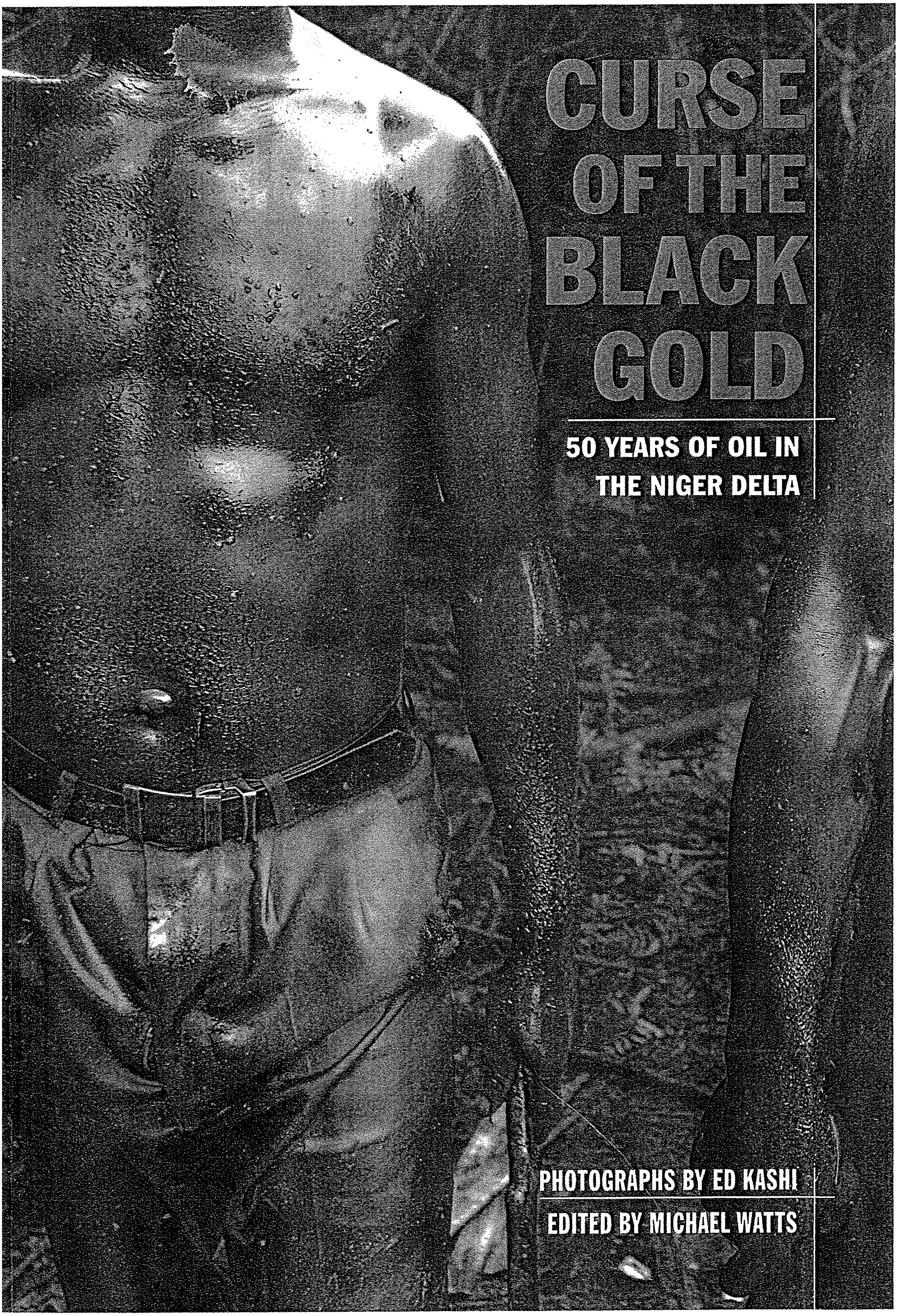


CURSE OF THE BLACK GOLD

50 YEARS OF OIL IN THE NIGER DELTA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ED KASHI

EDITED BY MICHAEL WATTS

"Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free.... The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident.... In this sense oil is a fairy tale and, like every fairy tale, a bit of a lie."

Ryszard Kapuściński, *Shah of Shahs*

Michael Watts
Sweet and Sour

child for all of the ills and failed promises of what Ryszard Kapuściński calls the fairy tale of oil. In the 1960s the town had a population of 10,000; it is now a wretched backwater, a sort of rural slum home to barely 1,000 souls who might as well live in another century. No running water, no electricity, no roads, and no functioning primary school; the creeks have been so heavily dredged, canalized, and polluted that traditional rural livelihoods have been eviscerated. "I have explored for oil in Venezuela and...Kuwait," said a British engineer, "but I have never seen an oil-rich town as impoverished as Oloibiri." In the last few years the town has been rocked by youth violence; the Aso Rock armed "cult group" dethroned the traditional ruler amidst allegations of corruption and half-finished community development projects.

It is a bleak picture, a dark tale of neglect and unremitting misery. Oloibiri, said one local, is now a "useless cast-away snail shell after its meat has been extracted and eaten by the government and SPDC" (Shell Petroleum Development Company). When I visited in 2001, the Chief, drunk on local gin, thrust into my hand a tattered copy of the original lease agreement with Shell, hoping that I might be able explain why the terms of the agreement had been abrogated. As if to mock the sad fact that Oloibiri is now a sort of fossil, rotting detritus cast off by the oil industry, a gaudy plaque dating from a presidential visit in 2001 sits next to Well No. 1. It is a foundation stone for the Oloibiri Oil and Gas Research Institute, and for a museum and library, an homage to Oloibiri and the early history of oil. Noble ideas. But the ground has not been broken, and never will. Regularly defaced, the plaque is policed by touts looking for a commission from erstwhile visitors who want to record where it all began, the ground zero of Nigeria's oil age.

Oloibiri's intimate association with oil contains another crucial lesson, this time a sort of prophesy. It was here that Isaac Adaka Boro, an Ijaw nationalist and leader of the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (who proclaimed, "Remember your petroleum which is being pumped out daily from your veins, and then fight for your freedom") was born at midnight on September 10, 1938. Declaring an independent Niger Delta Republic on February 24, 1966, Boro's famous "Twelve Day Revolution" was a foretaste of what was to come 20 years later as the abandonment and despoliation felt so harshly by Oloibiri was replicated, with terrifying fidelity, across the Niger Delta oil fields. Boro's immediate successors in the struggle for self-determination and resource control were Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni people. The meteoric rise of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) during a brutal moment in Nigeria's sad parade of military governments ended with a kangaroo court and the hanging of Saro-Wiwa and eight of his compatriots in November 1995. A novelist and poet by disposition, Saro-Wiwa was a complex and contradictory figure: a member of a ruling family yet a self-proclaimed man of the people; an Ogoni nationalist yet at loggerheads with a posse of influential Ogoni elders whose politics he vigorously opposed; a well-connected and savvy politician who had served in various levels of federal and state government yet staunchly committed to improve the plight of the poor and oppressed; a fierce critic of the ethnic majorities who dominated post-colonial Nigeria yet a fearless advocate for ethnic minorities who bore the full brunt of what he felt compelled to call genocide.

However history chooses to judge Saro-Wiwa, his legacy will rest on his commitment to democratic nonviolence and his condemnation of what he called the "slick alliance" of Big Government and Big Oil. His charismatic leadership spawned a raft of other ethnic nationality movements (the Ijaw most importantly but also the Isoko, the Urhobo and the Itsekeri) even as MOSOP itself fell into political disarray and internal squabbling after his death. Yet as he had predicted, and feared, the nonviolent struggle could and would turn violent in the face of business-as-usual politics. An Amnesty report entitled *Nigeria: Ten Years On: Injustice and Violence Haunt the Oil Delta*, released to mark the 10-year anniversary of Ken Saro-Wiwa's death, confirmed his worst fear, that conditions across the oilfields remained the same, only worse. Security forces still operated with impunity, the government failed to protect communities in oil-producing areas while providing security to the oil industry, and the oil companies bore responsibility too for the appalling misery and the political violence across the region.

The pipe-smoking writer equipped with the power of the pen has now been replaced by the figure of the masked militant armed with the ubiquitous Kaloshnikov, the typewriter of the illiterate. But even Saro-Wiwa's gravest fears could not have

The Niger Delta's long festering crisis is nourished by a gigantic reservoir of anger and dissent. The reality on the ground now is a dizzying and bewildering array of colorfully named militants (Thank God "Mopol" Musi, Livinus "Lokiri" Odudu, Nathaniel "Commander" Bidei, Whiskey Ebikabowei) and militant groups, militias, and cults. Over fifty operating military camps are dotted around the creeks. A large survey of Niger Delta oil communities by Professor Aderoju Oyefusi published in 2007 discovered that an astonishing 36.23 percent of those interviewed expressed a "willingness or propensity to take up arms against the state." The incontestable fact, as Ledum Mittee the Ogoni human rights campaigner has noted, is that there is overwhelming popular sympathy for what the militants are doing. Some sources estimate the number of trained militants now operating in the creeks at over 25,000 commanding monthly salaries of over N50,000—well above the wage that might be secured by an educated youth employed in the formal sector. For their part, the oil companies have lost their license to operate. How did it all come to this? How did a story that began with wildcatters and company officials preaching the virtues of oil to chiefs and traditional diviners in Oloibiri culminate in car bombs, rocket-propelled grenades, and counter-insurgency?

Bonny Light. Nigeria's benchmark crude for international oil markets. Like all naturally occurring crude oil, it consists of a complex mixture of hydrocarbons of various lengths. Shorter hydrocarbons are typically considered to be natural gas or natural gas liquids; longer chains are viscous and heavy (the longest chains are paraffin wax). Conventional crude oil typically contains non-metallic elements such as sulphur, nitrogen, and oxygen, and depending on its geological configuration, petroleum is recovered in combination with water and gas. Bonny Light is a "light" crude—it possesses an American Petroleum Institute (API) gravity rating of 36.7 degrees which means that it floats on water. It is "sweet" crude (low in hydrogen sulfide and carbon dioxide, unlike the "sour" crudes from Venezuela), much sought after by refineries worldwide for the high-quality distillates, liquefied petroleum gas, gasoline, and naptha that it yields. In the fall of 2007 the landed costs of Nigerian Bonny Light crude in the U.S.—the consumer of almost half of Nigerian oil—was over $80.00 per barrel.

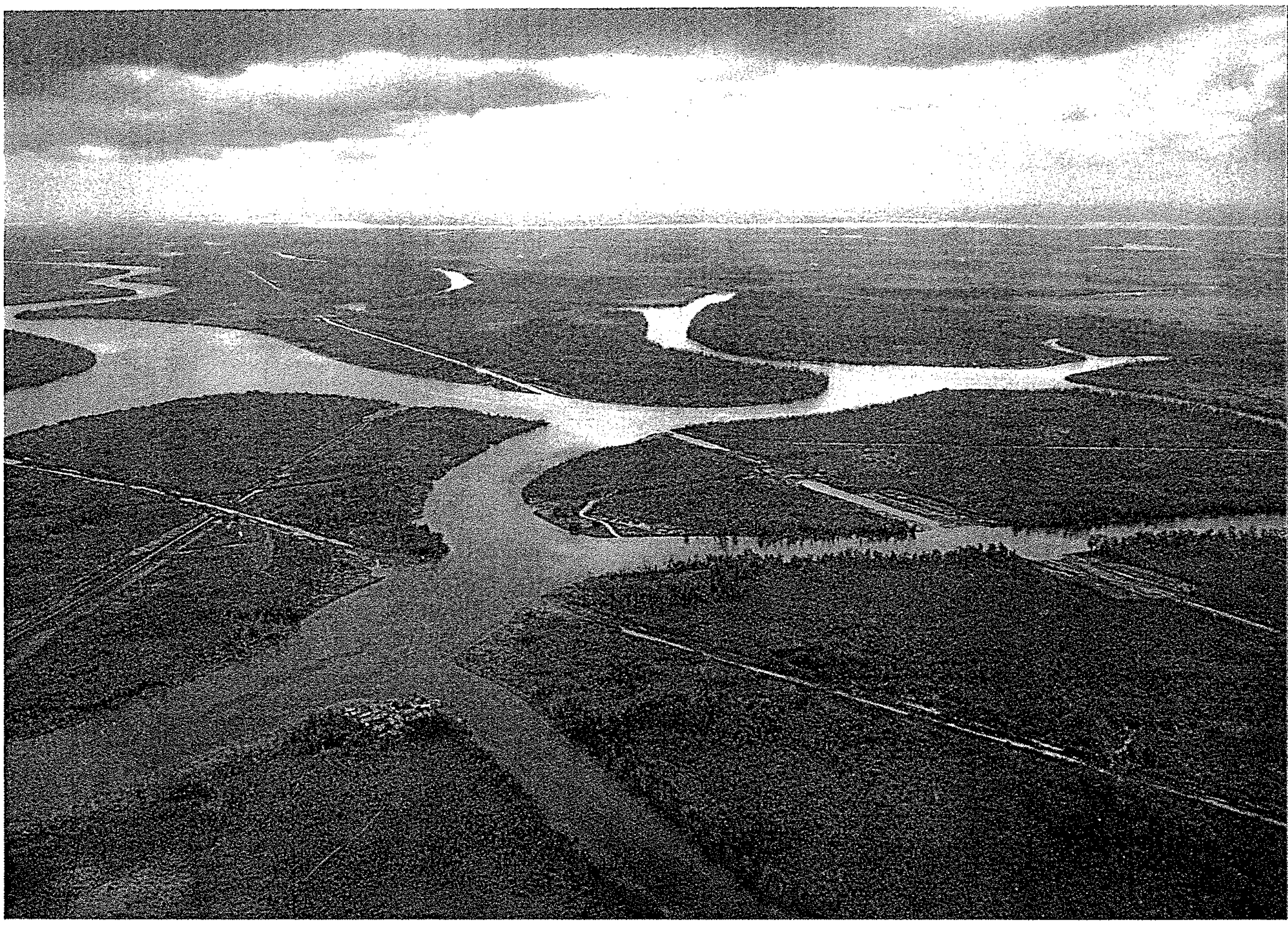
Oil is, in other words, a natural resource and a commodity—perhaps the mother of all commodities. It happens to be the fuel of our modern, turbo-charged hydrocarbon capitalism and an item of exchange capable of yielding unimaginable wealth ("black gold"). In the long march toward the modern world system, mass commodities of various sorts—sugar, silver, slaves, palm oil, petroleum—have been its beasts of burden. They have come to serve not only as markers for entire epochs—the Era of Slavery, the Age of Oil—but enter the world market bearing the hallmark of what Hanna Arendt once called "the original sin of primitive accumulation," dripping with blood and dirt. The annals of oil, after all, are an uninterrupted chronicle of naked aggression and the violent law of the corporate frontier. Iraq, was forged by this dreadful trinity of oil, empire, and markets.

Commodities define the modern history of the Niger Delta. The Delta was the "Oil Rivers" long before it became a global supplier in the world oil and gas market. Bonny Island, near the shores of the Bight of Biafra, was a slave port by the seventeenth century and later became a prosperous city-state exporting 25,000 tons of palm oil each year to a surging British industrial economy. One hundred and fifty years later it is home to a massive export terminal and one of the world's largest liquefied natural gas complexes. The great hulks of the Royal Niger Company moored in the estuaries of the Niger Delta in the nineteenth century—serving as consulate, treasury, hospital, prison and residence—were forerunners of the oil barges, the offshore platforms, and the massive Floating Production Storage and Off-Loading (FPSO) vessels that now populate the Delta mangroves and Nigeria's coastal waters.

Mass commodities with their blood and dirt still attached have always provided the Niger Delta's point of entry into a world economy, its calling card to the capitalist cosmos. If the commodity is what Karl Marx called the economic cell form of capital, oil is a perfect expression of contemporary capitalism's most basic genetic material. Oil's power as a commodity in the market derives from its twofold identity. It comes first with its usefulness—its expediency—and then with its price tag. Both seem straightforward and unambiguous but price, and the pricing of oil, is mysterious, confusing, and bewildering, part of a world of appearances that obscures the operations of the system of which oil is part. Walter Benjamin, the great German critic, said that the commodity has a phantom-like objectivity. Commodities are not what they seem and for this reason are subject to all manner of mystification; they come with their own aura.

Take oil. The great Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński was witness to the spectacular oil boom in West Asia during the 1970s. In his book *Shah of Shahs*, he says oil is "a filthy, foul-smelling liquid that squirts obligingly up into the air and falls back to earth as a rustling shower of money." It is a resource that "anesthetizes thought, blurs vision, corrupts...[it] kindles extraordinary emotions and hopes, since oil is above all a great temptation." Oil has always been vested with enormous, often magical powers. It has been called a "resource curse," the "devil's excrement," the source of the "Dutch Disease." Oil distorts the organic, natural course of development. Oil wealth ushers in an economy of hyper-consumption and spectacular excess: bloated shopping malls in Dubai or corrupt Russian "oilygarchs." "Oil has weakened our collective morality," says a Venezuelan journalist; "It obliges you to be corrupt." There is even a psychological appellation to describe the condition: the Gillette syndrome. ElDean Kohrs studied the booming coal town of Gillette, Wyoming in the 1970s, and was witness to how a commodity boom brought a corresponding wave of crime, drugs, violence, and inflation. It would afflict new gas fields of Wyoming, indigenous oil communities in Ecuador, and the rough-and-tumble Russian oilfields of Siberia.

There is inevitably an economic and political form of the Gillette syndrome. Development guru Jeffrey Sachs believes that every increase in oil dependency (measured as the proportion of exports to Gross National Product) produces a corresponding decrease in economic growth. For Oxford University economist Paul Collier, oil and civil war are evil twins. Oil encourages extortion and looting through "resource predation" and it is the feasibility of predation that determines the economics—that is to say the funding—of civil war. Others argue that "oil hinders democracy" (as if copper might promote



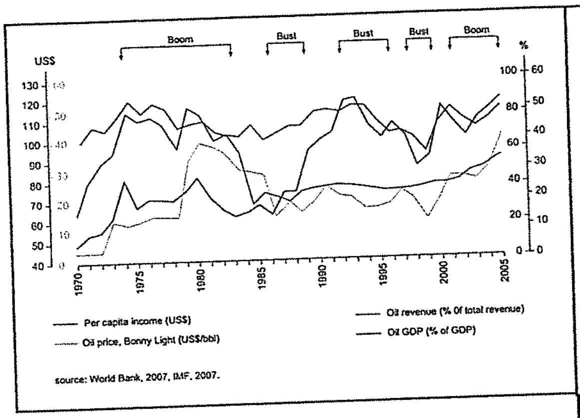
Aerial view of the riverine system of the Niger Delta near the Cawthorne Channel.

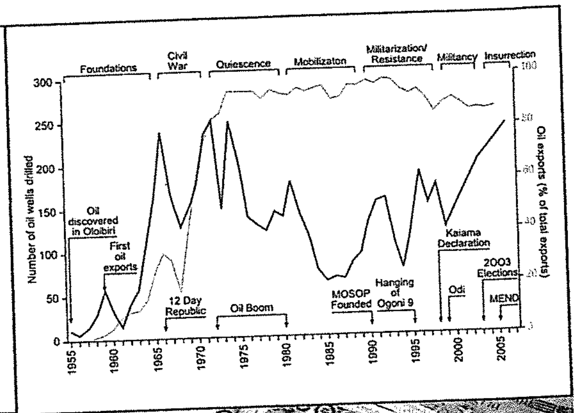
Ogoni, Ikwerre, Itsekeri, Urhobo, Isoko, Andoni, Efik, Ibibio, and so on—begs the very important question of what ethnicity means, its shifting political significance and why the language of the 1950s—"ethnic minorities"—has now been replaced by a new lexicon: "ethnic nationalities" and "oil minorities." Some form of ethnic identity is of great historical depth and antiquity. But the growing European presence after 1500, and in particular British colonists who deployed "the tribe" as the basis for indirect rule and political administration, has radically shaped the character of ethnic identity. Whether real or fictive, the British used local chiefs as representatives of primordial ethnic loyalties and in this way the prerogatives of customary rule and traditional forms of authority were reinforced. It produced what has been called a system of "decentralized despotism."

At Independence, Nigerian nationalist leaders provided civic rights for all Nigerians but provided a bonus, namely customary rights for what they termed "indigenes." In effect this perpetuated the parallel system of governance rooted in chieftaincy. Nigeria had to decide which ethnic groups were indigenous—typically the original settlers who occupied different niches within the delta as a result of successive waves of migration and settlement dating back millennia. Columbia political scientist Mamood Mandani says that as a result "the effective elements of the federation are neither territorial units called states nor ethnic groups, but ethnic groups with their own states." A federal mandate predicated on customary and civic rights meant that every ethnic group was compelled to seek, particularly with the discovery of oil, its own state or local government council to gain access to the oil-revenue allocation process. Only in this way can we understand why Nigeria, with four regions and 50 local governments in 1960, now possesses by 36 states and 774 local governments. But with each new political entity, the non-indigenes continue to grow. Once law endorses cultural identity as the basis for political identity, inevitably ethnic mobilization provides the idiom in which access to oil wealth—a national resource after all—is fought over.

Nowhere is this more the case than across the oilfields where oil has been, in the popular imagination, stolen through a raft of illegitimate laws and the corruption of the principles of derivation (the right to take a significant proportion of the value of a resource by virtue of its location within a given territory). It is no accident that Saro-Wiwa promoted the establishment of a state dedicated for Ogonis. At the same time, the Eleme, a small ethnic group related to but with a tense historical relationship to the Ogoni, promoted their own state (Nchia) as a response to claims of Ogoni sovereignty. Recently there has been a proposal by some militants for the establishment of two new "Ijaw States" (Itoru-Ibe and Oil Rivers). Oil minorities are one expression, then, of this contested and fractious process—resource control is another—operating against a backdrop of historical marginalization and neglect in the wake of the opening up of the oil frontier.

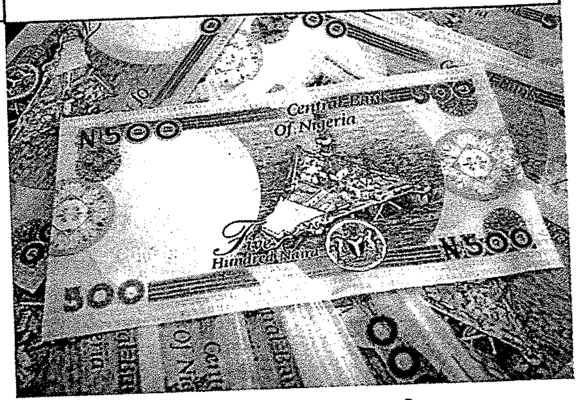
Anthropologist Martha Anderson has made the point repeatedly that the process of human occupancy in the Niger Delta, by which settlers reached the outer mangrove swamps some time around 800 CE, produced what she calls a "unique fabric of cultural resemblance and difference." The communities are fiercely autonomous—large-scale ethnic mobilization is





new government, according to Petroleum Minister Odein Ajumogobia, expects to invest over $75 billion in oil and gas over the next five years.

The enormity of the oil presence in the Niger Delta is hard to fully appreciate. Virtually every inch of the region has been touched by the industry directly through its operations or indirectly through neglect. Over 6,000 wells have been sunk, roughly one well for every 10-sq.-km quadrant in the core oil states. There are 606 oilfields (355 on shore) and 1500 "host communities" with some sort of oil or gas facility or infrastructure. There are 7000 km of pipelines, 275 flow stations, 10 gas plants, 15 export terminals (six onshore at Qua Iboe, Pennington, Forcados, Escravos, Brass, and Bonny, and nine FPSOs), four refineries, and a massive LNG and gas supply complex. The six-train Bonny LNG facility produces 22 million tons each year, with new plants in train at Brass, Olokola, and Escravos. The national oil company (NNPC) and its joint-venture partners (Shell, Exxon, Mobil, Agip, and TOTAL) directly employ an estimated 100,000 people.



Oil rig on the 500-naira note. Fredrick Nauman, Panos.

Oil has seeped deeply and indelibly into the political economy of Nigeria. In 2007 over 87 percent of government revenues, 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings, 96 percent of export revenues, and almost half of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is accounted for by just one commodity: oil. With oil prices now close to $100 a barrel, oil rents—what economists call unearned income—will provide the Nigerian exchequer with at least $50 billion annually. Nigeria is an oil state, driven by two cardinal principles: how to capture oil rents and how to sow the oil revenues. Like other OPEC countries—by most estimates the 13 OPEC members will pocket over $700 billion in oil revenues in 2007 alone—Nigeria is currently awash in petrodollars. According to the consultancy group PFC Energy, it is entirely possible that between now and 2020, Nigeria might pocket over half a trillion dollars in oil revenues. What this oil wealth has wrought, and is likely to bring, is another question entirely.

An El Dorado Nigeria is not. Flying into Port Harcourt or Warri at night—viewing the panorama of harsh gas flares burning bright—conveys a sense of the Dantean universe one is about to enter: the unforgiving, ruthless, and austere world of oil. To compile an inventory of the achievements of Nigerian petro-development is a salutary, if dismal, exercise: 85 percent of oil revenues accrue to 1 percent of the population. According to former World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz, at least $100 billion of the $600 billion in oil revenues accrued since 1960 have simply "gone missing." Nigerian anti-corruption czar Nuhu Ribadu claimed that in 2003, 70 percent of the country's oil wealth was stolen or wasted; by 2005 it was "only" 40 percent. By most conservative estimates, almost $130 billion was lost in capital flight between 1970 and 1996. Over the period from 1965 to 2004, the per capita income fell from $250 to $212 while income distribution deteriorated markedly. Between 1970 and 2000, the number of people subsisting on less than one dollar a day in Nigeria grew from 36 percent to more than 70 percent, from 19 million to a staggering 90 million. Over the last decade GDP per capita and life expectancy have, according to World Bank estimates, both fallen. The Bank put it this way in 2007: "Per capita GDP in PPP [purchasing power parity] terms fell 40 percent from $1215 in 1980 to $706 in 2000. Income poverty rose from 28.1 percent to 65.5 percent and other indicators of welfare—notably access to education and health—also declined." According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Nigeria ranks in terms of the Human Development Index [HDI]—a composite measure of life expectancy, income, and educational attainment—number 158, below Haiti and Congo; over the last 30 years the trend line of the HDI index has been upward, but barely.

Nigeria appears close to the top of virtually everyone's global ranking of corruption, business risk, lack of transparency, fraud, and illicit activity. If readers of this book have any association with Nigeria it is probably through email fraud—"Dear Sir: I am a former oil minister and I have the privilege of requesting your assistance in transferring $47 million"—what are called "419 scams" in Nigeria. Nigerian fraud has its own FBI website. Nigeria is not a country, as someone once noted, it is a profession. To suggest, as the International Monetary Fund has, that $600 billion dollars have contributed to a decline in the

Local youth guard the decrepit site in Oloibiri where the first wellhead was drilled in the Niger Delta. Symbolic of the failure of oil in this region, instead of a monument to success, the remains at this spot reflect the lack of development and frustration of the local community.

oil industry; a national oil company (NNPC) that operates through joint ventures with international oil majors who are granted territorial concessions (blocs) as Oil Prospecting Licenses (OPLs) or Oil Mining Leases (OMLs); a phalanx of state security apparatuses often working in a complementary fashion with the private security forces of the companies to secure "national oil assets"; and a political mechanism by which oil revenues are distributed. In the center of the petro-state is the national oil company which stands as the blackest of black holes: a dark star of theft, corruption and fictional accounts, typically under the direct control of the president. State oil, said one commentator, "is like a party with the lights out and the music on full blast."

The history of oil development in Nigeria is the history of the politics of oil revenue distribution. Nigeria possesses four key distribution mechanisms for oil revenues: the federal account (rents appropriated directly by the federal state), a state derivation principle (the right of each state to a proportion of the taxes that its inhabitants are assumed to have contributed to the federal exchequer), the Federation Account (or States Joint Account) which allocates revenue to the states on the basis of need, population, and other criteria, and a Special Grants Account. The latter includes monies designated directly for the Niger Delta through a raft of the notoriously corrupt designated entities such as the Oil and Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) founded in 1993 and abandoned in the late 1990s, the Niger Delta Development Commission [NDDC] founded in 2000, and the new (2006) Consolidated Council on Socio-Economic Development of the Coastal States of Nigeria.

Since 1960, the shifting geometry of this quartet of mechanisms has a clear trend-line. There has been a process of radical fiscal centralism in which the principle of derived income has diminished while the oil revenue flowing to the federal account has expanded dramatically. As a consequence, the oil-producing states have lost and the non-oil producing ethnic majority states have gained. By 1980 the non oil-producing states accounted for over 75 percent of total federal allocations; derivation had fallen by 1985 to barely 1 percent from 50 percent in 1960.

Driven by the popular pressures for resource control from below, Niger Delta states were able to roll back the secular decline in derivation income. In 1999, President Obasanjo was compelled to up derivation to 13 percent. As oil prices rose after 2001, enhanced derivation inserted a vast quantum of monies into the oil-producing states through the machinery of state and local government. Nobody believes, of course, that all of the legislated quantity of money actually reaches the beneficiaries. But the indisputable fact is that Rivers and Delta States, for example, garnered in excess of $1 billion in a profound sense of the unraveling—the un-imagining—of Nigeria as a nation. The patchwork quilt that is Nigeria is now deeply frayed, its stitching pulled apart at the seams by all manner of forces. At Independence in 1960, Obafemi Awolowo, the first Nigerian Premier of the Western Region, said that Nigeria was not a nation but a "mere geographical expression." Today, after a half century of oil, it is the same, only more so.

* * * * *

And what of the future? The April 2007 elections were recognized as being perhaps the most corrupt in Nigerian history. Nowhere was electoral fraud and intimidation more pronounced than in the Delta. Deeply flawed elections and a victory by the ruling People's Democratic Party produced nevertheless an Ijaw vice president, Goodluck Jonathan from Bayelsa State, with strong connections to a younger generation of activists and civic groups. Musa Yar'Adua, the new Nigerian president, is a machine politician from an influential Katsina political family in northern Nigeria, and has clearly put some stock in his Niger Delta running mate's capacity to address the insurgency. Whether the President can sell the northern powerbrokers on increased derivation or greater control of what Delta ethnic nationalities see as "their oil" is another matter. There were some positive signs early on: the release from detention on June 14, 2007 of Ijaw leader Asari Dokubo, and on July 27, the freeing of Chief Alamieyeseigha, met key demands of many of the Ijaw militants. Alamieyeseigha, the former Governor of Bayelsa State, was apprehended in London for money laundering but escaped, dressed in drag, to triumphantly return to the Delta where in some quarters of the Ijaw community he is viewed as a freedom fighter. Whatever their respective track records, both are seen as Ijaw heroes to many across the Delta.

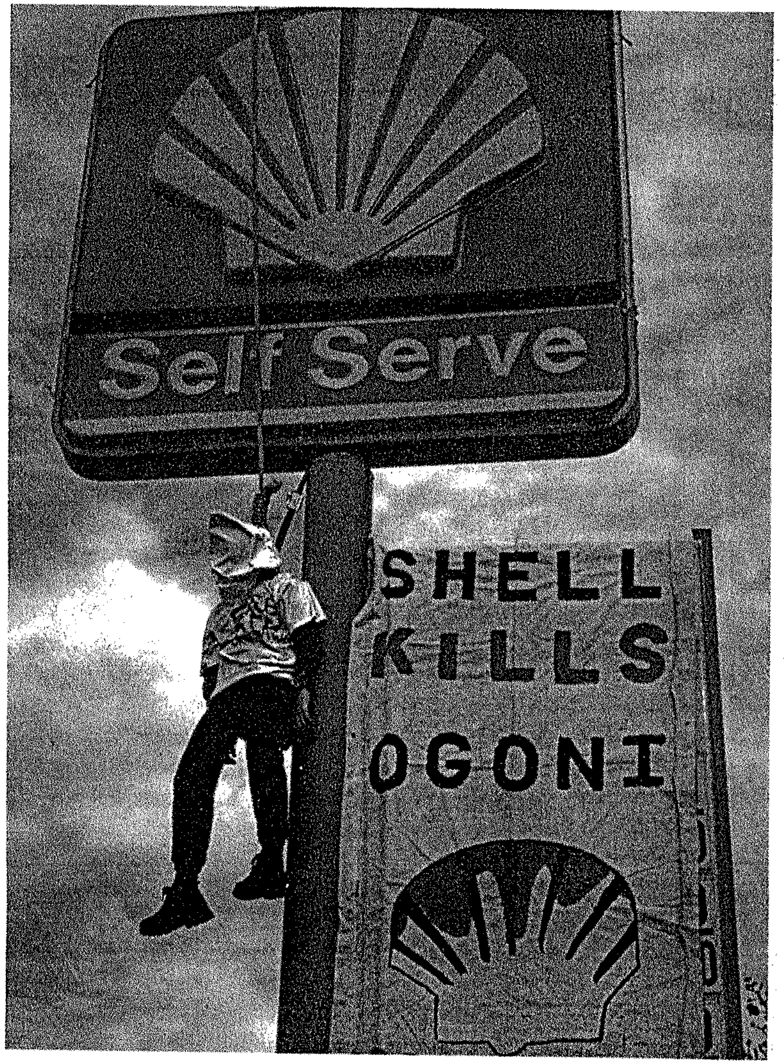
A one-month truce was declared by MEND on June 15, 2007. The vice president himself met with insurgents on June 28 at Okerenkoko, the heart of MEND territory. Several all-night meetings were held in July and August 2007 in the creeks. Senator David Brigidi and other representatives of the Niger Delta Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee, established on July 2, 2007, were present. While the government has in principle agreed to the insurgents' preconditions for negotiations—including the rebuilding of Odi and Odiama, two towns destroyed by federal forces, as well as the demilitarization of the Delta on the part of federal forces—one has to say that the prospects for some sort of resolution remain unclear. In late summer of 2007, the Rivers State Peace and Rehabilitation Committee was doling out one million Naira to anyone who professed to be a "cultist," a term which covers a multitude of sins but implies gang membership, and rejected the life of the "cultism." Gang leaders and thugs were subsequently reported in the local press as parading through the Government House chapel clutching bibles and preaching redemption. Port Harcourt devolved into street fighting and mayhem in July 2007 surrounding a contested Governorship in Rivers State, and since October, MEND, in the wake of the arrest in Angola of one their operatives and reputed arms merchants, Henry Okha, has resumed its activities. Hostage taking has now become simply another growth industry for organized crime in which gangs and government representatives split the dividends of hostage payments. The fact that the new 2008 budget has an enlarged national security line item (20 percent of the budget) is also cause for concern.

Profound changes will be required if there is to be lasting peace. Some of the needs—large-scale training programs and mass employment schemes, major infrastructure projects, and environmental rehabilitation—will take many years, perhaps even generations. To confront resource control—not as a matter of money but as a legal, constitutional, and political project—will need to address questions like corruption, the reform of the electoral commission, and transparency within a notoriously ineffective, indeed pathologically unaccountable system of local government. The oil companies must radically rethink by the same token what passes as responsible business practice. It will necessitate building new democratic institutions from below, perhaps trust funds for oil-producing communities and a radical strengthening of the weak citizenship that currently passes for Nigerian democracy. As Isaac Osuoka puts it, "Civic groups cannot offer the struggle 'governance'.... There need to be concrete goals and a political program."

Building such a peace in a post-9/11 world will not be easy. In the background stands the U.S. empire, energy security policy, tight oil markets, and the global war on terror. African oil has become of considerable national strategic interest to the U.S. General James Jones, in testimony offered to the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2005, claimed that the U.S. goal must be "to eliminate ungoverned areas, to counter extremism, and to end conflict and reduce the chronic instability," because of Africa's "potential to become the next front in the global war on terrorism." A year later at the African Seapower Conference in Abuja, Admiral Harry Ulrich, the European commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa, in referring to Shell's massive Bonga oilfield—Nigeria's largest oilfield, costing $3.6 billion to develop and lying within Nigeria's territorial waters—admitted that American ships were patrolling Nigerian oilfields within the 200 mile limit. In the wake of the establishment of an African Command in February 2007, the U.S. is now in search of a forward operating base capable of securing oil assets in the Gulf of Guinea. The perception that Nigeria is being squeezed from the north (the pan-Sahel anti-terror initiative) and from the south (the militarization of the Gulf of Guinea) is likely to be a major source of tension and destabilization as the Nigerian government attempts to reap the potentially vast benefits of a peace dividend in the Niger Delta.

There is, nonetheless, a window of opportunity here, even though the current negotiations have stalled. The grand commander of MEND, Tompolo, garners enormous respect and authority across the creeks and among virtually all of the militant groups. A peace pact was brokered on December 6, 2007 under the auspices of the Bayelsa Government—but predictably an avalanche of email followed in which MEND accused the government of stage-managing "rent-a-militants" in a "bad B-grade movie." It will not be easy. In some small way, we hope that *Curse of the Black Gold* may contribute to a better and deeper understanding of what it will take to defuse and rebuild the violent economies of the Niger Delta.

NAOMI KLEIN NO LOGO



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A TALE OF THREE LOGOS

The Swoosh, the Shell and the Arches

Dozens of brand-based campaigns have succeeded in rattling their corporate targets, in several cases pushing them to substantially alter their policies. But three campaigns stand out for having reached well beyond activist circles and deep into public consciousness. The tactics they have developed — among them the use of the courts to force transparency on corporations, and the Internet to bypass traditional media — are revolutionizing the future of political engagement. By now it should come as no surprise that the targets of these influential campaigns are three of the most familiar and best-tended logos on the brandscape: the Swoosh, the Shell and the Arches.

The Swoosh: The Fight for Good Jobs

Nike CEO Phil Knight has long been a hero of the business schools. Prestigious academic publications such as *The Harvard Business Review* have lauded his pioneering marketing techniques, his understanding of branding and his early use of outsourcing. Countless MBA candidates and other students of marketing and communications have studied the Nike formula of "brands, not products." So when Phil Knight was invited to be a guest speaker at the Stanford University Business School — Knight's own alma mater — in May 1997, the visit was expected to be one in a long line of Nike love-ins. Instead, Knight was greeted by a crowd of picketing students, and when he approached the microphone he was taunted with chants of "Hey Phil, off the stage. Pay your workers a living wage." The Nike honeymoon had come to a grinding halt.

No story illustrates the growing distrust of the culture of corporate branding more than the international anti-Nike movement — the most publicized to manufacture its products outside the U.S., both in high unemployment rates and in the erosion of the community tax base (which sets the stage for the deterioration of local public schools).

Instead of jobs for their parents, what the inner-city kids get from Nike is the occasional visit from its marketers and designers on "bro-ing" pilgrimages. "Hey, bro, what do you think of these new Jordans – are they fresh or what?" The effect of high-priced cool hunters whipping up brand frenzy on the cracked asphalt basketball courts of Harlem, the Bronx and Compton has already been discussed: kids incorporate the brands into gang-wear uniforms; some want the gear so badly they are willing to sell drugs, steal, mug, even kill for it. Jessie Collins, executive director of the Edenwald-Gun Hill Neighborhood Center in the northeast Bronx, tells me that it's sometimes drug or gang money, but more often it's the mothers' minimum-wage salaries or welfare checks that are spent on disposable status wear. When I asked her about the media reports of kids stabbing each other for their $150 Air Jordans she said dryly, "It's enough to beat up on your mother for ... $150 is a hell of a lot of money."[8]

Shoe-store owners like Steven Roth of Essex House of Fashion are often uncomfortable with the way so-called street fashions play out for real on the postindustrial streets of Newark, New Jersey, where his store is located.

> I do get weary and worn down from it all. I'm always forced to face the fact that I make my money from poor people. A lot of them are on welfare. Sometimes a mother will come in here with a kid, and the kid is dirty and poorly dressed. But the kid wants a hundred-twenty-buck pair of shoes and that stupid mother buys them for him. I can feel that kid's inner need – this desire to own these things and have the feelings that go with them – but it hurts me that this is the way things are.[9]

It's easy to blame the parents for giving in, but that "deep inner need" for designer gear has grown so intense that it has confounded everyone from community leaders to the police. Everyone pretty much agrees that brands like Nike are playing a powerful surrogate role in the ghetto, subbing for everything from self-esteem to African-American cultural history to political

power. What they are far less sure about is how to fill that need with empowerment and a sense of self-worth that does not necessarily come with a logo attached. Even broaching the subject of brand fetishism to these kids is risky. With so much emotion invested in celebrity consumer goods, many kids take criticism of Nike or Tommy as a personal attack, as grave a transgression as insulting someone's mother to his face.

Not surprisingly, Nike sees its appeal among disadvantaged kids differently. By supporting sports programs in Boys and Girls Clubs, by paying to repave urban basketball courts and by turning high-performance sports gear into street fashions, the company claims it is sending out the inspirational message that even poor kids can "Just Do It." In its press material and ads, there is an almost messianic quality to Nike's portrayal of its role in the inner cities: troubled kids will have higher self-esteem, fewer unwanted pregnancies and more ambition – all because at Nike "We see them as athletes." For Nike, its $150 Air Jordans are not a shoe but a kind of talisman with which poor kids can run out of the ghetto and better their lives. Nike's magic slippers will help them fly – just as they made Michael Jordan fly.

A remarkable, subversive accomplishment? Maybe. But one can't help thinking that one of the main reasons black urban youth can get out of the ghetto only by rapping or shooting hoops is that Nike and the other multinationals are reinforcing stereotypical images of black youth and simultaneously taking all the jobs away. As U.S. Congressman Bernie Sanders and Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur stated in a letter to the company, Nike has played a pivotal part in the industrial exodus from urban centers. "Nike has led the way in abandoning the manufacturing workers of the United States and their families.... Apparently, Nike believes that workers in the United States are good enough to purchase your shoe products, but are no longer worthy enough to manufacture them."[10]

And when the company's urban branding strategy is taken in conjunction with this employment record, Nike ceases to be the savior of the inner city and turns into the guy who steals your job, then sells you a pair of overpriced sneakers and yells, "Run like hell!" Hey, it's the only way out of the ghetto, kid. Just do it.

Gitelson may have recognized that Nike was scared – but not *that* scared. Once it became clear that the two parties were at an impasse, the meeting turned into a scolding session as the two Nike executives were required to listen to Edenwald director Jessie Collins comparing the company's Asian sweatshops with her experience as a young girl picking cotton in the sharecropping South. Back in Alabama, she told Manager, she earned $2 a day, just like the Indonesians. "And maybe a lot of Americans can't identify with those workers' situation, but I certainly can."[15]

Vada Manager returned to Oregon defeated and the protest went off as planned, with two hundred participants from eleven community centers around New York. The kids – most of whom were between eleven and thirteen years old – hooted and hollered and dumped several clear garbage bags of smelly old Nikes at the feet of a line of security guards who had been brought in on special assignment to protect the sacred Nike premises. Vada Manager again flew to New York to run damage control, but there was little he could do. Local TV crews covered the event, as did an ABC news team and *The New York Times*.

In a harsh bit of bad timing for the company, the *Times* piece ran on a page facing another story about Nike. Graphically underlining the urgency of the protest, this story reported that a fourteen-year-old boy from Crown Heights had just been murdered by a fifteen-year-old boy who beat him and left him on the subway tracks with a train approaching. "Police Say Teenager Died for His Sneakers and Beeper," the headline read. And the brand of his sneakers? Air Jordans. The article quoted the killer's mother saying that her son had got mixed up with gangs because he wanted to "have nice things." A friend of the victim explained that wearing designer clothes and carrying a beeper had become a way for poor kids to "feel important."

The African-American and Latino kids outside Nike Town on Fifth Avenue – the ones swarmed by cameras and surrounded by curious onlookers – were feeling pretty important, too. Taking on Nike "toe to toe," as they said, turned out to be even more fun than wearing Nikes. With the Fox News camera pointed in his face, one of the young activists – a thirteen-year-old boy from the Bronx – stared into the lens and delivered a message to Phil Knight: "Nike, we made you. We can break you."

What is perhaps most remarkable about the Nike backlash is its durability. After four solid years in the public eye, the Nike story still has legs (so too, of course, does the Nike brand). Still, most corporate scandals are successfully faced down with a statement of "regret" and a few glossy ads of children playing happily under the offending logo. Not with Nike. The news reports, labor studies and academic research documenting the sweat behind the swoosh have yet to slow down, and Nike critics remain tireless at dissecting the steady stream of materials churned out by Nike's PR machine. They were unmoved by Phil Knight's presence on the White House Task Force on Sweatshops – despite his priceless photo op standing beside President Clinton at the Rose Garden press conference. They sliced and diced the report Nike commissioned from civil-rights leader Andrew Young, pointing out that Young completely dodged the question of whether Nike's factory wages are inhumanely exploitative, and attacking him for relying on translators provided by Nike itself when he visited the factories in Indonesia and Vietnam. As for Nike's other study-for-hire – this one by a group of Dartmouth business students who concluded that workers in Vietnam were living the good life on less than $2 a day – well, everyone pretty much ignored that one altogether.

Finally, in May 1998, Phil Knight stepped out from behind the curtain of spin doctors and called a press conference in Washington to address his critics directly. Knight began by saying that he had been painted as a "corporate crook, the perfect corporate villain for these times." He acknowledged that his shoes "have become synonymous with slave wages, forced overtime and arbitrary abuse." Then, to much fanfare, he unveiled a plan to improve working conditions in Asia. It contained some tough new regulations on factory air quality and the use of petroleum-based chemicals. It promised to provide classes inside some Indonesian factories and promised not to hire anyone under eighteen years old in the shoe factories. But there was still nothing substantial in the plan about allowing independent outside monitors to inspect the factories, and there were no wage raises for the workers. Knight did promise, however, that Nike's contractors would no longer be permitted to appeal to the Indonesian government for a waiver on the minimum wage.

It wasn't enough. That September the San Francisco human-rights group as it seems to be," said Nikko stock analyst Tim Finucane in *The Wall Street Journal* in March 1998.[20] Wall Street really had no choice but to turn on the company that had been its darling for so many years. Despite the fact that Asia's plummeting currencies meant that Nike's labor costs in Indonesia, for instance, were a quarter of what they were before the crash, the company was still suffering. Nike's profits were down, orders were down, stock prices were *way* down, and after an average annual growth of 34 percent since 1995, quarterly earnings were suddenly down 70 percent. By the third quarter, which ended in February 1999, Nike's profits were once again up 70 percent—but by the company's own account, the recovery was not the result of rebounding sales but rather of Nike's decision to cut jobs and contracts. In fact, Nike's revenues and future orders were down in 1999 for the second year in a row.[21]

Nike has blamed its financial problems on everything *but* the human-rights campaign. The Asian currency crisis was the reason Nikes weren't selling well in Japan and South Korea; or it was because Americans were buying "brown shoes" (walking shoes and hiking boots) as opposed to big white sneakers. But the brown-shoe excuse rang hollow. Nike makes plenty of brown shoes—it has a line of hiking boots, and it owns Cole Haan (and recently saved millions by closing down the Cole Haan factory in Portand, Maine, and moving production to Mexico and Brazil).[22] More to the point, Adidas staged a massive comeback during the very year that Nike was free-falling. In the quarter when Nike nose-dived, Adidas sales were up 42 percent, its net income was up 48 percent, to $255 million, and its stock price had tripled in two years. The German company, as we have seen, turned its fortunes around by copying Nike's production structure and all but Xeroxing its approach to marketing and sponsorships (the political implications of that will be dealt with in Chapter 18). In 1997–98, Adidas even redesigned its basketball shoes so they looked just like Nikes: big, white and ultra high tech. But unlike Nikes, they sold briskly. So much for the brown-shoe theory.

Over the years Nike has tried dozens of tactics to silence the cries of its critics, but the most ironic by far has been the company's desperate attempt to hide behind its product. "We're not political activists. We are a footwear manufacturer," said Nike spokeswoman Donna Gibbs, when the sweatshop

scandal first began to erupt.[23] A footwear manufacturer? This from the company that made a concerted decision in the mid-eighties not to be about boring corporeal stuff like footwear—and certainly nothing as crass as manufacturing. Nike wanted to be about sports, Knight told us, it wanted to be about the idea of sports, then the idea of transcendence through sports; then it wanted to be about self-empowerment, women's rights, racial equality. It wanted its stores to be temples, its ads a religion, its customers a nation, its workers a tribe. After taking us all on such a branded ride, to turn around and say "Don't look at us, we just make shoes" rings laughably hollow.

Nike was the most inflated of all the balloon brands, and the bigger it grew, the louder it popped.

The Shell: The Fight for Open Space

In North America, Nike has been at the forefront of the burgeoning political movement taking aim at the power of multinationals, but in Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, that dubious honor has belonged to Royal Dutch/Shell.

It began in February 1995 when Shell finalized its plans to dispose of a rusted and obsolete oil-storage platform, known as Brent Spar, by sinking it in the Atlantic Ocean, 150 miles off the coast of Scotland. The environmental group Greenpeace was against the plan, claiming the 14,500-ton rig should be towed to land, where the oil sludge could be contained and the rig's parts recycled. Shell countered that land disposal was unsafe, not to mention impossible. Then, on April 30, just as Shell began towing the platform to its watery grave, a group of Greenpeace activists showed up in a helicopter and tried to land on the Brent Spar. Shell fended off the aircraft with water cannons, but the entire episode was captured on videotape, and the images were sent via satellite to TV stations around the world.

It was vintage Greenpeace, ever the made-for-TV activists. But the impact those images from the Brent Spar had on the European public took even Greenpeace by surprise. Before the Brent Spar incident, the group was teetering on the brink of obsolescence—the eco movement had been under attack, and appeared to be sputtering out in the wake of recession, and short term except that it comforts us that it is there – was indeed amorphous, but it was also powerful. As *Guardian* columnist Suzanne Moore wrote, Brent Spar had at least as much to do with mysticism as with science: "In the depths strange species lurk, and though we may never ever see them, we feel in our hearts that they should be left alone. Why must they share the great dark deep with bits and bobs from a dismembered oil platform?"[29]

The lesson Greenpeace took away from its Brent Spar victory, writes Grove-White, was about the sanctity of "the global commons" – places not named on any map, not owned by any private interest and thus belonging to everybody. The group also learned another lesson, something the anti-Nike campaigners had also discovered: targeting a big, rich, ubiquitous multinational corporation is to the late nineties what saving the whales was to the late eighties. It is populist and it is popular, and it was enough to bring Greenpeace back from the brink of death. After Brent Spar, the group was showered with members and money and, as *The Guardian* reported, it was even bequeathed estates. "One woman had phoned to say she had changed her will. 'Left all estate to Greenpeace,' says the note. Wants us to 'buy an inflatable with it and bash Shell.'"[30] In its Brent Spar postmortem *The Wall Street Journal* noted gravely that in the current climate, "economic warfare may be the best way to wage eco-warfare."[31]

Shell's capitulation also provided activists with another lesson. After going to the wall defending the appropriateness and inescapability of Shell's original plan, Prime Minister John Major was left looking like a corporate lap dog – and an unloved one at that. When Shell reversed its position, Major could only mutter that the executives were "wimps" for caving in to public pressure. His position was so compromised that it may well have played a role in his decision, only two days after Shell's U-turn, to step down as head of the Conservative Party and force a vote on his leadership. In this way, Brent Spar proved that corporations – even a notoriously cagey and cloistered company like Royal Dutch/Shell – are sometimes as vulnerable to public pressure as democratically elected governments (occasionally more so).

The lesson proved particularly relevant in the next Shell challenge – the need to focus world attention on the multinational's role in the despoliation of Nigeria, under the protection of the corrupt government of the late

General Sani Abacha. If the general wasn't vulnerable to pressure, Shell certainly was.

From the Ocean as Trash Pit to the Land as Oil Slick

Since the 1950s, Shell Nigeria has extracted $30 billion worth of oil from the land of the Ogoni people, in the Niger Delta. Oil revenue makes up 80 percent of the Nigerian economy – $10 billion annually – and, of that, more than half comes from Shell. But not only have the Ogoni people been deprived of the profits from their rich natural resource, many still live without running water or electricity, and their land and water have been poisoned by open pipelines, oil spills and gas fires.

Under the leadership of the writer and Nobel Peace Prize nominee Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) campaigned for reform, and demanded compensation from Shell. In response, and in order to keep the oil profits flowing into the government's coffers, General Sani Abacha directed the Nigerian military to take aim at the Ogoni. They killed and tortured thousands. The Ogoni not only blamed Abacha for the attacks, they also accused Shell of treating the Nigerian military as a private police force, paying it to quash peaceful protest on Ogoni land, in addition to giving financial support and legitimacy to the Abacha regime.

Facing mounting protests within Nigeria, Shell withdrew from Ogoni land in 1993 – a move that only put further pressure on the military to remove the Ogoni threat. A leaked memo from the head of the Rivers State Internal Security Force of the Nigerian Army was quite explicit: "Shell operations still impossible unless ruthless military operations are undertaken for smooth economic activities to commence.... Recommendations: Wasting operations during MOSOP and other gatherings making constant military presence justifiable. Wasting targets cutting across communities and leadership cadres especially vocal individuals of various groups."[32]

On May 10, 1994 – five days after the memo was written – Ken Saro-Wiwa said, "This is it. They [the Nigerian military] are going to arrest us all and execute us. All for Shell."[33] Twelve days later, he was arrested and tried for murder. Before receiving his sentence, Saro-Wiwa told the tribunal, "I and my colleagues are not the only ones on trial. Shell is here on trial.... The scholarships" (MOSOP put the figure at closer to $9 million, and says only a fraction of this amount was spent on Ogoni land). The company has also, according to Blakely, revised its "statement of business principles. These principles, which include the company's environmental performance as well as its responsibilities to the communities where we operate, apply to all companies in the Shell Group in all parts of the world."[36]

To arrive at these principles, Shell has looked deep into its corporate psyche and has focus grouped and deconstructed itself into a pulp. It has put its employees through a kind of New Age–consultancy boot camp, resulting in some awfully silly displays from such a grand old firm. In the interest of reinvention, Shell executives, according to *Fortune* magazine, have "helped each other climb walls in the freezing Dutch rain. They've dug dirt at low-income housing projects and made videotapes of themselves walking around blindfolded. They've tracked their time to figure out whether they're adding any value. They've even taken Myers-Briggs personality tests to see who fits in at the new Shell and who doesn't."[37]

Part of Shell's image overhaul has involved reaching out to black communities in Europe and North America, a strategy that has created bitter divisions in poor neighborhoods that are desperate for funding but suspicious of Shell's motives. For instance, in August 1997, the Oakland School Board in California hotly debated the ethics of accepting a donation from Shell worth $2 million – $100,000 for scholarships and the rest for the creation of a Shell Youth Training Academy. Since Oakland has a large African-American population that includes exiled Nigerians, the debate was wrenching. "Children in Nigeria don't have an opportunity to get a scholarship from Shell," said Tunde Okorodudu, an Oakland parent and a Nigerian pro-democracy activist. "We really need money for the children but we don't want blood money."[38] After months of stalemate, the board (like the Portland School Board that debated whether or not to accept Nike's donation) eventually voted to accept the money.

But even as the new Shell goes Zen, tossing around trendy management terms like the "new ethical paradigm," "change agents," the "third bottom line," and the "stakeholder economy," and even as Shell Nigeria speaks of "healing the wounds," the old Shell remains.[39] Although it has not yet succeeded in returning to Ogoni land, Shell continues to operate in other parts of the Niger Delta, and in the fall of 1998 tensions in the area once again erupted. The issues were all too familiar: communities complained of polluted lands, devastated fisheries, gas fires and flaring, and of seeing enormous profits pumped out of their oil-rich land while they continued to live in poverty. "You go to the flow stations, you see they are very well equipped, with all modern facilities. You go to the neighboring village, there is no water to drink, no food to eat. That is bringing about the protests," explained Paul Orieware, a local politician.[40] Only this time, Shell was up against foes far less committed to nonviolence than the Ogoni. In October, Nigerian protestors seized two Shell helicopters, nine Shell relay stations and a drilling rig, halting, according to Associated Press, "the transfer of some 250,000 barrels of crude a day."[41] More Shell stations were stormed and occupied in March 1999. Shell denied any wrongdoing and blamed the violence on ethnic conflicts.

The Arches: The Fight for Choice

At the same time as the anti-Shell campaigns were breaking out, the McLibel Trial, which had been in the docket for a few years already, was turning into an international situation. In June 1995, the trial was coming up to its first anniversary in court, when the two defendants, Helen Steel and Dave Morris, held a press conference outside the London courthouse. They announced that McDonald's (which had sued them for libel) had made a settlement offer. The company offered to donate money to a cause of Steel and Morris's choice if the two outspoken environmentalists on trial would stop criticizing McDonald's; then everyone would leave the whole messy nightmare behind them.

Steel and Morris defiantly refused the offer. They saw no reason to give in now. The trial, which had been designed to stem the flow of negative publicity – and to gag and bankrupt Steel and Morris – had been an epic public-relations disaster for McDonald's. It had done almost as much as mad cow disease to promote vegetarianism, had certainly done more to raise the issue of labor conditions in the McJob sector than any union drive and had sparked a more profound debate about corporate censorship than any other free-speech case in recent memory.

ruling—a summary of the actual verdict, which was over a thousand pages long. Although the judge deemed most of the pamphlet's claims too hyperbolic to be acceptable (he was particularly unconvinced by its direct linking of McDonald's to "hunger in the 'Third World'"), he deemed others to be based on pure fact. Among the decisions that went in Steel and Morris's favor were that McDonald's "exploit(s) children" by "using them, as more susceptible subjects of advertising"; that its treatment of some animals has been "cruel"; that it is anti-union and pays "low wages"; that its management can be "autocratic" and "most unfair"; and that a consistent diet of McDonald's food contributes to the risk of heart disease. Steel and Morris were ordered to pay damages to McDonald's in the amount of US$95,490. But in March 1999 an appeals court judge found that Judge Bell had been overly harsh and sided more forcefully with Steel and Morris on the claims "concerning nutrition and health risks and on the allegations about pay and conditions for McDonald's employees." Still finding that their claims about food poisoning, cancer and world poverty were unproven, the court nonetheless lowered the amount of damages to $61,300.[46] McDonald's has never tried to collect its settlement and has decided not to apply for an injunction to halt the further dissemination of the leaflet.

After the first verdict, McDonald's was quick to declare victory, but few were convinced. "Not since Pyrrhus has a victor emerged so bedraggled," read *The Guardian*'s editorial the next day. "As P.R. fiascos go, this action takes the prize for ill-judged and disproportionate response to public criticism."[47] In fact, while all this was going on, the original pamphlet had gathered the cachet of a collector's item, with three million copies distributed in the U.K. alone. John Vidal had published his critically acclaimed book *McLibel: Burger Culture on Trial*; *60 Minutes* had produced a lengthy segment about the trial; England's Channel 4 had run a three-hour dramatization of it; and Franny Armstrong's documentary *McLibel: Two Worlds Collide* had made the rounds of the independent film circuit (having been turned down by every major broadcaster because of—ironically—libel concerns).

For Helen Steel, Dave Morris and their supporters, McLibel was never solely about winning in court—it was about using the courts to win over the public. And judging by the crowds outside the McDonald's outlets two days after the verdict came down, they had every right to be declaring victory. Standing outside their neighborhood McDonald's in North London on a Saturday afternoon, Steel and Morris could barely keep up with the demand for "What's wrong with McDonald's?" the leaflet that started it all. Passersby requested copies, drivers pulled over to get their McLibel mementos and mothers with toddlers stopped to talk to Helen Steel about how difficult it can be for a busy parent when her child demands unhealthy food—what can a mother do?

Across the United Kingdom, a similar scene was playing itself out at more than five hundred McDonald's outlets, all of which were simultaneously picketed on June 21, 1997, along with thirty in North America. As with the Nike protests, every event was different. At one British franchise, the community put on a street performance featuring an ax-wielding Ronald McDonald, a cow and lots of ketchup. At another, people passed out free vegetarian food. At all of them, supporters handed out the famous leaflet: 400,000 copies that weekend alone. "They were flying out of their hands," said Dan Mills of the McLibel Support Campaign, amused at the irony: before McDonald's decided to sue, London Greenpeace's campaign was winding down, and only a few hundred copies of the contentious leaflet had ever been distributed. It has now been translated into twenty-six languages and is one of the hottest properties in cyberspace.

Lessons of the Big Three: Use the Courts as a Tool

It's a good bet that many brand-name giants besides McDonald's have paid close attention to the goings-on in that British courtroom. In 1996, Guess dropped a libel suit it had launched against the L.A. women's group Common Threads, in response to a poetry reading about the plight of garment workers sewing Guess jeans.[48] Similarly, though Nike consistently accuses its critics of fabrication, it has stayed away from trying to clear its name in court. And no wonder: the courtroom is the only place where private corporations are forced to open shuttered windows and let the public look in.

As Helen Steel and Dave Morris write,

only by the local media and known only to people in the area. But today, every time Shell sneezes, a report goes out on the hyperactive "shell-nigeria-action" listserve, bouncing into the in-boxes of all the far-flung organizers involved in the campaign, from Nigerian leaders living in exile to student activists around the world. And when a group of activists occupied part of Shell's U.K. headquarters in January 1999, they made sure to bring a digital camera with a cellular linkup, allowing them to broadcast their sit-in on the Web, even after Shell officials turned off the electricity and phones.

Shell has responded to the rise of Net activism with an aggressive Internet strategy of its own: in 1996, it hired Simon May, a twenty-nine-year-old "Internet manager." According to May, "There has been a shift in the balance of power, activists are no longer entirely dependent on the existing media. Shell learned it the hard way with the Brent Spar, when a lot of information was disseminated outside the regular channels."[53] But if the power balance has shifted, it is May's job to shift it back in Shell's favor: he oversees the monitoring of all on-line mentions of the company, responds to E-mail queries about social issues and has helped to establish Shell's on-line "social concerns" discussion forum on the company Web site.

Big companies are big targets... Thousands of companies are or have been the targets of anti-corporate activism online. With WeberWorks/Monitor powered by eWatch, not only will WeberWorks/Monitor clients be alerted when they become a target, they will also receive critical insights for how to effectively handle the situation.

–James M. Alexander, president of eWatch an Internet monitoring company, May 1998

The Internet played a similar role during the McLibel Trial, catapulting London's grassroots anti-McDonald's movement into an arena as global as the one in which its multinational opponent operates. "We had so much information about McDonald's, we thought we should start a library," Dave Morris explains, and with this in mind, a group of Internet activists launched the McSpotlight Web site. The site not only has the controversial pamphlet on-line, it contains the complete 20,000-page transcript of the trial, and offers a debating room where McDonald's workers can exchange horror stories about

McWork under the Golden Arches. The site, one of the most popular destinations on the Web, has been accessed approximately sixty-five million times.[54]

Ben, one of the studiously low-profile programmers for McSpotlight told me that "this is a medium that doesn't require campaigners to jump through hoops doing publicity stunts, or depend on the good will of an editor to get their message across."[55] It's also less vulnerable to libel suits than more traditional media. Ben explains that while McSpotlight's server is located in the Netherlands, it has "mirror sites" in Finland, the U.S., New Zealand and Australia. That means that if a server in one country is targeted by McDonald's lawyers, the site will still be available around the world from the other mirrors. In the meantime, everyone visiting the site is invited to give their opinion on whether or not McSpotlight will get sued. "Is McSpotlight next in court? Click on yes or no."

Once again, the broader corporate world is scrambling to learn the lessons of these campaigns. Speaking in Brussels at a June 1998 conference on the growing power of anticorporate groups, Peter Verhille of the PR firm Entente International noted that "one of the major strengths of pressure groups – in fact the leveling factor in their confrontation with powerful companies – is their ability to exploit the instruments of the telecommunication revolution. Their agile use of global tools such as the Internet reduces the advantage that corporate budgets once provided."[56] Indeed, the beauty of the Net for activists is that it allows coordinated international actions with minimal resources and bureaucracy. For instance, for the International Nike Days of Action, local activists simply download information pamphlets from the Campaign for Labor Rights Web site to hand out at their protests, then file detailed E-mail reports from Sweden, Australia, the U.S. and Canada, which are then forwarded to all participating groups.

A similar electronic clearinghouse model was used to coordinate both the Reclaim the Streets global street parties and the picketing outside McDonald's outlets after the McLibel verdict. The McSpotlight programmers posted a list of all 793 McDonald's franchises in Britain and in the weeks before the verdict came down, local activists signed up to "adopt a store (and teach it some respect)" on the day of protest. More than half were adopted. I had been fol-

THE PAN-AFRICAN NATION

Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria

Andrew Apter

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To appreciate how state vampirism made sense in the popular imaginations of a vast and variegated Nigeria, we must return to the magical qualities of royalties and ground rents in relation to transethnic idioms of moneymaking medicine. As mentioned in chapter 6, the magic of oil money emanating from the ground produced a national anxiety based on pervasive notions of "bad" wealth and "hot" money gained not through hard work but by nefarious means. We saw how such anxieties have been documented in the popular theater of the oil boom era (Barber 1982), drawing on popular accounts of moneymaking medicines of kidnappers who sacrifice humans for money. At the local level, these stories had serious consequences. During my first fieldwork in Ayede-Ekiti, Oroyeye priestesses sang vindictive songs against one Oladiran, who had allegedly kidnapped and killed his paternal half-brother for *lukudi* moneymaking medicine.[6] He was effectively isolated and thereafter died. The crime of effortless gain at the expense or even "consumption" of others is echoed in various witchcraft beliefs as well, but the underlying template motivating this genre is the transmutation of human blood into money—bad money, to be sure, curiously lacking value, without reciprocal advantage or gain. As Watts (1994, 427) explains in his insightful review of money-magic idioms during the oil boom, "money magic, whatever the empirical status of its liturgy of body parts and juju narratives, captured perfectly in this respect the magical and fetishistic (and violent) qualities of the petro-naira," further representing what Barber (1995, 219) identifies as "the convertibility of people into money . . . in the petro-naira narratives of money-magic."

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

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

But during the halcyon days of the oil boom and its spectacle of national development, these contradictions were nowhere to be seen. Not even Ken Saro-Wiwa identified the generalized condition of state vampirism gestating within. Perched from 1968 to 1973 as federal adminissouth's resistance to Hausa-Fulani hegemony and political repression than among northern constituencies.[8]

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

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

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

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

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

It is here, within this idiom of natural goods and value forms, that the *unproductive* relations of oil capitalism were ecologically expressed. As Harvey (1982), rereading Marx, explains, ground rent produces specific forms of fetishized value in which land is perceived as the source of value itself (a perspective refined in economic terms by the physiocrats). When Nigeria's oil boom took off and the good times rolled, the nation was naturalized as one blood and territory, blessed by God, heritage, and anisms, Nigerian democracy proved to be a politics of illusion, depriving civil society of its president-elect and any effective participation or collective voice in national affairs. After June 12, as citizens took to the streets in defense of their citizenship, the Ogoni struggle joined hands with a larger national cause. Thus the ecological destruction of creeks and waterways in the remote areas of the Niger Delta epitomized the pollution of the public sphere by an invasive and extractive petro-state.

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

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

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

John Ghazvinian

UNTAPPED

THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA'S OIL

A HARVEST BOOK
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Preface

HER VOICE MADE ME think of Fargo.

It was one of those scrubbed-up, warbling voices from the Northern Plains, full of flattened vowels and Scandinavian resolve, and as it shuddered its way down the phone line, it seemed worth giving in to the image in my head. So I closed my eyes and thought of Fargo.

"When would you like to *trayvel?*"

If you closed your eyes, it was all there. The Peterbilt trucks and the speedboat auctions; the envelope of fresh November snow. The "family" restaurants feeding the great American stomach a steady diet of hometown pride and manky coleslaw. A faded gingham and rusty styrofoam version of America, full of all the contrived honesty of a twenty-cent cup of truck-stop coffee and an evening with the Weather Channel. A postcard from the Great White North.

Okay, so I got a little carried away.

It probably wasn't Fargo on the line. Maybe it was Duluth, or Saginaw or Grand Forks or Fond du Lac. Or even suburban Delaware. Not like I'd know the difference. In fact, there's a good chance I was talking to a call center in Bangalore. But if you have to book airline tickets by phone, why not daydream a little?

It was November 2004, and we were living in a world where you could make a video clip of yourself and send it to a BlackBerry in Tora Bora in less time than it was taking to spell my last name to this woman on the phone. I couldn't remember the last time I bought airline tickets without using the Internet, and the whole thing felt a little

And it isn't simply a question of SUVs or Hummers or miles per gallon, despite what America's bumper-sticker playground of political discourse might have you believe. I have spent my childhood in London, my adolescence in the United States, and much of my adult life back in Britain. Every time I return, America's relationship to energy looks more bizarre. You don't have to be an alfalfa-munching hippie living in a tree house to notice that here in the United States, we go through oil like it's water.

But there is no point getting sanctimonious about it. America is not going to change into Europe overnight. We are not going to wake up one morning happy to live as a nation of miniature fridges, underheated homes, lukewarm soft drinks, and clothes hung out to air-dry. This is something American conservationists, like much of the world, will have to come to terms with for the time being. What makes us American is that we take our personal comfort seriously, and treat its instant realization as a sort of extreme sport. The corollary to that, and our collective Achilles' heel as a nation—as we all know—is the amount of nonrenewable energy it takes to maintain that way of life.

So, yes, Fargo was right. Until someone comes up with a better idea, we have to get it from *somewhere.*

This book is a journey into that somewhere. It is a journey into a part of the world that for most of us never transcends the familiar images of sweltering, fly-infested refugee camps; starving, wide-eyed waifs; and truckloads of doped-up child soldiers speeding through dusty villages.

In our hearts, we want to believe that "Africa" is so much more than this never-ending diorama of despair and human suffering, this biblical landscape of plagues and famines and smiting armies. And every now and again, when we learn to look for them, we see signs of promise. Every now and again, Africa seems ready to turn the corner, ready to embrace those who are drawn by the centuries-old allure of its considerable natural wealth. Every now and again, we are told to look past the perpetual slide show of maggots and blood and bloated corpses, and to hear the message that Africa is open for business.

We are living through another one of those now-and-agains. Thanks to more than a decade of wildly successful discoveries by the world's largest oil companies, as well as the efforts of a growing army of Washington lobbyists and lawmakers, Africa has been quietly transformed in policy-making circles from an insignificant backwater into a potentially lucrative new source of oil and gas for the global market. (Listen to some of the more zealous advocates and you may even hear wild talk about how it may soon "replace the Middle East.") This book is the story of that transformation, and an attempt to understand what it might mean—for Africa, for America, and for the world.

It is also the product of a fascination with Africa that dates back nearly twenty years. It was in a high-school library in suburban Los Angeles in the late 1980s, when I was fifteen years old, that I first read about a tiny tropical country called Equatorial Guinea, where the president had once lined up his political opponents in a football stadium and had them gunned down to the accompaniment of rock music. It was the kind of story that sticks in your head, and I became something of an Equatorial Guinea junkie after that.

Back then, my Africa was still the Africa of flies and dust and child soldiers, and it never took much effort to follow the news from Equatorial Guinea, because there was hardly ever any. But a few years ago, I heard the country had discovered oil, and lots of it. American oil companies were investing billions and the Bush administration, said the press reports, was about to reopen the American embassy in the capital, Malabo.

I began to hear other things that were hard to ignore. Equatorial Guinea was just one of several African countries suddenly awash with oil money. Older producers, such as Nigeria and Angola, were rapidly increasing their output as well. I read that the United States might

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now she was spiritedly reciting some of her work in front of around 3,500 assembled conference delegates.

All of our stories, individual and collective
Are born of the African dawn!

So continue to strive, mah Aff-ree-KAH!
And hold on to your pride
And Africa's sun shall never set on your greatness
Mah Aff-ree-KAH
Africa's sun shall NOT set!

To their considerable credit, the ocean of mostly gray, suited, mustachioed men from every corner of the globe were trying hard not to look disconcerted by this unexpectedly fierce display of sistah-hood.

It was (and could only have been) the official opening ceremony of the 18th World Petroleum Congress, a massive working pow-wow and lavish spectacle held once every three years and generally described as "the Olympic Games of the petroleum industry." The moniker is an apt one, as, when it comes to sheer pomp and pageantry, there is nothing else quite like it in the world of hydrocarbons and petrochemicals. At the 17th Congress, held in 2002 in Rio, delegates had partied to samba music late into the night, as their Brazilian hosts passed the ceremonial flag to South Africa. Since it takes in all aspects of the oil business, from global politics to finance to geophysics, the WPC has evolved into far and away the most important date on the industry's calendar, a rare opportunity for Gulf sheikhs in flowing robes to dine and dance with Venezuelan socialists in between discussions of lateral-drilling technology, international fiscal-compliance regimes, and the Caspian Miocene shelf. Possibly the only thing missing from the festivities is a sandaled runner carrying a perpetual flame.

In the years since the first Congress was held in London in 1933, the choice of venue has often acted as a reflection of profound changes

within the international petroleum industry. When the WPC was created, motorcars were seen as toys for the mega-wealthy, coal was still king, and oil exploration felt like a cutting-edge industry poised to supply the fuel of the future. No one had heard of "peak oil" or OPEC or Hugo Chavez, and most of today's oil-rich nations were still colonies and protectorates administered by Britain and France. BP, or British Petroleum, was still known as Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The world of oil, like virtually everything else, revolved around London. But in the decades that followed, the WPC would hold court in such upstart industry hubs as Mexico City (1967), Houston (1987), and Calgary (2000).

In September 2005 the traveling circus had come to Johannesburg, the first time in its seventy-two-year history that the WPC had convened in Africa. The decision to do so was being touted as a nod to the continent's growing importance as an oil-producing region, and the savvy South African hosts were not about to overlook an opportunity to milk the Afrikah angle for everything it was worth.

The evening had begun with delegates being dropped off by the busload in front of the Dome. We had sashayed along the red carpet as a grinning Soweto steel band played their hearts out from just behind the velvet rope. Inside, another traditional African band played on stage as delegates searched for their tables. Fifty-foot banners hung from the rafters, with messages like "African Dawn—World Energy Solutions Created in Africa" and "We welcome you with African pride to the 18th World Petroleum Congress." A gigantic disk marked with a PetroSA logo was suspended from the ceiling, reminder that the South African oil company would be picking up the tab for the evening's festivities.

As the first course arrived—a trio of terrines made with smoked salmon, Kabeljou, smoked snoek, and angelfish—the interior of the Dome went pitch-black. Two enormous video screens suspended over the stage came to life, showing a dramatic montage of classic African scenes, set to a stirring, primordial drum-driven sound track upmarket business park, hotel, and shopping center in Johannesburg's wealthy northern suburbs. The opening plenary session was called "The African Perspective," and made it clear, in case anyone had missed the point the night before, that Africa was ready for the international oil industry's embrace.

And as if this wasn't enough, on the third night of the Congress we were all invited to Gold Reef City, a gold-rush heritage theme park on the south side of Johannesburg, for "Africa Night," sponsored by South African Airways. SAA had rented out the park for the night, and laid on dozens of traditional performers from all corners of Africa, along with traditional foods representing each of Africa's oil-producing countries—Nigerian jollof rice, Angolan *calulu de peixe*, and so on—all topped off with a giant Lindt chocolate fountain for dipping desserts.

By the end of the five-day Congress, only a red-assed baboon could have failed to appreciate the take-home message to the international oil industry. *Africa: Come and get it.*

As if they ever really needed an invitation.

The WPC could have skipped the jollof rice and the steel bands and the live fireworks. These days, herds of stampeding wildebeest couldn't keep the international oil industry away from Africa. Since the early 1990s, advances in deepwater-drilling technology and attractive contractual terms have helped turn Africa into the world's last true El Dorado—a place where exploration blocks the size of France can still be picked up at an auction, and host governments lack either the experience or the technical capacity to impose burdensome constraints on drilling activity. For years Africa suffered from its image as a bad place to do business—racked by instability, corruption, and political violence—and in many ways, it still does. But as the world has begun to run out of big new oil bonanzas, the industry's appetite for risk has grown considerably.

You can see it in on board the fleet of MD-11s that leave the tarmac in Houston a couple times a week, bound for destinations with names exotic to the Texan ear, like Luanda and Malabo. Operated by World Airways and nicknamed the "Houston Express," the nonstop flights are open only to members of something called the US–Africa Energy Association, and seats start at $5,915 for business class. They rarely go empty.

You can see it, too, in Paris, where Air France runs its nonstop, private "Dedicate" service to an ever-growing number of African oil cities and encourages regular travelers to join its "Petroleum Club" to take advantage of "exclusive services for the oil and gas industry."

And you could see it in Johannesburg at the WPC, where the country presentations from Nigeria and Angola were so heaving with spectators that most delegates were reduced to peering in from the hallway outside.

Since 1990 alone, the petroleum industry has invested more than $20 billion in exploration and production activity in Africa. A further $50 billion will be spent between now and the end of the decade, the largest investment in the continent's history—and around one-third of it will come from the United States. Three of the world's largest oil companies—the British-Dutch consortium Shell, France's Total, and America's Chevron—are spending 15 percent, 30 percent, and 35 percent respectively of their global exploration and production budgets in Africa. Chevron alone is in the process of rolling out $20 billion in African projects over a five-year period.

The overwhelming majority of this new drilling activity has taken place in the so-called "deep water" and the "ultradeep" of the Gulf of Guinea, the roughly 90-degree bend along the west coast of Africa that can best be visualized as the continent's "armpit." Its littoral zone passes through the territorial waters of a dozen countries, from Ivory Coast in the northwest down to Angola in the south, and a good deal of its geology shares the characteristics that have made Nigeria a prolific producer for decades. Indeed, a number of unexpectedly productive particularly appealing to American and European refineries, which have to contend with strict environmental regulations that make it difficult to refine heavier and sourer varieties of crude without running up costs that make the entire proposition worthless.

Then there is the geographic accident of Africa's being almost entirely surrounded by water, which significantly cuts transport-related costs and risks. The Gulf of Guinea, in particular, is well positioned to allow speedy transport to the major trading ports of Europe and North America. Existing sea-lanes can be used for quick, cheap delivery, so there is no need to worry about the Suez Canal, for instance, or to build expensive pipelines through unpredictable countries. This may seem a minor point, until you look at Central Asia, where the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, stretching from Azerbaijan through Georgia and into Turkey, and intended to deliver Caspian crude into the Mediterranean, had to navigate a minefield of Middle East politics, antiglobalization protests, and red tape before it could be opened. African oil faces none of those issues. It is simply loaded onto a tanker at the point of production and begins its smooth, unmolested journey on the high seas, arriving just days later in Shreveport, Southampton, or Le Havre.

A third advantage, from the perspective of the oil companies, is that Africa offers a tremendously favorable contractual environment. Unlike in, say, Saudi Arabia, where the state-owned oil company Saudi Aramco has a monopoly on the exploration, production, and distribution of the country's crude oil, most sub-Saharan African countries operate on the basis of so-called production-sharing agreements, or PSAs. In these arrangements, a foreign oil company is awarded a license to look for petroleum on the condition that it assume the up-front costs of exploration and production. If oil is discovered in that block, the oil company will share the revenues with the host government, but only *after* its initial costs have been recouped. PSAs are generally offered to impoverished countries that would never be able to amass either the technical expertise or the billions in capital investment required to drill for oil themselves. For the

oil company, a relatively small up-front investment can quickly turn into untold billions in profits.

Yet another strategic benefit, particularly from the perspective of American politicians, is that, until recently, with the exception of Nigeria, none of the oil-producing countries of sub-Saharan Africa had belonged to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).* Thus they have not been subject to the strict limits on output OPEC imposes on its members in an attempt to keep the price of oil artificially high. The more non-OPEC oil that comes onto the global market, the more difficult it becomes for OPEC countries to sell their crude at high prices, and the lower the overall price of oil. Put more simply, if new reserves are discovered in Venezuela, they have very little effect on the price of oil because Venezuela's OPEC commitments will not allow it to increase its output very much. But if new reserves are discovered in Gabon, it means more cheap oil for everybody.

But probably the most attractive of all the attributes of Africa's oil boom, for Western governments and oil companies alike, is that virtually all the big discoveries of recent years have been made offshore, in deepwater reserves that are often many miles from populated land. This means that even if a civil war or violent insurrection breaks out onshore (always a concern in Africa), the oil companies can continue to pump out oil with little likelihood of sabotage, banditry, or nationalist fervor getting in the way. Given the hundreds of thousands of barrels of Nigerian crude that are lost every year as a result of fighting, community protests, and organized crime, this is something the industry gets rather excited about.

Finally, there is the sheer speed of growth in African oil production, and the fact that Africa is one of the world's last underexplored regions. In a world used to hearing that there are no more big oil discoveries out there, and few truly untapped reserves to look forward to,

*In January 2007, Angola became the first new member of OPEC in over thirty years, and Sudan is expected to join late in 2007. Gabon withdrew from the organization in 1995.

But it is not just the usual amen chorus of humanitarian Chicken Littles and louche, *bien pensant* urban intellectuals who have sounded alarm bells over the African oil boom. Hard-nosed economists, too, are skeptical. A growing body of evidence suggests that oil, far from being a blessing to African countries, is a curse. Without exception, every developing country where oil has been discovered has seen its standard of living decline and its people suffer, while its less-well-endowed neighbors have gone on to (relative) prosperity. Scholars have dubbed this phenomenon, which depends on a curious matrix of economic and sociological responses to a sudden influx of petroleum money, the "paradox of plenty" or the "resource curse." Inevitably, little of the oil wealth ever makes its way to those who need it most.

One of the great scandals of the African oil boom, for example, is that it has produced far more jobs in the United States and Europe than it ever will in Africa. Only about 5 percent of the billions and billions invested in African petroleum projects every year is spent *in Africa*. Oil exploration is by its nature capital-intensive rather than labor-intensive, meaning that most investment goes to developing and operating expensive and sophisticated hardware, such as the multimillion-dollar floating production, storage, and offloading vessels (FPSOs) that have popped up along the African coastline. What little labor is needed is generally of the skilled variety, and international oil companies have scant incentive to train an indigenous workforce when flying in expatriate engineers and technicians is cheaper and simpler. Offshore oil exploration is, in the parlance of economists, perhaps the ultimate "enclave industry."

As more African economies become dependent on their oil revenues, the stakes for finding ways to beat the resource curse have never been higher. Oil and gas are already Africa's largest export category, three and a half times greater than all others put together. Extractive industries (i.e., oil, gas, and mining) accounted for more than 50 percent of African exports and 65 percent of foreign direct investment in Africa in the 1990s. The American charity Catholic Relief

Services "conservatively" estimates that $200 billion in oil revenue will flow into the coffers of African governments over the next decade. All this, it is argued, makes it more important than ever for African governments to "get it right" and ensure that oil is allowed to be a blessing rather than a curse for their long-suffering people.

Others, of course, prefer to see Africa's oil boom as simply a centuries-old story of foreign exploitation and the subjection of Africa's people at the mercy of voracious commercial interests—a second great "Scramble for Africa," after the original carve-up of the African continent by European colonial powers in the late nineteenth century. Virtually everywhere in Africa today, Chinese, Malaysian, French, Australian, and American firms can be seen jockeying for position, trying to snap up exploration acreage in an undignified rush that seems to grow more ruthless by the day. And the chess game among oil companies is inevitably echoed in the foreign ministries of the world's great powers. France, China, and the United States are engaged in an intensifying competition for influence among the oil-producing nations of Africa. China, especially, has shown that it is prepared to plunk down large cash incentives in the form of loan guarantees in exchange for lucrative oil concessions from African countries.

So who are we to believe? The committed evangelists who tell us African oil can be a catalyst for the continent's development as well as a crucial source of Western energy security? The constructive critics who stress the importance of sound fiscal management and revenue transparency, and warn of the dangers of runaway oil bonanzas? Or the Afro-pessimists who say that experience has taught us that rapacious foreigners motivated by their interests in extractive industries will only stand in the way of Africa's development? In the long run, we all know that simply drilling for oil in a faraway country without thinking about the consequences of our inevitable involvement in its internal politics is not a recipe for stability, or even for the energy security we so badly crave. That is a lesson we have probably learned from Susan Comfort "Struggle in Ogoniland: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Cultural Politics of Environmental Justice" (2002)

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 neocolonial 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 Kataf 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

Shell-BP Petroleum Development Co. Ltd., Lagos.

The Commissioner,
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Natural Resources,
Rivers State of Nigeria, Port Harcourt.

Mr K. B. Tsaro-Wiwa,
Commissioner for Education, Rivers State, Port Harcourt.

Mr O. O. Ngei,
Commissioner for Works, Land and Transport,
Rivers State. Port Harcourt.

The Head of Operation,
Shell-BP, Port Harcourt.

A little over two months later, Shell-B. P. replied as follows:

H.E. The Military Governor,
Rivers State,
PORT HARCOURT.

Your Excellency,

OIL OPERATIONS IN OGONI DIVISION.

We refer to the "HUMBLE PETITION OF COMPLAINT FROM SHELL-BP OPERATIONS IN OGONI DIVISION", dated 25th April, 1970, addressed to Your Excellency by the "Ogoni Divisional Commission" and copied the Federal Commissioner for Mines and Power, and the Rivers State Civil Commissioners. This petition is one of a series which have originated in Ogoni Division over the past few years attempting to place development and other responsibilities on this Company which can only properly be undertaken by Government or by a Government agency. In support of such contentions, statements are usually made which, on examination, bear little

relation to what is actually taking place. Regrettably, this petition is no exception to the rule and we deal with the various matters raised in it in detail in the appendix to this letter.

As you know, the main aim and purpose of an oil Company must be to find and produce hydrocarbons as efficiently as possible. This is the area in which it makes a very significant contribution to the overall economic development of any country in which it operates. As is the case with the other oil Companies operating in Nigeria our obligations and responsibilities are clearly delineated in the agreements made with the Federal Government and by the Laws and Regulations relating to the oil industry in Nigeria. These have always been meticulously observed by this Company. We have, however been extremely careful to ensure that our operations cause minimal disturbance to the people in the areas in which we operate and we think that this clearly emerges from the content of the attached appendix.

As with any special pleading, the petition exaggerates or misrepresents in one direction (e.g. the amount of land occupied for oil operations in Ogoni Division) and minimizes in the other (e.g. the amount of compensation paid by Shell-BP in Ogoni Division over the past years). There can be no doubt, however, that the incidental benefits accruing to Ogoni Division from Shell-BP's presence there greatly outweighs any disadvantages.

We have given very careful consideration to the advisability of writing to you on this matter and have finally concluded that the inaccuracies in the petition should not remain unanswered. We are sending copies of the letter to the Governor and Commissioners of the Rivers State who received copies of the petition.

Yours faithfully,
for: SHELL-BP PETROLEUM DEVELOPMENT COMPANY OF NIGERIA LIMITED.

(Sgd.) J. SPINKS
MANAGER, EASTERN OPERATIONS.

APPENDIX TO LETTER NO.PUB/2110 DATED 9/6/70