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On the Tenth Anniversary of Ken Saro–Wiwa's Exeuction by his son, Ken Wiwa

(Use the back button on your browser to return to the previous page)

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"Your dad's dead." For most of my adult life I'd lived in dread of hearing those words. Even before he became a global icon of social justice I was keenly aware that my father's death, whenever it came, would have a profound impact on my life. Years before they killed him I would imagine what it would be like to receive the news. I would rehearse scenarios in my head; how would I feel, how would I react? I never imagined, not even in my wildest calculations, that my father's death would have such an impact well beyond my personal universe.

On the day they killed him I remember walking up a hilly street in Auckland. I was 25 years old and had flown to New Zealand to try to lobby the Commonwealth Heads of State to intervene on behalf of my father, who had been sentenced to death at the end of October. At the top of the street I turned to view the sunset. Looking out over the city center below me and out into the harbor in the distance, I watched the sun sink into the sea, casting a pale orange glow against the sky. I remember the exact moment he died. I was sitting in a restaurant chatting and laughing with friends when I felt a brief palpitation in my chest – it felt like a vital connection had been ruptured inside me and I just knew. It was midnight in Auckland and midday in Nigeria and my father had just been hanged; his broken body lay in a shallow sand pit in a hut at the condemned prisoners block at Port Harcourt Prison.

His death on 10 November 1995 shook the world. John Major described the trial that sent him to the gallows as a "fraudulent trial, a bad verdict, an unjust sentence." Nelson Mandela thundered that "this heinous act by the Nigerian authorities flies in the face of appeals by the world community for a stay of execution." Bill Clinton and the Queen added their voices to the worldwide condemnation, Nigeria was suspended from the Commonwealth, countries recalled their diplomats and there were calls for economic sanctions and a boycott of Shell oil.

Sitting here in my father's old office in the busy commercial quarter of the old town of Port Harcourt on the southern coast of Nigeria is a poignant place for me as I look back on his death. I've been traveling in and out of Nigeria since the end of military rule in 1999 dividing my time between my family in Canada and my

father's business interests here, and earlier this year I took a decision to relocate my center of gravity, moving my family back to England while I concentrated on running the business here.

People are always quick to remind me that I have replicated my father's arrangements. I usually smile sheepishly and protest that there are some subtle differences. Like his office, which I was happy to dust down and renovate to suit my own tastes only to be told by his friends and supporters that they preferred the place as it was with my father's old furniture and tastes that were fashionable in about 1982! I eventually gave in to their need to remember my father but the episode was a reminder that while I might feel I have moved on, my father's legacy remains the foundation stone on which we must build the future.

Outside here the streets vibrate to the rhythms of a town that mocks its nickname as the garden city. Where this part of Port Harcourt was once the genteel colonial quarters with elegant mansions and their spacious verandahs, postmodern Africa is busy decolonizing the city with a familiar pattern of snarling traffic jams, uncollected refuse and brash expressions of architectural confusion; the whole noise and color of a city floating on a wave of oil money that creates islands of startling wealth in a sea of dehumanizing poverty.

I remember how I would often find my father staring out of these windows. "Look out there," he would say gesturing with his chin. "Out there are all the stories a writer needs." He would stare in silence with a frown on his face as if he was contemplating some regret. Looking back, I think of him sitting there trying to come to terms with what must have seemed like the impossible burden of bringing those untold stories to the attention of the world.

Writing was my father's great love – I'm never sure how many books he actually produced but he once claimed 25 including poetry anthologies, plays, memoirs, collections of essays, short stories and at least two novels. No doubt he would have loved to have been remembered as a man of letters and he had already arrogated to himself the literary ambition of forging the uncreated conscience of his people in his soul. In the end he never quite managed to publish that book but then the greatest story he ever told was to die for his people and it took his death to realize his ambition of placing his people on the world map.

If you head northeast out of Port Harcourt and into the flat, gently sloping floodplains of the Niger River Delta you will likely arrive in my community. To foreign eyes Ogoni must look like any other rural community in sub–Saharan Africa. Off the main road that runs east–west right across the 404 square miles of Ogoni territory, the tarred roads eventually give way to dirt tracks of mud red earth that take you into the villages. You could travel around the 120 or so Ogoni villages and you might not see much evidence of the oil industry that has been at the core of this story but somewhere among the dense mangroves, the palm trees and the giant irokos are the flowstations and pipelines that have pumped 900 million barrels of oil out of the area since the natural resource was discovered there in 1958.

All told, there were once over a hundred oil wells, a petrochemical complex, two oil refineries and a fertilizer plant in the region. An area which, as my father once wrote, should have been as rich as a small Gulf state, stood as an example of how Africa's rich natural resources have impoverished its people and the land they live off.

Associated natural gas has been flared into the atmosphere for over 40 years in Nigeria – pumping noxious fumes into the atmosphere. Nigeria alone accounts for 28 per cent of total gas flared in the world and the flared gas volume in Nigeria translates into the crude oil equivalent of 259,000 barrels per day.

Apart from the gas flares there are the oil spills, the matrix of pipelines that criss–cross Ogoni, sometimes over farmlands and often in close proximity to human habitation. The pipelines had been laid without impact assessment studies, without community consultation and were often laid over appropriated farmland with little or minimal compensation. Few locals dared to question the oil industry because to do so was seen to

challenge the national security of the country since the governments of Nigeria are dependent on oil revenues for foreign exchange. It takes a brave man to block the flow of oil.

Few dared to question the cozy relationship between the oil companies and Nigeria's ruling elites until my father spoke out. Born on 10 October 1941, he grew up in a traditional home in Ogoni. He saw the coming of the oil industry and as a 17–year–old began writing letters to newspapers questioning the benefits when oil was first discovered in Ogoni. For the next 30 years his commentaries on the oil nexus escalated until he became best known in Nigeria for his trenchant criticisms of the industry.

By exposing the double standards of oil companies who preached sound ecological virtues in the north while singing from an entirely different song sheet in Nigeria, my father earned powerful enemies and became a marked man. Censored by editorial boards and denied a pulpit in a country where poverty made books a luxury, my father decided to abandon his writing and took his words to the streets. In 1990 he was instrumental in forming Mosop (Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People), a grassroots organization to mobilize our community to speak out for their rights. So successful was Mosop in raising awareness among the community that, within three years of forming the organization, an estimated 300,000 of our people spilled out onto the streets of Ogoni during a protest march.

My father later insisted that if he had died that day he would have died a happy man. Instead, from that day, he was a marked man. He was arrested or detained on four separate occasions until his final arrest on 21 May 1994 following a riot in Ogoni at which four prominent chiefs were murdered. My father and hundreds of Ogoni were held for nine months without charge and when he was finally charged to court he was accused of procuring his supporters to murder the four chiefs.

When my father was finally brought before a civil disturbances tribunal the case had dubious merit even within the provisions of the Nigerian law under which he was prosecuted. International and independent observers of the trial criticized the proceedings as unfair and premeditated to deliver a miscarriage of justice and the trial became an international *cause celebre*. The sentencing and execution of my father and eight Ogoni was the day my destiny was locked into a path that I had spent my entire adult life trying to resist.

Long before Ken Saro–Wiwa became a symbol of resistance for the Ogoni, Nigerians and social justice activists around the world, he was my father. As a child I had idolized Jeje, as I called him, but when he chose to send me to private schools in England, the cultural dislocation opened up a distance between us. Although my father always wanted the best education for his seven children, he had expected that we would return home to apply our expensively trained minds to the problems at home. It was a trajectory that many Nigerians had followed, returning home to good jobs and a society that could offer a good life and a basic standard of living to exiles returning home loaded with degrees and doctorates. By the time I had sleepwalked through Tonbridge school and the University of London I had no real idea who I was, what I wanted to do with my life and where I wanted to apply that expensive education. My father was apoplectic and exasperated that his eldest son and namesake showed little or no ambition of following in his footsteps.

Whatever my misgivings about this country because of my father's murder, I knew deep down that I had no choice but to return; my father's multiple legacies, literary, business, personal and political are centered here. His life and death have anchored me to Nigeria and over the past five years of coming and going I have developed the same love–hate relationship with this country that my father had.

Life goes on but the pain never goes, especially as he remains a convicted murderer in Nigeria's statute books, despite UN resolutions to revisit the trial and the intense lobbying of the Nigerian government. The current administration is slowly coming to terms with Ken Saro–Wiwa. President Olusegun Obasanjo and the governor of my state, Dr. Peter Odili, have been true to their word in allowing my family to retrieve my father's bones for a proper burial.

The process of rehabilitating, compensating and reconciling my family to Nigeria is proceeding but it has been too slow and too long in coming. My family remains committed and open to reconciliation and cordial relations between my family and members of the families of the four Ogoni chiefs murdered in May 1994 have been restored and our wounds are starting to heal from inside.

To my mind the 10th anniversary of his death is a symbolic occasion to begin the process in earnest but while I am happy to forgive I don't want to forget – I am mindful that there are still many who are afraid of my father in this country. There is an oil company which, though it has publicly admitted making "mistakes" in Nigeria, refuses to account or atone for its role in the execution of my father.

That is why, in 1996, we filed a suit against Shell in the US under the Alien Torts Claims Act – which human rights lawyers have used to help non–US citizens file complaints against US companies in the US for torts in foreign jurisdictions. Bringing the case helped to fulfill my father's prophecy that Shell must one day have its day in court. But it is not and has never been about vengeance. On the day my father was executed I was interviewed by David Frost and when he asked me about Shell I very deliberately answered that Shell were part of the problem and must be part of the solution. I knew what I was saying and I knew the risks I was taking then. I still believe in those words. Shell remains part of the problem in the Niger Delta but my feeling is that the company mistakenly believes it can ride out the crisis and return to Ogoni one day. [Shell denies playing any part in the arrest, trail and execution of Ken Saro–Wiwa and other Ogonis. Shell says it opposed the executions and also denies causing environmental damage in the region.]

There have been many stillborn attempts to arrive at a resolution of many of the problems in Ogoni and in the Niger Delta as a whole. My family remains open to any process that is transparent, that insists as a gesture of good faith that my father's dignity is restored and the stain on his reputation as a murderer is erased from the statue books. Returning home has been a bitter sweet experience because while it has, undoubtedly been good for the soul, I remain guarded about it if only because the official stance on my father is still muted and divided and I am keenly aware that while Ken Saro–Wiwa has been widely honored abroad he has not been afforded the same status by his own country.

Plans to commemorate the 10th anniversary of his execution around the world are reminders of what a tremendous legacy I have inherited and the good name that my father left his children. His story has touched ordinary people, is immortalized in songs, and in art. My father would have been so gratified that his death inspired John Le Carre's *The Constant Gardener* and that poets from around the world have contributed to an anthology in his name. Thirty PEN centers will mark the anniversary with a performance or readings of his last play, *On the Death of Ken Saro–Wiwa*, written a few days before his execution. In the US a resolution is being deliberated in the Senate, private parties are being held around the US, in Canada there will be a celebration of music and readings by writers and musicians. In London the winner of the Living Memorial, an art competition launched to remember Ken Saro–Wiwa on the streets of London will be announced. My father will be the second African, after Nelson Mandela to be given that honor.

Part of the inspiration for the Living Memorial came from Milan Kundera's observation that "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." It has become the motto for all the Ken Saro–Wiwa commemoration events but another way of looking at Kundera's observation is the old maxim that the shortest way to the future is via the past.

I often wonder what my own children will make of their grandfather and the name and history they carry. How will they interpret his story, my own for their own future? Up until now I have tried to avoid speaking to them about my father for fear of traumatizing them. There are hardly any mementos or memorials to my father's struggle in my house but this year my children will, for the first time take part in some of those celebrations. My two boys, aged eight and five, are if nothing else, cut from the same cloth as their grandfather because they have inherited their grandfather's strong sense of right and wrong. I guess most

children their age have a strong moral center but I am conscious that they are already aware of their history. Inevitably they didn't need me to fill in the gaps in the family tree.

I am conscious that my relationship with my father, with their history and community, will have an impact on the direction of their lives. I am loathe to steer or direct them in any way for fear of repeating my father but my sense or at least my hope is that they will, like me, eventually find their own way and make an accommodation through his story. I feel that my job is to ensure that they learn the truth about my father, guide them and leave them with enough clues to give them a secure sense of the past so that they can shape their future.