CONVERSATION · NYBALF 2026

The Burning Ground: Noo Saro-Wiwa in Conversation with Alexis Okeowo

Noo Saro-Wiwa in conversation with Alexis Okeowo

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Thirty years after her father, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and eight of his colleagues were executed by Nigeria's military government, Noo Saro-Wiwa returned to the Niger Delta to write The Burning Ground. In conversation with Alexis Okeowo, she places the Delta in the world economy, from the slave trade and the palm oil that fed Britain's industrial revolution to the crude that supplied cheap energy to the West, and describes a wetland of creeks, mangroves and emerald water that decades of spills have made hard to recognise.

Saro-Wiwa follows the arrival of the oil companies under military rule, the divisions created when one community received benefits and the next did not, and how her father's peaceful campaign, answered with execution, taught a generation that only violence would be heard. She discusses the amnesty that turned former militants into chiefs and security contractors, illegal refining, the unrecognised work of women as peacekeepers and farmers, the "ecological amnesia" of children who have never seen fireflies, Shell's exit and the UNEP-led cleanup, and her own work connecting solar projects with Delta communities. Audience questions turn to solar power in practice, memories of her father, the land before oil, the oil economy and conservation.

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Why the Niger Delta, thirty years on

ALEXIS OKEOWO 0:03

Well, I'm so happy to be in conversation with you today. You know, writing about in your book where you write about the Niger Delta, which is seen, I think, from the outside as such an extreme place, a place of crisis, a place of environmental emergency. I wondered what prompted you to write about this place that you have multiple, sort of, I think, relationships to. And how did you want to approach it?

NOO SARO-WIWA 0:36

First of all, thank you all for coming. I appreciate it. So, yeah, it was it's been 30 years since my father and his eight colleagues were murdered by the Nigerian military dictatorship. So I wanted to write a book 30 years on that really just sort of traced the events and how the landscape has changed socially, environmentally, economically since then. And for me, it's the combination of a personal journey. I think I was quite disengaged as a child from the issues there. You're just going back as a kid in the summer vacation and... not really understanding just how beautiful the Niger Delta is or was and is only as I've gotten older that I really started to appreciate the natural environment as well as the political.

But I also just think that the Niger Delta is a real cautionary tale about how oil and corruption can really change a society in ways that you can't predict. You know, my father's death... change the course of events in ways that no one could ever have predicted. And I think that is one of the reasons why we need to... move away from oil and turn towards green energy. It's not just about climate change, it's about people's rights and it's about leadership, who gets to run society and the economy and the source of power that you choose, whether it's oil or solar power, can really have a huge effect in so many aspects of society. And so I wanted to raise that issue in this book.

2:40

Slave trade, palm oil and crude

ALEXIS OKEOWO 2:41

One thing I really liked about your book is how you set the stage of what this place is and its importance. As you said, it's a quarter of Nigeria's population. It's also historically a place where people were trafficked for the slave trade. You know, and also, as you said, the environment, the fact that there's this vanishing wildlife, chimps, gorillas, elephants, later you described the book, seeing a few pristine areas. Can you talk a little about that? Because I never usually see that in writing about the Delta.

NOO SARO-WIWA 3:22

Yeah, the Niger Delta, I just think, is one of the most unsung regions of the world. It's... it doesn't get talked about enough. It's... So many slaves came from the Niger Delta and went over to the Americas. The palm oil that we grow was, taken by the British and it was used to power the industrial revolution. And the oil that we have now, the crude oil, is... The Americans buy a lot of it and it's responsible for... We've provided relatively cheap energy for the Western world. And so, the Niger Delta has had a huge economic importance, significance in the world. But it's just been so neglected and treated. It's just been ignored. People don't really understand how much it has contributed to the modern capitalist economy.

But it's also one of the most beautiful natural areas in the world. And it took me a very long time to recognize that because so much of it has become inaccessible. But it's the third largest eco-wetland system in the world. It's the Niger River. It's the delta of the Niger River, which rises in Mali and travels through maybe seven countries in West Africa before arriving at the delta. So you've got millions of little water channels and little creeks. And when it hasn't been polluted, it's actually really stunning. You just go in a canoe and you're drifting along these emerald waters. You're fringed by palm trees and hardwoods and there are exotic birds and alligators and monkeys in the trees and just so much wildlife.

It's just incredible. And in any other part of the world, tourists pay good money to go to these places. But, we're just sort of neglecting the beauty that we have and we've decided that oil is where the richness lies. And that environment has been... You know every year just constantly decimated and it took me a long time to really appreciate The natural beauty that we have and it was through writing this book that I was able to see a bit more of that and appreciate it even more.

6:11

Oil companies, the military and the land

ALEXIS OKEOWO 6:12

Right, and so as you document the curse of this place was that it is on millions of barrels of oil. British, American, you name it, oil companies came in, started extracting. And then can you kind of describe how the corruption of these companies and well, really the corruption of their relationship with an Nigerian government and how they're allowed to operate began to seep into the life of ordinary people who live in the Delta and how this business of extraction became just the business?

NOO SARO-WIWA 6:51

Yeah, it all starts with that sort of fundamental, the law of eminent domain, which is where a government can appropriate land, supposedly for the good of the people, because the land has a special resource, and in our case, oil. And so people were living in villages and farming land that was just suddenly not theirs anymore. And so, the government was in charge. And then you've got these oil companies, and we all know that businesses only behave when they're held to account by the governments. But of course, because Nigeria was run by military dictators who didn't care. And so oil companies were allowed to just operate with impunity and they didn't maintain their infrastructure in the way that they do in the West.

So you had a lot of pipelines that were old, that were rusty, pipe well heads that weren't functioning properly. And so by 1990, we must have had about nearly 5,000 oil spills huge oil spills that in any other parts of the world would make headline news, but for us it just became the norm. We didn't have democracy, so no one could complain to the government. And I think the arrival of the oil industry also... affected how people, like communities, related to one another. There's a sort of element of divide and conquer, which wasn't necessarily a deliberate strategy by all companies, but it's the natural consequence of coming into a community... and conferring benefits on one community but not giving to the other.

So for the oil companies... they'll just set up a wellhead and if there happens to be a community, a particular ethnic group living in that area, then they would receive certain benefits while the community next door didn't. And that created community fighting, inter-ethnic fighting. And oh, I mean, I could go on, but I don't know.

ALEXIS OKEOWO 9:22

No, that's good. And because what I was bringing that up to lead into the fact that you.

9:29

How violence became the language of the Delta

ALEXIS OKEOWO 9:29

It, as you said, oil spills became a natural feature of life. There is divide and conquer. And then eventually there became, as you said, violence became the basic fabric of how the Delta operates.

NOO SARO-WIWA 9:46

Yeah, my father, he started, he set up a group called the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People. The acronym is MOSOP. So when he and his and eight of his colleagues were killed by the Nigerian government, and this was off the back of peaceful campaigning, my father was a very sort of, he was all about peaceful campaigning. So when people saw how violently the government treated my father and his colleagues, it sent the message that you can only get what you want through violence. Peaceful protest makes no difference. As one former militant told me, he said, "If you don't make noise, they won't hear you." That was the motto after my father was killed in 1995, the government cracked down on further protests and that eventually led to the formation of these militant groups who were calling for control of oil resources for the profits to come back to the community rather than to the federal government.

But the people who… set up these militant groups were often kind of former cults, gang members who were involved in crime. And so they kind of took on the ideological mantra that my father had started, but it was mixed with… violence and enrichment. And so it created this era of militancy. They were sabotaging the pipelines, they were kidnapping oil workers just that violence became the, as you said, the operating… -

ALEXIS OKEOWO 11:43

The language that you use to get what you want. -

NOO SARO-WIWA 11:48

Exactly.

ALEXIS OKEOWO 11:48

And that I think has created a shift in the way because these militants still kind of… kind of control and have an outsized influence, I think, on the political life, social life of the Delta.

NOO SARO-WIWA 12:07

Massive. Their sort of direct action, sabotaging the pipelines, was so successful that around 2007, The oil output in Nigeria really went down, I think it was maybe by about a third. It was a very serious problem in a country where the government has always relied on oil revenues and hadn't really diversified the economy. And so it just led to… There was a lot of violence between the government military forces and the oil militants of the Niger Delta. And it got so bad that the government then…

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decided to offer an amnesty so militants could hand in their weapons in exchange for monthly stipends and some training, job training, etc. And the chief militants… were given royal titles, they became aristocrats and chiefs.

They were also given security contracts. So basically, these were the guys who were sabotaging the oil infrastructure, were now being paid by the government to protect the oil infrastructure and to stop other people, younger admirers of these militants from trying to follow in their footsteps. But also in Nigeria… economic power comes with political power. So, if you have money and you're in control of the oil resources, then you also have political control because then you have this horrible kind of intermingling of militancy and politicians, when we did eventually get democracy. The politicians then start working with violent oil militants to secure votes, etc. So there's, in all societies, especially in the US, money and political governance go hand in hand.

But in Nigeria, that's a particular problem because… the militants are often not educated men at all and I if you read the book you'll see the interviews I had with them and it's very clear that they don't have any education and so when they're in charge of the economy and of society, when people like that are in charge, it doesn't bode well.

14:51

The women of the Niger Delta

NOO SARO-WIWA 14:57

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ALEXIS OKEOWO 14:57

Yeah, and one thing I really like about your book is that these militants have come to sort of… symbolize the image of the Delta, right? These guys with their ammunition, their AK-47s, now their palaces, now that they've got these amnesty payments and these security contracts. But you also spend time with ordinary residents of the Delta who are actually having to live and raise families and work amid this immense environmental devastation. As you describe it's… dark water, it's completely rotten fields, it's pipelines just leaking and bubbling in the water. And you focus especially on women.

NOO SARO-WIWA 15:39

Yeah, I think women are the really unsung heroes of the Niger Delta. When I was travelling around to write this book… I realised after a while that everyone I was speaking to were men. It was, the former militants were men and you were taught to foundations that were helping rehabilitate them and all the work that they were doing was focusing on men. It was just men. And I'm like, where are the women in all of this? And it turns out, there are a lot of women doing really great things. But, women as always, the power is kind of soft. It's not what's the word. It's not official, you know. And what I found was that you had a lot of women, for example, who operated as peacekeepers mediating between warring

factions and communities, which was such a, and it was such a contrast to… When you look at the amount of money that the government poured into rehabilitating militants, they'd set up all sorts of training programs.

They were sending these militants to South Africa for conflict resolution training. It's just a lot of money involved, a lot of very sort of official stuff. But then you've got women who are doing that just on their own steam. They would set up their own organizations and they would mediate between warring parties if the oil companies gave guns to one community to guard the pipeline, then some of the young men in the neighbouring community felt left out and so you get this conflict between them. People would get shot, killed. And these women would come in and mediate. They would talk to the mothers and bring the men together and actually resolve the conflict without getting any money from the government or anything like that.

And that's just one example of… the difference that women were making, but they're totally ignored and they're often farmers as well. But again when there's an oil spill… the government will come in and if they do give compensation or there's aid relief, it goes to the men because the men are the landowners. And so the women are left to look after the children and sort things out. And it just bothers me so much, especially… in a country like Nigeria, which is so misogynistic, is something I didn't really appreciate until you become older and as a woman, and so underappreciated. And they don't seem to realise that… you have to respect women. Feminism isn't some sort of anti-man thing.

It's like if you help the women, you help society as a whole. And there really isn't that understanding in the Niger Delta. And what I found really interesting was when I spoke to former militants, I was really struck by how many of them told me that they had… maybe seven siblings that they went into they started sabotaging pipelines or becoming an illegal refiner because they were looking after several siblings and none of them seemed to have a father that was on the scene they all have but they all have fathers but the fathers have multiple wives And there isn't, people aren't sort of joining the dots there and making that link between this sort of patriarchy and this tradition where a man can have five wives, but he's not looking after the 30 children he might produce.

And so you've just got a lot of these young men having to look after their siblings and going into this militancy and these mothers who are having to raise children by themselves. And so, we need to just really fundamentally re-examine the social organisation and just looking at what women have to go through and the support that they really need. It's vital for our survival as a region.

20:14

Illegal refining

ALEXIS OKEOWO 20:15

Yeah, absolutely. One thing that I was really struck by in your book is that despite a ceasefire, despite the amnesty, despite militant groups saying we're putting our guns down, We're not blowing up installations or kidnapping oil workers anymore. The level of illegal refining is so widespread and so ingrained. I don't know how it will ever go away.

NOO SARO-WIWA 20:42

Yeah, it's become entrenched because the government got involved. This is the problem with Nigeria. So, for people who don't know, it's... In Nigeria, we... Back in the day, we didn't have any oil refineries. So we were exporting crude oil then and it would get refined in Europe or wherever and then we would import the refined oil and then because of corruption you had a lot of people who were friends with the government who became oil importers And Nigeria has always subsidised, the government has always subsidised refined oil imports. So these oil import license holders would then deliberately pick the most expensive kind of refined oil. But we don't need that sort of very expensive type to run cars and things like that.

But because the oil importers... could get more money by importing the highest grade, that's what they were doing. And my late brother, Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr He worked in government as a technocrat. And I remember him telling me at the time that I think when crude oil reached a very high level sometime in the 2000s, he said that there were importers who were earning about $100 million a month. So because oil became so expensive, the ordinary man couldn't spend... afford it. Not just to power their car, but to power, to use the kerosene lamps because our electricity doesn't work properly. And so that's why people started illegal refining. They would steal oil from the pipelines and then refine it themselves, which is actually quite ingenious.

But... terrible for the environment because it's unregulated and they just spill a lot of crude oil illegally refined oil became very popular. People use it a lot because it's cheaper. But the problem is that the government is so corrupt, government officials started getting involved and started connecting with the illegal refiners joining in as a venture. So everything's become very entangled and to this day, illegally refined oil represents a huge part of our consumption and I think some people say that maybe half of all businesses. And I'm talking about legit businesses rely on it. So it's become very, very sort of entrenched.

ALEXIS OKEOWO 23:40

And it's going to Europe, to China, right?

NOO SARO-WIWA 23:43

Oh, yeah. You've got people and I've seen it. I've seen the boats that you just go to a little village in the Niger Delta and you'll see these boats with a sort of lattice metal where you insert all the oil barrels and they get taken out to sea and where ships from... Japan, Europe are waiting to take this much

cheaper oil back to their countries. And so we're not even collecting official revenues from this oil. And people are taking advantage from around the world. Apparently if you go to... Some of the jails in Port Harcourt, my hometown You'll find sort of sailors from different countries who occasionally get caught by the Coast Guard. And so yeah, there's a lot of that. People just loading illegal oil onto foreign tankers. So yeah, it's a very, very big problem.

25:03

Ken Saro-Wiwa's legacy and ecological amnesia

ALEXIS OKEOWO 25:03

I was struck in your interviews with a lot of the former ex-militants who are now, quote unquote, chiefs, big men, that of course they're all, they're all educated on your father's work and his legacy. Even, and... there's been a really interesting evolution from what he was doing to, what these men are doing now and how they sit in society. I wondered if your understanding or your thoughts on your father's legacy had changed or evolved while working on this book.

NOO SARO-WIWA 25:45

I mean, I think his legacy is... Obviously his death created this chain of events that led to this oil militancy, which obviously, that's not his fault. But, you know... Yeah, these oil militants are very, very different from my father. You know, they're not educated and they don't appreciate the environment. Even though when you speak to them, they all grew up as farmers and whatnot. But people just have to survive. And I think there's a sort of... you have sort of ecological amnesia as well. You forget what an environment originally looked like, right? It's kind of... It's a bit like in England. When you drive around England, you see all these green fields, these farms, and people talk about it as a green and pleasant land because we've actually forgotten what it really looked like and... there's actually no wilderness left in England.

So your sort of baseline of what something should look like, it changes, right? And so that's what's happened in Nigeria now. Kids who are growing up now, they don't see the monkeys and the trees. They don't see the pythons and the alligators and the butterflies. We don't get fireflies anymore. That was such a big part of... the night in Nigeria, all these fireflies, just lighting up the night and my father would point them out in our garden and they were just beautiful and you don't see that anymore and I hardly see lizards even. There's been a real sort of ecological... think I we've just fallen off a shelf really ecologically. And I dread to think what the consequences of that are.

But yeah, so a lot of these militants are just, they don't have the education to begin with. They don't have that appreciation of nature. People have forgotten what the Niger Delta is supposed to look like. You know, you drive around and when I was a kid, it was just a forest of palm trees. Just loads and loads of palm trees. And some ecologists will say that even that was bad because some of that was like

plantation. But you had hardwoods, the iroko tree and the canopy was just quite full. Now when you drive in the Niger Delta, you just don't see that many palm trees. Agriculture has expanded a lot because the population has expanded.

And so there are kids growing up who really don't… know what the environment looks like, the militants don't know, the kids are swimming in really polluted water, and so these militants are the ones in charge that's And the problem. And when I speak to people who are trying to save the environment, so for example, there's a great organization, the African Nature Investor, and it's a Nigerian-run organization, ANI, and they've basically…

28:47

Conservation in a region run by former militants

NOO SARO-WIWA 28:57

Least at a couple of national parks from the Nigerian government, the ones that still have quite a bit of flora and fauna left. And I was speaking to the executive director of this organisation. And so, when he goes around to communities trying to explain to people the importance of not killing animals as bush meat, etc, he says that when he talks to village leaders… They're very, the traditional leaders are very receptive and they will cascade that knowledge down to their people and actually make a difference. There's been a change in culture. But ANI, the executive director told me that when he then comes to the Niger Delta, where communities are run by guys who were former militants and… he finds it very, very difficult to get them to appreciate what he's doing.

So, it's just another example of how this, the violence of the government inflicted on us is continuing to have an effect in ways that you couldn't have predicted 30 years ago. >>

ALEXIS OKEOWO 30:17

It's interesting because I wrote down this quote, I believe from one of the ex-militants who said, people can't think about the environment when they're struggling to eat, which on the face of it seems true, but actually, isn't true, as you said, because they could, because a lot was taken from the environment for health, for food, for things like that. There can be a value of the environment even in poverty or even when people are economically disadvantaged. But it's right. It's more of a…

NOO SARO-WIWA 30:48

Well, on a… I mean, I guess for us, we can appreciate that, and for us, it's almost more of an intellectual level. And that's what I was sort of basically accused of. I guess for the ordinary person, it's just day to day survival and they haven't got time to really… think about that stuff, they can't take stock and worry about what they're doing to the environment. I spoke to one very sweet young man who was refining oil illegally and he said that he… I asked him, "What does your mother, your grandmother think of what you do?" And he was like, "Oh, they're very happy because, they get money." But his mother, or was it his grandmother, was a farmer whose yields are going down and down because the land is being so degraded.

So there's this kind of... But I don't think he could draw the dots between that. And at the end of the day, it's like if his mother can't grow her cassava, he's just going to refine illegal oil in order to help her. It's just this terrible vicious circle.

ALEXIS OKEOWO 32:07

Right. The cycle is what I-- definitely came away with just money is the incentive and then so when one is an incentive then why care about the environment when you need money on a daily basis I mean Were there any sources of hope for you or optimism when working on this, when thinking about the environment?

32:21

Sources of hope and the case for solar

NOO SARO-WIWA 32:29

There were lots of really great civic groups doing wonderful things. There's a woman, fabulous woman, who should be president of Nigeria, really, Emem Okon, and she runs this... wonderful NGO, the Kebetkache NGO, and they get a lot of funding from the Clinton organization and people like that. And so they do a lot of these things. And there were lots of people doing great stuff, but Nigeria has always been a country that's not worth the sum of its parts. It's just full of brilliant, talented people. But without government cooperation, you really can't get anywhere. It's very, very difficult. The top-down approach is vital. You need a government that can create... a society where the law works, you need a government that provides at least electricity and infrastructure.

Without that, it's very, very difficult for these civic communities to do what they really want to do. And so for me, that's why I think it's vital that we move away from oil and roll out solar energy more. Solar energy... is obviously it's better for the climate. It's because oil is not it's not even labor intensive. It doesn't provide a huge amount of jobs. But with solar power, it frees people up. You become You're liberated from oil, you can run your business and you can run it cheaply and you don't have to kowtow to oil companies or former militants. I just think it could have a really liberalizing effect and release that entrepreneurial spirit that Nigeria has.

And so, yeah, for me, there is always a glimmer of hope in Nigeria. I just see so many people who are doing great things and could do even greater things. We just need to be free from the shackles of oil and... the bad governance that comes with owning that oil, the people who own it.

35:02

Shell's exit, UNEP and the cleanup

ALEXIS OKEOWO 35:03

Yeah, because I was going to ask you where you thought the responsibility lay and obviously as you said with the government. It's interesting, even though Shell has pulled out other foreign oil companies have downsized their presence, it's still the... the problem is still there.

NOO SARO-WIWA 35:24

It's been done these oil companies, the big ones they started Divesting and moving out from the onshore Operations. Some people are very skeptical about that, shell divested in 2025 but it's been replaced by a local consortium called Renaissance, which If you are some people, they'll tell you that it's Shell in all but name, they've just kind of transferred it to So it looks like it's a local company. But either way, even if that weren't the case It's just as worrying because At least with Shell, because it's a multinational, we could hold them to account by suing them in foreign courts. So... my family sued them and other communities sued them, some of them in New York State and won settlements as a result.

But now if you have Nigerian owned smaller oil companies then our only legal recourse is the Nigerian courts. And so there's a worry that the accountability will decline even further. And so, yeah, the situation really hasn't improved. But one good thing about my father's legacy was that the UN back in the 2000s, they undertook a... an audit of the environment. They measured, they looked at the soil, the water contamination, they looked at the levels of carcinogenic substances and concluded that huge amounts of damage had been done and that the oil companies and Nigerian government should contribute money towards cleaning up the environment. So it was the UN Environmental Programme, UNEP. They put out a very important report in 2011.

And as a result of that, Shell had to pay a billion dollars towards the cleanup. So there's an organisation... It's a long title, but the acronym is HYPREP. It's the hydrocarbon remediation programme. And so there's been a sort of clean-up of the environment. As with any Nigerian organization, it's not perfect. There have been accusations of corruption and inefficiency. But they've started to restore the mangroves, for example, and clean up some of the contaminated soil. So that has been one good legacy of my father's campaign. But all the other socioeconomic problems, they're still there. It hasn't changed as much as one would like.

38:33

Writing the book and finding a way to help

ALEXIS OKEOWO 38:34

And I want to ask you just about the act of writing. I wondered if, you mentioned how it was later on that I don't know if it was with this book that you really appreciated the sort of the natural environment, pre-oil spills, pre-extraction. And I wondered, yeah, if writing this book also opened up any other things for you.

NOO SARO-WIWA 38:58

I mean, I think for me it did sort of crystallize what it was that I wanted, how I could help. Because when my father died, people, they said, so what are you going to do to carry on his legacy? And for me, it was very difficult because… In some senses, what my father did was the easy part. It was the most dangerous part because he was challenging a multinational and a ruthless military dictatorship. So it was dangerous, but it was easy in the sense that he was calling out a problem that no one knew about. But once you've flagged up this problem… what do you do next? And so for me, I really struggled with that because I was watching a region that was descending.

The year 2000s were a very violent time in the Niger Delta. You had groups with guns and you've got the military and these really corrupt government officials. It's like, what could I do? In all of that. And I really, for a long time, it's been, 20 odd years, really struggling to figure out what I could do to help. I'm not my father and I live in England. And so this book… I think in situations like this you can't think on a big macro scale. You've just got to keep it small. And I think writing this book really helped me figure out how I could make a difference just in my own small way. And so for me it's about supporting these… organizations, especially like the Kebetkache, that's run by Emem Okon.

It's about helping to introduce solar powers. So I was… So I think one good thing when you live in the diaspora is that if you're feeling a little sort of powerless or you don't know how you can help and you don't have the funds to travel back and forth, what you can do is connect people in the West with some really good people that on the ground in Nigeria. So that's what I did. So I had a friend of a friend who she's Norwegian and… is tapped into environmental groups in the West. And so I connected her with a guy called Fyneface Dumnamene, who… He's just a great guy and in many ways he's kind of like my father's heir.

And so together they created an NGO that has now introduced solar power to… There's one community in Delta State and… And as a result of that, they got a little bit of funding. And now this community relies completely on solar power. They don't have to deal with illegal refining. They don't have to bring in oil into the community. It's wonderful. And so… it's been a real challenge to get that to happen. And trying to roll it out to other communities. There are all sorts of just bureaucratic things going on. But this NGO is up and running, and a friend of mine is on the board as well. And so that's one way that I can help. So yeah, for me to have narrowed it down, it's just me needing more solar power. That's all I can do, really.

ALEXIS OKEOWO 42:40

Well, that is useful. I wanted to open it up for if anyone has questions.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1 42:47

There's been so much... interesting topics discussed today and yeah thank you so much.

42:53

Q&A: solar power in Delta communities

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1 42:55

I feel like I learned so much and have just like so many questions buzzing. I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit more about what you've been finding the relationship between solar power and then like folks who are in these villages, like is... I'm just curious what their perspective is on solar power. How is it impacting how they are living? Is it changing even social dynamics? I would just love to hear a little bit more about that.

NOO SARO-WIWA 43:24

Yeah, I guess it's early days. I visited this one community. And so, they told me that it's just, you can just do things. There isn't that, you're not relying on electricity, you're not relying on oil. So things are a little bit cheaper, but it's... But there was some economic it's interesting because when you supply power to people as a company You want them to use as much as possible right that these are largely sort of They're farming communities and so the thing with farmers is that they're out in the fields during the day When and so that's you're not they're not using as much power as before so they're not using as much power as people in urban areas, but Yeah, just from what they told me they just said it's just a lot simpler.

I didn't really get into the specifics in that community about what life was like before with oil, but I know that there isn't that constant worry about getting those supplies in. But I think also in this case it's safer as well. So with refined Illegally refined oil, there are a lot of dangers with it, just the chemical composition isn't quite right. And so sometimes if you get a faulty batch, it can be really dangerous and it can just blow up in your face. And you meet a lot of people who have a lot of burns on them and stuff. And actually the woman, there was a woman in the community who was very burnt, but I was about to ask her about it and the man said, don't ask.

So it's going to be safer. You meet, because you just meet a lot of people who have a relative whose face was just, was burnt and stuff like that. So that element has been removed completely, which is wonderful.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2 45:39

Hi there, thank you so much.

45:41

Q&A: remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2 45:43

I really appreciated your talk. Yeah, so I-- I kind of think of your father because I've done a lot of work in West Africa and I remember in 2005 when I started Amnesty International and he was such a hero. And he really brought attention to, as far as I understood from our work at Amnesty International, like he brought so much attention to Nigeria, as I understand. And I also had an opportunity to visit Niger Delta for another organization. And I kind of remember a lot of, and this was back in like 2000 or so, but I remember some of the dynamics there with the, and we were, I was working with Doctors Without Borders and we were doing some work down there. But I just wanted to say, because when you talk about your father's legacy, like for me, he's like this hero.

NOO SARO-WIWA 46:45

No, thank you. He was... he was incredible. He really was just an amazing person. And again, it took me a long time to really appreciate it because growing up in England, I didn't quite appreciate... what the situation was like in Nigeria. You know, for us as an ethnic minority, for example, I remember, like, Ogonis, our ethnic group is the Ogoni, and the Ogoni were a tiny ethnic group, there were only, in the 90s, there were only half a million of us in a country of, back then, about 140 million people. So we were a drop in the ocean and we had no political clout, no visibility. When I was a child, especially living in England, people, other Nigerians would say, "Who are your people?" and you'd say, "Oh, Ogoni."

They'd never heard of it. You know, we just weren't on the map. And... But it was through my father that people then knew who we were and they knew about the Niger Delta. And that's a really big deal because within our region, we were very, as an ethnic minority, we were sort of mocked and belittled and... even to the point that we were changing our names in the 1960s, people were adopting Igbo names because that was the dominant ethnic group in that region. And it was only after the Biafran war that people started moving back to Ogoni names. So, that was the context of my father for him to stand up and demand oil rights and improvements in the environment was just a massive thing.

And he was challenging one of the world's biggest... multinational companies and one of the most ruthless military dictatorships. But yeah, he was very, but that's what he was like. I think a lot of activists tend to be very strong headed. They understand the risks of what they're doing they But don't care, they just very... they pursue these principles and that's what he was like and you kind of need people like that in order to... put us on the map the way that he did.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2 49:14

But do you think that there was any change? I mean, I just remember it from Amnesty International, but that it got more attention internationally from human rights groups from governments, like Western governments, that kind of thing, because it was a huge deal. Like it was such a big deal. And I remember I was like the 10th anniversary and people were really... Because it was, as I remember, it

was kind of, he was being held and then they didn't know if he was going to be executed. Sorry, I don't want to get into the details because it's probably horrible, but I just think it was a, I'm just maybe. Sharing that it was just a very big deal

NOO SARO-WIWA 49:56

Yeah, and if the problem with a lot of these things is that sometimes it's only in death but you then really sort of get it the attention that you want but before he died he was groups like Amnesty International had a Greenpeace It's taken the cause and really amplified things but it was when he died that it things really changed and I think that whole kind of corporate social responsibility that We see a lot of now Was really sparked by his death

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50:35

Q&A: the land before oil

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3 50:35

Hi there. You mentioned an interesting idea about ecological amnesia. And so when you mentioned that, I started wondering, like, what were... through maybe the conversations that you had with elders, older people, like what were the traditional relationships with the environment, with the land even before oil?

NOO SARO-WIWA 50:57

Yeah. Yeah, he... Well, I'll start by, yeah, when you talk to the elders, and I like doing that, you sort of ask them, what animals did you see when you were growing up? And when you look at our folk tales, that will, tells you a lot as well. You know, the tortoise was a really big thing. You know, I've never seen a tortoise just walking around, but you used to get a lot of that. The only time I've seen a tortoise was, I think it was like tortoise meat on a skewer or something, and that's the only time I've seen a tortoise. But, and they would tell you about, yeah, all the different animals and whatnot.

And so, yeah, before... oil came along, we had a sort of pre-Christian, well, we were Christian when the oil came, but let's say before Christianity came, you had this relationship with the land, as all pre-industrial people do, and we learned, we had a reverence for nature. There's some debate as to whether people, pre-industrial societies, anywhere in the world... have that holistic, true holistic understanding of the environment and whether they mix it in with religion. I don't know, religion is often a tool, right? But it's also something that you worship because you value what... Anyway, so there was, people value the environment and there were certain... certain places had spiritual significance. And so when oil came along, quite often those areas were just kind of swept away.

But also, we used the natural environment for healing for medicines and things like that. And so a lot of that knowledge has been lost as well. I don't know the ins and outs. That's one thing I ought to do really is to learn about our pre-Christian value system and whatnot. But yeah, when you take away the environment, when you install oil... you're not just taking away land, you're taking away medicines and that spiritual value and that connection, that understanding of the importance of nature.

53:38

Q&A: will solar threaten the oil economy?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 4 53:38

Thank you very much. So I hope to pick up a thread from the first question. To pick up a thread from the first question, the... reaction as it were or the feedback loop with the introduction of solar. So I wondered if, because the account you provide of how oil has created entrenched financial interests, it suggests that if there's a transition to solar, it will disrupt those financial interests. So I wondered if in the interviews you dated surfaced any concerns from the-- folks who have entrenched interest about how solar will interfere with their capacity to continue to receive revenue and sort of what the community reaction to that concern might be.

NOO SARO-WIWA 54:21

Sorry, are you asking if I've spoken to people who...

AUDIENCE MEMBER 4 54:26

Well, not if you've spoken per se, but if your interviews surfaced concerns about how solar, like the transition to solar will disrupt people's capacity to earn from oil. So the people who have an incentive to keep the oil exploration going, if they're concerned that solar will... impede that continued exploitation?

NOO SARO-WIWA 54:47

Well, what I can tell you is that in Ogoniland specifically, I'm talking about sort of our area where my father grew up, he expelled Shell. Shell moved out a long time ago, like back in 1993. So when we talk about oil in the Niger Delta, it's not actually in my village, it's kind of everywhere else. But the problem now is that you have people in my village... calling for the resumption of oil, which I just find so utterly depressing. And I think that tends to be the focus. They're not really thinking about the benefits of solar. They've just got their eye on oil as this prize. And that's still the case. There's this kind of fixation.

It's just this, the teat that we suckle on. And I don't think a lot of people have the imagination to understand what an economy and society can look like away from oil because we rely on it so much. And that's the problem I think in Nigeria as a whole, it's... It's the kind of the big man politics. It's about people, wealth and power being concentrated in certain hands and in certain industries. And because the middle class has atrophied, it's not really there anymore. So you've got these really rich people and then these really... poor people. And so there's this mentality that you've got to grab at the that source of the wealth. There isn't that understanding that you can have a nation of middle class, lower middle class people, all just earning a little bit and collectively producing a tax base that makes the country richer.

That mentality just, understandably, just isn't there because people haven't seen that happen in the last four years. Even when you go, and you see that mentality even when you go to hotels, they'll make the expensive rooms really nice. And then if you look at a budget room... It's just kind of like very messy and it hasn't been cleaned as much. It's like, well, we're not going to make an effort with the small ones,

because they're like, let's just make things nice for the big man with the big money and we'll just get money for that room. But. If you made the small rooms attractive, you could get a lot of budget travellers that would contribute to greater revenue.

But it just isn't there. The focus is always, let's just get the oil, let's get the… And so… Yeah, I'm not seeing that vision amongst people about what solar can do. There's just too much focus still on oil.

57:54

Q&A: wildlife and national parks

NOO SARO-WIWA 57:55

Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 5 57:56

Hi. Thank you so much for speaking here today. My question was along the lines of what do the wildlife preservation atmosphere look like surrounding the Niger Delta? I remember you saying that you no longer see the fireflies and lizards. So I was wondering if there are efforts, if there's a huge presence for wildlife preservation.

NOO SARO-WIWA 58:21

Yes, so there's a woman who I love. I always forget her surname. I think it's Ikemeh. Rachel Ikemeh. And she runs… an NGO. She's an environmental scientist. She's from the region. She studied abroad, etc., etc., and then she's gone back. And she runs an NGO called the Southwest. I'm so bad with names. I visited this place. I went last year. But they've protected a little bit of forests. It's maybe 200 hectares and they've had night cameras and stuff and you can still see these amazing wild cats and monkeys and red colobus monkeys and things like that. So, there is still stuff worth preserving. But to get there, you've got to go down to - sorry, I'm so bad with names.

The capital of Bayelsa State. You've got to drive there by road, which comes with risks. But you do that and then you get on a boat and you travel like an hour down the river past these oil installations and stuff and then you eventually get to this community where the traditional chief Very sensible guy has persuaded everyone to not hunt these animals and stuff. And so, yeah, they've set up, they've got these rangers and half of them are women. And yeah, she's doing an amazing job of preserving that bit of the forest. And then there's the organization I told you about before, African Nature Investors, ANI. And they're controlling the-- is it Okomu? There's a national park just outside Benin City.

And it's really well run. So I went there earlier this year. So you just land in Benin Airport, they pick you up in a car with Rangers who've got guns who protect you. You drive maybe an hour and you go to this rainforest and they give you boots and you go into the forest and I saw monitor lizards and you've got these ant hills which I've never seen before. They look like giant… toadstools, just stuff I've never seen. And then, the giant snails that we like to eat to actually see it not in soup, but actually just on a tree or whatever was amazing. It's like the size of, a big man's fist. It's just beautiful stuff.

And they found a baby elephant as well about a year ago. And so they've recently... just moved that elephant, they're gradually introducing it to the wild, but I was lucky enough to meet this baby elephant and it's putting its trunk on my leg and it was just really cute and... So, that company, that organization that's doing a really good job, but their big project is Gashaka Gumti National Park in Taraba State. And that's where you've still got chimps. Maybe gorillas the odd giraffe. But it's tough. You know, Nigerians, the population is big. People need to farm. So... But you've also got Chinese loggers, they want the hardwoods, they, and stuff like that. So it's a battle to protect this area.

But yeah, there are just a few pockets here and there, people doing fabulous things with no help from the government, of course, you know. And so I'm... I'm halfway through writing an article about these national parks and the importance for us in the diaspora to support them, to visit when we go there. Because it's really nice, actually, to go back to Nigeria, and you're not just sitting in a village and, around a swimming pool, listening to Afrobeats songs and eating suya, whatever. That's all very nice. But to actually go into the forest and reconnect with our environment, our natural environment, it's so nice. It's just so cleansing and just gives you more hope for the country, you know?

So... Yeah, I would urge people to either visit or to financially support these organisations. Because our environment has dwindled so much, but you'd be amazed at what we still... or what's in these forests, just these little pockets. There's still so much going on, so we just need to protect it at all costs.

1:03:29

Closing

ALEXIS OKEOWO 1:03:30

Well, thank you so much for this conversation. And I believe you'll be signing books.

NOO SARO-WIWA 1:03:36

I think so.

ALEXIS OKEOWO 1:03:40

After we leave this stage. But thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you all for coming.

NEW YORK BLACK AND AFRICAN LITERATURE FESTIVAL

ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was prepared by NYBALF from the verified caption track of the published recording and lightly edited for readability. The recording remains the authoritative record. Section headings are editorial. Timestamps refer to the recording on YouTube.

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