Published by **Traprock Peace Center**, http://www.traprockpeace.org
August 26, 2003

Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995),

Ogoni

&

the Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger

keith harmon snow

Born in the southern village of Bori, Ken Saro-Wiwa was one of Nigeria's most recognized and accomplished citizens. An Ogoni leader from Ogoni, Ken Saro-Wiwa was tried and hanged for challenging the environmental hostility and terrorism perpetrated against the indigenous minorities of the Niger River Delta by the petroleum industry and their corrupt political allies.

Saro-Wiwa's life was punctuated by careers as teacher, civil servant, publisher, television producer and dramatist. He is the author of over forty major works, including novels, volumes of poetry, essays, plays, journalism, short stories and children's books. From 1985 to 1990, Saro-Wiwa created, wrote, produced, financed and marketed Nigeria's most popular situation comedy, Basi & Co., watched weekly by 30 million Nigerians. He authored numerous political documents, including the Ogoni Bill of Rights (1990). Winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize and the Right Livelihood Award in 1995, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize prior to his execution.

Always environmentally conscious, Saro-Wiwa adopted the plank of environmentalism as a strategic tool to promote the Ogoni cause. "The visit to the United States (1993) sharpened

my awareness of the need to organize the Ogoni people to struggle for their environment," Saro-Wiwa wrote (Month: 79.). "A bit of research and thinking of my childhood days showed me how conscious of their environment the Ogoni have always been and how far they went in an effort to protect it. I had shown this consciousness all along."

Jailed in 1993 under the Treason and Treasonable Offenses Decree (known in Nigeria as "the Saro-Wiwa decree") promulgated in 1993 by then President Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, Saro-Wiwa wrote from prison poetry that widely echoed the sentiments of the minority delta peoples:

Ogoni is the land
The people, Ogoni
The agony of trees dying
In ancestral farmlands
Streams polluted weeping
Filth into murky rivers
It is the poisoned air
Coursing the luckless lungs
Of dying children
Ogoni is the dream
Breaking the looping chain
Around the drooping neck
of a shell-shocked land.

"The land and the people are one and are expressed as such in our local languages," says Dr. Owens Wiwa, Ken Saro-Wiwa's brother. "The Ogoni have always respected nature, and this informed the struggle for the environment. There are lots of names for the spiritual trees, sacred

rivers and lakes, and the traditions are very important. When people are ill, they revert back to indigenous beliefs and folklore. ” (Personal communication, Dr. Owen’s Wiwa, 2003.)

The Ogoni number some 500,000 people today, a minority amongst some 300 minority, and three majority (Yoruba, Igbo/Ibo and Hausa-Fulani), ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. They live near Port Harcourt, a major oil city on the coastal plain of the vast mangrove estuary of the Niger River. The floodplain is home to some seven million people, grouped by nation, ethnicity and clan: the Ijo, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Isoko, Efik, Etche, Ibibio, Andoni, Ikwere, Ogoni, Isoko, Edo, and Kwale-Igbo. These tribes’ relationships to religion and nature are complex and untransparent.

Like other affiliated linguistic groups in the delta, the Ogoni connection to the environment is defined in spiritual and ritualistic terms, where earth, soil, water, trees, plants and animals are sacred. (Despite the catastrophic spiritual, ecological and cultural devastation in the delta, this section is written in the present tense to reflect the prevailing attitudes, practices and beliefs.) Certain sacred groves and forests are revered: burial grounds for good and evil people; sacred boundaries between neighboring communities; family heritage forests. Ancient and enormous African oak, Iroko and cotton trees, animals and plants are worshipped. Customary laws have always existed; formal legislation to protect nature proliferated after 1850, and historical accounts of willful or accidental injury to wildlife document punishment by death. Sacrifice and ritual cleansing are daily events used to placate and honor nature spirits and deities. Priests and priestesses hold sway over the delineations and durations of sacred spaces.

Rights of habitation and ownership of communal spaces are intermittently transferred to animals: where the sacred Odumu (royal python) finds a home, it is the legal owner and community law recognizes its rights (until it vacates). “The concept of animal libertarianism has been practiced among the communities of the Niger Delta since antiquity… The people do not hunt animals for sport; rather, they are categorized in accordance with value – religious,

ecological, social and economic… Infraction could result in fines, expensive ablution and atonement rites, and ostracism from the age group or the community as a whole… Shell's right to explore and produce hydrocarbon (a right now seriously challenged by all communities of the Niger River Delta) does not preclude the rights recognized to be enjoyed by persons, animals, and other living and nonliving things." (Okonto & Douglas: 215-225)

Indigenous cosmologies (Ogoni and others) revolve around pantheons of benevolent and malevolent deities, cults and witchcraft, and portals between worlds seen and unseen; relationships to the natural world universally infuse and inform. Parochial concepts about the fundamental, activating energies of the cosmos (e.g. che, orgon, spiritual essence, etc.), and the flows and exchanges of energies, are fundamental to much traditional indigenous thought. The metaphysical dimensions of these forces, it is believed, are expressed in all earthly elements: rocks, leaves, trees, sculptures, prayers, animals, songs, gods – even the technological inventions of the west. Attention to nature and the deeper metaphysical relationships of being traditionally defined social relations and value-systems. Good and evil, sin and salvation, are concepts deeply and philosophically embedded in the spiritual belief systems today, universally infused or blended with introduced faiths and the values and beliefs that correspond to occidental nature, including its materialism.

Looking back to the delta's prehistory, excavations of bronze, iron, stone and terracotta statuary, vessels and figurines from shrines and burial chambers in southeastern Nigeria, dated around the first two centuries of the common era, attest to the existence of goddess-centered spirituality and other matrifocal cosmologies in the region, but by the late 16th century the tribes of the lower Niger lived in semi-permanent forest settlements ruled by patriarchal monarchies.

Subsequently, tribal kingdoms, trading and warrior city-states in the delta revolved around shifting confederations and alliances, bounded and influenced by the Ashante, Benin, Bornu, Mali and Songhay empires, and the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo. Interethnic warfare, piracy,

head-hunting and slave raids were common. “Religious sanctions were often invoked to bind warring parties to observe conditions of peace mutually accepted.” (Alagoa, 1972:289)

Long-distance trading across the delta and into the hinterland existed well before the European cultural invasion began (c. 1508), and tribal leaders were known to travel great distances to procure gifts for sacrificial worship and pagan rituals. (Alagoa) There is evidence that tribes of southeastern Nigeria participated in extensive pre-Columbian, transoceanic trade with the Americas. Religious artifacts and pagan goddess icons excavated or recovered from Latin America exhibit Negroid features similar to those of the Yoruba and Yoruba-influenced tribes of the delta. The Aztecs, for example, worshiped a negroid (head) sculpture as a representation of their god Tezcatlipoca.

Contact with European traders became significant in the 16th century, when the political economy of international slavery transformed the delta into a center of redistribution (imports from, and exports to, Europe) based on individualism and conquest. Javelins and shields soon gave way to cannon mounted on trade canoes and warriors armed with muskets, though trade proliferated as much by peaceful means. Religion played a central role. People of the delta were known to travel hundreds of miles through foreign (Ibo) territory to settle disputes before the oracle Ibini Akpabe of the Aro tribe. “Aro traders and settlers outside [Aro] were unmolested wherever they went because they were considered the children of the oracle.” (Alagoa: 299) Other oracles competed for influence, and such oracles had powerful spiritual and religious influence over socioeconomic relations of delta tribal communities.

The Ijo city-state of Bonny (a substantial oil refinery and transshipment port in the delta today) was a major West African supply point for the disembarkation of slaves. The ascendancy of Bonny’s King Asimini, conferred with greater authority by European traders than that of previous or rival kings, was sanctified by Asimini’s reported sacrifice of his daughter to the river gods, in his attempt to make the estuary navigable by ships, and thence better serve the interests

of European trade. The monitor lizard symbolized the national god, Ikuba, a tutelary deity of war, and the Bonny Ijo's warring (e.g., against Ogoni and Andoni) increased the "house of skulls," a special religious space constructed for war trophies. Deceased kings and queens were sometimes deified, as with Fenibeso, who "became the war god of the Okrikra, serving thenceforth as one of the main symbols of unity in internal religious observances and external wars." (Alagoa, 1972:)

The invasions of Christianity and Islam furthered the deracination of the delta's indigenous people and the unraveling of their social structures, religions, livelihoods and environments. After 1800, the Royal Niger Company, the Barclay (bank) brothers, and then Britain more directly, brutally pacified the kingdoms of the delta. While indigenous uprisings occurred to 1947, the leaders were coopted, enslaved, exiled or executed.

By 1950, indigenous minorities (e.g. Ogoni, Andoni, Itsekeri, Okrika) were pressing for the autonomy of the pre-colonial era. Royal Dutch/Shell, a multinational petroleum corporation, began exploring Nigeria in 1937; oil was discovered in Rivers State in 1958, the same year that Nigerian Nobel Laureate Chinua Achebe wrote his prescient and gruesome prolepsis foretelling "the pacification of the primitive tribes of the lower Niger." (Achebe: 147-148)

Ken Saro-Wiwa was raised in a large supportive family with strong tribal links. His father, Chief J.B. Wiwa (b. 1904), was a businessman (trained as a forest ranger) who lived to see his son hanged. Saro-Wiwa's mother, Widu (b. 1920) was a trader and a farmer; a feeble septuagenarian beaten with a stick at Saro-Wiwa's trial. "Saro" is an honorific name meaning "eldest son," and Ken Saro-Wiwa supported an extended family of over sixty individuals. Saro-Wiwa exercised the privileges enjoyed by the western capitalist elite, while at the same time struggling to negotiate the world of the underprivileged and the deracination of identity

served on him, first as a black man and second as an Ogoni, as on all of Africa's people, by the political, economic and intellectual institutions and forces of colonialism and neocolonialism.

From the first newspaper articles in the 1960's, Saro-Wiwa's writings reveal a slow political awakening underscored by a pervasive consciousness about the persecution of indigenous minorities in the Niger River Delta. His first experience of prejudice occurred during his secondary schooling at Government College in Umuahaia (1954-1961), where he was the sole Ogoni. At the same time, Saro-Wiwa's life was both enhanced and compromised by his affectionate ties to the Old Boys' of his *alma maters*.

Graduating with honors in English from the University of Ibadan, Saro-Wiwa spent the eve of the Biafran War (1965-1967) teaching at various schools in southern Nigeria. Fleeing with his wife Maria from warfare that claimed some 30,000 Ogonis (over a million Nigerians), Saro-Wiwa took a staunchly pro-federalist stance against Biafran succession, and was rewarded by a federal appointment as administrator of Bonny at age 26 (1967). This was the first of increasingly important government portfolios where Saro-Wiwa distinguished himself for battling corruption, poverty and starvation; Saro-Wiwa took the job because "there were not enough rivers people around to do it" (Plain: 206). He simultaneously served as assistant lecturer at the University of Lagos (1968-1973). Aspirations for public office were "blocked first by some educated Ogoni people and then by the rulers of Nigeria" (Month: 55). He accumulated significant wealth as a businessman and publisher in the 1970's and 1980's.

During the final activist years of his life (1989-1995), Ken Saro-Wiwa championed the cause of the Ogoni people in national and international arenas; towards the end he expressed his indigenous consciousness by addressing Ogoni audiences only in his native Gokana language. Writings and speeches in this period testify to the "injustice, brutality and inhumanity" of Nigeria's "indigenous colonizers;" the cooption of the Ogoni struggle; and genocide, underhandedly supported by multinational oil corporations Shell-BP and Chevron. Passionately

committed to non-violent political struggle, Saro-Wiwa attempted to model the Ogoni struggle on the American civil rights movement and the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King.

However, narrowly focused on the persecution of the Ogoni, Saro-Wiwa made only limited attempts to redress the fate of other minority peoples, or the concomitant injustice served by successive Nigerian military dictatorships, in collusion with international capitalism, on the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani majorities. Nonetheless, other delta peoples followed Saro-Wiwa's example.

In 1991, Saro-Wiwa organized the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), and was elected President in *abstentia* in 1993; MOSOP sought to reclaim economic rights and protect the environment against the petroleum ecocide that had already claimed the Ogoni mainstays of fishing, farming, hunting and gathering. In 1992, Saro-Wiwa delivered the Ogoni Bill of Rights in person, with his book, Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy (1993) during a speech to the U.N. Unrepresented Nation's and People's Organization (UNPO) in Geneva, Switzerland. Saro-Wiwa called for an end to the petroleum corporation's occupation of Ogoni and international attention to the devastation of the delta's ecology.

"The extermination of the Ogoni appears to be policy," Saro-Wiwa stated. "National ideas of national independence, the fact of Africans ruling Africans in nations conceived by and for European economic interests have intensified, not destroyed, the propensity of man to subject weak people's by force, violence and legal quibbling to slavery and extinction." (A Month and A Day: 98).

After 1992, Saro-Wiwa was relentlessly harassed, interrogated and arrested; he was also prevented from giving speeches or traveling abroad. On January 4, 1993, at what would be the first annual Ogoni Day, Saro-Wiwa organized some 300,000 Ogoni in a non-violent celebration, with music, dance and a rally at each of the seven Ogoni kingdoms. Masks (masquerade) are used as expressions of mysticism and power, and to validate the people's beliefs: elaborate

masks worn by revelers attested to the indigenous cosmology; “people are supposed to believe what the masks represent.” (Personal communication, Dr. Owens Wiwa, June 2003.)

In March 1993, Ogoni protesters forced Royal Dutch/Shell to suspend petroleum operations in the Niger River Delta. In June 1993, Saro-Wiwa organized the Ogoni boycott of the (rigged) Presidential elections; he was subsequently arrested and detained without charges for a month and a day. He did not heed the warning. “To Shell and the Nigerian government, my brother was a dangerous and irresponsible terrorist” (Dr. Owens Wiwa; personal communication, June 2003).

Saro-Wiwa’s detention diary, A Month and A Day (1995), expresses his evolution as an Ogoni nationalist: “My worry about the Ogoni has been an article of faith, conceived of in primary school, nurtured through secondary school, actualized in the Nigerian civil war in 1967-1970 and during my tenure as member of the Rivers State Executive council, 1968-1973.” Saro-Wiwa first wrote on the Ogoni as an exploited minority in The Ogoni Nationality Today and Tomorrow, a pamphlet published in 1968. In 1966, Isaac Boro, a minority Ijaw infused with the ideas of Che Guevara and tired of the injustice served on delta minorities, declared war and secession. In 1970, Ogoni leaders sent a petition to the Nigerian military government protesting the total expropriation of delta life by Shell, and British Petroleum, which by then had also made substantial inroads into the delta. The result, at every stage, was corruption, deceit, propaganda and vterrorism, against the backdrop of the further expropriation of natural resources.

Saro-Wiwa’s position on the environment was often confused by his staunch pro-Federalist nationalism, further muddied by an avowed respect and admiration for – and fascination with -- the Nigerian military. Ironically, amongst these were some of the soldiers who later assumed high posts in the administration(s) that persecuted him. Ken Saro-Wiwa was blinded by his friendship with Nigerian military ruler Olesegun Obasanjo (1976-79, 1999-), and by his personal associations with Nigerian presidents Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon and Gen. Ibrahim

Babangida, dictators who plundered the nation. (See esp. Saro-Wiwa's Plain; also see Ojo-Ade.) He revered Gowon (Plain); Babangida he praised repeatedly in his newspaper columns (Similia, 18-41). Saro-Wiwa met once with Gen. Sani Abacha (1993), who seized power in a bloodless coup. Abacha questioned Saro-Wiwa about "what his [Ogoni] people wanted" and he expressed outrage (disingenuous) at the inhumanity of Saro-Wiwa's incarceration. Saro-Wiwa failed to the end to comprehend the Nigerian military's collusion with international capital, or the terrorism to which international capital will go to protect its profits.

Saro-Wiwa was often scathing and moralizing in his political commentary, but his own writings at times reflect a narrow and speculative personal bias in favor of the military, and he did not hesitate to slant the truth to serve his private agenda (a "united Nigeria," for example, during the Biafran war). Saro-Wiwa complains about propaganda, but it is a quality of his works, particularly his war chronicle, On A Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War (1989). Saro-Wiwa failed to the end to comprehend the Nigerian military's collusion with international capital, or the terrorism to which international capital will go to protect its profits.

By 1994, the Nigerian military operatives in Ogoni were on a pacification mission, as delineated by Operation Order 4/94: Restoration of Law and Order in Ogoniland (1994). Royal Dutch/Shell purchased weapons used by Nigerian paramilitary forces. The Nigerian military and mobile police killed over 2500 Ogonis through direct murder and the bombing and burning of villages from 1993 to 1995. Throughout the 1990's, human rights organizations documented hundreds of rapes of Ogoni and other delta women. Increasing militarization and the unraveling of social institutions proceeded in tandem with the ecological devastation wrought by the petroleum industry.

Competition between Islam (north) and Christianity (south) fueled by the military government has led to widespread pograms, retaliation and communal violence in Nigeria. The persecution of Christians and their churches in the delta provoked an international Christian

solidarity movement (1990's). An equally frequent phenomenon is the dogmatic use of religion (Christianity and Islam) to justify punitive and repressive military operations. This phenomenon has been prevalent amongst delta oil communities.

As an example: "Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ," begins a memo (December 21, 1995) from the commander of the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force, charged with "wasting operations" in Ogoni (read: raping, torturing, killing), to Ogoni clergy. "Let us pray for Ogoniland and the Ogonis, even with the following passages in our mind: Luke 18:1; 1 John 5:14, 15; 1 John 8:21,22."

Raised a protestant, Saro-Wiwa attended church infrequently; but he read the bible constantly while imprisoned. (Personal communication, Dr. Owens Wiwa, June 2003.) It is likely, but uncertain, that he read the Quran as fervently: his writings are infused with the symbolism of Islam and Christianity, though he as often admonishes or lampoons these major faiths (and the blind or confused faith of followers), as he praises them for the attributes that he admired. Biblical references are common, often in the context of biting satire. His writings are equally contradictory about traditional village life, tribal beliefs, indigenous cosmology and paganism; in contradistinction are his confusions about modernity and the "comforts" and "benefits" of western civilization.

"The Christian church, as I have said, has a powerful hold in Ogoni, and the arrival of the Pentecostal churches at a time of serious economic difficulties had led to even more people seeking solace in religion… it was making the people not seek answers to their problems… [t]he Pentecostal churches tend to be one-man outfits out to exploit the people. They lack the strength of the organized Churches, which I definitely admire" (Month: 152).

On May 22, 1994, Saro-Wiwa was arrested and imprisoned on charges of murder stemming from a military frame-up. In an highly irregular trial convened by a special military tribunal, Royal/Dutch Shell bribed two prosecution witnesses, Ogonis who recanted in exile.

Lawyers for Royal Dutch/Shell attended and presented briefs at the hearing. Gani Fawehinmi, Nigeria's most prominent human rights campaigner and lawyer, resigned as Saro-Wiwa's defense attorney, along with the entire legal team assembled to defend Saro-Wiwa, because they refused to add legitimacy to the proceedings. Shell directors offered Saro-Wiwa's life to his brother, Dr. Owens Wiwa, if he (Dr. Wiwa) could get Ken to call off the protests. Dr. Wiwa replied to Shell that even Ken doesn't have that power [to call off protests] any more. Shell refused to use their influence to stop the executions (and very well may have urged the Abacha government to proceed). A posthumous United Nation's fact-finding mission documented the extensive irregularities and prejudices of the tribunal. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch condemned the trial (though it should be noted that this statement does not legitimize the work of these human rights organizations which, in the case of US interests in Rwanda, for example, do not always promote equitability and truth).

By the time of his death, Saro-Wiwa was a living manifestation of the Ghandian philosophy of *Satyagraha*. Given the opportunity to escape Nigeria, even by the jailers of the cell that held him, Saro-Wiwa refused to abandon his people. "I have devoted my intellectual and material resources, my very life, to a cause in which I have total belief, and from which I cannot be blackmailed or intimidated," he read, from his final defense statement. His last words to the tribunal cited the Quran (Sura 42, verse 41): "All those that fight when oppressed incur no guilt, but Allah shall punish the oppressor." On November 10, 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni men were hanged in a shallow pit at Port Harcourt, Nigeria. His last words were "Lord, take my soul, but the struggle continues."

An understanding of Saro-Wiwa's spirituality is difficult, given the many contradictions of his life and works. Symbolism of nature pervades Saro-Wiwa's works, most often as allegory for a Hobbesian world both brutish and short, or as symbols of peace amidst war and terror. In his collection of short stories, A Forest of Flowers (1986), Saro-Wiwa addresses the deeply

entrenched inequity between the sexes, and the patriarchal institutions of marriage and wife beating. Alternately, an article compiled in Saro-Wiwa's journalism collection Similia (1991), titled "Better Life for All Women," is confused in its praise for First Lady Maryam Babangida and her "Better Life For Rural Women" program, another propaganda instrument used to pilfer the state.

Equally poignant, his writings and political satires like Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English (1985), A Forest of Flowers (1986), Prisoner of Jebs (1988), offer many examples of the contradictions of "modernity" – the move backwards into corruption and bestiality, and the meanness of master over slave that so characterizes Saro-Wiwa's experiences of life in Nigeria. While the world beyond Ogoni had moved into computers and outer space, the people in the delta remained ignorant and backward.

Tradition is often the target of Saro-Wiwa's humor and criticism, depicted "as a monstrous monolith masking stagnation, inferiority complex, ignorance, and barbarity" (Ojo-Ade: 138). On the other hand, The Singing Anthill: Ogoni Folk Tales (1991) captures some of the oral history of the Niger River Delta in the recording of folk tales that expose the historical traditions and spirituality of the Ogoni. "In a world where human beings, spirits and supernatural forces lived in close proximity," reads the author's note (Port Harcourt 1990), "it is not surprising to find fairies and spirits practicing cannibalism and being copied by deviants in the society. The pre-literate society which these tales indicate is certainly gone; the Ogoni still fish and farm but their lives are ringed around today, not by spirits but by oil wells and gas flares, and the harsh crudity of Nigerian politics which threatens their very survival as a people."

Military pacification campaigns against the minorities of the Niger River Delta continued into the early 21rst century. Some 2000 Ogonis fled Nigeria in March of 1997, where they received cursory "refuge" by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in neighboring Benin. Royal/Dutch Shell pursued the Ogoni and set up an office behind the UNHCR

headquarters: Nigerian military agents abducted at least three Ogoni dissidents from Benin. (Personal investigations: Benin, 1997.)

Corporate mercenary firms from the United States (Military Professional Resources Inc.) continued to "advise and train" the Nigerian military. Oil companies continued to operate freely and expand in the Niger River Delta, sharing only hostility and arrogance with the survivors of constant terrorism. (Dr. Owens Wiwa, personal communication, June 2003; see also: Madsen, 1999). (Personal investigations 1995-2003; Dr. Owens Wiwa, personal communication, June 2003; see also: Madsen, 1999; see also numerous human rights reports).

Protests by indigenous people have taken unique spiritual forms. The Ijo Youth Council (1999) initiated "Operation Climate Change" as a vehicle to raise environmental awareness through non-violent protest. "Tapping the veins of Ijo culture, it sought to bring the pains and travails of the people to national attention through the "Ogele," a traditional Ijo dance where stories, song and mime are deployed to chastise the erring, heal the wounds of the injured, and invoke the spirit of the ancestors to cleanse the land in a festive atmosphere of drink and merriment" (Oko & Douglas: 146).

end.

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