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STRUGGLE IN OGNILAND

Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Cultural Politics
of Environmental Justice

Susan Comfort

I am recreating the Ogoni people, first and foremost, to come to the realisation of what they have always been which British colonisation tried to take away from them. So my effort is very intellectual. It is backed by theories, thoughts and ideas which will, in fact, matter to the rest of Africa in the course of time.

—Ken Saro-Wiwa, *The News*, May 17, 1993

From struggles by rubber tappers to protect the Amazonian rain forest, to the Chipko movement of the Himalayas fighting deforestation, to the more recent events in Ogoniland, Nigeria, to stop environmental degradation from large-scale oil drilling, the last few decades have witnessed the emergence of vital environmental movements in the Third World. Images of women hugging trees in the Himalayas to stave off clear-cutting (*chipko* means "to hug") and the faces of Ogoni dissidents detained by the military government in Nigeria have inspired activists and scholars to link the struggle for the environment to issues of basic human rights and social justice. As "struggles for "environmental justice," these movements are as much struggles for environmental conservation as they are battles against poverty and racism.¹ Indeed, they constitute a profound challenge to global patterns of development that have precipitated growing inequality, pollution, and land closures.

As part of a broad effort to develop a critical method for understanding the cultural politics of environmental justice, this article examines the cultural production of one writer who was deeply involved in a struggle for environmental justice—Ken Saro-Wiwa. Tried and executed on unsubstantiated murder charges by a military tribunal during the repressive days of Sani Abacha's regime, Saro-Wiwa is mostly remembered as a tireless advocate of

the Ogoni people and the environment of the Niger Delta. Also a prolific writer, he produced a considerable range of autobiographical testimony, political journalism, and fiction.

As I examine the cultural politics of Ken Saro-Wiwa, I argue that he is engaged in an attempt to resist the hegemony of state-sponsored maldevelopment and neocolonial capital by building an alternative consensus that transforms conventional political categories and expectations. Through an analysis of selected works by Saro-Wiwa, I explore his varied efforts to construct new narratives of social change that draw together environmental struggle with challenges to racial, ethnic, and class oppression. I pay special attention to the Nigerian context, one often neglected by critics and activists in the United States, where political discourse conflates racism and minority discrimination into a single oppression. Thus, there has been little recognition that the Ogoni were subject to *both* racism by global corporations *and* discrimination by an elite faction of dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria. Given the complexity of the political terrain that Saro-Wiwa negotiated, I argue that his political practice was multivalent and pragmatic. This article will analyze his cultural politics in-depth, specifically his explicitly polemical work, and I will argue that his attempt to construct an oppositional Ogoni identity is carried out through an appeal to the epic conventions of an embattled moral community. Even as his environmental claims for the Ogoni are premised on the assertion of their rights to self-determination and cultural sovereignty, an analysis of his work also reveals an accompanying critique of global capitalism and a broader collective vision of environmental justice.

Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni and Environmental Justice

Before his involvement in the Ogoni movement, Ken Saro-Wiwa led a varied and active life as a writer, journalist, publisher, businessman, and civil servant. Contrary to the popular image of Saro-Wiwa as a political outsider, he was a consummate politician, though he would use his "insider" knowledge to advance environmental justice and new pathways to social change. Born in 1941 in the area of the Niger Delta then designated the Rivers State, Saro-Wiwa obtained an undergraduate degree from the University of Ibadan, where he studied theater and literature. After graduation, he taught at Government College at Umuahia and at Stella Marris College in Port Harcourt. During the Nigerian Civil War from 1966 to 1970, Saro-Wiwa allied himself

with the Federal side against the Igbo secessionists, whom he believed would dominate the Ogonis and other Delta minorities if they seceded. When the secessionists were defeated, the Federal side appointed him Administrator of Bonny Province in the Rivers State, and he was active in the Rivers State government as a commissioner and a member of the Executive Council. He was later appointed as Executive Director of the National Directorate for Social Mobilization in 1987, though he resigned one year later in protest over the corruptions of the Babangida government. While not serving in government, he built a business in trading to finance his activism and writing. Saro-Wiwa was keenly aware that his ambitions to advocate for Ogoni rights required a financial basis, and he consciously sought financial security for this purpose.

While he built a business in trading and continued to be involved in politics, Saro-Wiwa maintained a prolific output as a writer. Frustrated by the lack of publishers, he began his own publishing company, Saros International in 1973, which enabled him to publish and distribute many of his books. He produced a considerable range of work and journalism, including poetry, children's literature, plays, short stories, and novels, as well as newspaper columns and satirical pieces. Beginning with the teleplay "The Transistor Radio," which won a BBC competition in 1972, he wrote and produced radio and television pieces, of which his most famous is the popular television sitcom *Basi and Company*. He also wrote two satirical, dystopian novels, *The Prisoners of Job* and *Pita Dumbrok's Prison*, both of which originated as weekly newspaper serials. Probably his best-known work is *Sozaboy*, a trenchant antiwar novel critical of the Nigerian Civil War. In addition, Saro-Wiwa's oeuvre includes forays into narrative realism: his two short story collections, *A Forest of Flowers* and *Adaku and Other Stories*, both of which focus on a fictional community modeled after Ogoni villages in the Niger Delta, experiment with a dynamic interplay of parable and folktale with social realism. In addition to his satirical work and fiction, he has written a wide range of polemical work and nonfiction, notably his treatise on Nigerian ethnic politics, *Nigeria: The Brink of Disaster*; his historical research of the Civil War, *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War*; his passionate account of the Ogoni struggle, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*; and his prison diary, *A Month and A Day: A Detention Diary*, which is as much a report on his detention as it is an argument for the cultural rights of the Ogoni.

Saro-Wiwa's experience as a writer, television producer, and especially his work with a government public relations service, were profoundly influential

in shaping his strategies for organizing and advocating the Ogoni cause. He observes that it is as a producer of popular culture that he gained some of his most valuable skills as an organizer: "Television production sharpened my writing skills and the flying success of the series, *Basi & Co.*, established my reputation as a creative writer. But above all, I learnt how to deal with the press and how to promote an idea, publicity being very central to the success of a television series. That was the importance of my television work to the Ogoni question" (*A Month and a Day*, 58-59). As critics have observed, in his role as television producer, Saro-Wiwa was a participant in the creation of a popular culture for the urban middle class that in Abiola Irele's words, "rejects the revaluation of traditional culture . . . which has become a dominant feature of African literature" (266). A major contradiction that runs through Saro-Wiwa's work is the conflict between his refusal to romanticize the folk and his commitment to a profoundly populist role as an advocate for Ogoni rights. He also cannot be described as a socialist (and thus he cannot be easily identified with the socialist intellectual tradition in Africa associated with writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o or Wole Soyinka) even though his writing contains powerful critiques of global capital.² As the analysis that follows demonstrates, his politics were transitional, pragmatic, and sometimes contradictory, and they were shaped in large part by his advocacy of the Ogoni cause within both national and international contexts.

Before examining his political practice in depth, let me first provide some background on the Ogoni and oil in Nigeria. Located in the eastern region of the Niger Delta, Ogoniland has a population of approximately five hundred thousand, and it consists of six kingdoms, where four closely related languages are spoken. During the colonial era and the subsequent First Republic, Ogoniland was included in the Eastern Region, where the Igbo formed the majority ethnic group. After the Civil War and the attempted secession of the Igbo, the Eastern region was broken up into smaller states including the present day Rivers State that administers Ogoniland and several other minority ethnic areas.

Oil production in the Rivers State, including Ogoniland, began in 1958 shortly after petroleum was discovered by Shell Oil.³ Today, Nigeria draws 80 percent of its revenue from oil production and earns 90 percent of its foreign exchange from oil exports (Sachs, 14). In the early twentieth century, the colonial government granted concessions to foreign companies to conduct exploration for oil, and in 1938, Shell D'Arcy Petroleum Development Company was granted an exclusive exploration license, and has dominated oil

production in the country ever since. A subsidiary of Shell Oil Company, Shell Petroleum Development Company, currently produces 50 percent of Nigeria's crude oil, and maintains control over 60 percent of commercially viable oil-bearing land (Ihonvbere and Shaw, 237). Despite a program of indigenization initiated by the military government in the late 1960s, which instituted joint ventures and the establishment of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), oil production remains an enclave industry in which the technology, management, and profits are mostly controlled by transnational corporations. Since the worldwide oil bust of the early 1980s, and the subsequent debt crisis and structural adjustment prescribed by the International Monetary Fund, the Nigerian government has relinquished even more control, and it has offered even greater incentives to foreign companies, in order to stave off economic hardship and an escalating foreign exchange crisis. Since oil production began in 1958, Shell has drilled over one hundred wells and established two refineries and a fertilizer complex in Ogoniland. According to Julius O. Ihonvbere and Timothy Shaw, "Shell estimates that about 624 million barrels of oil have been extracted from Ogoniland since it commenced operations," and an estimated \$30 billion worth of oil has been produced (226-27).

The environment of the Niger Delta has suffered as a result. Agricultural lands that produce cassava, yam, and other essential staples have been devastated by oil spills and toxic leakage from waste pits, and lands have been polluted or expropriated with little compensation to local communities. The United Nations has declared the Niger Delta one of the most endangered river deltas in the world. Between 1976 and 1991, there were nearly three thousand oil spills totaling over two million barrels of oil spilled (238). Indeed, 40 percent of Shell's oil spills worldwide have occurred in Nigeria, suggesting that Shell maintains a lower environmental standard there than elsewhere. Shell practices environmental racism by waiving, as one critic points out, "onshore drilling standards that it routinely upholds elsewhere" (Nixon, 116). In one notorious spill on farmland near Ebubu in 1970, the spilled oil was burned rather than cleaned up, resulting in the significant degradation of the land. Gas flaring is another serious pollution problem. According to a World Bank study, "76 percent of the natural gas produced in the process of petroleum production is simply flared. . . . The emission of CO₂ [carbon dioxide] from gas flaring in Nigeria releases 35 million tons of CO₂ a year and 12 million tons of methane, which means that Nigeria's oil fields contribute more to global warming than the rest of the world together" (qtd. in Ihonvbere and Shaw, 237). In addition, the oil

pipelines, which crisscross Ogoni lands and villages, frequently leak and do not receive regular maintenance.

The Ogoni movement emerged in protest of this environmental devastation as well as the closure of communal lands decreed by the 1979 Constitution. Environmental devastation and closure have hit women and poorer peasants particularly hard, given that these groups derive their subsistence and economic security from communal lands. Another significant factor influencing the emergence of the Ogoni struggle, particularly the participation of Ogoni elites, is the state's reduction of revenue allocated to state and local authorities (from 50 percent in 1960 to 2 percent in the 1980s). The publication of the Ogoni Bill of Rights in October 1990 is typically regarded as a significant starting point in the mass mobilization of the Ogoni movement, and Saro-Wiwa is said to have drafted it. The 1990 Bill of Rights calls for "political autonomy" for the Ogonis as "a distinct and separate unit"; the preservation of Ogoni languages and culture; as well as environmental reparations and a more equitable distribution of oil revenues. Ignored by the government, the Bill of Rights was followed by a 1991 Addendum reiterating the basic demands, and subsequent mass mobilization of the Ogoni signaled by the founding of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), the National Youth Council of Ogoni People, the Conference of Ogoni Traditional Rulers, and the Council for Ogoni Rights. In a pivotal moment, on December 3, 1992, MOSOP sent a letter to the oil companies and the NNPC demanding reparations for environmental degradation: payment of royalties on oil sales since 1959, and an end to environmentally damaging practices.

The next few months witnessed several significant mass actions, during one of which, on January 4, 1993, an estimated three hundred thousand people gathered to celebrate Ogoni Day in recognition of the United Nations Year of Indigenous Peoples. Mass rallies continued for the next few months and at the end of April, government troops fired on protesters attempting to stop the bulldozing of cropland by an American contractor, Wilbros. One person was killed and twenty others were wounded. In June 1993, though some of the Ogoni leadership disagreed with the decision, MOSOP boycotted the national elections to protest the constitution's failure to recognize minority rights. Charged with treasonous activities, Ken Saro-Wiwa was detained by the government for over a month that summer. During the summer and fall of 1993, amid increased government surveillance and repression, ethnic clashes broke out in the Rivers State. In fact, in fighting between the Ogoni and a neighboring ethnic group, the Andoni, which left over one

thousand dead and at least thirty thousand homeless, there is evidence that government soldiers orchestrated the hostilities.⁴ In addition, military involvement has also been documented in the violence between the Ogonis and Okrikas in December 1993, and state security agents are said to have aided the Ndokis in their raids on Ogoni villages the following spring. As a result of the violence, Shell temporarily ceased all operations in Ogoniland, and government repression was stepped up with the establishment of the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force in January 1994. In the summer of 1994, this mobile police force engaged in ongoing raids on Ogoni villages, which, according to Human Rights Watch/Africa, involved shooting and beating people indiscriminately; looting and destroying property; as well as arresting and detaining hundreds of Ogoni.⁵ On May 21, 1994, four pro-government Ogoni chiefs were killed in a mob attack, the crime for which Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists were tried before a military tribunal. The trial itself was riddled with irregularities and violated basic tenets of fair, independent, and impartial judicial procedures: the tribunal was appointed by the illegitimate government of Sani Abacha; the defense lawyers were denied access to their clients; and prosecution witnesses are said to have been bribed by state agents to provide false information. Moreover, the undisputed fact that Saro-Wiwa was nowhere near the scene of the four murders did not have any bearing on the final guilty verdict.

Saro-Wiwa's documentary research, essays, speeches, and polemical journalism were instrumental in articulating and calling attention to the Ogoni cause. His advocacy started during the Civil War when he wrote the 1968 pamphlet, *The Ogoni Nationality: Today and Tomorrow*, which recounts the repression of the Ogoni during the war and criticizes the government for not sharing the wealth generated by oil production in the region. He went on to develop this critique in documentary work published during his involvement in MOSOP. In *Genocide in Nigeria* (1991), for example, he cites original letters and memos in their entirety to construct a historical record of exploitation and destruction. It is a text designed to present evidence to support his case that Ogoniland has been subjected to repression because of the oil production in the region. Saro-Wiwa's argument draws its power from its evocative presentation of the plight of the Ogoni people and a narrative of their repression by the British and by the Nigerian government after independence. Under the British, according to Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni were able to assert some measure of autonomy, organizing the Ogoni Central Union (1930) and the Ogoni State Representative Assembly (1950). They were also granted a Native Authority in 1947, with the legendary T. N. Paul

Birabi as the chief administrator. After independence, and during the Civil War, the Ogoni suffered massive repression by the Igbo, who sought to control the oil resources of the region. Saro-Wiwa argues here, and elsewhere, that the Civil War was a resource war, and that the environmental devastation of the war was matched by the human one: according to Saro-Wiwa, as many as thirty thousand Ogoni were killed during the war, and many more were driven into detention camps by the Igbo, who suspected them of collaboration with the Federal side. After the war, the Ogoni did not fare much better due to the oil exploitation that has devastated the region.

In his analysis of maldevelopment in Ogoniland, Ken Saro-Wiwa relates a familiar story, one of ethnic politics and elite collaboration with foreign power. As many commentators have observed, Saro-Wiwa emphasizes "internal colonialism" or ethnic domination by the northern Hausa-Fulani rulers as the primary explanation for the exploitation of Ogoni lands. Ethnic politics in the country is arguably one of the legacies of colonial style rule: the British applied the principle of "divide and rule," administering the country regionally through Native Authorities, and thus creating ethnic and regional rivalries that have become more competitive and entrenched in the post-colonial era. As Sam C. Nolutshungu has observed, decolonization was a hierarchical affair in which the formation of regional political parties "from the top down, to respond to an opportunity created by the imminent departure of colonial rule . . . necessitated an aggressive definition and bounding by each prospective leadership of its own territory upon the received template of the region which could be given a cultural and ethnic significance as well" (89). In other words, as Nolutshungu argues, and as Mahmood Mamdani has also recently outlined in his book *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, "British colonialism contained no concept of citizenship for natives" (Nolutshungu, 89). The colonial policy of indirect rule emphasized "the distinctness of peoples, their cultures and needs," and thus required that the colonized be ruled through Native Authorities, which the British created for the purposes of colonial administration (89). Decolonization has resulted in the consolidation of ethnic distinction as the basis of power for competing regional elites. Furthermore, state power means access not only to political power, but also to the means of capital accumulation and patronage. Thus, the postcolonial state in Nigeria is dominated by patron-client relationships defined by ethnic allegiances and alliances among elites. Any semblance of democracy that the Second Republic claimed to have inaugurated was constituted from above. As Nolut-

shungu argues, "the colonial transfer of power set the precedent, and subsequently encouraged the expectation that democracy could be created from above by the enactment of constitutions that struck bargains among political elites—not classes—poised to succeed the preceding (undemocratic) regime" (103).

Saro-Wiwa's advocacy on behalf of the Ogoni is markedly different from conventional political practice in Nigeria, and it is his articulation of environmental injustice that complicates the typical logic of Nigerian politics. His political practice may be said to demonstrate the residual features of ethnic politics, but also the emergent characteristics of a new social formation constituted by movements for environmental justice. His argument for environmental justice draws its power and legitimacy from his assertion of Ogoni nationhood, and his narration of the Ogoni as a moral community of environmental stewards draws on the epic tropes associated with nationalist narratives. In other words, Saro-Wiwa's depiction of the political ecology of the Ogoni inscribes their collective culture, history, and geography in epic terms.

Let us take a closer look at one specific text wherein Saro-Wiwa makes a case for the cultural sovereignty of the Ogoni: *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* begins with a remarkable chapter that outlines Ogoni history and culture. Its first line reads, "The Ogoni are a distinct ethnic group within the Federal Republic of Nigeria." This is followed by a descriptive ethnography that establishes the boundaries of Ogoni territory, identifies a time in the past of their settlement and names the specific kingdoms which make up the Ogoni group: "the Ogoni are said to have settled in the area well before the fifteenth century and established themselves in the six kingdoms of Babbe, Elemo, Gokana, Nyo-Khana, Ken-Khana and Tai" (11). The chapter continues by describing the Ogoni attachment to the land and their sustainable agricultural practices: "The Ogoni had inherited a precious part of God's earth and did everything to preserve it. The rich plateau soil provided agricultural plenty and the rivers which wash the borders of the entire area brimmed with fishes and sea food. The Ogoni seized the opportunity to become competent farmers and fishermen and to transform their territory into the food basket of the eastern Niger delta" (12). Implied here is a prelapsarian, reciprocal and nonexploitative relationship to the land. The biblical overtones of this passage also suggest that the Ogoni attachment to this territory is sanctioned by a higher power. This enchanted relationship is further elaborated in language of holistic ecology: "To the Ogoni, rivers and streams do not only

provide water for life—for bathing and drinking etc.; they do not only provide fish for food, they are also sacred and are bound up intricately with the life of the community of the entire Ogoni nation" (12-13).

The narration of the Ogoni past stresses their territorial isolation and also the remoteness of their past. M. M. Bakhtin has suggested that the epic conjures up an "absolute past" that is "inaccessible" and marked off from the present.⁶ By rendering Ogoni history and culture an "immutable fact" and by attributing a sacred sanction to their ecological values, Saro-Wiwa renders the claims of the Ogoni unassailable and inviolable. Scholars and activists have noticed that movements for environmental justice have appealed to what has been called a "medieval" notion of justice, which is: "at one and the same time a moral and cosmic principle, to which all human activity must be subordinated. Any departure from this principle is equivalent to transgression of the divine order of things and of natural law" (Harvey, 388). Like so many groups that have challenged dispossession and environmental destruction, Saro-Wiwa inscribes the contours of a moral community that holds out noncommodified, "enchanted," equitable social relations and a sustainable relationship to the land against systemic maldevelopment and neo-colonial exploitation. The epic narrative of cultural rights constitutes what David Harvey describes as "a medium of social protest. . . [that] articulates ideas about a moral economy of collective provision and collective responsibility as opposed to a set of distributive relations within the political economy of profit" (Harvey, 389). Furthermore, this epic narrative holds out the ideal of the nation, which, according to Benedict Anderson, is a "deep, horizontal comradeship," an imagined political community, whose magic "turn[s] chance into destiny" and thus renders history purposeful (16, 19). Those values are a powerful challenge to the machine of "development" that also claims historical necessity and inevitability.

Saro-Wiwa's argument for environmental rights is thus intricately interwoven with his calls for Ogoni cultural autonomy, and the multivalence of his cultural intervention is further complicated by his claims that the Ogoni share a history of environmental injustice with other groups around the world. In doing so, he rewrites the Ogoni past within a larger transnational context of colonial history and contemporary globalization. For example, on the first Ogoni Day, January 4, 1993, timed to celebrate the United Nations Year of Indigenous Peoples, Saro-Wiwa gave a speech comparing the plight of the Ogoni with "the Maori of New Zealand, the Aborigines of Australia and the Indians of North and South America" (*A Month and A Day*, 131). In another speech later that day, Saro-Wiwa elaborated on that comparison,

drawing together the pasts of divergent groups into a collective history of oppression and exploitation:

Contrary to the belief that there are no indigenous people in black Africa, our research has shown that the fate of such groups as the Zangon Kafaf and Ogoni in Nigeria is, in essence, no different from those of the Aborigines of Australia, the Maori of New Zealand and the Indians of North and South America. Their common history is of the usurpation of their land and resources, the destruction of their culture and the eventual decimation of the people. Indigenous people often do not realize what is happening to them until it is too late. More often than not, they are the victims of the actions of greedy outsiders. EMIROAF [Ethnic Minority Rights Organization of Africa] will continue to mobilize and represent the interest of all indigenous people on the African continent. It is in this regard that we have undertaken to publicize the fate of the Ogoni people in Nigeria. (131)

By claiming an "indigenous" identity for the Ogoni, Saro-Wiwa indicates that MOSOP seeks broader political goals that include resistance to systemic global maldevelopment. Indeed, the Ogoni are now regularly featured as antiglobalization icons by the left popular media in the West.

By engaging in cultural activism that fosters an identification as an environmental justice movement, Saro-Wiwa developed a critical analysis and oppositional identity that challenged the politics of patronage and elite corruption in Nigeria. In his reflections on other elites who abandoned MOSOP to return to the state machinery of patronage and party politics, he remarked: "Mainstream politicians work for immediate reward. A movement like MOSOP is involved in alternative politics with a more long-term perspective" (*A Month and A Day*, 101). That "long-term perspective" included a strategy of mass mobilization to build a movement from below. In mass meetings held throughout Ogoniland in November and December 1992, MOSOP formulated a list of demands to Shell and the NNPC, demands that Saro-Wiwa would present in a formal letter in mid-December. His organizing strategy also included an emphasis on land closures and environmental degradation that appealed directly to the women and small farmers who had depended on expropriated land for subsistence. His critical analysis also appealed to Ogoni youth who were not party to the brokered land deals or small compensations made by the oil companies to traditional chiefs and state agents. Saro-Wiwa referred repeatedly to the many women and

young people involved in the ranks of the movement. The April 1993 protest against Wilbros contracting company, who were bulldozing croplands in Biara, consisted mostly of women. Furthermore, peasant women were the main organizers and participants in earlier revolts documented by political economist Terisa E. Turner, including the 1984 Ogharefe and 1986 Epan uprisings in what is now Delta state in the oil center of Warri, which is about one hundred miles east of the Niger Delta. In those struggles, peasant women whose land had been despoiled confronted elite men aligned with foreign capital.

As the political base of MOSOP broadened, and as Ken Saro-Wiwa's environmentalism became more critical of the collusion between the Nigerian state and global capital, the divisions within MOSOP reached a crisis point, and political violence was the result. It is significant that Shell would exploit this rift in order to identify a more moderate voice of MOSOP that would discredit Saro-Wiwa. By appealing to environmental justice as a basis for broadening the Ogoni movement, it is arguable that Ken Saro-Wiwa attempted to foster a political identity that combined a desire for cultural autonomy with a struggle to democratize the local sphere of political power and economic patronage that is the legacy of colonial capitalism and indirect rule. In *Citizen and Subject*, Mahmood Mamdani has argued that the colonial state was a "double-sided affair" divided between urban civil power and rural tribal authority. Urban civil power, a form of direct rule typically administered by Europeans, denied Africans their civil rights by an appeal to racism, whereas rural tribal authority subjected Africans to state-enforced customary orders. In short, indirect rule essentially reshaped native governing institutions into authoritarian, despotic Native Authorities designed primarily to extract taxes and labor (Mamdani, 18-19). In the postcolonial era in Africa, various attempts to institute political reforms in the sphere of civil power have partially dismantled the racist civil structures of the colonial era, but not the authoritarian character of Native Authorities. One might interpret Saro-Wiwa's activism as an attempt to challenge politics-as-usual in the Ogoni Native Authority. Indeed, in his detention diary Saro-Wiwa explains that several Ogoni leaders betrayed the movement because they had a material interest in maintaining the status quo. The day after the first Ogoni Day in 1993, Saro-Wiwa reflects on the collaboration of some Ogoni leaders with Rivers State Governor Ada George: "If I thought that there would be no answer to the march by those we had challenged, I was greatly mistaken. And, as usual, the first persons to be used were the Ogoni people

themselves. A few of them were very close to Governor Ada George and were benefiting by his being in power. And it was to them he turned for assistance to wreak his revenge on the Ogoni people" (142).

The broader significance of the Ogoni movement for the struggle for democracy and human rights during the recent dictatorship of Sani Abacha has also been the subject of recent scholarly debate. One critic has suggested that the pollution in Ogoniland became a figure for the corruptions of the "vampire state" of Nigeria.⁷ I would suggest it was the Ogonis' persistent drive to democratize local as well as national and global spheres of socio-economic power that appealed to so many Nigerians. During the pro-democracy struggles in the Abacha era, their protest of the massive exploitations of the state found resonance with many Nigerians who had grown increasingly impoverished, as cronies of the state appropriated the vast majority of the wealth. For example, in *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*, Wole Soyinka features the Ogoni in his rallying cry against state repression and exploitation under Abacha: "Ogoni people are, alas, only the guinea pigs for a morbid resolution of this smouldering inequity that was instituted by the British as they planned for their departure. The beneficiaries remain, till today, a minority made up of a carefully nurtured feudal oligarchy and their pampered, indolent, and unproductive scions" (6). Political ecologist James O'Connor argues that social movements such as the Ogoni struggle are erroneously dismissed as simply espousing parochial agendas, when, in fact, the agendas of these movements resonate with broader goals of economic equality and democratic accountability. The Ogoni call for democratic values is one example of a "site specific" movement, which became a model for human rights struggle against a repressive state in collaboration with global capitalism:

In the well thought out versions of post-Marxist thought, the "site specificity" which new social movements base themselves on are considered to make any universal demands impossible. . . . This is contrasted with the bourgeois revolution which universalized the demand for rights against privilege and the old working-class struggle which universalized the demand for public property. . . . However, [an analysis] . . . of production conditions and the contradictions therein reveals clearly that there is a universal demand to democratize the state (which regulates the provision of production conditions), as well as the family and local community. (35)

In an era of globalization and structural adjustment, movements to democratize the state and its power to regulate global capital's access to nature and labor—the production conditions that capitalism requires—have become one of the most significant arenas of struggle. The Ogoni movement is one among many movements, including protests against the Narmada Dam Project in India and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, which are struggling to reassert a public sphere of accountability against neoliberal schemes of privatization and debt-driven economic imperatives.

By linking environmental destruction, economic exploitation and oppressions of ethnicity and race, these movements attempt to build a broad oppositional consensus. In other words, they redefine poverty and cultural oppression as environmental issues, and thus build bridges among forces of resistance previously segregated into separate spheres of struggle. These movements engage, in the language of Gramscian analysis, in strategically coordinating diverse and often contradictory interests, beliefs, and values in order to construct a counterhegemonic formation. The cultures of these movements are thus shot through with contradictions: as movements that often strive for cultural autonomy and local power, they may develop parochial agendas, but their appeal to the values of environmental justice, such as equitable development, and Enlightenment principles of equal rights and democracy, implies a broader collective identity. Similarly, these groups may advocate for separatist goals, but at the same time their identification as indigenous or ethnic minorities under assault from destructive development implies a broader identity with other groups similarly under siege elsewhere. The 1992 Rio Conference and the more recent protests in Seattle make it clear that a new "Non-Aligned Movement" is emerging from the movements for alternative development and environmental justice.

Conclusion

Retired General Olusegun Obasanjo, the newly elected president of Nigeria, has recently established a commission to investigate human rights violations during the Abacha dictatorship. Among the abuses being investigated is the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995. Despite this attempt to rectify the abuses of the past regime, according to scholars and activists, the current government is not doing enough to alter the pattern of underdevelopment in the country and especially in the Niger Delta. Still denied meaningful democratic access to the central government, ethnic groups in

the Delta—including the Ogoni, the Ijaw, and the Itsekiri—continue to mobilize protests against government collaboration with foreign oil. Also, labor unions have been staging strikes and walkouts to protest economic exploitation by oil companies and government cronies. In addition, the press, an important voice during the pro-democracy struggles, has continued to push for more state accountability and equitable development in the Delta as well. Indeed, *Tempo*, one of the major Nigerian weeklies, has attributed recent ethnic violence between the Ijaw and the Itsekiri in the Delta to malddevelopment: "The animosity, actually, is not among feuding communities. Rather it is a sort of resentment against the state which exploits the oil—yielding billions of dollars—and leaves the area underdeveloped. And when such animosity lasts too long, the concerned people start suspecting one another of collaborating with the enemy or of being too passive with him. Hence the inter-communal clashes, which only justice in the sharing of oil revenue can solve in the long run" (qtd. in Fleshman, para. 7).

As struggles to democratize the state continue in Nigeria and elsewhere, I have argued that what is needed is an analysis that highlights the material connections among different sites of environmental degradation and economic exploitation but that also emphasizes the particular cultural idioms and local complexities of these struggles. It is hoped that attempts such as this one to theorize environmental struggle will facilitate not only alliances across race, ethnicity, and gender in specific sites but also coalitions across the borders of the First and Third World. At a recent conference at Ohio University on Global Human Rights, Owens Wiwa, a MOSOP organizer and Ken's brother, represented the Ogoni on a panel that included activists speaking about environmental devastation and Appalachian coal mining. The audience learned about mining subsidence experienced by poor, rural homeowners in southeastern Ohio in the same hour that they learned about Ogoni women struggling to grow yam and cassava on farmland despoiled by oil spills. In this instance, an analysis of environmental injustice is generating a recognition of the similarities between two disparate sites, and thus contributing to a new international community of resistance.

NOTES

1. I use the term "environmental justice movement" in a broad sense to refer not just to the toxic struggles that emerged in the United States in the

early 1980s, but also to environmental movements in the Third World. I do so advisedly. As some have argued, the environmental justice movement is not a singular movement. Specific struggles are differently mediated by class, race, gender, and ethnicity. For example, in Appalachia, environmental justice features corporate power and class, whereas in African American communities in the South, race is a prominent feature of environmental justice. In Nigeria, I will argue, *both ethnicity and race* are significant to the analysis of environmental justice, yet class is also an integral part of the critique of corporate exploitation. I gained clarification on this point from the work of Rob Nixon. See Nixon, "Pipe Dreams"; and Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Also see Krauss, "Women of Color in the Front Line."

2. For a comparative analysis of Saro-Wiwa's writing and cultural activism in an African context, see Irele, "Ken Saro-Wiwa"; McLuckie, "Literary Memoirs and Diaries"; and Nixon, "Pipe Dreams."

3. I have relied on the following sources for background on oil production and environmental conditions in Ogoniland: Cayford, "The Ogoni Uprising"; Hammer, "Nigeria Crude"; Kretzmann, "Nigeria's Drilling Fields"; Sachs, "Dying for Oil"; Ihonvbere and Shaw, *Illusions of Power*; and Osaghae, "The Ogoni Uprising."

4. See Human Rights Watch/Africa, "Nigeria," 12.

5. Human Rights Watch/Africa, "Nigeria." Not only was the government involved, but there is also evidence that Shell funded the operations of the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force. The commander of the Task Force, Major Paul Okuntimo, reportedly wrote a memo to the Governor of the Rivers State requesting that he put "pressure on oil companies for prompt regular inputs as discussed." See also Ihonvbere and Shaw, *Illusions of Power*, 239.

6. According to Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*, "The epic world is an utterly finished thing, not only as an authentic event of the distant past but also on its own terms and by its own standards; it is impossible to change, to rethink, to re-evaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value" (17).

7. See Apter, "Death and the King's Henchmen."

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13

TOWARD A SYMBIOSIS OF ECOLOGY AND JUSTICE

**Water and Land Conflicts in Frank Waters,
John Nichols, and Jimmy Santiago Baca**

Tom Lynch

The upper Rio Grande watershed of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico consists of arid and semiarid plateaus and valleys surrounded by high mountains. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains rise to the east, the San Juan and Jemez Mountains to the west. Much of the area is steeply sloped. All waters falling within this basin drain quickly towards the Rio Grande that slices through a faulted rift zone splitting down the heart of the landscape.

This bioregion, often referred to as the Rio Arriba or "upper river," is unique. Environmental historian William deBuys asserts that "no other region in all of North America so richly combines both ecological and cultural diversity" (6). During the past four hundred years a distinctive Chicano agropastoral culture has evolved here, characterized by a riparian long-lot settlement pattern, subsistence agriculture, communally owned grazing lands, and an acequia irrigation system. (For further details on this cultural pattern, see chapter 3 in this volume.)

Since the United States took control of the area through military conquest in 1846, however, these bioregionally integrated communities have undergone a series of assaults: The transfer of the land grant commons, often through nefarious means, to private Anglo ownership or to the U.S. Forest Service; the replacement of communal acequia irrigation districts by market-oriented conservancy districts that impose taxes that traditional water users are unable to pay; the replacement of a subsistence economy by both a market economy and by a reliance on industrial tourism; the enforcement of government regulations—including well-meaning environmental regulations—that conflict with vernacular behavior; and the arrival of a large number of Anglo "amenity migrants" whose culture is supplanting that of the Hispano community.