

## AN ECOCENTRIC PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF UNEP'S ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF Ogoniland

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### Abstract

*There has been a dominance of the anthropocentric orientation in science and technology, in economics and government thinking, in academia and among the world's religious traditions, with only an ambivalent support for ecocentrism through the history of thought (Taylor et al., 2016). Despite occasional admittance of the urgency of axiological paradigm shift by the UN it continues to confine itself to the anthropocentric framework in its assessment of environmental despoliation. This article demonstrates the inadequacy of UNEP's anthropocentric worldview by appraising its Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland (2011) in light ecocentric environmental philosophy. UNEP's assessment of what went wrong and what needs be done remains at the level of environmental law and fails to see the ethical failure antecedent to the ineffectiveness of environmental law in the form of existing oil company environmental guidelines. The objective is to underscore the failure of UNEP's assessment to espouse any remarkably different approach to human relation to the environment that promises protection for the ecosystem. For progress in confronting the challenge of environmental protection this article concludes with a recommendation that ecological ethics be emphasized in environmental education to broaden the axiological framework of environmental ethics accessible in academia and to government and private policy makers.*

**Keywords:** Ecocentric, UNEP's , Environmental and Ogoniland

### Introduction

Anthropocentrism continues to be the world's dominant philosophical framework, even in projects that spell out environmental sustainability and ethics as a stated goal. A clear instance of this is UNEP's Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland (2011) which blames human destruction of the environment only as destruction of resources and recommends no ethical change of behaviour beyond prudential protection of the said resources on account of their value to the human community. Another critical example is the failure of the UN and educational policy makers across the world to introduce ecocentrism into their much celebrated education for sustainable development programs. The critical challenge is the seeming or actual ignorance of the academia about ecocentrism, or its scepticism concerning its practicality. There is therefore the urgent need to expose, explore and appraise the ecocentric perspective of environmental philosophy and thus make it accessible to the academic public as the less charted and more radically philosophical framework of environmental ethics. It is from that background that this article appraises UNEP's environmental assessment of Ogoniland in

light of ecocentric environmental philosophy, with the objective of putting UNEP's anthropocentric orientation to the test of an ecocentric reassessment, thus underscoring the philosophical significance of ecocentrism.

### **The Concept of Ecocentrism**

Ezedike captures its essence when he says that “ecocentrism puts all beings in the ecosystem in one moral universe” and explains this to imply that “quite apart from its assumed instrumental value in supporting the existence of human species, nature is deemed as valuable in and of itself. humans, therefore, ought to respect and demonstrate moral responsibility to all beings in the ecosystem” (2020, 82-83). Washington et al (2017) similarly maintain that ecocentrism is the broadest term for worldviews that recognize intrinsic value in all lifeforms and ecosystems themselves, including their abiotic components. Anthropocentrism, in contrast, values other lifeforms and ecosystems insofar as they are valuable for human well-being, preferences and interests. Touching on the value theory root of the concept, Keller (2019:177) opines that ecocentrism “is an axiology that identifies biotic communities as worthy of moral consideration. It is a form of holism whose ethical good is based on the health and flourishing of the ecological entity as a whole. In a local context, this consists of the biotic community, in the global context, this consists of the biosphere”. Rowe (1994) likewise observes that ecocentrism proposes “a value-shift from *Homo sapiens* to planet earth: Ecosphere. A scientific rationale backs the value-shift. All organisms are evolved from Earth, sustained by Earth. Thus Earth, not organism, is the metaphor for Life. Earth not humanity is the Life-center, the creativity-center. Earth is the whole of which we are subservient parts”. Callicott (1999) sums it up in describing ecocentrism as a Copernican revolution in ethics that seeks to extend the boundaries of moral significance from homo sapiens to nonhuman nature.

### **History of Ecocentrism**

Animism, which promoted a highly ecocentric attitude to the environment, was the dominant culture in early antiquity (White, 1962) and persisted almost everywhere until the rise of Jewish monotheism and Greek philosophy assigned the role of “conqueror” of the rest of the natural world. Though Hughes (1994, viii) observes that the Greeks and Romans had environmental problems, Hargrove (1989) contends that the general philosophical climate of classical antiquity made ecological thinking technically implausible, if not conceptually impossible (p.26).

Inspired jointly by Greek philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition, modern Western science was cast upon the unecological paradigm that nature has no reason to exist save to serve man. Inspired by Cartesian dualism and the reductionism of Newtonian physics, and despite Copernicus and in spite of Darwin, modern science, according to Rees (1988), gave impetus to a sister physics in the form of capitalist economics, which sees 'the environment' in terms of isolated, individual resources, whose component parts are bendable to human will and purpose. The extreme anthropocentrism of this has led to global indifference to the disastrous ecological consequences of industrialization, while the gross national product (GNP) represented by bank statements is exalted as the

universal indicator of national health and social wellbeing.

Though accenting to the need for a broadened value consideration for nature in the interest of environmental sustainability, the UN has not been consistent in conceding to ecocentrism. The World Charter for Nature in 1982 held that “every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man” and demanded that in relating to them “man must be guided by a moral code of action” (United Nations, 1982: preamble). In *Our Common Future*, the UN held that development “must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth: the atmosphere, the waters, the soils, and living beings” (WCED, 1987a: 57). The Tokyo Declaration that accompanied *Our Common Future* lost the ecocentric viewpoint again. Its Principle 1 was to “increase growth” while Principle 3 was to “conserve and enhance the resource base” for humans (WCED, 1987b). In its Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland, UNEP (2011), as we shall see, the UN maintains a strictly anthropocentric focus, with no suggestion that the environment has an “intrinsic value” or “moral consideration” apart from its economic, health or cultural value to man. This history of ambivalent attitude towards ecocentrism underscores the need for academic research to look in the direction of ecocentrism, considering the catastrophic results of the anthropocentric orientation.

As an approach to environmental philosophy, Callicott (1999:159) explains that “ecocentrism sprung from Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic*. Leopold aimed at advancing an alternative to anthropocentrism in his *Sand County Almanac* and his *Land Ethic* is a clear-cut example of an ecocentric philosophy since it is centered on the whole ecological (or biotic) communities rather than their individual members. Schweitzer (1925) wrote *Civilization and Ethics* earlier but he was more biocentric in approach, emphasizing “reverence to life”. Taylor (1986) who wrote *Respect for Nature* much later got closer to ecocentrism. It is philosophical reactions to Leopold, however, and to Callicott (1987, 1989, 1994, 1999, 2013) his critical advocate, that has delineated ecocentrism as a philosophical framework in environmental ethics. Our task is to appraise the ecocentric status of UNEP's environmental assessment of Ogoniland.

### **Elements of Ecocentrism**

There are certain basic elements that characterize ecocentrism irrespective of the diversity of authors and viewpoints that intersect to constitute its universe of understanding. The most fundamental of them is holism, the outlook on the world as one entity of interdependent and interconnected parts. The second most critical viewpoint in ecocentrism is moral extensionism, the contention that nonhuman nature has a right to moral consideration in relation to human conduct. Another, on which the preceding position rather depends, is the according of intrinsic value to nature, that is, considering nature as having inherent worth of itself and in itself, prior to human valuation or usefulness to man. The other two are community metaphor and ecological conscience. The community concept draws on ecology and evolutionary sociobiology to assert that the degree of kinship between human and nonhuman nature amounts to a kind of community relationship which implies modes of cooperation and limitation of conduct in the struggle for existence. If the community metaphor is accepted then ecological

conscience, a kind of ecological moral sentiment, follows logically, according to Leopold. The last two are demands for attitudinal change and environmental education, both critical for the realization of the integrity of the ecological community.

### **Fundamental Issues in UNEP's Assessment of Ogoniland**

UNEP's environmental assessment of Ogoniland (UNEP, 2011) is the most comprehensive white paper on the environmental footprint of the oil industry in Africa, a product of scientific research conducted by competent experts with appropriate tools and criteria leading to credible conclusions, as opposed to politically orchestrated woe litanies or popular foul cries based on observable but uninvestigated environmental damage. Speaking for itself, the document admits of being “the best available understanding of what has happened to the environment of Ogoniland—and the corresponding implications for affected populations”, with a promise to provide “clear operational guidance as to how that legacy can be addressed” (8). It is this content and purpose of the document that we undertake to address within the framework of ecocentric environmental philosophy. For this purpose, an outline of the essential elements of the documents' empirical findings can be made as follows:

- Destruction of streams and rivers (surface water) through contamination with hydrocarbon (p.68),
- Contamination of underground water and soil due to vertical sipping of pollutants in areas where pollution has been unattended and or repeated for long periods (p.96-108ff.),
- Destruction of mangroves (aquatic vegetation) and farmlands due to repeated and unattended pollution (p.72),
- Destruction of fish and various kinds of seafood and aquatic creatures (p.178ff.)
- Destruction of air quality due to hydrocarbon sooth from gas flaring and artisanal refining (p.102),
- Failure of oil producing company to abide by available oil industry environmental regulation such as EGASIN (Environmental Guidelines and Standards for Petroleum Industries in Nigeria [1992]), including failure to decommission abandoned oil facilities (p. 43ff., 115ff, 138ff.),
- Failure of government and oil company to safeguard pipelines and abandoned oil facilities from bunkering and artisanal refining,
- Failure of SPDC's RENA (remediation by enhanced natural attenuation) procedure to achieve either environmental clean-up or legislative compliance (p. 144 ff.)
- Recommendation of clean up as joint restitution by government and oil company (p.207 ff.)
- Recommendation of environmental education in the form of awareness campaign (p.215)

It is these contents of UNEP's assessment that we shall now appraise in light of key concepts of ecocentric environmental philosophy.

### **The UNEP Assessment and the Community Concept**

As a prime concept of the ecocentric perspective the community concept constitutes a foremost challenge to the UNEP environmental assessment of Ogoniland. In this regard it is observable that the UNEP assessment does not indicate any concept of “community” that binds the streams and rivers and mangroves and tilapia and cockles together with the human inhabitants of the land and drillers and refiners of oil as unavoidably bound together as one whole. UNEP did not observe any breach of community relationship between the human actors on the land and the nonhuman members of the land community. The analysis did not observe the logical contradiction in the action of the people who took part in bunkery and artisanal refining that laced the creeks with layers of hydrocarbons and decimated the aquatic populations decisively yet used monies sold from the oil business to search in vain for fish they could buy for consumption. The same can be said of Shell's ravenous oil exploitation activities. UNEP did not observe that the oil company acted from a perspective of one who did not see himself as belong to a “community” with the land on which oil was struck. In Leopold's language, Shell acted with the mindset of modern homo sapiens, the conqueror of the land community. From this conqueror perspective oil business could thus be done without regard for the land and other members of the land community. The violation and reckless destruction of fauna and flora with no honest commitment to restoration is symptomatic of a pre-ecological understanding of the Earth as given to man to plunder and conquer as his strength can afford.

### **UNEP Assessment and Intrinsic Value**

Closely related to the absence of a community understanding in the human treatment of land is the failure to regard every member of the environment as having value in themselves, irrespective of their instrumental value to mankind. This is poignantly missing in UNEP's assessment. The assessment failed to observe that an instrumental axiology of the ecological community by the human members who do not see themselves as members stand at the baseline of the ecological disaster that both multinational oil business and local refining turned Ogoniland into. Even UNEP's judgment of misconduct on the part of these local and international actors only considered the instrumental value of the destroyed “resources”. There was no definite reference to a loss of ecological value or other forms of inherent worth attributable to the various nonhuman victims of the environmental damage. UNEP programmed its assessment on the ecologically fallacious premise consistently disparaged by Leopold, namely, the supposition that evidence of wrongdoing “had to be economic in order to be valid”. It appears by UNEP's assessment that the destruction of mangrove vegetation and farmlands and creeks alongside the massive extermination of periwinkle, tilapia, catfish, crayfish, mallet, sardines, bonga fish, oysters, cockles, mussels, and various kinds of crabs in the ogoni rivers was wrong only because of the economic and human cultural value of the species involved. There were surely thousands of other species of non-economically valuable and perhaps culturally unpopular species destroyed as a result of the massive pollution of land, stream and creek which the UNEP report apparently did not bother to assess or report about.

In Rolston's analysis, the perpetrators of the environmental damage would have had a sense of duty towards the natural world if they had an appropriate judgment of the values

resident in the natural world quite apart of their usefulness to human purposes. Among such cognitive, critical and moral duties of humans to the natural world missed out in the UNEP assessment is what Rolston captures as the duty of “transcending human interests and linking them up with those of the whole natural Earth” (1988, 72). In Rolston's view it is such duties as this owed by humans towards the natural world are part of the reasons human superiority to nonhuman nature isn't “groundless prejudice”. In Leopold's land ethic perspective even the members of the ecological community who have no direct human utility value have critical ecological value to the extent they contribute to the integrity, stability and beauty of the ecosystem. And, again, for Leopold, every member of the ecosystem should have been a subject of UNEP's value judgment for the sake of the ecological whole of which it is a part, if not for its own sake. From the angle of Taylor's biological egalitarian framework, UNEP assessed the damage done to the Ogoni ecosystems on the same ecologically ignorant and logically fallacious (it involves a *petitio principii*) consideration that humans are the superior species, that nonhuman species have no inherent worth, and that usefulness to human species is the standard for determining what treatment other species deserve.

### **UNEP's Assessment and Ecological Conscience**

Another point on which an ecocentric review of environmental destruction of Ogoniland would dwell relates to the concept of ecological conscience. The UNEP assessment could not see this because it viewed the disaster with the short-sighted lenses of anthropocentrism. An ecocentric binoculars would go further to see that an absence of ecological moral sentiment on the part of the human members of the ecological community stood at the backdrop of the senseless treatment of the environment fundamentally. Despite variations in the conception of conscience across the continuum of philosophy's history, Leopold's notion of ecological conscience as part of the evolutionary possibility of a land ethic is not philosophically unthinkable. The scholastics, most ably represented by Thomas Aquinas, saw conscience as the act of applying universal principles (i.e., divine laws) to real situations (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1 q79; Langston 2000 and 2015; Sorabji 2014: 62–66). Ecologically this implies that the created order makes certain moral demands on human conduct in real life situations even in relation to the natural environment. As Schaffer (2009) has argued, the sentiments of the Christian saints and other provisions of patristic and medieval hagiography are capable of alignment with the facts and theories of evolutionary, molecular, and ethological biology to suggest a behaviour pattern demanding more responsible attitudes and actions toward other species (p.149). In modern times Rousseau defines conscience as “an innate principle of justice and virtue, by which ... we judge our own actions or those of others to be good or evil (Rousseau 1921 [1762]: 253). This too is applicable to Leopold's idea that humanity activate our ecological conscience. Callicott has been emphatic in relating Leopold's ecological conscience to the “moral sentiment” theory of 18<sup>th</sup> Century sentimental philosopher, especially David Hume. In Kant, “every human being, as a moral being, has a conscience within him originally” (Kant 1797 [1991]: 160), and conscience is one of the four “natural predispositions of the mind (...) for being affected by concepts of duty”, the other three being moral feeling, love for one's neighbours, and respect for oneself (Kant 1797 [1991]: 160). This too does not

contradict the prospect of an ecological imperative as a matter of conscience, a judgment of the mind, to act dutifully towards nature in certain acceptable ways and to refrain from acting in certain unacceptable ways. In Leopold's analysis, the lack of community understanding and absence of moral sentiment between human actors in the Ogoni environmental odyssey and the ecological victims translated to the lack of care and sense of duty to respect and protect the natural environment.

### **UNEP's Assessment and Moral Extensionism**

An ecocentric appraisal of UNEP's assessment further considers the extent of moral extensionism in the assessment. The only apparent submission to moral extensionism in the assessment is the demand for clean up of the degraded environment by a collaboration of those who principally colluded to wreck the havoc in the first instance, the Federal Government and the Shell Petroleum Development Company. However, the assessment makes no proscription or approbation on the basis of any conception of right and wrong in human relation to nature. Even the demand for clean up as an ethical responsibility does not appear to be made in respect of the respect and care which the environment deserves in its own right in repair for the heinous disruption of its integrity, stability and beauty, but rather as restitution to the human community whose "resource" base for subsistent farming and fishing had been vandalized. In other words, the demand for clean up made by UNEP in favor of the Ogoni environment qualifies as call for moral responsibility only on the anthropocentric level, and does not meet the requirement of moral extensionism characteristic of ecocentrism.

Despite divergence of opinions among environmental philosophers regarding what the trademarks of moral consideration should be, the failure of the UNEP assessment to consider the various nonhuman victims of the Ogoni ecological disaster as deserving moral standing on their own worth leaves the assessment light-footed as a work of environmental ethics. Maintaining the classical human chauvinism of traditional ethics, the UNEP assessment fails, in the language of Richard and Val Routley, to consider a "removal of humans from a dominant position in the natural order" (1980, 96). The UNEP document leaves its reader with the classical impression that humans are free to do as they wish with the environment insofar as they do not cause damage to their human usefulness. Here Leopold would disparage the UNEP assessment for failure to evince an extension of ethics from people to land. Taylor would refute UNEP for failure to admit respect for nature into for its value into its assessment. Schweitzer would criticize the UNEP environmental assessment for failing to make ethical judgments regarding the mistreatment of various "will-to-live" in the Ogoni environmental carnage and would roundly reject the document's inability to call for an "extended responsibility with regard to everything that has life" (in Pojman, p.96).

### **UNEP's Assessment and Attitudinal Change**

Having failed in the previous aspects of ecocentrism considered in the foregoing, the UNEP project also failed in what should be their consequent, namely the ecocentric demand for attitudinal change. Ecological ethics, in Leopold's connotation, being fundamentally about "a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence" and

a “tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of cooperation”, the crux of any environmental assessment would assess current modes of conduct and prescribe appropriate change of behaviour. For the Land Ethic Leopold prescribed a change of conduct on the part of homo sapiens from the role of the conqueror of the land community to a plain member and citizen of the community. The UNEP assessment prescribed certain changes of behaviour but not in respect of the nonhuman members of the ecological community. The prescriptions of the UNEP document does not extend to the realm of human obligations towards nonhuman nature. The assessment does not call for respect for life and care for nature for their intrinsic biodiversity value. Naess would appraise the UNEP (2011, 138-151) assessment as having a shallow environmental approach, focusing almost exclusively on technical aspects of environmental protection, including, important as they are, noncompliance with the legal provisions of EGASPIN (Environmental Guidelines and Standards for Petroleum Industries in Nigeria [1992]) and ineffectual reliance by SPDC on RENA (Remediation by enhanced natural attenuation), thereby tending to “make the public more passive and disinterested in the more crucial non-technical lifestyle-related, environmental issues (in Zimmerman et al, 1993, 204). The UNEP document does not highlight in its recommendations the central challenge of attitudinal shift of environmental ethics; what Leopold dubbed “a little healthy contempt for a plethora of material blessings”; what Naess calls “simple living”, “appreciating life quality, ...rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living”. Pope Francis emphasizes this attitudinal change in his critique of the throwaway culture, that turns the earth into a pile of filth with accumulated rubbish from homes and businesses, construction and demolition sites, clinical, electronic and industrial sources, most of them non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive (LS, 21). Quoting Pope John Paul II, Francis would leave UNEP's assessment with a missing keynote on attitudinal change: “Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in “lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies” (LS, 5; CA, 58).

### **UNEP's Assessment and Environmental Education**

Considering the role of ignorance in our deepening environmental crisis (Leopold, 234-235; Tuttle, 2012), the final challenge of ecocentrism, or any environmental ethic whatsoever, is environmental education. This has been a critical dimension of ecocentrism. Significantly, however, UNEP's only reference to environmental education is an embarrassing half a sentence on the need for “awareness campaign” for local participants in bunkering and artisanal refining (2011, 215). Even so, UNEP's proposal for environmental education stops at informal education, with its susceptibility to unpredictability of definitive results and other limitations. In this UNEP appears to underestimate the role of education in checkmating the tide of environmental degradation. Then the recommended education leaves out the prime destroyers of the environment, the multinational oil companies and their staff and those undergoing formal education who shall take up leadership positions as government functionaries, institutional administrators and policy makers. Eventually the environmental education recommended is unabashedly simplistic and hopelessly human-centred, with emphasis only on “the disproportionate nature of the short-term financial gain set against the

medium to long-term health consequences” (215). In this the UNEP document fails in its rendition at the crescendo.

### **EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION**

The ecological disaster to which multinational oil business turned Ogoniland as evidenced in UNEP's assessment corroborates Leopold's repeated insistence that the conqueror (anthropocentric) relation of homo sapiens (humankind) to the environment (biotic community) to which he is merely a native, a plain member and citizen, is self-defeatist and calls for a new ethic of appropriate respect and care for the environment. The UNEP assessment demonstrates by implication the failure of classical philosophical ethics in its anthropocentric orientation to meet the global needs of environmental protection is evidenced in the catastrophic prospects of a looming environmental apocalypse due to global warming and climate change, resource depletion and desertification, ecosystem destruction and biodiversity loss, and global environmental pollution. The weaknesses of UNEP's assessment shows, as Wehrden et al (2016, 68) have argued, the urgency of research that aim at “harmonizing people and nature” (that is, that are ecocentric), and their “primary importance for achieving a sustainable future ... especially but not exclusively if they aid normative and transformative knowledge creation”.

Although ecocentrism was once thought to be theoretically groundless (Passmore 1974, Artfield 1992), its philosophical integrity has been robustly defended (Callicott 1987, 1999; Ress, 1988) and extensively expanded (Naess 1974, Rolston 1988). The converging postulation of ecocentric thinkers thus captured in the above critique of UNEP's environmental assessment of Ogoniland is that current threats to environmental sustainability cannot be checkmated by merely prudential anthropocentric prescriptions. A shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric models of human relation to nonhuman nature thus appears as a new Copernican revolution in ethics to which the UNEP assessment is diametrically disconnected. The inadequacy of anthropocentrism as an ethical framework for environmental protection implies the need for a new philosophical framework, just as the failure of geocentrism naturally called for a paradigm shift to heliocentrism as a logical necessity for scientific and civilizational progress (Kuhn, Popper). In view of progress in environmental protection we conclude with the recommendation that ecological ethics be emphasized in environmental education to broaden the axiological framework of environmental ethics accessible in academia and to government and private policy makers.

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