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Pipedreams

*Ken Saro-Wiwa, Environmental Justice,
and Micro-minority Rights*

Shell operations still impossible unless ruthless military operations
are undertaken for smooth economic activities to commence.

—Nigerian government memo, December 5, 1994

Pity the land that needs heroes.

—Bertolt Brecht

Ken Saro-Wiwa squints at us from the cover of his Nigerian detention diary, the posthumous *A Month and a Day*.¹ His moustache looks precise and trim; his eyes are alight; a gash scrawls across his temple. But it is his pipe that governs the picture. It is an intellectual's accessory, a good pipe to suck and clench, to spew from and lecture with. Saro-Wiwa had expected tobacco to kill him: "I know that I am a mortuary candidate. But I intend to head for the mortuary with my pipe smoking."² In the end, it was the other pipes that got him, the Shell and Chevron pipes that poured poison into the land, streams, and bodies of Saro-Wiwa's Ogoni people, provoking him to take up the life of protest that was to be his triumph and his undoing.

Saro-Wiwa believed to the last that his writing would return to haunt his tormentors. Shortly before his execution in the Nigerian coastal city of Port Harcourt on trumped-up charges of murder, he declared: “The men who ordained and supervised this show of shame, this tragic charade, are frightened by the word, the power of ideas, the power of the pen. . . . They are so scared of the word that they do not read. And that will be their funeral.”³ Saro-Wiwa’s conviction that the pen is mightier than the goon squad may well sound, to European and North American ears, like an echo from another age. But across much of Africa the certainty persists that writing can make things happen.

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Figure 3 Cartoon protesting Ken Saro-Wiwa’s execution. Reproduced by permission of the artist, JR Swanson; and Chris Carlsson, via Processed World magazine.

In one of his final letters from detention, Saro-Wiwa assured his friend, the novelist William Boyd: "There's no doubt that my idea will succeed in time, but I'll have to bear the pain of the moment. . . . the most important thing for me is that I've used my talents as a writer to enable the Ogoni people to confront their tormentors. I was not able to do it as a politician or a businessman. My writing did it. . . . I think I have the moral victory."⁴ Elsewhere, he prayed that his work would have as visceral an impact as Andre Gide's 1927 journal, *Voyage au Congo*, which prompted an outcry against Belgian atrocities, helping secure their cessation.⁵ Saro-Wiwa saw himself as part of that testimonial tradition, a witness to what he called the "recolonization" of Ogoniland by the joint forces of the oil companies and the Abacha regime.⁶ Together the corporations and the regime had transformed the Niger Delta into a Bermuda triangle for human rights.

Saro-Wiwa wrote as a member of what I would call a micro-minority: he was one of 500,000 Ogoni in a nation of some 140 million, composed of nearly 300 ethnic groups. He produced tireless testaments to the devastation of his culture by the oil-driven avarice of vast forces beyond its control. He recognized, however, that the justice of a cause—particularly an African cause—is no reason to believe that it will gain the international attention it merits. As a writer and campaigner, he saw the strategic necessity of analogizing, of turning what he called the "deadly ecological war against the Ogoni" into a struggle emblematic of our times.⁷ His prolific writings thus lay the ground for a broader estimation of the global cost, above all to micro-minorities, of the ongoing romance between unanswerable corporations and unspeakable regimes.

Micro-Minorities and the Delta of Death

The problem of competitive ethnicity is widespread in Africa, but it is particularly acute in Nigeria. The roots of the problem derive from the British invention of Nigeria in 1914. The British historian Lord Malcolm Hailey once described Nigeria as "the most artificial of the many administrative units created in the course of European occupation of Africa."⁸ When Nigeria gained independence in 1960, it kept its improbable borders with the result that almost 300 ethnic groups were clustered under the umbrella of one nation-state. For most of the five decades since independence, this

formidably diverse society has suffered under military rule. Unelected officials from the three largest ethnic groups—the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Hausa-Fulani—have totally dominated national politics.

For Nigeria, 1958 had the makings of an auspicious year. Independence was on the horizon; Chinua Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart* appeared, auguring great things—since realized—for the nation's literary future; and on February 17, 1958, the first tanker bearing Nigerian crude for export departed from Port Harcourt, destined for the Shell refinery at the mouth of the Thames.⁹ What could and should have been for the Niger Delta's oil minorities the beginnings of great promise augured instead a poisonous future. Who could have dreamed in 1958 that four decades and \$600 billion of oil revenues later, some 90 million Nigerians would be surviving on less than a dollar a day? And that Nigeria would rank below Haiti and Congo on the United Nations Human Development Index, a composite gauge of life expectancy, education, and income?¹⁰ Even those figures don't capture the plight of the Ogoni and the delta's forty other oil micro-minorities: their environment has become so despoiled that supplementing that daily dollar with untainted crops and fish has become untenable.

The Ogoni constitute approximately 0.4 percent of the Nigerian population. Thus, like the other micro-minorities who dwell in this delta the size of England, the Ogoni lack the political leverage and constitutional protections to lay claim to the wealth that has been stripped from their land. Nigeria's independence initially promised a measure of economic justice for micro-minorities: the 1960 constitution required that the government return 50 percent of any mining revenues to the region of extraction.¹¹ But instead of the 50 percent constitutionally due to them, the Ogoni have been awarded a mere 1.5 percent, and in effect not even that.¹²

As a rule of thumb, the greater a nation's reliance on a single product for its economic survival, the higher the chances that that society is riddled with corruption and afflicted by profoundly skewed income distribution. Nigeria's dependence on oil is absolute: it constitutes 96 percent of Nigeria's export revenue and generates 80 percent of government income.¹³ Thus Nigerian oil (of which the United States buys 40 percent) has readily become a precondition of and a byword for militarization. The petro-state has given rise, moreover, to a society in which 85 percent of oil wealth goes to a mere 1 percent of the populace, almost none of whom

belong to the micro-minorities who inhabit, ingest, and inhale the ecological devastation.

Shell is by far the largest foreign stakeholder in the Nigerian economy, owning 47 percent of the oil industry. Its joint venture partner in the petroleum business during Nigeria's most draconian years was the Abacha regime. Yet Shell representatives have repeatedly declared that they exercise no influence over Nigeria's rulers; Europe's largest oil corporation has thereby ducked behind the brutalities of its militaristic financial partners. Such an arrangement means that Shell and other foreign oil corporations can maintain their desired technological presence while, under cover of deference for national sovereignty, they continue to act as ethical absentees.

This arrangement has also enabled Shell to ignore appeals by the Ogoni, the Ijaw, the Ikwerre and other neighboring micro-minorities for a share of oil revenues, a measure of environmental self-determination, and economic redress for their devastated environment. For Shell, Chevron, and the other oil majors operating in the delta, these are internal, Nigerian matters that belong to a sovereign realm inaccessible to corporate influence. But the record suggests otherwise: Chevron, for example, has acknowledged transporting Nigerian forces to quell uprisings in the oil camps of Rivers State.¹⁴ Shell has imported arms for the Nigerian police, paid retainers to Nigerian military personnel, and made boats and helicopters available to them in assaults against protestors.¹⁵ This is all integral to what one former Shell scientist has dubbed "the militarization of commerce"—an apt designation, if ever there was one, of resource extraction procedures under neoliberalism across the global South.¹⁶

By the time Saro-Wiwa was executed, the Nigerian military and Mobile Police force had killed 2,000 Ogoni through direct murder and the burning of villages.¹⁷ Ogoni air had been fouled by the flaring of natural gas, their croplands scarred by oil spills, their drinking and fishing waters poisoned. Although Shell was driven out of Ogoniland in 1993, it simply moved on to other parts of Nigeria's once lush delta of death. Meanwhile, the Shell legacy continues to seep into the environment and bodies of the local farming community that, unlike the international corporation, has nowhere else to go.

One witness described the aftermath of an oilfield explosion near the Ogoni village of Dere as

an ocean of crude oil moving swiftly like a great river in flood, successfully swallowing up anything that comes its way. Cassava farms, yams, palms, streams, and animals for miles on end. There is no pipeborne water and yet the streams, the only source of drinking water are coated with oil. You cannot collect a bucket of rain water for the roofs, trees and grass are all covered with oil. . . . Men and women forced by hunger have to dive deep in oil to uproot already rotten yams and cassava.¹⁸

In the words of a second witness: “We can no longer breathe natural oxygen; rather we inhale lethal and ghastly gases. Our water can no longer be drunk unless one wants to test the effect of crude oil on the body.”¹⁹ The flaring of vast volumes of gas meant that villagers spent their nights beneath an artificial sun: “The people were used to having 12 hours of day and 12 hours of night. But now their position is worse than that of the Eskimos in the North Pole. For while nature gave the Eskimos six months of daylight followed by six months of night, Shell-BP has given the Dere people about ten years of continuous daylight.”²⁰ Subsistence farming and fishing are the mainstays of these delta communities, yet they have received no compensation for the devastation of resources on which they utterly depend.

The half million Ogoni retain nominal ownership of most of their densely populated territory. But since oil extraction began over sixty years ago, they have suffered massive subterranean dispossession. Shell, Chevron, and successive Nigerian regimes have siphoned \$30 billion worth of oil from beneath Ogoni earth.²¹ Yet the locals still find themselves lacking a hospital, electricity, piped water, basic roads, housing, and schools. The community has found itself, in the fullest sense of the word, utterly undermined.

Neocolonialism and Instrumental Aesthetics

Faced with the neocolonial politics of mineral rights in the Niger Delta, Saro-Wiwa continued to believe that written testimony, backed by activism, could make a difference. Like many African authors before him, he recognized that in a society with frail democratic forces and a thin intellectual elite, interventionist writing required versatility and cunning.²² His life as a public intellectual was distinguished by his astute sense of strategy.

Saro-Wiwa was alert to shifts in audience and occasion, locally and internationally; he would adjust his register and focus accordingly. He produced over twenty books across an ambitious spread of genres: novels, plays, short stories, children's tales, poetry, histories, political tracts, diaries, satires, and newspaper columns. *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*, a witty and wrenching book about life in the Nigerian Civil War, is an iconoclastic work in patois, daring and brimful of fine writing.²³ But across Anglophone West Africa, Saro-Wiwa achieved his greatest renown as the creator of the TV comedy hit *Basi and Company*: 30 million Nigerians tuned into it during prime time on Wednesdays. Saro-Wiwa wrote 150 episodes of *Basi*, a robust satire with a moralistic edge.²⁴ The series satirizes the street scammers and wide-boys who are such a feature of the Lagos life Saro-Wiwa loved and loathed. ("Living in Lagos," Saro-Wiwa wrote, "is an invention in itself and no one, I repeat, no one who lives in it can fail to be touched by its phonicness.")²⁵ But after the death of one of his sons in 1992, Saro-Wiwa cut back on his TV and literary activities. He single-mindedly devoted himself to the Ogoni cause, becoming the chronicler of his people's genocide and, finally, a death-row diarist.

Saro-Wiwa's generic versatility, his belief in an instrumental aesthetics, and his obsession with land rights place him in an established tradition of African writing.²⁶ Yet there the similarities end. For in East and Southern Africa, such tendencies have been routinely associated with writers whose anticolonialism—or anti-neocolonialism—has been inseparable from their socialism.²⁷ One thinks, for instance, of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Barrel of the Pen* and Mafika Gwala's essay "Writing as a Cultural Weapon" (which became the credo for a generation of South African writers).²⁸ Saro-Wiwa, by contrast, cultivated a deeply international sensibility while standing outside any lineage of African socialism. He was the first African writer to articulate the literature of commitment in expressly environmental terms: "[T]he environment is man's first right," he wrote in a letter smuggled from a Nigerian jail.²⁹ Yet as a successful owner of a small business—successful enough to send a son to Eton—he was never anticapitalist per se. He did, however, find himself painfully well placed to protest one of the signal developments of the 1980s and 1990s: the consolidation and increasingly unregulated mobility of transnational corporations. Five hundred corporations, Shell among them, now control 70 percent of global trade.³⁰

As a micro-minority intellectual in an impoverished African country, Saro-Wiwa viewed deregulation as a synonym for corporate lawlessness of the kind that had ruined Ogoniland. But it is a testament to Saro-Wiwa's savvy sense of strategy that his political protests went well beyond the devastation of his homeland. While passionately centered in that cause, he came to situate it in a wider, global frame. He began to criticize corrosive international tendencies: above all, how in third-world countries weakened by structural adjustment, unregulated transnational firms and the national soldiery are at liberty to vandalize the weakest minority communities.

Saro-Wiwa appreciated the improbability of converting an injustice against a small African people into an international cause. His strategic response was to scour the wider political milieu for possible points of connection. In the preface to *Genocide in Nigeria* (1992), for instance, he takes heart from three contemporary developments: "[T]he end of the Cold War, the increasing attention being paid to the global environment, and the insistence of the European Community that minority rights be respected, albeit in the successor states to the Soviet Union and in Yugoslavia." But, he worried, "It remains to be seen whether Europe and America will apply to Nigeria the same standards which they have applied to Eastern Europe." His doubts have proved well founded.³¹

Unconventional War by Ecological Means

A Month and a Day includes a record of Saro-Wiwa's imaginative efforts to capitalize on these new forms of international attention. Initially, both human rights groups and ecological groups proved equally unreceptive to the Ogoni cause. An African intellectual claiming ethnocide by environmental means? Saro-Wiwa seemed, at first, eccentric and unplaceable. At Boyd's prompting, he decided to contact Greenpeace. They replied, quite simply, that they did not work in Africa.³² Amnesty International, for their part, said they could only take up the Ogoni cause if the military was killing people or detaining them without trial, a process that had yet to begin. Saro-Wiwa responded with frustration: "The Ogoni people were being killed all right, but in an unconventional way."³³ As he later elaborated:

The Ogoni country has been completely destroyed by the search for oil. . . . Oil blow-outs, spillages, oil slick and general

pollution accompany the search for oil. . . . Oil companies have flared gas in Nigeria for the past thirty-three years causing acid rain. . . . What used to be the bread basket of the delta has now become totally infertile. All one sees and feels around is death. Environmental degradation has been a lethal weapon in the war against the indigenous Ogoni people.³⁴

Appeals to minority and environmental rights both gained ground in the 1990s, but there was little precedent in Africa for their simultaneous invocation. Despite the early unresponsiveness of Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Friends of the Earth, and Survival International, Saro-Wiwa persisted in arguing that the Ogoni were victims of an “unconventional war” being prosecuted by ecological means. Undeterred, he sought to educate himself further through travel. An odyssey through the rupturing Soviet Union confirmed his sense of a growing international context for the articulation of minority claims. A visit to Colorado gave him access to an environmental group that had successfully salvaged a wilderness from corporate and governmental assaults.³⁵ These experiences persuaded Saro-Wiwa that his incipient Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) would be well served by linking minority rights to environmental rights. Through a young Dutch lawyer, Michael van Walt van der Praag, long active in the Tibetan cause, Saro-Wiwa made contact with the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organizations.³⁶ This gave him access to the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, which he addressed in Geneva in 1992. (That same year, another Ogoni leader, Chief Dr. H. Dappa-Biriye, spoke at the Rio Earth Summit on behalf of the delta peoples.) Saro-Wiwa discovered that “in virtually every nation-state there are several ‘Ogonis’—despairing and disappearing peoples suffering the yoke of political marginalization, economic strangulation or environmental degradation, or a combination of these.”³⁷ The parallel tracks of Saro-Wiwa’s self-education had finally converged. From 1992 onward, the combined appeal to minority and environmental rights became fundamental to the MOSOP campaign. Human rights and ecological groups that had once found the Ogoni campaign enigmatic now became its most adamant international supporters. Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch/Africa, International Pen, Abroad, and the Body Shop all rallied to the cause.

These developments gave Saro-Wiwa's campaign a resonance it had previously lacked and challenged stereotypes about environmental activists: that they are inevitably white, young, middle-class Europeans or Americans who can afford to hug trees because they have been spared more desperate battles. Saro-Wiwa's campaign for environmental self-determination may well prove historically critical to the development of a broader image of ecological activism. Just as we witnessed how the sometimes rarefied concerns of middle-class white feminists in the 1970s gave way in ensuing decades to a more internationally diverse array of feminisms, locally led and locally defined, so too we are now seeing indigenous environmentalisms proliferate under pressure of local necessity. As the spectrum of what counts as environmental activism expands, it becomes harder to dismiss it as a sentimental or imperial discourse tied to European or North American interests. Nor does the case for this diversification rest, any longer, solely on Amazonian or Indian examples.

Saro-Wiwa understood that environmentalism needs to be reimagined through the experiences of the minorities who are barely visible on the global economic periphery, where transnationals in the extraction business—be it oil, mining, or timber—operate with maximum impunity. Environmental justice became for him an invaluable concept through which to focus the battle between subnational micro-ethnicities and transnational macroeconomic powers. As an Ogoni, suffering what he called Nigeria's "monstrous domestic colonialism," Saro-Wiwa was in no position to trust the nation-state as the unit of collective economic good.³⁸ Instead, he advocated a measure of ethnic federalism in which environmental self-determination would be acknowledged as indispensable to cultural survival. After the "judicial murder" of Saro-Wiwa and the eight other accused, public outrage tended to divide into those who primarily condemned the Abacha regime and those who condemned Shell.³⁹ For Saro-Wiwa, however, the blame was indivisible. He consistently represented the Ogoni as casualties of joint occupying powers: the transnational oil corporations and a brutal, extortionate Nigerian regime. Shell, meanwhile, sought to put a positive gloss on this relationship, with public relations primers like "Nigeria and Shell: Partners in Progress."⁴⁰ But the regressive character of the relationship is more accurately portrayed by a leaked Nigerian government memo addressing protests in Ogoniland. Dated December 5, 1994, it reads: "Shell operations still impossible unless

ruthless military operations are undertaken for smooth economic activities to commence.²⁴¹

This ruthless smoothing of Ogoniland was embarked on in a spirit of racism and ethnic hatred. Again, Saro-Wiwa resisted the temptation to reduce his people's suffering to either term.⁴² Shell's racism is manifest: in Africa, the company waives onshore drilling standards that it routinely upholds elsewhere. Indeed, 40 percent of all Shell oil spills worldwide have occurred in Nigeria.⁴³ When operating in the Northern hemisphere—in the Shetlands, for instance—Shell pays lucrative rents to local councils; in the Niger Delta, village authorities receive no comparable compensation.⁴⁴ A 1995 World Bank report noted that 76 percent of the natural gas resulting from petroleum production in Nigeria was flared (at temperatures of 14,000 degrees Celsius), while in Britain only 4.3 percent and in the United States a mere 0.6 percent was flared. This toxic practice foreshortened the life expectancy of the delta peoples. Children, moreover, who had no access to electricity to read or learn by also had no experience of night, as they lived 24/7 beneath the blazing false sun of interminable flares, as if in some seasonless equatorial rendition of an Arctic summer.⁴⁵ In the mid-90s, when flaring from Nigeria's oil fields was pumping 12 million tons of methane and 35 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere annually, it was argued by some that this was the single greatest contributor worldwide to climate change.⁴⁶ (In this one regard at least, the oil corporations did not discriminate.) Given this backdrop, the irony was not lost on the Ogoni that Shell was winning awards in Europe for environmentally sensitive conduct—north-south greenwashing, par excellence.⁴⁷

But Shell's racial double standard would have been inoperable without brutal backing from a Nigerian regime whose record on minority rights verged on the ethnocidal. General Abacha's dreaded Mobile Police force—which Nigerians dubbed the "Kill and Go Mob"—responded violently to peaceful protests by the Ogoni and their delta neighbors. After an anti-Shell rally in January 1993 drew several hundred thousand Ogoni, the police razed twenty-seven villages. Two thousand Ogoni were killed and 80,000 displaced.⁴⁸ Saro-Wiwa has likened the fate of the Ogoni during the oil rush to their fate during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967, when a conflict erupted between the nation's dominant ethnicities.⁴⁹ This battle over oil territory left the Ogoni flattened "like grass in the fight of the elephants."⁵⁰ Ten percent of

all Ogoni died in a war that was not of their making, a calamity that drove home for Saro-Wiwa the distinction between minority and extreme minority status.⁵¹ A micro-minority was powerless to influence national events, particularly in a society run on principles of kleptocratic militarism. The wealth that flowed beneath Ogoniland was wealth in name only: historically, it brought poverty, injustice, and death, as outsiders stampeded for oil. A quarter century after the civil war, Saro-Wiwa's despair about Nigeria continued to deepen because the nation's rulers had "the hearts of stone and the brains of millipedes; because Shell is a multinational company with the ability to crush whomever it wishes; and because the petroleum resources of the Ogoni serve everyone's greed."⁵²

The International Response

The fact that the Ogoni have been casualties of racism and ethnic hatred may help, in a peculiar way, to explain the low-key American response to the executions. The outcry in Britain, South Africa, and France was far more vocal and sustained. In the British case, this is understandable: Shell is an Anglo-Dutch conglomerate, and British coverage of Africa has traditionally been stronger than America's because of the colonial ties. (For similar reasons, the reverse is true of Latin American news.) But there was more to the American media's relative indifference to the executions than that. In U.S. political discourse, racial oppression and minority discrimination typically function as identical terms. This makes it difficult for liberal or minority Americans to condemn in a single breath an African regime for oppressing its own minorities and a European corporation for racism against Africans. Randall Robinson, director of TransAfrica, the African-American foreign-policy lobbyists, met with a ruptured response to his appeal for U.S. sanctions against Nigeria similar to those imposed on South Africa. Many African-American leaders, among them, Louis Farrakhan—who visited Lagos and gave the Abacha regime his blessing—argued that it was divisive to campaign against any African government.⁵³

But Saro-Wiwa never enjoyed the luxury of such long-distance compunc-tions. He insisted that the Ogoni were joint casualties of a brutal European racism and an equally brutal African ethnocentrism. He never hesitated to make such controversial connections. As he wrote in his prison diary,

skin colour is not strong enough to stop the oppression of one group by another. Sometimes it reinforces oppression because it makes it less obvious. White people oppressing blacks in South Africa draws instant condemnation because it is seen to be racism. But black upon black oppression merely makes people shrug and say, "Well, it's their business, isn't it?"⁵⁴

Saro-Wiwa repeatedly called for international measures—like those that had helped end apartheid—against a Nigerian regime that he deemed equally heinous.⁵⁵ The two countries rank as the powerhouses of the continent: South Africa boasts Africa's largest economy and Nigeria the second largest, as well as being the continent's most populous nation. At the time of Saro-Wiwa's appeal for international intervention, the image of these two giants had undergone a sharp reversal. For over thirty years, Nigeria had stood as Africa's leader in the antiapartheid campaign. But just as South Africa, under Mandela's leadership, was finally moving beyond apartheid, so Nigeria was sinking to its antidemocratic nadir.⁵⁶

By the time the fifty-two Commonwealth nations met in Auckland, New Zealand, in November 1995, South Africa and Nigeria's standing had largely been reversed. South Africa was present at a Commonwealth gathering for the first time in thirty-five years. And triumphantly so, in the magisterial form of Nelson Mandela. Previously the ritual object of Commonwealth condemnations, South Africa was now, by virtue of Mandela's moral gravitas, the *de facto* commonwealth leader. Nigeria, by contrast, had become a potential new pariah. The Commonwealth, the United States, and the European Union were all goading Mandela to take the lead in Africa. Nigeria was to be his first major foreign policy test.

On arriving at the summit, Mandela voiced his opposition to isolating Nigeria, advocating quiet negotiations instead.⁵⁷ The Nigerian regime responded, almost immediately, by hanging Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Eight. Mandela instantly became the target of outrage. Wole Soyinka charged him with appeasement, likening his "quiet diplomacy" toward the Nigerian junta to Reagan and Thatcher's notorious policy of "constructive engagement" toward the apartheid regime.⁵⁸ Professor Kole Omotoso, one of the swelling ranks of Nigerian exiles who had found refuge in South Africa, agreed: "Those who know my country know how irrational and illogical

the military regime is. There wasn't a chance that it would respond to what Mandela called 'softly-softly.'⁵⁹ Saro-Wiwa's lawyer protested angrily to Mandela, "Were quiet diplomacy pursued in South Africa . . . I doubt you would be alive today."⁶⁰

Mandela's tragic misreading of the Abacha regime and the threat to Saro-Wiwa can best be understood in terms the ANC's historical sentimentality toward Nigeria. Many of South Africa's new political and cultural elite had found refuge in Nigeria in the 1960s, when it was emerging as a bulwark against apartheid and colonialism. Those exiles included eminents like the academic and writer, Ezekiel Mphahlele, and the South African deputy president, Thabo Mbeki. It is no coincidence that Mbeki became South Africa's chief negotiator in the country's "softly-softly" response to the Abacha coup. He seemed to confuse South Africa's historic debt (and his own personal one) to the Nigerian people with a debt to Nigeria's rulers, even when they had deposed an elected government and enjoyed no popular mandate whatsoever. At the Commonwealth summit, Nigerian human rights activist Innocent Chukwuma stressed the wrongheadedness of this confusion. Calling for an international ban on Nigerian oil, Chukwuma pointed out, "The proceeds from oil revenue are going into private accounts. They don't even get to the people."⁶¹ In 1994 alone, \$12 billion worth of oil went missing from government accounts.⁶²

The South African failure to provide international leadership against Abacha also needs to be understood in terms of the ANC's "fetish for compromise."⁶³ This fixation had enabled Mandela to maneuver the ANC into power and to avert the civil war that just before the South African elections had begun to look menacingly imminent. But he misjudged the Nigerian political climate: Abacha was more ruthless than De Klerk, and Nigeria lacked the dense matrix of civic bodies, trade unions, and other democratic organizations that exerted pressure on the apartheid regime while Mandela negotiated a compromise.⁶⁴

If Saro-Wiwa's execution triggered a national political scandal for Mandela's government, it also quickened the flow of Nigerian exiles and refugees into South Africa. These included intellectuals, journalists, and democratic activists. In perhaps the surest sign of the about-face in Nigerian-South African relations, Johannesburg became a prominent outpost of the Lagos-based Democratic Alternative, of the Saro-Wiwa support campaign, and of

the international boycott of Shell. Where ANC activists had once plotted against apartheid in Lagos and Kano, thirty years later, Nigerian democrats were mobilizing in Johannesburg for the overthrow of the Abacha regime. Thus the Ogoni “judicial murders” brought into focus the critical vulnerability of Africa’s micro-minorities, as well as the shifting prospects for democracy on the continent.

Micro-Minorities and the Resource Curse

Some years back, the Philippine government placed an ad in *Fortune* magazine that read: “To attract companies like yours, we have felled mountains, razed jungles, filled swamps, moved rivers, relocated towns . . . all to make it easier for you and your business to do business here.”⁶⁵ The Philippines is just one of a succession of poor nations to have wooed transnationals in a manner indissociably catastrophic for the environment and micro-minorities. This process has been most acutely damaging in the equatorial belt that girdles the earth’s midriff from Ecuador, Bolivia and Brazil; through Surinam and Guyana; on through Nigeria, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Gabon, and Congo; to the Philippines, Malaysian Borneo, Indonesia, and New Guinea. This belt contains a unique concentration of ethnic minorities for simple ecological reasons. Rich equatorial ecosystems encouraged the development of a higher concentration of self-sufficient cultural groups than was possible in less fertile regions. Today most of these ethnic groups exist as micro-minorities in undemocratic, often destitute nation-states that register in the global economy principally as sites for the unregulated extraction of oil, minerals, and timber. It is thus no coincidence that indigenous environmentalism has burgeoned most dramatically in this zone, as micro-minorities battle for the survival of their land-dependent subsistence cultures.

The plunder and terror suffered by the Ogoni have been mirrored in other mineral-rich equatorial regions, West Papua, Ecuador, and Peru among them. West Papua has an even higher concentration of minorities than the Niger Delta. And, like the delta peoples, West Papuans have the curse of wealth—some of the world’s richest deposits of copper and gold—seaming beneath their land. They face a similar alliance between an occupying military power and an unscrupulous transnational corporation.

The same Indonesian regime responsible for the third worst genocide of the twentieth century, in East Timor, colonized West Papua with a brutality that killed 43,000 indigenous people. Their accomplice in that endeavor was the Louisiana-based mining transnational Freeport McMoran. After the arrival of Freeport in 1967, the indigenous people endured detention without trial, torture, forced resettlement, disappearances, the plunder of their mineral wealth, and the uncompensated degradation of their environment.⁶⁶ Freeport's private security officers and the Indonesian military on occasion combined to shoot and kill unarmed indigenous protesters. In an alliance even more devastating than that between the Abacha regime and Shell, the Indonesian regime and Freeport pursued ethnocide as a condition of mandatory development. James Moffett, Freeport McMoran's chairman, himself seemed confused as to whether such "progress" was a life-giving or death-dealing business. In Moffett's proud words, "Freeport is thrusting a spear of development into the heart of West Papua."⁶⁷ In this deadly battle, the micro-minorities fought back in a language that melded new modes of environmental defiance with a more traditional reverence for the land. As one Amungme leader put it, "Freeport is digging out our mother's brain. That is why we are resisting."⁶⁸

Some of these acts of environmental defiance have begun to take effect: for example, in the oil-rich Oriente Region of Ecuador, where Texaco devastated Indian territory in a manner similar to Shell's despoliation of Ogoniland. Oriente drinking water, fishing grounds, soil, and crops have all been polluted. According to the Rainforest Action Network, Texaco spilled 17 million gallons of crude oil in the Oriente, leaving a toxic legacy that has caused, as in Ogoniland, chronic health problems for the residents.⁶⁹ Here again, the seepage of oil-contaminated waste resulted from the jettisoning of procedures that are standard for onshore drilling in the Northern hemisphere. The appeal of the Oriente and Ogoniland is precisely the prospect of profits without interference or limits. As one petroleum geologist working in the Oriente put it: "I want to stamp on the ground hard enough to make that oil come out. I want to skip legalities, permits, red tape, and other obstacles. I want to go immediately and straight to what matters: getting that oil."⁷⁰

Ecuador's *Acción Ecológica* led a successful national boycott of Texaco and has helped drive the corporation from the region. In addition, a coalition of indigenous federations, mestizos, grassroots environmentalists, and

human rights groups pursued an innovative avenue of redress, filing a \$1.5 billion class action suit in New York against Texaco. The suit earned the support of Ecuador's Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities, the country's largest Indian organization. Following the Ecuadorian example, a group of Ogoni villagers decided to sue Shell for \$4 million for spillages that had robbed them of their livelihood.

Joseph Conrad and Colonial Buccaneering Redux

The ravaging of West New Guinea, the Oriente, and Ogoniland testifies to the growing inequity between subnational minorities and transnationals that have enjoyed enhanced mobility and experienced diminishing controls since neoliberalism's ascent in the 1980s. Third-world governments are often joint partners in the regional plunder or worse than useless at regulating transnationals that are more powerful than the states themselves. One result has been a reversion to concessionary economics in which forested or mineral-rich areas are sold for a song. It is in this context that Saro-Wiwa's talk of recolonization and his invocation of Andre Gide's Congo journal begin to sound eerily apposite. When Shell can pump out \$30 billion worth of oil and the trade-off for the locals is disease, dispossession, military occupation, massacres, and an end to self-sustaining fishing and agriculture, the process seems more redolent of late nineteenth-century colonial buccaneering than it does of twenty-first century international economics. But if the idea of the nation-state continues to lose any vestige of popular appeal through a failure to deliver local benefits, and if rulers lack the will or the resources to command a national polity, the continent's poorest countries will continue to fall prey to a twenty-first-century version of nineteenth-century concessionary economics, unhampered by regulations or redress. The nation-state will become ever more marginal to deals negotiated between local chiefs and transnationals, an imbalance in bargaining power if ever there was one. A German diplomat recently foresaw as much: "In the twenty-first century German ambassadors and CEOs heading for Africa may again be authorized to sign treaties of cooperation with whatever coastal kings or leaders are able to assert some sort of control over the interior."⁷¹

Under such circumstances, the kleptocrats and soldiery in the nominal capital will still demand their palm greasing, while locally, the chiefs request

their crude version of the same. Such practices are already widespread. During Abacha's rule, for example, a group of foreign explorers arrived by ship at the head of a marshy river near the Niger Delta village of Sangama. They sought to establish a station there. After lengthy bartering with a local chief, they settled on his cut: he would receive £1,000 sterling, twelve bottles of cognac, and twelve bottles of gin. But as the foreigners pushed deeper into the hinterland, they found villagers blocking their river route with a barricade of palm fronds and canoes. The explorers' leader felt bewildered and betrayed. He reported, "There were about a hundred people ahead of us. If we'd pressed ahead we would have risked killing them. So we took a boat and went back to get Chief Jumbo."⁷²

More bargaining, more demands. Another £300 changed hands, a further bottle of gin, an agreement to repair a building. The chief sacrificed a goat to the water gods; the barricade was lifted; the foreigners passed through. If they weren't pulling an oil rig in tow, this could be have been an entry from Gide's Congo journal or the opening scene of a lost Conrad novel.

Over a century has passed since Conrad immortalized in fiction the unregulated plunder that he witnessed in the Congo. In a gesture of imaginative cynicism, he christened the worst of these plunderers the Eldorado Expedition. They were "sordid buccaneers: reckless without hardihood. . . . To tear treasures out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe."⁷³ Over great swathes of Africa and much of the global South, Eldorado Expeditions are rising from the dead. They are still the self-declared standard-bearers of progress and are still tearing at the bowels of the earth. Today one finds in their motley ranks a mix of international and indigenous colonialists. Not least in Nigeria of which Saro-Wiwa once remarked in exasperation, "there is no such country. There is only organized brigandage."⁷⁴

We have witnessed in the past two decades the accelerated extraction of African minerals, oil, and timber in many of the continent's least stable nations: Liberia, Gabon, Congo, Central African Republic, Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sierra Leone, Mauritania, and Angola among them. (South African mining corporations, buoyed by their postapartheid legitimacy, have come to compete in this terrain against European, American, Australian, Canadian, Chinese, and Brazilian outfits.) However, in most of these shaky African nations, concessionary economics, kleptocratic rule,

structural adjustment, and corporate deregulation mean that irreplaceable minerals and forests are being lost for little national gain and at considerable local ruin. We are seeing a repartitioning of Africa into what French colonialists used to call *l'Afrique utile* and *l'Afrique inutile*: this time “capital ‘hops’ over ‘unusable Africa,’ alighting only in mineral-rich enclaves that are starkly disconnected from their national societies.”⁷⁵ It is in this climate that Saro-Wiwa’s campaign against the destruction of micro-minorities through the devastation of their environment has proven to be a harbinger of a much broader discontent. He seemed to intuit as much at his tribunal, as he looked back on his life with an otherworldly eye: “I will tell you this, I may be dead, but my ideas will surely not die.”⁷⁶

The Gospel cadences to Saro-Wiwa’s prophecy are consistent with the Passion play the Nigerian junta inadvertently helped create. Saro-Wiwa was no messiah. He was a courageous man who stood outside the conventions of corruption but who could also be testy, inflexible, self-aggrandizing, and subject to overweening ambition. The junta took this very mortal and internationally obscure activist, gave him a stage trial, and turned him through execution into a martyr. They thus amplified his cause and—as happens with martyrs—simplified it in his favor. (“Living people grow old but martyrs grow younger,” the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti once observed.)⁷⁷ Saro-Wiwa instantly became larger and longer than life. The word flashed around Lagos and Port Harcourt that he had refused to die, that it had taken five hangings to kill him. As a final precaution against his posthumous revenge, the regime stationed armed guards at the cemetery. They had orders to shoot anyone seen approaching the grave to pay homage or claim relics.

Saro-Wiwa understood far better than his adversaries that you can’t crucify ideas, that there are some things which cannot be resolved by a show of force. Abacha and his sidekicks were exasperated by the unruliness of language, by its refusal to submit to military control. In countries like Nigeria where official brutality and paranoia feed off each other, unofficial writing begins to assume the status of latent insult. Thus journalists, writers, and intellectuals are singled out for harassment, detention, torture, and execution often as much for what they represent as for anything they say. But Africa’s muscle men who seek to shackle language and criminalize imaginings only flatter writers with their fears. While Abacha was naïve enough to believe that murdering Saro-Wiwa would silence him, another African

autocrat, Kenyan president Daniel arap Moi, was simultaneously seeking to stamp out subversive fantasy. He had a journalist arrested for “the crime of imagining the death of the president.”⁷⁸ This was surely the high-water mark for the dictatorial tendency to equate fantasy with political treason.

Abacha clearly had no conception of the cost of creating a martyred writer, an image with considerable pulling power in the media—doubly so after the fatwa against Salman Rushdie. The threat of censorship typically raises the hackles of journalists and writers because they are professionally invested in freedom of speech. From this viewpoint, the execution of a writer on false charges is more than just another human injustice; it also becomes, as Harold Pinter observed, “the most brutal form of censorship.”⁷⁹ It was predictable, therefore, that the image of Saro-Wiwa as writer-martyr would provoke intense journalistic outrage as well as the most vocal literary protest since the Rushdie affair. Pinter, Soyinka, Boyd, Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, Fay Weldon, and Arthur Miller were just a few of the writers who spoke out publicly against Abacha and Shell.⁸⁰ So in death Saro-Wiwa extended—surely, beyond his imaginings—the remarkable coalition of international interests he had begun to forge while alive, an alliance that brought together environmentalists, minority rights advocates, antiracists, opponents of corporate deregulation, and defenders of free speech. Whether his principles ultimately prevail will depend as much on the future of this coalition as on the timeliness of the ideas themselves. Otherwise, the pipe-puffing activist, with his tenacious faith in democracy, nonviolence, and the power of the pen, will lose yet further ground to the figure (in Michael Watts’s image) of “the masked militant armed with the ubiquitous Kaloshnikov, the typewriter of the illiterate.”⁸¹

Forms of Inheritance, the Inheritance of Loss

At Saro-Wiwa’s funeral, his eldest son, Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr., followed his father’s express instructions, placing two copies of Ken Sr.’s books in the coffin alongside his favorite pipe. As the coffin was lowered into the tomb, the attendant crowd surged forward and, for a moment, Saro-Wiwa Jr. felt certain he would be swept into his father’s grave. The incident speaks powerfully to the son’s lifelong fear of the all-devouring cause, the cause that had swallowed his father and threatened to swallow the next generation

as well. More broadly, the incident speaks to the risks and quandaries that attend the martyr-focused cause as a political figurehead's pragmatic leadership enters the realm of mythic potency through the manner of his death. The immortal corpse, the one true body of the cause, can become a powerful political asset but also stand dauntingly in the path of those who wish to take the struggle forward in new ways, for new times. Rival claimants—all anonymous by comparison—will clash, sometimes violently, over who has the right, by birth or principle, to take up the hero's mantle. For those who follow, after martyrdom, what next?

This question looms over the life and writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr., his father's anointed but initially reluctant legatee. Saro-Wiwa Jr.'s memoir, *In the Shadow of a Saint*, which closes with that image of the son teetering above his father's gaping grave, stages a searching engagement with the forms of inheritance.⁸² This often-anguished, internally riven book allows us to open up vexing questions, at once political and aesthetic, about activist nonfiction: questions about individual creativity and movement answerability, about originality and reiteration, about self-revelation and self-concealment. Read in tandem, *A Month and a Day* and *In the Shadow of a Saint* offer contrasting routes into the maze of nonfiction forms that activist-writers can draw on in pursuit of their political and literary ends.

A Month and a Day is an unruly, polyvocal work, a nonfictional collage, in which Saro-Wiwa tacks back and forth among a raft of genres: diary, memoir, journal, manifesto, advocacy journalism, ethnography, and satire, throwing in for good measure some transcribed speeches and a bill of rights. The book's disorderly syncretism is partly circumstantial: most of it was spliced together under the stresses of Saro-Wiwa's confinement in a Port Harcourt prison. Yet one senses in the irreverent, breathless bricolage something tactical as well, the propulsive urgency of colliding forms as Saro-Wiwa strives to fit into a single book an ill-fitting set of causes by binding together, in unprecedented ways, an African commitment to environmental and human rights, to micro-minority justice, and to exposing the slow violence of what he judges to be attritional ecological genocide. The result is a book without a clear narrative itinerary or stable voice, structurally diffuse yet inventively affiliative and unwavering in its political energy.

Despite the word "diary" in the subtitle, *A Month and a Day* is at best a fitfully personal book; the private Saro-Wiwa disappears for long stretches,

and when he reappears he does so primarily as an outsize public persona in a way that renders him opaque. We can read his son's memoir, in part, as a questing, ambiguous protest against his father's vanishing acts—as a parent and as a writer. Saro-Wiwa Jr. uses the memoir's intimate potential to push back against a certain self-aggrandizing impersonality that comes with the heroizing territory of the cause. As he wrestles with his political and familial inheritance, Saro-Wiwa Jr. strives to humanize his remote, complex father—to put mortal flesh on his immortality—without diminishing what he stood for. This requires a layered exhumation, as the son seeks to unearth the father whom he'd lost in life to a higher cause and then lost a second time to “judicial murder” and then a third time, after death, to sainthood. In exhuming his father Saro-Wiwa Jr. must also exhume himself from beneath the weight of the familial, inherited cause so that ultimately he can embrace the commitments that his father had chosen for him, but on his own terms. That embrace is fraught with ambivalence at first because, while growing up, his chief competitor for his father's scarce time and affection was that most voracious rival sibling, the Ogoni cause itself.

Saro-Wiwa Jr.'s decision to become an *écriture engagée* himself compounded his predicament. What he had long feared was the already-scripted life, in which he was destined from birth to be his insurrectionary father's compliant shadow act, a fear intensified by his father's afterlife as the martyred essence of the noble, untouchable cause. “I grew up in a political house, and it had turned me off politics. When many of my friends were looking for a political cause because they were tired of living uncomplicated lives, I just wanted an uncomplicated life because I was tired of living a political cause.”⁸³ It was his father's detention that propelled the son—who had spent most of his life in England and Canada—into politics and political writing.

Saro-Wiwa Jr. walks a line between intransigence and deference as he creates a testament that is, in a double sense, a resistance memoir: he revolts against the emotional costs imposed on a household where political revolt was the iron-fisted orthodoxy, while also carrying forward the cause that shaped his father's life and sealed his fate. If it is originality that he prizes as a writer, Saro-Wiwa Jr. the activist must first defer such ambitions, as he recapitulates the arc of his father's—and his people's—grievances, citing amply from his father's work. But the memoir takes a decidedly individual turn as he travels to meet the children of mythic freedom fighters—some martyred,

some still monumentally alive—like Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, and Aung San Suu Kyi. He shares, with the small band of saints' children, the strange struggle to reconcile a parent's ethical stature as the hallowed face of justice with the absences, the aloofness, the familial dysfunction, and to find in all of that some measure of resistant loyalty. In looping back to embrace his father's commitment to environmental justice and micro-minority rights, Saro-Wiwa Jr. draws strength from literary precedent as well: while campaigning for his father's release, he carries with him Nadine Gordimer's great novel, *Burger's Daughter*, which charts the quest, by an antiapartheid hero's daughter, to find a way of circumventing the abstracted icon of her father while pursuing her own half-chosen, half-inherited commitment to the justice of his cause.⁸⁴

In his pursuit of environmental justice, Saro-Wiwa Jr. sought to do an end run around the dysfunctional Nigerian state. He took up the cause as writer and speaker on the international human rights circuit but also, critically, as a lead plaintiff in a fourteen-year-long case against Shell for complicity in his father's execution and for paying soldiers who had committed human rights abuses in Ogoniland. On June 9, 2009, days before the trial was due to begin in New York, Shell settled out of court, agreeing to pay \$15.5 million, mostly into a trust fund for the Ogoni people.⁸⁵ The plaintiffs had filed under the Alien Tort Claims Act of 1789, which the Supreme Court ruled in 2004 could be used to try in American courts foreigners accused of crimes against humanity overseas. There is a satisfying symmetry to learning that the Alien Tort Claims Act was originally introduced in the eighteenth century to combat piracy, given the piratical practices of the Shell-Abacha partnership under a system that Saro-Wiwa once condemned as "organized brigandage."⁸⁶

Saro-Wiwa Jr. saw the settlement as a victory that he believed would have pleased his father: "[F]rom a legal perspective, this historic case means that corporations will have to be much more careful."⁸⁷ However, the legacy of the case may be more complicated than that. Most large corporations sued under the Alien Tort Claims Act have, like Shell (and like the oil giant Unocal, charged with using slave labor to build a pipeline across Burma in the 1990s) settled out of court, leaving no clear trail of legal precedent. Moreover, when MOSOP activists ejected Shell from Ogoniland in the 1990s, the company left without conducting any cleanup and continued to operate

with environmental impunity in the wider, increasingly volatile delta area. The costs of environmental reparation for the slow violence that has permeated the delta and its inhabitants are incalculable: the World Wildlife Fund has put out a figure of \$6 billion, but really there's no telling.⁸⁸

Before the settlement, Ledum Mittee, who assumed the leadership of Saro-Wiwa's MOSOP movement, insisted that the Ogonis were still waiting for an apology from Shell: "[T]hey should be able to look us in the face and say 'We're sorry for what we have caused you to go through as a result of all these years.' It's quite important to us."⁸⁹ Likewise, Tompolo, leader of MEND (the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta)—the largest, most ethnically diverse of the increasingly diffuse and increasingly militant groups that have proliferated in MOSOP's wake—demanded, in addition to greater resource control, at the very least an apology from Shell and the Nigerian military.⁹⁰ Yet in settling the court case, Shell denied any wrongdoing, deeming with outrageous condescension the out-of-court settlement for \$15.5 million "a humanitarian gesture."⁹¹

Many of the delta's oil minorities, exiled from their subsistence cultures by ruined land, by dead-fish waterways, by government attacks and by multiplying uncontrollable militant groups, have gravitated toward the city of Port Harcourt. There, write Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas,

hunger leads to anger, and the crushing poverty and marginalization of communities, in contrast to the oil resources that are rightly theirs, provide the trigger. A war of all against all ensues: youths against elders, whom they accuse of selling out to Shell; community against community in competition for scarce Shell contract work; and communities against Shell and the federal government, who deny that their actions have driven the Nigerian people into a dark, impossible corner.⁹²

Twenty years ago, Saro-Wiwa foresaw this dire turn in an essay called "The Coming War in the Delta." "The Delta people," he warned, "must be allowed to join in the lucrative sale of crude oil . . . only in this way can the cataclysm that is building up in the Delta be avoided. Is anyone listening?"⁹³ In the aftermath of his "judicial murder" the wider world listened for a time, but one wonders who exactly is listening anymore. Apart, that

is, from the Mongolian leader who, when oil was recently discovered in his territory, declared, “[W]e do not want to become another Nigeria.”⁹⁴ Fresh oil strikes in Ghana and Uganda have prompted similar responses: exhilaration tempered by fears of letting loose unanswerable, unspeakable forces that rip through the socioenvironmental fabric, leaving behind a Niger Delta redux.⁹⁵