

While 10,000 people held a Carnival Against Capital in the City of London, UK, the indigenous groups of the Niger Delta in Nigeria were waging their own Carnival of the Oppressed against the oil multinationals who have devastated the lives of those in this richly diverse ecological region.

In 1995, the writer and Ogoni activist Ken Saro Wiwa was hanged with eight others by the military dictatorship. Ken Saro Wiwa was leader of the Movement for Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) who fought for self-determination and against oil companies like Shell who were working with the military dictatorship and drilling for oil on indigenous lands. As a physician in Nigeria, his brother, fellow activist Owens Wiwa treated and documented diseases caused by oil-industry pollution and the injuries of victims of the dictatorship. He was arrested and detained three times and on one occasion tortured. After the execution of his brother he and his wife sought asylum in Canada.

According to a New York Times investigation, in 1993 Shell not only transported but paid salary bonuses to soldiers taking part in attacks on the Ogoni after claims that they had sabotaged Shell equipment. The officers killed 2,000 Ogoni people and destroyed 30 villages. Shell subsequently pulled out of the oilfields there in the mid-1990s claiming that the local resistance made operations too dangerous.

In this testimony Owens Wiwa talks about what he found when he returned on a visit to Ogoniland from exile in 1999. The Carnival of the Oppressed was held on the streets of Port Harcourt as a welcome home celebration, and was part of the J18 international day of action against global capitalism. While people around the world took to the streets, Ijaw and Ogoni youth were removing the sign of the main road named after the dictator General Abacha, and renaming it Ken Saro Wiwa Road during their self-described “carnival against imperialism and corporate rule”.

Carnival of the Oppressed: resisting the oil occupation of the Niger Delta

by Owens Wiwa

I left Ogoniland on 21 May 1994. It was after my brother Ken Saro Wiwa was abducted. I remember it was on 22 May that I found out on the radio that I was declared wanted, and so I didn't go back. I went underground in Nigeria for a year and five months, then I went into exile.

I flew into the Nigerian capital of Port Harcourt on 18 June 1999, and 5,000 people came out to receive me. It was a wonderful reception that turned into a mass demonstration against what the corporations have done to the indigenous populations of the Niger Delta.

Twenty-two communities of the Niger Delta took part in the Carnival of the Oppressed, including the Chikoko, Ijaw, Isoko, Ikwerre, the Urhobol National congress, the Itsekiri Youth Vanguard, the Egi Peoples' Forum and Egi Women Movement – many, many different communities came in their truckloads and busloads from all the different corners of the delta. Together they created a convoy that stretched out two miles behind us.

We made a first stop at a major road junction where we laid a wreath in memory of Ken. Then we carried mock coffins to the oil company headquarters of Agip. We went on to Ken's old office and performed a ceremony for his

martyrdom and in memory of the others that died with him.

To me the carnival was amazing. There was lots of dancing in the street. I was so honoured. There were so many dancing in the street they blocked the whole city of Port Harcourt! There was carnival dancing, masquerades, music everywhere, everyone in the streets – it was quite a sight to see!

Then we went in the Shell headquarters and repeated the carnivalesque atmosphere, gave rousing speeches, and we blockaded the Shell offices. About 10,000 people took the great risk to come out onto the streets. Luckily we had already taken the precaution of alerting international society so that the government knew they were being watched.

From there we travelled to Ogoniland. From the moment we entered Ogoniland to the point where we reached my own village, there were thousands of people lining the roads the entire way. When we got there, every shop was shut, every market closed, the whole town had shut down and come onto the streets to welcome us home. There were 20,000 people on the roads, routes, and through streets on the way down to my own villages. Masses of people from my

“Arise, arise, great Ogoni, arise. We will not allow the world to oppress us any more.” – Ogoni song of struggle

village had come, then another 10,000 arrived. Ultimately I would say about 50,000 - 70,000 people in Ogoniland participated in my homecoming. It was very humbling.

Shell and the government tried to use force to cower us against our aspiration, but we came out to celebrate anyway.

When I went back to Ogoniland, I saw a group of people who were very visibly proud that they were able to drive one of the biggest transnational corporations in the world off their land. But I also could see that there was a lot of poverty.

Shell had not cleared up any of the spills in Ogoniland, the pipelines were still on the surface, they had not been buried. One thing that had changed, however, was that the gas flares had gone. The Ogoni had put a stop to those. Compared to a few years earlier, when Ken was still alive, the trees were green again. There was a visible change in the vegetation due to the fact that there was no more oil drilling going on.

the length of the transport, people resist riot cops with water cannons, dogs, and the military police using up to ten helicopters at a time. Though the shipment eventually reaches its destination, the anti-nuke movement is regvanized.

>> **May 2** >> Hundreds of thousands of peasants, agricultural labourers, tribal people, and industrial workers from all regions of India take to the streets of

Hyderabad to reject neoliberal policies and demand the immediate withdrawal of India from the WTO, against the backdrops of a growing wave of peasant suicides.

>> **May 5** >> The indigenous Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand arrive in Auckland after walking 375 miles to increase awareness of and resistance to the MAI.

>> **May 15-17** >> GDA Global Street Party

>> **May 21** >> The Indonesian government falls after

insurrection against the Suharto dictatorship and the country's IMF-dictated austerity policies. Police kill six students.

>> **May 27** >> Korean unions hold a general strike against the global rule of capital, denouncing the IMF and MAI.

>> **July 6** >> A 48 hour work stoppage entitled the Peoples' Strike Against Privatization takes place across



Ogoni people pay tribute to executed activist Ken Saro Wiwa. Ogoniland, Nigeria (Faces have been blurred by photographer for security)

But the people were so poor, and the inner anger against Shell was visible in their faces. You could see it in their eyes when the name Shell was mentioned. People in the region had been abused, raped, beaten, tortured. Still there had been no redress, no compensation for the human rights abuse and the destruction of the environment. They've had no redress from Shell. But the people were still very resolute and said that they did not want Shell to ever come back to Ogoniland.

Shell has made a lot of moves to divide people, to get some in the community on their side so that they will help the company back into Ogoni. There is a lot of bribery going on, especially of key people like chiefs, to use their influence to invite Shell back. But the women especially, the women will not be bought over.

Many other groups in the Niger Delta had also become aware of the economic, environmental, and human rights abuses going on and have increased their actions in working against Shell and other oil companies in the area. The oil companies' activities are backed up by the military police. Aside from Shell, the other companies involved in oil

“For a commercial company trying to make investments, you need a stable environment... Dictatorships can give you that.”

– Naemeka Achebe, Shell's General Manager in Nigeria, a few months before the Nigerian government hanged Ken Saro Wiwa

drilling in the Niger Delta include Chevron, Agip, Mobil, Elf, and BP. These are the main players in the region.

I also saw more drilling, both on and off-shore, than when Ken was alive – but not in Ogoniland. There was definitely an increased environmental awareness around the whole community, with an increase in civil actions. In relation to government, there was more freedom of speech and association but still incidents of senior military personnel arresting and molesting people, especially those resisting the oil companies.

When I was in Ogoniland, I did not see the community development of which Shell speaks. [Shell's 'Profits and

Puerto Rico, protesting against the privatization of the state telephone company. The country is brought to a standstill as the largest demonstration in the island's history shuts everything down, including shopping malls and the airport.

>> **July 27-August 25** >> One thousand indigenous people from the Pemon, Karina, Arawaco and Akawaio tribes join together to roll massive logs onto the only

highway connecting Venezuela and Brazil. The move reinforces their determined resistance to a proposed 450-mile long electrical transmission line that will rip through their rainforest homeland, particularly damaging the Imataca rainforest, a nine million acre natural reserve. Twice the size of Switzerland, Imataca is home to an extraordinary array of wildlife including jaguars, bearded bluebells, marmosets, and the world's

largest eagle, the endangered harpy. After 11 days, the national guard violently disperses the encampment, and bulldozes the crops of nearby villages. Yet the blockades continue for over a month and the government eventually concedes.

>> **July 30** >> In Chile, hundreds of indigenous Pehuenche people blockade access to the construction site of the World Bank-funded Ralco dam of the Biobío

principles, does there have to be a choice?’ report claims it has built many community development projects in the region.] I saw new roads built by Shell, but these were ringing their own facilities, and served only Shell. The roads I saw were not the priority of the Ogoni people. Ogonis don’t have cars, and these roads take up the land and carry loggers to our remaining forests.

The community development priorities of the Ogoni people are to clean up the polluted land, and the polluted rivers, so that they may be used once more for farming and fishing. So that ill health may be tackled, so that the people are no longer drinking polluted water. And so that they will not be malnourished because they can once more get the protein they need from the fish in the rivers. The killing off of the fish in the waters means people are malnourished and especially vulnerable to disease.

So there is a big disconnection between the brand and the reality.

It’s very important and strengthening to know that our struggle is not just local. Solidarity is always hopeful in many ways. Linking all our struggles, which we realize are really the same, gives us great encouragement – to see that others are in the struggle. If we connect with people in other places our struggle becomes internationalized, in that way we can look at our programmatic similarities and we don’t just remain isolated. And if we stay isolated, we will be wiped out. If the government knows we are part of a wider network they know they have to be more cautious.

Marginalized people in all parts of the world need to be

“What Shell and Chevron have done to Ogoni people, land, streams, creeks, and the atmosphere amounts to genocide. The soul of the Ogoni people is dying, and I am witness to the fact.” – Ken Saro Wiwa

making connections, coming together to develop conjoined solutions. You can see commonalities between the indigenous peoples in the Amazon, in Australia. The process of globalization has destroyed *our wealth*, the natural resources we use to sustain ourselves with and that made us prosper.

Still we draw great hope from this globalization from below. It is going well, but it is a very slow process. To do it properly, really from the ground up, is a very slow process. I have grown to understand that good things come slowly to people like us.

And I worry that our collective pace in combating globalization is too slow compared to the rapid rate that economic globalization is occurring. It is creating a space that nothing is filling. Our own slowness of movement cannot catch up with the fast pace of economic globalization – its speed, its momentum is like a train going too fast. Perhaps we do need to speed up our protest and our resistance, roadblock the rails or pursue the train faster. It is very difficult.

I was in Seattle. It was incredibly gratifying to see people

from the US on the streets protesting against corporate rule there. But one thing our friends in the North should know: that big corporations, the extractive industries – if you want to stop them, you have got to stop them at the point of production, as well as disrupting the meetings. So it is especially important to disrupt the process at the other end, to support the people who are fighting globalization from the grassroots in Southern countries.

In Ogoniland we use the method of the human shield – a simple, nonviolent human shield. Often it is the women who stand at the forefront. We use the biggest resource we have – humans – to prevent the oil companies from getting access to their weapons of mass destruction – to drill the earth, spoil the earth, drill for oil. Our processes involve making sure everybody is involved through democratic processes, holding a council meeting. We held lots of rallies in every village every week and different groups choose to form together, through self-organization, through self-building. In this way everybody in the community becomes mobilized.

We are working for freedom, for economic and social freedom. The corporations are dictating our lives right now.

And I am fighting for my brother's name to be cleared. I want it to be known that he was a man of peace, a man who gave his life so that those struggling against corporate power can do so without being killed, so that people can live in dignity.

Interview by Notes from Nowhere/Katharine Ainger

Dr Owens Wiwa's book *Politics of Bones: Dr. Owens Wiwa and the Environmental Wars in the Niger Delta* detailing the resistance actions in the Niger Delta is available from November 2003

Resources:

» **Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, still fighting for life against the oil transnationals in the Niger delta:**
www.dawodu.net/mosop.htm

River, thus enforcing the 1993 Indigenous Law which requires written consent from all 400 Pehuenche that would be displaced by the dam. Nicolasa Quintremán, whose family has owned and lived on the same land for 500 years says, "The only way I'll leave here is dead." Riot police tear gas the blockade, and arrest four people, and the government concedes, demanding that construction be halted until resolution of the dispute is

found. A constant vigil is established at the dam site to ensure that the order is obeyed.

>> **August** >> Fifty children aged between seven and thirteen launch a hunger strike in New Delhi, India to protest at being forced to work as bonded labourers in carpet factories.

>> **August 5** >> Ten thousand people take to the streets in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, protesting against

privatization of the nation's largest telecommunications company.

>> **October 1** >> The streets of La Paz, Bolivia are quiet except for squads of trade unionists patrolling to enforce a general strike in the city. Public and transport workers form the core of the mass protest against rising telephone, water, and electricity prices. Unions blame the price hikes on large-scale privatization of public