



# Introduction: On the 20th anniversary of the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa<sup>1</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This special section of *Extractive Industries and Society* addresses the legacy of the Nigerian writer, environmental and human rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa on the twentieth anniversary of his hanging along with eight other Ogonis in November 1995. Saro-Wiwa conceived and led the most effective protest campaign against the activities of a transnational oil company the world has yet seen. His innovative juxtaposition of environmental and human rights issues, his highlighting the intertwined relationship between oil companies and a dictatorial regime, and the worldwide attention his death and the suffering of his Ogoni people brought to these issues fundamentally changed the relationships between extractive industries and their local host communities. This introduction highlights some of the arguments put forth by the various contributors to this special section and places them in a larger context. It also brings up to date some of the developments that have taken place in the Niger Delta in the 20 years since Saro-Wiwa's hanging.

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## 1. Introduction

The title of this introductory essay is adapted from “On the Death of Ken Saro-Wiwa” which is both one of Ken Saro-Wiwa's last writings from prison (Saro-Wiwa, 1995a) and the title of one of the chapters in his son's memoir (Wiwa, 2001). Anniversary dates are convenient markers used to assess, reflect or evaluate on one's marriage, one's self or one's body of professional work over a specified length of time. In the case of those who have died or, like Ken Saro-Wiwa been executed in a process that former British Prime Minister John Major termed “judicial murder,” we use such dates to commemorate their lives and (re) evaluate their legacies. In reality, though, Ken Saro-Wiwa's legacy was probably not all that different three years ago and it probably will not change all that much in the next four years. Yet, the twentieth anniversary of his hanging on 10 November 1995 seems to call for some sustained reflection on a man who transformed relations between extractive industries and their host communities.

Fundamentally, although they focus on different topics and come to their own respective conclusions, all of the contributors to this special section believe that Ken Saro-Wiwa remains a world

historical figure whose legacy merits serious intellectual engagement. Indeed, in the context of this journal's focus on the extractive industries and society, one can argue that Saro-Wiwa was *the* most important historical figure of the late 20th century. It may be impossible to untangle multiple and overlapping causal explanations, but there is no doubt that the relationship between extractive industries and their host communities in 2015 looks dramatically different than it did in 1990. More than anyone or anything else, that dramatic difference can be explained by the life, death and ongoing historical legacy of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Ken Saro-Wiwa was a small man with big ideas. A complicated and controversial figure, he was an avid reader and writer, a proud Nigerian nationalist and variously a government employee, private businessman, self-employed publisher, journalist, TV show producer, political activist and political prisoner. There is a tendency among scholars who investigate Saro-Wiwa to compartmentalize “his work into discrete pieces that can then be analyzed separately—poetry, short stories, novels, journalism, activism, and the like” (Pegg, 2000: 702). Yet, it is important not to lose sight of a few important commonalities that run throughout Saro-Wiwa's professional career. For his son Ken Wiwa, the concise summary of his father's life was that everything “was for one purpose: to secure justice for our people. His books, the properties, the businesses—everything was subservient to his hopes and ambitions for our people” (Wiwa, 2001: xix).

Eckhard Breiting (1998: 247) describes Saro-Wiwa as a “cultural entrepreneur” and highlights how his literature and his ideas depended upon his private sector business prowess. Saro-

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Wiwa self-published most of his works both because he wanted to maintain complete control over the entire process and because he wanted his ideas to remain forever (Pegg, 2000: 703; Wiwa, 2001: 30). He approached his writing with military-like discipline. As explained by his son, Saro-Wiwa “bothered with only one draft of a manuscript. His production-line approach to writing partly explains how he managed, despite a late start, to produce those ‘25 books in all genres of literature, from pamphlets and poetry to children’s stories and novels’ (as the blurbs on his books boasted)” (Wiwa, 2001: 31). Breitinger makes clear that any evaluation of Saro-Wiwa’s literary or political impact must highlight “not only the ideas, not only the word” but also his “extraordinary efficiency and capability in making the word go round” (Breitinger, 1998: 252).

Saro-Wiwa also had a distinct view of the role of literature in politically contentious societies like Nigeria. While Western writers might have the luxury of peacefully practicing their literary craft, Saro-Wiwa maintained that “literature in a critical situation such as Nigeria’s cannot be divorced from politics. Indeed, literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics, by intervention, and writers must not write merely to amuse . . . . They must play an interventionist role” (Saro-Wiwa, 1995b: 81). More specifically, Saro-Wiwa wanted desperately to reach beyond a tiny audience of literary elites. In this regard, he noted that his guards and captors allowed him freedom to write because they realized how few people in Nigeria actually read books. The problem for them was a writer trying to go beyond this and reach the masses. As Saro-Wiwa explained in a letter from prison, “In short, they do not want literature on the streets! And that is where, in Africa, it must be” (cited in Pegg, 2000: 704). Imo Ben Eshiet (2000: 49) describes Saro-Wiwa’s mingling of the literary and political as “aesthetically pleasing presentations of the ugly” while Frank Schulze-Engler (1998: 286) maintains that “the popular, often humorous vein in which this satirical vision was put across . . . did not diminish the radical anger that informs most of Saro-Wiwa’s writing.” His own son (Wiwa, 2001: 150) is arguably a harsher critic here: “With Ken Saro-Wiwa, you barely get a personal introduction to the writer before he starts dragging you all over his political territory, pointing out the landmarks and signposts on his road to Damascus... It was politics, politics, politics.”

As a caustic, sarcastic and fearless public critic of Nigeria’s many ills, it is not surprising that Ken Saro-Wiwa generated enemies. His goals, after all, were revolutionary: fundamentally transforming the nature of oil production, the relations between oil companies and their local host communities, the relations between oil companies and the state, and irrevocably altering who exercised “control” over natural resources in a country that depended on oil for 80% of its government revenues and 95% of its foreign exchange earnings (United Nations Environmental Program, 2011: 20). Some of the criticisms of Saro-Wiwa were legitimate and justified. Azubike Ileoje, for example, takes Saro-Wiwa to task for his portrayal of the Igbos in his Biafran war memoir *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War*. Ileoje (1998) argues that Saro-Wiwa does not provide any evidence of pre-1967 Igbo abuse of political power to the detriment of the Ogoni and that his memoir succeeds only as “an insistent expression of awe at the sheer number of the Igbo” (Ileoje, 2000: 112). He also lambasts Saro-Wiwa’s ideas on the equality of all ethnic groups within Nigeria for failing to comprehend “that aspect of democracy which would allocate and/or allow power commensurate with the numerical strength of constituent groups” (Ileoje, 2000: 120). Many critics have objected to Saro-Wiwa’s use of the term “genocide” (Saro-Wiwa, 1992) to describe what was happening to his Ogoni people as inappropriate or exaggerated. Reading *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary*, one is struck in a number of places at

how Saro-Wiwa comes across as arrogant and also, at times, as a spoiled and pampered elitist. Outside of his unquestioned devotion to securing his children the best educational opportunities possible, neither the painstakingly honest and detailed account provided by his eldest son (Wiwa, 2001) nor the more occasional observations of one of his daughters (Saro-Wiwa, 2012) portray him as a model or award-winning father. He certainly was not faithful to his wife, having children with two other women.

Yet, one is also struck by the hypocrisy and wildly exaggerated vehemence of some of the personal attacks against him. It is perhaps not surprising that a number of journalists whose trips to Nigeria were funded by Shell would write columns noting that Saro-Wiwa was no Mahatma Gandhi (or no Martin Luther King Jr. or no Steve Biko). His son Ken Wiwa seems particularly troubled by the various insinuations regularly made without any supporting evidence that Saro-Wiwa, a meticulous record-keeper, was corrupt. He argues that his father lived comfortably yet “The reality was that his finances were always stretched . . . . Though it may be hard for his critics to swallow, the bottom line is that Ken Saro-Wiwa was a simple man who went a long way on a little” (Wiwa, 2001: 28–29). Saro-Wiwa also attracted his share of ridiculous character assaults. Demirel-Pegg and Pegg (2015) highlight the ludicrousness of labelling him a “secessionist” when he escaped Biafra in a canoe and worked for the federal government during the Biafran civil war and all of his demands in the Ogoni Bill of Rights (see Senewo, 2015) consistently noted the Ogoni’s desire for adequate representation *within* Nigeria. In a badly written, repetitive and unsubstantiated character assault, Desmond Orage (1998: 47), the son and nephew of two of the four Ogoni chiefs murdered on 21 May 1994 whose deaths prompted Saro-Wiwa’s final arrest and his ultimate death sentence from a military-appointed special tribunal goes so far as to accuse the consistently non-violent Saro-Wiwa of declaring war against three neighboring ethnic groups. Yet, investigations by Human Rights Watch (Crow, 1995: 12) conclude that attacks on the Ogoni which were blamed on the neighboring Andoni, Ndoki and Okrika peoples “were in fact carried out by army troops in plainclothes.” One of the more recent examples of someone trying to further their own career by directing various streams of malicious invective at Saro-Wiwa is Maja-Pearce (2013).

The remainder of this introduction does two main things. First, it highlights a couple of broad themes that emerge from the various contributions to this special section of *Extractive Industries and Society*. Second, it brings relevant events in Nigeria or involving family members or people or issues closely associated with Ken Saro-Wiwa up to date in the two decades following his hanging in 1995.

## 2. Broad themes highlighted by our contributors

One of the first big themes brought out in one way or another by all of our contributors is the novelty of the claims or the innovative nature of the ideas put forward by Saro-Wiwa and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). Senewo (2015) and Demirel-Pegg and Pegg (2015) both highlight the novelty of the Ogoni Bill of Rights and their self-determination claims more generally being directed not just toward the Nigerian state but also toward the transnational oil companies. In Senewo’s phrasing, the Ogoni Bill of Rights “was the first of its kind to be directed at both the government of Nigeria and transnational oil-prospecting companies such as Shell.” Shell often responded that some of the claims being directed against it were political and should instead be made to the Nigerian government. Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP refused to accept any clear-cut distinction between the (public and national) government and the (private and transnational) oil companies. As explained by Manby (1999: 200), oil-

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