



## Original article

## Chronicle of a future foretold: The complex legacies of Ken Saro-Wiwa

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## ABSTRACT

This article reflects upon the legacies of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his legal counsel Oronto Douglas who passed away in 2015. The article examines the prophetic quality of Saro-Wiwa's writings and how we can understand the slide into insurgency in the Niger delta.

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## 1. Introduction

Following the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa . . . and eight of his compatriots by the military junta in November 1995, the political equation changed. Nigeria's ethnic minorities are speaking out in a brave new voice and demanding that their wishes and aspirations be favored in the Nigerian project. The oil-producing communities are on the boil . . .

- Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast*, 2003, 3.

This is not, I repeat, NOT a call to violent action. We have a moral claim over Nigeria . . . I call for the practice of ERECTISM – Ethnic Autonomy, resource and Environmental Control- within each nation-state which must be run as a federation.

- Ken Saro-Wiwa, *A Month and a Day*, 1995, 75, 193.

On April 9th 2015, Oronto Natei Douglas, the Special Advisor to President Goodluck Jonathan on Research, Documentation and Strategy died after a protracted battle with cancer aged 49. By any reckoning he was a towering figure in and outside of the oil-producing Niger delta of Nigeria. He was, in short, an heir to the legacy of social activism and non-violent protest that Ken Saro-Wiwa, judicially-murdered along with eight other Ogoni activists by the Sani Abacha-led military junta in November 1995, had

bequeathed to a younger generation of post-colonial Nigerian activists. Douglas was born in a small fishing community Okoroba near Nembe in Bayelsa State – his father was a fisherman and a voice of progressive Christianity – and rose through the Nigerian student movement in Port Harcourt (he trained as a lawyer at Rivers State University of Science and Technology (RSUST)) to become the youngest member of Saro-Wiwa's legal defense team. Radicalised and transformed by the state military response to the political mobilization of the Ogoni and the establishment of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP, the political wing of the small Ogoni ethnic minority), Douglas was part of a dynamic and brilliant generation of Niger delta youth activists who came of age in the 1990s – Isaac Asuoka, Robert Azibo, Patterson Ogon, Timi Kaiser-Wilhem Ogoriba, Ike Okonta, Uche Onyeagocha, Felix Tuodolo, among them – and in particular in the wake of Saro-Wiwa's hanging.

Douglas's worldview was forged in the white heat of the struggles for resource control, human rights and environmental justice on the oilfields of the Niger delta in a period in which the charisma and leadership of a Ken Saro-Wiwa was no longer available. He founded the multi-ethnic Chikoko Movement which linked civic organization and youth movements – its membership comprised the major ethnicities of the Niger Delta, including the Andonis, Ogonis, Ijaws, Ikwerres, Itsekiri, Urhobos, Ilajes while its geographical footprint reached from Rivers State in the east and extended to Ondo State in the west. Douglas too was the central player in the formation of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) and in the drafting of the famous Kaiama Declaration of 1998 representing 500 communities from across the delta which demanded “the immediate withdrawal from Ijawland of all military forces of occupation and repression by the Nigerian State”

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and a rejection of “all undemocratic decrees that rob our peoples/communities of the right to ownership and control of our lives and resources, which were enacted without our participation and consent . . . [including] the Land Use Decree and The Petroleum Decree”. He co-founded Environmental Rights Action (ERA), with Reverend Nnimmo Bassey and Uche Onyeagocha, Africa’s foremost environmental movement, a spin off from Douglas’s earlier work with the Nigerian Civil Liberties Organization (CLO). Along with his close friend and comrade Ike Okonta (who himself went on to write the most insightful book on Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni movement, *When Citizens Revolt*), Douglas penned one of the most revealing and to this day the most compelling analyses of the oil-producing Niger Delta and its relation to the crisis of the Nigerian post-colonial state, namely *Where Vultures Feast* (published by Verso in 2003).

Like Saro-Wiwa, Douglas was a committed internationalist,<sup>2</sup> a charismatic and tireless voice of the oppressed and excluded, and someone deeply suspicious of the slick alliance of state and corporate power. In 2002 he founded the Community Defence Law Foundation (CDLF) in Port Harcourt, Rivers State (along with a sister organization he also founded Resource Access Foundation) designed to encourage the growth of intellectual and material capital by “formal and non-formal support to disadvantaged individuals and communities defending their human and environmental rights so as to aid survival”. I recall vividly traveling in the creeks of the delta with Oronto in 2001; it is no exaggeration to say he was at that point a heroic figure, his authority as a youth leader and his unimpeachable character were not in question. By the late 1990s Douglas had emerged as a veritable ‘man of the people’ in the creeks, villages and slums of the delta, arguably the most influential voice of his generation on matters of progressive youth politics, of resource control and minority rights. Oronto Douglas, in word and deed, was clearly the heir to Ken Saro-Wiwa’s mantle, to the commitment to fight, as Saro-Wiwa put it in his final words to the military tribunal which condemned him to death, the “dirty wars” and “crimes” perpetrated by state and corporate powers against the Niger delta.

Saro-Wiwa and Douglas were of different generations (the former born in 1941, the latter in 1966) yet they shared certain affinities in their biographies and political trajectories. Both were members of so-called ethnic minorities in the delta and yet were cosmopolitan and nationalist in their political orientation (each had attended high schools outside of the region and spoke other Nigerian vernacular languages). In the course of their lives they had both entered into government and in their own ways were far from marginal figures (both were well connected in state and federal circles at the highest levels). Each, in different ways, were the products of – and were fundamentally shaped by – popular struggles from below, and both men recognized the need to link environmental and human rights through a radical rethinking of the Nigerian constitution and of democratic resource control in a multi-ethnic federation in which ethnic minorities had historically been fearful and excluded as the famous Willink Commission concluded during the 1950s in the run up to Independence. Both individuals used their personal charisma and oratorical powers to mobilize ethnic communities in the name of the politics of recognition while always navigating the choppy waters of local parochialism and inter-ethnic tension. In helping to build popular movements among Niger delta societies marked by sharp divisions

along class, clan and age lines, Saro-Wiwa and Douglas struggled with twin forces of youth militancy (and armed struggle as a response to state repression) and state co-optation. Both men felt the violent hand of state power and the Nigerian security forces: detentions, harassment, physical abuse and torture followed each of them in the 1990s (the military of course murdered Saro-Wiwa after a kangaroo trial, and Douglas in the wake of the hanging of the Ogoni 9 essentially went underground living in Ghana and the UK for periods of time to avoid arrest by the Sani Abacha security forces). Their paths crossed in the 1990s: two men of differing generations and ethnic identities committed to not only contesting military rule and federal statutory powers in general but also to human and environmental rights. The hanging of Ogoni nine in a sense passed the torch and the political energy from the Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni to the Ijaw and Oronto Douglas. But the two movements exhibited differing trajectories too. Post- Saro-Wiwa the Ogoni movement fell into a precipitous decline and internecine strife – as Okonta (2005, 218) put it, the pot had cracked exposing deep contradictions between “moderates” and “hardliners”. The Ijaw movement conversely grew, assuming an institutional complexity, geographical capaciousness and political visibility associated with a the proliferation of youth movements. Twenty years on the proto-national Ijaw movement contains its own internal fractions and contentious politics.

After pursuing an academic career in Lagos, Saro-Wiwa served during the Biafran war (1967–1970) as a Civilian Administrator for the Port of Bonny and subsequently as an Education Commissioner in Rivers State until he was dismissed from his post for advocating greater Ogoni autonomy. He went on to be a businessman, novelist and television producer and his long-running satirical TV series *Basi & Co.* was purported to be the most watched soap opera in Africa. During the 1970s he built up real estate and retail interests and in the 1980s concentrated on his writing, journalism and television production while continuing to be concerned with the effects of the oil industry in Ogoniland, a concern that dated back to the 1960s (Watts, 1997). From 1990 he devoted himself full-time to the causes of the Ogoni, a minority ethnic group that numbered about 300,000 people. In mid-1992 he broadened the reach of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, an organization he led, and increasingly turned to the international environmental and human rights movements, focusing on the UK where Shell had one of its headquarters. As a result of mounting protest after 1990, Shell suspended operations in Ogoni lands in 1993.

Douglas conversely rose initially through the ranks of student, civic and social movements in the 1990s and emerged as a central figure in the rise of a powerful Ijaw youth movement. However, the government of Governor Diepreye Alamiyeseigha would later tap him in 2004 to become a member of the Cabinet in Bayelsa State with responsibility for strategy and information, where he worked with then Deputy Governor, Goodluck Jonathan. As an activist of renown, the decision to enter politics was controversial and many of his comrades from the youth movements questioned the wisdom of this particular entry, and in the short term they were right. Diepreye Alamiyeseigha was detained in London on charges of money laundering in September 2005 and at the time of his arrest Metropolitan police found about £1m in cash in his London home (later they found a total of £1.8 m (\$3.2 m) in cash and bank accounts) and he had been found to own real estate in London worth an alleged £10 m). He jumped bail in December 2005 in London by allegedly disguising himself as a woman and dramatically reappeared in Yenagoa. Douglas, as the Governor’s Information Commissioner, had the unenviable task of explaining these events to a skeptical Nigerian public and subsequently deal with the fallout of his Governor being impeached in December 2005 on serious corruption charges. Douglas resigned his position in Cabinet and declined to accept a return to the Cabinet of then

<sup>2</sup> Douglas was a Fellow of the George Bell Institute, England, and the International Forum on Globalisation, USA. A widely travelled activist, he has presented papers in over 200 international conferences and has visited over 78 countries to speak on human rights and the environment. Saro-Wiwa’s success in both organizing and founding MOSOP and the Ogoni Bill of Rights was in no small measure wrapped up with his ability to working internationally and build linkages and alliance with groups such as Greenpeace and Amnesty.

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