

PIPE DREAMS: KEN SARO-WIWA, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, AND MICRO-MINORITY RIGHTS

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Ken Saro-Wiwa squints at us from the cover of his Nigerian detention diary, the posthumous *A Month and a Day* (London: Penguin 1995). His mustache looks precise and trim; his eyes are alight; a gash scrawls across his temple. But it's his eyes that governs the picture. It's an intellectual's accessory, a good pipe to suck and clench, to spew from the 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" (*The Independent* {London}, 11 Nov. 1995). 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 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 last year 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" (*Mail and Guardian* {Johannesburg}, 11 Nov. 1995). 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.

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" (*The New Yorker*, 27 Nov. 1995). Elsewhere, he prayed that his work would have as visceral an impact as André Gide's 1927 journal, *Voyage au Congo*, which prompted an outcry against Belgian atrocities and helped to secure their cessation (Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Genocide in Nigeria, The Ogoni Tragedy* {Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Saros, 1992}: 9). 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,⁽¹⁾ which together had transformed the Niger delta into a Bermuda triangle for human rights.

Saro-Wiwa wrote as a member of a micro-minority: one of five hundred thousand Ogoni in a nation of a hundred million, composed of nearly three hundred ethnic groups. He produced tireless testimonies of 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 (*A Month and a Day*: 131). His profuse writings thus lay the groundwork for a broader estimation of the global cost, above all to micro-minorities, of the ongoing romance between unanswerable corporations and unspeakable regimes.

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."⁽²⁾ When Nigeria gained independence in 1960, it kept its improbable borders with the result that almost three hundred ethnic groups were clustered under the umbrella of one nation-state. For all but ten of the thirty-six years 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.

The Ogoni constitute approximately 0.5 percent of the Nigerian population. Thus, like the other sixteen micro-minorities who dwell in the oil-rich delta, the Ogoni lack the political leverage and the constitutional protection to lay claim to the wealth that has been taken from their land. Nigeria's independence initially promised a measure of economic justice for micro-minorities: the 1960 constitution required that the government return fifty percent of any mining revenues to the region of extraction.⁽³⁾ But instead of the fifty percent constitutionally due to them, the Ogoni have been awarded a mere 1.5 percent and in effect not even that.⁽⁴⁾

As a rule of thumb, the greater a nation's reliance on a single product for its economic survival, the higher the chances that the society is riddled with corruption. Nigeria's dependence on oil is absolute. It constitutes ninety percent of all exports, half of it going to the U.S. (New Statesman and Society, 17 Nov. 1995), and generates eighty percent of government revenue. Thus, oil has become a precondition of and a byword for military power.

Shell is by far the largest stake holder in the Nigerian economy, owning forty seven percent of the oil industry. Its joint venture partner in the petroleum business is the Abacha regime. Yet Shell representatives repeatedly declare that they exercise no influence over Nigeria's rulers. This allows the world's largest oil company to continue to duck behind the brutalities of its militaristic financial partners. It also enables the corporation to ignore appeals by the Ogoni and neighboring minorities for a share of oil revenues, a measure of environmental self-determination, and economic redress for their devastated environment. These, in Shell's terms, are internal Nigerian matters, belonging to a realm inaccessible to corporate influence.

By the time Saro-Wiwa was executed, the Nigerian military and Mobile Police Force had killed two thousand Ogoni through direct murder and the burning of villages.⁽⁵⁾ Ogoni air had been fouled by the flaring of natural gas; Ogoni croplands scarred by oil spills; Ogoni 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, now a delta of death. Meanwhile, the Shell legacy continues to seep into the environment and into the bodies of the people of the local farming communities which, unlike the international corporation, have 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."

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." 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 gives 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."⁽⁶⁾ Subsistence farming and fishing are the mainstays of these Ogoni 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 forty years ago, they have suffered massive subterranean dispossession. Shell, Chevron, and successive Nigerian regimes have siphoned thirty billion dollars of oil from beneath Ogoni earth (New Statesman and Society, 17 Nov. 95). Yet the locals still find themselves lacking a hospital, electricity, piped water and basic roads, housing, and schools. The community has found itself, in the fullest sense of the word, thoroughly undermined.

Faced with the neo-colonial 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 (*A Month and a Day*: 81). 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.⁽⁷⁾ But across Anglophone West Africa, Saro-Wiwa achieved his greatest renown as the creator of the TV comedy hit, *Basi and Company*: thirty million Nigerians tuned into it primetime on Wednesdays. Saro-Wiwa wrote a hundred and fifty episodes of *Basi*, a robust satire with a moralistic edge.⁽⁸⁾ The series pokes fun at 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 phoniness."⁽⁹⁾). But after the death of his son in 1992, Saro-Wiwa cut back on his TV and literary activities. He devoted himself single-mindedly 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. Yet there the similarities end. For in East and Southern Africa, such tendencies have been routinely associated with writers whose anti-colonialism – or anti-neo-colonialism – has been inseparable from their socialism.⁽¹⁰⁾ One thinks, for instance, of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Barrel of a Pen* and Mafika Gwala's essay, "Writing as a Cultural Weapon" (which became the credo for a generation of South African writers).⁽¹¹⁾ 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. And as a successful small businessman – successful enough to send a son to Eton – he was never anti-capitalist per se. But he did find himself painfully well-placed to protest one of the signal developments of the 1980s and 90s: the consolidation and increasingly unregulated mobility of transnational corporations. Five hundred corporations, Shell among them, now control seventy percent of global trade.⁽¹²⁾

As a micro-minority intellectual in a poor 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*, for instance, he takes heart from three contemporary developments: "the 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" (7). His doubts have proved well-founded.

A Month and a Day includes a record of his imaginative efforts to capitalize on these new forms of international attention. Initially, human rights groups and ecological ones 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, which replied, quite simply, that it did not work in Africa. Amnesty International, for its part, said it could only take up the Ogoni cause if the military were 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" (*A Month and a Day*: 88). As he later elaborated: "The Ogoni country has been completely destroyed by the search for oil...Oil blow-outs, spillages, oil slicks, 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" (Interview, Channel 4 (U.K.), 15 Nov. 1995).

Appeals to both minority and environmental rights have gained ground in the nineties, but there was little precedent in Africa for their simultaneous invocation. Despite the early unresponsiveness of Greenpeace, Amnesty, 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 (*A Month and a Day*: 79). These experiences persuaded Saro-Wiwa that his incipient Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) would be well served by linking minority to environmental rights. Through a young Dutch lawyer, Michael van Wait van der Praag, long active in the Tibetan cause, Saro-Wiwa made contact with the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organizations. 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...” (*A Month and a Day*: 183).

The parallel tracks of Saro-Wiwa’s self-education had finally converged. From 1992 onwards, the combined appeal to minority and environmental rights became fundamental to the MOSOP campaign. Human rights and ecological groups which had once found the Ogoni campaign enigmatic now became its most adamant international supporters. The Body Shop, Abroad, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch/Africa, and International PEN 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. In the eighties and nineties, we have seen how the sometimes rarefied concerns of white feminists in the 1970s have given way 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 any longer rest solely on Amazonian 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 macro-economic powers. As an Ogoni suffering what he called Nigeria’s “monstrous domestic colonialism” (*A Month and a Day*: 73), Saro-Wiwa was in no position to trust the nation-state as the unit of collective economic good. 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 his eight co-accused, public outrage tended to divide into those who primarily condemned the Abacha regime and those who went for Shell.⁽¹³⁾ 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, has sought to put a positive gloss on this relationship, with PR primers like “Nigeria and Shell: Partners in Progress” (*A Month and a Day*: 165). But the regressive character of the relationship is more accurately portrayed by a leaked Nigerian government memo addressing protests in Ogoniland. Dated December 5th, 1994, it reads: “Shell operations still impossible unless ruthless military operations are undertaken for smooth economic activities to commence” (*New York Times*, 26 Jan. 1996).

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.(14) Shell's racism is manifest: in Africa, the company waives onshore drilling standards that it routinely upholds elsewhere. Indeed, forty percent of all Shell oil spills worldwide have occurred in Nigeria.(15) 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 (A Month and a Day: 170). It is an irony not lost on the Ogoni that Shell has won awards in Europe for its environmentally sensitive conduct (Genocide in Nigeria: 82).

But Shell's racial double standard would be inoperable without brutal backing from a Nigerian regime whose record on minority rights verges on the ethnocidal. General Abacha's dreaded Mobile Police Force has responded violently to peaceful protests by the Ogoni and its 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.(16) 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.(17) This battle over oil-territory left the Ogoni flattened "like grass in the fight of the elephants" (A Month and a Day: 187). Ten percent of all Ogoni died in a war which was not of their making. The calamity drove home for Saro-Wiwa the distinction between minority and extreme minority status.(18) A micro-minority was powerless to influence national events, particularly in a society run on the 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 of a 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" (Genocide in Nigeria: 7).

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 is 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, has met with a ruptured response to his appeal for U.S. sanctions against Nigeria similar to those imposed on South Africa. Many black Americans – among them Louis Farrakhan, who recently visited Lagos and gave the Abacha regime his blessing – have argued that it is divisive to campaign against any African government (The Guardian, 26 March 1996).

But Saro-Wiwa never enjoyed the luxury of such long distance compunctions. 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 color 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?'" (A Month and a Day, 188).

Saro-Wiwa called repeatedly for international measures – like those that had helped end apartheid – against a Nigerian regime that he deemed equally heinous.(19) 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 anti-apartheid campaign. But just as South Africa, under Mandela's leadership, has finally moved beyond apartheid, so Nigeria has sunk to its anti-democratic nadir.(20)

By the time the fifty-two nation Commonwealth Summit 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 instead quiet negotiations.⁽²¹⁾ 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 (Mail and Guardian {Johannesburg}, 11 Nov. 1995). Professor Kole Omotoso, one of the swelling ranks of Nigerian exiles who have 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’” (Mail and Guardian {Johannesburg}, 17 Nov. 1995). Saro-Wiwa's lawyer protested angrily to Mandela that “Were quiet diplomacy pursued in South Africa....I doubt you would be alive today” (Independent, 21 Nov. 1995).

Mandela's tragic misreading of the Abacha regime and the threat to Saro-Wiwa can best be understood in terms of the ANC's historical sentimentality toward Nigeria. Many in 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 eminences 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 that: “The proceeds from oil revenue are going into private accounts. They don't even get to the people” (Independent, 13 Nov. 1995). In 1994 alone, twelve billion dollars worth of oil was missing from government accounts (New Statesman and Society, 17 Nov. 1995).

The South African failure to provide international leadership against Abacha needs also to be understood in terms of the ANC's “fetish for compromise.”⁽²²⁾ This fixation had enabled Mandela to maneuver the ANC into power and to avert the civil war which had looked menacingly imminent just before the South African elections. But he misjudged the Nigerian political climate: Abacha is more ruthless than De Klerk, and Nigeria lacks the matrix of civic bodies, trade unions, and other democratic organizations which exerted pressure on the apartheid regime while Mandela negotiated a compromise.

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-turn in Nigerian-South African relations, Johannesburg had become 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 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 both the critical vulnerability of Africa's micro-minorities and the shifting prospects for democracy on the continent.

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.”⁽²³⁾ 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 world's equatorial belt, from Ecuador, Bolivia and

Brazil, through Surinam and Guyana, on through Nigeria, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Gabon, and Zaire, to the Philippines, Sarawak, and New Guinea. This strip contains a unique concentration of ethnic minorities for simple ecological reasons. Rich equatorial ecosystems aged 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, 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 are mirrored in other mineral-rich equatorial regions, West Papua and Ecuador 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 second worst genocide of our century, in East Timor, has colonized West Papua with a brutality that has led to the killing of 43,000 indigenous people. Their accomplice in this endeavor has been the Louisiana-based mining transnational, Freeport McMoran. Since the arrival of Freeport in 1967, the indigenous people have endured detention without trial, torture, forced resettlement, disappearances, the plunder of their mineral wealth, and the uncompensated degradation of their environment.(24) Freeport's private security officers and the Indonesian military have, 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 Indonesians and Freeport have pursued ethnocide as a condition of mandatory development. James Moffett, Freeport McMoran's chairman, himself seems confused as to whether such "progress" is a life-giving or death-dealing business. Freeport, in his proud words, "is thrusting a spear of development into the heart of West Papua" (The Independent, 17 Jan. 1996: 16). In this deadly battle, the micro-minorities have fought back in a language that melds 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."(25)

Some of these acts of environmental defiance have begun to have results: for example, in the oil-rich Oriente region of Ecuador, where Texaco has 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 seventeen million gallons of crude oil in the Oriente, leaving a toxic legacy that has caused, as in Ogoniland, chronic health problems for the residents.(26) Here again, the seepage of oil-contaminated waste resulted from a 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."(27)

Ecuador's Acción Ecológica has 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 has pursued an innovative avenue of redress, filing a \$1.5 billion class action suit in New York against Texaco. The suit has 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 is suing Shell for four million dollars for spillages that have robbed them of their livelihood.

The ravaging of West New Guinea, the Oriente, and Ogoniland testifies to the growing inequity towards subnational minorities of transnationals which, in the 1990s, are enjoying enhanced mobility and experiencing fewer controls. 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 André Gide's Congo journal begin to sound eerily apposite. When Shell can pump out thirty billion dollars worth of oil and the tradeoff for the locals is disease, dispossession,

military occupation, massacres, and an end to self-sustaining fishing and agriculture, the process seems more redolent of turn-of-the-century colonial buccaneering than of end-of-millennium 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 the 1990s 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."(28)

Under such circumstances, the kleptocrats and soldiery in the nominal capital will still demand their palm-greasing, while locally, the chiefs will request their crude version of the same. Such practices are already widespread. Late last year, 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 one thousand pounds, twelve bottles of cognac and twelve 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 that "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" (Independent, 1 December 1995).

More bargaining, more demands. Another three hundred pounds 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 have been an entry from Gide's Congo journal or the opening scene of a lost Conrad novel.

Nearly 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 El Dorado 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."(29) Over great swathes of Africa and much of the former Third World, El Dorado 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" (Genocide in Nigeria: 91).

We have witnessed in the past decade the accelerated extraction of African minerals, oil, and timber in many of the continent's least stable nations: Liberia, Gabon, Zaire, Central African Republic, Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sierra Leone, Mauritania, Angola among them. Newly legitimized South African mining corporations now compete on this terrain against European, American, Asian, and Australian 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. It is in this climate that Saro-Wiwa's campaign against the destruction of micro-minorities through the devastation of their environment may prove to be a harbinger of a much broader discontent. He seemed to intuit as much at his trial, 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" (The Observer, 12 Nov. 1995).

The Gospel cadences of Saro-Wiwa's prophecy are consistent with the Passion Play that 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 overweeningly ambitious. The junta took this very mortal and internationally obscure activist, gave him a show-trial, and turned him through execution into a martyr. They thus amplified his cause and – as happens with martyrs – simplified it in his favor. 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 with 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 that 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 musclemen who seek to shackle language and criminalize imaginings only flatter writers with their fears. While Abacha was naive 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" (*New York Times*, 29 Oct. 1995). This is surely the high-water mark for the dictatorial tendency to equate fantasy, representation, and political advocacy.

Abacha clearly had no conception of the cost of creating a martyred writer, an image with considerable pulling power in the media – doubly so since 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 observes, "the most brutal form of censorship" (*The Guardian (London)*, 11 Nov. 1995). 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. So in death Saro-Wiwa extended – surely beyond his imaginings – the remarkable coalition of international interests that he had begun to forge while alive, an alliance that brought together environmentalists, minority rights advocates, anti-racists, opponents of corporate deregulation, and defenders of freedom of speech. Whether his principles ultimately prevail will depend as much on the future of this coalition as on the timeliness of the ideas themselves.

(1) Saro-Wiwa repeatedly uses the terms "recolonization" and indigenous colonialism" to describe relations between the Nigerian regimes that have favored the three major ethnic groups and violently suppressed the rights and claims of extreme minorities like the Ogoni. See, for example, *Genocide in Nigeria: 20*; and *Nigeria: The Brink of Disaster* (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Saros, 1991): 71.

(2) Quoted *Genocide in Nigeria: 19*. See also *Nigeria: The Brink of Disaster: 45-6*.

(3) This clause referred to revenue generated by both mineral sales and mining rents. See *Genocide in Nigeria: 21*.

(4) Most of the 1.5% has been unilaterally "borrowed" by the powerful states where the Yoruba, the Igbo and the Hausa-Fulani are in the majority.

(5) For the most authoritative account of the events leading up to these killings, see Human Rights Watch/Africa, "Nigeria: The Ogoni Crisis. A Case-Study of Military Repression in Southeastern Nigeria," *Human Rights Watch/Africa* 7, 5 (1995), esp. 7-25. See also *The Guardian*, 8 Nov. 1995: 10-11; and *The Village Voice*, 21 Nov. 1995: 21-23.

(6) Witnesses Sam Bakilo Bako, Panedom Bahom, and Oamen Enaholo, quoted *Genocide in Nigeria: 58, 66, 79*.

(7) Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Sozaboy: A Novel Written in Rotten English* (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Saros, 1985). For a discussion of Saro-Wiwa's use of dialect, see Chantal Zabus, "Mending the Schizo-Text: Pidgin in the Nigerian Novel," *Kunapipi* 14 (1) (1992), 119-27 and Willfried F. Feuser, "The Voice from Dukana: Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Matatu* 1 (2) (1987), 49-57.

- (8) For Saro-Wiwa's own reflections on this experience, see Ken Saro-Wiwa, "A Television Drama in Nigeria: A Personal Experience," a paper read at the African Literature Association Conference in Pittsburgh, April 1988.
- (9) Nigeria: The Brink of Disaster: 118.
- (10) The traditions of socialism were never as prominent in Anglophone West Africa as they were in Southern and East Africa, not least because West Africa was more shallowly colonized than Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique, and Angola. West Africa was thus spared the ravaging liberatory wars in which the goals of decolonization and socialism typically converged.
- (11) Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1983); Mafika Gwala, "Writing as a Cultural Weapon," in M.J. Daymond, J.U. Jacobs and Margaret Lenta, eds., *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Natal University Press, 1984): 37-44.
- (12) David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (London: Earthscan, 1995): 124.
- (13) The phrase "judicial murder" was coined by British Prime Minister John Major. See *Financial Times*, 13 Nov., 1995.
- (14) See Interview, Channel 4 (U.K.), 15 Nov. 1995; *Genocide in Nigeria*: 8, 82; and *A Month and a Day*: 18, 73, 186-88.
- (15) Greenpeace International, *Shell Shocked: The Environmental and Social Costs of Living with Shell in Nigeria* (Amsterdam: Greenpeace International, 1994): 9. See also Rob Nixon, "The Oil Weapon," *New York Times*, 17 Nov. 1995.
- (16) Rowell, "Trouble Flares in the Delta of Death": II.
- (17) The Igbo dream of creating an independent secessionist nation called Biafra would not have been viable without the sea of oil beneath the Niger delta, which they included in their projected Biafra. The prospect of losing that oil wealth intensified the ferocity of the Hausa-Yoruba response to the secessionists.
- (18) Ken Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (Lagos, Nigeria: Saros, 1989): 29. See also *Genocide in Nigeria*: 87-88.
- (19) See Interview, Channel 4 (U.K.), 15 Nov. 95, in which he called for economic sanctions and Nigeria's expulsion from the United Nations. He argued that "The military governments of Nigeria have sat on other Nigerians in a way that is just as evil as what was done in South Africa."
- (20) General Sani Abacha and his military regime annulled the democratic elections of November 1993 and imprisoned president-elect Moshood Abiola and other internal opposition leaders on trumped-up charges of treason. In July 1995, former president Olusegun Obasanjo and forty other opponents of the regime were convicted and sentenced to death. After an international outcry, these sentences were commuted to life in July 1995. Four months later, another of Abacha's kangaroo courts condemned Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni eight to hang.
- (21) Mandela's stance echoed that of his first deputy, Thabo Mbeki, who had visited Nigeria in July 1995 and, failing to dissuade Abacha from his hardline course, had nonetheless concluded that "We need a more equal relationship. Western countries must accept the capacity of African countries to set an African agenda." Quoted *The Economist*, 18 Nov., 1995.
- (22) Peter Vale, quoted in *The Independent* (London), 21 Nov. 1995.

(23) Quoted in Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World*, 159.

(24) *The Nation*, 31 July 1995; *Lingua Franca* Nov./Dec. 1995; *The Independent* (London), 17 Jan. 1996.

(25) Previous two quotes from *The Independent* (London), 17 Jan. 1996.

(26) See Judith Kimerling, *Amazon Crude* (San Francisco: National Resources Defense Council, 1991) and Joe Kane, *Savages* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

(27) Rick Bass, quoted Kimerling, *Amazon Crude*: iv.

(28) Quoted in Robert D. Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth. A Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century* (New York: Random House, 1996): 63.

(29) Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899; rpt. New York: Signet, 1978): 99.