

The New York Times' "1619 Project"

Nikole Hannah-Jones, Shell Oil and mass killings in Africa

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On Wednesday, December 11, Nikole Hannah-Jones, lead author of the *New York Times* ' "1619 Project," delivered a speech in Houston to inaugurate the Emancipation Park Conservancy's lecture series depicting the "Black Experience."

The appearance was part of a nationwide lecture tour in which Hannah-Jones is promoting the 1619 Project's "reframing" of the history of the United States as an unending racial struggle of whites against African Americans. The American Revolution of 1775 to 1783 and the Civil War of 1861 to 1865, according to Hannah-Jones, were sham events, unrelated to the struggle for equality and the eventual destruction of slavery. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln were racist hypocrites dedicated to the defense of white supremacy.

Hannah-Jones' appearance in Texas was sponsored by the Houston-based Shell Oil Company. This is the US subsidiary of the oil and gas corporate giant Royal Dutch Shell, which is confronting international public outrage over its involvement in massive human rights abuses in the African country of Nigeria. The focus of protests has been Shell's collaboration with the Nigerian government in the suppression of the Ogoni ethnic group. The company currently faces multiple court cases over its complicity in the murder of thousands, including the Nigerian dictatorship's hanging in 1995 of the well-known Ogoni writer and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Hannah-Jones is unsparing in her condemnation of the moral failings of the democratic revolutionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries. She can barely contain her contempt for those who failed to leap out of the historical epoch in which they lived and embrace the rhetoric of 21st century middle-class identity politics. But the unforgiving code of ethics she imposes upon the historic figures of the past does not seem to apply to herself. Her own personal moral compass does not seem to be in working order.

Shell's history in Africa has long made it an international pariah. In the 1980s, it was described as "the worst corporate collaborator" of apartheid South Africa, systematically violating sanctions to provide oil that fueled the racist regime's repressive apparatus. It also carried out mining operations in the country, including at its Rietspruit coal mine, where striking workers were beaten and forced back to work at gunpoint. Its support for apartheid provoked an international boycott movement against the oil giant.

Just two years ago, Amnesty International released an 89-page report titled "A Criminal Enterprise? Shell's Involvement in Human Rights Violations in Nigeria in the 1990s." Based on the testimony of survivors, internal company documents and minutes of meetings between Shell and Nigerian security forces, Amnesty's report declared:

In November 1995, the Nigerian state arbitrarily executed nine men after a blatantly unfair trial. The executions led to global condemnation. The United States and the European Union imposed sanctions on Nigeria, and the Commonwealth group of nations suspended the country's membership. Officially accused of involvement in murder, the men had in fact been put on trial for confronting the Anglo-Dutch oil giant, Shell, over its devastating impact on the Ogoniland region of Nigeria's oil-producing Niger Delta.

The executions were the culmination of a brutal campaign by Nigeria's military to silence the protests of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, one of the men executed. MOSOP said that others had grown rich on the oil that was pumped from under their soil, while pollution from oil spills and gas flaring had, "led to the complete degradation of the Ogoni environment, turning our homeland into an ecological disaster." In January 1993, MOSOP declared that Shell was no longer welcome to operate in Ogoniland. The military's subsequent campaign directly led to widespread and serious human rights violations, including the unlawful killing of hundreds of Ogonis, as well as torture and other ill-treatment, including rape, and the destruction of homes and livelihoods. Many of these violations also amounted to criminal offences.

Shell's exploitation of oil in Nigeria goes back to the period of British colonial rule. After independence, it became the most important economic actor in the country, with immense power over its government. Shell's operations centered in Ogoniland, located in the southernmost part of the country along the Gulf of Guinea. Fifty years of exploitation and Shell's continuous oil spills have left the region an ecological disaster, with its soil no longer viable for agriculture and its ground water massively contaminated with carcinogens. The Ogoni people saw their livelihoods destroyed, while they received nothing from the billions of dollars that Shell extracted from the region.

In the early 1990s, under the leadership of Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP emerged to challenge the destruction of the region by Shell and the Nigerian government.

As the protests grew, Shell called upon the government to provide "security protection" for its facilities, while the company offered "logistical" support in deploying heavily armed police and troops against the Ogoni people, providing them with transportation, salaries and even weapons. In some cases, those sent in to "murder, rape and torture" wore uniforms bearing the Shell logo.

Over the course of these operations, it is estimated that 27 Ogoni

villages were raided, leading to the deaths of as many as 2,000 people and the forced displacement of 80,000 more. Rape was employed as a weapon to intimidate the population, and prisoners were routinely tortured.

In May 1994, Saro-Wiwa and other prominent leaders of MOSOP were arrested for killings of which they were patently innocent. After imprisonment and torture, he and eight others were brought to a kangaroo court organized by the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha, found guilty and sentenced to hang.

In his final words to the sham tribunal that convicted him, Saro-Wiwa said that Shell itself would face its own day in court.

In a moving testimonial to his father published in *The Guardian* on November 10, 2015, Ken Wiwa, Saro-Wiwa's son, wrote:

Twenty years ago today my father and eight other Ogoni men were woken from their sleep and hanged in a prison yard in southern Nigeria. When the news filtered out, shock and outrage reverberated around the world, and everyone from the Queen to Bill Clinton and Nelson Mandela condemned the executions. ...

That it was a kangaroo court is no longer in dispute. The trial and execution were consistent with the way Nigeria's military regimes summarily dealt with people they regarded as a threat to their authority. A UN fact-finding mission led by eminent jurists vigorously condemned the process, and John Major, Britain's prime minister, described the trial as "fraudulent", the convictions as a "bad verdict", and the executions as "judicial murder". ...

If my father were alive today he would be dismayed that Ogoniland still looks like the devastated region that spurred him to action. There is little evidence to show that it sits on one of the world's richest deposits of oil and gas.

The *New York Times*—which has promoted the 1619 Project and selected Hannah-Jones as its principal mouthpiece—is thoroughly familiar with this history, having published numerous articles on the life and death of Saro-Wiwa. In an editorial written in the aftermath of his execution, the *Times* noted that, after the MOSOP leader's conviction, Shell issued a statement that "it is not for a commercial organization to interfere with the legal processes of a sovereign state." Clearly worried about the oil giant's reputation, the *Times* concluded tepidly, "Summary executions, fraudulent trials and brutal suppression of dissent are not practices a responsible corporation can ignore." Shell was not ignoring anything; it was entirely complicit in these crimes.

The crimes committed by Shell in Ogoniland did not occur in the 18th, 19th or even the early decades of the 20th centuries. This is a contemporary event and an ongoing crime. Shell is now on trial at a court in The Hague, charged with complicity in murder, rape and burning down villages by the Nigerian regime. The plaintiffs are the widows of four of the nine Ogoni leaders who were hung after being falsely convicted by the dictatorship's sham tribunal. Shell fought an earlier attempt to try the company in the US all the way to Supreme Court, where the case was thrown out on jurisdictional grounds.

A report by *The Guardian* published on February 12, 2019 quoted Mark Dummett, a researcher at Amnesty International, who stated that the widows of the executed Ogoni leaders "believe that their husbands would still be alive today were it not for the brazen self-interest of Shell." The trial, Dummett continued, "is an historic moment which has huge significance for people everywhere who have been harmed by the greed and recklessness of global corporations."

The oil giant is facing a second criminal prosecution in the Netherlands on charges of bribery and corruption for its part in handing out \$1.1 billion that went into the pockets of Nigerian politicians and middlemen to

secure lucrative offshore drilling rights.

Meanwhile, another lawsuit brought by Ogoni villagers and Friends of the Earth Netherlands over the environmental devastation of the Niger Delta region has been fought by the company for the past decade, with two of the plaintiffs dying in the meantime.

In November *Jacobin* magazine conducted an interview with two academic experts on conditions in Ogoniland, Roy Doron and Toyin Falola, who stated that Shell and other oil companies devote far more time to "public relations aimed at Western audiences and allaying investor guilt than actually making a difference to the communities impacted by years of oil spills, gas flaring, and systematic land dispossession."

Shell used Hannah-Jones, who was only too willing to be used, as part of its public relations operation aimed at diverting attention from the company's crimes as they face fresh exposure. Sponsoring an appearance by Hannah-Jones allows Shell to posture as an intrepid corporate fighter against racism. Moreover, the 1619 Project's obsessive focus on race conceals the essential economic interests that underlie the business practices of Shell.

Shell executives obviously sponsored the event in the expectation that endorsement of the 1619 Project would counteract the impact of ongoing lawsuits; and they could not have been disappointed by the results of their investment. Everything went exactly as planned. Shell basked in a moment of public adulation as the event moderator, Melanie Lawson, a local media personality, prefaced her introduction of Hannah-Jones with a shout-out:

I want to take a moment first to recognize tonight's presenting sponsor. And you might know this name, it's a giant in our community, Shell Oil. And if someone is here from Shell Oil will you please stand or wave or all of the above? Do we have some Shell folks? There we go.

The audience responded with an ovation, in which Hannah-Jones joined in. Lawson continued:

Yeah, don't be shy about this. Shell people stand up so we can thank you. We appreciate you. We know this event would not be possible without your very generous donation and we appreciate your continued support of Emancipation Park Conservancy.

It should not come as surprise that Lawson did not ask the audience to stand and observe a minute of silence to honor the memories of Saro-Wiwa and other victims of Shell's criminal activity.

The event in Houston underscores the fraudulent and class character of the 1619 Project. Hannah-Jones' appearance on a platform paid for by Shell Oil makes her politically and morally complicit in the oppression of the Ogoni people. Her staggering hypocrisy and moral blindness is not merely a personal characteristic. It is typical of an ultra-egotistical, self-absorbed and affluent petty-bourgeois social stratum, determined to make as much money as possible, regardless of where it is coming from.

It is not at all clear how Hannah-Jones' racist interpretation of history, which claims that North American slavery and all subsequent forms of discrimination in the United States stem from white people's allegedly inbred and intractable hatred of African Americans, would serve to explain her own apparent indifference to the crimes of Shell Oil against modern-day Africans. Moreover, Hannah-Jones' association with Shell is of an entirely voluntary character. Jefferson and Lincoln were born and lived in a historical situation in which slavery was a major element of the

economic structure of the North American and world economy. What objective historical factors have *compelled* Hannah-Jones to associate herself with, and profit from, collaboration with Shell Oil? What excuse does she have, other than personal self-interest, for appearing on a platform provided by Shell Oil?

Having promoted herself as the avenging angel of American history, Hannah-Jones is obligated to reveal all the facts related to her participation at an event sponsored by Shell. Did she receive any form of remuneration for her appearance in Houston? Why is she serving the publicity needs of a corporation branded as a “criminal enterprise,” complicit in the “murder, rape and torture” of African men, women and children?



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