

Review: Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil in the Niger Delta

By Ike Okanta and Oronton Douglas

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Ike Okanta & Oronton Douglas. *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil in the Niger Delta*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. 2001. 268 pp. ISBN 1-57805-046-4 (cloth). US\$24.00

Okanta and Douglas provide a vivid and relentless account of human tragedy since oil was discovered in the Niger Delta in 1956. Foreign manipulation and exploitation of the Delta has always been a central fact of life. However, the ferocity of the assault on both the people and the ecology of the Delta in the wake of nearly unrestrained oil development is unprecedented. While Shell is not the only oil company in the Delta, it has played a unique role in the country's oil development, having nearly exclusive concession over the Delta and accounting for half of the government's revenue. Oil is not the Delta's only natural resource. The Niger Delta is an area of tremendous biodiversity and vitally significant ecosystems. The impact of oil production, logging and hunting, unsustainable farming practices, and rapid population growth is resulting, however, in the slow death of this ecological heritage.

Despite the wealth of natural resources, little of the revenue generated in the Delta returns in the form of social and economic development. After the oil boom in the seventies, the region has witnessed growing impoverishment and declining GNP per capita, made worse by International Monetary Fund led "structural adjustment" policies imposed in the mid-eighties. As the authors note, Nigerian political and economic realities reflect its "dependent, peripheral capitalist structure" (p. 28) inherited from the British but exacerbated by a nearly exclusive dependence on oil exports.

By 1990, growing poverty and ecological destruction within the Delta created the ferment for social reform. While the movement had many different levels, the lighting rod organization came to be the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), founded by Ken Saro-Wiwa. The military junta of General Babangida attempted to thwart this movement through the appearance of social reform and the promise to divert more oil profits to the Niger Delta. These efforts were largely palliative. In 1993, 300,000 Ogoni took to the streets to protest Shell's "ecological warfare and the government's continued denial of the Ogoni right to self-determination" (p. 119). In the months following, the military junta unleashed a systematic

and brutal campaign of violence and massacre against the Ogoni.

This part of the story of the Niger Delta-ecological disaster, genocide, and the strategic alliance of the Nigerian military junta and Shell oil, is relatively well known. What is not as well known, but fastidiously documented by the authors, is Shell's role in the country's genocidal conflicts, including the "judicial murder" of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the rest of the Ogoni Nine by the Nigerian military in 1995. The second author, O. Douglas, was in fact a member of Ken Saro-Wiwa's legal team. The book provides insight into the backroom machinations between the government and Shell that anyone should find shocking. While the authors are never dispassionate in their writing, they support their arguments throughout with available evidence and make every effort to preserve the integrity and truthfulness of their account.

The efforts of MOSOP and the aftermath of Ken Saro-Wiwa's death have raised the stakes for Shell and the Nigerian government. Environmental and human rights are on the table in Nigeria; whether they are ever realized depends on the shape of "globalization" to come. As the authors note, the people and ecology of the Delta are dying, a fact that must be significant for Nigeria and for the world. Recommended for all libraries.

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