

## Foreword

### Small places, large struggles, huge stakes: why this book matters

Pp. vii-xii in Samuel Udogbo, *Minority Discontent in Nigeria Since Independence: the Ogoni People's Resistance in Perspective*. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2024.

In the mid-1990s, a tiny Indigenous people in a remote part of the great Niger Delta became the vanguard of the global struggle against fossil fuels and ecological destruction. Perhaps 60% of the then estimated half-million Ogoni took part in the 1993 Ogoni Day: resisting Shell's presence in the Delta, the devastation caused to a fishing and farming community by the poisoning of the air and the water, and the combination of exploitation and oppression that resulted. In 1995, the military dictatorship responded with the execution of nine Ogoni activists, most famously the writer, broadcaster and politician Ken Saro-Wiwa, and a campaign of state terror that killed perhaps 2,000 Ogoni along with the destruction of villages, widespread rapes and other atrocities. Today, nearly three decades on, courts around the world are still handling lawsuits against Shell for its roles in the ecological and political violence.

Indigenous peoples globally are often at the forefront of resistance to extractive industries such as oil and gas, mining, logging, dam construction because of the ways in which their livelihoods and cultures are tied to what dominant and coloniser populations previously saw as marginal land (Indigenous Environmental Network 2021). Like the resistance of Andean Indigenous, First Nations and Native American to fossil fuel extraction and transport, the Ogoni movement was and remains far more effective than their small numbers, poverty and oppression might suggest. In fact, despite the success of white climate activists in making the global conversation about their own preferred tactics, Indigenous populations often succeed in stopping and slowing the machinery of ecological destruction in ways that media-friendly events aimed at generating soundbites and photo opportunities rarely do. (It is also worth knowing that MOSOP, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, founded by Saro-Wiwa, was an early member of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation and thus actively contributing to the global politics of indigenous resistance to ethnically dominated nation states.)

If there is hope for the future – for an end to extracting, transporting and burning oil and gas, and for the survival of biodiversity – far more of that hope is held in small places like Ogoni than we might think; and people living in ways we struggle to fully understand, speaking languages we will never learn, on the receiving end of police and military violence, state discrimination and racial hierarchies, deserve our full solidarity and support in their struggles.

MOSOP – the main organised voice of Ogoni people – is a huge achievement, and an achievement now spanning more than three decades. Organising such a large proportion of an internally diverse and externally oppressed population, holding to a political strategy of effective non-violence, surviving the oppression of the dictatorship and afterwards, mobilising international support around the execution of the “Ogoni Nine”, successfully rendering Shell “persona non grata” – unwelcome – in Ogoni since 1993, and still operating as a significant political force: not many social movements manage this. If we want to learn from one another's struggles, we should listen to the Ogoni one.

At the same time, it is important to be clear that the existence of a social movement is simultaneously an acknowledgement that it is unfinished, not yet successful. Movements exist when it is not enough simply to “raise awareness” about an issue – because that issue, like the fossil fuel industry which is slowly killing the planet we live on and more directly killing the victims of droughts and heatwaves, floods and rising seas, changing patterns of food plants, diseases and invasive animals, is firmly embedded in powerful coalitions of economic interests, political structures, cultural assumptions and ideologies. Movements’ opponents, *at any given point in time*, are more powerful or more effective than we are – but as we know from history (for example, the end of empires, dictatorships or apartheid), this can change, and those movements fade or change with success.

If we want it to change, though, our movements need to become stronger or more effective; and what we do makes a difference to this, as Saro-Wiwa constantly emphasised. Courage, determination, being in the right – these only go so far if we are not also brave in examining our activist practice, determined enough to change when we have it wrong, and serious enough about our issue that we put “how can we do this?” as a central question rather than attaching our identity to a particular way of doing things. For this reason, we need to learn from one another’s struggles: in our other movements, we need to learn from MOSOP (and vice versa).

And we need to reflect, together, on what we are good at and what we are not so good at. Participatory action research (PAR) is all about this: creating spaces where movement participants can talk together freely both about what is working and about the discontents (Cox 2024). What is not working? What approaches made sense in the past but have become problems? What are the limits of our effectiveness? What do we promise but fail to deliver? And, crucially, what can we do about all of this? PAR constructs conversations between practitioners in which we take ourselves, our skill and action, seriously – and try to improve it. This is also learning across generations: we cannot live simply “in the shadow of a saint” (Wiwa 2001) – we hope that our children can succeed where we have not, or that we can learn from our elders’ mistakes as well as their good choices, and take the challenge forward.

This is the task that Samuel Udogbo took on in his research on Ogoni. Starting from his own rich experience as a member of another Nigerian ethnic minority, the Tiv, and his role as a priest of the Spiritans, a Catholic “option for the poor” order, who supported him in this work to gain learning for development work, he spent long periods in Ogoni, getting to know people in many different social groups and contexts, holding interviews and focus groups and feeding back what he was finding. Accompanying his work from a distance and in conversation, I was constantly struck by his capacity to persevere in the face of many difficulties; his courage in reflecting on his own situation in the complex and contested realities of today’s Nigeria; and his dedication to making a better world possible.

This book is the fruit of that research, and of the following years of reflection during his development work in the Gambia in which he put his learning from Ogoni to work. The book starts with an overview of the complexity and variety of pre-colonial culture and civilization in what is today Nigeria. It situates Ogoni in the long history of European colonialism in Africa, the post-colonial states and cultures that followed independence struggles, and the popular movements that shape the continent today. It asks about the changing meaning of ethnicity and identity in Nigeria, how politics and clientelism work today, and what the possibilities are for social justice for his own vast, beautiful, overwhelming and heartbreaking country (Saro-Wiwa 2013).

*Minority Discontent in Nigeria Since Independence* situates MOSOP within the wider context of violence and non-violence in the Niger Delta’s many different ethnic groups. It explores

how the next generation, speaking a quarter of a century after the traumatic events of 1995, understand themselves, the meaning of the Ogoni struggle, its difficulties and challenges – and how these can be overcome: how liberation can be possible, for Ogoni, for Nigeria and beyond. It is a rich, heartfelt, thought-provoking and valuable read which deserves to be read widely, within Ogoni and Nigeria, but also across Africa and around the world.

One small example of its global significance lies half a world away, in the tiny, remote Erris peninsula in northwest Ireland where a handful of village communities – also based around fishing and farming – resisted a Shell pipeline project for fifteen years, facing state violence and corruption in their turn (Cox 2015). The connection to Ogoni was made by the late Sr Majella McCarron from nearby Fermanagh, who had been a development worker in Nigeria and to whom Saro-Wiwa smuggled out a series of letters from death row (Fallon et al. 2018). When she retired and returned to Ireland, she supported the Erris community and told them about the Ogoni experience. Living in “the bog”, the peatlands that cover much of Ireland but also a derogatory name for the country, they came to talk about themselves as the Bogoni. Those letters, published and edited in Ireland, made the connection for Samuel Udogbo, at that time working in a Dublin school: from Ogoni to Tivland, via Erris, small places speak to one another.

In these small places, big struggles come to life: justice for Ogoni and survival for the world are interconnected. The Ogoni have carried huge weights on their shoulders for far too long: the weight of colonisation by Britain and post-colonial domination by Nigeria’s main ethnicities; the “curse of oil” with its ecological devastation, loss of health and livelihood, political corruption and state violence – and the weight of finding themselves forced to face off against one of the world’s wealthiest corporations and a dictatorial state. That they are able to keep going, and to think about how to do so better, is an extraordinary fact; and Fr Udogbo’s engagement and support for this process is a real contribution. For the rest of us, whether in Nigeria, in Ireland or elsewhere, it is important to pay attention and to think how we can offer solidarity and what we can do where we are.

The best climate science tells us that it is not too late, even though much has been lost and much damage has been done. But it will be too late unless enough of us act – and act effectively, with intelligence and the humility to learn from the struggles of the Ogoni and others so that we can actually put our spanners into the works of destruction. The same is true for the “survival of the Ogoni people” and the many other indigenous peoples around the planet who between them contain far more diversity than do dominant cultures, far more different possible ways of being human. In 2024, we have to say that it is also true for resistance to the forces of a new authoritarianism, those who want to turn the clock back to a world where most people have no real say in deciding the future. This book helps to put the question of human liberation in the centre and to “make hope possible”, to bring a better world back within the realm of what we can do together.

## References

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