



•Ogonis tents at a refugee camp



•Close up of the UN tent

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Perspectives of a Nigerian-American



# The unquenched fire: Ogonis abroad

*'One Nigerian group which has been particularly supportive is the Egbe Omo Oduduwa'*

IN the 1990s, the Ogoni attracted more attention around the world than any other Nigerian ethnic group because of the Ken Saro-Wiwa led campaign against the evils of the oil industry. Through that campaign, Ogonis within Nigeria became persona non grata, forcing many to escape the country. A large number ended up in refugee camps in Benin Republic from where they were sent to different destinations around the world, usually without consultation. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees sent the Ogoni refugees to Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Germany, and the United States.

Within the United States itself, they were sent to Chicago, Houston, Dallas, Washington DC, Atlanta, New York City, New Hampshire, Kansas City and St. Louis. What, you may wonder, has happened to these Ogoni refugees as they have started new lives in different places around the world?

This is a question I sought to answer by examining how they have managed in one of the lesser known American cities to which they were sent - St. Louis, Missouri, a place better known as the home of Budweiser Beer and baseball player Mark McGwire than as a haven for refugees.

My first encounter with the Ogoni people took place in 1988 when I visited Bori, Rivers State, for Easter Holiday with a friend from secondary school whose parents were serving as Lutheran missionaries there. Thus, when I heard that there were Ogoni refugees in St. Louis, I assumed it was be-

cause of the mission connection as the headquarters of the Lutheran missionaries in Ogoniland was in St. Louis.

It turned out, however, that it was completely coincidental, and it was only after the Ogoni refugees were already in St. Louis that the connection with Lutheran missionaries there was established. How surprised some of the refugees must have been when they discovered oyinbos in St. Louis who had not only lived in Ogoniland, but also spoke their language!

Contrary to popular opinion, life in the United States is not heaven on earth, and, like many Nigerians have dis-

covered upon arriving, life in the United States was very difficult at first for the Ogoni refugees. Their difficulty was augmented by the fact that they had not left for economic or educational reasons, but for political ones. Thus, even while they were safely in the United States, there was the constant fear of what might be happening to friends and family back home.

The refugees in St. Louis and elsewhere in the United States faced discrimination and racism, especially when seeking employment, and the accent barrier was often difficult to overcome. In addition, people who were medical doctors and legal practi-

tioners back home could only find factory jobs in their country of refuge.

Thus, in addition to the anguish of having to leave their own home behind against their will, many of the refugees were forced to live and work in much humbler circumstances than they were used to in Nigeria as they tried to pursue their version of the so-called American Dream.

As Nobel Obani-Nwibari, the president of MOSOP International, and the vice-president of MOSOP Nigeria, told me by phone from his base in St. Louis, "America is not wonderful, there is nothing as good as your

home. The biggest punishment is being thrown into exile. One is not comfortable and finds it difficult to interact with society."

The experience in the United States has not been all negative. For example, Ogoni refugees who had been university students back home were able to continue their education in American universities.

The Ogoni community has garnered support from human rights groups, environmental rights groups, and especially church groups. One church in particular, Messiah Lutheran Church, has provided the refugees with a place where they conduct their own worship services. Obani-Nwibari described the Messiah church community as having been very open, supportive, and encouraging, helping new arrivals to find jobs, accommodations, and generally to help them settle in.

Other Nigerians in the community have also been supportive, and many join the Ogonis on their monthly picketing of Shell petrol stations in the city, actions which have resulted in the closing of a number of Shell stations.

One Nigerian group which has been particularly supportive is the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, a Yoruba cultural group with branches throughout the United States. On January 4th, 2000, the 100 strong Ogoni refugee community in St. Louis along with 400 others - Kenyans, Ethiopians, Asians, and Americans, both black and white - conducted a candlelight procession from a Shell

station in St. Louis to the Messiah Lutheran Church to celebrate Ogoni Day. Ogoni refugee communities all over the world conducted similar candlelight marches.

Exhibiting the changing political environment in Nigeria, Ogonis back home were also able to march on Ogoni Day, a day earmarked to celebrate worldwide Ogoni solidarity.

The Ogoni refugees in St. Louis have come a long way in a short time and are becoming more and more settled in their new home, but dreams of their real home are never distant. On April 24th, as many of them as possible will return to Nigeria for the official burial of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the rest of the Ogoni Nine. Based on what they observe and experience then, they will decide if and when a final move back to Nigeria will be possible.

The Ogonis, although small in number, have been able to attract more attention internationally than any other Nigerian ethnic group over the last decade. The movement they started lit a fire across the Niger Delta which is yet to be quenched.

Let us hope that what they find in Nigeria in April will convince them that a new era in Nigeria has truly begun so that they can refocus their formidable international public relations networks towards rebuilding Nigeria's damaged international reputation.

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