

When wealth becomes a curse

Nigeria, the oil vampires

Shell, Mobil, Chevron, Texaco, Elf, Total and Agip: the black gold multinational companies are owner of the only real resource of the most populous African country. A resource shared with Nigerian federal government, until a few months ago dominated by a military caste of greedy and ruthless people. With the new President Obasanjo, Nigeria hopes to emerge from its "incredible nightmare"

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The area around Port Harcourt seems to be the set of a film like "Mad Max" of Mel Gibson. Warriors and petrol, oil wells and jungle, mangroves and flaming gases: chemistry and nature live together, the air impregnated with carbon monoxide.

The mad tangle of cars, trucks and motorcycles winds on the long strip of asphalt: on the sides, on the dusty edges of the road, behind the rusty signs and wooden shacks, the outsiders. Still as always, looking at the progress that passes by and gives them the leftovers, the crumbs of the great energy orgy: tires, cans, carcasses of cars, concrete blocks, steel cables.

The oil gatherers recycle all waste materials, making human cities that, otherwise, are trash cans, making alive the sad culture of the internal combustion engine, which here shows its decline, with no pretense.

Intersections, junctions, roundabouts are the meeting point of Africa's version of the New Millennium: monstrous traffic jams and men on the pavement to sell everything, from watches to peanuts, from fried bananas to electronic games. Mothers with children asking for a flying mercy, paraplegics who come to the window, they run when the traffic becomes faster, they picked up money thrown on the road, they dribble the threatening bumpers and arrogant motorcycles. Chaos. In the dust, in the sticky humidity, breathing for hours black exhaust emissions of four-wheeled monsters. All day, every day, until night falls, and Nigerian cities switch off. The lighting is practically non-existent. At night, the noise of generators accompanies the fear of those who want to have at least a little light. The country that exports more oil in Africa, a leading global manufacturer, even fails to illuminate its major cities, including Lagos. For the vast majority of the people of Niger River delta, the area where oil is concentrated, electricity remains a dream. But the light always shines on the establishment of the oil companies, and the residences of their employees, which look luxury barracks, modern "Fort Apache" in this "tropical version of Wild West", with whites wearing boots playing the role of black gold hunters, three rival ethnic groups playing the role of Indians, and a military administrator in the unenviable position of sheriff "(Joelle Stolz, French journalist, "Le Monde Diplomatique").

The "rival ethnic groups" are really at least a dozen of the 200 that make up Nigerian federation. Divided by language, customs, sometimes by religion, but above all by the maneuvers of those who control power, ie military, politicians and businessmen linked to the army, oil companies: the oil vampires, which share two million daily barrels of crude oil.

In the official version, the army is the guarantor of the unity of a nation of over 110 million people who would otherwise be unmanageable, and the oil companies the pillar of economic development of Nigeria according to the "trade, not aid" reiterated by Clinton in his last (and only) trip to Africa. The problems would derive mainly from selfishness of the dominant ethnic groups (ie, in hierarchical order, the Hausa-Fulani north, the Yoruba west and Igbo east), and then, ultimately, from ancient and never dormant virus of African tribalism.

It is a vision that is useful especially for multinational oil companies operating in Nigeria (Shell, Mobil, Chevron, Texaco, Elf, Total, Agip), but that is often accepted by the inhabitants of the Delta, convinced that money from their oil "go north", making rich "the ones who are in Abuja", the federal capital that was established in 1991.

But North is as poor as South, like everyone in Nigeria. Gasoline is scarce (!) everywhere, just like

electricity, running water, schools, hospitals, work.

Of course, the injustice in the Delta reached grotesque levels, because they add insult of not seeing proceeds of the oil in their land, to the injury of having an increasingly sterile soil, poisoned water, polluted air and a traditional society which, upset in its balance, may tear in a masochistic struggle to hoard the crumbs of wealth and power wisely granted by federal satraps or by oil companies, "victims" of so-called "ecoterrorism", a pervasive phenomenon in last fifteen years. Ten, hundred, thousand alleged Robin Hoods kidnap engineers of the oil companies to ask for ransom, or sabotage the oil pipelines and then to demand compensation for environmental damage. A real suicide, typical of those who have been driven to desperation, not much different from the accidental one of the hundreds and hundreds of "oil gatherers" who burnt alive in the immense pile of Jesse (October 17, 1998, explosion of a pipeline, more than thousand deaths). Shell, which alone extracts about half of Nigerian crude oil (and it is part of a joint venture with NNPC, Nigerian state company, Elf and Agip) states an average of 221 oil spillages per years, which drain into the swamps of Delta seven thousand barrels of black poison. The causes? For 21 percent, the normal extracting activities, 50 per cent, the deterioration of structures and 28 percent the sabotage. The local Robin Hoods, the "eco-terrorists", thus cause only a portion of "normal" pollution.

The struggle of peoples of the oil region is not only blind desperation, however, violent claim.

The real change born in people's consciousness, and it needs ideas and words, and a voice that knows how to express them.

That voice was born in Ogoni ethnic group, one of the smallest one (only 500 thousand people) in Delta region, and it was that of a brilliant writer who, on the threshold of his fifty, decided to devote his life to his people, who could become an example for all Nigerian oppressed people.

He could live comfortably in his privileges, Ken Saro Wiwa, given the success of the television series "Basi & Co." he was the author, one of the most-watched programs in Africa.

Ken Saro-Wiwa told the stories of ordinary madness of Basi, a Nigerian boy, who, along with his friends, invents a thousand ways, mostly fraudulent, to make ends meet. It always went wrong, the moral message was clear: don't adapt to the general trend, don't duplicate the squalor of our ignoble ruling classes. By dint of getting by, by dint of considering as normal corruption and incompetence combined with greed, a nation dies.

But Nigeria of the last is not a nation of thieves, murderers and whores, as, regardless of their skin, the rich ruling class and their Western partners, closed in the paranoia of their bad conscience, tend to think. Nigeria of the last, always tempted by brutalization, demonstrates uncommon kindness, and even excessive patience. Ken Saro Wiwa knew it, and became the "voice of the voiceless", choosing non-violent resistance.

Nothing to do with the tragicomic attempt of Major Isaac Boro, who in 1966 wanted to "free Ijaws" with his men of the "Delta Volunteer Force", and proclaimed an ephemeral "Republic of Niger Delta" which lasted 12 days.

It was the advance of the catastrophic attempt at secession of Igbo of East, the most Catholic region of Nigeria, under the leadership of Colonel Ojukwu, backed by France and opposed by the British who created Nigeria in order to be able to better control.

The new state, proclaimed in 1967, was called Biafra. A name that has remained in collective memory as a symbol of tragedy.

Post-colonial Africa for the first time entered the world of media, getting the apocalyptic image that it has not yet been able to shake off: war and hunger, violence and misery.

One million dead people in Biafra war, which ended in 1970. No sane Nigerian will talk again about secession.

The new watchword is autonomy, indeed, "ethnic autonomy, control of resources and environment," according to the definition of Ken Saro Wiwa. On August 26, 1990, the "Ogoni Bill of Rights" is approved, the manifesto of the new indigenous consciousness, which is organized in MOSOP, the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People.

The Nineties began in Nigeria in the sign of repression, but they closed with a glimmer of hope. The

turning point came in three basic stages: the presidential elections of 1993; the arrest, the trial and the hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa in 1995; the death of General Sani Abacha in 1998. In 1993, after ten years of military dictatorship, General Ibrahim Babangida holds the promise to return the government to civilians. It would have been a smooth transition for the army, as the two competing parties (the Social Democratic Party and the Republican National Convention) were both created by the army, and as Moshood Abiola, the leader of the opposition Social Democratic Party, was a billionaire linked to the regime, with which had done business for years in the telecommunications sector.

This is why Ken Saro Wiwa and the MOSOP decide to boycott the elections. Only 30 percent of voters went to the polls. Abiola wins hands down: despite all the compromises, it was a democratic change. But soldiers can not accept this: they delete the elections and arrest Abiola, while Babangida is replaced by General Sani Abacha, his heir apparent. The regime was beginning to show its most infamous face.

Since 1993, following the dramatic cancellation of the elections, the more and more embarrassed diplomatic ballet of the "international community" begins, ie Great Britain and the United States. For the moment, they threaten sanctions, which consist of military supplies embargo. Repression is always hard, Amnesty International vigorously denounce political persecution, especially against Ogoni and their leader, Ken Saro Wiwa, who was arrested four times, the most recent one, on (absurd) charges to be the instigator of the murder of four leaders of his own ethnic group considered close to the federal government.

In October 1995, after a farcical trial, Ken Saro Wiwa and eight other MOSOP activists were sentenced to death. The international community is mobilized (?) to obtain a pardon: President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, tries till the end to find a diplomatic solution, drawing criticism of Nigerian opposition that calls for a tougher line against Abacha.

On 10 November 1995 Ken Saro-Wiwa and his companions were hanged in the federal prison in Port Harcourt, a stone's throw from the bases of oil companies.

Abacha has bitten off more than he can chew: Nigeria is immediately suspended from the Commonwealth and threatened with expulsion "if democracy is not restored within two years". But when Nelson Mandela calls for oil embargo on Nigeria, the United States and Great Britain refuse point-blank. The oil is untouchable.

For Nigerian opposition is a dark night. As a gesture of retaliation against Mandela, Abacha prevents the participation of Nigeria, the strongest team on the continent, to the Africa Cup of Nations that takes place in South Africa in early 1996.

Nigerian dictator is increasingly obsessed with power. Locked in his bunker villa in Aso Rock, surrounded by concubines and *fetichours* (traditional African healer priests) he goes from a purge of military leaders to another, constantly accused of plotting against him. Abiola's wife is murdered by a group of killers. The writer Wole Soyinka, Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, already in exile, is convicted of some bombing. The future President Olesgun Obasanjo, a general who was head of state in 1976 and had returned power to civilians, goes into jail. The two years given by Commonwealth passed by without any result.

For oil companies, business as usual. Only Canada is dissociated from the "waiting" line of the Commonwealth, which confirms the words of Ken Saro-Wiwa: "The stability seems to be the credo of these gentlemen, stability to ensure continuing economic cooperation, which means exploitation".

Nigeria slowly sinks into an abyss of corruption. While the country begins to suffer from an unprecedented shortage of fuel, Abacha and his (very large) entourage of clients and emulators plundered the state assets, accumulating an appalling wealth, and the foreign debt continues to increase (Nigeria is the Sub-Saharan Africa country with the greatest financial exposure). In this dark scenario of despair, Nigerian issue, now in the process of forgetting, returns on media for the visit of John Paul II in March 1998.

The official reason is the beatification of a priest, the Rev. Tamsi, who lived after the war, but the political message is clear and strong, in line with that of Nigerian bishops: the nation needs justice and freedom. The pope gives a list of 60 political prisoners to be released, but Abacha did not bat an eyelid.

In the popular imagination, the arrogance of the dictator against the pope is a too big challenge to divine justice: a few weeks later, Abacha dies mysteriously in his residence.

The more or less official version says that he was seized by a heart attack due to sexual fatigue and immoderate use of Viagra.

For some Africans, the Providence would be helped by a little poison.

The point is that, with the end of Abacha, Nigeria regains hope. His successor, General Abubakar, establishes a plan to restore civilian rule through free elections, scheduled for February 1999. The most important candidate, Abiola, the winner of the elections of 1993, dies in prison the day before his release. American doctors who assisted him speak of death by natural causes, but the suspicion of a political murder is not completely dissipated.

Nigeria goes into a long period of transition, which is still in progress, even after the inauguration of Obasanjo in power, elected by a vote held regularly in substance, but which has seen serious fraud and a strong turnout in South East (areas of Igbo and oil).

Many opposition leaders do not believe that a former soldier can bring radical renewal which Nigeria desperately needs.

Since independence in 1960, but you can tell from the start extracting oil in 1958, the institutional changes have followed two parallel paths: the number of states within the federation (from the initial four to 12 after Biafra war, to the current 36) increased and the share of oil revenues allocated to investments in community development and the environment decreased: from starting 50 percent to 45 percent in 1970, 20 percent in 1975, two percent in 1982, 1,5 percent in 1984 and then, in 1992, three percent, which is the current share.

The new President Obasanjo will bring it to 13 percent, trying to rearrange the disastrous federal budget, to stem the rampant corruption, and drastically reduce the role of the soldiers. His first steps are promising: you can experience an atmosphere of greater freedom, the asphyxiating controls at airports and checkpoints on the roads are gone.

But tensions in Delta area are stronger than ever. Ijaws, the largest ethnic group in the region (seven million people), process the "Kaiama Declaration", which incorporates the principles expressed in "Ogoni Bill of Rights", even if the no violent option is much less pronounced, and Ijaws are reputed to be formidable warriors.

Despite the dramatic events of the nineties, the attitude of oil companies has not changed one iota. Agip Operators in Port Harcourt are so kind as reticent, definitely not used to journalists.

Italian company's position is clear: "Nigeria Agip Oil Company has always maintained excellent relationships with the communities living in areas of its operations. In the field of infrastructure and services it has made several access roads to several towns and villages, and provided water, electricity and other basic necessities".

It looks like the copy of Shell answer to Ken Saro-Wiwa, in 1993: "The Shell Petroleum Development Company has a program of continuous improvement in environmental services and benefits, and assistance to communities in infrastructure, health, agriculture and education". In

short, "all is for the best in best of all possible worlds" (Voltaire, "Candide"). If there are problems "Shell believes that they are Nigerians problems". Just as Agip today: tensions in the states of Bayelsa and Rivers? "Most ethnic conflicts emerged already during the pre-colonial age". The version of the oil vampires is the winner. Who would dare to criticize the brilliant successes of Agip, or even Shell, the official sponsor of the beloved Ferrari, to defend the interests of unknown populations of an African country? The outcast of the energy orgy should, to solve the "internal problems", trust Providence, which already freed them from a ruthless dictator. But as argued by Wole Soyinka, the great Nigerian writer: "If there was divine intervention in this story, it is just what it should be, because the lesson we have learned since our childhood is: Heaven helps only those who help themselves".

Cesare Sangalli

Interview with Chief Saro Wiwa

In the name of the father

In the twilight of his house, watched by women and children of his family, an old African chief tells his pain. Long pauses, the silences are as important as words, arriving bright, clear, safe, in a good English. But the look strikes, a look where the bitterness for the loss of his eldest son, killed by the most extreme injustice, is lost already waiting for eternity. Chief Saro-Wiwa is a 92 years old Abraham, he saw the sacrifice of Isaac, and he can not expect miracles from this life, but only a good day to die.

How was Ken Saro Wiwa as a child?

- He was a very intelligent child. He went to school at 5, and he was always one of the best. He was the first of my six children: after him there were two females and three males then.

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When did he begin his work as a writer?

- During the years of high school. He began to distinguish himself in 1972, after the Civil War. He wrote in his office in Port Harcourt. He soon became president of Nigerian authors.

How did he develop his political consciousness?

- Ken saw the conditions of his people, and felt pity on his soul. He started his fight to point his people in the right direction, to ask the government to do something. He did not it for profit, he was already well known abroad, but only to defend the rights of Ogonis.

What was your reaction when you heard of your son's project?

- When Ken told me his intentions, before his fight, I told him that if God had given him this mission, I would not have stopped him. Lord sent him to free Ogoni, as he had sent Moses to free Jews from slavery in Egypt.

Are there organizations that have helped you in recent years?

- No, I have received no help. For this reason I ask the human rights organizations: what are you doing? Because if you do nothing means that what Nigerian government did was right.

- I always asked to all people I could talk with: is it a crime if a man asks his rights? (Repeats the question several times, author's note). They also came to ask me to forgive, they offered me money. I said no, I'm not Judas, it would be like killing my son back for thirty pieces of silver ...

What has changed in Nigeria after the death of Ken?

- Nothing has changed. Ogoni people have written their "Bill of Rights" (he asks his relatives to go and pick up a copy). Read here ... None of these requests has been heard. The companies continue to exploit the oil, build new pipelines. We were deceived. We have neither weaponry nor ammunition, we are in God's hands.

Do you believe that with President Obasanjo, things will be different?

- I am a 92 years old man. In my experience, I do not think ...

Chief Saro-Wiwa is interrupted. In his silence, plenty of emotion. No tears, just a twinkle of the eyes, hurt by memories. The interview is over. Farewell, old warrior.

Cesare Sangalli