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## The Ogoni of Nigeria

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## Chapter 7

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### The Ogoni of Nigeria

*A. Olu Oyinlade and Jeffery M. Vincent*

#### CULTURAL OVERVIEW

##### The People

The Ogoni are a minority ethnic people who live in the Western Niger Delta Region of southern Nigeria. During the 1970s, Ogoniland, or the Ogoni Nation, became part of the Rivers State of Nigeria. There are approximately 500,000 Ogoni who represent less than 0.05 percent of Nigeria's 100 to 120 million people. The population density of this region equals 1,233 people per square mile, making it one of the most densely populated areas of Nigeria.

Reliable information about the origin of the Ogoni is limited. Archaeological and oral historical evidence suggests that the Ogoni have inhabited the area for over 500 years. Presently, two theories exist about the origin of this people. First, the Ogoni may have migrated into their present territory from across the Imo River sometime around the eighteenth or the nineteenth century. Vestiges of this migration are two Ogoni villages, Warife and Utetuk, that still exist at the other side of the river. Warife still speak Khana, whereas Utetuk have adopted the customs and language of Annang, a neighboring tribe in the Akwa Ibom State. When they arrived in the region, the Ogoni did not find this area to be occupied. As a consequence, they were able to keep their identity from their neighbors—the Ibibios in the southeast, the Igbos to the north, the Ikwerres to the west, and the Andoni and Ijaws to the south. According to this theory, the first Ogoni settlement was in the Khana kingdom, followed by Tai, Gokana,





Ogoni family. (Courtesy Fred Idamkue)

and Eleme, respectively. The Ogoni Nation grew from these first settlements.

The second theory claims that the Ogoni people came on the trading ships, which often visited Bonny, a small city-state island in the delta. They began to settle in Bonny until their population began to outgrow the little town. This necessitated their migration further inland. Once they arrived at Bonny, the resident Ibani people referred to the new arrivals as the "Igoni" or "strangers." As time passed, the Ibani then became known as the "Ogoni." Today, in Bonny, people say that the Ogoni and the Ibani are "brothers." It is quite possible that Ogoni residence on this island in the delta prevented them from being captured during the slave raids that ravaged the mainland.

Following the signing of the Berlin Treaty in 1885, the European colonial powers divided Africa among themselves. Many tribal leaders in Nigeria were coerced into signing treaties with the British. The Ogoni were possibly the last tribe to come into contact with the Europeans due to the pre-colonization ban on European penetration for trade imposed by the powerful king Jaja of Opobo in the southern point of the delta region. When it eventually came time to enter into treaties with the English colonial ruler of Nigeria, the Ogoni chiefs refused. British colonial records indicated that the Ogoni fiercely resisted colonization until the early 1900s.

Their resistance to colonization may have contributed to the woes that eventually befell the Ogoni Nation and continued to affect it until the present time. The English did not meet with much resistance to colonization from other Nigerian tribal populations in the region. During the late 1880s, tribal leaders representing the Hausa and Fulani tribes in northern Nigeria, the Yorubas in the southwest, and the Igbos in the southeast established treaty relations with the English. As a result, the English facilitated the economic development in these tribal territories. Schools were built, and trading relationships were put into place. At this time, for example, the Nigerian Military Academy (now a military university) was built in the Hausa city of Kaduna, and Nigeria's first university and medical college was established in the Yoruba city of Ibadan. On the other hand, the English provided little assistance to the Ogoni people since they had resisted colonization.

During the colonization period, the English generally recognized only three major tribal populations—the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo. More than 250 other tribes in Nigeria were largely ignored. As the English began to withdraw from Nigeria, they divided it into three major arbitrary regions (North, West, and East). Each region was dominated by one of the three major tribes. The other 250 tribes within Nigeria were then governed by one of these three dominant groups and were further marginalized and given minority status.

The Ogoni people are organized into traditional political systems referred

## Ogoni of Nigeria

to as kingdoms. There are six kingdoms that are divided into three separate yet united divisions. First, the Khana division is situated in the eastern as well as the northern-most portions of Ogoniland. It consists of four separate kingdoms—Babbe, Ken Khana, Nyo Khana, and Tai. Each kingdom speaks a dialect of the language Khana and maintains separate territories. Second, the Gokana division and kingdom lies in the south-central part of Ogoniland where the people speak Gokana, a language similar to, but not identical to, Khana. Third, the Eleme division and kingdom is found in western Ogoniland. Although the Eleme language is closely related to both Khana and Gokana, it is distinctly different.

Today, there are over 124 villages and towns in the Ogoni Nation, each headed by a chief. The town of Bori serves as the capital of Ogoniland. Other important towns include Bodo, Dere, and Bomu in Gokana; Nonwa in Tai; Nchia in Eleme; Bane, Baen, Kono, and Kpean in Southern Khana; and Tabangh, Okwali, and Beeri in Northern Khana.

### The Setting

Ogoniland is bounded on the north and east by the Imo River, on the south by the coastal sand plains (occupied by the Andoni people), and on the west by the Aba-Port Harcourt highway. The delta region contains a range of environmental zones including coastal sand plains, deltaic and floodplains, mangrove forests, and barrier island habitats. Ogoniland currently includes about 404 square miles. The climate for the southern coastal region of Nigeria is hot and humid. Average temperatures in the Port Harcourt area range between 77.0°F in August to 81.0°F in March and April. This area receives 93 inches of rainfall during the year; heaviest rains arrive during the months of July and August.

### Traditional Subsistence Strategies

Ogoniland had abundant, fertile soil and the delta plateau within Rivers State was known as the “bread basket” of the region prior to the oil drilling in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The extraordinary fertility has historically enabled the Ogoni to make a good living as subsistence agriculturalists. Fertile plateau soil has supported agricultural endeavors, while the rivers that empty into the Gulf of Guinea provide ample fish and other seafood. The agricultural economy has mainly consisted of yam and cassava (manioc) production.

At the height of its agricultural production, people came from all over the region to buy Ogoni-produced and -processed food. With their cooperative efforts, Ogoni fishermen typically work together in small groups to enhance their catch and improve their share of the fish market. The main source of income for an Ogoni family, however, is the sale of agricultural

products. They make substantial money from Gari (which is processed from cassava) and palm oil (which is processed from palm fruits). They also make money by trading in coconuts, pottery, and palm wine (processed from the sap of certain palm trees). Ogoni palm wine tappers are known to migrate hundreds of miles, sometimes as far as Lagos and Ijebu-Ode in Yoruba land, in search of good-quality palm trees for tapping.

### Social and Political Organization

The social organization of the Ogoni is centered around the family. The typical Ogoni family consists of a father, a mother, and eight children. Unlike most other tribes in Nigeria, polygyny (the marital custom whereby a male has two or more wives) is uncommon among the Ogoni, making the line of descent and inheritance less complex than in the polygynous tribes. Unlike the more dominant tribes like the Yorubas and the Igbos, however, Ogoni mothers have larger families. On average, Ogoni women have three to four more children than women in the dominant tribes. Like most of Nigeria, the role of the Ogoni family is very crucial in socializing a child to become a good tribesperson and a good citizen of Nigeria. Anecdotal sources suggest that from childhood the Ogoni are raised to respect their parents, older siblings, older relatives, and elders of their community. Ogoni families are arranged internally into a hierarchy that includes father, mother, and then children according to birth order. The privileges range from choice pieces of meat during meals to more complex issues revolving around marriage. Younger siblings, for example, may delay marriage based on the marriage plans of older siblings. By tradition, younger siblings are obligated to perform as instructed by older siblings. In fact, in many cases, it is the younger ones who go to their older siblings to offer their services as a sign of respect. Although Ogoni accept such priority rules based on the family hierarchy, it does not prevent some degree of conflict or unhappiness. On occasion, birth order privileges may be modified so that a younger child, usually a female, can marry and begin to have children while she is young.

The traditional political structure of the Ogoni Nation, like most other cultures in Nigeria, can be described as benign dictatorship by the monarchy. This political system is hierarchically arranged and extends downward and outward from the *Gbenemene*, or "king." Under the *Gbenemene* in each kingdom is the *Mene Bua*, a high chief who oversees a group of villages and towns. Each village and town, then, is directly governed by its own chief called the *Mene Buen*. In turn, each village or town is subdivided into many compounds, each headed by a compound chief (or lower chief) called the *Mene Zeu* who reports directly to his *Mene Buen*.

The *Gbenemene* has the highest authority over all matters in his kingdom, and all the chiefs pay homage to him and allow him to subordinate

them as a sign of respect for his position. For example, they would defer authority to him in matters dealing with the development of his kingdom and the relationship between state government and the kingdom. It is the chiefs that oversee each village or town in matters that are most germane to each locality. Since there are many chiefs within each village and town, the Ogoni have the largest number of chiefs in the council of chiefs in the Rivers State of Nigeria.

The traditional political system is classified as benign dictatorship because the king is appointed by a council of king makers rather than being democratically elected by the people. Typically, there is a ruling family from which the king and his successors are appointed, with the crown prince being the oldest male alive. In order to ensure traditional succession pattern, it is imperative for the king to have a son. Aside from the symbol of power and prestige that polygyny accords the king, the desire to have a crown prince often contributes to his having many wives at the same time.

Since both the king and his chiefs are appointed, the Ogoni traditional political system qualifies as a dictatorship of monarchy. They are, however, very generous in serving the people by giving very freely of themselves to work for progress of the people. Like the king, the work of the chief is endless. They are frequently called upon to help resolve a range of problems including family disputes, marital discord, or land claims. For all their services, the king and his high chiefs are nominally paid by the city council, with the king being better paid than the high chief. The positions and services of the compound chiefs are purely voluntary. They must combine their responsibilities for the people with making a living from other sources. It is because of their benevolence that the term *benign* is appropriate in describing the chiefs and the entire monarchy system. In return for their selflessness, the people usually give the king and the chiefs gifts including farm produce, fish, ornaments, jewelry, cloths, goats, cattle, and substantial cash. In many cases, coupled with their own personal income, the chiefs receive enough gifts to enable them to live above the average living standards of other Ogoni. The monarchy is highly respected; Ogoni people hardly ever challenge its authority and prefer to take instructions from the monarchy rather than from the officials of the state government. This is especially true of the *Gbenemene*, whose rulings on disputes and issues concerning his kingdom are deemed the final word.

### Religion and World View

The fertile land and rivers of the region not only provide sustenance for the Ogoni but are regarded as a spiritual inheritance. The land is a god, and it is worshiped as such. Despite Christianization, many aspects of indigenous culture persist. Colorful masks and decorative arts, for example, are used to demonstrate the strength of Ogoni during ceremonies. If some-



one is ill, the Ogoni still consult the shamans and voodoo priests for cure. Although various denominations of the Christian Church abound throughout Ogoniland, most people are traditionalists who worship a common deity, Bari (Obari-Elemé), the creator of Heaven and Earth. Also, various groups in the different villages and towns worship other more immediate gods and ancestral spirits.

The planting season is regarded as more than a time of preparation; it is a spiritual, religious, and social occasion. The waters that flow throughout the region not only provide life and food, but the Ogoni view the rivers and streams as an integral life force intricately bound with the life of the whole community. Common myths of origin are found within the subgroups, but not within the Ogoni as a whole. Ogoni tend to feel stronger ties within subgroups.

## THREATS TO SURVIVAL

### Impacts of Oil Production

I hereby appeal to the international community to come to the assistance of the Ogoni people who are threatened in a very real way by the activities of Shell, on the one hand, and the insensitivity of successive military dictators in Nigeria on the other hand. There are signs that the government of President Bahangida is at last waking up to the dire plight of the Ogoni people but there is still need for men and women of goodwill throughout the world to come to the aid of the Ogoni people before they are driven to extinction. More so as Ogoni leaders have been harassed and arrested by Nigerian Security agents.<sup>1</sup>

The Dutch Shell Oil Company first discovered oil in Ogoniland in 1958, and since then, the lives of the Ogoni people have been changed. Since drilling began in the late 1950s, Shell and its partners—the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC), Elf Aquitaine, Chevron, Willbros of Tulsa-Oklahoma, and the British Oil Corporation's Agip—have been responsible for 50 percent of all extracted oil from Nigeria, and Ogoniland specifically. Records of the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited (SDPC) show that Shell owns five major oil fields—Bomu, Korokoro, Yorla, Bodo West, and Ebubu—and about 100 wells in Ogoniland. According to SDPC, about 900 million barrels of crude oil have been extracted from Ogoniland, yielding by 1996 over U.S. \$30 billion for Shell.<sup>2</sup>

For decades, the Rivers State region has been the “goose that lays the golden egg.” As the costs of oil exploitation escalated and violence ensued, however, the Ogoni area has become a thorn in Nigeria's side. In the early 1990s, the Ogoni began to speak of the “ecological war” that the Nigerian government and Shell Oil were waging against them. They then accused

both the government and Shell of “mounting a campaign of intimidation and terrorism against the Ogoni people.”<sup>3</sup>

The presence of Shell and its partners in Ogoniland have led to both industrial development and environmental degradation of the area. For development, one can cite the establishment of two oil refineries, one petrochemical plant, a fertilizer plant, and a power plant in Ogoniland. The positive contributions of Shell to the development of Ogoniland can be disputed. While Ogoni people complain of not having pipe-borne water, electricity, hospitals, and schools, Shell believes it has exhibited considerable goodwill toward Ogoniland. Shell continued to argue that they had devoted considerable time, energy, and capital to community assistance programs, education scholarships, health and water treatment programs, agricultural development, and road construction.<sup>4</sup>

The response to this claim by Shell was cynicism by the Ogoni. One thirty-four-year-old man from Bianu in the Nyo-Khana kingdom responded by saying “[W]e would be better off today if Shell had never come and taken one drop of oil.” Despite the good intentions that Shell might have had in improving the livelihood of the Ogoni people, very little of their efforts have resulted in tangible gains for the Ogoni. Even in the refineries and other plants run by Shell in Ogoniland, few Ogoni were employed in these establishments.

### **Environmental and Sociocultural Crises**

The heavy production of oil in Ogoniland as well as the Niger Delta has resulted in intensive ecological damage of the areas. The environmental effects of having eight oil fields, over 100 oil wells, numerous oil pipelines, and four flow stations in Ogoni have been severe. Between 1976 and 1991, nearly 3,000 separate oil spills, averaging 700 barrels each, have occurred in the Niger Delta.<sup>5</sup> Shell’s response to spills has been reported to be slow and insufficient. Oil spills can be traced miles from the source. Reports claim that more than 6.4 billion liters (1.6 million gallons) were spilled in Nigeria between 1982 and 1992. Much of the land has been stained black, destroying the once fertile soil and continually limiting agricultural productivity. Waters in the area flow black-brown and are void of fish. According to Shell, of the total number of spills recorded by the company worldwide in 1995, 40 percent were in Nigeria alone.<sup>6</sup> Shell’s response to criticism has been to largely deny that there is a problem, although they do admit to the 3,000 sites affected by drilling operations and the occurrence of acid rain one month a year in the Delta.

Many of Shell’s practices and equipment would be prohibited under the environmental laws of most countries. But under Nigerian law, companies are not required to clean up or compensate for the effects of spills caused by sabotage. This makes it easy for the oil companies to operate with less

regard for the environment and its people since spills can easily be attributed to local sabotage. The entire delta region is plagued by the careless flaring of gas, poorly placed aboveground pipelines, and unlined toxic waste pits. A major blowout at Kegbara Dere in 1970 spewed oil for several weeks, destroying a large part of Ogoniland in a densely populated area. According to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Niger Delta is the most endangered river delta in the world.<sup>7</sup> The Ogoni maintain that, within Ogoniland, both Shell and the Nigerian government have instituted a policy of ecocide (the purposeful destruction of the environment). The Ogoni have continually pushed for self-determination and autonomy through statehood, in order to benefit from the region's oil reserves and drilling operations.

As a direct result of considerable environmental degradation, Ogoni health and livelihood have been greatly threatened. Oil spills and the intense venting of toxic gases have continuously destroyed the traditional means of subsistence farming.<sup>8</sup> The World Wide Fund for Nature has calculated that the gas flares in Nigeria are a major contributor to global warming. More than 75 percent of the natural gas that is vented from the oil wells is burned off, as opposed to 20 percent for the wells in Libya, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. In the United States, most of the natural gas is captured and used for domestic and commercial purposes.

The burning of methane and other hydrocarbons has produced a sharp increase in respiratory diseases, and the noise from burning has led to hearing problems for many Ogoni. Many flares are located near villages and give inhabitants around-the-clock light. The flares also give off so much heat that it is sometimes impossible to go near them, thereby preventing local farmers from having access to many parts of their land. Even though the environmental impact assessment has not been fully documented, the impact of gas flares and oil spills on local ecology and climate, as well as on people's health, is quite significant. Some studies, for example, have indicated that blood-lead levels of many inhabitants are at near toxic levels. Also, respiratory problems, coughing, skin rashes, tumors, gastrointestinal problems, and various forms of cancer have been linked to pollution in the land.<sup>9</sup> Many children exhibit the symptoms of kwashiorkor (a protein deficiency ailment) with their distended stomachs and light hair. Worse still, the death rate in Ogoni escalated as many people began to die from the consequences of environmental pollution and "barrow pits," which companies dig to extract gravel for road construction. These pits are left uncovered, so during the heavy tropical rains of the raining season, they are filled with mud and water, causing the drowning of unsuspecting children. By the middle of the 1990s, the death rate in Ogoniland deteriorated to a state of natural decline (more people dying than were being born each year).<sup>10</sup>

In similar manner, animal life throughout the region has also been de-

stroyed along with their habitat(s). The mangrove forests of the Nigerian Delta is home to a number of endangered species including the Delta elephant, the white-crested monkey, the river hippopotamus, and crocodiles.

### **Nigerian Political Structure**

Nigeria gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1960. Since then its people have lived under the control of a military government. Such dictatorships struggled to secure and to maintain power, and little attention was given to the people of Nigeria. The armed forces have retained power through continuous military coups and have utilized the large oil reserves in the south to finance their regimes.

The recent regimes of General Ibrahim Babangida (1986–1993) and General Sani Abacha (1993–1998) were held as violent, rights repressive dictatorships that allowed few freedoms for their citizens and quickly stifled internal critiques. The untimely death of Abacha brought Nigeria under the current leadership of General Abdulsalami Abubakar in June 1998. For the most part, General Abubakar continued the repressive tactics used by the Babangida and Abacha regimes; however, his reign was short-lived. He announced a timetable for democratic elections and soon after relinquished power to a democratically elected civilian government in 1999.

Under the 1989 Nigerian Constitution, the federal government holds all mineral rights within the country. Oil companies buy shares of the land from the government in order to extract oil. The successful extraction of mineral wealth requires assistance from both parties. Every day Shell alone sends nearly 300,000 barrels of crude oil through 3,800 miles of pipeline out of the region. Oil revenues represent over 90 percent of Nigeria's total exports and supply over 80 percent of the nation's revenue.

During the economic boom of the 1970s, Nigeria enjoyed great wealth from its share of oil revenues. This enabled the nation's economy to boom and strengthened the Nigerian currency, the Naira, significantly. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Nigeria's military and civilian governments were extremely corrupt. Stealing from the national treasury in the billions of dollars, wasteful spending, misappropriation of funds, and gross mismanagement of the economy became the norm in Nigeria.<sup>11</sup> It is a well-known fact that oil made General Abacha, the former military head of state, a billionaire and kept him in power for many years. The value of the Naira plummeted from U.S. \$2 in the 1970s to a mere \$.0095 in the late 1990s. Consequently, the Nigerian economy collapsed.

With the election of 1999, Nigeria returned to civilian rule under a democratically elected president, congress, and many public officials. The new president, a retired military general and former Nigerian military head of state in the 1970s, Olusegun Obasanjo, has been very active in rebuilding the country and heading it toward economic recovery. So far, the economic

recovery has been very slow and not yet felt by the Nigerian masses. Economic and political pundits are optimistic about Nigeria's future, assuming that future presidents will continue with the recovery efforts of the present administration.

### Human Rights Abuses

In addition to widespread environmental impacts, the Ogoni have been the victims of intense human rights abuses by the federal government. These abuses began as a consequence of the government's failure to resolve the initial tension between the Shell and Ogoni farmers on whose land oil was discovered. As competition for land escalated between the two sides, the Nigerian government intervened by forcefully taking land away from the farmers, especially the illiterate ones, and appropriating it for the oil companies. In some cases, limited monetary compensation was given to the landowner.

There is a strong belief by many members of the international community that the Nigerian government has engaged in systematic oppression in Ogoniland since May 1994 to silence protests of oil-related environmental hazards and mishaps.<sup>12</sup> Since the beginning of oil exploitation in their area, the Ogoni have repeatedly demonstrated for improved extraction methods, some local input in the drilling, and compensation for both the land and resources taken or destroyed. Most of these public protests have been met with state-sponsored violence.

The crackdown on Nigerian protestors initially began in 1990 when Shell called for military assistance under fears that the company's operations were going to come under attack by protestors from a village just outside the Ogoni territory. Although the protest was peaceful, military forces opened fire, killing at least eighty villagers. Shortly afterward, military forces swept through the village, destroying or badly damaging nearly 500 homes. This was a clear warning to the people that hindrance of oil production would be swiftly countered with harsh punishment.<sup>13</sup>

As further protests ensued, they were repeatedly met with government-sanctioned violence. Villages throughout Ogoniland and the entire delta have been subject to repeated military raids. These raids were characterized by flagrant human rights abuses, including extra judicial executions, indiscriminant shooting, arbitrary arrests and detention of outspoken individuals, floggings, rapes, looting, and extortion. Strong evidence exists that links government forces with Shell in an attempt to crush this community movement for environmental justice (equity and fairness in the treatment of the environment and the people in those environments by companies, governments, and individuals).<sup>14</sup>

For nearly a decade, Ogoniland has been under military occupation by the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force in order to protect oil facilities

and quell any uprisings. Since the start of the attacks on the Ogoni by the security forces, access to the region has been closed off to outsiders. The refusal to allow reporters, human rights monitors, or environmental researchers into the area to document the claims of human rights abuse, military sweeps, and environmental destruction is an important aspect to this situation.

## RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

### Organizing to Survive

Since the beginning of oil exploitation in their homeland, the Ogoni have repeatedly asked for improved extraction methods, some local input into the drilling, and just compensation for both the land and resources taken. As already mentioned, however, under Nigerian law, the government holds subsurface mineral rights. The Ogoni people who take no part in the oil operations, feel their lands are being ravaged while they receive no benefit in return.

The Ogoni people had experienced the effects of a corrupt partnership between the Nigerian government and Shell Oil that destroyed portions of the Niger Delta environment, its wildlife, and many people.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the Ogoni formed the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) with the launching of the Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR) in 1990.<sup>16</sup> The OBR was signed by all of the Ogoni leaders, and it outlined the people's demands for environmental, social, and economic justice. It especially emphasized the need for Ogoni political autonomy (mainly in the form of statehood) in all political matters that affect them within Nigeria as well as the right "to the control and use of a fair portion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development." Other demands laid out in the document include "adequate and direct representation as of right in all Nigerian national institutions, the use and development of Ogoni languages in Ogoni territory, the full development of Ogoni culture, the right to religious freedom, and the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation." In August 1991, MOSOP amended the OBR to internationalize their campaign as well as affirm their commitment to non-violence by stating that "the Ogoni people abjure violence in their struggle for their rights within the Republic of Nigeria."

In October 1990, MOSOP presented the OBR to the then military president of Nigeria, General Ibrahim Babangida, and members of the Armed Forces Ruling Council. This was MOSOP's first attempt at getting governmental response to the problems of the Ogoni Nation, but unfortunately, the government was silent on the matter by not giving any reply to MOSOP. The next step taken by MOSOP was to present some of its demands (mainly economic) directly to the oil companies operating in Ogoniland.

The movement specifically demanded the NNPC, Shell, and Chevron to pay back royalties totaling U.S. \$10 billion within thirty days or quit operating in Ogoniland. The oil corporations did not acknowledge this demand.

The silence of the government and the oil corporations to MOSOP's demands did little to deter the movement from continuing its struggle. On January 4, 1993, the inaugural day of the United Nation's Year of the Indigenous People, MOSOP organized its first annual Ogoni day. The activities of the Ogoni day, which included speeches by Ogoni leaders and a march with 300,000 participants, signaled the determination of the Ogoni people to have their demands heard by the Nigerian government and the oil companies. Despite so many people participating in the event, the event was completely free of violence. Since the demonstration by MOSOP remained violence free, it was recognized as the official voice of the Ogoni people during the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) general assembly meeting at The Hague in January 1993. This gave MOSOP and the Ogoni their first major international press coverage by Cable News Network (CNN) and *Time* magazine.

MOSOP played a central role in creating a number of grassroots organizations. These organizations were designed to give each Ogoni individual a role to play within the political movement. The first president of MOSOP was Dr. Gary B. Leton, a highly respected and well-decorated scientist, as well as a conservative traditional leader. Serving with Leton at the behest of MOSOP at this time was Chief N. Kobani, the first vice president and a leading conservative traditional chief in Gokana Kingdom. Like Leton, Chief Kobani had also served in many important government roles.

During the Leton-Kobani leadership, MOSOP's steering committee faced several issues that eventually led to a factionalization of the committee and the movement in general. Most notable among their concerns was the erosion of the power of the traditional rulers, which they alleged was happening. The conservative leaders believed that the community-based grassroots organizations compromised the power of the chiefs by making community decisions that normally were under the authority of the chiefs. In a society where the chiefs are paramount as well as significant in leadership, this was a serious matter. To make matters worse, during the national presidential election of 1993 (which was eventually annulled by the seating military president), the conservative leaders wanted the Ogoni people to participate in the elections, but other committee members, led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, successfully convinced the rest of the movement not to vote. This was Saro-Wiwa's way of protesting against the government for not addressing Ogoni concerns earlier presented to it.

Other problems such as the personality clash between Ken Saro-Wiwa and the conservative chiefs, as well as disagreement over the continuing

acceptance of government contracts by individual MOSOP leaders, pushed the two sides further apart. In the past, many Ogoni leaders, conservatives and “radicals” alike (including Ken Saro-Wiwa), had benefited from big government and private contracts from the oil companies. Often, these contracts served as a way to silence opposition to drilling activities in the area since most of the time, the contracts were never fulfilled and neither the government nor the oil corporations would complain. This is a common patronage system across Nigeria.

With the determination of MOSOP to represent adequately and honestly the Ogoni Nation, Ken Saro-Wiwa stopped accepting any further contracts and called on his fellow committee leaders to do the same. Reportedly, they feared that open attacks on the government would threaten their contracts; hence, they preferred to split from MOSOP in an effort to protect their economic interests. In June 1993, Dr. Leton, Chief Kobani, Chief Orage, Mr. Badey and many conservative chiefs left MOSOP, even though they remained committed to the objectives of the OBR.

Ken Saro-Wiwa became leader of MOSOP in the early 1990s. Many people had believed that Saro-Wiwa was a traitor for supporting the federal government against Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War. On the other hand, Saro-Wiwa was a highly charismatic leader who regained the trust and love of the Ogoni masses. Saro-Wiwa spoke a number of regional languages, so he could address the people in different kingdoms in their local mother tongues, which enhanced his charisma and respect among the Ogoni masses.

Under the leadership of Ken Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP took a strong stand against the environmental degradation and repression in Ogoniland. The movement contended that Shell and the Nigerian government had actively participated in a cooperative effort to ravage the land while providing little, if any, benefit in return. Saro-Wiwa demanded that power be returned to local communities. For example, although Nigeria ranks among the largest oil producers in Africa, it is one of the poorest nations on the basis of its per capita income—U.S. \$260 per year.<sup>17</sup> Year after year, MOSOP resubmitted its demands as outlined in the OBR to the federal government with no response. “MOSOP’s protests provoked a violent and repressive response from the federal government, for which any threat to oil production is a threat to the entire existing political system.”<sup>18</sup>

In May 1994, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other MOSOP activists were arrested and detained by the military. The government contended that the group had ordered Ogoni youth to murder four conservative, government-sympathetic Ogoni elders. MOSOP and the nine defendants strongly denied any connection to the murders. Within a day, security forces swept through Ogoniland, killing over 1,000 Ogoni and displacing thousands more over the next few days in the name of “restoration of law and order.”<sup>19</sup> Leaders



of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People contend that government agents carried out the killings in order to incriminate Saro-Wiwa and to polarize the MOSOP.

The nine defendants were held without trial for eight months before a specially constituted quasi-military tribunal was formed. It was no surprise that the defendants were found guilty of murder in November 1995 and sentenced to death by hanging. Calls for leniency came to the Nigerian government from across the world, but General Abacha ordered that the verdict be carried out as quickly as possible. Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other defendants were hanged on November 10, 1995.

Many governments threatened economic sanctions against Nigeria, and international calls for a worldwide boycott of Shell Oil were made. The global community, including world leaders and environmental and human rights groups, united in pronouncing the hangings as unacceptable and unjustified. Immediately after the hangings, as thousands of Ogonis wandered the streets in mourning, 4,000 military troops were deployed throughout Ogoniland to beat anyone found mourning in public. During the following week, many countries withdrew their ambassadors from Nigeria.

In the years following the executions, Ogoniland has continued to operate under military control, and the security forces maintain a strong hold on any opposition. Shell has yet to officially resume its operations in the area, claiming it will produce oil only if there is a genuine and broad-based agreement with communities and groups in Ogoni. MOSOP has claimed, however, that in 1998 some oil facilities had been reactivated without addressing claims of alleged ecological damage.

Since the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa and some MOSOP leaders, coupled with the imprisonment and exile of other leaders, anecdotal evidence show that the movement lost its cohesion. Many movement leaders and participants still remain in refugee camps, some returned from exile and refugee camps to Nigeria, while many others were relocated by international organizations in Western countries (about 1,500 in the United States). It is suggested that MOSOP still continues to operate but in various factions and under different leaders, with the more popular factions being headquartered in Nigeria, Great Britain, and the United States.

### **International Advocacy on Behalf of the Ogoni**

As a passive resistance movement, the Ogoni uprising followed a vigorous campaign at the local and international levels to popularize the Ogoni plight and solicit support. Given the powers of global electronic communication, the Ogoni were able to communicate with other groups facing similar situations and people and organizations that could lend assistance. The Ogoni Bill of Rights was presented to the United Nations Subcommittee on Human Rights on the Prevention of Discrimination against and

Protection of Minorities, to the African Human Rights Commission, and to several human rights and environmental organizations in Europe. In response, the Rain Forest Action Groups and Greenpeace wrote to Shell regarding environmental destruction in Ogoni.

Human Rights Watch/Africa, Amnesty International, and the Sierra Club all launched campaigns to spread information on the Ogoni situation and put international pressure on Shell and the Nigerian government. The Ogoni also presented their case at the tenth session of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in Geneva in 1992 and the General Assembly of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization at The Hague in 1993. The massive propaganda effort brought intense media attention to Shell and the Ogoni. The international profile gave the struggle its much-needed legitimacy as it faced off against two very powerful and wealthy opponents.

Some of the tensions within Ogoniland were calmed on September 1998 when General Abubakar ordered the release of twenty Ogoni activists. The "Ogoni 20" had been detained for four years on charges of murder. These charges were the same as those made against Saro-Wiwa and eight others. Since then, reports of periodic government-supported military raids on Ogoni and other area villages have continued to surface throughout 1999.

In May 1999, the family of Saro-Wiwa filed a lawsuit in the United States seeking damages as a result of the hanging, which, they say, is partly Shell's fault. Shell denies all wrongdoing and is appealing on jurisdictional technicality to stop the lawsuit from being heard. These raids and earlier arrests of MOSOP activists led many Ogoni to flee Nigeria and seek refuge in neighboring African countries like the Republic of Benin.

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The environmental change that occurred among the Ogoni can be described as environmental ethnic discrimination. Environmental ethnic discrimination is the unequal treatment of the environment by a majority ethnic society such that the environment of the ethnic minority is treated with less regard. This may include engaging in environmentally destructive practices in areas dominated by minority populations. It may also include ethnic discrimination in environmental policy making, differential enforcement of regulations and laws to the detriment of ethnic minorities, the deliberate targeting of minority communities for toxic wastes disposal, and the exclusion of minorities from leadership of the environmental policy making.

The cultural context of environmental ethnic discrimination finds powerless peoples and their rights to land, resources, health, environmental protection, and their future "expendable" in the name of national security and national debt. A striking commonality in many cases is the Nigerian

government's resort to claims of protecting national security as a means of covering up environmental degradation and silencing environmental activists. This, in turn, has led to the devaluation of economic, social, and political rights.

Vast reserves of crude oil were discovered in Nigeria during the 1950s. It is currently believed that Nigeria possesses estimated crude oil reserves equal to 16 to 22 billion barrels. Most of these reserves lie beneath the Niger Delta including Ogoniland. Western Africa has become more important in the global energy picture during the past two decades. It is now, for example, the fifth largest supplier of crude oil to the United States. Crude oil represents a very significant component of Nigeria's economy and, by extension, its political system. Oil exploration and extraction have been carried out by well-financed, powerful multinational oil companies including Shell (Dutch-British), Chevron, Mobil, Elf (French), and Agip (Italian).<sup>20</sup> Crude oil is the basis for a disproportionate amount of Nigeria's total federal revenues, export earnings, and the gross national product (GNP). Consequently, these multinational oil companies have had a considerable influence upon the economic and political systems within Nigeria. The people of Nigeria, however, have not only been denied the benefits of the country's oil wealth, but they have also suffered under repressive governments. A 1999 Human Rights Watch report stated, in this regard, that "Successive governments have misspent the oil wealth which the oil companies have helped unlock, salting it away in foreign bank accounts rather than investing in education, health, and other social investment, and mismanaging the national economy to the point of collapse."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the inhabitants of the Niger Delta such as the Ogoni have also had to endure the devastating impacts of oil spills, natural gas flarings (burning of vented gas), ill-planned construction, and toxic waste upon the soil, water, air, vegetation, animal life, and people. Multinational companies must be held accountable for the adverse impacts that their worldwide activities have upon the people and the lands from which they extract resources.<sup>22</sup>

The Ogoni have taken their struggle to the international level with the formation of MOSOP. Their plight is unique in its success in recruiting international assistance and could mark a new era of indigenous and minority mobilization for the protection of rights and put the realities of self-determination within reach. A new imperative combines profit with sustainable development, economic growth, and social equity.

### Questions

1. How should the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights be enforced in situations like those of the Ogoni?
2. Discuss the concept of self-determination. Should the Ogoni as a minority population have the right to self-determination?

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3. In such a case of natural resource extraction, who should own the rights to those resources? Those who live on the land, the government, private companies, or someone else? Should people receive compensation for the resources that are extracted from their lands?
4. What Are the roles and responsibilities of multinational corporations operating in Third World countries that may not have the environmental laws of the industrialized nations?
5. Discuss how environmental degradation is directly linked to human rights. For example: right to a secure livelihood, right to adequate food and water, the right to a healthy ecosystem.

## NOTES

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5. "Shell in Nigeria: What Are the Issues?" [www.essentialaction.org/Shell/issues.html](http://www.essentialaction.org/Shell/issues.html).
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21. "The Price of Oil: Summary," 2.
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### Films and Videos

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### WWW Sites

- Environmental Rights Action  
[www.essentialaction.org/era/Field50.html](http://www.essentialaction.org/era/Field50.html)
- MOSOP Canada  
[www.mosopcanada.org/index1.html](http://www.mosopcanada.org/index1.html)
- "The Ogoni 20 Are Free."  
[www.oneworld.org/mosop/](http://www.oneworld.org/mosop/)
- Report from Essential Action and Global Exchange. Provides links to sites describing Shell's controversial past and present in Nigeria.  
[www.essentialaction.org/shell/report](http://www.essentialaction.org/shell/report)

## Ogoni of Nigeria

Shell Nigeria  
[www.shellnigeria.com](http://www.shellnigeria.com)

Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization  
[www.unpo.org/](http://www.unpo.org/)

### **Organizations**

African Commission of Human and Peoples' Rights  
% Organization of African Unity  
(OAU)  
P.O. Box 3243  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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