

Boro-Saro Wiwa-Dokubo

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As if preparing for a degree examination, I have closely followed the story of Alhaji Mujahid Dokubo Asari, the Niger Delta nationalist. I have followed events as they appear and accounts as they are presented. I have read interviews, claims, counter-claims and rationalisations. Of course, I have also sought after, and listened to, rumours. Finally, I have read media analyses and listened to oral pontifications. Although there is no new lesson offered I am nonetheless wiser.

My specific interest in this piece is historical. It can be introduced with what Dokubo said in answer to a question posed to him at his interview with the *Newswatch* newsmagazine in its edition of September 20, 2004. The "warlord" had been asked: "So, this fight is not about territory, it is not about economic fortunes. What is it all about?" And Dokubo had responded: "Then, you go and ask Boro in his grave. You go and ask Ken Saro-Wiwa in his grave. Then, when you have finished asking, you then come back and ask this little Alhaji Dokubo Asari". The Niger Delta militia commander was therefore referring us to history. He was saying that his struggle is a continuation of the emancipatory struggle which threw up Isaac Boro and Saro-Wiwa in the 1960s. It was in this struggle, as they separately saw it, that the former died in 1968 and the latter 27 years later.

Isaac Adaka Boro was a native of, and was born in Kaiama, an ancient Ijaw settlement in the present Bayelsa State of Nigeria. He lived for only 30 years (1938-1968). In December 1998, 30 years after Boro's death, an Ijaw Liberation Charter was adopted in Kaiama. The charter was called the Kaiama Declaration. At the time of Boro's birth, the eastern flank of the Niger Delta had just become an oil-rich minority province of Eastern Region of colonial Nigeria. Less than two decades later, the "black gold" had started gushing out in commercial quantity in the Niger Delta. The independence constitutional conference, dominated by British officials and Nigeria's big-tribe regionalist politicians, failed to agree on the creation of more states before independence. But Britain managed to insert into the constitution the designation of Niger Delta as a special development area. A Niger Delta Development Board was established to undertake the development of this "special area". But the board was virtually controlled by the government party in the region, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) through its members on the board. In this circumstance, the board achieved very little.

The demand of the Niger Delta nationalists at this time was straight-forward: the creation of a Niger Delta region (or state). With the economic derivation principle then enshrined in the constitution, a Niger Delta region would control the bulk of the revenues derived from the oil produced in the area. The ruling party and government of the Eastern Region were, to put it mildly, not interested in the creation of the new region. The Niger Delta nationalists then went into alliance with the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) which controlled the government of Northern Region and was the senior partner in the Federal Government. The nationalists reasoned, correctly, I would say, that given the balance of power in the country, this alliance offered the best, if not the only hope for a peaceful and constitutional creation of the Niger Delta region. It was in this historical and political context that Isaac Boro became conscious as an Ijaw nationalist. For some time, he went along with his elders who hoped that a determined pursuit of the constitutional option would yield the desired result.

Isaac Boro recognised that there were ethnic groups other than the Ijaws, in the Niger Delta. Nonetheless, he regarded the proposed region as the Ijaw nation - just as many Igbo elites regarded the whole of Eastern Region as theirs. Boro, a former

police officer, a graduate of Chemistry from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and a former president of the institution's Students Union, committed himself to the liberation of the Ijaw nation through the creation of the Niger Delta region. Inspired, in his own words, by the Castro-led revolution in Cuba, he was still considering the option of armed struggle when the military coup of January 1966 took place. With the overthrow of his main political ally, the NPC-led Federal Government, Boro settled for armed struggle. He told his young compatriots: "Our Prime Minister has been killed. There is now no alternative to liberating the Ijaw nation by force".

The armed struggle was initiated on February 23, 1966, less than six weeks into the administration of General Aguiyi-Ironsi. The insurgents held out in the Niger Delta for 12 days. Eventually they surrendered to Ironsi's superior federal troops. That was on March 7, 1966. On March 23, 1966 Boro and two of his commanders, Samuel Owonaru and Nottingham Dick, were charged with treason. Three months later, on June 21, 1966, they were condemned to death by a tribunal. They were in the "death cell" when Ironsi was overthrown and killed on July 29, 1966, and Colonel Yakubu Gowon took over. Even then, their death sentence was confirmed by the Supreme Court on December 5, 1966. But the sentence was not carried out.

On May 27, 1967, General Gowon restructured Nigeria into 12 states. One of the states was the Rivers State. Boro jubilated. From his cell he sent a telegram to Yakubu Gowon: "Congratulations on your God-guided, God-protected actions. Long live Nigeria and her Head of State. Long live Ijaw and Northern Nigeria solidarity". Three days later, on May 30, 1967, the state of Biafra was declared by Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, the military governor of Eastern Region. The death sentences passed on Boro and his compatriots were, at this point, commuted to life imprisonment. The Civil War broke out on July 6, 1967. A month later, on August 4, 1967, four weeks after the start of the Civil War, Boro and his compatriots were pardoned and released from jail. Boro then joined the Nigerian army, rose to the rank of Major and was killed in combat on the federal side in 1968.

Ken Saro-Wiwa was born in Ogoniland on October 10, 1941. Ogoniland is a "minority in a minority" in the former Rivers State that included the present Bayelsa State. It is still a "minority in a minority" in the present Rivers State that excludes

Bayelsa State. Three years younger than Boro, Saro-Wiwa came to ethnic consciousness about the same time as Boro. He supported the federal side during the Civil War and became the war-time Administrator of Bonny at the age of 26. But increasingly he realised that the liberation of Ogoniland, a non-Ijaw ethnic group in the Niger Delta, could not be achieved through the Nigerian mechanism of state creation. The area has a population estimated at half a million. By their mechanical conception of self-determination and grassroots democracy the ruling power blocs in Nigeria could not consider creating a state for the Ogonis unless they were prepared to create more than 100 new states. Saro-Wiwa, an intellectual, thinker and writer, thus settled for the self-determination of all ethnic nationalities, including the Ogonis.

At the time he was judicially murdered by General Sani Abacha on November 10, 1995, Saro-Wiwa was the President of the Ethnic Minority Rights Organisation of Africa (EMIROAF) as well as President of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). He was also the immediate past President of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). He was an apostle of non-violence. His main weapons were his brain, his pen, his mouth, his faith and commitment, and his energy. But Sani Abacha's military dictatorship decided that he must die - for his ideas - and only waited for the opportunity to carry out the death sentence. And it came with the murder of four prominent Ogoni indigenes in 1994. Saro-Wiwa, an innocent man, and eight of his compatriots were accused of the murders and were hanged in the Port Harcourt prison on November 10, 1995.

I shall end with two general comments.

First, the old political lesson that has been demonstrated here is that war is the continuation of politics "by some other means", that it is a political act, that ultimately political power issues from the "barrel of the gun", or is guaranteed by the "barrel of the gun". These maxims have been demonstrated strongly enough in the latest phase of the Niger Delta struggle, a phase in which Dokubo Asari appears as a pre-eminent character. For more on these maxims, especially their origins, you may wish to refer to the works of Karl von Clausewitz, a German soldier and military theorist, and Mao Zedung, the founder of the People's Republic of China.

My second comment is a historical irony. Three young men, among many others, had in the last 40 years, been thrown up to prominence in the Niger Delta self-determination struggle: Isaac Boro, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Dokubo Asari. The first and the third led armed struggles against the Nigerian state. They escaped with their lives and were later reconciled with the state. The second, an intellectual, preached and practiced non-violent protest. But he lost his life in the hands of the state. I remember what Nicolo Machiavelli said: **"All armed prophets have conquered; and all unarmed prophets have been destroyed"**.