6-1-1996

Ken Saro-Wiwa: Homage to a Prophet

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By Emmanuel Orobator, S.J.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! (Luke 13:34)

In the history of religion and society the lot of the prophet has always been a precarious one. Tormented by the crooked fate of his decaying generation and persecuted by the profiteers of the evil which he denounces in the light of a future whose contours he can only dimly perceive, he stands astride the tide of the times—the “already” and the “not yet”. If Jesus of Nazareth lamented the fate of prophets in his days, it was not unconnected with the fact that he was treading the blood-stained path of the ancients prophets. The prophet’s lamentation is double-sided: for his generation and for his posterity. He is chastised for the sake of both.

Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was hanged by the Nigerian military government on November 10, 1995, would hardly have qualified as a prophet in the orthodox sense of the term. He predicted no future, saw no vision, and was not the privileged recipient of any supernatural auditory experiences. But undeniably, his life bore witness to a simple vision: the survival of the Ogoni ethnic minority in Nigeria. Today he is remembered as a writer, social critic and minority and human rights activist. This description, perhaps, sketches a contemporary profile of a contemporary prophet. Only the insensitive would fail to grasp the prophetic significance and urgency of Saro-Wiwa’s vision as recounted in his last book, A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary (London: Penguin, 1995, 238 pp). Here the formidable foes pitted against him in battle are reminiscent of the classical struggles between the ancient prophets and corrupt established authorities and systems. This tragic encounter between prophetic idealism and the structures of sin is an intriguing aspect of human history. If Saro-Wiwa represented the former, the Nigerian military government and Shell Oil Corporation wear the mask of the latter.

A Month and a Day is the gripping tale of how the Nigerian military dictatorship, in collusion with Shell Oil Co., wages a systematic ecological, socioeconomic and
political war against the Ogoni minority group. The armaments of this war are crude, and Saro-Wiwa depicts them with the dexterity of the seasoned writer that he is. They range from deceit to political intimidation, brute force to divisive manoeuvre, ruthless suppression and denial of fundamental human rights. The spectacle of destruction in Ogoni limned in *A Month and a Day* is best captured as gruesome. Massive pollution of air, coastal waters and soil has turned the area of just 400 square miles into an ecological wasteland. Oil spillage and gas flaring are regular occurrences which threaten fishing and cause serious health problems. To date the balance sheet of oil drained from Ogoni is a colossal $100 billion profit for Shell and corrupt Nigerian government leaders. Only a meagre sum trickled down to Ogoni. The people lack clean running water, and electricity. What difference do pot-holed roads, poorly equipped schools, and one run-down hospital make in the lives of a population of 500,000? These appalling conditions suffice to stir up the flames of revolt and make a fiery prophet out of the most timorous of men, as they did of Saro-Wiwa.

*A Month and a Day* tells another story, that of the emergence and evolution of the *Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People* (MOSOP). The instrumentality of Saro-Wiwa in its founding, growth and subsequent international recognition and reputation is amply documented in this book. To the simple-minded, Saro-Wiwa merely grants free reign to his voracious thirst for a personal *apologia* and self-aggrandizement. But the recent history of his tragic murder belies this simplistic conception which is prevalent even in some circles in the MOSOP. The idea for which he stood, “ethnic autonomy, resource and environmental control”, called for an ultimate sacrifice. It could hardly have been otherwise, given the sinister instruments wielded by his opponents. Nor did he delude himself in thinking that the reward will be immediate and instantaneous self-gratification. Like many of his prophetic breed, the certitude of a “moral victory” to which he lays claim bears fruit only for his prosperity, not in his lifetime.

Saro-Wiwa’s life, work and tragic fate set off a series of pertinent questions. In the first place, they confront us with the reality and power of evil and sin, abroad and active, veiled as contemporary socioeconomic and political structures, armed with an array of refined gadgets of oppression, torture and manipulation. That these structures of sin abound on the face of the earth is no longer in doubt. As Saro-Wiwa himself confesses in *A Month and a Day*, “I had been detained for a month and a day, during which I had witnessed the efficacy of evil” (237).

Even more disturbing is the almost impersonal nature of these structures of sin. Their self-propagating and elusive personality conceals the collective responsibility and complicity of the oppressive classes in modern society. One could point fingers at General Sani Abacha and his bloodhounds, but the evil they do lives beyond them, making of them as hapless a victim as Saro-Wiwa. The cast of actors that stoke the flame of evil gathers the Nigerian leadership and groups it with the dubious mechanisms of multi-national corporations, such as Shell, and the international community, which looks only to its financial interest when drastic actions are called for. The result is a conspiracy of silence and loss of moral responsibility. Who is to blame? Nobody.
It is important to note that the fate of Saro-Wiwa is not an isolated one. Not every African who suffers the abuses of dictatorial regimes and the complicity of the West is a gifted writer and orator like Saro-Wiwa. The story of these lowly oppressed men and women may never be told in the media. But their faces of agony, despair and misery serve as a constant judge of our society that has besotted itself with the resources of the earth to the detriment of the poor and the marginalized minority.

In addition to the foregoing, the case of Saro-Wiwa and the Ogonis lends urgency to the contemporary concern for the integrity of creation. Today there is talk of an eco-theology. No where is this brand of theological enterprise more needed than in Africa, where unbridled, massive exploitation of the earth’s resources leads to unprecedented environmental degradation which affects the lives of millions of Africans. The task of this eco-theology, beyond raising the awareness of men and women on issues of the environment, is to address the situation as a double question of justice. That means that the issue at stake concerns, on the one hand, the just, reasonable and equitable distribution of the goods of the earth which were originally meant for all of God’s children. One the other, it has to do with our responsibility towards future generations which will inherit the kind of environment we leave them. Here the biblical saying serves as a pungent reminder of the danger of destroying the natural resources of the earth in the name of greed: The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge!

More pertinent is the question: where is the promised reign of God in a world of injustice such as that perpetrated against the Ogonis? Evidently, one can no longer look in beatific quietude for the automatic descent of the Kingdom of God from the skies. Faced with an injustice as formidable as that in Ogoni, personal engagement and pro-active solidarity in resisting the reign of evil become the yardstick for measuring the credibility and relevance of our contemporary theologies. Saro-Wiwa was no theologian. But his vision of a nation that treats its weakest and most vulnerable members with justice and equity squares well with the theologians’ vision of the Kingdom of God. It is a Kingdom that demands justice and obedience rather than sacrifices and burnt offerings.

Saro-Wiwa died for a dream. The shocking reality of his death should jolt African theologians and Christians out of their slumber of indifference and quietistic piety and challenge them to practice an ardent faith that does justice in all spheres of human existence.

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