



Everywhere You Go, Can You be Sure of Shell?

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I used to deeply love Shell. That probably seems odd from someone who has never bought a pint of petrol in her life. As a child I loved the Shell Building on the South Bank (before they ruined it with Everest glazing windows) and the spiral sculpture outside it. We had the Shell Guide to Britain at home and with Shell I perused the geography of the 1950s. It was the artists they used that I loved - John Piper, Graham Sutherland, Paul Nash. They were Neo Romantics who were using the British landscape to express the spirit of place and soul of the people. Shell produced books to encourage motorised travel and at a serendipitous point the vision of the artists coincided with the commercial direction of the oil company. Oil was sold through marketing the spirit of place. As I grew up I had no need to go into petrol stations but the affection for Shell grew subconsciously with my art education.

Two years ago I was invited to design a memorial for Ken Saro-Wiwa the Nigerian writer who had campaigned for justice for his people, the Ogoni, whose lands and lives had been horribly damaged by the oil extraction activities of Shell over the previous 50 years. He was hung by the Nigerian government with the collusion of Shell. I had been to the demonstrations calling for the freeing of Saro-Wiwa in November 1995. However it was only when I sat down and started thinking about how I would capture Saro-Wiwa's struggle visually that it hit me – it was Shell of my childhood that we were talking about. Somehow the brutal



corporation and the tender nostalgia had occupied different spaces in my brain. I realised that I had been co-opted, just as those painters of the 1950s had been.



REMEMBER SARO-WIWA

Photo: Stakeholder Democracy Network

This is the picture that did it. This is the Niger Delta today. Looking at it triggered a visual memory.



Source: Paul Nash², *The Menin Road*, 1919. Oil on canvas. 1828 mm x 3175 mm. IWM ART 2242, Imperial War Museum. Copyright Status: IWM reproduction right.

² Site for the Paul Nash Rye poster and his other work for Shell <http://tinyurl.com/d33h2s>

And it was this – Paul Nash’s great painting that hangs in the Imperial War Museum – The Menin Road – the landscape of the First World War. The Niger landscape has been created by the Shell corporation. The landscape of Northern France is a record of the destruction of the human spirit. Shell had created an armageddon.

When Shell was producing Shell Guides to Britain in the 1950s, there were little oil wells in the English countryside whose single nodding donkeys blended into to English rural scene, while prospecting in Nigeria was slicing remorselessly through the landscape. It was imagery that opened my eyes and consciousness to the co-opting of art by Shell to mask its environmentally destructive activities. Obviously the mask is now crumbling but the powerful effect of Shell's use of artists, such as the Wildlife Photographer of the year exhibition or the New Orleans Jazz Festival or Imperial College's Charity Fashion show, is still deeply submerged in our cultural consciousnesses. So I decided to return to that first idea that Shell had had of linking oil to a movement concerned with the spirit of the land. And just as Shell had commissioned powerful posters of the British Isles, I designed this series of posters to commemorate Saro-Wiwa’s life and murder. Just as humans have understood water and trees to have spirits, so oil seems to have its own spirit and in this context it has become demonic. In the following work I tried to draw this demonic spirit out from behind the scallop shell.

As you look at the following pictures I invite you to think about how Shell as a monstrous corporation has abused a population with 24 hour a day oil flaring, imagine a life with no darkness. Think of fire and water and earth struggling against one another.

Think of the mangrove as an anonymous everyman, the mangrove as a frontline species adapting to its environment, creating its own land and a vital barrier to the destructive force of the sea, creating a delicate eco system. The mangroves have been severed, and the people have been cut down.

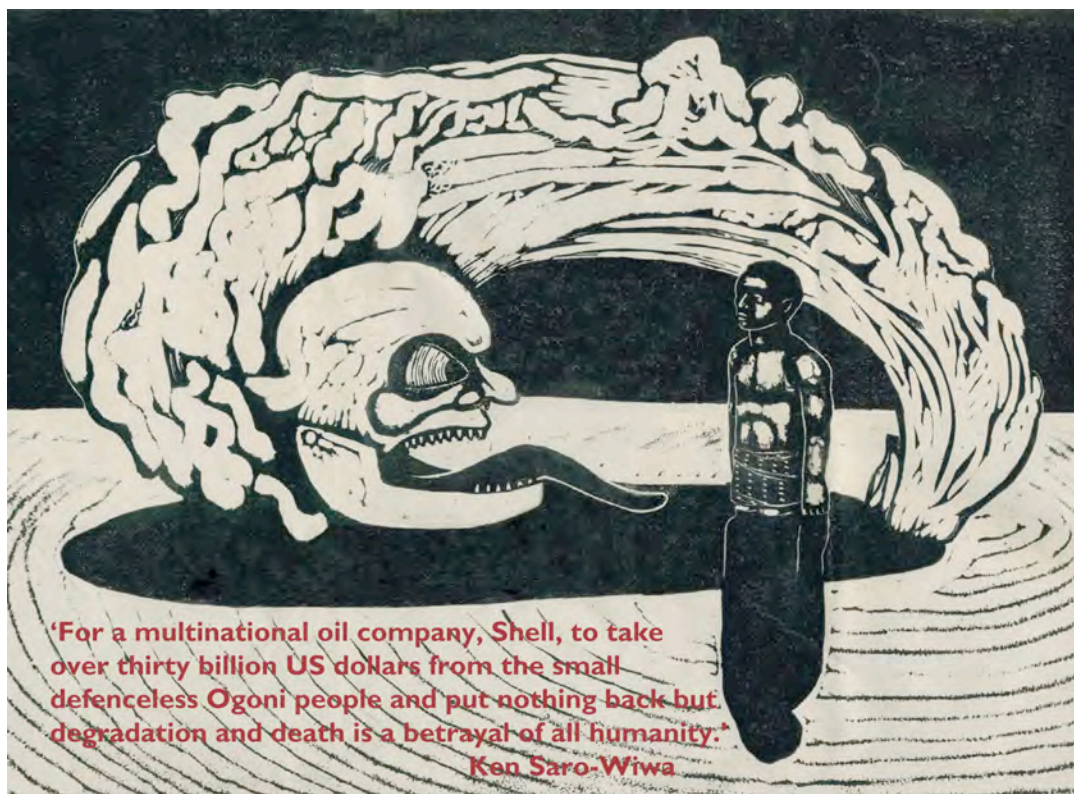
Consider how the delta python which traditionally made its home where ever it fancied has become a serpentine oil-pipe coursing its way over the countryside, taking ownership of the land it crosses, a travesty of the regal snake

How Saro-Wiwa was inspired by the nonviolent philosophy of Martin Luther King and how he determined to bring the power of the African American civil rights movement back to Africa. And how he and eight comrades were executed in an attempt to crush the justice movement.

And to remember, on reading his words, to go to the library and discover what a great and talented novelist, script writer and poet Saro-Wiwa was.

Just as Shell used art to shape the public feelings about a company and a natural resource, so artists can impact on the corporations by offering another narrative of land and politics. In the future the visual art associated with Shell will still consist of the Shell Guides, but it is the responsibility of artists and geographers to add another reality of Shell to the public consciousness – one that contains images of slaughtered trees, of poisoned land and the dignity and resistance of its victims.

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“Don’t worry, at least you know you’re in the hands of the police. You’re safe.”

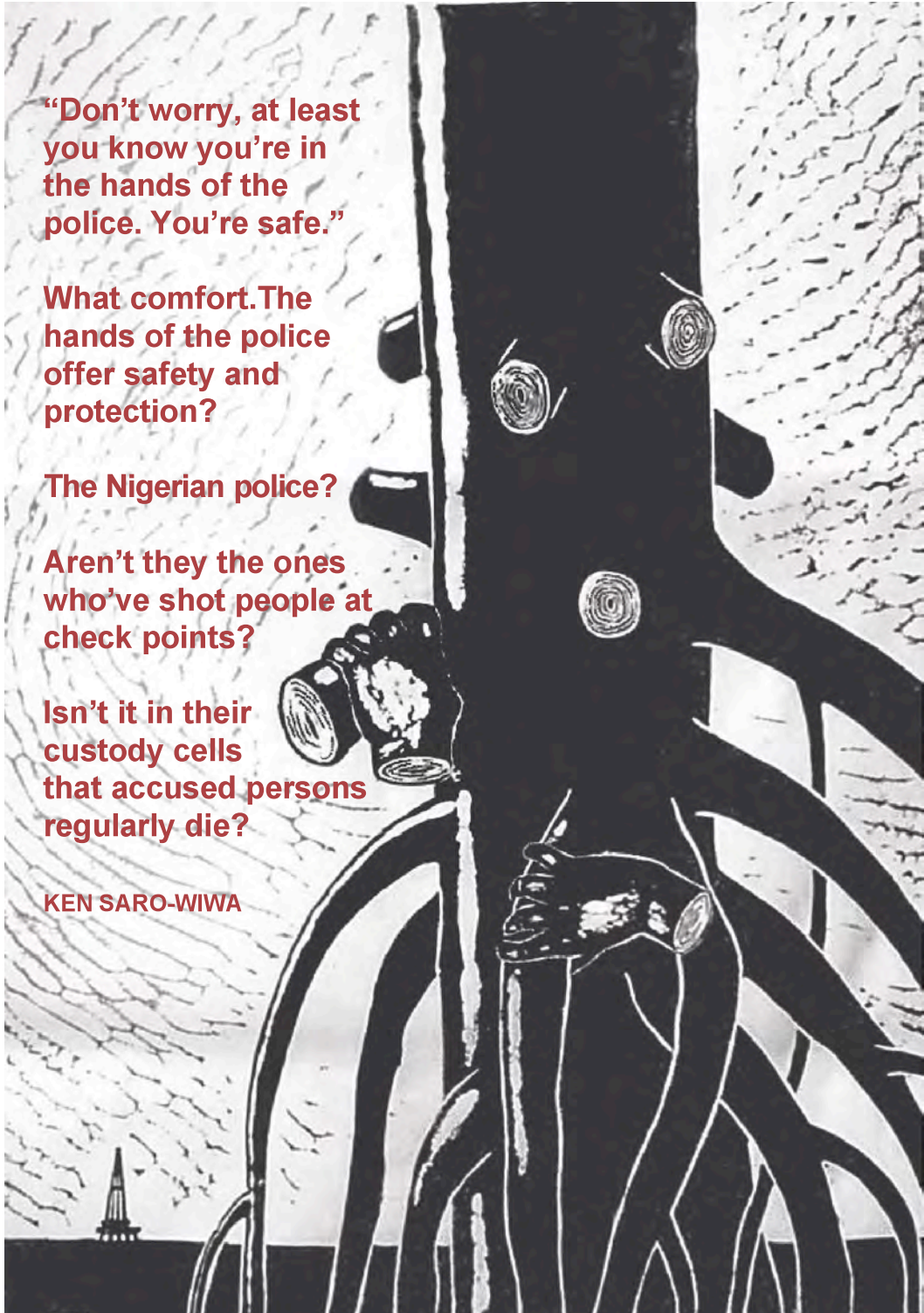
What comfort. The hands of the police offer safety and protection?

The Nigerian police?

Aren’t they the ones who’ve shot people at check points?

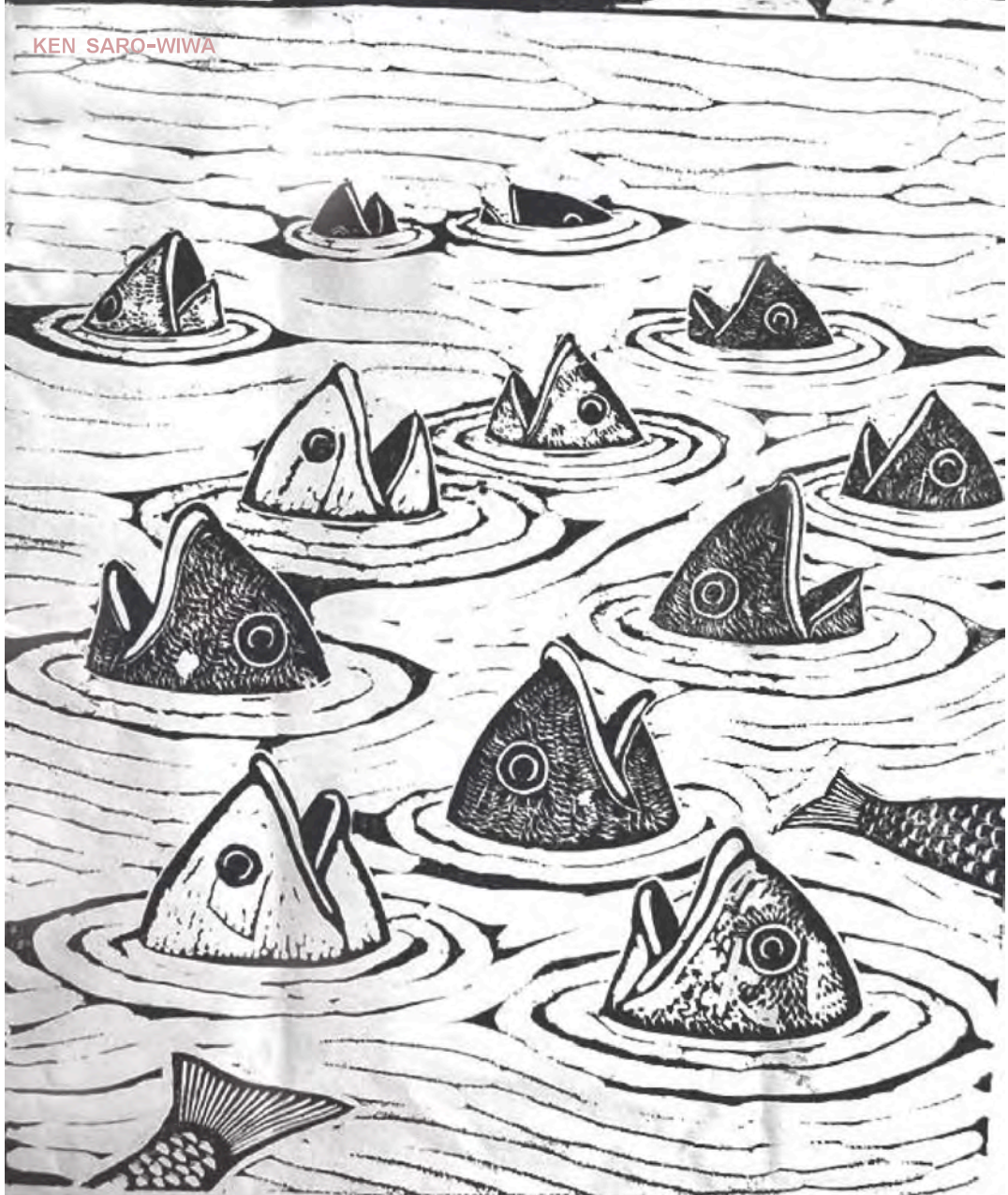
Isn’t it in their custody cells that accused persons regularly die?

KEN SARO-WIWA



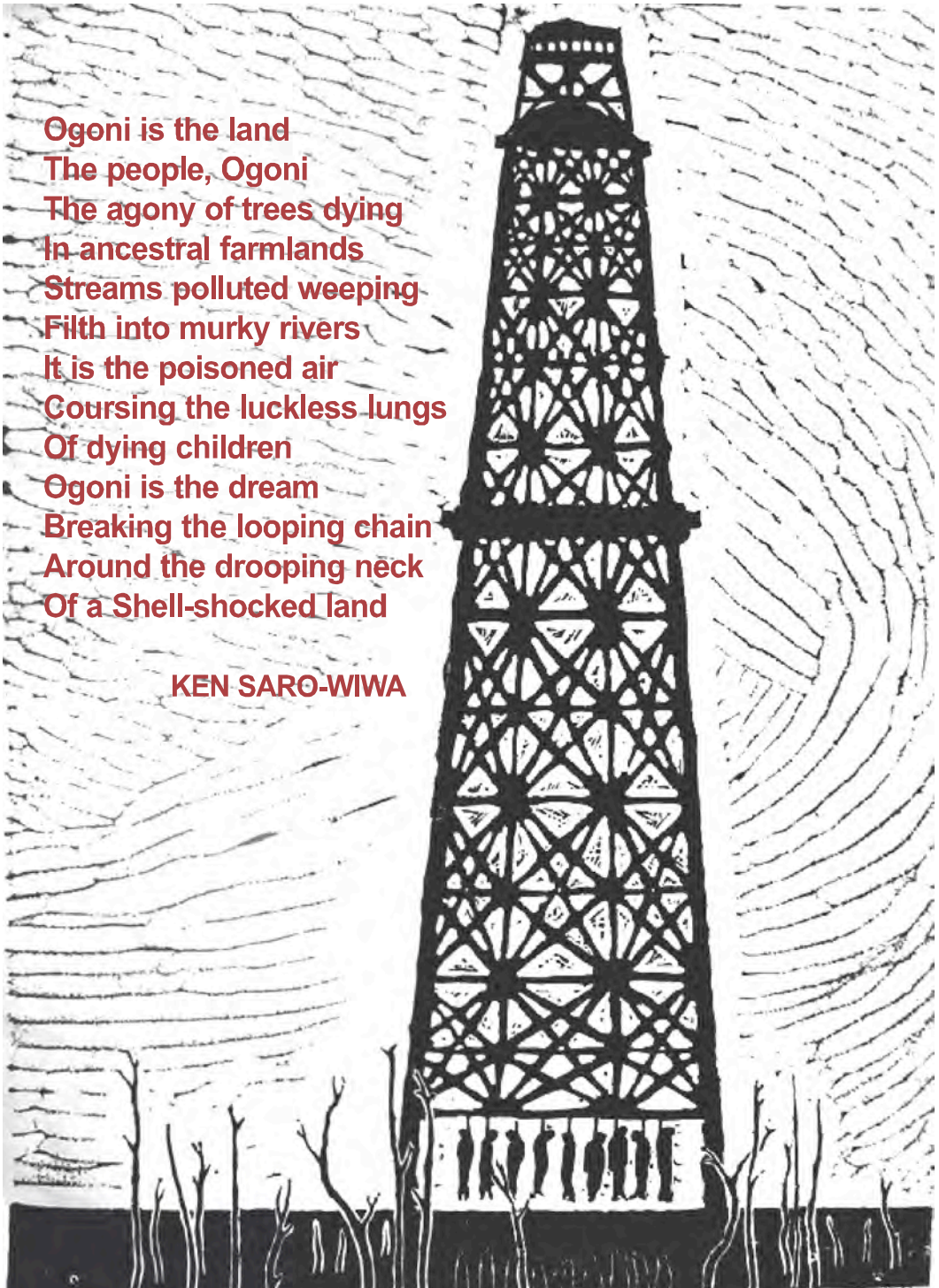
**“The flares of Shell are the flames of Hell
We bask below their light
Nought for us to serve the blight,
Of cursed neglect and cursed Shell”**

KEN SARO-WIWA



Ogoni is the land
The people, Ogoni
The agony of trees dying
In ancestral farmlands
Streams polluted weeping
Filth into murky rivers
It is the poisoned air
Coursing the luckless lungs
Of dying children
Ogoni is the dream
Breaking the looping chain
Around the drooping neck
Of a Shell-shocked land

KEN SARO-WIWA



'Nonviolent struggle offers weak people the strength which otherwise they would not have. The spirit becomes important, and no gun can silence that.'

KEN SARO-WIWA

