

Ringling the Ogoni bells: the Ken Saro-Wiwa archive



Helen Fallon (Helen.b.fallon@nuim.ie) is Deputy Librarian, Maynooth University.

In the words of writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, executed for protesting against environmental destruction in the Niger Delta ‘the Ogoni story will have to be told’. His correspondent, Sister Majella, offered an archive of his letters to Maynooth University, and **Helen Fallon** explains how it continues to tell the story and support new research.

ON 10 November 2015, award-winning travel writer and journalist Noo Saro-Wiwa visited Maynooth University (MU). She read from her book *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria*, launched the MU Ken Saro-Wiwa Postgraduate Award and was interviewed for the MU Ken Saro-Wiwa Audio Archive. The event marked the 20th anniversary of the execution of her father, Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, and eight others (the Ogoni Nine) for protesting against the environmental destruction of their homeland Ogoni in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The MU Ken

Ken Saro-Wiwa archive

The Ken Saro-Wiwa image archive can be viewed at:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/22668824@N07/albums/72157636927385056>

The audio archive is hosted in Sound Cloud and is freely accessible at:

<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/library/collections/ken-saro-wiwa-audio-archive>

<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/>

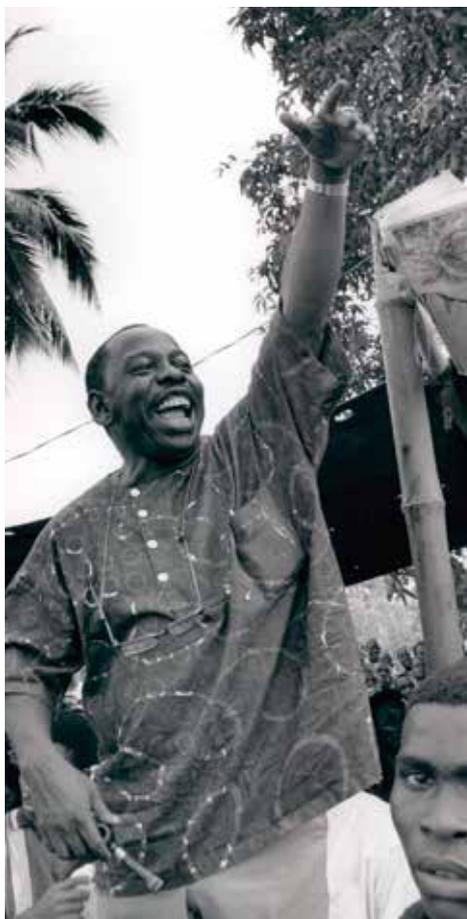
Saro-Wiwa connection commenced four years prior to her visit.

Plight of the Ogoni people

In November 2011, Sister Majella McCarron (OLA) donated a substantial archive of material relating to Ken Saro-Wiwa to MU. In the early 90s, Sister Majella worked with Saro-Wiwa to highlight the plight of the Ogoni people, a small ethnic group who live in the Niger Delta region of south-western Nigeria – an area with extensive oil reserves. While the then Nigerian military regime received massive revenues from the petrochemical industry, in Ogoni there was no piped water, no electricity, no hospitals, and schools were almost non-existent. Alongside this, the environmental impact of the unchecked oil exploration had devastated the land. Saro-Wiwa established the Movement for the Solidarity of the Ogoni People (Mosop) in 1990 and Sister Majella helped him in many ways, including organising leadership training for Mosop, based on the psychosocial method of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian adult educator. Saro-Wiwa was arrested and detained a number of times. Most of the letters date from his final period of detention.

A unique social justice collection

Sister Majella kept this material, which included death row-letters from Saro-Wiwa, for 16 years among her personal belongings. In her mid-70s she had concerns



Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Photo courtesy of Noo Saro-Wiwa.



The Nigerian military regime received massive revenues from the petrochemical industry, while in Ogoni there was no piped water, no electricity, no hospitals, and schools were almost non-existent.



Left: Noo Saro-Wiwa, Ken Saro-Wiwa's daughter, with Sister Majella. Noo launched the MU Ken Saro-Wiwa Postgraduate Award and read from her book. All pictures © Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa Archive and photographs by Alan Monahan unless stated.

about the future of the collection, knowing the potential value of the material to researchers and activists. Still active in environmental justice issues, Sister Majella had taken on the role of table observer – monitoring activity – of the Irish Shell to Sea campaign, a movement which was endeavouring to stop Shell laying oil pipelines underground in a coastal area of Mayo in the West of Ireland. MU postgraduate student John O'Shea interviewed her on the topic of media coverage of the campaign for his sociology thesis. During their conversations, Sister Majella asked John to investigate if MU would be interested in the collection. In the library, his query was passed to me, as I have an interest in West Africa, having worked for two years with VSO in Sierra Leone. I was immediately drawn to the project. I had also met Sister Majella, when she was trying to track down an African play.

A tool to foster dialogue

The value of the Ken Saro-Wiwa collection was immediately obvious. MU has programmes and course modules relating to social justice, community studies and post-colonial studies and is home to the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for Conflict Resolution. Ireland has become a much more diverse society in the last decade and I felt that the archive could be a tool to foster dialogue and understanding. I had previously had an input into the BA in Community Studies, exploring the parallels and contrasts between the lives of women from various African countries with mature students, as presented in modern African fiction and the students' lives in Ireland.¹

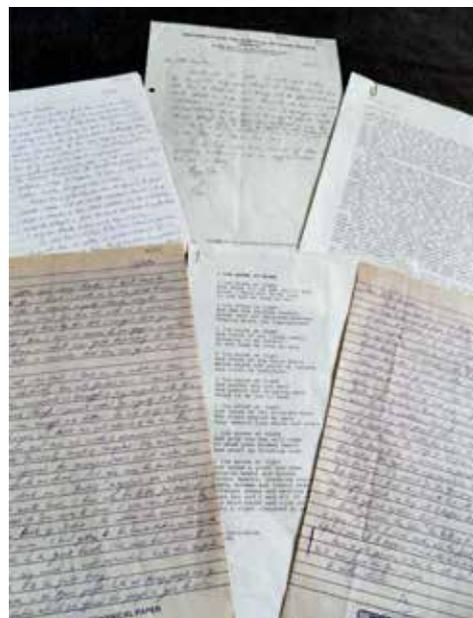
Letters from the breadbasket

The collection arrived in plastic fold-

ers, boxes and bags. It contained 28 letters Saro-Wiwa wrote to Sister Majella, mostly from military detention in the two years leading up to his execution. These were smuggled out of the detention centre in breadbaskets. The letters paint a picture of Saro-Wiwa as a writer, family man and political activist, and cast a unique light on a major conflict over ownership of natural resources and environmental destruction. Sister Majella also donated poems written by Saro-Wiwa, video recordings, photographs, a Mosop flag and t-shirt, a cap that had belonged to Saro-Wiwa, and other items and artefacts in a moving ceremony which took place on 16 November 2011, the 10th anniversary of the execution of the Ogoni Nine.

Ringling the Ogoni bells

In a letter to Sister Majella – after her return to Ireland in 1994 – Saro-Wiwa wrote of



The Saro-Wiwa letters: poignant to read.

her ringing the Ogoni bells i.e. letting the world know what was happening in Ogoni. Despite her efforts and international protest, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight colleagues were executed on 10 November 1995.

When Sister Majella donated the archive to MU, she wanted it to be publicised and made available for both academic research and to grassroots community groups. We approached 'ringing the Ogoni bells' in a number of ways.

Silence would be treason

The 28 letters were published, with introductory essays, as *Silence Would be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa*.² Reading and rereading the spidery handwriting, mostly on thin lined sheets of paper, for my essay was a very personal and enriching experience. A letter by its very nature has a certain intimacy and knowing the fate of the writer who, during the two years in detention, oscillated between optimism and a conviction that he would be executed, made the reading of the letters more poignant.

We received a grant from Trócaire, an Irish aid agency, towards publication. A stipulation of the grant was that a certain number of copies of the book be made available free of charge to grassroots community development organisations, and that the book be available in Nigeria. The book was launched in November 2013 in the MU Library by Dr Owens Wiwa, brother of Ken Saro-Wiwa and shortly afterwards in Abuja, Nigeria. Dr Wiwa featured on Irish national radio and television and I was interviewed about the archive for a programme on development issues on national radio.

The Ken Saro-Wiwa Audio Archive

While working on the book, the library explored other avenues to publicise the

letters and the work of Saro-Wiwa. A local media producer had filmed the handover of the letters in November 2011, producing a piece for national television. I worked with the producer to create an audio archive of recordings of people connected with Ken Saro-Wiwa and the issues in the letters. This was a wonderful opportunity for me to gain experience of interviewing, both in terms of techniques, and practicalities such as using recording equipment. Seven hours of audio were recorded with Sister Majella. This was free-ranging in the topics covered, from her Irish childhood, her education, her missionary work in Nigeria, the events that brought her to Saro-Wiwa, and all that passed subsequently. Other recordings include Dr Owens Wiwa, Noo Saro-Wiwa and the three authors of the edited letters.

The audio archive is hosted in Sound Cloud and is freely accessible at <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/library/collections/ken-saro-wiwa-audio-archive>

Recordings from the audio archive have been accessed over 1,500 times. However, the actual listenership is much greater, as some have been broadcast on University of Ibadan radio – where Ken Saro-Wiwa was a student – and Irish national radio.

Ken Saro-Wiwa Bursary

Sister Majella and the three editors of the letters agreed that funds raised from sales of the book would go to a fund in Ken Saro-Wiwa's name, administered by the library. This was considered appropriate to the spirit both of the donation and Ken Saro-Wiwa's work, and in line with the wishes of the family. It also enables the university to develop its profile as a centre for African studies in Ireland and to draw attention to the archive. On 10 November, Noo Saro-Wiwa presented the inaugural Ken Saro-Wiwa Postgraduate Award award €2,000 – to Maynooth History student Graham Kay. His PhD thesis will explore the relationship between governments and the oil industry in the early 20th century.

Integrating the archive

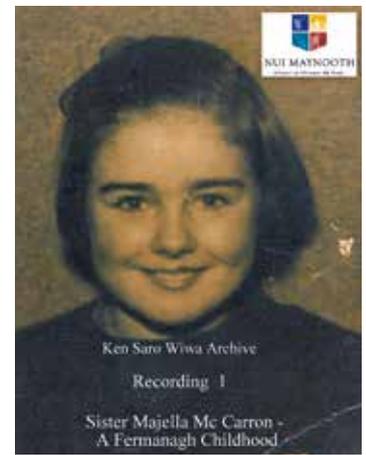
A number of MU programmes, particularly in the social sciences, have modules relating to topics such as environmental issues, social justice, community development, minority rights and development theories. I worked with the Professor of Adult Education to integrate the archive into a module on Development Theories on the BA in Community Studies.³ The BA in Community Education attracts a number of members of Ireland's new communities each year. By an incredible co-incidence, one of the students had been a warden in a detention centre where Saro-Wiwa had been held for a period. He declined to be interviewed for the audio archive, feeling that as an asylum seeker in Ireland, it might not be helpful to draw attention to himself.

Preservation and digitisation

Work on the archive began immediately



MU staff and the published collection of Saro-Wiwa's letters.



Ken Saro-Wiwa audio archives.



Dr Owens Wiwa, brother of Ken Saro-Wiwa, at the launch of *Silence Would be Treason* at MU.

after its acquisition, with preservation work carried out on items requiring attention. Some of the letters had been folded and Sister Majella was intrigued to see the iron the archivist used to tackle the creases! The letters were transferred from plastic folders and boxes to acid free boxes, and our conservator examined the condition of the cap, flag and t-shirt and ascertained that it was not necessary to call in the expertise of a textile conservator.

The collection was incorporated into the Calm database. The letters were digitised and are now available as part of the Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI) database at www.dri.ie.

In 2012, MU completed a major library extension. The Ken Saro-Wiwa archive is housed in the new Special Collections area, which provides custom-made space for the accommodation, consultation and exhibition of collections, which conforms to best international standards.

Exhibitions and visits

A number of initiatives to create awareness of the collection have taken place. The letters have been exhibited to mark events such as International Human Rights Day, Africa Day, Development Studies Week, the anniversary of the execution of the Ogoni Nine (10 November 1995) and to coincide with conferences/seminars which have a development studies/conflict resolution theme.

A local public library selected *Silence Would be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa* as their reading club book and children from local schools have visited the library, viewed the letters and discussed the issues surrounding the conflict in the Niger Delta in class. High quality copies of the letters have been made. The lead author of *Silence Would be Treason* brought a number of these surrogates to Oxford University, when delivering a keynote address at a conference on Saro-Wiwa in 2015.

Telling the story

In a letter to Sister Majella, dated 1 December 1993, Ken Saro-Wiwa urged Sister Majella:

'Keep putting your thoughts on paper. Who knows how we can use them in future. The Ogoni story will have to be told.'

We hope the library has gone some way to fulfil his wishes. [U]

References

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