

THE PAN-AFRICAN NATION

*Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria*

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media, the struggle came to represent the rapacious appetite of oil capitalism and the ruthless abandon of military dictatorship as oil spills, burn-offs, and blowouts destroyed the creeks and farms of the Ogoni people with no compensation provided. From the outside, Saro-Wiwa's death was a heroic tragedy of one man against a Leviathan, a hybrid beast of corporate profiteering and military domination violating human rights and destroying nature. Within Nigeria, however, Saro-Wiwa's struggle was tied to ethnic politics, championing the cause of the Ogoni minority against the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Ibo power blocs that stole from the state and gave only to their own. If Ken Saro-Wiwa was a respected writer, producer, and critic in his own country, many others saw him as a troublesome gadfly who resented his people's lack of patronage opportunities. In the vast Nigerian nation of nearly 100 million people, few really cared about the Ogoni, whom the popular press sometimes likened to pygmies of a lower evolutionary order. What most outsiders forget, or never realized, is that although Saro-Wiwa's demand for oil revenues and reparations began in the 1960s and gained momentum during the oil boom of the seventies and early eighties, his cry was hardly heard. The majority of Nigerians did not really care about the tiny, relatively isolated "tribe" of folk who were considered scarcely human, happy to be fishing their mangrove creeks and planting their gardens, cut off from the modern world. Given this general contempt for the Ogoni people, why did Ken Saro-Wiwa's struggle erupt into a Nigerian cause célèbre?

To answer this question, I will examine how the plight of the Ogoni people came to represent the contradictions of oil capitalism in Nigeria at large. We will see how the pollution of natural ecosystems and environments provided the language for opposing historically specific forms of economic alienation and political dispossession throughout the nation as rentier capitalism and prebendal politics privatized the state and undermined the public sphere; and how the pattern of class involution, discussed in chapter 1, eventually imploded. Only then can we appreciate how Ken Saro-Wiwa's demand for Ogoni autonomy escalated into a struggle for universal citizenship in Nigeria, and why, as the world waited to see what would happen, he was hanged.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE STATE OF NATURE

Of the many novels, poems, short stories, plays, critical studies, and essays that Ken Saro-Wiwa published in his lifetime, his last two books, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (1992) and *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (published posthumously in 1995), chronicle his

#### CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Death and the King's Henchmen*

For Ken Saro-Wiwa, 1941–1995. In memoriam.

ON NOVEMBER 10, 1995, Nigeria's military strongman, General Sani Abacha, shocked the world by ordering the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight fellow Ogoni activists on trumped-up charges of inciting violence and murder. The activists' trial was a sham, having taken place in a military tribunal that played by its own rules, denying legal counsel, visits from family members, and, after the fact, any kind of public burial for the defendants. Their corpses were purportedly disfigured with acid, literally defaced to prevent their resurrection into martyrdom as fearless critics of the venal military regime. The United Nations condemned the act, countless ambassadors were called home, Nigeria was suspended from the Association of Commonwealth Nations, the United States denied visas to Nigerian military officers—but the only truly effective response, a U.S.-led embargo against Nigeria oil, was never pursued. Oil, Nigeria's black gold turned toxic waste, against which Ken Saro-Wiwa struggled in defense of his land and his people, won the day. After the harsh talk and half-measures taken against Abacha's disreputable regime, the ambassadors trickled back to Lagos, and Royal Dutch Shell brazenly signed on to a \$4-billion natural gas liquefaction project.

Saro-Wiwa's fight against Shell was largely environmental, highlighting the ecological devastation of riverine ecosystems in the Niger Delta area, where Nigeria's oil is pumped from the ground. In the global

cause most fully. Reviewing this struggle as he presented it serves two initial purposes: first, it illustrates the main actors and events in the history of Ogoni persecution, leading to the founding of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP); and second, it illuminates the "organic" idiom in which this struggle was framed, and that developed into a *political ecology* of citizenship for all Nigerians.

The main actors in the Ogoni tragedy are the multinational Shell Petroleum Development Corporation, along with its British and Dutch subsidiaries; the Ethnic Majority, referring directly to the Hausa-Fulani in the north who have dominated Nigerian politics since the days of the British Protectorate, but also including the Yoruba and Ibo, who also reign as majorities over the Ogoni and other ethnic minorities; the Military Dictatorship, which—through seven different regimes that assumed power through coups—has ruled by decree and plundered the country; the Ogoni, the paradigmatic ethnic minority who live on the oilfields, and whose society and habitat have been destroyed by pollution; and finally, the American, European, and Japanese markets for Nigerian oil, those impersonal consumers who drive the global oil economy but remain largely in the background. If I recount the Ogoni tragedy as a drama or morality play, it is to highlight some of its mythic themes and to prefigure those allegorical dimensions linking Ogoniland to the Nigerian nation. For Saro-Wiwa, however, *Genocide in Nigeria* was a work of empirical documentation.

The book opens with an account of precolonial Ogoniland as an Edenic paradise or primitive commune (not unlike Nwoko's *Children of Paradise* discussed in chapter 3), where production was for use, and where social, economic, ecological, and religious orders were integrated into "natural" rhythms and routines:

To the Ogoni, the land on which they lived and the rivers which surrounded them were very important. They not only provided sustenance in abundance, they were also a spiritual inheritance. The land is a god and is worshipped as such. The fruit of the land, particularly yams, are honoured in festivals and, indeed, the Annual Festival of the Ogoni is held at the yam harvest. The planting season is not a mere period of agricultural activity: it is a spiritual, religious and social occasion. "Tradition" in Ogoni means in the local tongue (*dooni kunkere*) the honoring of the land (earth, soil, water). . . . To the Ogoni, rivers and streams do not only provide water for life—for bathing, drinking, etc; they do not only provide fish for food, they are also sacred and are bound up intricately with the life of the community, of the entire Ogoni nation. (Saro-Wiwa 1992, 12–13)

In political terms, this foundational account of an "original affluent society" (Sahlins 1972, 1–39) serves as a charter for Ogoni ownership of the land, a resource framed as a cultural and spiritual heritage that would be spoiled by oil and stolen by the state. According to the correspondences established in this vision, the devastation of land and water is tantamount to the destruction of tradition itself, one that sustained a harmonious balance between ecology, economy, and community. The predations of the military-petroleum complex upon this pristine "state" of nature—organized into the six ancient kingdoms of Babbe, Eleme, Gokana, Nyo-Khana, Ken-Khana, and Tai (what anthropologists would call clans)—are thereby framed as crimes against culture and humanity, violating the sacred foundation of human community. Hence Saro-Wiwa's use of the term *genocide* to describe the destruction of Ogoniland, although military "scorch and burn" campaigns against Ogoni protestors would follow.

As we shall see, the mythic model of 'Ogoniland' served a specific agenda that Saro-Wiwa pursued with total conviction. Although he demanded reparations from Shell and the Nigerian government for the ravages of oil pollution, he also sought a much greater share of reallocated revenues for the Ogoni people, arguing that the oil from their land belonged to them. Small wonder that most Nigerians were uninvolved with this cause. Saro-Wiwa was pleading special circumstances for his people, with that persecution complex that came to be associated with Ogoni "cannibal rage" and ethnic chauvinism.

For Saro-Wiwa, trouble was always associated with outside intervention. In 1914, the British subjugated the Ogoni by force, denying their autonomy by incorporating them into Opobo Division within Calabar Province, thereby subjecting them to a remote administrative center that demanded taxes and ruled through courts. Saro-Wiwa recounts with pride how the Ogoni participated in the 1929 Women's Tax Riots, otherwise known as the Igbo Women's War, in which several Ogoni women were killed. Their deaths attest to the Ogoni tradition of mobilization and resistance against external domination. Under the British, it was not until 1947 that the Ogoni Native Authority was established, framing Ogoni ethnic identity in the administrative terms of indirect rule, and securing representation in the Eastern House of Assembly in 1952. Politically, however, the Ogoni were overwhelmed, swallowed by the dominating Ibo interests of the Eastern Region, to which they were unwillingly consigned by the 1951 constitution. In an attempt to join with other Delta minorities to found an autonomous Rivers State, the Ogoni broke from Nnamdi Azikiwe's National Council of Nigeria and

the Cameroons party and voted for Obafemi Awolowo's Yoruba Action Group Party. Zik's party won, and the Igbos took reprisals against the Ogoni, denying them scholarships and social amenities (Saro-Wiwa 1992, 23) and splitting the Ogoni Native Authority into three local government units. In a move echoing the divide-and-conquer tactics of the British, the Ogoni were thus subjected to a form of internal colonialism by the Ibo majority of the Eastern Region, who were to prove even more brutal as overlords during the dark days of the Biafran war.

The federal structure of the Nigerian state in the early years of independence was fragile at best, composed of three semi-autonomous regions competing with each other for power at the center. The three dominant parties of the First Republic had in fact developed largely from cultural organizations and platforms that capitalized on ethnic affiliation—such as the Yoruba Ormo Egbe Oduduwa, the Ibo State Union, and the Hausa Jammiyyar Mutanen Arewa in the north—consolidating regional identities in terms of ethnicity and political party, and through regional marketing boards.<sup>2</sup> The balance broke down in 1966 with the first coup after independence, led by Major General Thomas Ironsi, in which, Saro-Wiwa (1992, 26) reminds us, “the Federal Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar Tafewa Balewa was killed along with two other Regional Premiers of the Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani ethnic majorities.” Ironsi's regime attempted to replace Nigeria's weak federalism with a stronger unitary state, but the effort was cut short. The Hausa-Fulani retaliated in the north, massacring thousands of Igbos, killing General Ironsi in General Yakubu Gowon's counter-coup, and unleashing the tide of violence that swept into the Western Region, where Igbos had to close down their shops, leave their government jobs, and flee for their lives.

Saro-Wiwa's *On A Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (1989) reveals another side of the bloody struggle for secession led by Colonel C. Odumegwu Ojukwu and his aspiring Biafran nation. The Ibo's valiant struggle for Biafra, and their remarkable military and technological ingenuity, earned them the respect even of their critics. Less appreciated and understood, however, was their treatment of the Ogoni and other Delta minorities who were corralled into Biafra against their will. When federal troops swept through Ogoni Division and onward to take Port Harcourt, the Ogoni were scapegoated as saboteurs, and were evacuated to concentration camps and refugee centers where many starved to death. Others were sent to the Training Depots en route to the front, where they were used as cannon fodder. From May to August of 1968, four thousand Ogonis died from forced relocation and Ibo “reprisals.” Bombed and shelled by federal troops, the Ogoni were then persecuted by Biafrans. According to Saro-Wiwa's calculations, an esti-

mated thirty thousand Ogonis, over 10% of the ethnic population, died in the war. Whether the figures are biased or exact hardly matters, for it is clear that in the ethnic politics of Nigerian federalism, the Ogoni were universally despised and had nowhere to turn.

After the Biafran defeat in 1970, Nigeria's three regions were replaced by twelve states in a plan to stabilize the federal government, and the Ogoni joined the newly formed Rivers State with other Delta minorities. By this time, however, the Ogoni were fighting another battle for survival—this time against oil. Although Shell-BP first struck Ogoniland oil in 1958, in the village of Dere, production was curtailed by the Biafran war and only began in earnest toward the close of the violence. By the war's end, the Ogoni had come to realize that the oil company's promises of development and economic prosperity were empty lies, as the new industry brought no benefits and only hardships to the area. Virtually no new jobs were created for the Ogoni, and profits were siphoned away without any returns to the villagers. Company undertakings such as the Ogoni Rural Community Project existed in name only, with diverted funds counting as tax deductions. What Shell brought to Ogoniland was not profit but pollution, contaminating the mangrove swamps and farmland with seepage and spills while fouling the air with black smoke and lethal gases from flare-offs that burned day and night. Growing discontent erupted in July 1970, when a blowout in one of Shell's oilfields wreaked havoc on the surrounding villages. An entire village ecosystem was destroyed, prompting petitions to the military governor and protests against Shell-BP's unwillingness to help. One such letter from an Ogoni schoolteacher likens the horrors of the blowout to the violence of the Biafran war:

We in Dere today are facing a situation which can only be compared with our experiences during the civil war . . . an ocean of crude oil has emerged, moving swiftly like a great river in flood, successfully swallowing up anything that comes on its way. These include cassava farms, yams, palms, streams, animals etc etc for miles on end. There is no pipeborne water and yet the streams, the only source of drinking water is coated with oil. You cannot collect a bucket of rain water for the roofs, trees and grass are all covered with oil. Anything spread outside in the neighbourhood is soaked with oil as the wind carries the oil miles away from the scene of the incident. . . . Thrice during the Civil war the flow station was bombed setting the whole place on fire. . . . Now a worse fire is blazing not quite a quarter of a mile from the village . . . men and women forced by hunger “steal” occasionally into the “ocean” [of oil], some have to dive deep in oil to uproot already rotten yams and cassava. I am not a scientist to analyze what effects the breathing of dan-

gerous gases the crude oil contains would have on the people, but suffice it to say that the air is polluted and smells only of crude oil. We are thus faced with a situation where we have no food to eat, no water to drink, no homes to live and worst of it all, no air to breathe. We now live in what Hobbes may describe as a STATE OF NATURE—a state where peace or security does not exist "... and the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." (Reprinted in Saro-Wiwa 1992, 58–59)

Oil, fast becoming the lifeblood of the new Nigeria as the oil boom took off, was for the Ogoni the scourge of development, transforming the precolonial "natural" economy—considered the food basket of the Eastern Niger Delta—into a postcolonial state of Hobbesian "warre." Prefiguring the hidden costs of an "unnatural" enclave economy that would burn hot and then out, the plight of the Ogoni came to stand for the plight of all Nigerians subjected to the losing combination of oil capitalism and political kleptocracy. In the 1970s, however, Saro-Wiwa's struggle still seemed ethnically motivated in that from his perspective, the ethnic majorities and the nation at large gained at the Ogoni's expense.

At issue was the method of revenue allocation by an increasingly unitary and autonomous state. As Watts (1992, 35–36) has observed, the oil economy transformed the regional structure of the First Republic into a "centralized, bureaucratic petrostate" that consolidated control over oil rents and revenues and embarked on a program of states creation—twelve states out of four regions in 1966, nineteen states in 1969, up to thirty states in the early 1990s—which increased direct fiscal dependency on the center. We have seen how, during the 1970s, Nigeria joined OPEC and became extremely wealthy, with a robust currency backed by petrodollars that financed an expanding public sector fueled by national development schemes. We have also seen how the state became the broker of virtually all productive ventures financed by oil, establishing a pattern of patronage in business and politics that allocated licenses and revenues in exchange for kickbacks and loyalty. As administrative units, each state depended upon federal disbursements, with ethnic blocks consolidating around economic as well as political resources and opportunities.

I will review the rather complex structural consequences of this incorporative and distributive modality in the next section. For now, we can focus on the view from Ogoniland, which was quite simple. For as far as the Ogoni were concerned, the federal government and its expanding circle of "lootocrats" were stealing from the poor and giving to

the rich. Denied the black gold that was mined from their land and appropriated by the center, the Ogoni were screwed over twice. First, the federal government successively swindled the local areas out of any share in their oil by revising the revenue allocation formula to benefit the ethnic majorities. Thus the share of mineral rents for the minorities in the oil-producing areas fell from 20% down to 2% and again to 1.5%, which in any case was never paid. By 1979, the constitution of the imminent Second Republic vested all mineral rights in the federal government, adding a land-use decree that appropriated all lands as well. Second, the Ogoni were further oppressed within Rivers State, which diverted federal revenues to its own Ijaw majority at the expense of the most basic amenities and utilities in Ogoniland. Although sitting on the nation's wealth, the Ogoni lacked adequate funds for water, roads, and even primary education. As the nation's program for universal health care and primary education built more hospitals and schools in the arid north and populous west, the local government areas of Ogoniland could not even pay their doctors and teachers.

The situation intensified as the number of states in Nigeria increased, giving the ethnic majorities more states and hence a greater proportion of reallocated revenues while consigning the Ogoni and other oil-producing minorities to virtual if not literal extinction. With characteristic clarity, Saro-Wiwa sums up the systemic obliteration of his people in the language of ethnic domination. At the federal level: "Under the military dictatorships which have ruled the country from 1967 to the present (1992), the determination has been to subvert the federal culture of the country, establish a unitary state, corner the oil resources of the nation at the centre and then have these resources transferred by the Big Man who has come to power either by electoral fraud or military coup to the ethnic majority areas" (Saro-Wiwa 1992, 89). And within Rivers State, the same siphoning underwent a secondary elaboration:

In Rivers State, the majority Ijaws are more interested in their own welfare than in establishing a fair and just state. The constituent ethnic groups spend more time fighting for crumbs which fall from Nigeria's Federal table at which the ethnic majorities preside, than in creating social and economic progress. In short, Rivers State is but a microcosm of Nigeria in which the majority ethnic groups triumph while the minorities gnash their teeth in agony. But it is even worse because the multi-ethnic Rivers State is run as a unitary state without the nod which is made at the centre towards federalism. In such a situation, such ethnic minorities as the Ogoni are condemned

to slavery and extinction. Thus, political structuring and revenue allocation have been used to completely marginalize the Ogoni, grossly abusing their rights and veritably consigning them to extinction. (Ibid.)

The Ogoni thus suffered a double indemnity under state-sector oil capitalism, and a double alienation from their resources and rights.<sup>3</sup> Added to such formal dispossession was the prebendalism of public office and the privatization of the state, in the form of kickbacks and embezzlement that again could follow ethnic lines.<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, Saro-Wiwa's nearly exclusive focus on ethnic politics and clientism was one-sided, overlooking the development of class factions and what Bayart (1993, 150-79) calls "the reciprocal assimilation of elites" on transethnic grounds. But the ethnic factor was obvious and striking enough to provoke an ethnically framed reaction.

Called the *Autonomy Option* by MOSOP, the Ogoni response to oil pollution, government kleptocracy, ethnic cronyism, and the resultant cultural "genocide" was a demand for political recognition that fell short of a full-fledged secessionist movement but invoked the language of independence in its Ogoni Bill of Rights. Presented to President Ibrahim Bădamosi Babangida (who turned a deaf ear) and the military governor of Rivers State in October 1990, the manifesto called for greater political autonomy for the Ogoni as a distinct "ethnic nationality," with greater participation in the affairs of the federal republic. The pamphlet highlights seven specific guarantees that define the unit of autonomy and its sphere of operations. These are (1) political control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people, (2) the right to the control and use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development, (3) adequate and direct representation as of right in all Nigerian institutions, (4) the use and development of Ogoni languages in Ogoni territory, (5) the full development of Ogoni culture, (6) the right to religious freedom, and (7) the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation (Leton 1990: 4). These steps toward a political ecology of citizenship formulated for a specific ethnic nation would become paradigmatic of Nigeria at large as the meaning of political autonomy widened to embrace an embattled public sphere. But in 1990, Saro-Wiwa's Ogoni platform was defiantly parochial, and the benefits that would accrue to Ogoniland were both tangible and enormous.

Although never explicitly defined, the distinct and separate unit of autonomy would presumably be a state, just like the many other new states carved from selected ethnic communities in Nigeria under Babangida's administration.<sup>5</sup> The economic implications of such an ar-

rangement within the national federation involved huge sums of money, based on the assumption that Ogoniland would receive "a fair proportion" of oil revenues—in Saro-Wiwa's judgment a whopping 50%, following the regional allocation formula established before independence, although presumably this proportion was negotiable. Depending on calculated exchange rates, net oil revenues, and estimated damages to the land and people, government reparations to the Ogoni totaled about \$20 billion. The figure was not exactly realistic, and it is not clear whether Saro-Wiwa sought these damages in literal monetary terms or more figuratively, as a monetary value placed on environment, cultural heritage, and minority rights. Added to the economic guarantees would be instant appointments to "quota" positions in education and the civil service, based on minority representation within the federation. The remaining demands in the Ogoni Bill of Rights identify language (Gokana and Khana), territory, Ogoni culture, religious freedom, and the environment and ecology as guaranteed parameters of an autonomous entity, one which, located between the state and civil society, would become the kernel of a national public sphere. For Saro-Wiwa, however, the Ogoni struggle would remain that of persecuted minorities against the so-called ethnic majority, the lootocratic regime, and the profiteering oil companies. Oil capitalism destroyed the Ogoni state of nature by devastating the environment and draining, through its oil pipes, "the very life-blood of the Ogoni people" (Saro-Wiwa 1992, 82). Saro-Wiwa concludes his *Genocide in Nigeria* with an image of a "vampire-like" Nigeria, sitting over the Ogoni and expropriating their oil to finance a corrupt and wasteful regime. He may not have appreciated how well this model applied to the nation as a whole.

#### THE VAMPIRE STATE

How did the most robust national economy in black Africa, fueled by an oil bonanza that inaugurated an era of unprecedented prosperity, give rise to the cannibalistic vampire state described so vividly by Ken Saro-Wiwa? How did the engine of development and progress that burned so brightly in the seventies and early eighties—bringing contracts, commodities, and new opportunities to virtually all sectors of the Nigerian economy—degenerate so thoroughly into a self-consuming, predatory regime by the 1990s? To understand how and why things fell apart in Nigeria so soon after they appeared to be taking off, we need to look past the limits of ethnic politics and poor leadership *per se* and return to the underlying contradictions of oil capitalism in Nigeria's enclave

economy. From this more inclusive perspective, Saro-Wiwa's struggle against the majority ethnic oil barons and power brokers took place within more general transformations of the oil economy.

As Coronil (1987, 5) argues from the political economy of oil in Venezuela, the economic autonomy of the oil-based rentier state vis-à-vis society's productive capacity has an enhancing effect, whereby "the state appears to stand above society, and is represented as the locus of extraordinary power." Or as recapitulated by Watts (1994, 418), "the state appears suspended above society—it is represented as *the* source of power since oil is power." This historically specific variation of what Mitchell (1988) has called the "state-effect"—referring to the reification of the state standing apart from civil society—can be understood in Nigeria as a type of state fetishism, in the double sense of the commodity fetish and, following Taussig's "maleficium" model, the state's "aura of might" (Taussig 1992, 112). Unlike Mitchell's discussion of colonial Egypt, however, this separation was effected not by disciplinary practices of learning, policing, and military training—which had already occurred in colonial Nigeria—but by the accumulation and redistribution of oil revenues, in the form of taxes and rents. The distinction is significant because, as I have illustrated in previous chapters, oil capitalism in a rentier state entails a specific phenomenology of power and value, one in which Saro-Wiwa's political ecology must be located to understand his vision of the vampire state.

To appreciate how state vampirism made sense in the popular imaginations of a vast and variegated Nigeria, we must return to the magical qualities of royalties and ground rents in relation to transethnic idioms of moneymaking medicine. As mentioned in chapter 6, the magic of oil money emanating from the ground produced a national anxiety based on pervasive notions of "bad" wealth and "hot" money gained not through hard work but by nefarious means. We saw how such anxieties have been documented in the popular theater of the oil boom era (Barber 1982), drawing on popular accounts of moneymaking medicines of kidnapers who sacrifice humans for money. At the local level, these stories had serious consequences. During my first fieldwork in Ayede-Ekiti, Oroyeye priestesses sang vindictive songs against one Oladiran, who had allegedly kidnapped and killed his paternal half-brother for *lukudi* moneymaking medicine.<sup>6</sup> He was effectively isolated and thereafter died. The crime of effortless gain at the expense or even "consumption" of others is echoed in various witchcraft beliefs as well, but the underlying template motivating this genre is the transmutation of human blood into money—bad money, to be sure, curiously lacking value, without reciprocal advantage or gain. As Watts (1994, 427) ex-

plains in his insightful review of money-magic idioms during the oil boom, "money magic, whatever the empirical status of its liturgy of body parts and juju narratives, captured perfectly in this respect the magical and fetishistic (and violent) qualities of the petro-naira," further representing what Barber (1995, 219) identifies as "the convertibility of people into money . . . in the petro-naira narratives of money-magic."

Thus if rooted in local socioeconomic fields and cultural forms, money magic, like the money it invoked, was iconic of the nation and symptomatic of its unproductive wealth. Whether articulated through Hausa distinctions between fertile (*uwa mai anfi*) versus ominous (*jarin tsaya*) money (Watts 1994, 425), Ibo stories of body parts in suitcases (Bastian 1991), Yoruba notions of blood-draining profit, or the many minority perspectives—including those of the Ogoni—between and beyond, the symbolism of evil surrounding the negative values of money fetishism acquired national focus and circulation. Writing from a Yoruba perspective, Matory (1994, 124) contrasts local reports of money magic with its larger relevance to the nation-state: "*Lukudi* and the similar *eda* moneymaking magic occupy a nightmarish space in the national imagination far out of proportion to their actual incidence. They not only tap an extant and widespread symbolism but vividly symbolize the sense that acquisitive strategies in the mercantile capitalist state cannibalize normal forms of collective and personal life."

Following this development of money magic into an allegory of the national economy, we can map its blood-draining logic more precisely onto the accumulation and distribution of oil royalties and rents, not only in terms of the enormous wealth that was mysteriously conjured and publicly invested, but more specifically in terms of the hidden costs exacted by the concurrent privatization of the public sphere—the kickbacks, prebends, and wholesale diversion of public funds into private accounts and personal fiefdoms. If, as we have seen, oil represented the lifeblood of the nation, the petro-state paradoxically expanded by consuming this life blood of the people—sucking back the money that it pumped into circulation while absorbing the process of sectorial competition and even class formation within its hypertrophic belly. The oil economy may have energized domestic markets through the intensified circulation of money and commodities, but it enervated and undermined the real productive base of Nigeria, those agricultural resources that not even a state-sponsored green revolution could revive.

But during the halcyon days of the oil boom and its spectacle of national development, these contradictions were nowhere to be seen. Not even Ken Saro-Wiwa identified the generalized condition of state vampirism gestating within. Perched from 1968 to 1973 as federal adminis-

trator for the oil port of Bonny in Rivers State, where he witnessed the beginning of the boom, Saro-Wiwa well understood the siphoning off of oil from Ogoniland to the so-called ethnic majorities, but he remained less concerned about the involution of *étatization* writ large. If his struggle, like his vision, appeared parochial on this issue, it would not remain so, for after the demise of the Second Republic in the 1980s and the failure of the farcical 1993 elections, the vampire state boldly emerged during Abacha's destructive misrule. Thus consumed, oil as black gold turned to "devil's excrement" (Coronil 1997, 321 *passim*; Watts 1994) and toxic waste. In the next section, we will see how the anemic anatomy of a dying nation took an ecological turn, invoking the state of nature and the sanctity of the land to restore the "natural" conditions of civil society and effective citizenship from the ravages of oil.

#### THE UNCIVIL SOCIETY

"Why are you people doing this to me? What sort of a nation is this?" (Soyinka 1996, 149). Ken Saro-Wiwa's last words were uttered during the fifth and final attempt to operate the gallows that left him hanging and dead. Softly uttered, his words echoed throughout Nigeria and the international press as the global community waited in disbelief. With respect and dismay, Nigerians shook their heads over the tragic irony maintained by Saro-Wiwa's trenchant wit to the end. His final double entendre implicated not only his killers, from Abacha's ruling band of thugs and the excuse of a nation that they pretended to represent, but the tattered country that could do nothing right—not even kill a man on the gallows. Imported and previously unused, not even this dreaded instrument of execution was correctly operated by the state.

But Ken Saro-Wiwa did die. His death represents not just a drama of arbitrary power, following Mbembe's model of the postcolonial *commandement* and its farcical mimesis of judicial process and authority (Mbembe 1992), but the ultimate collapse of that elusive distinction between the Nigerian state and civil society, and thus the demise of effective citizenship. We can follow this drama in a linear narrative of linked events, as a convergence of local and national struggles in the global context of oil capitalism, to achieve an instrumental understanding of Saro-Wiwa's death and transfiguration into a spokesperson for all Nigeria. From this perspective, two series of events converged on the annulled national elections of June 12, 1993, and the aborted delivery of Nigeria's Third Republic. From below, Saro-Wiwa's leadership of MOSOP to defend the Ogoni against the military-petroleum complex developed greatest momentum as an ecological struggle for the natural

environment, not surprisingly related to Greenpeace's estimates that "between 1982 and 1992, 37 percent of Shell's spills worldwide—amounting to 1.6 million gallons—took place in the Delta" where the Ogoni (and other minorities) reside (Hammer 1996, 62). Organizing an Ogoni youth wing that sabotaged oil pipes and installations, Saro-Wiwa's activism caused Shell to pull out of the region by January of 1993, costing the company and the government 28,000 barrels of crude oil a day (*ibid.*).

The struggle had been violent since 1990, when paramilitary police called "Kill and Go" massacred about fifty neighboring Umuechem residents demanding reparations from Shell, and fomented machine gun and grenade attacks—thinly disguised as "tribal" animosity—between Ogoni and Andoni peoples. The "slow genocide" of Ogoni by oil pollution was now supplemented by the "scorched earth" campaigns of military death squads, amounting to over two thousand Ogoni deaths and lending eerie credence to Saro-Wiwa's prophetic accusations. Thus when members of MOSOP's radicalized youth wing attacked the conservative chiefs and Ogoni "turcoats," resulting in the death of four elders, the government seized Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni associates on charges of incitement to murder, although Saro-Wiwa had been far away from the scene.<sup>7</sup> From the military's perspective, Saro-Wiwa and his Ogoni activists were the saboteurs of the economy. Eliminate the Ogoni problem, and oil could flow freely again. On a more tactical level, Abacha's rush to the gallows followed the colonial logic of divide and rule. If the Ogoni were not alone in opposing the alliance of Shell and the military junta, they could hardly mobilize a Delta revolt when government violence masqueraded as interethnic conflict. According to Soyinka, the immediate execution of Saro-Wiwa was to remove the pivotal figure of opposition around which a united Delta front could emerge. The "trial" was thus a sham:

Ken Saro-Wiwa's fate had long been sealed. The decision to execute him and his eight companions was reached before the special tribunal was ordered to reconvene and pronounce a verdict that had been decided outside the charade of judicial proceeding. The meeting of the Provisional Ruling Council to consider the verdict was a macabre pretence, a prolongation of the cynicism that marked the trial proceedings from the outset. (Soyinka 1996, 152)

But Saro-Wiwa's struggle also transcended riverine politics to capture the frustrations of a nation that was withering away. The identification was not of course uniform, resonating more immediately with the



south's resistance to Hausa-Fulani hegemony and political repression than among northern constituencies.<sup>8</sup>

When Abacha replaced the transitional Ernest Shonekan in a pro forma coup just weeks after Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida ("IBB") had "stepped aside," the final nail was driven into the national coffin. "Now we are finished!" headlined the feature story of *Razor*, a soon-to-be banned magazine. For unlike IBB, who bought off his enemies, Abacha was known as a ruthless hatchet man who—as events would soon prove—incarcerated and killed them. The absolute crackdown on Nigeria's formerly open press; the life prison terms given to such political luminaries as Shehu Yarad'ua and former (and once again) Head of State Olusegun Obasanjo, together with other alleged coup plotters whose death sentences were so benevolently commuted to life terms for crimes cooked up by Abacha's paranoid imagination; the interminable incarceration and eventual death of president-elect Moshood Abiola, whose wife was gunned down by unknown assailants whom everyone knew were government thugs; and of course the cold-blooded execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight Ogoni associates—these were only among the more blatant symptoms of the death of a nation and the demise of its citizenry, reduced not only to subjects of the northern political oligarchy but to veritable inmates as the government seized the passports of critics and intellectuals. There was no sphere of *res publica* in Abacha's Nigeria; no effective system of interest articulation, legal process, public education, press coverage, or publicity, nor was the most basic protection of life and liberty even recognized by the state. In one of his later editorials, Saro-Wiwa (1991, 131) maintained faith in the nation as he appealed to Babangida to convene a national conference and initiate real dialogue with the people:

[T]he down turn (to put it politely) in the economy of the nation is exacerbating every possible source of tension and creating new ones . . . it takes a lot to maintain a belief in Nigeria. In these moments of doubt, there is need for self-examination and re-examination, a need to dip into reserves of energy at individual level to find that faith that fuels belief. And at national level, there has to be considerable soul-searching to clean the springs of political co-operation and self-restraint, to identify the homogeneous fundamental interests upon which reliance and voluntary collaboration must be based and to seek that common consent without which federation is meaningless.

Under Abacha, Saro-Wiwa died for these ideas, for they resonated beyond the disaffected minorities to all victims of a ruinous oil economy

held hostage by a kleptocratic regime. To grasp the underlying dialectic of Nigeria's particular form of immiseration, linking the plight of the Ogoni to the collapse of civil society, we can return to the forms of fetishized value under oil capitalism and the naturalized idioms of people and land—what Coronil (1997, 67–118) has called "the nation's two bodies"—which were so enriched and then polluted by an oil boom gone bust.

In terms of the model of the vampire state sketched in the previous section, in which the production of false value equals the consumption of human blood, the riverine context of rentier capitalism transposed blood into soil and water. It is historically appropriate that the Niger Delta area where the Ogoni reside is part of a historic complex of chiefdoms and trading networks known in the nineteenth century as the Oil Rivers, based on the extensive trade of palm oil that gradually supplanted the slave trade. As we saw in chapter 4, palm oil was sold domestically as a vitamin-rich source of cooking oil (rich in ritual properties as well), but also for export to overseas markets, primarily British, where it lubricated the growing cosmetics industry and the heavy machinery of the Industrial Revolution. So basic was palm oil as a measure and standard of social and economic value in the Delta that it actually served as a trading currency, in the form of containers or "punchoons of oil" (Jones 1963, 91). It was this type of exchange that has misled some scholars to characterize this trade as a barter system, in which a dominant commodity assumed a money form; but whatever technical economic description best applies, the palm-oil economy may well correspond to that period of greater abundance in the past when, as Batom Mitee, brother to one of condemned Ogoni activists would say, "in the old days . . . you could fish, farm, and survive without money" (quoted in Harmer 1996, 61). As a moral economy recalled with nostalgia, the palm-oil trade and the forms of "natural value" that it invoked—found in nature and sold together with such commodities as timber, ivory, and beeswax (Dike 1956, 57)—established a profound contrast with the immoral economy of petroleum, which pumps bad money from beneath the ground, only to pollute and destroy the productive base of the ecosystem.<sup>9</sup>

It is here, within this idiom of natural goods and value forms; that the unproductive relations of oil capitalism were ecologically expressed. As Harvey (1982), rereading Marx, explains, ground rent produces specific forms of fetishized value in which land is perceived as the source of value itself (a perspective refined in economic terms by the physiocrats). When Nigeria's oil boom took off and the good times rolled, the nation was naturalized as one blood and territory, blessed by God, heritage, and

natural resources, in the heady words of FESTAC. Was it not in 1976 that Shell-BP, in partnership with the Nigerian Oil Corporation, published *Nigerian Heritage*, a large, glossy book narrating within one singular category—oil—Nigeria's land and people, arts and culture, trade and industry, power and mineral resources, as if to ground the wealth of nationhood itself beneath the very soil? Did not the head of state, Lieutenant General Olusegun Obasanjo, personally launch the book amid much media fanfare? Whether or not the book received much popular attention is not the point; for it is the underlying logic motivating its publication and launching that so accurately captures how the indigenization of foreign capital—oil rents, to be specific—naturalized the nation. Nigeria, after experiencing the oil boom and FESTAC, was no longer a colonial or neocolonial entity, but could boast a long and valuable singular heritage extending deep beneath the ground and back into the precolonial past.<sup>10</sup>

It followed from this ideological baseline that as the contradictions of oil capitalism developed and as the nation, with its currency, declined, the soil and waters of the oil-producing regions were sullied. These contradictions, we have seen, follow an "alienated" form of false value and bad wealth, conjured by the state through nefarious means to promote illusory growth while eroding the very foundations of citizenship and civil society. As the oil economy imploded and collapsed, the signs of wealth and development became increasingly estranged from their referents, infusing the value forms of everyday exchange with ghostly simulacra—food that did not satisfy, clothes and uniforms that disguised, financial instruments that had no legitimacy, banks lacking capital, hospitals without medicine, and finally a democracy that had no *demos*. As the condition of the Niger Delta waterways converged with the collapse of the nation, the Ogoni autonomy option became a movement for the survival of the entire nation.

#### CONCLUSION

If the plight of the Ogoni and all Nigerians raises political issues of considerable urgency, it also points to broader conceptual issues within the anthropology of what Appadurai (1996) has dubbed "the global cultural economy." Oil capitalism after OPEC has produced specific economies of meaning and power as well as specific modalities of hyperexpansion and underdevelopment (like the so-called Dutch disease) that acquire a distinctively ecological salience, not only in terms of contamination and deforestation but also in struggles over citizenship and civil society. To be sure, oil in Nigeria has undermined riverine ecosystems and weak-

ened the nation's agricultural base when imported staples and the lure of easy money drew Nigerians away from the land and into the urban undertow of the petro-naira. But it also had less-material effects that belong to an economy of representation and value forms, and it is here that Saro-Wiwa's struggle conveys lessons he may not have anticipated.

If the false wealth of oil ruined the nation, polluting its land and waterways, ecopolitics attacked a mode of rentier oil capitalism that violated the natural foundations of real wealth and legitimate commerce. Compared with the "natural" economy of the Ogoni, the money and wealth of the national economy was unrelated to productive labor, intensifying circulation while actually undermining the nation's productive base. As the "natural" relation between wealth and hard work became more obscure, the pollution of the environment became more apparent. And Nigerians rallied to Saro-Wiwa's cause. Thus Soyinka (1996, 110) wrote, "The Ogoni predicament has provoked, sometimes in the most unexpected quarters . . . open debates that increasingly posit the assumptions of nation being—be it as an ideal, a notional bonding, a provider, a haven of security and order, or an enterprise of productive co-existence—against the direct experience of the actual human condition within the nation." I would extend this national identification with the Ogoni struggle to the erosion of citizenship and civil society, not only in terms of unrealized ideals to be achieved or minimal standards to be maintained—as expressed in the language of activists today—but in more abstract terms of the civic breakdown itself as the oil economy melted down.

In an immediate sense, MOSOP's reclamation of Ogoni land and waterways represents an appeal to the very ground of civil society itself, as adumbrated by the autonomy option that the organization pursued. The state, we recall, had quite literally taken possession of all mineral-rich land, extending its sovereignty into the earth according to the 1979 Land Use Decree and appropriating its oil according to the mysterious mathematics of derivation, by which oil revenues were nationally "chopped" and redistributed. And what the state seized, the oil companies destroyed, polluting the farmland and fishing creeks with spills and runoffs while filling the air with noxious gas and acid rain. As MOSOP invoked the language and iconography of secession, boycotting the 1993 elections and rallying around an Ogoni national anthem and flag (Welch 1995, 643), it set the stage for a more-inclusive "war of position" against the vampire state and transnational capital. From this perspective, Ogoni activism suddenly resonated with the general struggle for a civil society by a country robbed—in Soyinka's words—of its nationhood. Stripped of its social base and its representative mech-

anisms, Nigerian democracy proved to be a politics of illusion, depriving civil society of its president-elect and any effective participation or collective voice in national affairs. After June 12, as citizens took to the streets in defense of their citizenship, the Ogoni struggle joined hands with a larger national cause. Thus the ecological destruction of creeks and waterways in the remote areas of the Niger Delta epitomized the pollution of the public sphere by an invasive and extractive petro-state.

But what is this sphere of civil society that functions rhetorically in the language of liberal political economy as the "natural" ground of effective democracy through a free market of interests and preferences? In a larger sense, the extended crisis in Nigeria today sheds light on the location of civil society in postcolonial Africa, where, following Kunz (1995, 181-82), two dominant perspectives compete. The more-Lockean position "posits [civil] society as a self-regulating realm, the ultimate repository of individual rights and liberties, and a body that must be protected against incursions of the state" (ibid.). This vision concurs with the American constitutional separation of powers and protection of civil rights and liberties, such as free speech, assembly, et cetera, that are ultimately grounded in a market mechanism with its own assumptions of natural law. It also presupposes norms of sincerity, trust, and accountability in the representation of individual and collective interests. A second, more-"Hegelian" understanding of civil society presents "an integrationist or holistic picture of civil society and the state" (ibid., 182) where the former functions more as a sphere of communication and interaction within the nation-state as a whole. There is no question that as African states have liberalized in the late 1980s and early nineties, pursuing uneven paths of structural adjustment and democratization, the liberal model has reestablished itself in Africanist scholarship, particularly among political scientists focusing on "weak states" and predatory regimes. The Ogoni situation and the Nigerian crisis appear to support this perspective in that natural ecosystems have provided the moral framework of a civil society besieged by the state. As a strategic essentialism of political activism, moreover, such an organic idiom of civil society makes instrumental sense.

The dialectics of Nigerian rentier capitalism, however, and the forms of commodification that it has entailed, suggest a more-Hegelian or even Marxian approach to civil society in Africa, not as a natural and autonomous domain to be protected and reclaimed but as a fetishized sphere of circulation within the national economy. We have seen how notions of citizenship and national culture were animated by the logic of the commodity form in idioms of reciprocal equivalence and commensurate value. As oil boosted the national economy, accelerating the

circulation of money and commodities through what were primarily political relations of distribution, the nation was naturalized as one blood and soil beneath a benevolent state rising above. But as the oil economy burned out and the dollar dropped out of the Nigerian naira, the illusory basis of the bonanza became apparent, draining the very blood of the nation and its citizens. Within the sphere of circulation, the arteries of the nation were blocked by irrational shortages until even oil disappeared from the service stations. As inflation soared, arbitrary exchange values destabilized the very phenomenology of exchange itself, giving rise to the era of the "419"—of fraud, con artistry, deception, and desperate survival. From this perspective, the breakdown of civil society and of the intersubjective norms governing accountable interaction and political representation in Nigeria can be attributed not only to the rapacious appetites of predatory rulers and multinational companies but to the collapse of a sphere of circulation whose previously obscure relation to "the hidden abode of production" (Marx 1976, 279; quoted in Postone 1993, 272) has almost literally disappeared.