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Ken Saro-Wiwa:

Through the Eyes of the Oppressed

Ken Saro-Wiwa’s life ended at the hands of his own government. He fought to protect his land from the exploitation of Shell Petroleum Development Company. Saro-Wiwa was the opposition leader of the environmental movement in Nigeria and advocated for the land and people of Ogoni. His contribution to the preservation of the Niger Delta also sparked a revolutionary shift in Nigeria’s governmental system. Saro-Wiwa viewed nature as precious; he believed people and land should exist harmoniously. He strived to preserve nature and to stop environmental exploitation; he viewed the exploitation as death and nature as life.

Saro-Wiwa, birth name Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa, was born October 10, 1941. Saro-Wiwa was born into a prominent family in the Ogoni tribe located in the Niger Delta. He was one of the few Ogoni children who were able to attend school; he graduated from the University of Ibadan in 1965 (Wiwa 13). In 1960, while Saro-Wiwa was still in school, Nigeria gained independence from Britain. However, there was a constant struggle to unite the country because of a weak federal system and clashing regional tribes. Saro-Wiwa’s first employment opportunity after college was at an oil refinery at Bonny Island in the Delta State as federal administrator. It was around this time that international companies, specifically Shell Petroleum Development Company, or Shell, began oil explorations, resulting in the production of massive refineries and pipelines that overran the Delta Region (Saro-Wiwa 31-33). In 1973, Saro-Wiwa reached his highest government position as commissioner of education but was dismissed shortly after because he advocated for greater Ogoni autonomy. After his dismissal, Saro-Wiwa started a business in Port Harcourt, subsequently building a business empire in real-estate and retail. Saro-Wiwa’s name became nationally recognized for his production of an extremely popular television show, Basi & Company. In the 1980s Saro-Wiwa concentrated on writing, authored novels, poetry, and newspaper columns (Wiwa 22-26). The foundation of Ken Saro-Wiwa quotes some common themes and ideas in Saro-Wiwa’s work, “Throughout his work he often made references to the exploitation he saw around him as the oil and gas industry took riches from beneath the feet of the poor Ogoni farmers, and in return left them polluted and disenfranchised.(2)” Saro-Wiwa publicly addressed the corruption and repression of the government and began the movement that had an immense effect on his country and labeled him as the opposition leader in Nigeria. His criticism was specifically directed at the environmental destruction of the Delta Region and the government’s passivity to it. In 1990 Saro-Wiwa was one of the founding members of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, or MOSOP. He authored The Ogoni Bill of Rights and had ties with Greenpeace International (McLuckie and McPhail 109). A publication by MOSOP reflected Saro-Wiwa’s contribution:

Under Saro-Wiwa's leadership, MOSOP became one of the most visible organizations in protesting the economic exploitation of the Delta region. Saro-Wiwa led a nonviolent campaign against the environmental degradation of the land and waters of Ogoniland by the operations of the multinational petroleum industry, especially Shell. He was also an outspoken critic of the Nigerian government, which he viewed as reluctant to enforce environmental regulations on the foreign petroleum companies operating in the area.

By 1993, Shell had pulled out of Ogoni. It was a triumph that became overshadowed by the events that were soon to come. In May of 1994 four of MOSOP’s critics were killed in an ambush. Saro-Wiwa and eight of his colleagues were arrested and charged. It was viewed as unfair, unfounded and a set-up to silence the opposition. The "Ogoni Nine" were hastily tried, convicted and sentenced to death in Nigerian military court. Six months before his death, Saro-Wiwa was awarded the Right Livelihood Award for “exemplary and selfless courage and in striving non-violently for the civil, economic and environmental rights of his people.” Despite the international outcry and outrage, Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed by hanging on November 10, 1995 (Hammer 65-68).

There are approximately 500,000 Ogoni people who populate the 650 sq. km. of Ogoniland. Although the area has a high population density, the land of the Niger Delta is extremely fertile and has allowed the Ogoni to make a good living as farmers and fishers (Maier 256). During his childhood, Saro-Wiwa was accustomed to a natural and peaceful lifestyle. Shell’s destruction of the Niger Delta is what compelled Saro-Wiwa to commit to the protection of the land and nature. In The Ogoni Bill of Rights Saro-Wiwa describes the destruction, “The once-beautiful Ogoni countryside is no more a source of fresh air and green vegetation. All one sees and feels around is death,” According to Shell Oil's own figures, between 1958 and 1993, the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria took 634 million barrels of oil from Ogoni, valued at US $5.2 billion (Maier 301). Saro-Wiwa knew that the people and land were being exploited. His goal was to preserve nature. He valued land and viewed nature as one with the people. The Ogoni’s means of survival were greatly damaged by the pollution from gas flaring, repeated oil spills and blowouts. In a public statement representing EMIROAF in regards to Shell in Ogoni, Saro-Wiwa says:

The most notorious action of Shell has been the flaring of gas, sometimes in the middle of villages, as in Dere, (Bomu oilfield) or very close to human habitation as in the Yorla and Korokoro oilfields in Ogoni. This action has destroyed wildlife, and plant life, poisoned the atmosphere and therefore the inhabitants in the surrounding areas and made the residents half-deaf and prone to respiratory diseases. Whenever it rains in Ogoni, all we have is acid rain which further poisons water courses, streams, creeks and agricultural land.

Saro-Wiwa gave a voice to the minority of indigenous tribes that were being repressed by large corporations and government. The environment in the Niger Delta was being destroyed by the gases and Saro-Wiwa wanted to save the precious land from destruction that was slowly becoming irreversible. Saro-Wiwa explains how the battle against Shell is a constant struggle, “In this most sophisticated and unconventional war, no bones are broken, no blood is spilled and no one is maimed; yet men, women and children die; flora, fauna and fish perish, and finally, the land dies.(36)” His perspective stresses the importance of preservation. There is a destructive cycle that needs to be stopped to save Ogoniland.

MOSOP and the Ethnic Minority Rights Organization of Africa, or EMIROAF, were two foundations that Saro-Wiwa led (McLuckie and McPhail 109-110). Saro-Wiwa’s view of preserving the rights of the land and people of Ogoni is the reason he led the fight against the oil exploitation. Unwilling to succumb to the environmental devastation of their homeland, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Ogoni leaders presented The Ogoni Bill of Rights to the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the transnational oil companies in 1992, but to no avail. The death toll was rising, but so was the voice of the people, and Saro-Wiwa and would not be silenced. On January 4, 1993, Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP gathered and led a protest to get Shell out of Nigeria. Saro-Wiwa’s leadership in this act presents his passionate dedication to the protection of his land. “Approximately 300,000 Ogoni came out in a series of rallies to declare Shell Oil persona non grata in Ogoniland. A few months later, Shell officially ceased production in Ogoniland which, according to a MOSOP press release, made the Ogoni ‘the first indigenous people in the history of our planet to force a transnational oil company to leave our land by peaceful means’” (Wiwa 89). Those 300,000 people stood for the 88 million who lived in Nigeria at the time. Although Shell had pulled out of Ogoni, Saro-Wiwa still faced the devastation of Ogoniland after the oil companies’ thirty-five year stay (Hammer 59). The evacuation of Shell could never be deemed as a true success because so much nature and land had been devastated by the gas flares, oil leaks and subsequently acid rain. The recovery of the Ogoni people still goes on today. As the closing testimony for his trial, Saro-Wiwa reflected on the subjugation of his people and ultimately the annihilation of his homeland, “…for there is no doubt in my mind that the ecological war that the company [Shell] has waged in the Delta will be called to question sooner than later and the crimes of that war be duly punished” (78). Saro-Wiwa’s undeniable passion for justice continued to be fueled by the corruption of the Nigerian justice system. Even facing death, Saro-Wiwa wanted only for nature to be preserved and his people to rightfully lead good and peaceful lives.

The main theme that emerges in Saro-Wiwa’s life is preservation. He fought to preserve the land, preserve peace and preserve justice. He was saddened by the devastation of Ogoni land and all of the Niger Delta. In his book, A Forest of Flowers, the following passage from the story Night Ride, reflects Saro-Wiwa’s anger at seeing oil companies, like Shell, appropriating land from local people:

An old woman had hobbled up to him. My son, they arrived this morning and dug up my entire farm, my only farm. They mowed down the toil of my brows, the pride of the waiting months. They say they will pay me compensation. Can they compensate me for my labors? The joy I receive when I see the vegetables sprouting, God’s revelation to me in my old age? Oh my son, what can I do? What answer now could he give her? I’ll look into it later, he had replied tamely. Look into it later. He could almost hate himself for telling that lie. He cursed the earth for spouting oil, black gold, they called it. And he cursed the gods for not drying the oil wells. What did it matter that millions of barrels of oil were mined and exported daily, so long as this poor woman wept those tears of despair? What could he look into later? Could he make alternate land available? And would the lawmakers revise the laws just to bring a bit more happiness to these unhappy wretches whom the search for oil had reduced to an animal existence? They ought to send the oil royalties to the men whose farms and land were despoiled and ruined. But the lawyers were in the pay of the oil companies and the government people in the pay of the lawyers and the companies. So how could he look into it later? (98-100)

The oil exploitation by Shell was the evil in this story. It left one man defenseless against a crying old woman who represented the Ogoni people. The incident captures the life of one whose land and means were taken away by greed. Much of Saro-Wiwa’s writing and poetry reflects his care for nature and his sadness to the destruction of it. Saro-Wiwa’s belief that his land is being destroyed and exploited is established in his poetry:

For Ogoni out in the dreary rain

Her legs apart like a cheap prostitute

Exposed, utterly exposed.

Ogoni is a ravished woman. (43)

Saro-Wiwa uses vulgarity to illustrate the immense exploitation. Saro-Wiwa made this comparison because Shell viewed Ogoniland as insignificant and cheap, like a prostitute. Shell ravished Ogoniland of its oil and left it helpless and tarnished. He uses the term exposed to imply that the Ogoni people and land were torn up from the roots and left completely bare with no resources and no where left to turn. Saro-Wiwa intended to cause discomfort when reading this piece with the crude words and sexual parallels.

It is clear that Saro-Wiwa’s selfless commitment stopped the ongoing exploitation of his land. His execution stood as an even greater statement to the corruption and repression of his people. Saro-Wiwa’s name will live on as that of a courageous leader and protector of Ogoniland. Nature was precious to Saro-Wiwa; his efforts to preserve nature in life have been carried out in honor of his death.