

# Environmental Racism in Nigeria's Niger Delta: An Ethical Appraisal

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## Abstract

Nigeria's Niger Delta is plagued by serious environmental problems. These environmental problems include oil spillage, pollution, deforestation, biodiversity destruction, and so forth. Many of the environmental problems in the Niger Delta arise from the anthropogenic activities of multinational oil companies. While these environmental problems, which have caused widespread environmental degradation, are well discussed in light of environmental justice, the reality—that these problems are also precipitated by environmental racist attitudes and practices—is not receiving just attention. This article argues that the environmental problems in the Niger Delta should be seen from the perspective of environmental racism. Through critical hermeneutics and analytic methods, the article shows that what is taking place in the Niger Delta can be called environmental racism. The Niger Delta peoples and cultures have disproportionately suffered from the burden and effects of oil exploration and exploitation activities. Many practices taking place in the Niger Delta, such as gas flaring, use of obsolete oil equipment, and so forth, will not be tolerated in Western countries where the headquarters of multinational oil companies are located. The article finds that unacceptable levels of environmental racism are taking place in the Niger Delta. The article concludes that there is a need to promote environmental justice and mitigate the environmental problems in the Niger Delta.

**Keywords:** environment; racism; Niger Delta; Nigeria; ethics

## Introduction

The environmental crisis in the world manifests itself in various ways. The term “environmental crisis” refers to the multi-faceted problems plaguing the Earth in the form of various environmental problems. It is “... distinguished by rapid and largely unexpected changes in environmental quality that are difficult if not impossible to reverse. Examples would be major extinctions and significant degradations of an

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ecosystem” (Taylor 2009). The environmental crisis can be seen in the form of deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, gas flaring, global warming or climate change, drought, forced migration, environmental racism, and so forth. In a place like the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, much attention is paid to environmental degradation caused by oil exploration and extraction (Kii 2017). Environmental degradation refers to the deterioration of environmental quality as a result of pollution of the air, water, and soil from various human activities (Bentley 2022; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia 2020). Pollution can also result from natural disasters such as earthquakes, forest fires, tsunamis, and so forth.

In the Niger Delta, very little attention is paid to the question of environmental racism. Environmental racism is normally not a concept that you find in discussions of the affairs of the Niger Delta. It is important to discuss the issue of environmental racism, for some of the practices carried out by multinational oil companies amount to environmental racism. While the concept of environmental racism will be discussed in detail later on, it is important to state that this present author sees environmental racism as a situation of causing environmental harm to people arising from not seeing them as equal to oneself and, therefore, believing that they do not deserve equal treatment; and so, even if they are harmed, it does not matter. Oil extraction practices that are not tolerated in Western countries of origin of these global multinational oil companies are practised in the Niger Delta region. It should also be noted right away that the issue of environmental racism is patently ignored in discussions on the Niger Delta. There are many discussions on environmental justice in the Niger Delta; however, they hardly zero in on the issue of environmental racism.

Environmental justice can mean: “The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin, culture, education, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2022). Concerning environmental racism, it is the deliberate, disproportionate, and unfair treatment of “others” by allowing them to suffer greater and more grievous environmental risks and burdens, as the “other” is seen as inferior in certain regards, especially in terms of race, colour, or culture. Environmental racism is indeed a subset of environmental justice, but it deserves adequate treatment in its own right. In an internet search of the phrase: “environmental racism in the Niger Delta” on Monday, 8 July 2019, out of 480 000 results, the first 50 sites had no words such as environmental racism in the headings of the topics that showed up. It may likely be so in the many other results that may pop up. This indicates that the issues of environmental degradation taking place in the Niger Delta are often not considered from the perspective of environmental racism. Though some have used the terms environmental justice and environmental racism interchangeably (Steady 2009), they are not the same. To equate them is like equating justice and racism. They are related, and one is a subset of the other, but they are not the same. We know that racism is a distinct but obnoxious phenomenon in human history that deserves treatment as a crime against humanity. Anything that bears the name of racism should not be ignored. Environmental justice

relates to equal treatment of people of all colour without discrimination, giving them access to decision-making and equally sharing the burdens of environmental problems, and not allowing some persons to suffer more than others. On the other hand, environmental racism sees and deliberately allows that people (whom one considers racially inferior) suffer from environmental burdens and harm. Environmental racism is inspired by a racist motive.

The central aim of this article is to examine environmental racist practices in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In carrying out the purpose of the article, the following shall be the procedure. The article will proceed by situating the Niger Delta. It will then examine the situation of environmental degradation in the region. The meaning, origin, and issues related to environmental racism will be examined. The situation of environmental racism in the Niger Delta will be specifically deciphered. When that has been done, there will be an ethical appraisal of the issues raised and a concluding reflection.

## The Niger Delta in Focus

To alleviate the sufferings of people in the oil-producing states of Nigeria, on July 9, 1992 the General Ibrahim Babangida administration created the Oil Mineral Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC). The oil-producing areas at this time were in the Niger Delta. In the year 2000, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was created by the Federal Government of Nigeria to include the nine states of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2006; Okafor 2010). This, for some authors, is a political definition of the Niger Delta, as some of these areas are not in the natural geologic delta (Amadi and Chijioke 2020; Kii 2017; Tamuno 2008). One scholar even argues that the geographic Niger Delta should be only Delta, Bayelsa, and Rivers states (Tamuno 2008). The region called the Niger Delta geographically is in the southern tip of Nigeria (Nkejiaka 2010). Geographically, the triangular landmass is roughly in the shape of a delta through which the river Niger empties into the Atlantic Ocean (Kii 2017). It is located within the Latitudes of 4° and 6° N; and also within the Longitudes of 4° and 8° E. It is worth noting that the NDDC was officially inaugurated on December 21, 2000, with a vision “to offer lasting solution to the socio-economic difficulties of the Niger Delta region and a mission to facilitate the rapid, even and sustainable development of the Niger Delta into a region that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative, and politically peaceful” (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2006, 103). This region is rich in crude oil and gas resources, earns more than 80% of her national income for Nigeria, and is at the heart of Nigeria’s economy (Douglas and Okonta 2018). The Niger River is one of the world’s largest and longest rivers, with a length of about 4 100 kilometres. It is the third longest river in Africa after the Nile and the Congo. The river empties into the Atlantic Ocean in a deltaic formation. This delta is one of the world’s largest wetlands; its mangrove forest is the third largest in the world and the largest in Africa (Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria 2006). This “Niger Delta is a vast coastal plain in the southernmost part of Nigeria, where one of West Africa’s longest rivers empties into the Atlantic Ocean between the Bights of Benin and Biafra, in the Gulf of Guinea” (Obi

and Rustad 2011, 3). The Niger Delta, that is the concern here, is regarded as defined by the NDDC.

Endowed with rich oil and gas wealth, the region has featured prominently in global oil politics. The Niger Delta is also greatly endowed with a biodiversity of animals, plants, and other organisms. The Niger Delta used to be filled with enormous fish wealth in the streams and rivers of the region. However, because of oil spillage and the pollution of the streams, many of those fishes have gone to extinction. Fishermen and women who used to make a great deal of hauls no longer get those catches. Many are starving and hungry. Amnesty International, in her report on the Niger Delta, has shown that oil companies such as Shell and Eni neglect oil spills in the region, thus causing more environmental pollution (Amnesty International 2018). These oil companies operate with irresponsibility and flagrantly break Nigerian laws and international best practices in the region. Painfully:

... the Niger Delta suffers from an epidemic of oil spills. Every year, hundreds of oil spills damage the environment and devastate the lives of people living there. Neither the powerful actors in the oil industry, nor the Nigerian government, have yet been able to put into practice lasting solutions that prevent the spills, and then clean them up effectively. The cumulative impact of decades of contamination makes the Niger Delta, Africa's most important oil-producing region, one of the most polluted places on Earth. (Amnesty International 2018, 4)

Oil companies violate the human rights of the people in the region with impunity. One point is clear about oil spills in the region; there are hundreds of oil spills by oil companies that they have failed to attend to, and even when oil companies do respond, they respond slowly, showing a lack of concern. There is a great deal of human rights violations in the Niger Delta region. The violations of human rights for both individual and group rights of the people include: 1) "violations of the right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to food—as a consequence of the impact of oil-related pollution and environmental damage on agriculture and fisheries"; 2) "violations of the right to water—which occur when oil spills pollute water used for drinking and other domestic purposes"; 3) "violations of the right to health—which arise from the failure to secure the underlying determinants of health, including a healthy environment, and the failure to enforce laws to protect the environment and prevent pollution"; 4) "violations of the right to ensure access to an effective remedy for people whose human rights have been violated"; and 5) "violations of the right to information of affected communities relating to oil spills and clean-up" (Amnesty International 2018, 13).

Though enormous wealth has come out of the region, it has experienced very little development in terms of social and economic infrastructures compared with other regions in the Western world where oil has been discovered and explored. Because of the poor development and massive underdevelopment in the region, it has also been noted for youth restiveness, ethnic militancy, oil companies' communal crises, kidnapping and hostage-taking, and so forth. Large-scale international capitalist exploitation is taking place in the Niger Delta. Billions of dollars are taken away from

the Niger Delta almost every month, yet the region is grossly under-developed. Most of the people in the Niger Delta are poor, and many youths are unemployed (Ahonsi 2011). Many of the people in the region have no connection with the wealth in their land, and even those employed by the oil industry are paid low wages (Ahonsi 2011). There is no gainsaying the fact that the people in the Niger Delta are suffering, and the region is grossly underdeveloped. The region is inundated with militancy and conflicts.

## The Environmental Degradation and Its Effects on the Niger Delta

The challenges facing the Niger Delta as a result of the exploitation of oil and gas resources and the resultant consequences of that exploitation are numerous and cannot all be explained. It will suffice to list some of them as follows: communal lands appropriation for oil activities; degradation of the environment; habitat destruction; destruction of local means of sustenance, such as fishing and farming; low compensation for appropriated lands; serious conflicts over oil and gas rights; marginalisation of the people in political life and decision-making; economic deprivation; ecological injustice; ecological insecurity; and others (Adeola 2009, 135–136). There can be no doubt that environmental degradation is a reality in the Niger Delta. Oil exploration has its hazards and operational challenges, and environmental degradation in the Niger Delta emanates from soil erosion, gas flaring, deforestation, oil spillage, and so forth.

Many factors precipitate environmental degradation. Violent conflicts in the region between ethno-militant forces and multinational oil corporations also precipitate environmental degradation. Violent conflicts do not take place in a vacuum; they take place on the land. In violent conflicts, militant forces, vehicles and equipment have to be moved through the land. In the process, the persons transiting often care nothing for the environment. Trees and forests are felled to make way for human and vehicular movements. For instance, in March 2010, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) exploded two car bombs near the governor's office annexe in Warri, Delta State. The bombs exploded on land and destroyed the natural environment. The impact of violent conflicts in the region is often underreported. Writing of the consequences of violent conflicts in the region, it should be noted that they are both depressing and ubiquitous; and they include violent and violated environments, and failing community governance structures, causing hardships that are detrimental to sustainable livelihoods and healthy environments (Ukiwo 2011). The neglect, deprivation, and exploitation in the region have inspired violent militant groups to arise. These militant groups, in the name of advocating for justice, turn to kidnapping of oil workers, hostage-taking, illegal oil-bunkering, and so forth.

One of the most devastated areas of the Niger Delta is Ogoniland. The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) writes concerning the degradation in Ogoniland that it will take up to 25 to 30 years to remediate and restore the environment of Ogoniland. As usual, a great deal of the degradation was caused by a multinational oil company, in this case, Shell (UNEP 2011). The report notes that extensive and devastating oil spillage had polluted the Niger Delta for over five decades, and that it

will cost up to \$1bn to remediate. As the report states, Shell and other multinational oil corporations have contaminated a 386 square mile or 1 000 square km area of Ogoni (UNEP 2011). All this has caused damage to both human life and the natural environment (UNEP 2011). Some key findings of the UNEP report include: 1) “heavy contamination of land and underground water courses, sometimes more than 40 years after oil was spilled”; 2) “community drinking water with dangerous concentrations of benzene and other pollutants”; 3) “soil contamination more than five metres deep in many areas studied”; 4) “most of the spill sites oil firms claimed to have cleaned still highly contaminated”; 5) “evidence of oil firms dumping contaminated soil in unlined pits”; 6) “water coated with hydrocarbons more than 1 000 times the level allowed by Nigerian drinking water standards”; and 7) “failure by Shell and others to meet minimum Nigerian or own standards” (Vidal 2011).

In the Bodo community in Ogoniland, Amnesty International has noted that what took place there in 2008 was a tragedy, as two oil spills contaminated and destroyed both land and water sources that fishermen rely on for food and sustenance (Anikpo 2015). The cry of the fishermen from the community reveals the pain and tragedy that multinational oil companies have meted out to them. They lamented: “In 2008, life became very difficult in Bodo. All the fish died. We were paddling on top of the oil. Our canoes and fishing nets were destroyed. It used to be much better. Now poverty is everywhere” (Anikpo 2015, 3).

From the foregoing we see that environmental degradation has impacts on flora, fauna, and entire ecosystems. The environmental impacts of oil and gas exploitation that have caused the degradation of nature include deforestation, toxic waste dumping, destruction of soil and water, frequent oil spills and leakages, gas flaring, and health problems (Adeola 2009). Various species of plants and animals that used to be in abundance in the Niger Delta have either gone into extinction or are now endangered. People’s farmland and water sources from which they derive their food and sustenance have been devastated. The social and economic lives of the people have been all but totally destroyed. Places that were once habitable by people are now polluted and poisoned with gas and other chemicals. Many people are suffering from hunger and starvation. Places like sacred groves and other religious sites that the people hold to be vital to their spiritual well-being have been contaminated or destroyed. Cherished cultural and historical artefacts and other places of ancestral value have been destroyed.

This article argues that environmental degradation and its negative consequences have continued unabated because of environmental racist policies and actions taking place in the Niger Delta. The fact is that anyone with a racist attitude, who considers others as racially inferior, will generally not care about the well-being and welfare of the inferior in a pure altruistic manner. If anything is done at all, it is for the self-interest of the doer. Take, for instance, the fact that multinational oil corporations in the Niger Delta engage in some corporate social responsibility projects. It is merely to assuage the oil communities and quell agitations that may stop the oil wells. If oil companies had

embarked on massive development of the Niger Delta, the region would have been far better off than it is now. This issue of environmental racism is subsequently examined.

## Environmental Racism in Focus

It is crucial to explicate the concepts of environment, racism, and environmental racism. The term “environment,” which comes from the French word, *environer*, refers to what surrounds or encircles a thing and implies all abiotic and biotic realities that surround an organism (Ezedike 2020). The Environmental Protection Act defines it as consisting “... of all, or any of the following media, namely the air, water, and land” (Stranks 2008, 134). All that surrounds an organism is constitutive of the environment. For human beings, everything that exists on the planet constitutes the environment of human beings and all other organisms. The natural environment refers to nature or the natural world that human beings did not bring into being, while the social environment is the world in which human beings live and interact (Adewusi 2011; Umoru 2001). The environment refers to the totality of everything that surrounds an organism or entity/reality. The organism can be a human person, plant, animal, microorganism, building, and so forth. Everything that surrounds a plant is the environment of the plant. From an environmental justice perspective, the environment is not just green/natural or man-made, but it is inclusive of economic, political, and sociocultural realities (Steady 2009). The following definition of environment is comprehensive and is accepted for this study:

Everything that affects an organism during its lifetime is collectively known as its environment. Environment may be defined as the sum total of all external conditions that affect the growth and development of all living organisms. These external conditions may be the air we breathe, the soil on which we stand or organisms live in, the water we drink or organisms live in, living and non-living things around us. Our environment constitutes a life support system. Environment consists of all living and non-living things which surround us. The basic components of the environment are (i) atmosphere or the air (ii) hydrosphere or the water (iii) the living component of the environment or the biosphere. (Rim-Rukeh 2009, 39)

This meaning of environment is adopted here, and it is not plausible to invent another meaning for environment. Therefore, the Niger Delta environment has to do with the atmosphere, plants, streams, and the entire natural world in which the people live. The Niger Delta terrain through which the Niger River empties into the Gulf of Guinea, together with the peoples and cultures existing there, constitutes the Niger Delta environment.

What is environmental racism? Before defining environmental racism, it is important to define racism. There are various definitions of racism. Concerning the term “racism,” it is the belief that sees some races as superior to other races and often implies that they do not deserve equal treatment (Chaturvedi 2006). Racism could be understood as the belief that one particular race is more noble or superior than others (Anti-Defamation League 2019). It is grounded erroneously in the belief that a person’s moral and social

traits are inborn (Anti-Defamation League 2019). The implications are that somebody who believes in racism sees others as inferior human beings, and believes they should not be treated equally to the perceived “superior race.”

Racism could also be defined as “any action, practice, or belief that reflects the racial worldview ... that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and traits of personality, intellect, morality, and other cultural and behavioural features; and that some races are innately superior to others” (Smedley 2017). Racism is the unequal and unfair attitude towards and treatment of another ethnic group(s); it could also involve violence against other social groups as a result of these racist beliefs (UNESCO 2017). In racism, the other person or his ethnic group is ascribed dangerous/inferior characteristics, and because of this, that person or ethnic group is not entitled to equal and just moral treatment (Mautner 2000, 468). Because the person or ethnic group is considered inferior and not deserving of equal treatment, unjust actions can even be perpetrated against them. They can be deprived of amenities available to others. Classic examples of racism include the apartheid system in South Africa, in which Blacks were discriminated against; oppression and segregation against Blacks in the United States of America, and colonial maltreatment of indigenous peoples and degradation of their cultures. In a study of the history of racism, George M Frederickson advances that: “racism exists when one ethnic group ... dominates, excludes, or seeks to eliminate another based on differences that it believes are hereditary and unalterable” (Frederickson, cited in Boxill 2013, 4306). Though there are varieties of understanding of racism, it will be understood here in this article as carrying out discriminatory practices and allowing others of different ethnic groups to suffer economic, political, social, and other pains and deprivations, taking into consideration that the same person will shy away from doing the same to his kith and kin.

Environmental racism is defined as “... a type of discrimination where people of low-income or minority communities are forced to live nearby of environmentally hazardous or degraded environments, such as toxic waste, pollution, and urban decay” (Kathym 2016). The same point is hinted at in the following description, which sees it as the disproportionate dumping of garbage dumps, toxic waste facilities, and other materials and objects that cause environmental hazards in areas inhabited by minority groups, people of colour, and poor people (Learneo 2023). The fact that environmental racism occurs all over the globe is also acknowledged by the last-mentioned source. Environmental racism is driven by the same erroneous logic that drove colonialism. Africans and Black people are “structurally expendable,” as Larry Summers notes, and there is nothing wrong with dumping waste on their land (Summers, cited in Steady 2009). Like colonialism, oil multinationals operate from a spirit of domination. It is rooted in the mind-body division of Descartes, in which the body is deemed inferior. It is also informed by Kantian epistemology that sees Africans as inferior. It is also Hegelian, which affirms that the absolute spirit has not moved in Africa. Moreover, it is driven by the ghost of Levy-Bruhl, who saw Africans as primitive and pre-logical. The erroneous notion is that since Africans are inferior, whatever is done in their environment does not matter. Their environments exist as a means to an end.



It should be noted that these notions about Africans are fundamentally wrong, have been discredited and are not in line with universal and regional human rights instruments. These ideas are a gross violation of the cultural rights of the people. A vital cultural right that people in the Niger Delta are entitled to is the cultural preservation of ancestral heritage. As stated in one United Nations Declaration, indigenous people have a right to the preservation of their cultural traditions, customs, spiritualities, and environmental values (United Nations 2007). It is important to explain that the environment, for many indigenous African peoples, is not just a resource. It is rooted in sacred values, the earth is seen as a god/goddess, the mother of life and abundance, and is to be preserved and protected (Ejeh 2008; Gbadegesin 2001).

It ought to be noted that environmental racism is a sub-set of environmental injustice. The understanding of environmental injustice adopted here sees it as the exposure of communities of colour and other poor communities to pollution and other environmental hazards in a disproportionate manner (Maantay 2002). It is equally inclusive of making environmental policies to protect the powerful and rich from the neglect of poor communities. This is akin to what is happening in the Niger Delta. It is a form of environmental injustice. It is, however, not the only form of environmental injustice. This is why it would be wrong to equate environmental racism with environmental injustice. Righting environmental racism brings about environmental justice. It is imperative to state what environmental justice is, for in demanding an end to environmental racism, the people are invariably demanding for environmental justice in *all* its dimensions.

Understand that: “Generally speaking, there are two different dimensions to environmental justice. The first is distributive justice: how are environmental benefits and burdens distributed? The second is participatory justice: how are the distributive decisions made? Who participates in their making?” (Figueroa and Mills 2001, 427). With this in mind, the people of the Niger Delta, in whose environment oil drilling and other activities take place, suffer from a disproportionate amount of suffering and pain. While much of the profit from oil goes to people outside the Niger Delta, these people (who never experience the pain) are living well on the wealth of the Niger Delta. The burdens of oil drilling are borne by people in the locality. This is unfair and unjust. When it comes to decisions on the sharing of environmental burdens, the people of the Niger Delta are poorly represented. Most of the decisions by oil companies are made in Western boardrooms and passed down to the Niger Delta. It is important to name environmental racism as a form of environmental injustice. It is a violation of the norms of justice. It is here understood that “environmental justice represents the history and continuing struggle of ordinary people for their civil, spatial, and human rights as members of the international community” (Steady 2009, 1). In the process of oil exploration and drilling, some burdens and benefits come and they should be proportionately shared by all. In the Niger Delta, the burden of oil extraction is essentially borne by the people living there, and the environmental degradation happens in their land. At the same time, the benefits that come to them are piecemeal and insignificant. This is discriminatory on the part of the national elites and oil

multinationals. The fact that the environment of oil-producing communities is highly degraded (and the people suffer from numerous health hazards) is well documented by many authors (Adeola 2009; Resnik 2012; Steady 2009). Oil companies are driven by the capitalist spirit of prioritising profit above all else.

In discussing environmental racism, it would not be out of place to remark that even before contemporary forms of environmental racism were practised by multinational corporations that operate in the global south, there was colonialism, which was founded on racism that destroyed the cultures of indigenous peoples and took away their resources. It is known that one of the reasons that precipitated colonialism was the claim to bring development to the natives, who were considered inferior to these so-called “imperial masters.” It is a reality to aver that:

Domestic and global environmental justice come together in the environmental justice struggles of indigenous peoples. For centuries, indigenous groups which have maintained traditional, non-industrialized, self-subsisting, environmentally friendly, and spiritual lifestyles in their natural environments have experienced waves of colonial and industrial conquest, carried out for the explicit purpose of wresting away control over natural resources. (Figueroa and Mills 2011, 436)

Though the official government position in Nigeria fails to see the various ethnic nations as indigenous people, the peoples in the Niger Delta have claimed their right to indigenesness, for they are native inhabitants of the region predating the coming of colonialism. The environmental justice movement, which has environmental racism as one of its subsets, began in the United States of America. It is a by-product of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Steady 2009). The movement argued for equal rights to be extended to Black people and people of colour, and indigenous people, and this movement has inspired cries against environmental racism all over the world, such as in the African Diaspora and Africa (Steady 2009).

## Environmental Racism in the Niger Delta

Environmental racism in the Niger Delta is not limited to some oil exploration activities. In 1988, it was reported, and it was true, that a company from a foreign country had dumped toxic waste in the town of Koko in Delta State in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It should be noted that: “Pollution has been a source of tension across the Niger Delta, which often erupts into violence. The poverty-stricken region produces most of the OPEC members’ oil, the source of two-thirds of government revenue, but sees little of the money” (VOA News 2017). A company in a rich Western country takes its waste to a poor neighbourhood in Africa. The containers, amounting to 18 000 drums of harmful industrial waste, were presented as building materials and dumped on land for which they would pay the owner \$100 every month (Buck 2017). Sunday Nana, the owner of the land—it was discovered—asked to be paid \$200 but was given \$100, and more shipments were coming following the four shipments that had already arrived. The toxic waste was eventually cleaned up by Italy, but by then, the harm had been done. The *African Guardian* states the following with regard to the incident of the dumping

of toxic waste: “The toxic waste matter reeks full of the odor of corruption” (Buck 2017). The Nigerian magazine *African Concord* corroborated this fact, averring: “That Italy did not contemplate Australia or South Africa or some other place for industrial waste re-echoes what Europe has always thought of Africa: A wasteland. And the people who live there, waste beings” (Buck 2017).

The issue of gas flaring in the region must be discussed. Many other countries in the West have stopped gas flaring and stiff penalties are in place for gas flaring. Though the government in Nigeria has attempted to stop gas flaring, it has not succeeded. Oil multinationals prefer to pay fines and continue flaring because it is cheaper for them. They are driven by profit. They do not care about the environmental hazards to human beings and the environment. When you go around where gas flaring takes place (like in Ukwuani land and Urhobo land, all in Delta State and other places in the Niger Delta), there is a high record of smog in the early morning. At night, many people find it difficult to sleep because of the heat and fire. All these have consequences for both human and non-human beings. Gas flaring in the Niger Delta has not stopped. What was written about the Niger Delta in 2005 is still essentially true. Nigeria’s oil fields contribute more to global warming than many other countries in the world (Curtin 2005, 70). In the United Nations, as of 2005, 0.6 % of oil production is flared, while in Nigeria, it is 76% (Curtin 2005). As of 2019, nearly 8 billion cubic metres of gas are flared in Nigeria (World Bank 2017). It is the same oil companies, or their partners, that operate in the Niger Delta and Western countries. It amounts to environmental racist practices to have two different standards of behaviour. The human beings in both environments are humans with equal rights. The point is that the outlook of many multinational oil companies is racist in attitude and practice. In a disproportionate manner, that which they will not tolerate in their home countries, they allow to happen in the Niger Delta. Many of the same shareholders in oil companies in Nigeria will not behave in the same manner in their home countries.

In a little town in Delta State called Erovie, the oil company Shell has injected a million litres of waste into an oil well that had been abandoned (Olukoya 2001). From the health problems that occurred as a result of this, up to 93 people have died of a mysterious sickness, and it has been confirmed that the chemicals that Shell released into the atmosphere were poisonous (Olukoya 2001). What has taken place in Erovie and many other communities in the Niger Delta amounts to environmental racism, and there is a need for environmental justice to be done to the communities of this region. This is the argument of 50 non-governmental groups who attended the Durban conference on racism (Olukoya 2001).

In the West, there is a greater sense of respect for the environment than in the Niger Delta, even if it is from a profit motive on the part of multinational oil corporations. When there was an oil fire on April 15, 2000, in the Gulf of Mexico, the companies went into immediate action to clean and remediate. By the summer of that year, it had been curtailed (Rolston 2012, 4). Note the response to the British Petroleum (BP) oil spill disaster:

There was outrage at the damage caused, anxiety about future deep water drilling to quench American thirst for oil, blame for causing the event, the greed for money, oil, and wondering about the trade-offs between the need for oil and environmental integrity. There was fear that the Gulf oil spill might be a harbinger of forthcoming similar disasters. Amidst all this wake-up, confusion, and disaster, Americans seemed to be gaining consensus that environmental conservation must be high on the national agenda. The big spill left no doubt about that. (Rolston 2012, 4)

Painfully, in the Niger Delta, oil spillage or fire can be left unattended for months, if not years, by oil companies. There is utter neglect for the people, their cultures, and their lands. The above injustices meted out to the Niger Delta ought not to be tolerated. There should be an equitable distribution of the burden and pain of oil exploitation to both the people of the region and the powerful shareholders and many others who benefit from the oil wealth of the Niger Delta. Moreover, the people in the region should get more from the benefits of oil since the exploitation takes place on their land and the hazards are located in their communities. Therefore, more than environmental justice is required in the Niger Delta; there should rather be a just affirmative/preferential option to remediate the Niger Delta and its people.

## Ethical Appraisal and Evaluation

The goal of this article, outside what has been done so far, is to also do an ethical or moral appraisal of the question of environmental racism in the Niger Delta. Ethics, here, is understood to mean the study of what is right or what is wrong. It probes into what makes an action or behaviour to be right or wrong. There are various criteria for determining what is right or wrong. Though there may be various standards, there is also the fact that universally, there are basic standards of morality that signatories to the United Nations have subscribed to, such as in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and other standards. It is essentially from the perspectives of human rights that this article critiques the practices of oil companies in the Niger Delta. To subject ethics to relativism will be very problematic. There will ultimately be no basis for solidarity and cooperation in the world. And if that is the case, it becomes difficult to judge what is right or what is wrong. The Universal Declaration speaks of human beings as equal in dignity and also rights, and that they all share in a common universal brotherhood (United Nations 1948). That brotherhood, which binds all human beings together, should be respected and valued.

People who practise environmental racism will generally not agree that it is environmental racism. It is the same with the phenomenon of racism. Hardly ever will any person who practises racism agree that he/she is racist. The very action of taking waste out of your environment and neighbourhood to that of another community, with the hazards and burden disproportionately borne by that community, is discriminatory. Concerning the Niger Delta, many Niger Deltans are rarely involved in the management of their environment regarding oil exploration. Many do not partake in environmental policies. These policies are strange to them, and their areas are underdeveloped and degraded. They suffer unfairly from the burden of oil exploration. While it is true that

there are representatives of peoples of the Niger Delta in the Nigerian senate, the reality is that there is still massive underdevelopment in the Niger Delta as a result of corruption. All the various commissions that the Federal Government of Nigeria has set up have not accomplished much from the people's perception. Many years after the landmark report of the United Nations Environment Report, calling for the clean-up of Ogoni land in the Niger Delta, the task remains uncompleted. In 2020, the NDDC was subjected to a probe, but not much has come out of it in terms of the development of the region.

Just as racism is a crime against humanity and a violation of human rights and dignity, so also is environmental racism. Environmental racist practices do not only harm the environment; they harm the health and well-being of human beings. When industrial waste and poisonous chemicals are emitted into the environment, they cause sickness and diseases. People's right to health, clean and safe water, and a healthy environment are violated. Their right to freedom of movement is also greatly vitiated. When streams and land are polluted, the places where people can practise their indigenous occupations are destroyed.

There should be no doubt that what multinational oil forces are doing in the Niger Delta amounts to environmental racism. Terisa Turner, a coordinator of an international non-governmental group, has said: "These practices are not, and could not, be pursued in Western Europe or North America, nor should they be practised anywhere." For her, what these oil companies are doing amounts to environmental racism, as the rich countries of the Western hemisphere and their shareholders benefit from oil profits from the degraded Niger Delta (cited in Olukoya 2001). Turner argues rightly that environmental racism continues unabated because oil companies with corporate relations departments peddle lies to deceive their shareholders while the people of the region are living in degrading and dehumanising poverty, and the money from oil that goes to the government, is stolen by some government officials.

Multinational oil corporations operate as if they have no duty to non-human nature. Even their duties to humans in the Niger Delta are poorly done. If oil companies truly value human lives and well-being in the Niger Delta, they will ensure better environmental practices. It is evident from reports of the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and so forth, that the so-called corporate social responsibility of oil companies is questionable. They prefer to use weak and obsolete facilities to make more profits. It is clear from the rise of environmental ethics that humans, individually and corporately, have duties to the natural world or aspects of the natural world. Philosophers who have affirmed these duties include Holmes Rolston III, Tom Regan, Peter Singer, Thomas Berry, Arne Naess, and more. With the rise of the environmental movements that are well established in the Western world and environmental governance by many governments in the West, there are sound environmental practices. If these multinational oil companies follow the same standards that they follow in the West, the environment of the Niger Delta will become healthier and good for the well-being of the people. It is painful to note that practices that are not

tolerated in the West are carried out in the Niger Delta. It is tragic to note that oil companies simply see the environment of the Niger Delta as a resource and the people of the region as simply a means to an end—the making of profit for shareholders. This conflicts with Kantian ethics, which affirms seeing the human being as an end in itself. It is also against the philosophy of personalism, which affirms humans should not be treated as instruments. African indigenous ecological ontology is also in consonance with seeing the Earth as having intrinsic value, and that human beings should live in respect of the Earth, and not simply treat it for utilitarian purposes. Igbo ontology, the Oromo of Ethiopia, the Nso of Cameroon, and the Yoruba of Nigeria affirm that human beings should live in harmony with nature, while prudently making use of nature, not destroy it (Ezedike 2020). The idea of “Afroecosolidarity” has also been proposed as helpful in this regard. Afroecosolidarity affirms that African peoples in their various cultures before colonialism saw themselves as being in communal solidarity with all other entities in nature, and they have duties to protect them (Ikeke 2021; 2023).

In evaluating the situation of environmental racism and injustice in the Niger Delta, it should be noted that what is taking place is a form of internal colonialism. Colonialism in all of its forms is evil and wrong. No human rights instruments or declaration supports it. It is condemned by the following human rights instruments (Organisation of African Unity 1981; United Nations 1948). What is internal colonialism? It is different from classical colonialism, which was “a process of economic and political domination and exploitation of nations by other more powerful nations” (Adeola 2009). Internal colonialism is a “condition in which both the dominant and subordinate groups coexist as natives of the same society” (Steady 2009). There is no doubt that what is taking place in the Niger Delta is internal colonialism. The elements of internal colonialism are present in the country: 1) ethnocentric domination that is used to control the natural resources of the Niger Delta; 2) alliance of the dominant groups with political elites and multinational forces that milk the resources and repress any violent agitation by the people; and 3) environmental destruction and disruption of lives and livelihoods (Adeola 2009).

## Concluding Reflection

In light of the foregoing, the article avers categorically that environmental racism is taking place in the Niger Delta. This environmental racism manifests itself in unfair environmental practices and policies imposed upon the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta is merely seen as a resource for making a profit by multinational oil companies. They care little or nothing for the environment, culture, and people of the region. As noted, environmental practices that are not tolerated in the West are carried out in the Niger Delta. The peoples of the Niger Delta bear a greater burden of oil exploitation in their land, and yet at the same time, scant benefits come to them from oil exploration. The Niger Delta is grossly underdeveloped and is marginalised in Nigeria and the international political economy. All areas on Earth, no matter where they are situated, should be protected from pollution (Bullard 2010, 499). The article agrees with Gbadegesin (2001, 200) that “the problematic practices by multinational corporations

and developed nations engaged in business in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria,” and the unfriendly environmental behaviours of oil merchants, amount to racism.

In line with ethical environmental practices in the West, universal and regional human rights standards, and in respect of African cultural values of ecojustice towards lands and peoples, multinational oil companies should end harmful environmental practices. The government has a moral obligation to ensure that multinational oil companies follow ethical standards and best practices in oil exploration. All and sundry must advocate for environmental justice in the Niger Delta. If this is done, a better and more sustainable Niger Delta is set to arise.

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