

KEN SARO WIWA AND THE OGELE

WINDOWALL GALLERY AT BOYS' QUARTERS PROJECT SPACE



17TH SEPT TILL 5TH DEC 2014
24 AGGREY ROAD, PORT HARCOURT, NIGERIA

Boys' Quarters Project Space is pleased to present *Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogele* showing at the Ken Saro-Wiwa Windowall Gallery. This is the second exhibition to take place at the Windowall Gallery, located in Saro-Wiwa's old office which forms part of Boys' Quarters Project Space. The Windowall Gallery is the only part of his office that has been altered. Formerly the window Saro-Wiwa would have looked out of, it is now a wall where photos and video installations that relate to Saro-Wiwa's legacy are projected. The photos, taken by Zina Saro-Wiwa, reveal an unseen documentation of the life of this Niger Delta icon. Saro-Wiwa's untimely death in 1995, did not only have a global impact but it, unsurprisingly, left a lasting impression on the people of Ogoni, his ethnic group. Known simply as "Our Hero" in many quarters, he and his story have been turned into lore. And in this exhibition we are showing ways in which Ken has been folklorised by the masquerade movement in Ogoniland.

Ogoniland is located about an hour outside of Port Harcourt. Like many parts of West Africa, it has its own masquerading culture. Most masquerades were created far in the past before anyone can remember when or how they emerged. Traditionally tied to farming cycles, a masked performer would perform for audiences surrounded by drummers and flautists at specific times of the year like yam harvest or New Year. Masquerades existed and still exist to augur good luck for planting seasons, for entertainment and also as a form of social control. But in the 1980s and 1990s a new form of masquerade emerged in Ogoniland. Officially called “Gbaaloo” which means “United” in the local language, this new masquerade form is nicknamed “Ogele”.

There are said to be around 36 Ogele groups in Ogoni. Some are more active than others. These groups were formed by young men and their masquerades feature large, tall, very heavy masks made of wood that were and still are often painted with car paint and they are markedly distinct from the face masks and raffia of the older masquerade masks. Ogele also differs in that it is often danced by much younger men; the costumes worn on the body are more elaborate and outlandish featuring found objects and scraps of cloth materials and, finally, their dance steps differ from the masquerades of the past. Many Ogele masks feature deities such as Mami Wata, but in the 1990s the story of Ken Saro-Wiwa began to be reflected. Saro-Wiwa often appears smoking a pipe, with a mustache and beard. During the time of the struggle in the early 1990s songs that were sung ceased to be about spiritual or folkloric themes and became political as they told the story of Ken and the plight of the Ogoni people. Nowadays Ogele songs and storytelling are not so political and are more about entertainment. But the masks still bear the hallmarks of that time and Ken remains a centrally important Ogoni icon documented on these sacred head-dresses.

The images you see in the The Windowall Gallery were taken by Zina Saro-Wiwa during the course of research into masquerade culture in Ogoniland for a project for Seattle Art Museum. Finding her father carved into a variety of masks came as a surprise to her and was not something she expected to encounter. Through her documentation, Zina also seeks to highlight the relationship between masculinity and vulnerability present in the bodies of the Ogele group members which are almost exclusively male. (This relates well to the figurative work of Segun Aiyesan in Gallery 1 currently on display at Boys’ Quarters located just outside Ken Saro-Wiwa’s office). Though Ogoniland has experienced economic, social and ecological hardships, Ogele groups, when they are strong and active provide a sense of belonging, cultural renewal, vitality and employment. Ogele groups can be called out to provide entertainment and a lively atmosphere at special social events such as funerals, political rallies and cultural holidays.



They demonstrate strength, playfulness and a potent spiritual energy. The dancers and the groups in possession of a powerful new art form that engages the world around it, drawing energy and ideas from the landscape and from history. And as they do so, ensuring that singular and powerful story of Ken Saro-Wiwa is never forgotten.