



Just Before the Blackout

KEN SARO-WIWA
(1941-1995)

'My Lord I have heard your verdict. I have been found guilty even before my trial. During the trial, an official of the Federal Government pronounced me guilty at a conference in far away Geneva. And now these verdicts have been confirmed.'

SOCRATES
(469 - ? B.C)

'There are a great many reasons, gentlemen, why I am not distressed by this result - I mean your condemnation of me - but the chief reason is that the result was not unexpected...'

PRELUDE

LIKE TWO BOXERS TOTALLY SPENT AT THE twilight of a prolonged bout, the trial of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other minority rights activists had dragged, with both defence and prosecution lawyers waltzing around the Port Harcourt sitting of the Special Disturbances Tribunal set up at the wake of the Ogoni Crisis.

But then something snapped. The defence whiffed a mischief and had to withdraw.

On one occasion, a defence lawyer was assaulted, while much later, vital documents that could have punctured the prosecution frame-up were refused in evidence.

The ghost of a trial that had lingered on for about seven months was however rifled up to a feverish level by mid August, and by October 31, 1995 judgement was delivered on the murder charges preferred against the accused. Toss them at the hangman's noose, presiding Justice Ibrahimauta pronounced.

Much earlier in his address, counsel to the first defendant, Mr. D. M. Kemebiglu contended that the prosecution had not made any cogent allegation against his client to warrant his conviction, and urged the tribunal to discharge him. But to determine the substance of the charges preferred against the others, the Judges relied only on

the arguments of the prosecution, owing to the earlier frustrations encountered by the defence lawyers, which led to their withdrawal from the trial.

A reconstruction of the last hours of Ken Saro-Wiwa, and eight other MOSOP activists

Sola
Olorunyomi

With an inter-phase period of less than a week, the provisional Ruling Council (PRC) rose on November 6 and spoke through a Brigadier, Victor Malu, General Officer Commanding 2nd Merchandise Division that, the PRC

unanimously accepted the Verdict of the tribunal. 'We went through all the papers in detail and we are completely satisfied.' He probably forgot to add that 'all the papers' excluded ALL the other documents the tribunal refused in evidence on behalf of the accused.

Back in his cell at Bori Camp, Ken pulled hard at his pipe and felt a puzzle. Then he suddenly realised that he had not lit the tobacco. He smiled to himself as the Prison guard was making an entry. 'What's the matter,' Maleta, the sympathetic guard queried. 'It's alright God will certainly intervene', he consoled.

'How is your family', Ken finally said, 'I was just hoping that the

manuscript has gotten to either Methuen or Pen....'

'What,' the guard exclaimed in shock, 'don't you ever think of committing suicide, setting yourself ablaze with methane!'

'It's alright', Ken replied knowingly, with a sense of pathos. God, another simple mind deprived of education, he reflected. 'So how is your family,

you talked about the children's school fees,' Ken asked again.

'Oh, thank you so much, I cashed the cheque, God bless you and others like you in the country helping yonder man to survive,' the guard replied and took a quick exit before the arrival of the 'hawks', a term used for hardline prison officials.

Since the confiscation of his writing materials, Ken had undergone the agony of imaginary scribbling, a process by which he either mentally constructed events and narratives or backed them up by tracing imaginary lines on his thigh or the floor. A day before his hanging (

of which he was yet to be informed, had been confirmed by the PRC), he got into his prolific element and scribbled to one of his wives:

MUSING

'I am presently holed in a six by six feet cell. Must be just about ten feet in height. No window, no toilet, no illumination at all. A ray of light pierces in through the key hole of the iron door - its indeed my ray of hope. Mind you, not necessarily the hope of getting out of here alive but my only contact with the living world. And for hours, these past few days I've held my body against this ray of hope. It's warmth has been more of the mind than physical. Even my lips, I've also held against it, in the hope of re-enacting those supple warm lips of yours I'll forever miss. Oh!

If my plans do come true, indeed, I intend to plant a flower, a shrub, no, a tree - just any testimony of life, at that point where the ray hits the floor. It would grow, and blossom. It would be the expression of a people's will. It will be a testimony to all those of our country men in quest of human liberty.

Here in my hole the floor is damp, and we are supposed to be bare-feet. Not even when the doctor alarms the risk to health. But really, what does it matter? What difference does it make in a Coffin? By the way, have you ever reflected on what will become of this flesh - same flesh that held you in warm embrace? That cuddled you. Lips that wiped your tears. Hands that bedecked your sleepy head.

Now, I am losing my mind and I know. Wasn't I giving an overview of the dilapidation called a cell? Being damp, it oozes a stenchy odour. Permanent rancid odour that hits the nose at every turn. What else do you expect, when you are made to... and dine in the same air-tight enclosure? I hear all these are security measures to prevent our escape. Even if there was to be an escape bid, I wonder how I could manage without a meal in my belly! You probably have heard that they've stopped my colleagues' wives too from bringing their meals directly to them. But then I know they cook up stories in the Press, and the public gets a feeling they are observing human rights. Well, perhaps the Public knows better.

And when night falls? Of course there is a sturdy plank screwed to the floor - just on the same damp floor at the corner opposite the iron door. When its dinner time, your meal is pushed through a hole in the iron door, usually opened only for such purposes. It's also through this hole you are expected to pass off your inconveniences.

Just last night as I was about going to bed, Long Antena, Ireti, peeped in. In the absence of a companion, I urged her on. So she came in, looked me up and probably concluded, this one doesn't amount to much - I'll soon square up with him in the grave. 'Those tough-looking muscles of yours are only illusions of strength', she seemed to have said, and darted across the cell room, sniffing with her antenna.

'But I am fighting a just cause, and it shouldn't bother me whether I live or die', I protested.

'Well, it all comes to that, the ego of your race is incredible. Every local, little indulgence of yours must find some false universal reference.'

'You talk like a 'Cynic', I charged. 'Cynic? What does that imply? Sounds like cynade,' she asked. 'Now, not exactly - its this feeling of tending to trivialise the most urgent concerns.'

Again she looked me up and down, twitched



her antenna and pecked at some stray ant. 'Oh yes, when it concerns your race it is called 'Cynic', or how did you just describe it? But have you ever sat down and reflected on how much of that 'Cynic' business you resort to in treating mine and our own race?' - Watching from the Corner of her eyes, she added: 'You even painted God, the creator of all in your own image. Oh, how selfish you can be. We inhabited the planet before your Adam, which explains the futility of your insecticides on us.'

Darting around, she made for sneaking away into her burrow, but just then like one struck by a thought, looked back and asked. 'Just now you claimed you were fighting a just cause - how do you really mean?'

I could only mumble back, 'you see, these problems have been long with us, long before the Union Jack was lowered, but things got worse since the first coup. As you can probably see, the new nation has been so badly balkanised, you can't even figure out a future in the horizon.

'I tell you most sincerely Ireti, the current social, ethnic, and religious balkanisation is an artificial creation of our ruling elites. It is superficial. It is unreal. Our attempt therefore is to redress all these wrongs. Now they claim that we maimed our own folks.'

Ireti looked sympathetic for the first time since our encounter. So she said, 'but I heard you partitioned the self-same country, that can't be explained.'

'No it wasn't quite like that, you probably realised that a rule book is as good as it allows one to be human', Ken started. 'Laws should be made for man, and not the other way round. There are no fixed forms in life, we are all in eternal flux, and so should be a nation and its perception of its weak and defenceless minorities. Far from destroying the nation, we were only trying to...' and Ireti darted into her burrow on sensing some approaching footsteps.

'Lord, I'd been musing with a roach,' and Ken's mind drifted to the Egyptian pyramids, to Tewfik El-Hakim, and his *Fate of a Coccoach*. Then he smiled again.

GALLOW WAY

The next morning, Friday November 10, the convicts were moved from Bori Camp to Port Harcourt prison. The pathos in the reception of the news lied in the happiness with which the convicts received it. At last, they thought, they were being moved to a civil prison. But not even their Chief Jailor, Major Obi Umahi, seemed to have been aware of this final hour.

Out of the camp, the Black Maria sped into the highway leading to Port Harcourt. With a deafening howling of Klaxons which rudely cut into the serenity of the morning, they were raising ahead of nine O'clock, with an escort before and a Police rumoured Personnel Carrier behind them. Past the initial buildings, a bridge, a water front, past the receding trees, past all greens, past, past, past, and by 10.30 a.m. they made a final stop on the tarmac of the concrete jungle called Port Harcourt Prison.

Looking rather youthful and hearty, the Governor also arrived. A video recorder had been brought along, a source said, while another official complained about the indiscretion of forgetting to pack his lunch. The mission had to be seen accomplished. Joined by other members of the tribunal, both the executive and judicial arms of the State joined hands, as had been dutifully done all through the mock trial, to watch the exciting, extirpation scene of minority rights activists.

Meanwhile, the activists were still oblivious of these developments, even as they sat on a bench in the corridor of the condemned convicts (CC) cell. Indeed they were living on borrowed time, since two days earlier instructions of their hanging had been given. But there was no death warrant and Prison officials had to remind the Governor that it was all about human lives.

A warrant was quickly rustled up but, again, prison officials pointed to the fact that the signatories were incomplete. And as reports have it, a harassed Governor Komo had to inform Abuja, which flew in a brand new warrant signed by the Head of the PRC, which is confirming authority.

Then, Ken was called in, and he thought it was about being allocated a cell. But then he met a priest who mumbled something to the effect of praying to commit his soul to the bosom of Jesus the Christ. The fact that this preacher man couldn't be praying against flea-infected mattresses in the cell to be allocated, dawned on Ken. 'So this is the idea,' he finally found his voice. No response. He looked the priest straight in the eye, but the latter made a gesture of rubbing his eyes. Then he surveyed the Governor, other military and para-military personnel, and members of the tribunal, but his adversaries had no courage to respond, they couldn't look at him eyeball to eyeball.

They asked if he had any requests, and he expressed willingness to give a parting message to his wife. They refused. 'Then, could you kindly hand over this pipe to my 91-year dad?' Again, they refused.

Ken felt a pang of a pity for them and wasn't

sure if he should console them for their loss of manhood. Two hundred metres away, his younger wife, Hauwa, was still wondering why they had not allowed her to deliver her husband's breakfast. She was bothered that the meal might get cold.

Then in the silence of the gallows hall, came a thunderous clap, and the horde of conquistadors scampered in commotion, but it was only a walking stick that fell. Embarrassed by this turn of event, a top military brass was said to have yelled: 'get it done with', sweat dripping down his nose. And Ken added, laughing, 'get ahead.'

So the priest again, the charge-reading Sheriff, the hood and the noose. But there were a number of false starts. In spite of

the fact that the equipment had been put in good condition, the lever was pulled, but somehow the trapdoor refused to snap. By now there was utter confoundment and for a while the Governor's mind might have wondered and regretted the absence of private, commercial gallows in the country.

Reports have it that Ken had to be let off for a while and the others were quickly dispensed with. Somehow when he returned, there was one false start, and Ken was said to have pleaded: 'the Spirit of Ogoni, let me go,' exuding the ambience of Socrates' last hour when he proclaimed: '... I tell you, my executioners, that as soon as I am dead, vengeance shall fall upon you with a punishment far more painful than your killing of me.' **GR**

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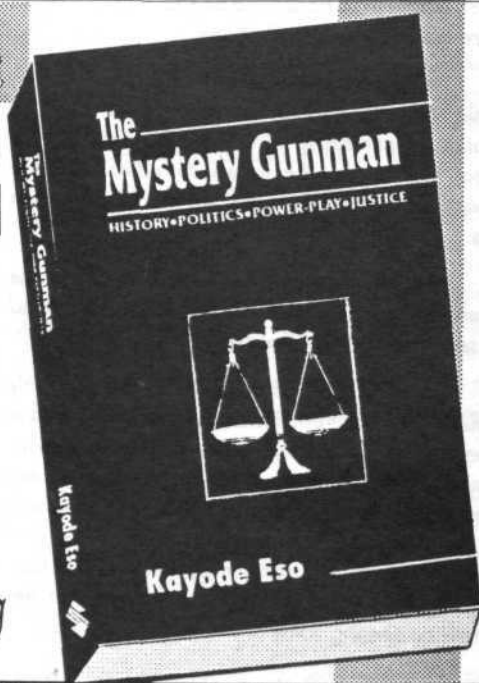
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