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*. eds. Pieterse, Cosmo and Donald Munro (London, Ibadan and Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969) p.5.
 2. Chinua Achebe, “Preface.” *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975) p.xiii.
 3. Chinua Achebe, “Preface.” *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p.xiii.
 4. Chinua Achebe, “Kofi Awoonor as a Novelist,” *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1965-1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988) p.83.

Through his works, Awoonor underlined the roles he believed that writers are expected to play in their societies. Achebe contended that Awoonor was able to prove that a writer shares a kinship with the community, while her/his works reflect, relate to, and engender desirable change in that same society. As Achebe explained that relationship;

“[...] every literature must seek things that belong unto its peace, must, in other words, speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current, and the aspirations and destiny of its people.”⁵

Sartre shared the same opinion. He believed that the function of every writer is “to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say s/he is innocent of what it’s all about.”⁶ Similarly, Ngugi maintained that “every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics?”⁷ Writings of the type that Achebe, Sartre, and Ngugi envisioned are perhaps what Raymond Williams called building “a community of sensibilities” between the writer and the society for which s/he writes. According to Williams;

“[...] at all times, the community between the artist and audience which seems to matter is *the community of sensibilities*. The artist’s sensibility—her/his capacity for experience, her/his way of thinking, feeling and conjunction—will often be finer and more developed than that of the audience. But if her/his sensibility is of the same kind, his language and the language of his audience will be closely and organically related (emphasis in the original).”⁸

Aside from Awoonor, the African continent boasts of several pioneer visionary writers who deployed their art towards the political, social and economic liberation of their societies: one would recall “philosopher-kings” like Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, Augustino Neto of Angola and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, as one is also reminded of a generation of committed writers like Christopher Okigbo of Nigeria and Steve Biko of South Africa, who was killed, according to Mandela, in order to extend the life of the Apartheid regime.⁹ Elsewhere on the continent, writers like Jack Mapanje and Ali Mazrui of Uganda; Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Abdullah Abdullatif, Koigiwa Wamuwere of Kenya; Alex La Guma, and Dennis Brutus of South Africa during the Apartheid era; and the

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5. Chinua Achebe, “Colonialist Criticism” *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1965-1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988) p.50.
 6. Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* Trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen, 1976) p.14.
 7. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “Preface” *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1981).
 8. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961) pp.93-6.
 9. Nelson Mandela, “Row Clouds Biko Anniversary”, *BBC News*, September 12, 2012.

trio of Ayi Kwei Armah, Mongo Beti, and Wole Soyinka were at one time “executive” prisoners in their various countries. By challenging what Osundare described as the “virulent atomisation of modern capitalist society and the philistinisation of values,”¹⁰ these writers became the targets of oppressive governments which used state machineries to hunt them down. In his 1986 Nobel Prize Lecture, Soyinka expressed a similar concern, and hinted at how writers are strategically relevant to helping both their people and societies to survive the terror posed by dictatorial governments in spite of the continued threat to their lives. He argued that, “every act of terror, with its vastly increasing sophistication of style and escalation in human loss, is itself an acknowledgement of and respect for the potential of what is feared, an acknowledgement of the sharpening tempo of triumph by the victimised.”¹¹ This is very true when one is reminded of Apartheid South Africa and its history of tyranny.

South Africa under the Apartheid system remains perhaps the best example of the worst place for writers to live in and practice their art. That era recorded the most trying and devastating accounts of hatred and brutality towards writers. According to J.M. Coetzee, “South African literature is a literature in bondage. It is a less than filthy human literature. It is exactly the kind of literature the world expects people to write from prison.”¹² As the South African writer and Nobel Prize winner (now an Australian citizen), rightly observed, the South African experience did not only promote “deformed and stunted relations between human beings,” it also strove towards “a deformed and stunted inner life.”¹³ Examples abound which underline Coetzee’s submission: Breyten Breytenbach was detained and imprisoned for fifteen years in 1975 on trumped up charges of terrorist attack, and especially for marrying a French woman of Vietnamese ancestry in contradiction of the Mixed Marriage Act (1949), and the Immorality Act (1950); Lewis Nkosi was both restricted and banned under the Suppression of Communism Act 44 (1950), renamed Internal Security Act (1976); the Nobel Prize winner, Nadine Gordimer’s works, *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), *A World of Strangers* (1958), *Burger’s Daughter* (1979) and *July’s People* (1981) were variously banned for periods ranging from one month to twelve years respectively.

10. Niyi Osundare, *The Writer as Righter* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2007) p.9.

11. Wole Soyinka, “This Past Must Address its Present” *Wole Soyinka: An Appraisal*, (ed.), Adewale Maja-Pearse (London: Heinemann, 1994).

12. “Coetzee, Getting Prize, Denounces Apartheid” *New York Times*, April 11, 1987.

13. “Coetzee, Getting Prize, Denounces Apartheid.”

Indeed, postcolonial Africa has not had it good in many ways and writers on the continent have not stopped addressing the persistent failure that has accompanied its dawn. In a related context, after conducting a research based on the political and economic measurement of Sudan since its independence, Peter Kok concluded that;

“The controlling feature of post-colonial Sudan [Africa most particularly] has been a crisis of governance. It expresses itself in various forms, but primarily in the recrudescence of *violent political conflict, economic and social stagnation, corruption, alienating between liberation democracy and an authoritarian regime, and the proliferation of obscure ideologies* (emphasis added).”¹⁴

As a specific example of what Kok described as “obscure ideologies” which only sow seeds of disconnect with the masses, let us recall here Kwame Nkrumah’s strategic formulae that was meant to move Ghana forward shortly after independence in 1957. Quite appropriately, postcolonial Ghana is a very good starting point: the first of its generation to experience political independence and a significant example of how not to run a country. Ironically, while the country remains a beacon of Africa’s hope, and both Nkrumah and Awoonor’s beloved country, Ghana also represents the misdirected permutation that we earlier talk about. It is a good example of how failed political leadership has robbed the African continent of the immense talent that Awoonor symbolized and the vision that his oeuvre articulated. Sadly too, it has provided the enabling environment for a menace like as-Shabaab to grow and fester unchecked. According to Nkrumah;

“Since according to philosophical consciencism in its embracing of philosophical dialectical materialism, a change can only result from an operation of forces [which was necessary] in order to liberate a colony [wherein] a dialectical moment needs to be introduced in (na>pa)g to transform it to (pa>na)g. Hence a liberated territory arises under the condition lib.g<-> [D (na>pa)g—> (pa>na)g].”¹⁵

Such high-sounding, obscure and, albeit, self-deceptive permutation from Nkrumah draws an ironic response from a sensitive writer like Soyinka who “eulogizes” the Ghanaian statesman by having members of the Reformed Aweri Fraternity reformulate his idea:

“THIRD: Whatever it is, it is not long-winded proverbs and senile pronouncements. In fact, we could say a step has already been taken in that direction. If you’ve read our leader’s last publication—

14. Peter Kok, “Sudan: Between Radical Restructuring and Deconstruction of State System” *Review of African Political Economy* (ROAPE), 23/70 (1996), p.555.

15. Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonization* (Monthly Review Press, 1970) p.109.

FIFTH: Ah yes. Nor proverbs nor verses, only ideograms in algebraic quantums. If the square root of XQY (2bc) equals QA into the square root of X, then the progressive forces must prevail over the reactionary in the span of 32. of a single generation.”¹⁶

Awoonor saw all of these pitfalls and wrote about them. His literary output, although fully immersed in his ewe tradition, nonetheless, engaged the concerns of the people of Ghana (even Africa) beyond tribal/ethnic affiliation. His poems and novels address what Osundare termed the “neo-colonial exploitation of Africa, the cannibalistic ethos of her comprador capitalism [and] her depressing socio-economic contradictions.”¹⁷ As it appears, Awoonor belongs to a class of African writers who draw attention to how African inheritors of power drain the continent of hope in various guises, while being secretly urged on and applauded by their Western allies. He belongs to a class of writers whose works continue to address the endemic squalor in which their people live, those Cheney-Coker described as the “skeletons of stillborn promises”; his rage and anger were directed at politicians and wielders of power for “permitting a perpetual butchery of her [Africa] womb aided by those who barter her on Wall Street [especially] the World Market muckrakers, smugglers and the like,”¹⁸ and many other players hiding in the background, but whose activities nonetheless undermine the development of the continent.

Indeed, Awoonor was definitely not one of those who never acted. But, certainly not among the “westernized and middle-class or petit-bourgeois intellectuals who cerebrate in a chronically metaphysical and intellectually unsustained manner.”¹⁹ In his own words, the writer is both a technician and visionary, these roles being indivisible and interdependent. This is because “her/his technical sense enables her/him to select and utilize materials which in themselves carry a spirituality, an innate essence. It is from here that the transformation into the visionary realm is primarily fed [...]. In short, her/his art assays in reassemblment, the establishment of a harmonic order.”²⁰ It is obvious for what purpose he yielded his art, and on whose side he chose to stand.

Furthermore, Awoonor belongs to the class of thinkers who believe that Africa’s independence has no business failing at all, especially considering the lessons that ought

16. Wole Soyinka, *Kongi's Harvest, Collected Plays II* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) pp.71-2.

17. Niyi Osundare, *The Writer as Righter*, p.22.

18. Sly Cheney-Coker, *The Graveyard Also Has Teeth* (London:Heinemann, 1980) p.11.

19. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, “A Moralist Reading of Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*” Paper presented at the Nigerian Modern Languages Association Conference (University of Benin, Benin City, 1980) p.3.

20. Kofi Awoonor, “Voyager of the Earth” *New Letters*, vol.40, no.1 (Kansas: University of Missouri, 1973) pp.89-91.

to have been learnt from the colonizers. He lamented the fact that, rather than the pursuance of the ideal upon which the struggle and clamour for political independence from colonial rule was built, deceit and betrayal from the African inheritors of power and the leadership have destroyed that very important apparatus upon which the continent could have built her progress. After more than fifty years since the first lights of hope shone in Ghana and upon the rest of the continent, the only visible legacy the people continue to grapple with has remained socio-political and economic failure, as well as a cumulative weight of foreign debt and local despair. In a peculiar thought, Achebe perceived the same notion of failure;

“[...] at every stage there is a misty hint of a viable alternative, of a road not taken, of a possibility that fails to develop. [It is] the central failure of African independence, whose early promise is like a butterfly that the child Amamu caught in the fields of the yellow sunflowers wide as the moon, and it flew away again.”²¹

In his debut novel, *This Earth, My Brother* (1971), subtitled “the allegorical tale of Africa,” Awoonor examined Ghana as a model for Africa, in respect of the “cumulativeness, indeed an organic, albeit bizarre development towards failure,”²² which characterizes the way independence from colonialists has been handled by the inheritors of power. It is a work Achebe described as an “intense and tight sequence of poetic prose alternating with more open stretches of realistic narrative and now and again broken by shots of running commentaries, all moving sometimes forward in time, sometimes backwards or in circles and at yet other times completely flung outside our accustomed historical time scale”²³ The work renders with resonance the “purposelessness and self-destructiveness of the continent” under myopic leadership and its “revolting malevolence.”²⁴ The work captures what was left undone at every turn of the continent’s wheel on which it moves forward after several years of disentangling itself from colonial imperialism. In fact, *This Earth, My Brother* remains a valid document and testimony to the failures around, especially the endemic culture of corruption, violence, stagnation and rot.

Furthermore, Awoonor stressed the political class’ betrayal of their countries. He emphasized the betrayal of both the trust and responsibility placed on their shoulders, and how the common masses too are complicit in their own tragic reality. Also, through

21. Chinua Achebe, “Kofi Awoonor as a Novelist,” p.83.

22. Chinua Achebe, “Kofi Awoonor as a Novelist,” p.83.

23. Chinua Achebe, “Kofi Awoonor as a Novelist,” p.82.

24. Chinua Achebe, “Kofi Awoonor as a Novelist,” p.83.

the work, he asserted the “truth of Fiction” as a “proven fact and way of life,”²⁵ and its ability to engage us, our imagination, and drive us to “discovery and recognition by an unexpected route”²⁶ His characters are prototypes drawn from his society. For instance, there is Mr Attipoe, the fat drunken road overseer who ensures that the gates of Dume are shut down during the rain so that stranded lorry drivers can offer him bribe in order to ply their trade; there is Kozo the town-crier who gets drunk and forgets his duty to the community; the elders (especially Topa) who abandon their sacred duty only to run after trivial drinks; Abotsi the symbol of the British Empire who returns as a hero of the Burma war only to die and be refused burial by the Church, which also symbolizes the same British presence in the community. But the most striking of the characters, especially in terms of its metaphor and resonance with contemporary reality, is the pathetic ex-service man, Sule (also a Burmese veteran) who goes mad after his return from war and drills his five year old son under the scorching sunlight.

However, it was through his poems that Awoonor actually earned his acclaim. His poetry exudes the magic and awe of the traditional African griot, especially his pervasive use of mythology, which enriched his craft in terms of the aesthetics of language and thematic candour. His collection of anthologies, from *Night of My Blood* (1971) to *The Breast of the Earth* (1976) and others, shows an artist’s consistent emphasis of the renewal and continuation of a rich heritage of words, symbols and images through cultural self-discovery necessary for racial identity.²⁷ In the *Night of My Blood*, Awoonor demonstrated that the poems “supplement one another, and a continuity of theme is maintained,”²⁸ while the ‘Africanness’ of the poems are easily recognized, especially in the way he deployed the same mythical resources, in the pungent manner in which he handled his subjects, and the overall theme that he engaged in the anthology. In *The Breast of the Earth*, Awoonor smoothly merged his *ewe* poetic form with his own self-conscious awareness to create a work that celebrates the “juxtaposition of myth and reality and the intermixture of belief and anger.”²⁹ In the work, Awoonor expressed belief in

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- 25. Chinua Achebe, “The Truth of Fiction” *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1965-1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988) p.101.
 - 26. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) p.9.
 - 27. Kofi Awoonor, *This Earth, My Brother* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1971) p.xiii.
 - 28. Ezekiel Mphahlele, “Introduction” *Night of My Blood* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1971).
 - 29. Thomas, R. Knipp, “Myth, History and the Poetry of Kofi Awoonor” *African Literature Today: Myth and History*. (ed.), Eldred Durosimi Jones (London: Heinemann, 1980) p.50

the dynamism of the human nature to overcome trial; as such, he regarded Ghana as well as the continent of Africa as the prodigal child that will soon come back home. At the same time, he directed his anger toward those he described as the “termites of westernization,”³⁰ who have plundered the resources of the continent. Indeed, both poems serve the useful purpose of engaging the tragic pathos and pains of postcolonial Ghanaian and African life and may as well be regarded as the ironic expression of our everyday life.

At a time like this, as pay tribute to Awoonor, the poet/philosopher, we also express our recognition of the new kind of spirit that rules over the continent, the “spirit of terror” represented by the as-Shabaab, and how Awoonor’s oeuvre has been dedicated to drawing attention to the failure of the political system, which gave birth to the as-Shabaab menace. Ironically, on wonders if he had a premonition of his own death; if he knew that inside that Shopping Mall would be death “where so many lost children of Africa will be found.”³¹ One wonders if he also knew that what would remain of him and the ill-fated Westgate Mall would be, like in “The Cathedral”, nothing but a dirge, mourning the loss of precious lives

“On this patch a tree once stood
Shedding incense on the infant corn:
Its boughs stretched across a heaven
Brightened by the last fires of a tribe
They sent surveyors and builders who cut that tree
Planting in its place
A huge senseless cathedral of doom.”³²

Perhaps Awoonor would still wish to be around with us, if only to deliver that speech at the Nairobi Storymoja Hays Festival. Perhaps he would wish that a visit to that Mall was not taken, that his voice as a seer could be heard again. Perhaps he chose instead to “wander away from the peace and wisdom of the traditional hearth.”³³ However, in these hard and perilous times, we are left with wishes;

“If I had known, if only I had known
I would have stayed at home
I would not have gone to them.”³⁴

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- 30. Thomas, R, Knipp, “Myth, History and the Poetry of Kofi Awoonor” *African Literature Today: Myth and History*. ed. Eldred Durosimi Jones (London: Heinemann, 1980) p.53.
 - 31. Kofi Awoonor, *Night of My Blood* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1971) p.25.
 - 32. Kofi Awoonor, *Night of My Blood* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1971) p.35.
 - 33. Ezekiel Mhpahlele, “Introduction” *Night of My Blood* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1971).
 - 34. Kofi Awoonor, *Night of My Blood* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1971) p.35.

At this juncture, we also recall the memory of the Nigerian writer/activist and environmentalist, Kenule Saro-Wiwa, whose sacrifice is also particularly significant as Awoonor's. Certainly a man of many parts—writer, journalist, businessman, activist and environmentalist—Saro-Wiwa established Saros Publishing company in 1973 in order to make his works available to the Nigerian public. His oeuvre ranged from auto-biographical testimonies, through fiction, children's literature, plays, short stories, to satirical sketches and newspaper columns, most of which he utilized to formulate his ideas, and to push the Ogoni people's struggle, and for which he has remained identified even after his tragic, albeit, avoidable death.

Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni-born writer and activist, contended that Nigeria is dogged by Lord Malcolm Hailey's description as "the most artificial of the many administrative units created in the course of European occupation of Africa."³⁵ As a former British colony, Nigeria, like most nations on the continent [was] morphed into new forms which appear to be nothing more than "domestic nationalistic tyranny imposed on minority groups, and [functioning] as collusions of nationalistic power with militarized global economic power [...] within the networks of power."³⁶ While the country continues to grapple with that colonial legacy whose antecedent is buried very deep in deception and chivalry, one of the legion of irrationality which characterizes successive governments, was certainly the Ogoni crisis over which Saro-Wiwa and his other colleagues were executed by hanging in 1996 by the late General Sani Abacha military junta, which enjoyed palpable complicity from multinational companies and big players in the crude oil exploration business.³⁷

Saro-Wiwa's prison diary, *A Month and A Day: A Detention Diary* (1995), was published barely a year before his execution. Released at the height of his intimate, conscious and passionate internationally acknowledged fight on behalf of his people to overcome their death by instalment through environmental pollution and degradation, the work has remained a testimony to fearless confrontation with the forces of stagnation and corruption at a staggering scale. This work was preceded by two dystopian novels, *Pita Dumbrok's Prison* (1991) and *The Prisoner of Jeb* (1998). His other works, such as the 1968 pamphlet, *The Ogoni Nationality: Today and Tomorrow*, engaged the repression of the Ogoni, the same with *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (1992), in which he

35. Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (Lagos: Saros International, 1992) p.19.

36. Susan Abraham, "What Does Mumbai Have to do with Rome? Postcolonial Perspectives on Globalization and Theology" *Theological Studies*, 69 (2008) pp.376-93.

37. Ed Pilkington. "Shell Pays out \$15.5m over Saro-Wiwa Killing" *The Guardian*, 9 June (2009).

articulated the historical antecedents to the exploitation and destruction of Ogoni land; and in both *A Forest of Flowers* (1995) and *Adaku and Other Stories* (1989), he satirized the Nigerian government through a fictional community, which shares palpable resemblance with the Niger-Delta reality and the inhuman rot that he devoted the last phase of his life fighting; *Sozaboy: A Novel Written in Rotten English* (1985) which critiques the Nigerian Civil war, and how the larger Igbo society, suspecting the Ogoni of sympathy towards the Federal government, made life unbearable for the minority groups with which it shared boundaries remains Saro-Wiwa's most popular work.

In terms of the Ogoni struggle for emancipation and recognition, Saro-Wiwa insisted that, contrary to widespread opinion and “official” position that the Nigeria/Biafra war was fought for political reasons and the urgent need to keep the nation united, its more salient economic motive was more persuasive, with oil resources and the struggle for the control at the heart of the crisis. He insisted that while the plight of the minority groups like the Ogoni have been swept under the carpet through official channels, most narratives and discourses around the subject have also glaringly excluded them. But the recognition of the sacrifices of the minority groups and especially the Ogoni in much the same way the Igbo have always been seen as the “only victims” of the Nigeria/Biafra war, and which Saro-Wiwa considered a major step towards true reconciliation, will reposition the minorities in their proper places in the nation’s history.³⁸

In the dark period of the struggle for the recognition of the Ogoni/minorities rights in the Niger/Delta and especially during the brutal military regimes of Gen Babangida and his cruel successor, Gen Sani Abacha, Saro-Wiwa’s writings became the torch that lit the path through the thick darkness of greed that enveloped the creek. His speeches, the only pricking conscience in an open and vast ocean of corrupt and conniving assemblage of leadership, whose brazen indifference to the stifling conditions of the minorities in the oil-rich region, have rendered the whole Niger-Delta and especially Ogoniland completely inhabitable for the people. Saro-Wiwa’s writings, including his documentary research, essays, speeches, and polemical journalism were instrumental in articulating the complexity of the Ogoni crisis and drawing global attention to the Ogoni cause, while his fundamental rights’ group, Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), emerged in the midst of the protest against environmental devastation as well as the closure of communal lands as decreed by the 1979 Nigerian constitution.³⁹

38. Ama Oko Omaka, “The Forgotten Victims: Ethnic Minorities in the Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970” *Journal of Retracing Africa*, 1/1 (2014) pp.38-9.

39. Susan Comfort, “Struggle in Ogoniland: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Cultural Politics of Environmental Justice” *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy*. eds. Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans and Rachel Stein (University of Arizona Press, 2002) pp.229-46.

In response to environmental degradation of the Ogoni land and successive Nigerian governments' insensitivity to the plight of the people, Rob Nixon explains that Saro-Wiwa coined the terms "recolonization" and "indigenous colonialism" to conceptualize the role of the multinationals in the country and the activities of the Nigerian regimes that have favoured the three major ethnic groups and violently suppressed the rights and claims of the extreme minorities like the Ogoni. MOSOP became the rallying point for engaging the socially and politically excruciating policies of successive civilian and military administrations in the area.⁴⁰ On some occasions, he screamed; "There is no country [...] only organized brigandage."⁴¹ On some other occasions, he railed, "Oil companies have flared gas in Nigeria for the past thirty-three years causing acid rain [...] What used to be the bread basket of the delta has now become totally infertile. All one sees and feels around is death."⁴² In a recent publication, Nixon beams his searchlight on the activities of Saro-Wiwa and other committed writers (Arundathi Roy, Abdulrahman Munif and Jamaica Kincaid to name a few) from other parts of the world, who engage their governments' insensitivity, albeit, complicity in the "occluded relationship" between transnational players (governments and multinational companies) and those elements—such as labour, land, resources and commodity dynamics which tie them together.⁴³ Nixon contends that, like others, Saro-Wiwa was "alive to the inhabited impact of corrosive transnational forces, including petro-imperialism, the mega-dam industry, out-sourced toxicity...and the militarization of commerce, forces that disproportionately jeopardize the livelihoods, prospects, and memory banks of the global poor."⁴⁴ Because Nixon is very much aware of the power of writing/fiction and the largely representational crux of Saro-Wiwa and co.'s works and how "stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects,"⁴⁵ he stresses the significance of Wiwa's writing in exposing the phenomenal of slow violence that oil exploration in the Ogoni communities represents. According to Nixon, slow violence often occurs gradually and out of sight, and remains obscure largely because it does not carry with it, the sensational visibility of the violent extremism of a

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40. Rob Nixon, "Pipe-Dreams: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Environmental Justice, and Micro-Minority Rights" *Black Renaissance*, 1.1 (1996) pp.1-11.
 41. Ken Saro-Wiwa, "Nigeria: the Ogoni Crisis: A Case-Study of Military Repression in Southeastern Nigeria" *Human Rights Watch/Africa*, 7/5 (1995) pp.7-25.
 42. Ken Saro-Wiwa, *The Guardian*, 8 November (1995); *The Village Voice*, 21 November (1995) pp.21-3.
 43. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) p.479.
 44. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, p.6.
 45. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, p.3.

group like the as-Shabaab or Boko Haram. This is exactly what Saro-Wiwa meant when he said, “the Ogoni people were being killed all right, but in an unconventional way [because] the Ogoni country has been completely destroyed by the search for oil [...] Oil blow-outs, spillages, oil slicks, and general pollution accompany the search for oil.”⁴⁶ As it were, the “environmentalism of the poor” which much of Saro-Wiwa’s writings addressed, has remained a pathetic reality in our world today.

Similarly, Nixon also stresses how Saro-Wiwa also uses his writings to engage the tragic reality of Ogoni people’s battle with displacement from their abode due to oil exploration in the area, their “displacement without moving.”⁴⁷ According to Nixon, the Ogoni writer/activist’s works emphasize “the loss of the[ir] lands and resources beneath them”; a loss which leaves the people stranded in their communities, “stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that make it inhabitable.”⁴⁸ It is to these kinds of pathetic situations that Saro-Wiwa wrote, “environmental degradation has been a lethal weapon in the war against the indigenous Ogoni people [...] in virtually every nation-state there are several ‘Ogonis’—despairing and disappearing peoples suffering the yoke of political marginalization, economic strangulation or environmental degradation, or a combination of these [...] in Nigeria’s monstrous domestic colonialism.”⁴⁹ As such, what one perceives of the conditions in Ogoniland, is a people “existing out of place in place” beyond their just being marginalized communities of people.⁵⁰

Indeed, socio-political situations on the African continent show that nothing much has changed with regard to the issues Awoonor, Saro-Wiwa and others, devoted their lives and writings to addressing. It is the more reason why their works have remained relevant, not just to mirror the inadequacies in their societies and the malignancies which characterize socio-political life on the continent, but to also create the sensibilities required to insist on change. In spite of the burden such a memory has become, it remains a task that the rest of us must bear, as our own way of expressing an acceptable solidarity towards their (writers) commitment to our collective good. And, one way of doing this is to always remember how and what they have sacrificed on our behalf.

46. Ken Saro-Wiwa, “Nigeria: the Ogoni Crisis: A Case-Study of Military Repression in Southeastern Nigeria” *Human Rights Watch/Africa*, 7/5 (1995) pp.7-25.

47. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, p.19.

48. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, p.19.

49. Ken Saro-Wiwa, *The Guardian*, 8 (November 1995); *The Village Voice*, 2/1 (November 1995) p.23.

50. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, p.19.

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