

Nigeria: The Ogoni: Oil, Blood, and the Death of a Homeland

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The 500,000 tribal Ogoni of the Niger delta in southern Nigeria have watched as their traditional fishing and farming livelihood has been laid waste by Shell Oil's extraction of oil, with full complicity of the national government, which has allowed large parts of the Ogonis' homeland to be ruined. The Ogonis' land has been contaminated not only by oil wells and pipelines, but also by gas flares that burn 24 hours a day, producing intense heat and chemical gas fogs that pollute nearby homes as they render farm fields barren and unproductive. The constant flaring of natural gas also contributes measurably to global warming. Several Ogoni who protested the ruination of their homeland and the impoverishment of their people have been convicted of false charges and executed.

Shell has extracted oil from the Niger Delta since 1958. Shell operates a joint-venture consisting of Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, Elf and Agip. Shell is by far the largest foreign oil company in Nigeria, accounting for 50 per cent of Nigeria's oil production. Nigeria generated roughly 12 per cent of Shell's oil production world-wide in the late 1990s. (Shell: 100 Years, 1997)

High-pressure pipelines have been laid above ground through villages and farmlands, a major reason why the area suffered an average of 190 spills per year between 1989 and 1996, involving on average 319,200 gallons of oil. (Shell: 100 Years, 1997)

According to one observer on the scene, "Rivers, lakes and ponds are polluted with oil, and much of the land is now impossible to farm. Canals, or 'slots', have permanently damaged fragile ecosystems and led to polluted drinking water and deaths from cholera. Gas flaring and the construction of flow stations near communities have led to severe respiratory and other health problems..." (Shell: 100 Years, 1997)

By 2000, oil accounted for more than 90 per cent Nigeria's export earnings and roughly 80 per cent of government revenue. More than 90 per cent of Nigeria's oil is extracted from the Niger Delta. During the last 40 years, oil worth \$30 billion has been extracted from the Ogonis' homeland. (Wiwa, 2000) By 2000, the Ogonis' homeland was home to 100 oil wells, two refineries, a petrochemical complex and a fertilizer complex, while most of the Ogoni people do not have electricity or running water. It is a land where five physicians serve 500,000 people. (Wiwa, 2000)

According to a local observer, "Chevron-Texaco extracts hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil from the Niger Delta in Nigeria every year despite decades of resistance by the people of the Delta. In Opia, one community of the Delta, Chevron-Texaco has destroyed the traditional local economy, run pipelines through gardens and villages and leased helicopters to the military to attack local demonstrators." (Environmental Injustice, 2001)

While local opponents of its activities assert that Chevron-Texaco profits heavily from its operations in the Niger Delta and has provided both dollars and infrastructure to the Nigerian military, (which uses those resources to suppress resistance and kill activists), Chevron-Texaco accepts no responsibility for environmental problems or human-rights abuses. While all meaningful quality-of-life measures continue to indicate that the lives of indigenous people in the Niger Delta continues to decline, the corporation continues to claim that its operations "promote democracy and development." (Environmental Injustice, 2001)

Obsolete, leaking, rusty oil pipelines have become a major source of contaminating oil spills for the Ogoni. In 1992, a major oil blow-out in the village of Botem lasted a week before it was stopped, creating a biological dead zone in the water courses that supplied drinking water for local residents. Oil spills caused by obsolete pipelines are routinely blamed on sabotage, which allows companies to ignore repairs under Nigerian law. During October, 1998, an explosion and leak flooded a large part of the village of Jesse, killing more than 700 people; two years later, two pipeline explosions in southern Nigeria killed 300 people. (Gedicks, 2001, 45)

Repression by the "Kill and Go"

The Ogonis' protests of such conditions have been met with brutal repression by Nigerian police. During 1990, people in the village of Umuechem protested oil pollution of their homeland, to be set upon by the notorious Mobile Police (known locally as the "Kill and Go") who bombarded the village, killing more than 100 people, as they looted many homes. Survivors were forced to leave their homes. (Gedicks, 2001, 46) The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), organized during 1990, adopted an Ogoni Bill of Rights demanding local control of political and environmental affairs, blaming Shell Oil for "full responsibility for the genocide of the Ogoni." (Gedicks, 2001, 46) Following this declaration, the rights of the Ogoni were discussed before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, during 1992. In 1993, roughly 300,000 people gathered in protest in the Ogoni village of Bori, to declare Shell Oil persona non grata on their land. Shell was forced to suspend oil production for a time due to the protests at its nearby facilities.

Response to these protests by Nigerian police and military was quick and forceful. Within the next eight years, according to an account by Al Gedicks (in Resource Rebels, 2001), more than 2,000 people were killed and 37 villages substantially destroyed. About 30,000 other Ogoni were displaced from their homes as troops took up long-term residence in the area to protect Shell's assets. (Gedicks, 2001, 47)

On May 21, 1994, four Ogoni leaders were murdered in Gokana Kingdom, reportedly by angry youths. Ken Saro-Wiwa, the most notable leader of MOSOP and eight other MOSOP leaders were arrested and accused of involvement in the murders. The day after the crimes, military police (the Internal Security Task Force) stormed into Ogoniland, raiding, burning and looting villages. While thousands of Ogoni villagers took refuge in the bush, hundreds who did not escape were detained and tortured. On October 31, 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogonis were sentenced to death by the Special Tribunal. They were executed on November 10.

Oil Spills and Wastelands

Large oil spills have turned large areas of the Ogonis' homeland into wastelands. In mid-2001, for example, a United Nations Internet page described Yaata, a Ogoni village, where "dying vegetation in various shades of ochre stretch as far as the eye can see, poisoned by soil turned soggy and a dark, greasy hue since crude oil began seeping through over a month ago." On April 29, at the Royal/Dutch Shell Yorla oil field, a "quake-like tremor sent shockwaves onto Yaata and surrounding villages." (Nigeria: Focus, 2001) Within minutes, before people could guess the cause, jets of crude oil were already shooting up 100 meters, raining on the surroundings. The oil plume was quickly followed by strong fumes of natural gas, as the people of the village ran for their lives.

John Nwike, a student from Yaata, told the U.N.'s Integrated Regional Information Network that the villagers "knew from experience that any accidental fire was going to light up the area and spread as fast and as far as the fumes were going." (Nigeria: Focus, 2001) For nine days, according to an I.R.I.N. account, "The shower of crude oil and gas poured on Yaata unabated. The rapidly resulting streams of crude oil swamped neighboring farmlands, forests, streams and rivers." (Nigeria: Focus, 2001)

Although Shell Oil was quickly alerted to the disaster, its employees were described by indigenous people on the scene as appearing helpless, as teams of Shell workers circled the area in helicopters, without landing. In the meantime, local people organized to alert inhabitants to the danger of lighting fires, limiting the damage as best they could. "Nevertheless," according to the I.R.I.N. account, "People in the areas pervaded by the fumes complained of breathing difficulties, in a number of cases combined with cough and runny noses" until experts from Boots and Coots International Well Control of Houston, Texas, capped the broken well-head on the ninth day. (Nigeria: Focus, 2001)

When Yaata's residents returned after the spill was stopped,

They found their village was uninhabitable. Their maize, cassava and yam crops were stained with crude oil, wilted and dying. Much of their livestock had either died or were dying from eating polluted vegetation and drinking contaminated water. Dead fish rose to the surface of creeks and ponds. (Nigeria: Focus, 2001)

Two months later, no attempt had been made to clean up the spill's damage, aside from the digging of a few trenches to divert some of the oil spill. Residents of Yaata had been forced to move into other villages, giving up their lives' work.

In the meantime, the spilled oil seeped further into the earth, contaminating underground water for miles around, as Shell blamed "sabotage" and refused to pay compensation. Shell complained that protests by local people had inhibited its ability to properly shut down the well that blew, in effect blaming the Ogoni for the explosive spill in the Yorla field. (Shell Says, 2001) Ledum Mitee, president of MOSOP in 2001, accused Shell of seeking "scapegoats" for the spill instead of taking prompt steps to contain and clean it. "We are shocked that Shell is already leveling accusations against local people who have risked their lives and health to prevent a fire for the last three days," Mitee said. (Shell Says, 2001)

The Death of Friday Nwiido

The tensions between the oil companies and people in the Niger Delta are a regular feature of daily life that often result in deaths, illustrated by the death of one young man, Friday Nwiido.

On Sunday April 29, 2001, at about 9:30 a.m., a huge explosion took place at the Well 10 facility (Yorla Oil Field) and the affected facility rained crude oil sporadically for days into adjacent farmlands, settlements, streams, swamps, lakes and rivers. Jollyboy Olole, an eyewitness, who was inspecting his cassava crops when the explosion occurred, said that the crude "rained into his eyes." (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

On the same afternoon, Shell organized a press conference in its staff club in nearby Port Harcourt. At the conference, Shell staff insisted that the blow-out had been caused by sabotage. Three Texan oil engineers who helped to deal with the problem later were quoted as saying that the blow-out was caused by "mechanical failure due to gas pressure coupled with corrosion of the facility." (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

In the meantime, Friday Nwiido celebrated his 30th birthday in June, was working as a welder in Port Harcourt to where he commuted every day on his motorbike. He also was a farmer and fisherman; "a true Ogoni Man," he said. (Ashton-Jones, 2001) Seventeen people were dependant on his earnings, including his mother, his wife and three children.

Following the blow-out at Yorla, a group of local youths, including Friday, who seems to have been accepted him as a leader, went to see Shell in Port Harcourt about clearing up the mess. It was agreed that Shell staff would meet the youths at the site to discuss the situation. However, Shell arrived on the scene, contrary to the perceived agreement, with all their equipment, plus their Wilbros contractors. Nonetheless, it was agreed with Friday that the youths would do the cleanup labor. The operation was not completed that day and it was further agreed that Shell would employ the same youths when they returned to complete the work. No payment was made.

However, contrary to the agreement Shell did not send a prior message of their return so that the group of youths were not on site when the clearance contractors returned. As a result, another group was employed. By the time Friday and his cohort learned what had happened, the work had been completed and, by coincidence, Nwiido met the Shell team returning to Port Harcourt as he was coming home on his motorcycle. (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

Nwiido stopped the Shell vehicles and asked what was going on. He was told to see the Shell Community Director in Port Harcourt but he replied that he could not do that because he was afraid for his safety and because he knew from experience that he would not be allowed inside the gate. Instead, Nwiido said he wanted to keep one of the vehicles and, apparently, he was allowed to keep the fire truck at his house. (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

On June 10 or 11, the police came to Nwiido's house, saying they wanted to remove the truck to Bori, the district center. Friday refused and the police returned with the local government chairman who said he was willing to pay N.500 to each of Nwiido's men because his possession of the truck was affecting his job as chairman. They pleaded with Friday but he refused, saying he would only talk to Shell and not to middlemen. On June 15, the police came to the village with tear-gas and guns. The villagers ran to Nwiido, according to an observer on the scene, "immediately surrendered himself to the police. With his hands up and outside his own house, he was shot in the legs and put into the boot [trunk] of the police car by the Divisional Police Officer and the Area Commander. That was the last time that Friday was seen." (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

For five days, Nwiido's mother searched for her son. She was not allowed into the Shell compound in Port Harcourt, but told to go to the nearby Rumuibekwe police station from where she was sent to the Shell clinic; there an Ogoni nurse told her that her son had died. His body apparently had been deposited in the teaching hospital where she was told that she could only inspect the name in the mortuary register; the body could only be seen with police permission. (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

Another version of the story, that quotes Nwiido's mother is consistent:

I don't know who called my son. He suddenly reappeared from his workplace and walked into the invading force with his hands raised in surrender. As he came he was shouting, "I am the one, I didn't hijack any vehicle, Shell is owing me and I want my money." He cried as the police fired live bullets at him at close range. He was hit on his thighs several times. He fell down, bleeding profusely. He was carried from the ground by one of the police officers and dumped in the boot. I hired a car immediately and followed the police who were retreating after killing my child. When they noticed that we were following them, they stopped us. We diverted and monitored them up to the police station at Bori, Ogoni. I saw when Shell vehicles stopped and entered the police station. The police held brief talks with Shell and Khana local government officials. (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

From there, we moved to Port Harcourt. My son was crying in pains as they drove on. Some of the police vans had left the convey remaining in some unmarked cars. It was when they stopped over in Shell clinic at Rumukrushu, Port Harcourt that I missed my way. I went to the military hospital where they told me that there was no body like that. I visited all the government and Shell hospitals in Port Harcourt but I could not find my son. It was at the Shell hospital somebody I will not mention his name, told me that really the boy was brought there alive and after several secret talks with the medical personnel, they transferred him to the Mini-Okoro police station. At Mini-Okoro, another reliable source told me that the boy was executed on Saturday and that the people who were present during the shooting were the Divisional Crime Officer (DCO), Divisional Police Officer (DPO), Area Commander, one man nicknamed Ahoada and two others. (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

To confirm the source, I was told that the corpse was deposited at the mortuary of the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital (UPTH). I went there and saw the corpse of my son. I then went back to report all my ordeals to Hon. Emmanuel Deeyah, Commissioner for special duties in Rivers State. I told the commissioner that I want to see the Governor, Dr. Odili, since I voted for

him. On 29 June 2001, Deeyah held a meeting with us in his office. Present at the meeting were our village head, elders, youth and the chairman Khana local government council, Hon. Letam Korsi. The Ogoni commissioner blamed those who attended for allowing the poor to die. (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

Up till now I am still waiting for the corpse of my son. I want to bury him -- the police, Shell council officials, and the village council are all responsible for my child's death. I will say these things anywhere, any day. Please quote me anywhere, I have read what Shell and the police are saying in the Nigerian media, they are all liars. (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

The Travail of Ogoniland Continues

As the third millennium dawned, an old story continued in Ogoniland: poorly maintained oil-drilling infrastructure continued to leak and blow up, as anyone who spoke out against the devastation risked death. The August 31, 2001 issue of *Drillbits & Tailings* was dedicated

to the memory of Mr. Vincent Ifelodun Bolarin Oyinbo (also known as Bola), his family and friends, the Ilaje people, all people of the Niger Delta, and the staff and volunteers of Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, Nigeria. Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth (ERA/FoEN), Nigeria notified friends and allies that Bola passed on to the great beyond on July 19, 2001 in Lagos, Nigeria at the age of 36 while preparing for a trip to the United States. ERA/FoEN said a death certificate issued by a private medical clinic in Lagos put the cause of his death as cardiac arrest. But relatives and friends say he never had a history of heart problems. Bola was one of the 100 peaceful protesters on the Parabe offshore platform who were attacked by the Nigerian military in helicopters operated by Chevron personnel. He was held for 12 days and tortured by the Nigerian military personnel. Bola witnessed bribes given by Chevron employees to the military personnel who attacked and arrested him. His trip to the United States was to receive medical treatment from injuries he sustained during this attack and to work on a court case filed against Chevron by communities in the Niger Delta. (Drillbits, 2001)

Within a week of Bola's death, the Niger Delta was afflicted with yet another massive oil spill. People living in the community of Ogbodo, on the banks of the Miniamu River, "were engulfed with irritating odor and itching every morning." Isiri Alison, an observer, related that "We no longer drink from the rivers. As an emergency measure, Shell supplied few liters of water to the 15 families that make us Ogbodo. Apart from the one I saw with my eyes, everyone here complained that the water Shell supplied is dirty and smells. Many people simply threw theirs away." (Drillbits, 2001)

As of August 21, 2001, community leaders from Gokana, Ogoniland reported that fires caused by ruptured pipelines owned and operated by Shell Oil had been burning for two months with no response from authorities. "Agency reports yesterday [August 20, 2001] that the community faced being ravaged by 'devastation of unimaginable proportion' unless urgent steps were taken to put off the 'scores of fires ignited by pipeline excavators,'" said *The Guardian* news agency in Lagos. (Shell Oil, 2001) Other news correspondents reported that farmland has been lost to the fires.

In June 1997, when Shell refused to pay compensation for a 1982 oil spill (defying a local court order), members of four affected Ijaw communities gave Shell an ultimatum to leave the oil producing area by July 8, or be forced out. Hours before the deadline expired, the leader of the community protest was arrested by the State Security Service (SSS). A local

observer wrote that: "Worried that the said payments will encourage other legitimate compensation demands, Shell has alerted the security forces and this morning Mr. Matthew Eregbene has been whisked away," said a spokesman for the Niger Delta Oil-Producing Communities Development Organization. (Shell: 100 Years, 1997)

In Bayelsa State, the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) has called on Shell Petroleum Development Company, the Nigerian subsidiary of Shell Oil, to cease all operations at the Nun River flow station in response to the murder of a 22-year old Ijaw man by the mobile police, the infamous "Kill and Go." At about the same time, the Lagos newspaper *This Day* reported that by August, 2001, 4,835 oil spills totaling almost 2.4 million barrels of crude oil had afflicted the Niger delta. (Lowri, 2001)

Drillbits & Tailings November, 2001 reported that another oil-related accident had claimed several more lives: "An oil pipeline owned by the Royal Dutch Shell exploded, killing as many as 15 people and injuring 14 others. The explosion occurred at Umidike in Imo State on November 5, 2001. Ironically, *Drillbits & Tailings* noted that Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) the previous October had called for the introduction of a national environmental and safety standard in the Nigerian oil and gas industry that meets international standards. (Hotspots: Nigeria, 2001)

Meanwhile, to quell any popular expression of notions that something might be dreadfully wrong in the oil fields, the Nigerian government set up a special committee to ensure total security for oil-producing areas. The authorities demanded that "a recent siege" in the oil producing areas by "restive youths, communal agitators and economic saboteurs" must end. The new committee signaled increasing vigilance on the part of the military against any sign of unhappiness among the Ogoni. Chief Ekaette explained that the recent "terrorism" had made the assured security of oil installations an urgent imperative. Felix Ekure, Delta State chairman of the National Youth Council of Nigeria (NYCN), warned that unless the youths of the Niger Delta are included in the development of the region, "The country may know no peace." (Hotspots: Nigeria, 2001)

Oil-related disasters in Ogoniland have assumed a daily regularity. *The Lagos Vanguard*, on July 18, 2001, for example, carried, on page 7, a report describing how three children had died in Akwa Ibom by drowning in uncapped oil wells belonging to Shell Producing Nigeria Ltd. Addressing the World Conference of Mayors in Eket, Gov. Victor Attah said that "Shell callously left uncapped wells in which three young children have so far drowned." Narrating the "evil side" of oil exploitation in the area by Exxon-Mobil, Addax and Elf oil companies, he said that pollution, environmental degradation, terminal diseases and birth defects had affected many people in oil producing areas." (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

The same newspaper, on the same day and the same page carried the headline: "Oil Spill: Strange Illness Hits Rivers Community." In the Ogbodo Isioko community in Ikwere area of the Rivers region, where (the) June 25 oil spill of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) occurred, [residents] have reported strange ailments among its people which they said, had claimed four lives. The community said the spill, "which spread quite extensively on the only stream that provided (the) source of drinking water for the area." (Ashton-Jones, 2001)

In the midst of all this, Royal Dutch-Shell told a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* that its "more urgent concern is to protect Ogoni lives and avert disaster." (Moore, 2002, A-10) The company also said it plans to spend \$7.5 billion to extract 300 million barrels of remaining oil reserves in the region. This particular account portrays the oil company as a victim of "local hostility," as well as enterprising thieves who can sell a purloined 25-foot section of oil pipeline for \$87, or more than an average Nigerian construction worker earns in a month. (Moore, 2002, A-10) Children are said in this account to "flock to the theft sites, collecting leftover oil with plastic bottles to sell to those who use it as medicine or to frighten away evil spirits." (Moore, 2002, A-10) Shell executives are portrayed here as lamenting local hostility that keeps them from helping clean up the mess. "We have pleaded with the Ogoni people to let us come and make those wells safe," says Hubert Nwokolo, Shell's general manager of community development in Nigeria. "What worries me is one day we'll have a blowout and then they'll say, 'Shell, they planned it, they want to kill us all.'" (Moore, 2002, A-10)

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