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# Ogoni Opera. Theatrical Invention Based on Witnessed Events: Art at the Convergence of Documentary Theatre, Reenactment, and Therapy

Javier López Piñón

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## Résumé

Le 23 novembre dernier, l'Opéra Ogoni a donné sa représentation inaugurale à Ouidah. Entièrement produit et interprété par la communauté des réfugiés, il a reçu un accueil chaleureux de la part du public béninois. Pour ce premier numéro de la *Revue des Inventions Théâtrales Africaines*, le processus créatif qui a conduit à cette production pourrait servir d'exemple inspirant, montrant comment les arts du spectacle peuvent également aborder des objectifs et des intentions allant au-delà du purement esthétique.

Mots-clés : Artivisme ; théâtre musical ; théâtre des camps de réfugiés

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## Abstract

On November 23 of last year, Ogoni Opera had its opening night in Ouidah. It was entirely produced and performed by the refugee community and met with a warm reception from the Beninese audience. For this first number of the *Revue Internationale des Inventions Théâtrales Africaines*, the creative process that has led to this production might serve as an inspiring example how the performing arts can also touch on goals and intentions beyond the purely aesthetic.

Keywords: Artivism; music theatre; refugee camp theatre

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## Introduction: the context

Ouidah is a historical city in the Benin Republic, in West Africa. The city is quite near to the country's western border with Togo. It boasts an impressive monument at the nearby beach that marks the final stop of what was once a brutal chained walk from the city. This is where enslaved Africans were assembled in order to be embarked upon their voyage to the other side of the Atlantic. Every year in January, the city is flooded with tourists (often from Brazil) who arrive to celebrate the big *vodun*-festivities (which is how the thing that we, thanks to Hollywood, learned to call "voodoo" is really named). For many years, *vodun* has been on the list of officially recognized religions in the country.

Right in the heart of the city there is a walled refugee camp belonging to the Ogoni people. In the final quarter of the last century, the Ogoni suffered from the merciless and violent exploitation of the petrol riches found on their territory, which is at the delta of the Niger river of Nigeria, Benin's neighbor to the east. This community of refugees, which counts some 250 souls, has decided, under the capable and inspired leadership of

their elected foreman Barry Wugale, to transform itself into nothing less than a theatre collective.



*Figure 1. The camp in Ouidah. Photo by the author.*

The Ogoni camp is formed by an elongated rectangle where the lodgings are assembled around a spacious central courtyard. Perhaps the word shelter is the most adequate one to describe these lodgings. In the center of the courtyard, the community members created a covered multi-purpose communal space to shield against the tropical sun and monsoon rains. This space could also be, and immediately was, converted into a theatre hall with an acting space that stood apart from a separate auditorium.



*Figure 2. The communal space in the camp. Photo by the author.*

The members of the community have a shared experience as activists. Barry Wugale for instance, was acquainted personally with Ken Saro-Wiwa, the well-known activist who was condemned to death, along with eight fellow activists, in 1995 by the military junta that governed Nigeria in those days. By the time I had my first meeting with the community in August 2024, their decision to transform their activism into artivism had resulted in a filmscript conceived by Barry Wugale. He had sent me the script, entitled *The Killing Field*, to serve as the basis for another idea, which was to create a piece of music theatre that could be performed live in the community's own environment of Ouidah (and potentially other places in Benin and neighboring countries).

The material for the script (and hence for the music theatre piece as well) has been sourced from memories of actual events, incidents, and conflicts that led to the Ogoni taking refuge at the end of last century. In the wake of a visit by my colleague and friend Bright Richards, who gave a workshop on camera-acting for the actors participating in the film script, they were able to present a run-through in the camp of all the material they had worked on so far.

This run-through, which was performed in the heart of the camp by the people who actually witnessed close-up most of what was being portrayed in the scenes (if they hadn't been directly involved), made a great impression on me. I was witnessing a series of fragmentary re-enactments which were meant to inform outsiders of the plight of the Ogoni refugees. The dedication, energy and sheer motivation of the performers even

pointed to a therapeutic effect. Not one of the participants had ever before acted in front of an audience; yet, as they were familiar with the actions that they had to do and the words that they had to speak, and as they understood fully the purpose of their performance, the acting was totally convincing.

After he finished the screenplay of *The Killing Field*, Barry Wugale provided a new scene in addition to the already written dialogues. The scene was played out to me, and I decided that it could work perfectly as the opening scene. In this new scene we are witness to the court case that in the end led to the death sentence of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight fellow activists. To the audience unaware of the history of the Ogoni people, this scene would set the context, provide necessary knowledge and possibly have the impact needed to engage the audience in the story of the Ogoni people.

When I was staging the scene, Barry Wugale contributed from his personal experience and provided me with eyewitness reports about the way in which Saro-Wiwa presented himself and how his followers reacted to him. This added a very valuable element: as it happened, whenever Saro-Wiwa appeared he was actually greeted in song, thus underscoring how music and dance had always been part of activist procedures.

On the basis of this run-through, and in combination with the written scenario, I was asked to conceive and stage the music theatre piece. The following sections aim to shed light on an exceptional artistic process which resulted in the opening night of *Ogoni Opera* on 23d November 2024.

### Establishing theatrical codes

There were no fixed theatrical codes that I could employ in adapting the screenplay into a libretto. Indigenous opera in West Africa has taken on various shapes over the last decades, the more well-known of these, like the Concert Party (Ghana/Togo) and Yoruba Opera (Nigeria), have been widely studied, both as anthropological phenomena and works of performance.<sup>1</sup> In those cases, entertainment remains the primary objective; however, social critique and societal behavior find their way into the scenarios. A very different and less indigenous, though interesting, example of opera performance is provided by the Dutch Prince Claus Fund, which initiated a *Sahel Opera* that is along the lines of the European practice with *Bintou Were*. This opera included a libretto by Koulsy Lamko and music by Zé and premiered in Bamako in 2007. I had taken an initiative myself two years earlier in Bénin that led to the creation of *Madame Paradji*, which was based on a libretto by the late and regretted José Pliya and included music by Angélique Kidjo. In an environment where multidisciplinary performance arts form part of everyday experience, music theatre/opera is no stranger and performing through music, dance, pantomime, singing as well as speaking, with costumes and props integrated into the performances, will activate the community without any hesitation.

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<sup>1</sup> Just to mention a few: Cole, Catherine M. 2001. *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Bame, Kwabena N. 1985. *Come to Laugh: African Traditional Theatre in Ghana*. New York: Lilian Barber Press; Barber, Karin, John Collins, and Alain Ricard. 1997. *West African Popular Theatre*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Kerr, David. 1995. *African Popular Theatre: From Pre-Colonial Times to the Present Day*. London: James Curry; Jeyifo, Biodun. 1984. *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria*. Lagos: Nigeria Magazine; Barber, Karin. 2003. *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theater*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Okagbue, Osita. 2012. *African Theatres and Performances*, Abingdon: Routledge. The publication of the African Theatre Association, *African Performance Review*, provides a rich source on recent research: <https://apr.african-theatre.org/index.php/apr>.

The Ogoni people have their own particular heritage of religious and/or secular performance practices. As these have always been part of their activism as well, in the end I judged it necessary to integrate these practices into the fabric of the music theatre piece instead of conforming to European models of opera production, where libretto and music are prepared by specialists after which the fully prepared composition is rehearsed and staged under the guidance of other specialists. In this case, a screenplay needed to be transformed into a piece of music theatre, drawing from the repertoire of performance practices of the Ogoni refugee community.

For the run-through I attended, theatre had been created by a group of people unfamiliar with any theatrical codes other than those that might be part of a religious or ceremonial practice in their community. Certain chosen situations and conflicts from the past were re-enacted by the community to share with outsiders what had happened and what had motivated the Ogoni people to turn into activists. Re-enactment was staged as explanation and argument. How this was achieved and the theatrical codes according to which this was established will be illustrated in the following examples.



*Figure 3. A scene from Barry Wugale's The Killing Field, performed in the camp. Photo by the author.*

The picture above shows the Ma Lemu episode, which is one of the group's recalled conflicts. A situation is presented wherein the army is helping the oil-company workers to strip the fields of their farming functions to prepare them for the establishment of the extraction industry. All soldiers carry guns and wear at least one piece of clothing referring to army dress. Together they create a shield behind which the workers wait to start clearing the fields; one of the workers holds an enigmatic tool that served convincingly as an extractor's tool. The farmers have stopped the soldiers and workers in their tracks, and now the soldiers are threatening the farmers at gunpoint, ordering the latter to clear the way.

But not one real gun is to be seen: not having the correct props didn't worry the actors at all. To them it was not the physical reality of the guns or the extractor's machine that mattered, only the reality of the threats posed to the community. In fact, the serious and

thorough way in which these fake props were handled turned them into mightier props than would have been appropriately realistic ones. A realistic gun on stage is always a problem. Its presence can be real, but its use can only be faked. Its realistic presence thus spoils its actual power, whereas the improvised guns used by the community hold all of their threat within their manipulation. It's not the gun that presents the real danger, it's the person holding the gun who possesses its killing power, as do the actors who play their roles without the slightest hint of irony or amusement while fully recreating moments from their past. The theatrical code then is based on recognizable costume elements together with stylized, symbolic objects, all of which illustrate the re-enacted dialogues of the conflict. The theatrical code works with references, a *pars pro toto* for the costumes, tube-shaped objects for shotguns and no attempt at realism.

The way in which the music theatre piece was cast once the libretto had been finished provided an even more prominent example of just how far this dedication and motivation could go. As the community has been living in Ouidah for 25 years, the younger generation has been educated within the Francophone system, while the older generation has been trained the Anglophone way. So, one can hear French spoken side-by-side with English in the camp, but the Ogoni people speak their own language, Bukhana, amongst themselves, and there are many refugees who have become quite well-versed in all three languages. It should come as no surprise, given that West Africans are so often multilingual, that there are also several refugees who speak fluent Fongbe, the African language dominant on the southern coast of Benin.

We envisioned working on the music theatre piece with two separate casts: an English one, mostly involving the older members of the community, and a French one, where the young formed the majority. The absence of any preconceived theatrical dictate led to a casting for the French version that made no distinction in age or gender for the portrayal of the character that was to be played: the opening scene, describing the court case of Saro-Wiwa and his eight fellow-activists, all male, was cast with a majority of female performers, mere girls in some cases, who performed the roles of adult, even middle-aged men. And the young woman who intelligently played the judge, was continually addressed throughout as "your lordship".

As with the nature of the soldiers' guns, the reality of the correct gender or age didn't matter, only the reality of what was said and done at the court case. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this is that these choices were made completely organically without any need for discussion or argument. The invention of the theatrical code was established on the spot by common consent. As an afterthought, I couldn't help thinking that the theatrical code thus established by intuition would grace any avant-garde production in any urban context.

### **Opera as music and theatre**

From screenplay to music theatre, the aim was to create an opera, a piece of theatre in which music would play a decisive part. In order to develop the musical elements of our *Ogoni Opera*, as it endearingly came to be called, I needed an inventory of the available musical/dance material. As I had noticed on every occasion, singing and music making and at times dancing too, were part of an everyday routine in which most individuals took part. Any communal activity started or ended or turned into a musical session, and I witnessed regularly a chorus forming on the spot that started singing with the utmost urgency, unifying all present, from the slow overweight elderly grandfather, next to the pubescent boy with his awkward uncoordinated gestures and breaking voice, next to an intelligently observant young mother, next to a muscular construction worker, to the owner of a powerful voice, the middle-aged woman who often took on the role of cantor.

It was like striking gold. Music and dance have been instrumental for the activists, and they have built up an impressive repertoire of original (choral) songs; this can't be separated from the dance practice of their cultural heritage, which is performed wherever and whenever the occasion arises.

Within the community, antiphonal as well as responsorial choral singing is well established in all possible combinations, and the community can boast some very powerful solo voices that were able to shine in the music theatre piece. One night in the camp, a kind of concert was organized for the videographer who had requested to film some of their (often activist) repertoire. This led to an unforgettable evening: after dark the whole community came together, singing, sometimes dancing, going through their whole repertoire, which was of course sung in Bukhana and accompanied by the orchestral group.



*Figure 4. The musical ensemble. Photo by the author.*

This repertoire includes songs whose texts were written by Ken Saro-Wiwa himself, who besides being an activist and a journalist, also worked as an artist in literature and drama. On a personal note: as a stage-director who has worked his whole career of 40 odd years with professional singers, many of them impressive artists of great renown, this impromptu concert has been one of my most cherished and sacred experiences in vocal music ever. Nothing to do with that simplistic idea of "feeling" or "emotion" being the source of this singing, no: this was the sound of the soul itself, each chorus member's individual soul blending together into the singing voice of a single communal soul.

One of the scenes in the opera, the one right before the finale, exposed to the fullest the power of this musical language. It was preceded by an episode of silent acting over which a voice-over described how, at a certain period during the conflicts, trained assassins were sent out to secretly execute activists and make them totally disappear from the face of the earth, leaving no trace whatsoever. After the fourth killing, the women

enter, frantically looking for their husbands, fathers, sons, brothers and starting a long and impressive scene of desperate wailing and searching. The solo voice took the lead and the chorus responded over and over the same crucial words “i jaa boo,” which translates as “we are searching”.

In short, most of the material used for the music theatre piece was created from dramatized eyewitness reports to which songs and dances were added from the rich repertoire well maintained by the community. For the French version, they themselves provided the translations - no mean feat as they had to fit it within the rhythmical structure of the music.

### **Dramaturgical structure**

The structure of the screenplay consisted of a sequence of unrelated conflict situations illustrating the ravages to which the Ogoni people were exposed. In the end, this left them with one remaining option, which was to flee from Ogoniland, and even Nigeria altogether, to find shelter in a remote but more peaceful place. All these situations had been elaborated as dramatic scenes either around a central character (the Ma Lemu episode for instance) or around a dramatic situation (such as the army searching a secondary school for weapons). As I had decided not to follow European practice and look for a single composer to take on the job, I decided to keep the dialogues as they were written, but to add a second layer to the action. The central character of the whole music theatre piece thus became the Ogoni people living in exile.

European opera could not give me the right production example, neither could it provide me with the right kind of dramaturgy needed for this piece. So, by making the refugee camp community the central *dramatis personae*, the whole piece could be conceived as a frame story, with the community itself functioning as the narrator. In certain scenes two central narrators were singled out to represent the community as a whole.

Any European inspiration for the piece came not from opera, but from a baroque passion like Bach's Matthew Passion (or, even better, St. John's) that has been superficially taken as the skeleton for the music theatre production. I regularly experienced concert performances of Bach Passions (especially St. John's) as a kind of tribunal where the audience must listen to witness statements and come to a judgement about the injustice presented. In our music theatre piece, the spoken scenes describe events and present the dialogues that contain the drama, comparable to the evangelist narrating in Bach, while the arias take the form of songs, rap or spoken word; the choruses can function both as moments of contemplation (for example, with a mourning chant for the victims following the assassinations of four activists), but can also function on an expressive dramatic level (as with the protest demonstration that takes place in the opening scene).

The basic dramatic situation of the *Ogoni Opera* became that of the Ogoni people sustaining themselves by keeping the memories alive of their history while living in exile in their refugee camp. The fact that the music theatre piece now became centered around the community itself activated their collective energy and sense of a common goal. They are re-enacting and retelling their stories to pass them on to the next generations so that they may never forget. Song and dance are a fixed part of these stories and are naturally integrated.

Barry Wugale himself had already understood that the play needed a strong opening scene and provided the courtroom scene that was used, with gratitude, for that purpose. The scene provided the opera with the perfect introduction. But the opera also needed a final scene. As the situation in Ogoniland is still the subject of intense debate and the

situation for the exiled Ogonis ongoing, I preferred a scene that was set in a not-too-distant future, hinting at a possible outcome.

To sum up the opera's final synopsis: after the introductory scene where Saro-Wiwa and his fellow-activists plead their cause, the Ogoni people flee from their persecutors. They settle in Ouidah and keep the memories alive of the injustice that they have suffered. In five scenes, the persecution by the government and the ravages carried out by the oil companies are shown, ending with the wailing scene, which is the musical highlight of the opera. The final fairy-tale scene shows the Queen of Sweden awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to the Ken Saro-Wiwa Stool for Environmental Activism of the newly created Ogoni University.

Of course, the word play on opera as the plural of opus is intentional, as is its intertextual reference to the famous play by Soyinka. This additional abstract layer of the frame narrative permitted the introduction of other musical and dance elements. Of course, this extra layer is an artificial element, and some time was needed before it could take hold so that everybody could come to grips with its dramatic consequences. The two young women who generally took on the narrator function throughout succeeded particularly well in delivering with maximum impact Barry Wugale's often complicated and sometimes poetic texts. And they stepped in and out of character as well as accomplished Brechtian actors.



*Figure 5. The main narrators, French cast. Photo by the author.*

This might not be the right place, but I would like to point out something on a more general scale: there are some aspects of drama and acting that we automatically refer to as "Brechtian". Even drama schools in the West African region work with these definitions, while in fact drama and acting within the performance practices of the global majority can be considered Brechtian by definition. It actually is the standard approach to

drama and acting. The space between the actor and the role as different identities can be elaborated in a very refined way in Japanese theatre for instance, or in very playful ways as in the Togolese Concert Party, mentioned above. It can be reinforced by the use of masks or make-up or exploited for storytelling approaches; the phenomenon can be found across all continents and all kinds of cultures. I always find it a bit awkward to attach the label Brechtian to this, as it is not an exception to the practice but actually the practice itself that is characterized by this vital constituent of the art of acting.

### **The production units**

To understand how the production of a full music theatre piece has become possible in a refugee camp, we must look at the structural self-organization of the camp by which every member of the community belongs to one or more workgroups. Maintenance, security, religious practices, to mention just a few, as well as the *Ogoni Opera* as it came to be called definitively, were the responsibility of the following workgroups: script, music, dance, set and props, and costumes. My first dealings were with the script group as our major concern was to produce a script that could be reproduced and handed out to all the participants and thus offer a central reference that could keep track of the process. And, of course, the actors needed to start learning their lines, which is a different process when one is dealing with theatre as compared to film.

The orchestra group not only accompanied the chorus and solo songs, but it also provided further stage music. In one of the scenes, the yam goddess makes an appearance in order to warn farmer Ma Lemu of the future threats. This was staged as a dream sequence, and together with the orchestra we experimented to find the right kind of musical idiom to enhance the scene and increase its impact. As the ensemble consisted mainly of percussion instruments and a very basic type of home-made trumpet, it lacked a melody instrument, which would have been very useful. But one of these resourceful musicians came up to me later in the week to show me a flute that he had invented and that was made from a plastic tube in which he had drilled a hole. The video recording produced during the dress rehearsal prominently features his invention, which accompanies the yam goddess scene throughout.

Towards the end, a pantomime scene showed how four individual activists were executed by assassins that had been engaged by the military junta to prevent them from organizing an opposition against the oil companies. This called for instrumental accompaniment as well as sound effects, and I spent some time coordinating actions with the music, but I didn't really succeed in turning the whole scene into a tight unity. It needed much more rehearsal time in order to make each element work as part of an acoustic whole to support the actions. A lighting plot would have helped to better focus the center of attention, but the means were not available. Luckily, Uche Andrew, the videographer, found an elegant solution for the film version. If ever I get the chance to continue working on this scene, I would be all too happy to do so.

The costume group deserves special attention in this article. I never spoke with them separately. I never even met the head chief of the workshop, but truth is, they surprised me at each instance with their incredibly stylish, aesthetically pleasing, correct and dramatically well understood contribution, this on top of something which is even more to the point: their immaculate sense of timing. At each run-through another scene turned out to be presented in appropriate dress, from the opening scene where all the activists were clad in Nigerian prison uniforms, through the wailing scene where all women wailers appeared in black while a string of ghosts dressed in white traversed the stage. There was also the festive final scene, where everybody wore exquisitely matched colored *pagnes* (loincloths), which accentuated the dance movements beautifully.



*Figure 6. Opening scene, English cast. Photo by the author.*



*Figure 7. Final dance, French cast. Photo by the author.*

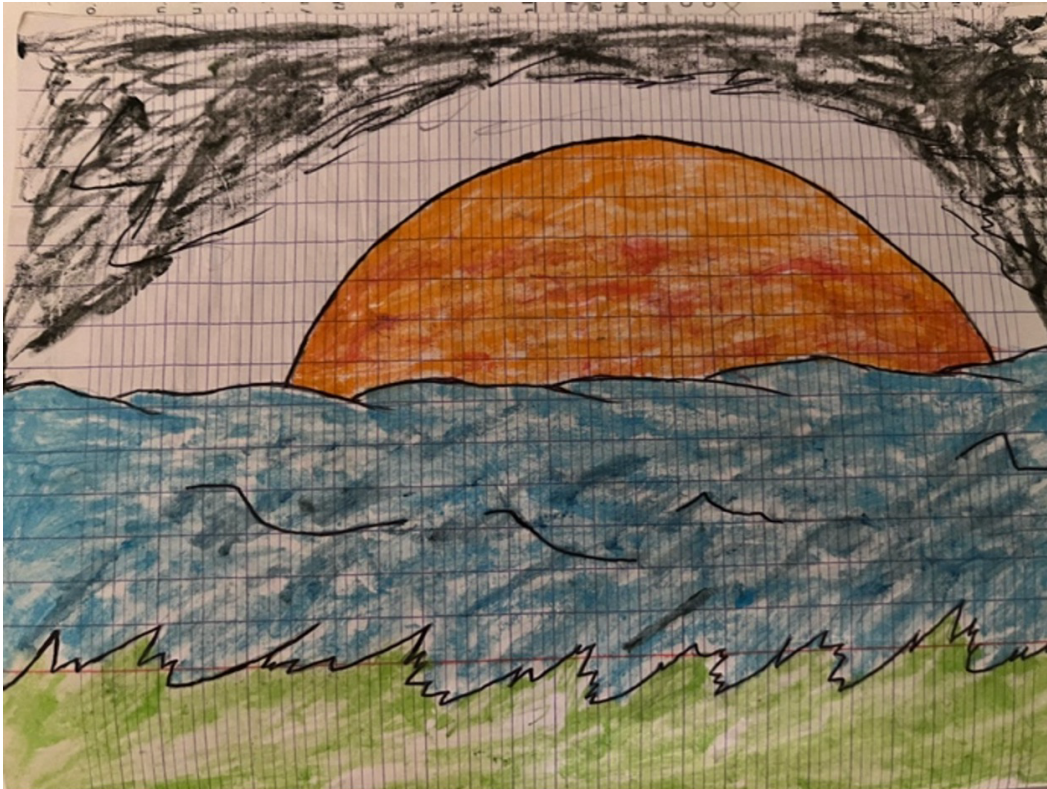
With hindsight, it is clear that their long experience in large-scale ceremonies has served beautifully in the context of the creation of a new piece of music theatre: the know-how and insight that went into the production contributed in a major way to the impact of the show.

### **Cultural capital**

The community ambitions reach beyond one single live performance; they are actually aiming (partly) towards professionalization, on the artistic as well as the production level. There is a high-quality BA theatre training academy at the renowned École Internationale de Théâtre du Bénin, and one of the closely held dreams of the

community is for its young talented members to pass the audition and be accepted to study at this institute where I have been teaching a lot myself. The artistic projects have been functioning so far as internships for those members of the community who wish to develop their talents and potential capacities further.

So, there is this group of people mastering their story and making full of use of it for whoever wishes to listen. We're dealing with a group of refugees who arrived in Ouidah carrying with them only what possessions they were able to carry. In fact, this story is their only capital and under the inspiring leadership of Barry Wugale, it is being invested into artistic projects. I don't think there is a better form of opposition possible to the immeasurable, profit-hungry exploitation that has taken place in the Niger delta. In this way they will be able to transform the cultural capital acquired into social capital and thus terminate the isolation to which this community has been condemned.



*Figure 8. A new dawn. Bariledum Monday, refugee at Come Camp Ouidah. Photo by author.*

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