

“To See Things in His Time”: Ken Saro-Wiwa’s Sense of Place in *Sozaboy*Timi Oyabara^{1*}¹Department of English and Literary Studies Niger Delta University Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa StateDOI: [10.36348/sijll.2022.v05i01.002](https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2022.v05i01.002)

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Abstract

Ever since Ken Saro-Wiwa published his novel *Sozaboy* in 1985, it has attracted and received tremendous critical attention. However, literary scholars and critics mostly explore either the author’s use of language or his representation of the Nigerian Civil War in *Sozaboy*. Deploying theories of ecocriticism and regionalism, this paper shifts that focus by examining certain ways Saro-Wiwa articulates his sense of place in *Sozaboy* and the place, as is well-known, is Dukana – his narrative locus. At the centre of this paper is the contention that Dukana, Saro-Wiwa’s fictional world, is replete with certain characteristics which shape a writer’s vision of place and these include the landscape, culture, beliefs, habits and mannerisms or ethos of a place. Accordingly, I shall analyse Saro-Wiwa’s sense of place in *Sozaboy* in terms of his perceptions of these characteristics of Dukana. In this way, I propose to locate Saro-Wiwa in the regionalist or place-sense writer’s tradition. I shall further argue that Saro-Wiwa derives his sense of place from what he has seen and known about the Niger Delta region and its people in lived experience. The paper finds that in addition to Saro-Wiwa’s experimentation with language and his concern with the civil war, what also informs his writing of *Sozaboy* is his desire to articulate rural sensibilities. Drawing from his preoccupation with regional life and events that live on in the pages of his fictional works, the paper concludes that Saro-Wiwa is, for the most part, a regionalist or place-sense writer.

Keywords: place, sense of place, Dukana, Mene, Saro-Wiwa. Living in a place with no prior history and understanding could paralyse one’s desire to connect to the place.– Kincheloe, et al 147.

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INTRODUCTION

Of all the genres of literature, it is in the literature of place and, therefore, in environmental literary studies or ecocriticism that the phrase, “sense of place” is timelessly and tirelessly deployed to give literature a solid environmental basis. The idea of sense of place dates back to Roman times in the concept of *genius loci* which has to do with the spiritual reality or understanding of a place. About this, Neal Alexander explains: “The conceptual origins of sense of place can be traced to the Roman idea of *genius loci*, or “spirit of place”. Genius denotes a guardian spirit thought to protect both individuals and specific places, and requires propitiation.” “The idea of *genius loci*,” Alexander continues, “articulates a specifically spiritual conception of place –particularly those places associated with nature and the natural world – as zones of encounter with the divine” (40). Alexander argues convincingly that over the years, this Roman spiritual meaning of place shifted through the writings of “humanist geographers who took up the [Roman] idea

of spirit of place and transformed it into sense of place in the 1970s” (40), and since then, sense of place has taken centre-stage in geographical and literary studies.

For humanist/cultural geographers and literary critics, sense of place means one’s perceptions and conceptions of the characteristics of a particular place or environment. In *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, John Brinckerhoff Jackson defines sense of place as “the atmosphere to a place, the quality of its environment” (158). For Edward Relph, it is “an innate faculty, possessed in some degree by everyone that connects us to the world” (qtd in Alexander, II). Sense of place also means one’s rootedness or connectedness to a particular geographical locality. It enables us to know places we have not known earlier and it “increases our feeling for places previously known and places known but never so deeply felt” (Lawrence Buell, 261). In addition, sense of place helps one to know his identity as well as the nature of man-community-relationship and it figures importantly in the works of many writers across the world.

To represent his sense of place in his work, the writer usually evokes a setting, a particular geographical locality and it is this that we call place which, in most cases, is his native place or milieu, and he uses it to give the reader insight about the place. The writer's sense or knowledge of the place may be acquired by birth, naturalization, visiting or seeing the place in a flash. Used synonymously with setting and environment, place is, therefore, the starting-point for every writer, for it provides both a source of knowledge and inspiration for him. In her famous and much-quoted essay, "Place in Fiction," Eudora Welty writes that "place is where [the writer] has his roots; place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference; in his work the point of view" (qtd in Waldemer Zacharasiewicz, 198). In addition to this, place provides a "source of environmental awareness and self-awareness" (Antonia Mehnert, 67) for the writer.

The writer's choice of place may be partly real, partly imagined and whether real or imagined, he employs the social realism approach so that his vision of place becomes more and more truthful to life. In representing his regional vision or sense of place, the writer's concern is either to ridicule the ways of life of the place, or to show his love of the place by displaying his nostalgia in glamourization and romanticization of the place's distant past as in the fictions of American South. This apart, the writer also engages with showing certain distinct peculiarities or characteristics of the physical and social spheres of the place which, though are necessarily local and particular or insular, have universal significance. As Jeffrey C. Kinkley points out, "[p]eculiarities of [a] region may serve to depict universal concerns, issues whose presence within the region might not have been anticipated by uncomprehending outsiders" (158). Among others, these peculiarities or characteristics of a place or region include the landscape, history, politics, culture, the identity and experiences of the people, their habits and mannerisms, their thinking, speeches and mystery.

To my mind, the foregoing concerns of the place-sense writer or regionalist hold good for all such writers, whether in American South, England, Canada, India, France, Russia, Germany, the Carribean, Africa, etc, and as I mentioned earlier, many writers engage with the idea of sense of place in their works. From Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Maddening Crowd* (1874) to John Cowper Powy's *Maiden Castle* (1937); from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) to Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1946), and from William Faulkner's *Soldier's Pay* (1926) to Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* (1946), sense of place figures importantly. In African writings, from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977), it is sense of place that inundates these works. Similarly, in what is now termed "Niger Delta Literature", the focal theme, from say,

Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966), J.P. Clark's *Song of a Goat* (1965), Gabriel Okara's *The Fisherman's Invocation* (1975) and Tanure Ojaide's *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986) to Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005) is sense of place – the Niger Delta region, the writers' home and specific setting of their works.

A nascent regional literature, Ojaide describes Niger Delta Literature as "writings [that] reflect the worldview, sensibility, identity, and experiences of the people as well as the society and landscape that form the Niger Delta" (55). In this Niger Delta literary canon, Saro-Wiwa's 1985 novel *Sozaboy* which offers this paper its textual moorings is, to my mind, also informative in the place-sense context, for the novel details many features of a place-sense work such as landscape and other regional peculiarities. Given this, my aim in this paper is to show how Saro-Wiwa engages with sense of place in this novel. Though critical consensus has it that *Sozaboy* deals with the author's experimentation with language (Maureen N. Eke, 87; Harry Garuba, 27; Abiola Irele, 335-337; Diri I. Teilanyo, 189), I argue in this essay that the novel, in most part, represents Saro-Wiwa's effort to chronicle what he knows in real life about the life and experiences of the Niger Delta people represented by Dukana and other places. As Irele points out, in Saro-Wiwa's representation of these places, "[t]here is clarity of details in his evocation which suggests a familiarity with the environment and the category of characters he employs for his stories" (341).

For instance, Dukana which echoes Gokana in Ogoniland, Pitakwa which means Port Harcourt, Iwoama a village properly called "Greens Iwoama" in the Bonny area of Rivers State and Egwanga a place where Saro-Wiwa says he and his cousin Simeon Idemiyor stopped to refuel while travelling on a speed boat from Bonny to Bane to see his people during the war when Federal troops entered Ogoni (*On a Darkling Plain*, 171) are all real places in the Niger Delta region. Given this, Saro-Wiwa, like any other regionalists or place-sense writers, has "transliterated real places and place-names into fictional forms" (B.P. Birch 349) and I submit he has a strong sense of these places, the events and the people he describes.

This is not surprising, for born and bred at Bori in Ogoni, Rivers State in 1941, Saro-Wiwa undoubtedly has an intimate knowledge of his native milieu and he draws upon this knowledge in his fictional works. As he tells us in his war memoir *On a Darkling Plain*, "I was born to Ogoni parents at Bori in the Ogoni Division of what is now Rivers State in 1941... In 1947, by which time I had begun to form lasting impressions of the world around me, Bori was still a rather primitive place, without government presence in the form of a Divisional Office, without a hospital or dispensary" (43). This quotation suggests

that Saro-Wiwa began to have sense of his place at the tender age of seven, and as he matures, he continues to know the place and the entire Niger Delta region, providing him with knowledge and inspiration for his writing career as is the case with most place-sense writers.

Accordingly, when he begins to write his fictional works, Saro-Wiwa has deeply known the innards of his Niger Delta environment and he demonstrates this in large doses, beginning with the juvenilia *Tambari* (1973) and *Tambari in Dukana* (1973), the novel *Sozaboy* (1985) and the short story *A Forest of Flowers* (1986), all of which, we are all aware, are set in the semi-fictional landscape of Dukana which, according to the author, was founded by Chief Birabee's grandfathers (*A Forest of Flowers*, 14) and it "means Khana Market" (Teilanyo "Fictionalist as Journalist", 194). One result of this is that Saro-Wiwa was tending towards writing a regional literature, for in the final analysis, he was espousing an author's fidelity to the representation of regional "habits, speech, manners, history, folklores, or beliefs" (C. Hugh Holman, 422-423; see also M.H. Abrams, 202). Commenting on Saro-Wiwa's tendency to writing regional literature, Charles Nnolim avers that the "technical innovation Saro-Wiwa has brought to the art of Nigerian fiction consists in the creation of a regional novel mainly peopled by Dukana inhabitants," adding that Saro-Wiwa's "regionalism in setting consists in anchoring *Sozaboy* and *A Forest of Flowers* in a particular, if peculiar, environment... with a back-to-the-soil locality" (*Approaches*, 161).

Furthermore, Saro-Wiwa's regionalism fits into what Majorie Kinnan Rawlings calls "native regionalism" (386). As she explains it, native regionalism is an approach to regional writing by a "sincere writer who has something to say and who uses a specialized locale – a region – as a logical or fitting background for the particular thoughts and emotions that cry out for articulation" and is mostly found "among native or long-resident writers" (385) of the region. All these credentials of native regionalism espoused by Rawlings are true of Saro-Wiwa such as the fact that he is a "native or long-resident writer" of the Delta region and his use of "a specialized locale" – Dukana, his writing cite which Nnolim characterizes as the author's "fictional proto-type for Ogoniland" ("The Labyrinthine Ways," 161) or the Niger Delta region about which Saro-Wiwa writes.

In this, Dukana is to Saro-Wiwa what, say, Wessex is to Hardy; what the Five Towns is to Arnold Bennett; what Yoknapatawpha county, Mississippi is to Faulkner; what Yorkshire is to Emily Bronte; what the Delta of the Mississippi River is to Welty; what Walden Pond is to Thoreau; and what West Hunan is to Shen Congwen in the sense that just as these canonical regionalists use these disinterred names as regional

settings in their works to portray life and experiences in their places, so does Saro-Wiwa disinterred Dukana to reach our consciousness about life and events in the Niger Delta or to explore "issues relevant or specific to the Ogoni" (Alexander Fyne, 92). About why Saro-Wiwa uses Dukana as setting in his fiction, Nnolim also adds his voice: "Saro-Wiwa probably chose Dukana for his setting in several works to draw attention to... the coastal region of minority people where Saro-Wiwa was born and bred" (*Approaches*, 161). In what follows, I dissect Saro-Wiwa's sense of place in *Sozaboy* drawing upon his conceptions of the landscape, culture, beliefs, habits, mannerisms or ethos of Dukana. To do this, I use the ecocritical approach. The reason is simple: place or sense of place "is a core concept in ecocriticism" (Svend Erik Larsen, 342; see also Sarah Juliette Ray, 878 and Mehnert, 67).

II. Saro-Wiwa: Narrating the Landscape of Dukana and Iwoama

To begin with, as with most place-sense writers or regionalists, one of the ways Saro-Wiwa articulates his sense of place in *Sozaboy* is by describing the physical landscape of Dukana, the novel's principal setting and the landscape of Iwoama another rural place. "Writers dealing with landscape," Michael McDowell tells us, "tend to emphasize their sense of place and to create narratives that are geographically rooted... that the environment plays a role as important as the roles of the characters and narrator" (384). In referencing the landscapes of Dukana and Iwoama, Saro-Wiwa gives us a general geographical or topographical description of these places such that even without our actual contact with the places, we are able to know them. Let me begin with the landscape of Dukana.

Like a topographer, Saro-Wiwa opens before us and describes the landscape, buildings, spaces, and material resources of Dukana, and all of these are key aspects that shape a place-oriented or regional work. As Kotein Trinya explains, "[a] regional work may be identified not merely by its themes or details of social history but also by its geographical features; its landscape and material resources" (409). As I shall show, Saro-Wiwa specifically uses the landscape to show the relationship between the Dukana people and their natural world. Thus, he integrates the landscape with the people unlike some Western writers who present landscape as a place that is not part but separate from the human society, or as an "image of the unknown, the undiscovered country into which the explorer plunges to find, at the end, himself" (Fred Langman, 35).

In the opening paragraph of *Sozaboy*, Mene, the narrator, informs us that Dukana is a small geographical area, comprising of "nine villages" (1) and four pages into the novel, he says that it is a backwater and remote place:

Dukana is far from any better place in this world. You must go far in motor before you can get to Pitakwa. All the houses in the town are made of mud. There is no good road or drinking water. Even the school is not fine and no hospital or anything. The people of Dukana are fishermen and farmers. They no know anything more than fish and farm. Radio sef they no get. (4)

This is one good passage that encapsulates the essence of Dukana and it is used by the author to draw attention to the features or nature of the place: it is a primitive place with mud houses; its people are self-sustaining farmers and fishermen and it lacks basic infrastructure such as good roads, pipe-borne water and hospital, suggesting that it is thoroughly neglected and undeveloped by the government.

Though a primitive place, Dukana is made beautiful at night by the moon, an element of the celestial landscape. Like Ilmorog in *Petals of Blood*, Dukana is portrayed as a beautiful village at night with a constant moonlight. So beautiful is the moon in Dukana that Mene, on one occasion, compares the beauty of his wife Agnes to the moon: “And particularly this Agnes who have travelled to Lagos and is wonderful girl, beautiful like full moon in Dukana” (57). While for the Westerners, the moon is a natural element that lights the terrestrial landscape at night, for the people of Dukana, the moon brings happiness and a new life to them. Like other African peoples, the people of Dukana respond to the moon by spending their time outdoors, gathering in spaces to engage in their social activities such as telling folktales, singing and dancing. Early in the novel, Mene recalls and romanticizes the beautiful moonlit landscape of Dukana in which its inhabitants “were eating plenty maize with pear and knocking tory under the moon” (1). This recalls a similar way Nwoye, his siblings and other children in Umuofia listen to their mother’s folktales during moonlit night in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

It is also with an evocation of the moon in Dukana and the response of the people to it that opens Chapter 4 of the novel:

It was a beautiful new moon in Dukana. You can see all the plantain and banana as they are standing straight and tall inside the moon. No wind at all. And the people are beating drum and dancing in another part of the town. (36)

The above foregrounds Dukana’s landscape as one with food resources and in which human beings come together and celebrate during moonlit night. The climate, one of the components of the landscape of Dukana is dynamic and changes for good or bad. When the climate is good, it is benevolent, beautiful, cool and absorbing. When it is bad, the climate is violent and harsh. For instance, when Chief Birabee summons the people to the town square in order to ask them to contribute money, food and clothes for the war

returnees, Mene treats us to a cool landscape within the town square: “The sun never appear. Every place cool like forest. Water fall from all the trees and plantain and grass everywhere” (6).

The landscape of Dukana is characterized by forests, swamps, rivers, bushes and mangrove trees. Throughout human history, these natural spaces are viewed by different cultures in different ways. For instance, in *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*, Saro-Wiwa explains that in Ogoni, “forests are not merely a collection of trees and abode of animals but also, and more intrinsically, a sacred possession” (12). Forests and other similar natural spaces not only provide for economic needs but also refuge for people, especially freedom fighters and outlaws, for as Pogue Robert Harrison points out, “the first and most essential cover of all for the outlaw is none other than the forest itself. The forest represents his locus of concealment. It is his hood and its foliage his robe. In its shadows the outlaw finds safe haven from the established order and can harass his enemies” (79-80).

In *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa gives vent to this by portraying the forests and other natural spaces in Dukana and Iwoama as places that provide haven or refuge for the people and the soldiers before and during the war. As Mene tells us, to escape arrest, whenever the Dukana people “see police sef, everyone will begin to run inside bush or farm to hide” (8). Similarly, when the war gets to Dukana, it is the forests and bushes that the people run into for safety. For instance, as Mene runs away from the war front in Iwoama to Dukana to see the condition of his people and finds that the whole town has been deserted, it is to the farms, fishing port and where the people tap palm wine, all of which “are in one place” (130) in the bush that Mene goes to search for his people. There, he finds Duzia and Bom hiding in a hut from which “Bom used to go near Dukana to see what is happening” (134) and returns to report to Duzia. Presumably, other Dukanans must have also taken refuge in this bush before fleeing to the refugee camps in Urua and Nugwa, leaving behind Duzia, the cripple and his friend, Bom.

It is also in the swamps and mangrove trees in and around Dukana that the Biafra forces, to borrow Harrison’s words, find “safe haven from the established order” of the Federal forces and “harass” them. Sensing that “the enemy sozas are hiding there” (132) in the swamp and mangrove, the Federal soldiers order the people of Dukana to cut and clear these natural spaces, resulting to environmental destruction. Even in his dream world, Mene has a deep sense of the landscape or seascape of Dukana and the security function it provides for Dukana. While escaping conscription into the army in his dream, it is the river in Dukana that Mene plunges into, swims to the bank and runs into the bush for safety.

In addition to the security function, the landscape also provides economic needs for the Dukana people. In other words, the physical landscape is a means of their livelihood and they depend on it for their survival. The landscape influences and determines life in Dukana. This is seen in the way they utilize their land by planting and harvesting abundance of food resources like cassava, yam, banana, pear, maize and orange. As delineated for us by Trinya cited earlier, a place-oriented or regional work is also known by the material resources of the place about which the author writes. In *Sozaboy*, some of the material resources of Dukana include canoe, drum, palm wine and local gin, all of which could be identified with the Niger Delta region. They also help the Dukana people to maintain a cultural identity. There are peculiar buildings and re-created spaces in Dukana such as the mud houses of Mene's and Agnes's mothers; the town square where meetings are held and frequented by Duzia, Bom, Kole and Zaza where they gossip and tell stories. In all, the town square serves as the place for the daily social interactions of the people or where they enact their "Dukananess".

As with Dukana, Saro-Wiwa also has a keen sense of the landscape of Iwoama – a real village in the Bonny area of Rivers State and he describes it fittingly. As civilian Administrator of Bonny during the Nigerian Civil War, Saro-Wiwa surely knows the place very well and according to him, during the war, Iwoama "was nothing but desolation" (*On a Darkling Plain*, 158). This is because of oil extraction by Shell which has long destroyed the landscape of Iwoama even before the war. But in all probability, before the advent of Shell and the war, the landscape of Iwoama was a beautiful one. In *Sozaboy*, Mene tells us that "Iwoama is not far from Pitakwa" (115) and its landscape is replete with bushes, farms, rivers, creeks, mangrove swamps and flora and fauna, suggesting the natural beauty of the place. These spaces in Iwoama are portrayed as theatres of war and as refuge for the people. They also supply the people with their economic needs.

When Mene and others passed out from army training in Port-Harcourt and they are taken in a lorry to the frontline at Iwoama, Mene describes the place as one with "plenty canoe and water. Canoe and water" (82), suggesting that the people are farmers and the place, riverine. As Mene's company uses one of these canoes and later a speed boat to engage the enemy soldiers in a battle, the reader's delight is the natural world they passed through such as rivers, mangrove swamps, creeks and forests replete with "toads all shouting like say dem dey for church" (82) and "plenty mudskippers and crabs and birds singing in the trees" (107). For the people of Iwoama, as for some Niger Delta residents, mudskippers, crabs and birds provide food resources for them. According to Mene, close to one of the mangrove swamps in Iwoama is a river, one

with "big waves" which he characterizes as a "troublesome river" (108).

Like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's demon-infested sea with "Water, water, everywhere/nor any drop to drink" (242), Iwoama, too, is surrounded by water but there is no drinkable water in the place, for the rivers and the mangrove swamps have been polluted. Hear Mene, the narrator:
And something was very bad for that place, you know. Water to drink no dey. Common well sef, you cannot get. So all that time, it was the water in the swamp that we are drinking. And that is also the place that we are going to latrine. Na the same water that we are bathing and using to wash some of our clothes. And na the same water we were using for cooking. (90-91).

In the above, the lack of drinkable water in Iwoama is caused by the neglect of the place by the State while the impurity of water in the mangrove swamp is a direct consequence of oil exploration by Shell, for even though oil is not mentioned in the novel, it is implied. As Brendon Nicholls puts it:
Oil is a key omission in *Sozaboy*. Oil is almost like the unconscious of the book. It motivates key narrative events and minor metaphoric details alike. It is in the margin of the text. Oil is everywhere evident and yet nowhere to be found. Saro-Wiwa replaces something that should be there, but is not (oil) with something that should not be there... (69)

The landscape of Iwoama is also characterized by a thick forest with plenty farms. It is an ambiguous natural setting, for it mingles with light and darkness. As Mene describes it, "inside that forest, night and day na one" (113). So dense and dark is the forest that one does not "know when day don break or otherwise" (115). It is a forest without light "but rather darkness visible" (1261) as John Milton would describe the dungeon in Book One of *Paradise Lost*. Interestingly, this forest landscape is not merely a setting but defines the livelihood of the people of Iwoama, for it contains a rich flora and fauna such as fruits, snails and animals which serve as food to the people. It is also where they farm and have abundant cassava. In addition, the forest landscape provides a haven for the people such as Mene. Following Bullet's death, when the enemy soldiers attack Mene's camp in Iwoama, it is in this forest that Mene takes refuge: "I run and hide behind tree", says Mene. "I run for swamp sotey that dirty water reach me for mouth. I swim like fish. Then I enter inside forest" (112). Safe in the forest, Mene escapes from there to Dukana during which he feeds on the raw flora and fauna in the forest:

I know that I must find some small wackies otherwise I cannot move one step. And my brother, if I tell you that I begin chop fresh snail make you no suprise... I will find the root of cassava. I will chop it just like that. Then I find plenty fruit. Some I never see before, but hungry will just make me pluck them and begin to

chop. So I was plucking and eating the fruits like that plus snails and other animals for a long long time. (115)

Here, the forest landscape of Iwoama is portrayed as one which is pregnant with flora and fauna that provide economic security to the people.

Like Dukana's, the forest landscape of Iwoama is also dynamic and, so, it changes. It is transformed by the seasons and the weather, suggesting climate change. As Mene escapes to Dukana through the forest, he says that during the day, "the sun dey shine plenty" but during the night, the forest shines with a "big moon like football" (116). At this time, nature, the moon itself comes to Mene's aid. Like Nyawira in Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* who uses the stars shining upon the prairie as guide during her flight into the mountains when she is hunted by the State, Mene also uses the moon as a guide as he escapes through the forest to Dukana: "I beg God make 'e show me the way I go take reach my mama house. So I look as the moon was standing and I come remember that for Dukana, the moon used to rise from our backyard. So I just follow the moon" (116). Then, at dawn, there is no sun but the skyscape changes to the gathering of thick cloud in the forest, heralding a heavy rainfall that falls and stops intermittently, drenching Mene and adding to his sufferings in the forest until he is rescued by Manmuswak and other soldiers, and is taken to the hospital for treatment.

Finally, we see the refuge function of forest landscape when Mene and two other soldiers are captured as prisoners of war. For to escape execution by Manmuswak, it is the bush that all three escaped into as refuge. There, in the bush, away from the death-ridden and turbulent space of the war, Mene and his colleagues are at peace, for in the bush, they are in a harmonious relationship with nature, hearing no gunshots except "only birds singing in the tree for morning time and in the night cricket making noise" (169). In the following section, I explore Saro-Wiwa's sense of the people of Dukana, for his description of the physical landscape of Dukana flows into a scrutiny of the typical kind of life and spirit of the Dukana people.

III. The Old Ways of Life of Dukana People Prior to Government Presence and the War.

In the "Author's Note" to *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa tells us that what "provided [him] the right opportunity" to write the novel was the Nigerian Civil War which he "saw from very close quarters among young soldiers in Bonny where [he] was civilian Administrator." So that the novel tells the story of that war. But as I think, the novel also tells another story which is sandwiched between Saro-Wiwa's account of the civil war and this is his telling and re-telling about the old ways of life of a people represented by the Dukana people before the coming of the government and the war that disrupted life in the place. Now, before the government and the war destroyed Dukana, it was in its pristine state, a

world of peace and harmony without corruption, bribery, destructive impulses and exploitative capitalist values and this explains why confronted by the widespread corruption of the civilian and military governments, Mene and his community lament over it. Prior to government presence and the war, the Dukana people live an unsophisticated and rustic life-style.

As Mene tells us earlier, Dukana is a backwater place and the people are mainly farmers, fishermen, traders and palm wine tappers, living in mud houses. For instance, Mene's mother is a farmer and trader. Terr Kole, too, has many farms and his wives are all traders. The Dukana people are materially poor, for according to Mene, "Dukana people no get money and they no get property" (8). They are rural folks or typical villagers and we see this, for instance, in the dressing and appearance of some of the people. When Chief Birabee summoned the Dukana people to a meeting in the town square early in the novel, Mene tells us about the simple, rustic appearance of the people which recalls those of the people in the riverine communities of the Delta region: "Some tie cloth. Some no get shirt sef. Some were using chewing stick, spitting along the road. Some women carried their baby for back" (6). Zaza's mode of dressing which carries an index of identity also points to the fact that the Dukanans are rural folks and it also shows the way some elders dress in the riverine communities of the Delta region. An adult and ex-soldier, Zaza goes about Dukana without shoes and shirt; his only dress is "one big cloth on his waist, holding the loin cloth with his left hand and walking slowly on the road" (25).

Furthermore, before government presence and the war, the Dukanans had a traditional political or administrative structure and "chieftaincy the main form of power" (Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham, 7). If as Mene tells us, there are "nine villages" (1) in Dukana, then in all probability, each village has a chief with Chief Birabee as the head chief. This point could be buttressed by Mene's question when he wonders why the anonymous "thick man" lives a solitary life in Dukana: "Why can't he talk with Chief Birabee and *the rest chiefs?*" (41, mine emphasis). As can be seen, "the rest chiefs" suggests other chiefs in Dukana. From this, it is safe to infer that there was a Council of Chiefs which administered justice and it is headed by Chief Birabee. The chiefs were also the constitutional authorities in Dukana but they act within the safeguards of the village, for as Perera-Rajasingham avers, the "villagers and the village structures set limits on what [the chiefs] could do" (11-12). For instance, though the head chief, Birabee had limited powers, for according to Mene, "before before, this Chief Birabee is chief but he is not very important. He cannot prison anybody and if you like, you can refuse to go and judge your case in his house" (41). But with the advent of the military government and the war, Chief Birabee acquires and

wields new powers hitherto unknown to the people and he becomes autocratic.

The Dukana people also have sense of oneness or collective identity and they live a communal life. For instance, the welcoming of a fellow-citizen who travels and returns to Dukana is a shared communal experience and the person is received with happiness. When Mene takes Agnes from Pitakwa to Dukana, we are told that her mother was “very happy to see her. All the town people too” (20). This is because Agnes has been away from Dukana for a long time and her return to the village provides happiness for the entire community. This smacks of communal love and recalls the way the narrator in “Home, Sweet Home” in *A Forest of Flowers* is given a warm reception by her relatives and the entire community on her return from school. It also echoes the way Wanja is received by the Ilmorog villagers when she returns from the city, Nairobi to Ilmorog in Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood*. We further see the Dukana peoples sense of communality when their fellow-citizen dies. Believing that Mene died in the war front in Iwoama, all the villagers cried for him “[E]verybody was crying for you. Everybody in Dukana” (132), Duzia tells Mene. The same communal life among the Dukanans is seen in the way Duzia, Bom and Zaza go to Mene’s house to celebrate his departure for Pitakwa to join the army and while singing, dancing and drinking, they are later joined by other passers-by.

As in *Tambari in Dukana* and *A Forest of Flowers*, the people of Dukana in *Sozaboy* also have sense of communal ownership of property. This manifests in the manner they collectively bought a lorry labeled “Progress” to ease transportation difficulties. The lorry transports passengers from Dukana to Pitakwa and during the war, it transported those fleeing with their goods from Pitakwa, enabling Mene and his master to make huge profits. Lacking modern means of communication, the Dukana people resort to traditional means of disseminating information, involving a town-crier going round the village, beating a drum and disseminating the information (5 and 51). In addition, before government presence and the war, the Dukanans had a simple traditional system of marriage. The process of this marriage is described by Mene in the way he is to contract his marriage with Agnes: “As you know, if it is before before,” Mene reminds his imagined audience of the distant past, “it is not necessary for me to go and tell Agnes that I want to marry her. I for first tell my mother and then my mother will tell her mother and uncle as her papa is dead. And if they ‘gree then we two will marry, after I have brought drink and paid the money” (57). In terms of religion, the Dukanans are both Christians and pagans. While the former worship in Pastor Barika’s Church of Light of God, the latter having confidence in their relationship with their ancestors, worship their god, Sarogua, the “[a]ncestral spirit, guardian of Dukana” (Glossary, 184).

Also, before the coming of the government and the war, the Dukanans were peace-loving people. “Dukana people do not give trouble since the world begins” (6), Chief Birabee tells us. “We cannot give trouble. We people in Dukana cannot give trouble. We never give trouble before” (7), Duzia presses further. Living a peaceful life, the Dukanans engage in telling stories, singing and dancing. Like most riverine people, the Dukanans are fun-loving and having merry-making habits even in the face of the war. It must, however, be observed that the people do not dance, sing and tell stories for the fun of it. These are part and parcel of the social life not only of Dukana but of any society and they perform certain functions to Saro-Wiwa’s people, for as he explains:

Rooted in orality, our literature was always a shared communal experience. We did not only sing: we sing to satirize or praise or to cleanse society of some ills... We did not merely dance to entertain; we danced to express joy or displeasure. Invariably, story, song and dance come together and achieve vitality as a renewing, reaffirming or instructional group or community activity. (qtd in Mary Harvan, 161)

Saro-Wiwa knows this oral layer of his people and he draws upon it in writing *Sozaboy*. First, we see the story-telling habit of the people even in the form of the novel itself, for it is cast in the African story-telling mode, a form of an oral tale which Mene tells to an imagined audience. As Eric James points out, “*Sozaboy*’s narration reads as if it is oral performance” (421), adding that “[t]he elements of African oral tradition that structure the text’s narrative... emphasize the idea that Mene shares his time and space of narration with an audience” (423). This is evident in Mene’s repeated use of the pronoun “you” which spreads throughout the novel such as “I am telling you, this kain talk can make me shame” (14; see also 22, 28, 36, 37, 46, 51, 61 and 104).

It is also on a note of the social life of the Dukanans, involving story-telling and dancing that the novel opens: “All the nine villages [of Dukana] were dancing and we were eating plenty maize with peer and knocking tory under the moon” (1). Then, consider that again and again, we see Duzia, Bom, Zaza, Terr Kole and others, including Mene, telling stories in the town square (23-35, 43 and 61-64). In addition to their story-telling habit, the repeated references that Duzia, Bom, Zaza and Terr Kole make to sex emphasize the fun-loving propensity of the Dukanans (33, 34, 62-64 and 110). And as Tony Afejuku observes, these references to sex by these characters also “give the impression that sex is an important aspect of the communal ethos of the Dukana people” (110).

Another aspect of the life of Dukana is that it is a patriarchal society from immemorial. Jerome Okpewho also harps on the same point: “Through Mene the reader is given an insight into a community where

male chauvinism holds sway” (125). In the masculinist thinking of the Dukana patriarchal order, women are objects to be exploited, pawned or discarded at any time. This dynamics plays out in *Sozaboy* when the soldiers arrive in Dukana. Afraid of the soldiers and to appease them, many of the Dukana people, irrespective of status, offered their “goats, yam, chicken and plantain” (39) to the soldiers but “one man” who sees women as objects “bring him daughter to give the soza captain. But the sozaman do not want the girl so the girl went away crying” (39), Mene tells us.

Also, for the men in Dukana, women are to be relegated to the background and are not meant to be heard in public gatherings: “Women do not talk in Dukana meeting,” says Mene. “Anything the men talk, the women must do. Dukana people say woman does not get mouth. And it is true” (8). In addition, the men see women as weaker than men and this explains why in placing his levy, Chief Birabee asked the men to pay three shillings while the women one shilling for which the men protest. And as a patriarchal community, Dukana sanctions polygamy. For instance, we are told by Mene that Chief Birabee has five or six wives and Terr Kole, many wives. Desirous to imbibe the polygamous culture of his people, Mene also nurses the idea of marrying a second wife, Hitler’s daughter, believing that his wife Agnes will not be angry “because she know that man must marry two, three or four wife, as him hand reach” (81). Here, the Dukanans are not alone. It is the practice in most African communities.

It must be observed that when all things are considered, Saro-Wiwa’s portrayal of women in *Sozaboy* is fraught with ambivalence, for while telling us in one breath that women are worthless in Dukana, in another, he says they are useful and worthy people. Let me explain. Like the men in his patriarchal community, Mene feels that women are not his superiors and, therefore, they cannot command him. He articulates this when Simple Defence girls search and command him on road blocks while returning from Pitakwa to Dukana. Hear Mene: [I]t is not good for my persy to have women giving me orders. Remove your hat. Remove your shoe. Come this way... Can woman begin to command me like that? Am I man or what? If they hear for Dukana that woman is commanding me will they not laugh at me?” (54). A moment later, Mene insists in retrospect with anger: “As we got nearer Dukana, I begin to vex when I think how those girls were giving me orders. I vex bad bad. I think I cannot have that nonsense again. I must go join the army immediately” (54).

As can be seen, Saro-Wiwa and Mene pitch their tents with the Dukana patriarchal order that sees women as inferior people from who men cannot take orders. Yet, like Ngugi, like Sembene Ousmane, Saro-Wiwa and Mene perceive women as people to be loved,

obeyed and respected, as pillars of the family, or as Helen Chukwuma would put it, as “family backbone and sustainers” (43). This is best illustrated in *Sozaboy* by the way Zaza, an adult and World War II veteran lives with his mother at home and is being fed by her. Mene himself is influenced by his wife Agnes as seen in the way she urges him to join the army as a condition for her marrying him and which he complies with. In addition, Mene cannot do without his mother. He obeys and respects her and she also reciprocates, accordingly. A prosperous and wealthy farmer and trader, she helps to pay Mene’s school fees and driving apprenticeship, during which she tells him “what to do and what not to do” (55), marries a wife for him and gives him money to bribe the authorities to recruit him into the army.

Simon J. Ortiz, the Puebloan writer has noted that “a sense of place is strongly rooted in a people’s culture” (qtd in Joni Adamson, 120). In *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa gives expression to this by representing aspects of the cultural practices or beliefs and tradition of the Delta people which he appears to know very well and through Mene, we see these beliefs and traditions. One is the reliance of the Dukana people on their gods or ancestors to guide and protect those who are leaving the community for other places. Saro-Wiwa references this in the way Mene’s mother performed some traditional rituals on Mene when he was about to leave Dukana for Pitakwa to join the army. She poured water, a symbol of rebirth and regeneration on Mene’s feet and offered prayers to the community’s gods to guide, protect and bring him back safely to her. This recalls a similar way a mother in Birago’s Diop’s poem “Viaticum” performs a well-ordered ritual on her son, invoking the ancestral spirits to guide and protect him as he journeys through life.

Similarly, the rustics – Duzia, Bom, Zaza also go to Mene’s house to offer prayers to Dukana’s ancestral spirit Sarogua to guide and protect Mene as he goes to war: “Ach, Sarogua!,” Zaza invokes the ancestral spirit. “You must guide this pickin. You know how you brought me out of the forest of Burma safely... Now you must be with this Sozaboy: bring him back to Dukana in his two legs... Bring him back, Sarogua, bring him back safely” (69). In his war memoir, *On a Darkling Plain*, Saro-Wiwa relates a similar traditional practice which he himself underwent. According to him, when he was about leaving his hometown Bane for Lagos during the Nigerian Civil War, his cousin Alex “poured libation before the family shrine” (171), invoking the gods to guide and protect him.

A second layer of the Dukana people’s beliefs and tradition is seen in their sense of bad and good deaths. This builds directly on J. Omosade Awolalu and Adelumo Dopamu’s assertion that in West Africa, “[t]here are two categories of death – bad or good; death of the young and of the old” (254). As they

explain, “[b]ad deaths do not normally receive full burial rites” (254) such as mourning and dancing, and they are believed to be “caused by anti-wickedness divinities like the gods of thunder, small-pox and iron” (254). According to them, good death, on the other hand, “comes when one lives to a ripe old age” (254) and the deceased is “given impressive burial ceremonies” (256) like mourning, dancing and rejoicing.

In *Sozaboy*, Mene tells us that the Dukana people also have this idea of bad and good deaths. As he, too, explains, in Dukana, when a person dies a bad death – i.e. “by juju or some bad illness” (174), there are no burial ceremonies and the deceased is not buried in his or her compound but in the evil forest to prevent the disease that killed the person from returning to cause more and more deaths in the village. Conversely, if a person dies a good death, the person is given a befitting burial with mourning, drinking and dancing, and also buried “in his house, whether inside or in his compound” (174).

Finally, from their beliefs, we also see the Dukana people’s sense of superstition in *Sozaboy* and Saro-Wiwa articulates this through Duzia, the “voice of Dukana” (177). On his return after the war, a deadly disease has been killing the people and out of superstition, the Dukanans believed that Mene is the cause. They, therefore, reject him and barred their doors against him. This forces Mene to live in the church where Duzia meets him. Mene is told by Duzia that the Dukana people believe that he (Mene) died in the war but because he was not properly buried, he has assumed the form of a ghost, appearing first in the refugee camp to cause disease and death to the Dukanans, and disappearing when Chief Birabee and Pastor Barika wanted to arrest him. At the end of the war, Duzia continues, the Dukanans still believed that Mene has again come to Dukana in his ghost form to cause more disease and death to the people.

To avert this, Duzia tells Mene that the Dukana people had consulted a medicine man who says that “unless we kill your ghost, everybody in Dukana must die” (180). Duzia further tells Mene that to kill his ghost and bury him properly requires performing certain sacrifices that involve “money and seven white goats and seven white monkey *blokkus* and seven alligator pepper and seven bundles of plantain and seven young young girls” (180). That the items of sacrifice here are all white show the Dukana people’s adherence to the traditional belief that white is a symbol of purity and it is with white that the community would be cleansed. According to Duzia, the medicine man says that seven days after the sacrifice, Mene’s ghost will return to its proper place where it will be properly buried without returning to haunt the Dukana people. Afraid for his life and aware that he has “[n]o town, no family, no identity” [Harvan, 171), Mene leaves his

hometown and goes on self-exile without any future hopes. The foregoing discussions reveal the simple, peaceful and undisturbed life the Dukana people were living until that life is disrupted by the State and the war, and they experienced unprecedented sufferings.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I return to my opening argument: that though *Sozaboy* represents Saro-Wiwa’s efforts to re-write the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) in a fictive mode and to experiment with language, the novel also deals with the author’s sense of place - Dukana his fictional world and its peculiarities or characteristics. From his juvenilia *Tambari* (1973) to the short story *A Forest of Flowers* (1986), Saro-Wiwa has consistently shown his sense of place: the rural life of his people, the Ogoni in particular and the Niger Delta region in general represented by Dukana.

As my analysis has shown, in engaging with his sense of place in *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa deploys certain distinct peculiarities of Dukana, peculiarities which shape most writers idea of a region or place. Firstly, is the landscape of Dukana and Iwoama which Saro-Wiwa fuses with the people. The landscape performs social, security and economic functions to the people of Dukana and the people of Iwoama. Secondly, is the way he shows life as lived by the Dukana people before that life is destroyed by the government and the war. In doing this, Saro-Wiwa details the pre-occupations, beliefs, habits, culture, mannerisms, experiences and sensibilities of the people of Dukana. Perhaps with the exception of Elechi Amadi, no writer, to mind in Niger Delta Literature, paints better than Saro-Wiwa the rural life of his/her people or the Niger Delta region. Together the foregoing concerns make *Sozaboy* a place-oriented work and along with his literary canon, place Saro-Wiwa squarely within the place-sense or regionalist tradition.

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