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Who is this ignorant soldier?: A post-colonial reading of Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt at a postcolonial reading of Ken Saro-Wiwa's novel, *Sozaboy*, which in his own words is written in "'rotten English', a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English" (Author's Note, *Sozaboy*, 1994). In this piece, I identify Saro-Wiwa's novel as an indifferent account of the historical happening in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970. The novel emphasises "the rule of darkness" where "some peoples were the imperialists and others the imperialized in history" (Brantlinger, 857), a situation that led to the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria in 1914. Applying A. T. George's theory of anomaly, the paper considers the characterization of Mene (herein referred to as Sozaboy) as a deliberate attempt to re-create history from the point of view of a partisan judge, the author. The perennial struggle for relevance by perceived minority ethnic groups of Nigeria brought under the control of three main or dominant groups by a colonial fiat remains a major concern in post-independence Nigeria. The paper also examines the role of colonisation and the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta area of the country towards the end of colonial rule as major factors that contributed to the struggle for supremacy among the people of Nigeria in the early years of independence. It also examines the incursion of the military into governance of the newly-independent state as a catalyst for internal struggle, political instability, corruption, mutual hatred and wanton destruction of life and property. The new country witnessed these in the early years, leading unavoidably to the Nigerian-Biafran War. It is argued that *Sozaboy*, though not a true canon for the post-colonial rendition of Nigeria's history, is "anti-war," and provides adequate inspiration for retooling Nigeria.

Keywords: Biafra, Niger-Delta, Nigeria, Oil war, Postcolonial, Rotten English

Introduction

I wish to begin this paper with references to relevant literature on the Nigerian civil war in order to properly situate my argument that Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* is not a true reflection of the realities of that war. This becomes expedient against the backdrop of the "anomaly" (George, 2008) and ignorance displayed by the protagonist of the novel, Mene. By this effort, I hope to correct the impression reinforced by Saro-Wiwa's writings that the people of Nigeria fought a senseless war between 1967 and 1970. It is my intention to make the point that post-colonial studies in universities across Europe and America, as a matter of duty, owe Africa and the nation -states that emerged as a result of the 1884 partition of the continent by Europe, the responsibility to accurately reflect the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial experiences of the colonised through the choice of literary texts for their African Studies programmes. That said, I consider below references and scenarios from four different texts (including *Sozaboy*) by authors of Nigerian origin but from different regions.

First, *Sozaboy*. The text reveals: "Although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first" (Saro-Wiwa, 1).Why everybody was happy remains to be seen in the face of pending crises. In another instance, the soldier boy, Mene, claims he has no understanding of what he is doing and why he is asked to fight in a war for which he cannot query his own participation: "Even, I no understand what I was doing until now. I come begin see as I dey think for that swamp that day that true I do not know why we are fighting the war. …Every thing they tell me, I must do, no question" (114).

Second, *Measuring Time*. The text provides background information on peaceful co-existence among Nigerians living in the northern part prior to the 1966 pogrom: "The Keti Igbos had been here for as long as most people could remember. They had intermarried and prospered, and they even had their own chief, Mr. Eme, who had the biggest shop in the market, where he

sold dresses and shoes and all sorts of men's clothes" (Habila, 42). The text further depicts the violence that engulfs Keti and Mr Eme's disbelief that anyone from Keti can ever betray him. When trouble starts, Eme is warned but he refuses to heed the warning to stay away: "One man, his name was LaMasa, when he heard the crier, ran to Mr. Eme to warn him, but Mr. Eme did not believe him, he reported him to the police as a troublemaker and he was detained" (42). He regrets that decision, as his local friend, Ando, betrays him, seizing the gun in Eme's living room and kills him: "It had all been planned. That was how Mr. Eme was killed" (43).

Third, "Luxurious Hearses" in *Say You're One of Them*. This selected story from Uwem Akpan's anthology, *Say You're One of Them*, captures vividly the dilemma of any Nigerian with mixed parentage. Jubril is the archetype of such confusion in the Nigerian identity crisis, and he is not safe anywhere whenever problem breaks out. He grows up among his mother's people and changes from Gabriel (his Christian name given to him by his Southerner father at birth) to the Muslim equivalent, Jubril (which is acceptable to his Islamic Northerner mother). Having being amputated via a Sharia judgement in his northern state which he is fleeing now, owing to rejection by the people among whom he grew, who now consider him a kaffir; he faces another problem with the people from the South who are running away from the crisis centre in the north:

> Those who spoke English did so with accents peculiar to their tribes – all of them unlike Jubril's accent. The more he paid attention to the noisy crowd, the more convinced he became that the best way to disguise himself was to speak as little as possible. (Akpan, "Luxurious Hearses", *Say You're One of Them*, 191-192).

Fourth, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The author reminisces about the events preceding the war:

> Ojukwu's voice was unmistakable; it was vibrantly male, charismatic, smooth:
>
> *Fellow countrymen and women, you the people of Eastern Nigeria: Conscious of the supreme authority of Almighty God over all mankind; of your duty over posterity; aware that you can no longer be protected in your lives and in your*

> *property by any government based outside Eastern Nigeria; determined to dissolve all political and other ties between you and the former Republic of Nigeria; having mandated me to proclaim on your behalf in your name that Eastern Nigeria be a sovereign independent Republic, now therefore I do solemnly proclaim that the territory and region known as and called Eastern Nigeria, together with her continental shelf and territorial waters, shall henceforth be an independent sovereign state of the name and title of The Republic Of (sic) Biafra* (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 164-165).

Ojukwu's speech, for Adichie's character, Odenigbo, marks the beginning of the Nigerian-Biafran War, which lasted three years.

In the foregoing scenarios from four prominent Nigerian texts on the civil war, I have drawn attention to four different perspectives, reminiscent of the biblical accounts of the gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The same account but dissimilar representations. Only that in the case of the Nigerian-Biafran civil war, it is according to Ken Saro-Wiwa, Helon Habila, Uwem Akpan and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. These eminent Nigerians, through their literary works, have etched their names in the hearts of many Nigerians at home and abroad. I have singled out these authors for a comparison of notes with Ken Saro-Wiwa due to their origin and the thematic preoccupations of their craft. Habila hails from Kaltungo in Gombe State, Northern Nigeria; Akpan, who was born in Ikot Akpan Eda in Southern Nigeria, shares ethnic heritage of Niger Delta with Saro-Wiwa; and Adichie, from the university town of Nsukka, hails originally from Aba also in Southern Nigeria. Apart from Saro-Wiwa, the other three accounts seem to agree with events leading to the Nigerian-Biafran civil war.

Due to political expediency, Nigeria is now a country of 36 states plus the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, and is grouped into six geopolitical zones of North-West, North-East, North Central, South-West, South-East and South-South. Three major ethnic groupings into Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba further subsume the minorities. In the years following the independence on October 1, 1960, Nigeria became a country of many interests, no thanks to the British "divide-and-rule" policy which the new leaders imbibed wholly. Through the divide-and-rule policy, each ethnic group is made to understand its position within the polity

and the roles ascribed to it. District Officers were employed to man posts according to British demarcations. Euphemistically, some of the groups were made to feel it is their birthright "to rule" over the others and viewed opposition to its hegemony and authority as treasonable felony. Political rivalry among the three leading groups became fierce and threatened the soul of the system. Arrow-heads of the era's political battle were: Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto; Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Owelle of Onitsha; and Chief Obafemi Awolowo. They were the three premiers of the northern, eastern and western regions respectively. The mantle of leadership at independence fell on Ahmadu Bello, who nominated his lieutenant, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, to lead the government at the centre in Lagos while he remained at the helm of affairs in the Northern Region. The belief in political circles then was that the regional government was stronger than the central parliamentary government. Nnamdi Azikiwe became the first President, albeit ceremonial, of the Nigerian state while Obafemi Awolowo headed the opposition.

On 15 January 1966, Nigeria witnessed the first coup d'état led by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, a soldier of eastern Nigerian origin. The Nzeogwu coup led to the death of several northern leaders including the Prime Minister, Balewa; the ascendancy to the "throne" of Nigerian leadership by soldiers of eastern origin, and subsequent displeasure by soldiers of northern origin who felt that the coup was targeted at their ethnic leaders in order to prize away the control of the country from their grip. This feeling led to another coup exactly six month after the first, which swept away Major-General Aguiyi Ironsi, then military head of state and other military leaders of eastern and western origin in power. This time around, soldiers of the northern origin took over from their southern counterparts in a bloody coup that saw the head of state and the governor of Western Region, Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi, a Yorubaman from the western region, killed in ignominious way. The bad blood generated by the military coups soon spread to the communities like wildfire, leading to sporadic riots, religious uprising, wanton

killings and destruction mainly in the north. In total, it is reported that about 30,000 men, women and children of eastern origin were killed in the north while about 1,800,000 returned as refugees (Suzanne Cronje, **Times**, 27 April 1967). These people lost all their possessions. Cronje reports as follows:

> There is hardly a family in the East which is not personally affected by the tragedy, and the demand for guarantees against Northern aggression is universal. It is this which dictates the Eastern attitude towards federation. Colonel Ojukwu and his advisers decided against secession in order to preserve Nigeria's economic potential; instead the East proposed a confederation in which the central authority would coordinate common services and external relations, but would not have power to intervene in regional affairs (cited in Emefiena Ezeani, *In Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot 2nd Edition*, 2013: 238).

Cronje aptly captures the mood of the Nigerian people prior to the civil war and the hard-line position of the leaders of the Federal Republic as opposed to the desires and demands of the eastern people led by Ojukwu. Ojukwu and his co-traveller in the Biafran war chose diplomacy as an initial option. This was brokered in a deal known as the Aburi Accord. But the military government at the centre refused to implement the agreement. As demonstrated in the foregoing scenarios referenced, the issues degenerated and inevitably, Nigerians went to war against one another. It was a war of attrition, an ill-wind that blew no one any good. Military leaders at the federal level got immense support from Britian and Russia and they justified the war with a campaign slogan: "To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done" (see Iyayi's *Heroes*, 86). At the end of the war, another slogan, "No Victor, No Vanquished" became a mantra that is only true in expression but not in practice. Literature has however shown that a lot of undercurrents were responsible for the war beyond mere slogans and it is against this postcolonial background that I wish to discuss Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*.

Who is this ignorant Sozaboy?

That Saro-Wiwa's novel, *Sozaboy*, portrays the war as a senseless and meaningless adventure may seem alright to an outsider but not to an average Nigerian, including those who witnessed the civil war and those born after the war. It is also not a coincidence that Saro-Wiwa, in this novel, adopts the stance of an indifferent participant. Why did I say so? I say so because his novel, *Sozaboy*, is a reflection of the hybrid nature of the Nigerian state – one of the problematics of post-colonialism. Obi Nwakanma captures the sentiment: "Nigeria is, in its current formation, a hybrid state; a nation of multiple nations coalescing to form the basis of nationness and national belonging" (2008:1). I say so because owing to the mumbo-jumbo of Nigeria's creation through the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by the colonial imperialist in January 1914, many ethnic groups who found themselves in a coalition in which they had no say remain undecided as to where to pitch their support. I say so because the question of identity and "nationness" continues to tug at the heart of the nation without a coherent answer till date. Nigeria held a conference of nationalities beginning from March 17 to August 14, 2014 to discuss its continued existence (Etemire 2014: 482) but arrived at no concrete agreement.

Saro-Wiwa's people of Ogoniland, one of the many minority ethnic groups that suddenly became part of the constellation termed "Eastern Nigeria," find themselves constantly asking "Who are we?" The civil war, which was reportedly premised on the economic gains of prospecting crude oil from Saro-Wiwa's people's land, created a new dimension that demanded allegiance from the minorities. While others joined in the war against Nigeria, Saro-Wiwa and some other prominent citizens of Eastern Nigeria decided to stay aloof. Inadvertently, they found themselves and their people dragged into the war on either sides and they suffered the consequences. In the battle for supremacy that ensued in the Nigerian political set-up shortly after independence, therefore, the Ogoni, Ijaws, Efik, Annang, and several others who are commonly referred to as "Niger-Delta" people, found themselves at the periphery. They did

not seem to have a voice, but their interest was presumably taken care of by the dominant group, the Igbo, led by Ojukwu.

The battle royale for the heart of the Nigerian State remains the purview of the three dominant ethnic groups up until now. That is if we choose to ignore the permutation that brought into power President Goodluck Jonathan who is a son of the Niger Delta. The lackadaisical attitude of an average Niger Deltan to the politics in Nigeria accounts for the opening statement of *Sozaboy*: "Although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first." The question is: Why would everybody in Dukana be happy at first given the chaos and political instability in the country? Maybe because they felt the casualty on their side would not be major. Another issue to ponder is: At what point is this "first" to which Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* makes reference: prior to 1884, 1914, 1960, 1967 or when? Or is it prior to the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1957? *Sozaboy* does not seem to provide a clue. If the Dukana people were happy at first, why were they no longer happy at the end of the war, when it became evident that the war, like death, is a grim reaper? Saro-Wiwa's novel provides an attempted answer to the last question through a revelation of the sad irony that whether the people of Niger Delta participated in the war or not, they still suffered its effects, which percolated to the outermost corners of their villages. Dukana, as observed by William Boyd (1994) in the "Introduction" to the novel, is an archetype for the Niger Delta while Sozaboy (Mene) is the stereotype for the victims, those who became casualties in the war they "pretended" they knew nothing about.

Earlier in 1968, in the thick of the civil war, Dr Akanu Ibiam, former governor of Eastern Nigeria, who was decorated many times by the Queen of England for his services to humanity and the British Empire, wrote to Queen Elizabeth II, renouncing all the honours bestowed on him by the Queen's father and the Queen herself for what he perceived as Britian's undisguised support for the "Muslim" Federal troops against the "Christian" Biafran State (cited in Ezeani,

2013: 245). Ibiam argued that the people of eastern Nigeria (including the Niger-Deltans) have always been united and they believe in their common destiny. It was this understanding of an "indivisible" eastern bloc that made him write to the Queen, stating that "Eastern Nigeria did not retaliate in any way, for we do not kill strangers within our gates, and being humble and sensitive Christians, we refused to commit murder, contrary to the commandment of God, particularly as we believe that two wrongs can never make a right. Northern Nigerians in Eastern Nigeria were therefore collected together and escorted safely by train across the border to their own section of Nigeria" (see Ezeani, 2013: 245). By this letter, Ibiam tried to prove that Eastern Nigeria was one and that the decision by Ojukwu to declare a secession was a popular one supported by the people of Eastern Nigeria across board.

Mene, in *Sozaboy*, is quoted to have said: "Even, I no understand what I was doing until now" (114). He continues his profession of ignorance by adding that: "The Chief Commander General have not told us why we are fighting the war. No. Tan Papa did not tell us why we are fighting. The soza captain did not tell us why we must go inside the pit." Mene's portrayal, in my view, is to showcase the average soldier recruited into the army during the war as "zombie" and ignoramus. This is more so given the fact that Mene has to bribe his way into the military. The novel, *Sozaboy*, contradicts itself on the account of the Niger Delta being forced into a war the people knew nothing about through the characterisation of the recruits who have to pay to be accepted into the military. Mene is, in Saro-Wiwa's artistic portrayal, a metonymic representation of the military institution. *Sozaboy* ends up ridiculing not only the military institution but the Nigerian State for its unmistakable indifference to the war. Sozaboy goes through the novel living the life of lie, pegging his hopes on the aspiration of people in his communities: Zaza, the one who claims to have fought in Burma during the World War II; Tan Papa, Duzia, Bom, Chief Birabee, Pastor Birika, and his wife, Agnes. He ignores the only voice of reason, which is his mother's.

Mene, the sozaboy, flows on the edge of life, and like a "waif", he is blown like a leaf to wherever the wind enlists. His capture by the Federal Troop and subsequent "reinstatement" into the Federal Army is another signpost of the author's position on the civil war. For Saro-Wiwa, there is no clear-cut demarcation between the soldiers; either can be branded the "enemy" to achieve a common purpose, which is mutual destruction. His encounter with Manmuswak – a psychopath who takes pleasure in destruction and killings – is another critical point in the novel. At first, he presents himself as a friend, meets regularly with Sozaboy's platoon leader, Bullet, and eventually contrives the destruction of the entire command by sowing seeds of discord in their hearts. Bullet is described as young, enterprising and very promising. But the military destroys him. He plots the killing of his captain, a circumstance that eventually leads to the destruction of the whole battalion.

Mene's journey motif and the search for his mother and wife is another trope worthy of mention in *Sozaboy*. This is important in the reinforcement of Saro-Wiwa's perspective that the war was not necessary in the first place. To discover that his mother and his young, beautiful wife – two most important people on earth to him – have been killed in an air raid, marks his descent into the abyss of hopelessness. To worsen his situation, he returns to find his village men and women in perpetual mourning. He is also rejected by them, as rumours from the war front has it that he has died during an attack. True to his characterisation, Sozaboy becomes a useless symbol of the war. Life in Dukana never remains the same. Life, for Mene, never remains the same as well. And "Although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first", the events of 1967-1970 have made it possible that no one in Dukana will ever be happy again.

Saro-Wiwa, *Sozaboy* and the Nigerian State

Dianne Feeley, in "Ken Saro-Wiwa's Antiwar Masterpiece," describes Saro-Wiwa as one of the nine key Ogoni leaders convicted of inciting to murder by a Kangaroo panel on November

2, 1995. All the nine leaders, against international outcry and concerns for fundamental human rights, were executed by the regime of General Sani Abacha, then Nigeria's maximum ruler on November 10, 1995. Feeley writes:

> Since the Sani Abacha military regime seized power in 1990 (sic), the Ogoni tribe, an ethnic minority living on the Niger delta in south-eastern Nigeria, has suffered extremely brutal repression. Amnesty International points to government-instigated attacks resulting in at least 100 extrajudicial executions, 600 Ogoni detained, and the destruction of dozens of villages. (http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/2409)

The brutal killings and attacks on the Ogoni people led to Saro-Wiwa's formation of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). He is credited with the authorship of seven titles, including novels, plays, poems, an autobiography (*On a Darkling Plain*) and children's books. According to Feeley, "His 1992 manifesto, *Genocide in Nigeria: the Ogoni Tragedy*, outlined the exploitation and pauperization of the Ogoni people by both the Nigerian government and Shell Petroleum Development Company." Through Feeley, we are able to catch a glimpse of Saro-Wiwa's position on the Nigerian State, Biafran aspiration and the destiny of the Niger Deltans in the political and economic equation:

> During the Nigerian civil war (1967-70) – when one million people died, mostly from starvation and disease – Saro-Wiwa worked as a civilian administrator in Bonny, a crucial oil port on the Niger River delta. At the war's outbreak he fled from the new Biafran state. Saro-Wiwa did not identify with the aspirations of General Ojukwu, who was from the area's dominant tribe – the Ibo. For Saro-Wiwa, then, the rhetoric of self-determination was hollow. As he has pointed out in several of his essays, colonialism isn't simply European, but has been long practiced in Africa by dominant tribes against smaller tribes. (http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/2409)

From the foregoing, it is clear that Saro-Wiwa chooses to deliberately ignore the happenings in the country prior to the civil war in his writing. He sidesteps issues of political brigandage by the military, the wanton destruction of lives and properties by people of the northern ethnic group, to favour a primordial sentiment for the freedom of the Niger Delta. Saro-Wiwa's false

hope, built on the adventures of Isaac Adaka Boro (1938-1968) before him, is to be extirpated the same way the federal military might clamped down on Biafra. Boro was the first Nigerian, riding on the aspiration of the people of Niger Delta, to declare on February 23, 1966, a Niger Delta Republic. The Federal Government fought Boro and members of his volunteer force for twelve days before regaining the control of the oil-rich region (Iporukpo 2018: 35).

In 1987, two years after *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa's article, "Awo & the Creation of States," was published. In reproducing below excerpts from the article, I wish to show graphically why *Sozaboy* has been written in 1985 to foreground the theme of ignorance, senselessness and meaninglessness. First, Saro-Wiwa states his helplessness as a minority in the Nigerian scheme:

> I am a Khana. The Khana along with their cousins, the Gokana, Tai and Eleme have, since 1947, been grouped as Ogonis, in the Ogoni Division. Today, the Khana and Gokana are in the Bori Local Government Area, the Tai and Eleme are part of something called Otelga, a hybrid Local Government consisting of the Okrika Ijaws, the Ndoki Igbos and the Tai and Eleme. We belong to the Rivers State. The Ogoni number about 500,000, which makes me an extreme minority in a Nigeria of one hundred million people. The first secondary school in Ogoni country was established one hundred years after the first secondary school in Yorubaland, the CMS Grammar School in Lagos (1858). These two facts alone, in the first instance, establish my pitiable plight. (http://africanheraldexpress.com/blog8/2014/02/16/awo-and-the-creation-of-states-by-ken-saro-wiwa/)

Saro-Wiwa then proceeds to give reasons why he considered his citizenship as a Nigerian unfortunate:

> I am unfortunate to be a Nigerian. I would rather not be, but I am doing my level best to be one, and a good one at that. Being a Nigerian means that my brother Nigerian of the Bura ethnic group in Borno State has been told that I am a "Southerner," equal to the Yoruba or Igbos who are numerous, well-educated and are after the jobs which the "northerner" ought to have. I wander, therefore, through the Federal Civil Service and am lost in the competition between "northern" and "southern" Nigerians, between the Igbo and the Yoruba, between the various clans and religions of the various peoples of Nigeria, between personal ambition and greed. I am lost. I cannot truly answer the name Nigerian.

> [...] (http://africanheraldexpress.com/blog8/2014/02/16/awo-and-the-creation-of-states-by-ken-saro-wiwa/)

In the foregoing, Saro-Wiwa explains why it is difficult to be a minority in a post-colonial State of Nigeria. His position presents his audience with the dilemma which every minority citizen faces as there appears to be no respite in sight even thirty-four years after the publication of his article. Saro-Wiwa also provides his readers a window into the consciousness that produced *Sozaboy*:

> I was a graduate student when the cataclysmic events of 1966 happened. Apart from my revulsion at the needless murders of the innocent, nothing upset me more than Ojukwu's dishonest formulations and his attempt to kidnap the Ogoni, among others, into his Igbo empire called "Biafra." I knew that he pinned his hopes of the economic viability of "Biafra" on the oil of the Ogoni and the Ijaw. I rebelled. I became Secretary of a small committee which met nights in Port Harcourt and issued a communique calling on Gowon to create a Rivers State by decree. (http://africanheraldexpress.com/blog8/2014/02/16/awo-and-the-creation-of-states-by-ken-saro-wiwa/)

Saro-Wiwa became a commissioner when Rivers State was eventually created. He discovered, sadly, that the creation of the state did not in any way abate the problems of the Ogonis. Instead, the problems multiplied, snowballing into a bigger crisis that eventually consumed him and eight other Ogoni activists (known as the Ogoni Nine) under the tyranny of Late General Sani Abacha in 1995. Highlighting some of the internal crises in the then Rivers State and the injustice and uneven distribution of the "commonwealth," he says: "…oil money from Ogoni country (as well as Ijaw country) was being carted away to Lagos, leaving the Ogoni illiterate and backward. This is anti-federalism. Worse still, the Ijaws were taking their frustrations out on the non-Ijaws of the State." (http://africanheraldexpress.com/blog8/2014/02/16/awo-and-the-creation-of-states-by-ken-saro-wiwa/)

Saro-Wiwa's "Awo & the Creation of States" ought to be the yardstick through which all Saro-Wiwa's writings and actions should be judged. He does not mince his words: "I want the option of CHOICE. I am not begging for it. I DEMAND it." Saro-Wiwa's desire is yet to materialise and the problems he confronted are still there, unresolved.

***Sozaboy* and A. T. George's theory of Anomaly**

I cite A. T. George's unpublished doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Witwaterstrand, South Africa as a veritable source of useful information on the post-colonial treatment of *Sozaboy*. In chapter three of the thesis entitled "Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* and the Gamble of Anomaly" (2008: 74-109), George describes Saro-Wiwa's *On a Darkling Plane* (1989) as a controversial war memoir, in which the author "retells the story of the Nigerian civil war by excavating the submerged experiences of ethnic minority Niger Delta communities during the war, and projects these as vital shards of Nigeria's nationalist memory" (74). He continues by stating that "throughout his (Saro-Wiwa) narrative, we find a certain relentless insistence that history is a patchwork of different memories and that unless we view history in its many-sidedness, admitting and examining its many fragments with sensitive and attentive care, we may miss history's scattered and incessant lessons (74).

George examines Saro-Wiwa's use of the trope of anomaly as a carrier of the value of subversion and a marker of narrative difference. For him, *Sozaboy* is "the effect of the civil war on one individual in a fictive mode" (74). Mene, according to him, is the central character presented as an apprentice-driver who joins the army following the outbreak of hostilities in a naive effort to prove his manhood to his would-be wife and to clinch a hero's welcome from his community. But the tragic realities of war shatter his fantasies and brought him into a new consciousness of his community and of himself (74).

George also describes *Sozaboy* as a narrative of war, which “projects an unusual universe of catastrophe, displacement and death” and follows with an argument that *Sozaboy*’s “characters in peace and war are transgressive, unknowable, and they tend to defy our expectations of rational behaviour” (75). He submits that if anomaly presupposes the irregular, the strange and the uncommon, …it also provides the fulcrum around which minority writers may spin their narratives of resistance – resistance to dominant expectations and systems of knowledge. That by using theme, character and language (“a triumphant retreat from the protocols of ‘standard’ English”) as critical access points into the universe of the novel, anomaly then becomes the aesthetic strategy through which Saro-Wiwa destabilizes our notion of the ‘normal’. George further describes *Sozaboy* as a narrative that operates from the margins of social experience and has a tendency to subvert dominant expectations and knowledge by pointing to alternative ways of seeing and knowing. Such narratives, he says, are “a house with many doorways. Each doorway affords us a fresh view of the contours of the edifice, and so serves as an alternative corridor of knowledge (75-76). George argues that employment of anomaly as an aesthetic implement of subversion is “one way in which minority writers seek to dethrone dominant rationality” (76). The characterisation of Mene is the canonisation of this theory of anomaly in a performative way, as the characters of *Sozaboy* are made to actually talk and act in a way that undermine popular understanding, familiarities and expectations.

George defines *Sozaboy* as “a quaint and compelling narrative of war which contains gory images of tragedy and anomie” (76). He proffers: “But this is a confused and muddled war in which the meaning of ‘enemy’ seems unstable, contingent and situational. In this war, ignorant and eager recruits offer bribes to enrol in the army in order to fight and die for an unknown cause” (76). The novel opens with “a hint that a corrupt and unpopular government has just been overthrown through a coup d’état raising hopes of a moral rebirth, away from the venality of the ancient regime” (77). But the widespread expectations of natural regeneration and good

governance are dashed as the tussle for political control results in turmoil and war (77). Okonkwo, Chief Birabee and Pastor Barika of Church of Light of God are examples of the corrupt elements in the system sustained in the novel.

But it is Mene's story, an account in the first-person narrative as Sozaboy, that draws unmistakable attention to the ignorance and anomaly inherent in his characterisation and fate. His attribution of his mother's inability to pay for his education, which in turn means he could not pursue his dream of becoming a lawyer or doctor to "luck" (*Sozaboy*, 11) is the most pathetic statement in the novel. It is unfortunate that in spite of the oil wealth of the Niger Delta, the children of the people on whose land the country's wealth is sourced are denied education. To have dismissed such deprivation and monumental neglect of the Dukana people as "my luck" is not only ignorant but also contrary to reason:

> When I passed the elementary six exam, I wanted to go to secondary school but my mama told me that she cannot pay the fees. The thing pained me bad bad because I wanted to be big man like lawyer or doctor riding car and talking big big English. In fact I used to know English in the school and every time I will try to read any book that I see. So when I see that I cannot go secondary, I was not happy. However, that is my luck (11).

Going by George's theory of anomaly, "Mene's attribution of his abbreviated education to "my luck" is pathetic and reflects his ignorance of the discourses which frame his life (George, 77). Niger Delta has low school enrolment due to poverty, deprivation and constant evacuation of entire communities as a result of oil exploration. Thus, Mene's mother's inability to sponsor the education of her only child is in George's view, "one of the grimmest ironies of the lives of a people whose lands produce immense petro-wealth, while they themselves live out a harsh and penurious existence" (78). George reasons that "unknown to Mene, he is trapped in the middle of that Fanonian paradox in which the greatest wealth is surrounded by the greatest poverty" (78-79).

In the semiotics of 'Progres', the only commercial lorry that plies Dukana-Pitakwa route, it is posited that Mene's progress as an individual is inextricably tied to the locomotive progress of the lorry. "Thus as the vehicle develops some mechanical fault and is grounded, Mene's ambition of becoming a licensed driver is similarly grounded" (George, 79). It could be argued that "the missing "s" in the spelling of 'Progres', becomes a vital signifier of both individual and communal statis" (George 79; *Sozaboy*, 12).

Conclusion

This paper has projected a new chapter in the study of Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* as a literary work. The intention is not to rubbish Saro-Wiwa's effort. My intention is to subtly showcase more important issues in the annals of Nigeria's history, which Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* and his other writings decidedly ignore. By so doing, I intend a call for a more robust discourse of post-colonial experiences of the Nigerian people, the hydra-headed socio-political and economic problems confronting the nation, polarisation along ethnic and religious groups, and the unending drums of war due to inability to see things from a single point-of-view.

It has been submitted that "most narratives of war as seen partially through the eyes of warlords, troop commanders and field generals tend to valorise the gallantry, heroism and the courage of soldiers... But by projecting the meaninglessness and destructiveness of war in *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa inscribes an anti-war rhetoric which challenges dominant notions of war as a logical extension of politics. And by seeing the war through the eyes of a naive army recruit, the writer mocks the vaunted intelligence and heroism of soldiers" (George, 81). The foregoing conclusion, if considered in association with Saro-Wiwa's other activities, marks him as a candidate for tragedy in the hands of the military he so derided.

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