How Useful are 'national' and/or 'nationalist' Frames when Analysing the 'Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People' in the Niger Delta?

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'Royal Dutch/Shell is more than a colonial force in Nigeria. A colonial power exhibits some measure of concern for the territory over which it lords. This is not the case with this mogul, which goes for crude oil in the most *crude* manner possible' (Douglas and Okonta, 2003: xi).

The epic struggle between the Ogoni, an African tribe with deep roots in the environment of the Niger Delta, and Royal Dutch/Shell, one of the world's most powerful multinational oil companies, is a story which has caught the imagination of 'Western' publics. However, whilst there is little doubt over Shell's devastating role in the Delta, the understanding of the Ogoni 'nation' as natural guardians of the Delta's Eden-like environment deserves our critical analysis. Is this anything more than simply a story?

In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said has asserted that 'stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonised people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history'. For Said, 'nations themselves *are* narrations'. Thus, the 'power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging' is an important one (1994: xiii). In the early 1990s one man was instrumental in the mobilisation of the Ogoni: Ken Saro-Wiwa was the author not only of numerous books and poetry anthologies, but arguably, the man who narrated and framed the Ogoni 'nation'. Whilst heading the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) he led thousands in their protests against Shell and the Nigerian government, the latter of which he accused of 'indigenous colonialism' (1992).

However, as will become evident, Saro-Wiwa's activism cannot be neatly explained within existing 'national' and 'nationalist' frameworks. Victoria Bernal has observed that 'in all of its meanings, nation is about boundaries, about inclusions and exclusions [and] about members and outsiders' (2004: 4). Yet, the story narrated by Saro-Wiwa was also directed towards—and defined by—entities and processes which lay well beyond the 'boundaries' of the nation he sought to construct. Outsiders were not simply 'Others' against which to define the Ogoni nation, but instrumental sponsors which shaped the movement from *within*. Furthermore, the essay will argue that 'overlaying' the nationalist paradigm with a notion of 'transnational governmentality', as advocated by thinkers such as James Ferguson, creates its own practical problems and academic pitfalls. Through its analysis of MOSOP, the essay demonstrates that further scholarship is sorely needed to address the relations between—and relevance of— 'local', 'national' and 'global' spheres.

The Mobilisation of the Ogoni: 1990-1993

Minorities in the oil-producing states of Nigeria have long called on the central government to address their concerns.

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Namely, the environmental degradation caused by oil spillages and gas flaring, as well as claims that they are marginalised from state power and are thus subordinated to the country's major groups. However Eghosa Osaghae writes that 'the Ogoni uprising which lasted between 1990 and 1993 marked a new phase in the interesting interface of oil and minority politics' (1995: 326).

The failure of the Nigerian state to respond to repeated claims for Ogoni citizenship rights left 'disenchanted individuals and social groups' increasingly susceptible to mobilisation 'along religious, civic and communal lines' (Okonta, 2002: 239-240). It was against this background that Ken Saro-Wiwa—a television producer, author, businessman, and politician—brought together representatives of five of the six Ogoni clans to sign the 'Ogoni Bill of Rights' (OBR) in August 1990. The OBR began by asserting that 'the people of the Ogoni' represented a 'separate and distinct ethnic nationality within the Federal Republic of Nigeria', before going on to argue that the 'majoritarian' ethnic principles which supported Nigeria's power system denied minorities the agency to escape impoverishment. It concluded by *demanding* 'political autonomy' (1990). As such, the OBR represented 'the classic story of a people who became putative 'tribesmen' in order to realise full citizenship in a Nigeria of several competing tribes' (Okonta, 2002: 253). Osaghae summarises that 'the failure of the state to respond positively to previous petitions about oil companies and its failure to protect the interests of the frustrated Ogoni people, led them to assert their right to self-determination to enable them to deal with the oil companies directly' (1995: 333).

Drawing on the work of Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, Okonta has asserted that the OBR 'was calling for a return to moral ethnicity'. By draining 'national' politics of 'the explosive and divisive ingredient of inter-ethnic competition' for resources, and with 'each 'nation' free to resolve the questions of equity, exploitation, and moral agency within its domain', the Nigerian state could be reconstructed by its composite 'nations' (2002: 258-261). Whilst recognising its 'potential parochial alter-ego', Okonta asserts that the OBR was driven by 'civic language' with goals of 'democracy and development'. For Okonta, it formed the foundations of 'nationalism as a liberating force recapturing cultural identity and recreating solidarity as a basis for the prosperous democratic state' (2002: 262).

Two weeks after the OBR had been released, MOSOP[1] was founded by 'ideological and political entrepreneurs… to make real the document's claims and aspirations' (Okonta, 2002: 251). However, the organisation was 'fragile from the outset'. Despite Saro-Wiwa's wariness of the Ogoni elites, he knew it necessary to win their support. Thus, 'the MOSOP that emerged in September 1990' was 'a political movement of the Ogoni elite led by the Ogoni elite'. Furthermore, it 'conducted its politics in the conventional elite grammar of petition writing and public speeches in English', which the overwhelming majority of Ogoni 'did not understand' (ibid: 269; also Osaghae, 1995: 329). Watts identifies 'at least five somewhat independent internal strands embracing youth, women, traditional rulers, teachers

and Churches', and concludes that MOSOP represented a fractious 'we' (2005: 69). There was concern within the organisation that it 'had yet to register in the national consciousness' (Okonta, 2002: 270). Keen to resolve these tensions, work began to stitch together the social cleavages which divided the movement. The 'main strategies of mobilisation' consisted of campaign tours to the various clans, 'serious propaganda in the media' and giving people a stake in the struggle by promising 'material progress and lump sum monetary compensation' if it succeeded (Osaghae, 1995: 334). In taking these measures, Okonta writes that the MOSOP leaders 'went about building the movement and reinventing the Ogoni nation in the process' (2002: 251).

The mobilisation of the Ogoni 'nation' was soon to take another step forward. In December 1992 MOSOP issued Shell with a series of ultimatums. It was demanded that the company pay ten billion dollars in royalties and damages; cease all environmental degradation; cover all exposed high pressure pipelines; and begin negotiations concerning future oil extraction and exploration. Shell was given thirty days to agree. The company responded by upping security and the Nigerian army moved into the region (Osaghae, 1995: 336). Osaghae reports however, that 'such reactions from the state only strengthened the people's resolve' (ibid). Thus, on January 4th 1993, upon the passing of the thirty-day ultimatum and on the UN's opening day of the 'International Year of the World's Indigenous People', Saro-Wiwa led an Ogoni national march at Bori in defiance of a state order. Watts argues that it represented his 'crowning moment of glory'; he 'presided over the birth of [the] Ogoni flag, the Ogoni anthem and the National Youth Council of the Ogoni People' (2003: 19). Saro-Wiwa appeared to have 'secured the popular base in Ogoni that he had always craved' and in the process had created 'a new powerful sense of national identity and solidarity by mobilising [the Ogoni] against Shell and the 'greedy' Nigerian state' (Okonta, 2002: 275). For Okonta, 'Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP [had] deepened [the Ogoni] consciousness by merging land, people, and their travails in a political drama touched with mythic grandeur on 4 January. By doing so they created the modern Ogoni nation' (ibid: 283). Thus, one can trace 'the 'invention' of the traditions of [this] modern Ogoni nation', a process which had begun with the signing of the OBR in 1990, and which 'was formalised with a public ceremony that merged MOSOP and its elite self-appointed officials with the wider society' (ibid: 283-284).

If one defines nationalism as a political project aimed at fostering the belief amongst a people that they have a common past and thus should be permitted to control a common destiny, then Saro-Wiwa's project appears to be a nationalist one in every sense of the word. However, by 1993 processes were already underway which would pose a challenge to the utility of 'national' and 'nationalist' frameworks in analysing the movement. The previous year, Saro-Wiwa had registered MOSOP with the 'Unrepresented Nations and People's Organisation' (UNPO) based in the Netherlands. Now, fearing that the Nigerian government would take measures to suppress the blossoming mobilisation, he looked towards more influential international NGOs for support. Saro-Wiwa—the author and

poet—knew well that different types of audience require different types of story to move and 'involve' them.

Transcending Ethno-nationalism?

'MOSOP under Saro-Wiwa's leadership had helped create an indigenous subject and an indigenous space.MOSOP's claims were territorial as a basis for an Ogoni state, and as a way of securing "their oil".But these property rights and the boundaries of the territory proved to be hotly contested since they were necessarily exclusivist (Watts, 2003: 19-20).

In 1993, with a 'national' flag fluttering at the head of huge protest rallies and thousands marching to the sound of its anthem, Ogoni 'nationalism' posed a tangible threat to corporations working in the Delta as well as to the Nigerian government itself. Neighbouring 'ethnic-nationalities' were also growing restive at the prospect of a reinvigorated Ogoni (Osaghae, 1995: 337-338; Apter, 2005: 275). Saro-Wiwa was concerned: 'as a tiny minority movement in a poor country, MOSOP had little prospect of support from domestic power-holders' (Bob, 2003: 403).

James Ferguson has pointed towards the vital role 'transnational connections' increasingly have in 'enabl[ing] 'local' actors to challenge the state's well-established claims to encompassment and vertical superiority'. He reports that 'canny 'grassroots' operators may trump the national[-interest] ace [played by states] with appeals to 'world opinion' and email links to the international headquarters of such formidably encompassing agents of surveillance as Africa Watch, World Vision International, or Amnesty International' (2006: 111). Saro-Wiwa had made previous attempts to garner the attention of foreign sponsors – in 1991 the OBR had been augmented with 'an appeal to the international community'. However, organisations which might have been sympathetic to the cause had been put off by 'thorny political issues concerning autonomy for minorities and complex economic issues concerning allocation of oil revenues'. Furthermore, in declaring that the Ogoni were victims of 'genocide' without having substantive evidence to back up the claim, the MOSOP leadership had alienated powerful Human Rights groups (Bob, 2003: 405; also Leton in OBR, 1990; Saro-Wiwa in Osaghae, 1995: 330). Whilst smaller NGOs such as the UNPO had been willing to adopt MOSOP's campaign, the complex, exclusivist and politically contested discourses of 'indigenous subject' and 'indigenous space' left larger NGOs wary. Clearly a new narrative was necessary.

Clifford Bob writes that 'the attempt to win international support' had 'directly shaped [the January 4th] protest'. The marchers 'were outfitted with signs in English attacking Shell' and 'bore twigs highlighting the importance of environmental concerns' (2003: 403). MOSOP also sought to 'ensure that our important events were covered filmicly' for later distribution abroad (Saro-Wiwa, 1995: 140). Saro-Wiwa had instigated a shift in the framing of the struggle; through his international travels he had come to see 'what could be done by an environment group to press demands

on government and companies' and had grown 'convinced that the environment would have to be a strong plank on which to base' the movement (ibid:79–80). Having 'initially presented the Ogoni cause as an ethnically based conflict between a powerless minority and dominant 'indigenous colonialis[ts]' (Bob, 2003: 405), Saro-Wiwa now fused'Shell, environmental devastation, and a threatened indigenous people' to create a 'potent brew', which brought organisations such as Greenpeace, the Rainforest Action Group, the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth into the fold (Okonta, 2002: 285; also Bob, 2002: 40). Okonta reports that Saro-Wiwa constructed the 'Ogoni past as Edenic' and sought to show that they 'had always been conscious of their environment since the dawn of time and had gone to great lengths to safeguard it… The land was the people and the people was the land' (ibid: 278).

Ferguson has claimed that today's minority groups frequently appeal not to the 'national' interest, when protesting against major projects such as dam-building or resource extraction, but 'style themselves 'guardians of the planet', protectors of 'the lungs of the earth', or participants in a universal struggle for human rights'. It appears an incisive observation (2006: 111). Movements such as MOSOP, which might once have been conceivable as elements of a national 'civil society', can no longer be 'coherently labelled 'local', 'national', or 'international' phenomena. 'Instead… like much else of interest in contemporary Africa' they embody 'a significant local dynamic [which] is indisputably a product and expression of powerful forces, national and global' (ibid: 99). For, Philippa Hall 'the political impact of MOSOP lay in the extent to which the movement transcended a bounded ethno-nationalism and instead linked local and global concerns' (2000: 132).

As MOSOP grew in strength, the Nigerian government began to crack down on the movement. Bob reports, 'this repression further intensified international support… [which] grew to include scores of environmental, human rights, and indigenous rights NGOs from many countries around the world' (2003: 408). The 'tight dialect between the domestic and international levels' renders a purely 'national' or 'nationalist' framework inadequate. It was not the case that international actors simply supported or had 'solidarity' with a 'national' movement. Rather, 'local' dynamics facilitated and encouraged global relationships, which, in turn, 'shaped MOSOP's goals and strategies' from *within* (Bob, 2003: 397; also Okonta, 2002: 375). One might accept Edward Said's assertion that nations '*are* narrations'. However, as Ken Saro-Wiwa deftly demonstrated by manoeuvring and merging MOSOP into simultaneously 'local', 'national' and 'global' processes, by no means do all narrations sit easily within national or nationalist frameworks.

Transnational Apparatus of Governmentality: The Emergence of a New Paradigm?

Having identified that numerous organisations and movements can no longer be bracketed 'within the familiar vertical division of analytic levels', Ferguson goes on to argue that they 'may be better conceptualized not as 'below' the

state, but as integral parts of a new, transnational apparatus of governmentality'. He continues, 'this new apparatus does not *replace* the older system of nation-states… but overlays it and coexists with it' (2006: 103). Thus, dynamics such as that within the Ogoni movement can be seen 'operating on the same level and in the same global space' as the state; they are 'horizontal contemporaries' (ibid).

Ferguson identifies practical and academic advantages to such an approach. Drawing on the example of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement, he argues that by merely identifying locally-based 'civil society' as in 'opposition to the state', one risks lumping together 'diametrically opposed political agendas of distinct and antagonistic social classes' (ibid: 104). Furthermore—and crucially for the purpose of this essay—he recognises that 'national' politics 'are constrained not only by the balance of forces' within the state, but also by transnational forces such as capital flows. 'Traditional nationalist politics', which operates according to vertical levels, 'seems to have reached its limits' (ibid: 105). Conversely, a transnational framework allows one to conceive of 'international civic politics [as] a real alternative to weak [or, one might add, strong] nation-states across the globe' (Mayekiso in Ferguson, 2006: 106). As the case of the Ogoni demonstrates, this is an approach which has already been adopted by a number of social movements. The analysis leaves Ferguson to pose a series of questions:

'Are we ready to jettison received ideas of 'local communities' and 'authentic leadership'? Critical scholars today celebrate both local resistance to corporate globalisation and forms of grassroots international solidarity that some have termed 'globalisation from below'. But even as we do so, we seem to hang on stubbornly to the very idea of a 'below'—the idea that politically subordinate groups are somehow naturally local, rooted, and encompassed by 'higher-level' entities. For what is involved in the very idea and image of 'grassroots' politics if not precisely the vertical topography of power that I have suggested is the root of our conceptual ills?' Can we learn to conceive, theoretically and politically, of a 'grassroots' that would be not local, communal, and authentic, but worldly, well connected, and opportunistic? Are we ready for social movements that fight not 'from below' but 'across', using their 'foreign policy' to fight struggles not against 'the state' but against the hydra-headed transnational apparatus of banks, international agencies, and market institutions through which contemporary capitalist domination functions?' (2006: 107).

Ferguson summarises by enthusing that 'new forms of transnational connection increasingly enable 'local' actors to challenge the state's well-established claims to encompassment and vertical superiority'. Instead, there has arisen a 'transnationalised 'local' that fuses the grassroots and the global in ways that make a hash of the vertical topography of power' (ibid: 111).

The analysis simultaneously reveals and obfuscates processes evident in contemporary social movements. Whilst a convincing argument can be made that 'national' and 'nationalist' paradigms are often problematic, seeking to analyse MOSOP through a 'transnational apparatus of governmentality' has its own potential pitfalls. Operating in the

'global space' is not a luxury afforded to all social movements. For every Tibetan monk, Ogoni environmental protestor, or Latin American indigenous activist, one can cite numerous examples of movements which have failed to acquire entry onto the 'global' stage. Few people follow—or have even heard of—the plight of seven million Uigher who live northwest of Tibet, whilst the independence movement in Ache was only recently swept onto the popular global radar by the 2004 tsunami (see Bob, 2002).

Those movements which *have* achieved a 'transnational' status have often done so on the back of recognised 'brand names' such as the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Subcomandante Marcos, Rigoberta Menchu or Ken Saro-Wiwa. Bob writes that 'if marketing is central to a local movement's gaining international support, a gifted salesman [or woman], one who identifies [themselves] completely with [their] "product," is especially valuable' (2002: 42). Leaders such as Saro-Wiwa—who had contacts and resources to draw upon—are thus able to interpret the international scene and translate 'a host of abstract issues' into something more 'personal and concrete' (Bob, 2002: 42). Similarly, contemporary 'leaders on the rise' such as Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas have worked hard to narrate the Ogoni story to North American and European publics (Newswatch Magazine, 2005; also Bob, 2002: 42; Bastian, 1999).

By 'overlaying' alternative frameworks with a 'transnational apparatus of governmentality', one inevitably risks reinforcing existing hierarchies both among and within social movements. Those groups which do not have access to the 'global space' may be further marginalised, whilst powerful spokespersons within movements (who already dominate media, NGO and academic attention) will be further studied and legitimised. As such, it is likely one will continue to privilege certain discourses; namely those in English or other 'international' languages, which operate within the bounds of a conventional 'western' political grammar, and which have close ties to the business, media, academic and NGO communities.

The branding of social movements to make them consumable across transnational contexts also creates internal tensions. Saro-Wiwa's efforts to gain the backing of major international environmental NGOs involved the construction and imposition of 'a hegemonic discourse on an otherwise complex problem that could have been better served by a nuanced, balanced, and realistic approach informed by the specificity and historicity of the case' (Okonta, 2002: 362). Bob observes that in order to enter the global space, Saro-Wiwa risked distorting MOSOP's original principles and alienating its constituency:

'By the time the Ogoni had gained worldwide exposure, some of their backers in the indigenous rights community were shaking their heads at how the movement's original demands for political autonomy had gone understated abroad compared to environmental and human rights issues. The need for local groups to click with trendy

international issues fosters a homogeinty of humanitarianism: Unfashionable, complex, or intractable conflicts fester in isolation, while those that match or—thanks to savvy marketing—appear to match international issues of the moment attract disproportionate support' (2002: 44).

Finally, one might question whether operating in the 'same global space' as states affords the opportunities that Ferguson claims. Okonta points towards the vast and varied resources at the disposal of states and multi-national companies in his observation that the Nigerian junta was able to hire 'a US based PR and lobbying firm'. The company, which had 'made its name laundering the image of dictatorships in such diverse countries as Burma and Iraq, [began] to wage a disinformation war in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*' (2002: 363). The actors of 'international civic politics' are often unable to compete on such terms. Thus, seventeen years after Saro-Wiwa launched MOSOP, and twelve years after his execution, the case of the Ogoni appears to demonstrate that the transnational paradigm may also have its practical and analytical limits.

Conclusion

Ken Saro-Wiwa, the political and business entrepreneur who headed MOSOP, navigated the 'local', 'national' *and* 'transnational' simultaneously, narrating and adapting 'the Ogoni story' according to the audience he sought to move and involve. Thus, by tracing the emergence and development of MOSOP this essay has highlighted the potential inadequacies of purely 'national' and 'nationalist' frames.

However, there are also problems when adopting alternative frameworks such as James Ferguson's 'transnational apparatus of governmentality'. One might question the extent to which many social movements are able to operate in a 'global space', or even—in light of the MOSOP case—the efficacy of doing so. Furthermore, when drawing on the paradigm, academics risk entrenching existing power structures by focussing on movements which either represent or have access to transnational actors, and specifically, spokespeople within those movements who operate according to dominant contemporary 'transnational' discourses.

The arguments put forward in this essay have a number of implications, both for academia and organisations that seek to support progressive social movements. First, further scholarship into the relations between—and relevance of—'local', 'national' and 'global' spheres is keenly needed. The Ogoni case demonstrates significant shortfalls within the current analytical frameworks. Second, organisations which operate within existing frameworks should seek to identify and address the potential consequences of doing so. For example, NGOs which offer training programmes aimed at enabling social movements to take full advantage of 'global' opportunities should consider which discourses they are empowering. Finally, major international NGOs which involve themselves in complex emergencies should

consider how their policies shape the politics in which they intervene. Through its interactions in the transnational sphere, MOSOP morphed into a movement which, for some, was unrecognisable from that which had emerged in 1990.

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[1] Whilst MOSOP by no means represented the entirety of the Ogoni movement, it led the mobilisation and will therefore be the principal organisation subjected to analysis in this essay.

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