



KEN SARO-WIWA

WRITER

AND

POLITICAL

ACTIVIST

EDITED BY CRAIG W. MCLUCKIE AND AUBREY MCPHAIL

KEN SARO-WIWA

Writer and Political Activist

edited by
Craig W. McLuckie
Aubrey McPhail



Published in the United States of America in 2000 by
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
1800 30th Street, Boulder, Colorado 80301
www.rienner.com

and in the United Kingdom by
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
3 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8LU

© 2000 by Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ken Saro-Wiwa : writer and political activist / edited by Craig W.

McLuckie and Aubrey McPhail.

p. cm.

"A three continents book."

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-89410-883-2 (hc : alk. paper)

1. Saro-Wiwa, Ken, 1941— 2. Authors, Nigerian—20th century—
Biography. 3. Political activists—Nigeria—Biography.

I. McLuckie, Craig W. II. McPhail, Aubrey, 1956—

PR9387.9.S27Z74 1999

823—dc21

99-31267

CIP

British Cataloguing in Publication Data

A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

Ⓢ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements
of the American National Standard for Permanence of
Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgments

I am pleased to acknowledge the assistance and cooperation of the following people and institutions: Ross Tyner and Laura Neame, librarians, Okanagan University College; Faith Peyton, Inter-Library Loans, Okanagan University College; Jake Block and Steve Rosco, Computing Services, Okanagan University College; the OUCFA Professional Development Fund; the library staff at the Universities of Washington (Seattle), Alberta (Edmonton), Stirling, and Calgary.

Jean Hay, Lesli Brooks Athanasoulis, Beth Partin, and Sally Glover of Lynne Rienner Publishers have been key figures in this project. Their advice, industry, and encouragement permit us to acknowledge them as *de facto* coeditors. Angela Smith, director of the Centre for Commonwealth Studies, University of Stirling, offered a list of potential contributors; our discussions and correspondence on matters postcolonial formed a backdrop to this project.

I have had the opportunity of exploring the relationship between political commitment and the literary arts with numerous classes; particular appreciation is extended to seminar participants in "Literature of Africa and the Caribbean": Dave, Cait, Mike, Ginger, Shannon, April, Maria, and Kathleen.

Michelle McLuckie held the line for seventy-five days in frigid (political, economic, meteorological) conditions; her example and commitment are exemplary. Work of this nature requires the forbearance of a great many people: thanks go to Ronald and Doreen; Peter Murray; John and Shirley Murphy; B. J. Tyner; Francis Aleba; and especially to Emily, Nathan, Jessica, Anna, Callum, Tia, and Max.

Ronald Ayling, professor emeritus, University of Alberta, has assisted this project in a variety of ways—from making materials available to read-

ing each chapter. His advice, his attention here and in his own work to an elegant prose style that communicates effectively, and his commitment as a human being are all deeply appreciated.

To risk a Kelmanesque phrase: thank Christ they're still around.

* * *

The editors gratefully acknowledge Ken Wiwa, son of the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, and the Maggie Noach Literary Agency, literary executor of the Estate of Ken Saro-Wiwa, for their kind permission to quote from the works of Ken Saro-Wiwa in this volume.

The editors also acknowledge Indiana University Press and *Research in African Literatures* for permission to reprint Chris Dunton's essay.

Craig W. McLuckie

Myth draws selectively from the past, but its key purpose is to provide a contemporary reservoir of legitimation for belief and action. The . . . myth lends itself to two main interpretations, an activist one which seeks the resolution of the apparent contradiction between real social inequality and an egalitarian ideology in favour of the latter. However, there is also a second, more conservative interpretation of the myth, that if man is primordially equal, then social structural inequalities do not matter, and nothing needs to be done. It is sufficient that "we're a' Jock Tamson's bairns."

—*David McCrone*

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
------------------------	----

PART 1 THE CONTEXT

1	Ken Saro-Wiwa, or “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger” <i>Charles Lock</i>	3
2	A Political Assessment: <i>Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy</i> <i>Joseph McLaren</i>	17

PART 2 THE LITERARY EXPERIMENTS

3	Literary Memoirs and Diaries: Soyinka, Amadi, and Saro-Wiwa <i>Craig W. McLuckie</i>	29
4	The Poetry: <i>Songs in a Time of War</i> <i>Tanure Ojaide</i>	53
5	The Short Fiction: <i>A Forest of Flowers</i> and <i>Adaku and Other Stories</i> <i>Aubrey McPhail</i>	69
6	The Novel: <i>Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English</i> <i>Maureen N. Eke</i>	87

PART 3 THE PUBLIC MAN

- | | | |
|---|--|-----|
| 7 | Pipe Dreams: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Environmental Justice, and
Microminority Rights
<i>Rob Nixon</i> | 109 |
| 8 | “Buried Beneath Six Feet of Crude Oil”: State-Sponsored
Death and the Absent Body of Ken Saro-Wiwa
<i>Misty L. Bastian</i> | 127 |
| 9 | Saro-Wiwa the Publisher
<i>Laura Neame</i> | 153 |

PART 4 POPULAR MEDIA

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 10 | The Children’s Series
<i>John LeBlanc</i> | 177 |
| 11 | <i>Dream of Sologa, Eneka, and The Supreme Commander:</i>
The Theater of Ken Saro-Wiwa
<i>Chris Dunton</i> | 201 |

PART 5 EPILOGUE

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 12 | “From This Hurt to the Unquestioning World”:
Seven Poems from <i>Delta Blues</i>
<i>Tanure Ojaide, with an Introduction by John Lent</i> | 215 |
|----|--|-----|

APPENDIXES

- | | |
|---|---------|
| Appendix 1: Chronology of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s Life
<i>Laura Neame</i> | 233 |
| Appendix 2: Chronology of the Nigerian Civil War
<i>Ross Tyner</i> | 237 |
| Appendix 3: An Annotated Bibliography
<i>Craig W. McLuckie and James Gibbs</i> | 245 |
|
<i>The Contributors</i> |
285 |
| <i>Index</i> | 287 |
| <i>About the Book</i> | 291 |

PART 1

The Context

1

Ken Saro-Wiwa, or “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger”

Charles Lock

Nigerian literature first came to international attention forty years ago. An initiating and defining moment of anglophone writing in Africa—Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958)—has found its gruesome prolepsis fulfilled. That short novel concludes with the district commissioner—the servant of empire—planning to write a book:

Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. . . . He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (Achebe, pp. 147–148)

That title—parodic of colonial discourse, of its customary euphemisms, of its presentation of autobiography and memoir in the guise of history and anthropology—could well serve as a summary of the fate of the Ogoni. In 1958, African literature discovered a voice, and the Shell Petroleum Development Corporation discovered oil in Rivers State, in the Niger Delta of southeastern Nigeria: river and nation fortuitously named for the black gold that would bring prosperity to many, and misery to a few (Vidal, pp. 20).¹

SARO-WIWA, THE OGONI, AND SHELL

Ogoni! Ogoni!

Ogoni is the land
The people, Ogoni
The agony of trees dying

In ancestral farmlands
 Streams polluted weeping
 Filth into murky rivers
 It is the poisoned air
 Coursing the luckless lungs
 Of dying children
 Ogoni is the dream
 Breaking the looping chain
 Around the drooping neck
 of a shell-shocked land.²

"Shell-shocked" is a two-faced homophone. We hear oil, and we see Ogoni divided by trenches, another Flanders Fields; and what links oil and trenches is gas: gas-flaring, poison gas. The simple chiasmus of the poem's opening: "Ogoni is the land / The people, Ogoni"—writes the inseparability of the Ogoni, the people, from Ogoni the land, a people doomed by their tree-like immobility, their rootedness: not just an indigenous people but an ecosystem, almost an ecosyntax. "To the Ogoni, the land and the people are one and are expressed as such in our local languages" (Saro-Wiwa, *A Month*, p. 2), wrote Ken Saro-Wiwa in July 1994. And the repetition of Ogoni makes its "agony" as inevitable as an echo. It was this poem, written in prison, that gave rise to the slogans of the Greenpeace protest against the environmental despoliation of Ogoni—"A Shell-shocked land" and "Get the (S)hell out of Nigeria"—slogans that were then taken up around the world by those protesting against the imprisonment and trial of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

One cannot write about Saro-Wiwa without writing about the Ogoni, whose symbol he remains and whose unofficial leader he was, as head of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). Nor can the name of Saro-Wiwa be mentioned without invoking that of Shell. One still lacks the evidence to blame Shell directly for the execution at about 11:30 A.M. Friday, 10 November 1995, of Saro-Wiwa and eight other leaders of MOSOP. Saro-Wiwa was not alone, either in his struggle or in his death.

It has been alleged—in *The Drilling Fields*, the Channel 4 documentary first broadcast in Britain in May 1995—that at a top-level meeting of Shell executives in London, a decision was taken to impede the work of MOSOP, and to put Saro-Wiwa under surveillance. This is sketched by Saro-Wiwa himself: "Shell had been working extraordinarily hard to destroy all my efforts. Now, do not ask me for hard evidence. These things are never done in writing" (Saro-Wiwa, *A Month*, pp. 146, 160). Shortly before his arrest, when he first heard rumor of the allegations that would be brought against him and eight other Ogoni leaders, Saro-Wiwa declared: "They are going to arrest us all and execute us. All for Shell"

(Greenpeace pamphlet, summer 1995). Most damning of all, one of the prosecution witnesses confessed during the trial in October 1995—that he, like other witnesses, had been offered bribes of £300 (300 pounds, a very large sum in the Nigerian economy) by Shell to make statements incriminating Saro-Wiwa.³ Furthermore, Saro-Wiwa's brother, Dr. Owens Wiwa, alleged (after the execution) that Shell had some months earlier offered to negotiate a deal whereby Shell would arrange for Saro-Wiwa to be released without his case going to trial—if Saro-Wiwa would promise to make no further criticisms of Shell. Owens Wiwa refused to negotiate under such conditions (Cooly, pp. 18–20).

By a process of no little irregularity, Saro-Wiwa and his associates were tried by a special tribunal in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State. They were charged with the murder of four Ogoni chiefs, who had disagreed with Saro-Wiwa and the MOSOP leadership and had advocated support for the federal government of Gen. Sani Abacha. The murders took place on 21 May 1994. The defendants were not allowed to select their own defense lawyers. It was not necessary even to establish that Saro-Wiwa (or any of the eight codefendants) was at the scene of the crime. They were judged to have abetted and incited, even in and by their absence from the scene of the crime, and were sentenced to death on 31 October. Eight days later the sentence was confirmed by the Nigerian government. The Heads of Commonwealth States were meeting in Auckland, and hope appeared to rest on their collective protest and especially on the personal authority of Nelson Mandela.

The South African president did nothing dramatic and spoke, somewhat mysteriously, of the value of quiet diplomacy. The cynical reaction of the day was that Mandela did not want to endanger Shell's involvement in the fragile economy of his own country. Mandela's failure of both tact and judgment forms a melancholy sideshow. (Let it be said that within days of the executions, Mandela promised to work for a complete oil embargo against Nigeria; more significantly, he threatened to suspend Shell's operations in South Africa if Shell failed to cooperate.) (Let it also be said, in a separate parenthesis, that Saro-Wiwa's son, Ken Wiwa, flew to Auckland to make his appeal and was prevented, by the organizers of the Commonwealth Conference, from meeting Mandela. Not until after the conference, and long after it was too late, did Mandela learn that Ken Wiwa had been in Auckland.)

Shell's response statement (undated) "to the allegations put forward in *Delta Force* asserts that Shell Nigeria has never been approached or pressured 'by the military to provide input.' . . . Nor would Shell Nigeria do so if it had been approached." This is strictly true: Shell's dealings were not with the military but with the police. Thanks to a dispute between Shell and XM Federal Limited (and its Nigerian subsidiary Humanitex Government Licensed Dealers on Fire-Arms) that came to the Federal High Court

in Lagos in July 1995, an incriminating array of documents was brought into the public domain. A letter, for example, from Shell Nigeria, dated 19 January 1994, to the inspector general of police in Lagos, asked for 150,000 rounds of 9 mm ammunition and 130 semiautomatic rifles, only six of which were to be used in Lagos: sixty-four were for Warri and sixty for Port Harcourt, both in Rivers State.

The accusations that Saro-Wiwa made, in various speeches and writings, about the "genocide" and "environmental devastation" being perpetrated in and on the Ogoni by collusion between Shell and the Nigerian government are hardly refuted by such evidence:

Shell . . . having successfully waged an ecological war against the Ogoni people since 1958, has been giving protection money to the Nigerian security agencies to complete the genocide which it began. Of the 126 Ogoni villages, the military regime have burned around 30. (Saro-Wiwa, quoted in Gerner, *Index*, pp. 4-5, 219)

Saro-Wiwa was an exceptionally energetic writer, publicist, and activist, who used hyperbole to publicize the sufferings of the Ogoni, appealing to such dissenting factions and sequestered outposts of conscience and good faith as have survived the global commodification of behavior, the market valuation of values. At first Saro-Wiwa's outrage was pitched at a political level—the corruption of Nigerian society—and then at an economic level, with accusations against multinational interference in local communities. As Saro-Wiwa became more attuned to the lobbying procedure and the arcane hierarchy of grievance that pertains at the United Nations and other international bodies, he focused on two issues: the environment and the rights of indigenous peoples (see Saro-Wiwa, *A Month*, pp. 93-101).

Through shrewdness and determination, Saro-Wiwa managed to articulate the plight of the Ogoni in the terms of almost all the good causes of our day: he could appeal to the ideals of both Greenpeace and Amnesty International, to International PEN and the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations. Such unlikely and even unholy alliances drove capitalism and its governments into disgraceful, shameful collusion in the executions. Most shockingly, it can be said that no judicial murder has been carried out in such a brazen absence of secrecy. Without even waiting for the dispersal of the Commonwealth Heads of State, the military government of Nigeria had the executions carried out. Ideals have seldom appeared quite so powerless, almost contemptibly feeble.

SARO-WIWA AND LANGUAGE

The novel has been characterized as the literary genre in which linguistic deviation has been tolerated. It is worth noting that poetry and drama, as

oral forms, seldom trouble with deviant orthography. Tonal variation need not be signaled at the orthographic level for it to be realized in enunciation. By contrast, in M. M. Bakhtin's words, the novel "alone is receptive to new forms of mute perception" (Bakhtin, p. 3). The occurrence of orthographic irregularities in fiction is thus closely involved with the "muteness" of the genre. Characters in fiction are represented orthographically as speaking in ways that reveal their identity, their difference from the standard. This differs markedly from the occurrences of nonstandard orthography in poetry and drama, which almost always serves a comic purpose. Actually to hear deviant speech is, it seems, necessarily comic. That is the difference between Shakespearean "Mummerset" and the somber irregularities of the unheard speech in *Wuthering Heights* or *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

Until quite recently, however, orthographic deviation in fiction was confined to direct speech. Orthographic standardization and stylistic purity are instruments of a central authority. Deviation and even stylistic opacity can be seen in terms of resistance. Each instance of linguistic resistance is a mark of the regional or peripheral and a constitution of the localized particular voice against, or merely outside, the general chorus, the symphony of accordant voices. For Bakhtin, the history of the novel is the history of resistance to the homogenizing discourses of modernity. In view of the metaphorical gathering of discourse, currency, and purity—a clustering that runs through and can be traced back to the sources of Western literature—it is fitting that the first novel in which orthographic deviance spills over the banks of its quotation marks should have been a novel about the Mississippi. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) muddies the waters of English. T. S. Eliot writes of the Mississippi: "I think that the river is / A strong brown god—sullen, untamed, and intractable"⁴ and thus figures that river in contrast to the Spenserian well of "English undefiled" and the river as figure of poetry in "Prothalamion": "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song" (Spencer, p. 760).

The River Niger is of course our clue, a river named for blackness, yet a river and a delta not so black as to be beyond pollution by the spilling and overflowing of oil. One hundred years after the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*, Ken Saro-Wiwa issued *Sozaboy* (1985) with that most remarkable, defiant subtitle: *A Novel in Rotten English*. The putrid corruption and the shameless deeds of commercial exploitation and degradation are both to be opposed by a novel whose language seeks to be anything but clear, limpid, or transparent, to break every rule of *Modern English Usage* as propounded by the happily-named Fowler. The "Author's Note" to *Sozaboy* explains:

Sozaboy's language is what I call "rotten English," a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even

idiomatic English. This language is disordered and disorderly. Born of a mediocre education and severely limited opportunities, it borrows words, patterns and images freely from the mother-tongue and finds expression in a very limited English vocabulary. To its speakers, it has the advantage of having no rules and no syntax. It thrives on lawlessness, and is part of the dislocated and discordant society in which Sozaboy must live, move, and have not his being. (Saro-Wiwa, *Sozaboy*, p. xi)

We find examples in Saro-Wiwa's earliest writings, such as "High Life," a story first published in 1969:

All I was thinking was how I will get one portable damsel to deposit in my room for that night. I was near the market place when I saw one. That damsel was a bundle of sophistication I tell you. And she was perambulating lackadaisically along the road. (Saro-Wiwa, *A Forest*, p. 70)

That sort of lexical and idiomatic incongruity appears stylistically absurd and politically inauthentic. It does not represent any one of the numerous Englishes now spoken in the nations of the Commonwealth. In making a plural of English, one makes of each variety a self-sufficient and self-validating language; one no longer speaks in terms of dialect and degrees of deviation.⁵ The claim of Ebonics is not that there is such a way of speaking, but that it has the order and rationality that we ascribe to *language*. The latter assumption is the greatest fallacy of all, the one that we have lived with and within since discourse and reason were comprised within the one word *logos*.

Instances of modified and internally consistent Englishes have been represented by various postcolonial writers. With few exceptions, by using deviant orthography and syntax, such writers aim to represent consistently the deviations of a particular group of speakers. They remain attached to the logocentric assumption that writing represents speech. Bakhtin insists that novels are "mute," and a few linguists have explored the ways in which novelistic discourse resists or dispenses with utterance.⁶ Saro-Wiwa's originality lies precisely here, in the understanding that a novel is not obliged to represent a voice, and therefore that its language is free to be deviant without being consistently so. Furthermore, the representation of deviation as consistent may well be a falsification and one that serves the homogenizing imperative to equate language with rationality.

By mixing the discourses, one creates an impossible language, according to those linguists who would maintain that a language must have rules and syntax. "Rotten English" is a rottenness not of speaking (for which of us speaks grammatically? Whose accent gives voice to standard orthography?) but of writing. *Sozaboy* is intensely, almost hypnotically readable—and unspeakably so.

SARO-WIWA AND LITERATURE

Saro-Wiwa makes a distinction between the rotten English that forms and informs the entire text of *Sozaboy*, and that which represents the speech of Nigerians, such as Madam in *Basi and Company*:

Madam spoke different Englishes according to her mood. [This sentence is in the idiom not of rotten English, but of postcolonial academic jargon.] Sometimes she spoke standard English, at other times pidgin English, and she had an English reserved for the most vicious moments—rotten English which was a mixture of all types of English, her mother-tongue which she hardly ever spoke, and the predominant Yoruba of Adetola Street. (Saro-Wiwa, *Basi*, p. 30)

It should be said that there is very little dialect in *Basi and Company*: the speeches are written in standard English, obviously to be enunciated by Nigerian actors, for whom standard orthography—also used in the connecting narratives—is the normative representation of the way Nigerians speak.

Sozaboy is even less protected from spillage than *Huckleberry Finn* is: the latter book is at least structured in an orderly fashion. In *Sozaboy* the rottenness spreads even into the structure of the book, the paratextual elements.⁷ The chapters are not called chapters but "lomers," that is, numbers. This is how Lomber One begins:

Although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first. All the nine villages were dancing and we were eating plenty maize with pear and knocking tory [gossiping] under the moon. Because the work on the farm have finished and the yams were growing well well. And because the old, bad government have dead, and the new government of soza and police have come.

Two pages later we read the first sentence again, this time with its grammar somewhat amended:

So, although everyone was happy at first, after some time, everything begin to spoil small by small and they were saying that trouble have started. People were not happy to hear that there is trouble everywhere. . . . Radio begin dey hala as 'e never hala before. Big big grammar. Long long words. Every time.

Before before, the grammar was not plenty and everybody was happy. But now grammar begin to plenty and people were not happy. As grammar plenty, na so trouble plenty. And as trouble plenty, na so plenty people were dying. (p. 3)

Rather than claim the dignity of a language for each variety of English, the eponymous narrator of *Sozaboy* associates war with grammar and