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Ogoni: Ethnography, Ethnogenesis, and the Issues of Communicating in a Neo-MOSOP Milieu, Nigeria

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Abstract:

The issues around Ogoni are many. The recommendations in the UNEP Ogoni Report, which assessed Ogoni environment as depleted and depleting, have been lying idle on the pages of the report since 2011. Moves by both national and state government actors, as well as by corporate interests, to resume oil production in Ogoni have been heightening. In the midst of these, other voices, some of them new, have been challenging the privilege of the Late Ken Saro-Wiwa's Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) as the leading voice of the Ogoni. This paper submits that these issues are the very kind of issues which Communication handles well. Tracing significant aspects of Ogoni ethnography and ethnogenesis, the paper shows how the tool of Communication can use Ogoni idioms, Ogoni semiology, and Ogoni folklore to not only do an effective job with those recommendations of the UNEP Report which have to do with health, environmental, and other kinds of awareness campaigns to the communities, but also to do an effective job with connecting the many voices in Ogoni with each other. The paper concludes that how Ogonis and all stakeholders handle the tool of Communication will determine to a great length what will become of the contentions between the representative organisations in Ogoni, what will become of the implementation of the UNEP Report, and what will become of the moves by government and corporate actors to resume oil production in Ogoni.

Keywords: Ethnography, MOSOP, Ogoni, Ogoni cleanup, UNEP Ogoni Report

1. Introduction

This paper centres on the ethnography and ethnogenesis of the Ogoni of Nigeria's Niger Delta, on how the ethnogenesis of Ogoni relates to the prevailing experiences of the group, and on the ways in which the ethnography of Ogoni can guide a strategy for communicating in, to, and with Ogoni around the issues of oil, environmental and peoples' rights. Since the 1990s when the MOSOP-Ogoni movement for oil, environmental and peoples' rights resulted in the tragic execution of its leader Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ogoni has remained a subject matter of global prominence. The main point of interest in the international conversation since then has been the worsening ecological conditions of the Ogoni area and the continuing violations nonetheless. No amount of attention paid to the Ogoni question can ever be too much, actually. The UNEP (2011) assessment of the Ogoni environment reports the urgency of the conditions. For example, "hydrocarbon contamination... found in [some samples of] water...[were] at least 1,000 times higher than the Nigerian drinking water standard ...", and although "local communities are aware of the pollution and its dangers... they continue to use the water for drinking, bathing, washing and cooking as they have no alternative." (UNEP, 2011, p. 11). Also, "benzene was detected in all air samples", with some of the "detected benzene concentrations... higher than the concentrations WHO and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) report as corresponding to a 1 in 10,000 cancer risk." (UNEP, 2011, p. 11). When taken into account that the straightforward steps recommended in the report for "remedy[ing] the multiple health, environmental and sustainable development issues facing millions of people in Ogoniland" (UNEP, 2011, p. 6) have been lingering since 2011, the Ogoni issue becomes exasperating.

However, noting that the UNEP Report has its recommendations for "mount[ing] a campaign against environmental degradation" (UNEP, 2011, p. 228), for "a campaign in Ogoniland to end illegal oil related activities" (UNEP, 2011, p. 13), and for "a public awareness campaign... to improve the community's understanding of the environmental and health impacts arising from hydrocarbon contamination in Ogoniland" (UNEP, 2011, p. 16), exasperation must give way to voracious learning about the ethnography, the land, the history, the language, the worldview, the ethnogenesis, and the native systems of organization of the Ogoni people; as successful campaigns, being research-intensive research-driven undertakings that they always are, must necessarily first bring these and even more other variables into context, and keep them in perspective going forward. This work provides a threshold into significant learning about the Ogoni.

2. Ethnography of Ogoni

The Ogonis are arguably now the best-known-about and most-talked-about ethnic group from Nigeria's Niger Delta on the international scene (Isumonah, 2004). A minority in Nigeria, they occupy a territory of about 1,000 square kilometers or just over 400 square miles on the south-eastern fringe of the Niger Delta basin (Agbonifo, 2009; UNEP, 2011; Kpone-Tonwe, 1987). Ogoniland stretches from the Imo River to its east down to Port Harcourt on its western flank, and

from Ndoki on its northern border to Andoni and Bonny on its southern sides (Kpone-Tonwe, 1987; Agbonifo, 2009); the area lying between the coordinates of latitudes 4.05' and 4.20' north and longitudes 7.10' and 7.30' east (Agbonifo, 2009); and the people living contiguously in four administrative local government divisions of Rivers State, namely, Eleme, Gokana, Khana and Tai (UNEP, 2011, p. 22). Bori, a central town in Khana Local Government Area, is the capital of Ogoniland (Kpone-Tonwe, 1987; Agbonifo, 2009). The three Ogoni languages of Khana, Gokana and Eleme are closely similar, with "mutual intelligibility among the speakers" (Agbonifo, 2009, p. 122; CLO, 1996). The 2006 National Census puts the population of the Ogoni area at over 800,000, this number "consisting mainly of the Ogoni people" (UNEP, 2011, p. 22).

One tradition held among some Ogonis lay a claim to an autochthonous origin. This tradition credits the founding of Ogoni to preternatural beings and circumstances, but evidence in support of this claim is lacking (Isumonah, 2004). The other tradition tells a story of migration. There are two versions of the migration story (Agbonifo, 2009; Isumonah, 2004). According to Isumonah (2004), in the "western" version" (p. 438), Ogoni migrated from the west, from Ghana, settling first in Bonny before moving to their current abode (Kpone-Tonwe, 1987). However, in the "eastern" version" (Isumonah, 2004, p. 438), Ogoni migrated from somewhere east, traversing Ibibio territory, then across the Imo River, and then settling first at Nama (present-day Babbe) (Agbonifo, 2009; Isumonah, 2004; Kpone-Tonwe, 1987). More scholars find the 'eastern version' of the migration myth more plausible for a number of linguistic reasons. First, the Ogoni and Ibibio languages share linguistic similarities between themselves. Second, the Ogoni and Ibibio languages share similarities with the languages of the areas around the fringes of Cameroon. Thirdly, the languages of the Ogoni fit naturally with the other languages of the Benue-Congo sub-family category of Niger-Congo languages (Alagoa, 1971; Kpone-Tonwe, 1987; Williamson, 1968, 1988; Wolff, 1964). It is possible, therefore, that Ogoni may have migrated from somewhere in, somewhere around, or somewhere not far from the Cameroons.

As mentioned hereinbefore, Ogonis today live contiguously in four local administrative units of Eleme, Gokana, Khana and Tai, called Local Government Areas (LGAs) under the Nigerian system. But these are creations of the Nigerian state. The pre-Nigerian, even pre-colonial, cultural and political divisions were "the Seven States of Ogoni", the "*Ereba Edo Khana*" (literally, "the seven multitudes of Ogoni"), the ancient seven kingdoms of "Boue, Gokana, Leme, Tee, Luekun (Baan), Baen, and Babbe (Nama)" (Isumonah, 2004, p. 438; Kpone-Tonwe, 1987, p. 135). From these ancient seven evolved the extant six traditional kingdoms of today: "Nyo-Khana, Ken-Khana, Gokana, Babbe, Tee [Tai], and Leme (Eleme)" (Kpone-Tonwe, 1990, p. 100; Isumonah, 2004, p. 438; Agbonifo, 2009), each kingdom consisting of its own number of villages and communities but all under the ultimate headship of a *Gbenemene* (literally, "Great Ruler or King") (Kpone-Tonwe, 1990, p. 21; Isumonah, 2004, p. 439; Agbonifo, 2009). It is instructive to note that these kingdoms are listed on the Ogoni Bill of Rights (MOSOP, 1992), a document presented to the government of Nigeria in October 1990 and to the international community in December 1991, articulating Ogoni's position on issues of consequence on its environmental, economic and political destinies.

The pre-colonial religious dispositions of the Ogoni were steeped in spirit-medium traditions and ancestral-spirit possession (Kpone-Tonwe, 1987, p. 29). According to Kpone-Tonwe (1987), spirit mediums provided an important guidance service to ancient Ogoni society:

From the ruler and his chiefs to the ordinary man on the street, all depended on the services of spirit-mediums for their important problems. No major undertaking was embarked upon without consulting the ancestral spirit first with rituals and sacrifices and with petitions asking for support and guidance (Kpone-Tonwe, 1987, p. 29).

Also, at trying or dangerous times like periods of famine, epidemics or war, spirit mediums intermediated between "the Ogoni spirit and other deities" on the one hand and the people on the other hand (Agbonifo, 2009, p. 187; Kpone-Tonwe, 1987). In times of war, for example, warriors would first touch base at Nama, held as "the centre of Ogoni ancestral spirit-medium[s]" (Kpone-Tonwe, 1987, p. 30), for rituals and for guidance before proceeding to undertake any military onslaught.

With the introduction of Christianity to Ogoniland, following missionary campaigns by the British, many Ogonis took to Christianity, with the traditional religious practices dwindling somewhat in prominence. But even though it lost some ground in the outward practices of many of the Christian converts, many of them still "retain awe for the Ogoni spirit" (Agbonifo, 2009, p. 187). This admixture of Christianity and traditional beliefs coexisting side by side in the contemporary worldview of the Ogoni is manifested especially in the MOSOP-Ogoni struggle. According to Agbonifo (2009), it is widely held among the Ogoni that a *Wiayor*, a deliverer like the biblical Moses or the messianic Jesus, would come sent from the supreme deity to emancipate them from their oppressors. "Saro-Wiwa believed he was the *Wiayor* sent by God to liberate the Ogoni" (Agbonifo, 2009, p. 150). Saro-Wiwa himself stated:

One night in late 1989, as I sat in my study working on a new book, I received a call to put myself, my abilities, my resources, so carefully nurtured over the years, at the feet of the Ogoni people and similar dispossessed, dispirited, and disappearing peoples in Nigeria and elsewhere (Saro-Wiwa, 1995).

Even Saro-Wiwa's father, when approached by his son to lay his fatherly blessing upon his son's decision to answer this call, said to him, "If God has sent you, then go. After all, God sent Moses to Egypt" (Maier, 2000, p. 78). Yet, side by side such subscription to the God of the Bible, it was routine for leading actors of the Ogoni struggle to hold up, call upon, or invoke the 'Spirit of Ogoni', a spirit whose shrines and relics exude a mien that should ordinarily run crosswise common Christian sensibilities. The Ogoni worldview then, or at least the worldview of the Ogoni struggle, either considers the Spirit of Ogoni and the God of Moses of the Bible as one and the same, or considers the Spirit of Ogoni and the God of Moses as belonging on the same side of the good and evil divide; or better still, considers the Spirit of Ogoni a neutral spirit who is neither on the side of good nor evil but only just on the side of the Ogoni. One or more of these

hypotheses could be possible explanation for this unique phenomenon, what Agbonifo (2009) describes as a “syncretistic system suffused with belief in the miraculous” (p. 192).

As with many other ethnic groups of the lower Niger, Ogoni traditional economy has been agrarian from ancient times. The chief produce of the ancient economy was yam (*ka zia*) and plantain (*ka ebue*). (Kpone-Tonwe, 1987). Cassava, also, and raffia palm wine are some of the other produce that Ogoni is known for (Agbonifo, 2009). Raffia palm wine (*mii kue*, or simply, *mii*) and its unique production arrangement under the Ogoni traditional system give a good insight into the Ogoni sense of economic justice. Raffia palm trees, from which raffia palm wine is extracted, usually grow on swampland. In the Ogoni system, the landowner of a swampland rarely climbs to extract the *mii* from his own palm trees; an occupational palm wine extractor (*nee aa mii kue*) is who usually undertakes the climb to extract. However, under the standard traditional Ogoni extraction arrangement, the landowner and the *nee aa mii kue* are both bound by contract terms which provide that for each week that the *nee aa mii kue* extracts from the trees (an Ogoni week is a five-day week unlike our Roman-derived seven-day week), for each week of extraction, the *nee aa mii kue* can keep for himself the produce from four days of extraction, but the landowner must have his royalty of the produce of a full one day's extraction. The landowner's day is *mii deekor* (literally, the day for that wine, or, the wine of that day). Standardly, the landowner is done justice to in this manner on the fourth day (*deekor*) of the five-day week.

Often in his rhetoric, Ken Saro-Wiwa pointed to this philosophy of *mii deekor* to explain the Ogoni sense of economic justice that prompts their case for community equity-holding in the oil exploration businesses that are undertaken on their fatherland. A quarter of a century after Ken Saro-Wiwa, the current MOSOP president, Legbosi Pyagbara, still reechoes this philosophy of *mii deekor*, as he did for the umpteenth time on a Rhythm 93.7 FM talk-radio show on Saturday, March 23, 2019 (Owolabi, 2019). In a phone conversation with Legbosi Pyagbara exactly a week after his Rhythm show, he shared with this researcher how incorporating *mii deekor* into the rhetoric of the struggle made it easy for Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP to have organic two-way-flowing communication with all strata of Ogoni people on the issues of injustice that they were up against in the business arrangements of the oil industry in the Nigerian jurisdiction. *Mii deekor* made it easy because *mii deekor* was something the people already knew, something the people found resonating with their intrinsic impulses, something the people felt running along the natural grain of their ancient instincts. Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP's successes with *mii deekor* should instruct us on how Ogoni idioms, semiology and folklore can empower our communication with Ogoni, and how bypassing them can disempower us.

3. Ethnogenesis

For an ethnic group which was until 1990 “politically salient only within Rivers State” (Isumonah, 2004, p. 439) and once referred to as a “linguistically obscure people” (Jones, 1963, p. 10), but now highly reckoned on the “international scene” (Isumonah, 2004, p. 433), having “successfully internationalised their cause”, and winning the support of global organisations like “Body Shop, Greenpeace, Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO), Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch/Africa”, as well as enjoying good coverage by international media houses, “notably by CNN and *Time* magazine, *Newsweek* and Reuters” (Agbonifo, 2009, p. 9; Boele, 1995), Ogonis have achieved much mileage with their ethnic identity-building project. The project began progressing by leaps and bounds in 1993 when MOSOP engaged the Nigeria government in a mass rally, demanding a reversal of the status quo in Ogoni environmental, economic, social and political conditions. But Ogoni ethnic identity-building attempts did not begin with the rally of 1993. Its history goes back to pre-independence days.

According to Isumonah (2004), although the colonists could identify a distinct Ogoni “cultural category” which they reported as a “tribe” (p. 439) in the Henry Willink (1958) Report and elsewhere, amongst the Ogonis themselves, there was no pan-Ogoni consciousness as yet (Isumonah, 2004). According to Gibbons (1932) in his ethnographic account cited in Isumonah (2004, p. 439), there may have been ‘clan’ consciousness noticeable among at least two of the Ogoni sub-groups: “The TAIS [*sic*] and GOKANAS are clans in the accepted sense of the term, having a common clan centre and a certain amount of clan consciousness” (Gibbons, 1932, p. 3); but these clans were “independent one of the other and their organization not interdependent” (p. 2). As at 1932, the year of Gibbons' report, Ogoni clans showed “no trace of Ogoni tribal organization” (p. 30).

However, in the years leading up to independence, especially the 1950s of the constitutional reform conferences preparatory to independence, the efforts of, and leadership provided by, Ogoni's first and only university graduate at the time, T. N. Paul Birabi, helped mobilize a pan-Ogoni consciousness across all the Ogoni clans (Isumonah, 2004). If Ogonis were slow to build an ethnic identity and grow it, stigmatization by and from all sides forced them to do so quickly. First, pre-independence, it was the colonists, stigmatizing them variously as clans and also collectively as a tribe. Then post-colonialists, it was the Ibos, the dominant ethnic group under the Eastern Regional arrangement, teasing and taunting them, as Ken Saro-Wiwa remembers from his secondary school experience at Government College, Umuahia. And then post-Eastern Region, it was from their fellow Riversmen, typified in the “Monkey no dey wear coat” gibe, an unkind remark made at a campaign by the first civilian governor of Rivers State, “denigrating the gubernatorial aspirations of his rival Chief Kemte Giadom, an Ogoni, and implying that the high office of state governor was not meant for the proverbial ‘little dogs’” (Isumonah, 2004, p. 440).

These unkind experiences suffered collectively must have inspired what Isumonah (2004, p. 440) citing Nnoli (1980) called an “in-group solidarity and exclusiveness” among Ogonis. That solidarity produced some rapid outcomes. For example, although Ogoni's first university graduate, Paul Birabi, graduated in 1953, by as soon as the 1970s, “the list of Ogoni university and secondary school graduates had increased several hundredfold, thanks to the efforts of Ogonis such as Edward Kobani and Ken Saro-Wiwa” (Isumonah, 2004, p. 440). The roll call of Ogoni champions had begun to burgeon.

According to Isumonah (2004), the first representative group or association to achieve pan-Ogoni subscription was the Ogoni State Representative Assembly (OSTRA). There had been other Ogoni groups like the Ogoni Central Union (OCU) formed in 1945, but not all Ogonis had subscribed to them. Founded in 1950, OSTRA was instrumental in getting some Ogoni indigenes elected to the federal and regional parliaments in 1951, including OSTRA's first president, T. M. Paul Birabi, and OSTRA's secretary, F. M. A. Saro-Wiwa (not Ken Saro-Wiwa). Although another group, the Ogoni Divisional Union (ODU), was formed in 1962, serving as a platform for coordinating Ogoni contributions to the movement for the creation of Rivers State which was ultimately created in 1967 (Isumonah, 2004), the second Ogoni association to achieve as much all-inclusive and all-subscribing pan-Ogoni participation is the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) formed in 1990. More than any group before it or after it, and especially under the leadership of Ken Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP has achieved the most for Ogoni ethnic identity.

4. MOSOP, Ogoni, the UNEP Cleanup and a Post-Saro-Wiwa Future

Now, more than twenty years after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa along with eight of his MOSOP colleagues after trial by a military court, the major issues before Ogoni include how to stabilize MOSOP's increasingly rocking ship of leadership; how to get all concerned action parties to begin implementing cleanup of their environment as detailed in UNEP's recommendations lingering since 2011; and also whether or not, and if yes, on what terms, to allow resumption of oil exploration activities on their land after their barring Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) from oil exploration activities in Ogoniland since 1993 (UNEP, 2011). Every one of these issues is each very closely related to the others. How Ogonis resolve these will have a great lot to do with how they and all other stakeholders handle the tool of communication. For all parties on both sides of the divides in all of the respective issues we have raised here, because of how contentious the contending interests have become, and because of how high the stakes have risen, only a win-win resolution will now do. And only communication can now do it. Empathetic responsible communication handled by master craftsmen can do it.

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