

Ken Saro-Wiwa

Roy Doron and Toyin Falola

OHIO UNIVERSITY PRESS
ATHENS

Contents

List of Illustrations	7
Preface	9
Introduction	13
1. Nigeria and Saro-Wiwa's World to 1960	20
2. Saro-Wiwa's Childhood and Education	35
3. The Nigerian Civil War Years	43
4. Business, Writing, and Politics	60
5. Activism and the Politics of Oil, the Environment, and Genocide	77
6. MOSOP, the Ogoni Bill of Rights, and Saro-Wiwa's Activism	100
7. The Trials and Death of Saro-Wiwa	125
8. The Many Legacies of Ken Saro-Wiwa	146
Notes	159
Bibliography	167
Index	173

Introduction

On November 10, 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa's life ended on a hangman's noose in a prison in Port Harcourt, the victim of one of the Nigerian "Kangaroo Courts" he so enjoyed satirizing. His death, along with eight other activists in the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), catapulted the Ogoni plight to global awareness. The Ogoni Nine, as they became known, were victims of an alleged conspiracy between Shell Oil and the Nigerian military dictatorship headed by General Sani Abacha to silence MOSOP and Saro-Wiwa, one of the most vocal critics of oil exploitation in Nigeria and the environmental costs to the Ogoni people.

Though Saro-Wiwa is best remembered for the activism that cost him his life, he was famous both in Nigeria and abroad for his many achievements. As a respected author, playwright, poet, and television producer, Saro-Wiwa helped redefine the Nigerian novel, creating a body of work that was consciously Nigerian in its conception rather than based on ethnic identity. His memoirs and journalistic work shed light on the ideas he formed as a young man and his political activities

during the Nigerian Civil War, when he became military governor of Rivers State and served on the council that helped create the postwar administration. When he felt he could no longer work within an increasingly corrupt and patronage-based system favoring the larger ethnic groups in the country, he left government work and turned to the private sector. Through a series of businesses culminating in the Saros Publishing and Holding companies, he used his private sector wealth to further his goal of creating a Nigerian consciousness that would not be fragmented into Ogoni, Eastern, Christian, or Southern Nigerian cultural manifestations.

Above all, Saro-Wiwa was a nationalist. Throughout his work and personal experience, he learned to love the English language because it made his work accessible to a broad and receptive audience. He regarded English as the unifying language of Nigeria, one of the most ethnic and linguistically diverse countries in the world. He was not an Ogoni nationalist or separatist, but a Nigerian nationalist, albeit a reluctant one. He fought not only to incorporate his people into Nigeria, but to create a Nigeria that would accept all ethnic groups in Nigeria as equal partners in the country.

Although it is possible to examine Saro-Wiwa's life in segments, to do so distorts his legacy. He lived and died dedicated to Nigerian unity and attempted to create a nation out of the fragmented state. All his work in government, entertainment, literature, and activism focused on that goal. In life and death Saro-Wiwa

confronted what he saw as the injustice of a Nigerian system that rewarded corruption, nepotism, and regionalism at the expense of merit and minority rights.

Ken Saro-Wiwa was a prolific author who left his mark on the literary world as early as 1973 when his first play, *The Transistor Radio*, was published and produced. His stature as a writer, producer, and journalist gave him a platform to voice his views on Nigerian unity and the place of minorities within the country. His crowning achievement, the hit television series *Basi and Company*, was a landmark work for Nigeria. For the first time, there was a program that was entirely Nigerian, with characters that all Nigerians could recognize and relate to. Though Basi (aka Mr B) occupied a country not of his own creation, Basi made the postcolonial state his own. Similarly, Nigerians needed to coexist in a federation that provided security for all groups, no matter their size and influence. This idea permeated much of Saro-Wiwa's work and gives us a lens by which we can study the life of this unique and sometimes controversial man.

Two closely related events in Nigerian history catapulted Saro-Wiwa to prominence. In 1967, Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, military governor of the Eastern Region, broke away from Nigeria to form the short-lived Republic of Biafra. Thirty months of intense civil war culminated in the return of Biafra to Nigeria and the creation of a federal republic, albeit one still under military rule. Unlike many in the nascent republic,

Saro-Wiwa became a vocal supporter of Nigerian unity, actively joining the war effort and becoming the civilian administrator of Bonny (in southeastern Nigeria) before going on to join the newly formed Rivers State assembly. Saro-Wiwa's bold step in supporting Nigerian nationalism came from the realization that the interests of the ethnic minorities in general, and the Ogoni in particular, would be better served as part of a federal Nigeria, where no single ethnic group could dominate.

When Shell discovered oil in the Niger Delta in January 1956, the Delta's economic importance forever changed. For the Ogoni, oil was a curse, as the ensuing years brought economic destruction and environmental devastation. For Saro-Wiwa, the destruction of the environment that people depended on, coupled with the siphoning of oil revenues to the larger ethnic groups who controlled the economic patronage system in Nigeria, amounted to genocide. Saro-Wiwa did not believe the fight could be waged within Nigeria alone. After the failure of Biafran secession in 1970, oil became the economic glue that held Nigeria together, and Saro-Wiwa began organizing his people in a nonviolent struggle to regain their economic and political rights and keep their cultural identity, which he felt were imperiled by environmental destruction and the lack of economic opportunity.

It may seem a contradiction that Saro-Wiwa preached for a unified Nigerian society while working to preserve his ethnic group's identity within the structure

of the country, but for him, the ideal Nigeria was one where each ethnic group could be culturally independent and still share equally in the political and economic project that was Nigeria. Thus, the worst injustice was that the Ogoni, his people, who numbered less than half a million, were subsidizing Nigeria with the oil pumped out of their land and in the process destroying their environment to such an extent that the Ogoni way of life could not survive. This book charts the tightrope act performed by a man who saw no contradiction in merging his own cultural ideals into a larger and much more diverse country.

The first chapter explores the colonial Nigeria into which Saro-Wiwa was born. This chapter explores the effects that colonial rule and the transition to independence had on the young Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni, and state-society relations in Nigeria.

The second chapter discusses Saro-Wiwa's childhood and early career at university, where he dedicated himself to the study of the English language and became a lecturer before the civil war cut short his career in education. Saro-Wiwa's university experiences played an especially important part in his intellectual development and political awareness. His experiences as a young minority student in a multiethnic country planted in him the seed of the desire to show Nigerians that the country they inherited from the British could be forged into an inclusive society, rather than one that was based on ethnic loyalties.

Following Biafra's secession in 1967, Saro-Wiwa took a pro-Nigeria approach to the conflict and became the administrator of the newly formed Rivers State. The third chapter explores this tumultuous period in Nigeria's history and Saro-Wiwa's placement firmly on the Nigerian side. His actions set the stage for his future involvement in Nigerian politics and his ideals for Nigerian unity, setting him increasingly in conflict with the Nigerian civilian and military elites.

The fourth chapter looks at Saro-Wiwa's business interests and his writing career. After leaving governmental work, Saro-Wiwa established several real estate, retail, and publishing companies. These businesses served as a base for his writing career, and he published many of his own works through Saros International, his publishing arm. He also used his fame as a writer to create many more business opportunities, culminating in the hit sitcom *Basi and Company* for the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), to which he added a series of novelizations, including novels for young readers.

The next three chapters look at the issues surrounding Shell Oil's exploitation of the Niger Delta and the complexities of Saro-Wiwa's response to the destruction of the ecosystem that the Ogoni have depended on for their livelihood for millennia. It was this response, which included the creation of MOSOP, Saro-Wiwa's increasing involvement with global human and environmental rights groups, along with his constant criticisms

of internal Nigerian politics, that set him on a collision course with the Babangida and Abacha regimes.

The final chapter explains Saro-Wiwa's multiple legacies and attempts to unify the legacies of Saro-Wiwa the poet, author, businessman, scholar, government official, and human rights and environmental activist into a unified legacy of Saro-Wiwa the man. Ken Saro-Wiwa was a complex person who attracted intense admiration from those who supported his work and fierce hatred from those who felt threatened by the brand of nationalism and unity he represented.