

THE AFRICA SOCIETY
PROFILE

Chief Mathew A. M. Tornwe III, JP

Chief Mathew Tornwe came to Edmonton, Canada as a political refugee from Nigeria, via Benin, along with his wife Josephine and their six children in November 1997.

Chief Tornwe, who was also a Justice of the Peace in his homeland, comes from the Babbe Kingdom of Ogoniland which is located in the Niger Delta in Southern Nigeria. He is one of the traditional leaders of the Ogoni People. His father was a traditional ruler as well and, in fact, was one of the Ogoni kings of the six Ogoni Kingdoms. Chief Tornwe is the deputy president of the Conference of Ogoni Traditional Leaders. He is also president of various organizations and religious bodies in Ogoniland and his region.

Prior to being forced to flee his native homeland, Chief Tornwe owned and operated a successful family fish farming enterprise for many years and had more recently managed his own construction company.

Chief Tornwe was very active in the political life of Ogoniland. In 1993 he was chosen by the Nigerian Government along with 4 others to negotiate between the management staff of Shell Oil and the Ogoni people. They sat for only two sessions. He was also one of the founding members of the organization, MOSOP, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People which Ken Saro-Wiwa led before his execution. In 1990, Chief Tornwe proposed the Ogoni Bill of Rights, which was unprecedented for most traditional African tribes.

After the killing of the "Ogoni 4" at a pro-government rally in May 1994, the Ogoni People met and delegated a 3-person team, including Chief Tornwe and two other chiefs, to encourage the Nigerian Government to stop the arbitrary arrests, killing of people and the destruction of property in Ogoniland. However, the government arrested Saro-Wiwa and 15 other Ogonis; Saro-Wiwa was led away with his legs in iron chains, he was denied access to doctors or his own family. Amnesty declared him a Prisoner of Conscience. At an extra-judicial Special Tribunal was convened for his trial at which he was found "guilty" of murder. (see: Ken Saro-Wiwa, *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary*, Penguin Books, 1995).

Chief Tornwe's name was 10th on the same list of leaders, but he managed to escape before being apprehended. All the other nine on the list were accused of murder and sentenced to death on October 31, 1995. All were executed on November 10, 1995, including Ken Saro-Wiwa, Dr. Barinem Kiobel, Saturday Dobe, Paul Levura, Nordu Eawo, Felix Nuate, Daniel Gbokoo, John Kpuinen and Baribor Bera.

The Tornwe family all fled Nigeria, variously walking or using public transport. They slept in bus cities and finally took a bus near to the border between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. They could not cross the official border without a passport, so they had to travel through the jungle in order to reach a refugee camp in Benin. Chief Tornwe describes this trek in the jungle as "hell." They lived in the camp for 18 months. All along the way they had to pay out money to Nigerian soldiers to ensure their safety and their lives.

On March 28, 1996 – a day he remembers well -- they first went to the American Embassy and requested passage to the UN High Commission for Refugees office in Benin. The family was short-listed as "venerable refugees" by the UN, the highest designate for refugee claimants. The top four countries for which they were eligible to travel were Geneva, followed by Canada, the US and Australia. Because of language -- Chief Tornwe and his family speak English -- they came to Canada as Canadian-government sponsored refugees, under recommendation of the UN. The family was brought to Edmonton by the Government of Canada in November 1997.

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