



Underlying Philosophies of Ken Saro Wiwa's Concept 'Erectism' in *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary*

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Abstract

*This research undertakes a study of how Ken Saro-Wiwa constructs his life philosophy into a form of activism, which he pursued throughout his adult life and ultimately died for. Moreover, this article adopts Wiwa's own definition of the concept 'erectism', which he characterises as having three main dimensions (ethnic autonomy, resource control, and environmental control) in his book *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary*. Additionally, views and theories submitted by critics are included in this report. Adapting the constructivist approach to define the term 'erectism' as in national unity, development, democracy and justice.*

Key-words: Ken Sare-Wiwa, erectism, environmental degradation, internal colony

Introduction

This research paper examines Ken Saro-Wiwa's fundamental concept, 'Erectism', which he strongly presents as the guiding principle of his social and political life. While he describes it as a social philosophy (149), it appears to me that the others—economic, political, and environmental—also fall under this definition. Wiwa himself employs this in *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* as the acronym for ethnic autonomy, resource control and environment control (149). Surely, all of these ideas embody his vision of society, its politics, economy, and environment, for which he fought so hard throughout his life and made the ultimate sacrifice. The present project attempts to answer how Wiwa relates his concept of 'Erectism' to culture, politics, economics, and the environment in his Ogoni land within the context of federal Nigeria.

The term 'erectism' is out of 'erect' and 'ism'. The term 'erect' comes from the Latin word 'erectus', meaning upright, elevated and lofty, whereas 'ism' denotes a distinctive doctrine, cause or theory. And the phrasal use of 'to stand erect' means to stand on end or hold one's head high or upright. Through this orientation, one can relate the meaning of 'erectism' as the principle that orients someone to live life with respect, freedom and dignity, having the head upright or elevated.

In *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary*, Wiwa's Concept of 'Erectism' Ken Saro-Wiwa coined the word 'erectism',

derived from the acronym for ethnic autonomy, resource control and environmental control (149). His idea of ethnic autonomy is based on the position of the Ogoni people, one of more than 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria, located in the southern part of what is known to others as the Niger Delta. Likewise, the resource control that refers to the power of the natural resources like in Southern Niger Delth like land water jungle etc. and in particular mineral i.e., the crude oil by his people or people of land, the Ogoni land and thirdly there is an environmental control which Wiwa implies, this healthy environment of land that had been degenerated to its apogee internationally by oil corporations: British Shell and American Chevron. Ken Saro-Wiwa was optimistic that this same philosophy would ultimately help him and the Ogoni nation achieve self-reliance, democracy, social progress, a healthy environment, and competition for development (149).

About the Writer

Ken Saro-Wiwa was a writer, television presenter, and human rights activist who dedicated his life to bringing about positive change in the lives of the Ogoni people. He ran campaign inside the country especially in the Ogoniland to beware the people about the rights of the aborigines, drew the attention of the international institutions about their demands and sought for their support, wrote in the international newspapers and journals about the injustice, indifference and problems the Ogoni people were facing in the country, and attended several meetings and seminars inside his own country and abroad to

make them known about their (his people) issues and movements. In this sense, he was the true “messiah” of his people, i.e., the Ogoni people. Ken Saro-Wiwa faced numerous difficult situations due to the military rulers’ rude behaviour and inhuman actions. But he never allowed his belief to be shaken, instead devoting himself continuously to the betterment of the land he was born and brought up in, which had been polluted by the oil company, Shell. Ken Saro-Wiwa believed that international human rights institutions or organisations could play a positive role in preserving their nationality. Therefore, he wrote a note to such agencies describing the areas in which they could support him inside his country.

Regarding the event in which the Ogoni issue and movement were covered by world agencies like CNN and Time magazine, Ken Saro-Wiwa expressed his sense of satisfaction after he visited The Hague and his election as vice-chairman of the assembly (145). In Hague, Saro-Wiwa did not miss an opportunity to share his sorrows and sufferings with the Palestinian representing the assembly. He basically pointed out two forms of violence: military and environmental violence in Nigeria. A week after that, Ken Saro-Wiwa addressed the Ogoni Survival Fund, a group that had committed all Ogoni men, women, and children to the struggle, held at Bori on February 27, 1993. There, he talked about their two main wars as:

Today, the Ogoni people are embroiled in two grim conflicts: the first is the 35-year-old ecological war waged by multinational oil companies, Shell and Chevron. The second war is the political war of tyranny, oppression and greed designed to dispossess the Ogoni people of their rights and their wealth and subject them to abject poverty, slavery, dehumanisation and extinction. (148)

About the Ogoni People

The Ogoni are one of the 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria, located in the southern part of the country. The oddity of state politics, the economics of resource control, and institutionalised injustice in wealth distribution systems that sustain this environmental insanity and economic harakiri are all part of the negative characteristics Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Nigerian writer and rights crusader, sees below the surface. Ogoni, for him, is one of the oppressed ethnic nationalities constituting an internal colony in a Nigerian capitalist framework. And not just economic exploitation and environmental devastation by the oil companies at the hands of the Nigerian government, but also, pejoratively, political marginalization – genocide/ethnocide against the Ogoni people and indeed, the Niger Delta as a whole. As mentioned by Achim Steiner in his Foreword to the UNEP *Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland, the history of oil exploration and production in Ogoniland is a sorry tale of suffering, neglect, degradation, and violence*. It is a history that has pitted people, politics, and the oil industry against each other, leaving behind an environment characterised by distrust, deadlock, and blame amidst deteriorating circumstances for those locals affected (6).

The Concept of Erectism

Saro-Wiwa uses the term ‘erectism’ and stretches its meaning from an acronym for Ethnic autonomy, Resource control and Environmental Control (Saro-Wiwa, A Month and a Day 149). The idea, which can be seen as the fulcrum of his political thought, comprises three main principles or building blocks: ethnic autonomy, ethnic resource control, and *environmental control*. To be less ambiguous, the ideals of federalism imply that all ethnic conglomerations (nationalities and nations) that make up or define the political geography of Nigeria are unique, equivalent components or bodies, and therefore form the proper federating organs in the State. And from such a postulate is to be deduced the fact that the ethnic groups are supposed to control not only their natural resources, but also their physical environment in each domain. Saro-Wiwa believes that a ‘reasonably well-adjusted federal or confederate system’ could be the only configuration of government possible in a country as multi-ethnic as Nigeria. Reference to ethnic autonomy as a form of erectism does not in any way suggest secession or statehood for the ethnic groups. It demands not the territorial recognition of nationalities, but the acknowledgement of nationalities as the ethno-federal basic units. It highlights the constitutional right of each group to preserve its culture and identity. That’s resource control, and it means that the local ethnic nationalities should own and control all the natural resources (including oil) in their territory. The constitution, which is expected to come from the people and not to be an imposition on them, ought to unambiguously state the percentage of such revenues that should accrue to each tier of government.

The third aspect, environmental control, also aims to place ownership and control over environmental resources within the communities belonging to ethnic groups. And it would lead to responsible exploitation of the environment and its resources, as opposed to what is happening, as_ the world’s more fortunate residents insensitively wreck them. An arrangement where those who bear the most significant harm or loss as a result of resources being exploited benefit less (or not at all) from such exploitation is an unfair and unjust one. The catholicity of our Nigerian state is no controversial issue. It’s estimated that Nigeria has more than 250 ethnic groups with different numerical strengths and different positions in the sociopolitical matrix. Inevitably, in the absence of a functioning institutionalised framework to contain injustice and enable governance, the group that can politically control others on some basis other than mere accession tends to be oppressive and marginalise those over whom it has control.

There must, therefore, be constitutional and institutional mechanisms to ensure that the vulnerable groups and individuals in the state are protected politically, economically and culturally. The Ogoni program espoused by Saro-Wiwa was based on the erectist philosophy. He was mainly concerned about the emergence of a stable modern Nigeria with civilised values, a democracy where minority rights are respected, the right to education is enshrined as a right, and freedom of speech and association is enjoyed without obstacle

in its path; a country where meritocracy becomes the national emblem.

The same philosophy, he believed, would lead them to enjoy self-reliance, democracy, social justice, healthy competition and progress in the nation (149). Then he asked the United Nations to stop the genocide and savagery of the twenty-first century that is happening in his country, Nigeria.

(1) Why is his emphasis on ethnic autonomy

Political marginalisation is the act of excluding a particular group, individual, or group from the political process. Most of the time, that is only political marginalisation – using political and economic opportunities to manipulate policies to their whims. In a pragmatic sense, politics is primarily about structuring social existence to facilitate the distribution of resources. Power is, of course, the most significant concept in political life and its inexhaustible currency. However, political power is essentially a tool used to obtain economic and other material resources. These (along with whether it is absorbed and the way in which it is acquired), more than anything else, are likely to account for the reason that questions about the control of power, and its acquisition and about whether or how much of it is shared, have been matters of so serious concern everywhere.

Nigerian politics has unfortunately been an “ugly war” (a departure from the bourgeois caricature of the “beautiful bride”) in which domination and oppression of one by another is institutionalised. The geo-political structure of the nation, as we have all noted very clearly indeed, is made up of three dominant ethnic groups – The Hausa -Fulani, Ibo and Yoruba -and over 200 ‘minority’ ones. A few favoured persons essentially from within the ‘major’ ones hold sway and make gains from stewarded power: they run the press agencies/parastatals and diplomatic services – public and private sector investments; and that is just some examples. The situation may be characterised by what has been dubbed the cultural division of labour-that is, where people’s ethnicity and culture dictate which kind of work is available to them or which doors are open. He mentioned it thus:

That the government of the federal republic of Nigeria has, in utter disregard and contempt for human rights since independence in 1960 till date, denied us our political rights to self-determination, economic rights to our resources, cultural rights to the development of our languages and culture, and social rights to education, health and adequate housing and to representation as of right in national institutions. (90)

In Review of African Political Economy, in a jointly issued report of the Law Society and the Bar Human Rights Committee entitled “Fundamental Rights Denied: Report of the Trial of Ken Saro-Wiwa and others”, the author of the report, British barrister Michael Birnbaum, observed thus:

The tribunal is neither independent nor impartial; some of its decisions have been blatantly biased in favour of the prosecution. By appointing a special tribunal to hear this case instead of the ordinary courts, the Nigerian government is

undermining the rights of defence enshrined in the country’s constitution and in international human rights instruments to which Nigeria is a party. (jstor.org)

(2) His arguments on ecological degradation

Crude oil was first discovered on Ogoni land in 1958, and oil production commenced in 1958 at K. Dere (Bonny). However, the first commercial export was made at Akpajo Main Yard near Eleme in 1958, just as crude oil production from Ewgu was initiated and incorporated for a period after the discovery by Shell Darcy. Massive research bases were built over the next thirty years (UNEP *Environmental Assessment of Ogoni* and 24).

In this sense, the (Dutch/British) Shell and American Chevron had been pointed out by Ken Saro-Wiwa as incurable sources of environmental damage. These companies, he further noted, collectively destroyed the environment and ecology, flaring gas in villages for 33 years, leaving oil spills on land and at sea; they dehumanised people by refusing them employment and development benefits that are the custom of industrial organisations in Europe and America to give back to their areas of operation (91).

In the same speech, he clearly described how various sectors of people and their social lives have been impaired by the multinational oil company, thus:

The Ogoni are embattled and imperilled. Since oil was discovered in the area in 1958, they have been the victims of a deadly ecological war in which no blood is spilt, no bones are broken, and no one is maimed. But people die all the time. Men, women and children are at risk, plants, wildlife and fish are destroyed, the air and water are poisoned, and finally the land dies. Today, Ogoni has been reduced to a wasteland. (131)

The impact of oil exploitation in the region is alarming; the people cannot grow crops on polluted land, nor can they fish from it. Saro-Wiwa’s words describe the above when he asserts that:

The Ogoni people have settled in this area as farmers and fishermen since ancient times and have established a well-organised social system. Petroleum was discovered in Ogoni in 1958, and since then, an estimated \$100 billion worth of oil has been extracted from Ogoni land. In return for this, the Ogoni people have received nothing. Oil exploration has turned Ogoni into a wasteland: lands, streams, and creeks are totally and continuously polluted; the atmosphere has been poisoned, charged as it is with hydrocarbon vapours... Acid rain, oil spillage, and oil blowouts have devastated Ogoni territory. High-pressure oil pipelines crisscross the surface of Ogoni farmlands and villages in a dangerous manner. (95-96)

(3) Various critics and criticisms along with Wiwa himself on the issues of political marginalisation, environmental degradation and internal colonisation.

Similarly, Clifford Bob, in Political Process Theory, aptly presents the outline of Human Rights Watch 1999 and World Bank 1995, warning about the environmental damage

as “oil spills and constant natural gas flaring have fouled the environment and caused injuries and deaths (395). In another place, Elias Courson refers to Michael Ross, who described five different areas where oil has affected in Nigeria: causing economic volatility, crowding out the manufacturing and agricultural sectors, heightening inequality, inducing violent conflict and undermining democracy” (23). Courson recognises that the impact of the Oil and Gas industry on the delicate environment of the Niger Delta is harmful, including costs to local livelihoods, land, water, air, poverty, unemployment, deprivation, and dispossession (25). Zainab Mai-Bornu, in *Oil, Conflict, and the Dynamics of Resource Struggle in the Niger Delta: A Comparison of the Ogoni and Ijaw Movements*, recalls Kero Saro-Wiwa, who discussed two colonialisms when considering the Niger River Delta. For him, the formation of Rivers state in 1967, by the second military government of independent Nigeria, was perceived as a calculated move to push the Ogoni people into extinction. He recognised two types of colonialism in the Ogoni case: one, the British colonial rule, and another by the post-colonial state (3).

Niyi Akingbe, in an article “Writing Against Tyranny: Ken Saro-Wiwa and...” Oftentimes, the literature works on the Niger Delta dwells primarily on issues of possession/dispossession, location/dislocation and a sense of belonging/marginalisation to underscore economic exclusion by which successive Nigerian governments have squeezed literary ineffectiveness (7). Akingbe also writes about what others say about Ken Saro-Wiwa’s writings. His writings were not only a pointer to the cause of the region’s crisis, but also an instrument in guiding its way through non-violent resistance against an alleged economic strangulation orchestrated by General Sanni Abacha’s military junta with equal participation of the Shell multinational (9). Akingbe, highlighting the reason for Saro-Wiwa’s writing, would quote in turn those exact words of Saro-Wiwa:

He was galvanised to write the leading against campaign of Ogoni Land ecological degradation so that like then, the world would come up in arms in search of a solution for this obvious tragedy following its direct intervention in Congo when they coasted Congo, saw and heard about gross violation of human rights inflicted on the people of the Congo by King Leopoldist II of Belgium and his agents (10).

Nbete summarises that internal colonisation is a process which primarily serves the interests and happiness of just a few of the lucky class or group. On the other hand, “Erectism” can foster a friendly political and social atmosphere for shared prosperity, general progress, and peaceful coexistence. Therefore, it will bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people in society (45).

Austin Tam-George, in “Ken Saro-Wiwa, The Ogoni Struggle and the Aesthetics of Spectacle,” discusses the use of carnivals in the Niger River Delta by the people to effectively raise their issues, making people aware of their rights and coming together to fight for their inherent rights. Tam-George views carnivals as moments in which the paradoxical

experience of painful jubilation among the Ogoni, with all differences of class, age, status, gender, and education momentarily suspended. Here, the clown and the reveller may interact and play with the wise, and the rich may interact with the poor in the community, as oppositional bonds and networks are strengthened and concretised (299). As Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, carnival is seen as having de-hierarchizing power, the ability of the people during carnival to both parody and abrogate the immutable codes and ordinances of official and dominant power. He further 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” (7). Tam-George, at a different reference, discusses the Nigerian draconian laws: all land and mineral resources, wherever they may be located, are owned by a central authority—the state—which is then tightly controlled by a tiny, unaccountable cabal. By appealing incessantly to notions of nationalism, the state hopes to deaden the impulse for active citizenship and to reduce its citizens into passivity and subjection, in thrall to the “nation” (302).

In another context, Ken Saro-Wiwa in *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* as well condemned the Nigerian elite themselves (bureaucratic, military, industrial, academic) who played deaf and dumb to the depredations of ethnic minority dehumanisation and had connived with all agents of neg-destablishment (91). In the internal colony, the elites and compradors sold out for purely venal reasons.

Ken Saro-Wiwa, in a letter to the *Guardian Weekly*, boldly denounced the role of the British government which, instead of warning the military rules in Nigeria to go against the rights of her own people, rule of law and basic democratic principles, constantly supporting the Nigerian rules in a way provoking them to rape and devastate the previously placid, clean environment of the Ogoniland along with the international oil- companies. For him, even the British government is either turning a deaf ear or indirectly supporting the global company, which hurts his social and political philosophy.

He hated the Babangida federal and local rule, which brutalised them in the oil-bearing delta; it was truly a lie to Truth as civility, slap on the face of modern history; DSTV robbery with violence (100).

In a compelling address delivered on January 4 (the Great March), Ken Saro-Wiwa sought to draw a parallel between the plight of the Ogoni and that of indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world, including the Australian Aborigines, New Zealand’s Maori, and Native American peoples of North and South America. The history of the two peoples was alike; both had been despoiled, and their land taken from them; in both cases, the policy had been to kill out the manhood of the race and thus inevitably destroy themselves. So often, indigenous people don’t quite know what has happened until it’s too late. They are usually victims of others’ grasping intentions (131).

Entitled “Globalisation and Local Resistance: The case of the Ogoni Versus Shell”, Cyril & OBI (Research and Studies

Department, Nigerian Institute of International Affairs) cited the reference of Julian Saurin to mention the deaf ear of Shell to the local, thus:

The destruction of Ogoni lands in Southern Nigeria by oil companies, including Royal Dutch Shell, satisfies the covetous and distant shareholders who derive huge financial benefits from these lands and people. At the same time, the Ogoni pay the permanent costs of ecological degradation and repression, while relinquishing their control over what happens to their land, to the oil, or the product of their labour. (136)

OBI also documents Ken Saro-Wiwa's contribution to the struggle against these multi-nationals when OBI writes that:

Silences Apart from the literature, interviews and speeches of its most eloquent spokesman and MOSOP leader (the late Ken Saro-Wiwa), others have read it in terms of a struggle against 'internal colonisation', ethnic minority elite protest or as one aspect of the failure to solve Nigeria's unresolved national question in respect of minority nationalities within Nigeria's skewed federalism. (139)

Explaining Ogoni resistance, Ken Saro-Wiwa underlined its moral superiority when he said:

Over the past thirty years, the Ogoni people have given Nigeria an estimated \$ 30 billion and received nothing in return, except a blighted countryside, an atmosphere full of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, and hydrocarbons, a land where wildlife is unknown, a land of polluted streams and creeks, and rivers without fish. This land was in every sense of the term an ecological disaster. (74)

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that a strong institutional framework of rights would delineate and entrench the cultural, political, economic, environmental, and other entitlements of persons and groups as a sine qua non in any national development process in an ethnically and culturally complex

country like Nigeria. Ken Saro-Wiwa's assertion on federalism: that ethnic independence within a federal Nigeria should control such natural resources as land, the bodies of water therein, minerals beneath the soil, and even the jungle used by the aborigines in Ogoni land. Similarly, it also encompasses his socio-political philosophies, including the principles of living a life of respect, dignity, equality, freedom, and justice. Thus, his concept of 'Erectism' not only infers his social philosophy but also encompasses his philosophy of culture, politics, and economics, for which Ken Saro-Wiwa struggled throughout his life. In this respect, the concept of 'Erectism' can be considered Wiwa's life guiding principle in its entirety.

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