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RETHINKING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE NIGER DELTA

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Abstract
Albert Schweitzer's ethic of reverence for life emphasizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and advocates for a respectful and responsible relationship between humans and the natural world. The Niger Delta, a region rich in biodiversity and natural resources, has been plagued by environmental degradation and exploitation, leading to devastating impacts on local ecosystems and communities. This study, therefore, examines how Schweitzer's philosophy can inform and inspire efforts towards environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta, highlighting the need for a holistic and compassionate approach to human-nature relationships. The study draws on Schweitzer's writings, indigenous conservation styles in literary forms, as well as contemporary environmental and philosophical perspectives, to offer insights into the potential for environmental sustainability initiatives in the Niger Delta. The paper argues that if the people of the region adopt a reverent attitude towards life, it can promote more sustainable and equitable practices, and contribute to the restoration and preservation of the Niger Delta's fragile ecosystems. The findings of this study reveal that man's anthropocentric approach toward nature is mostly damaging the ecosystem. As a result, there is an urgent need for non-anthropocentric ethics to guide policymakers and Nigerians in their interactions with the natural environment. Therefore, emphasis is on Schweitzer's respect for a life-centred ethics that stretches moral consideration beyond biotic units to encompass abiotic components of nature.

Key Words: Reverence for Life, Environmental Sustainability, Niger Delta, Ethics, Conservation

Introduction

The Niger Delta region faces severe environmental crisis affecting communities and biodiversity. Human activities have led to environmental degradation, highlighting the need for sustainability. A holistic approach recognizing the intrinsic value of all life can promote environmental sustainability. Albert Schweitzer's "Reverence for Life" philosophy offers a framework for rethinking human-nature relationships, emphasizing respect for all living beings. This approach is relevant to the Niger Delta, where environmental impacts have been devastating. Respect for life ethics can lead to a harmonious nature, supporting environmental sustainability. Humans have become limited in their perspective, overlooking nature's complexity and the value of other living beings, including plants, animals, and fellow humans. Schweitzer's philosophy emphasizes that all life is sacred and interconnected, advocating for environmental protection for the benefit of all living beings, not just humans. This approach challenges the dominant human-centered view, promoting solidarity and respect for all life, ultimately benefiting humans in various ways. Schweitzer's view aligns with Korthals' (2016) observation that animals and plants possess impressive traits and abilities, often surpassing human capabilities. Recognizing these competences can inspire innovative solutions for humans, promoting sustainability and comfort. Nature's diverse abilities offer valuable lessons, rather than just being viewed as resources. Research also shows that exposure to natural environments, rich in fascinating elements, reduces cognitive load and improves cognitive and affective functioning (McMahan, 2018). Humans respond positively to nature, with environments featuring vegetation, water, and open views reducing stress (Ulrich, cited in McMahan, 2018). Appreciating nature's abilities can enhance human well-being.

This paper, therefore, appraises the relevance of Albert Schweitzer’s ecological oriented philosophy captioned "Reverence for Life" for environmental sustainability and how it can inform, inspire and aid efforts towards promoting sustainable development and environmental conservation in the Niger Delta. Hence, the objectives include:

- a review various literatures on environmental catastrophes in the Niger Delta and the impacts on local ecosystems and communities.
- an analysis of how Schweitzer's philosophy can inform and inspire environmental sustainability efforts in the Niger Delta, including the

promotion of sustainable livelihoods, conservation of biodiversity, and respect for indigenous cultures.

- ❖ Identifying similar and related values in literary texts that also promote, synergizes and strengthens Schweitzer's philosophical ideas on environmental sustainability.

Theoretical Frameworks:

i) Ecocentrism

Ecocentrism is an environmental philosophy that places intrinsic value on the ecosystem as a whole, including its non-living components like rivers, mountains, and air. Unlike anthropocentrism (human-centered) or biocentrism (life-centered), ecocentrism sees the ecosystem itself as the central focus of moral consideration. Key aspects include: values the ecosystem's integrity and balance, sees humans as part of the ecosystem, not superior to it, emphasizes interconnectedness and interdependence of all components and often linked to holistic and systems thinking. Thinkers like Aldo Leopold and Arne Naess are associated with ecocentric ideas. Leopold's "land ethic" is a classic example, advocating for humans to act as stewards of the land, recognizing its intrinsic value. Leopold (1949, p.8-9) gives moral status to the land community itself. He phrased his famous ethical precept as follows: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community." It is incorrect when it tends otherwise." Leopold's work highlights that all species, including humans, are interconnected products of evolution. His "Land ethic" shifts focus from human-centered views to preserving healthy ecosystems and responsible environmental management.

Ecocentrism is a fitting approach for addressing environmental issues, like those in the Niger Delta, as it emphasizes human obligations to nature. It aims to broaden moral values, promote sustainable practices, and improve environmental quality by transforming human activities to be more nature-friendly and reassessing humanity's relationship with the natural world. Ecocentrism shapes approaches like deep ecology, influencing environmental conservation and sustainability discussions. It's a nature-based value system that extends morality beyond humans to the entire natural world, seeing nature as the center of moral standing. Ecocentrism evaluates human actions based on their impact on ecological welfare, prioritizing the biotic community's well-being over individual members. This means showing love and care to all lives - terrestrial, aquatic,

plants, and animals - in the ecosystem. Ecocentrists believe humans have a moral responsibility to restore the environment, preserving ecosystem balance and processes. It values everything in nature, recognizing intrinsic value in all components, including the atmosphere, water, and soil that support life.

ii) Ecocriticism

This study also employs ecocriticism as an ancillary theory. Ecocriticism emerged in the 20th century, focusing on literature from an environmental perspective. Ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, encouraging a deeper understanding of humanity's connection with nature. It investigates literature in relation to ecological thought, ethics, and activism, exploring the impact of human activities on the environment. According to Buell (1995, p.105), ecocriticism is "the study of the relation between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of environmental praxis". Ecocriticism has evolved into various forms, including "green cultural studies", "eco-poetry", and "environmental literary criticism". At its core, it seeks to analyze the function of nature in literature and promote environmental awareness. As Estok (2001, p.220) notes that ecocriticism is committed to "affecting change by analyzing the function... of the natural environment or aspects of it represented in documents – literary or others". Ecocritics examine how literature reflects and shapes our relationship with the natural world, exploring themes such as environmental degradation, conservation, and sustainability. By studying literature through an ecocritical lens, scholars can gain insights into the complex interactions between humans and the environment, ultimately promoting a more empathetic and sustainable approach to the natural world.

(i) Environmental Catastrophe in the Niger Delta: An Overview

The Niger Delta region has recorded various environmental challenges in the last three decades in various magnitudes resulting to short and long terms devastation on the ecosystem. But also resulting to severe environmental and socio-economic challenges. These issues are largely driven by the petroleum industry. This crisis has raised global concern, with both human and natural factors contributing to the devastation. The Niger Delta region has suffered greatly due to environmental degradation caused by ecological imperialism, leading to the destruction of traditional economies, cultural practices, and socio-political wellbeing. This has resulted in a state of disquiet, with the region's people facing significant challenges to their way of life. This statement echoes the continued predicament in

the region's biodiversity. A region plagued by ecological problems leading to a state of widespread devastation. The discovery, exploration, and exploitation of oil have severely impacted agriculture, fishing, and the people's living conditions. Oil spills from pipes and leakage have contaminated lands, farms, and water, posing a significant threat to the region.

Ordinioha and Seiyefa (2005, p.4) highlight the devastating impact of oil spillage, affecting "at least 1,500 communities in the eight-crude oil producing states in Nigeria". The effects are far-reaching, with increased childhood malnutrition, bio-accumulation of heavy metals in food crops, and decline in overall quality of life. Adelana (2011, p.835) describes oil spillage as "the release of a liquid petroleum hydrocarbon into the environment due to human activities", with devastating effects on vegetation, marine life, and local livelihoods. Gas flaring and combustion release pollutants, causing air pollution and health issues. Opukri and Ibaba (2005, p.174). note that environmental degradation leads to "internal displacement of communities in the Niger Delta" and "occupational and income losses".

Obviously, gas flaring and fossil fuel combustion release pollutants like methane, carbon monoxide, and particulate matter, causing air pollution and health issues**.** Oil spills and effluent discharge contaminate water sources, affecting aquatic life and human consumption**.** Habitat destruction and pollution threaten plant and animal species, compromising ecosystem balance. The region's devastation has led to loss of livelihoods, as farmlands and rivers used for agriculture and fishing are destroyed. This damage affects both humans and the environment, threatening future generations. Agochi (2014) notes that gas flaring increases carbon emissions, releasing soot and carbon monoxide, and causing climatic changes that lead to extreme floods and droughts.

According to Effiong & Ubi (2012), the Niger Delta's geography makes it vulnerable to flooding, as rivers overflow and lands become unusable for agriculture. The environmental damage affects human and aquatic life, polluting water and contaminating soil. Oil exploitation has left indigenous farm households with less fertile farmlands and limited access to clean water, weakening family and communal bonds. As Agochi (2014, p.2355) submits that, "The effect of gas flaring is multifaceted causing undesirable ecosystem disequilibrium". Gas flaring raises temperatures, rendering land inhabitable and uncultivable. Ovuakporaye et al. (2012) emphasize that increased temperature and climate variability have seriously affected agricultural activities, impacting farm households' wellbeing in the Niger Delta.

In addition, several cultural art forms from the Niger Delta region have also continued to depict the deleterious condition of the Niger Delta environment. For instance, in Okpewho's *Tides* (1993), the devastating impact of environmental destruction on the Niger Delta region takes center stage. The story explores the consequences of oil exploration and exploitation, highlighting the destruction of aquatic ecosystems, loss of biodiversity, and the displacement of local communities. Examples from the novel: oil spills and pollution of waterways, destruction of mangrove forests and marine life and displacement of communities and loss of ancestral lands. The novel is a powerful portrayal of the human and environmental cost of oil extraction in the Niger Delta, emphasizing the need for environmental justice and sustainability.

Ojaide's autobiography, *Great Boys: An African Childhood*, highlights the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta region. The narrator describes gas flaring's impact on Ibada community, causing intense heat, fire clouds, and disruption to daily life (Ojaide, 1998:126-128). The gas flares bring eternal heat, killing ants and altering the local climate, illustrating the ecological nuisance faced by the community. The flaring of gas as the passage suggests releases greenhouse gases, which contributes to climate change and causing thermal pollution, acid rain, and heat damage to soil and crops.

Similarly, environmental degradation is a major theme in Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006). The novel highlights the devastating impact of oil exploration on the Niger Delta. Ojaide vividly describes the destruction of the environment, lands, and waters, painting a picture of a once thriving ecosystem now ravaged by pollution. The Activist and Ebi are shocked by the polluted water, where the "herb-dark draught" has turned "light green, greasy, and smelly". The passage highlights the loss of biodiversity, with flying fish, storks, kingfishers, and other exotic birds disappearing due to oil pollution. Ojaide in the novel reveals all the culprits responsible for destroying environment.

Okpewho (1993) novel, *Tides* portrays environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region through the lens of human-nature interconnectedness. The novel highlights the destructive impact of oil exploitation on the environment, affecting the lives of local communities. Key aspects of environmental degradation in the novel include: oil spills and pollution: Destruction of aquatic life and farmlands, impacting livelihoods, ecological imbalance: Alteration of natural habitats and disruption of traditional ways of life and community displacement. The narrative underscores the human cost of environmental

degradation, emphasizing the need for sustainable practices and environmental stewardship.

Garrick (2000) portrays the Niger Delta as a polluted and devastated regional space. Gas flaring and oil spills are everyday occurrences, with young boys like Doye, Kaniye, Amaibi, and Tubo describing the "hellfire" in their land. The gas flare, a "gift" from Imperial Oil, makes the island unbearable, killing animals and destroying livelihoods. Fishermen are forced out of the river, and farmers can't farm due to oil-soaked lands. Amaibi explains that the gas flare is a destructive presence, while Doye's account of an oil spill on the Asiama River is heartbreaking. The river is degraded, with thick, black oil floating on top, killing fish and making the water stink. The environment is devastated, and the people's lives are ruined, with communities forced to live in a polluted environment, losing their livelihoods and dignity. The novel highlights the devastating impact of oil exploitation on the Niger Delta, leaving communities to suffer the consequences.

In addition, Nwoye (2015) depicts the human-environment relationship in the Niger Delta, where oil exploitation has devastated the ecosystem. The discovery of oil disrupts the community's peaceful life, bringing environmental degradation. The people of Ubolu were unaware of the oil beneath their land, but its discovery brings suffering and death. The novel highlights the devastating impact of oil exploration on the community. A community leader's speech evokes despair and sympathy, detailing the destruction of their environment and livelihoods. The community's economic life is under threat, with oil spillage destroying fertile land, and fish and livestock disappearing. The people are denied access to clean water, leading to hardship and poor health. The community leader urges action against the injustice, highlighting the polluted environment, contaminated water, and dying livestock.

Also, Ogochukwu (2013) relates a vivid picture of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. The story begins with a stark portrayal of a devastated environment, ravaged by oil spillage and gas flaring, leading to poverty, loss of livelihood, and unemployment. Ebiye, a spinster, laments the loss of nature, mourning the destruction of her beautiful homeland. Her life is a testament of the destruction as she dies after the rivers are polluted and the herbs she relies on are destroyed. Arogo, returning from overseas, is shocked by the environmental degradation and its impact on his people, noting their poor health and lack of access to herbal remedies. Isabel and Boma witness the dire situation, seeing destroyed farmlands, polluted water, and people living in shacks. Children fetch water from contaminated streams. The novel highlights the curse of oil

exploration, bringing hardship, agony, and tragedy to the people, rather than blessing them. The disadvantages of oil business outweigh its benefits, leaving the region with acidic water, polluted environment, sickness, and death.

Both Agary (2006) and Habila (2010) document the Niger Delta region's devastation. Agary's novel highlights oil spills' impact on local farming and fishing, with Bibi's farm affected by crude oil leakage, forcing her out. The spillage destroys farmlands and aquatic life, causing villagers to lose their livelihoods. The strong smell of crude oil also poses health risks (Agary, 2006, p.4). Zilayefa notes the gradual decline of agricultural yields and river creatures due to oil spills, acid rain, and gas flares, illustrating the cumulative impact on the community's occupation and environment (Agary, 2006, p.4).

Habila (2010) however, explores the horrific actions of man which have adversely affected the eco-system, resulting in terrible consequences for all. This is evident in several pages of the novel where Rufus reveals how rivers and lands have been contaminated beyond measure. The erstwhile sources of livelihood have now become poisonous due to oil spills and toxic waste contamination:

> Mi driver the water was clear and mobile, but towards the banks it turned brackish and still... a bat flying overhead, a dead fish on the oil-polluted water....We drifted almost aimlessly on the opaque misty water. The water took on various forms.... Sometimes, it was a snake, twisting and fast and slippery, poisonous.... Their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines (Habila, 2010, pp. 3-4; 34; 40).

Rufus draws a sharp contrast between the present state of the physical environment of the community and the one known to him in the past, noting how unrewarding the villagers' efforts at seas are as they merely succeed in catching 'a handful of thin wiggling fish' (Habila, 2010, p.25). Gloria later adds her voice, stating that many islands around her used to be a big habitat for bats, but now have a few dozen due to the gas flares that kill them (Habila, 2010, p.120). At every direction now, one sees '...dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fish bobbed white-bellied between tree roots.... The patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil...' (Habila, 2010, p. 8-9).

Obviously, from the various review data, the Niger Delta region is a paradox, with its rich natural resources and devastating environmental degradation. The destruction of livelihoods and ecosystems by the government and oil cartels is a "conspiracy against the people of the Niger delta". The exploitation is both "genocidal and eco-cidal", highlighting the severe impact on human and environmental well-being. The opinions and data emphasize that the plight of the Niger Delta is a global concern, with the writers stating that the general insensitivity to the plight of this region remains an anathema and a stain on our common global corporate humanity. This underscores the need for collective responsibility and action to address the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta. It is within this purview that Schweitzer's ethics for the respect for life will gain reverence. There is therefore, a pressing need for ethical consideration and responsible management of the region's natural resources to mitigate these impacts and ensure a sustainable future. No doubt, the region's challenges highlight the need for a more effective and sustainable approach to environmental management and community development. A reverence for life and the environment could provide a foundation for addressing the Niger Delta's challenges and promoting sustainable development. Schweitzer's "reverence for life" philosophy emphasizes the intrinsic value of all life and the need for responsible stewardship of the environment.

ii) Schweitzer's Reverence for Life: Rethinking Environmental Conservation in the Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria faces severe environmental degradation due to the petroleum industry, with oil spills, gas flaring, and other activities damaging agricultural lands, water sources, and vegetation, impacting human welfare and ecosystems. Global concern is growing, and urgent action is needed to address this issue, which will have long-term consequences for coastal communities reliant on agriculture and fishing. In this context, Albert Schweitzer's philosophy of "reverence for life" offers a valuable framework for rethinking environmental sustainability. Schweitzer's ethics emphasize the intrinsic value of all life, promoting a holistic approach to environmental conservation. The relevance of Schweitzer's philosophy to the Niger Delta's environmental issues, highlights the need for a shift in human values and behaviors towards the environment. Schweitzer's philosophy emphasizes humans' capacity for reason and change, aligning with sustainable development principles (Brundtland, 1987, p.27). This

involves meeting current needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet theirs, prioritizing basic needs, equity, biophysical protection, and preservation. The Niger Delta's fragile ecosystem requires attention and action to sustain biodiversity and limit waste, necessitating a comprehensive approach to sustainable development. By examining Schweitzer's principles and their application to the Niger Delta, this exposition will provide alternative thinking to a more sustainable and equitable approach to environmental management. The target is to stimulate critical thinking and reflection on the human-environment relationship, exploring ways to promote sustainability and preserve the Niger Delta's ecosystem for future generations.

To begin, Albert Schweitzer sought for the conception of the good that will bring him in union with world and life-affirmation. The phrase reverence for life flashed in his mind, and it became clear that reverence for life is the concept in which the world, life-affirmation, and ethics are linked side by side with civilizational goals established on intellect. According to Schweitzer, “If man aspires to reach clear concepts about himself and his relation to the universe, he must constantly look aside from the multifarious, which is the product of his intellect and knowledge, and focus on the first, most immediate, and continuously provided fact of his own consciousness” (Schweitzer, 1933, p.186). Reverence for life having been the new begging of Schweitzer’s philosophy, which he applies to all aspect of life contains sacredness and respect as its basic component. This sacredness and respect apply to all life inhabiting the environment not only humans, so respect and sacredness should be extended to all creatures.

Schweitzer's ethics of respect for life significantly influence human interaction with the environment. The concept of reverence for life offers a solution to the human-environment relationship, emphasizing that humans are part of a larger web of life. Humans must recognize that everything, including themselves, is a manifestation of the will-to-live, placing them in a position of both passivity and activity. Humans are subject to environmental events and have the capacity to impact other life forms, either positively or negatively. To give meaning to their existence, humans must transform their relationship with the environment into a spiritual one, achieved through resignation. This involves acknowledging their place in the world and finding inner liberation, allowing them to cope with challenges and cultivate a deeper, more tranquil self (Schweitzer, 1947, p.266).

Through resignation, humans establish a spiritual connection with the environment, acknowledging their place within it. Resignation is the spiritual and ethical affirmation of one's existence, recognizing interconnectedness with all life. By embracing this connection; Niger Deltans will feel a sense of unity with other living beings, empathizing with their experiences and striving to support and preserve life. Reflecting on life's mystery and connections leads humans to adopt the principle of reverence for life, demonstrating it through ethical actions. This principle values all life, recognizing the universal will-to-live that drives living organisms to maintain their existence. Traditional relationships with nature, as noted by Ogungbemi (1997) emphasize the importance of nature to communities, promoting a moral code of taking only what is needed. This philosophy, rooted in recognizing nature's value, contributes to environmental preservation. Thus, self-realization involves recognizing the interconnected growth and development of all living things in the environment. Humans rely on other biotic elements (humans, animals, plants, etc.) and abiotic elements (air, water, land, etc.) for survival, highlighting mutual dependence. Reverence for life acknowledges this interconnectedness, eliminating the need to prioritize one life over another, despite the world's inherent struggle for survival. As an ethical principle, it recognizes the uniformity of human-environment interaction, demonstrating the links between species: plants rely on soil bacteria, animals on plants, bacteria on organic waste, and humans on plants and animals. This illustrates the evolution of life and interconnectedness in the environment.

In the African ecological context, a bilateral relationship exists between non-human environmental elements and human inhabitants. Nfon and Mbu (2020) highlight the intrinsic connections between living organisms and their physical environment, as depicted in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*. The novel showcases the amaXhosas' pre-colonial life, guided by respect for and preservation of ecological elements, demonstrating the inseparability of human experience and the natural environment (Nfon & Mbu, 2020, p.282). This interdependence implies that policy makes and stakeholders in the Niger delta must consider environmental impacts when making policies, as they affect the environment and, in turn, human communities. Schweitzer advocates for love, respect, and care for all life, emphasizing the need for humans to care for bioregions, respect nature, and use technology wisely. Environmental stewards expect humanity to end exploitative practices, promoting sustainable growth regionally, nationally, and globally.

Mda's (2002) concept of "African redness" shares similarities with Schweitzer's reverence for life, emphasizing Africans' harmonious coexistence with nature. "Redness" refers to the integration of nature into African spiritual, social, economic, and psychological life, reflecting a deep connection with the environment. This perspective, rooted in African culture and religion, highlights the importance of nature in daily life, aligning with Mbiti (1969) observations. In *The Heart of Redness*, Mda explores the interplay between people and their aquatic environment, influencing physical and spiritual well-being. Traditional Africans rely on nature for daily needs and spiritual fulfillment, emphasizing the need to consider these aspects in sustainable development and ecological policies, encompassing spiritual, economic, physical, psychological, and social dimensions.

Furthermore, the ultimate moral principle, reverence for life, requires that all lives be respected and that no life, whatever of its kind, be destroyed. Man is flawed, though, because he believes that he must only deal with human connections as taught by conventional ethics, leaving open the question of how he should relate to the outside world and other people. Reverence for life will demonstrate to man that he is ethical only when life is seen as sacred; he must be driven to treat the sacred life with the same respect for life that he accords to his own. He acknowledges that it is right to protect, advance, and elevate life that has the capacity for development to its ultimate ideal and that it is evil to destroy, harm, or suppress life that has the capacity for development (Schweitzer, 1947, p.249).

Tempelhoff (2008, p.28) notes a special bond between ancient Africans and nature, highlighting the cultural significance of water bodies like rivers. Mboweni and Crom (2016, p.4) describe rivers as spiritual sanctuaries for communication with ancestors, while Losambe (1993, p.159) views aquatic environments as domains of gods, spirits, and ancestors, inhabited by genii requiring propitiation. Saro-Wiwa (2007) describes the spiritual and life-giving importance of rivers in Nigeria's Niger Delta, where they provide food, water, and spiritual significance, deeply connecting to community life and identity. Humans are meant to be nature's goal, but reality shows a struggle for survival where one existence thrives at the expense of others. Reverence for life promotes solidarity with other living beings, encouraging humans to minimize harm and recognize their connection with the environment. This perspective is rooted in traditional African beliefs, where elements like trees, rocks, and water bodies are seen as inhabited by spirits and ancestors, possessing human-like qualities (Bodunde, 2017, p.37). This anthropomorphic view gives natural entities social influence,

leading Africans to view the earth as "mother earth". This perspective aligns with Schweitzer's "Reverence for life", offering insights for ecological sustainability in the Niger Delta.

Interestingly, with this perspective, non-living things like plants, animals, and water are part of nature, created and adored like humans. Africans see themselves in close relationship with the cosmos, worshipping and appeasing gods through aquatic bodies like ponds, lands, and streams, considered abodes of the gods, which suggests African animism and environmental ethics can guide ecological conservation because traditional African beliefs promote a holistic understanding of the environment, where nature is revered (Ogaga & Egule, 2024, p.89). This perspective aligns with scholars like Gumo et al., (2012) who note that African spirituality enhances environmental protection by restricting exploitation of natural resources. Similarly, Awuah-Nyamekye (2014) observes that African spirituality views the environment as sacred, embedding conservation in cultural and spiritual practices. Applying the ethics of respect for life can help restore humans' natural relationship with nature. Schweitzer argues that dominance over nature leads to hazards, defiling the environment, destroying ecological balance, and dehumanizing humans (Schweitzer, 2008, p.333). Truly ethical individuals value life, and reverence for life promotes maintaining and cultivating the natural world. This ethics can transform individuals, making them sensitive to life's values and fostering accountability for surrounding life. Schweitzer emphasizes concern for all life, preserving and advancing its existence, and raising it to its maximum potential (Schweitzer, 2008, pp.330-31).

This thinking finds expression in indigenous ecological perspectives as viable alternatives for achieving sustainability in the face of modern environmental catastrophe in the Niger Delta. Awuah-Nyamekye (2014, p.50) notes that Africans believe natural objects are sacred, not just commodities, and this prompts them to conserve and preserve nature. This thinking also aligns with Taylor (2010) ideas of "dark green religion", which implies ascribing spiritual agency to natural entities, establishing a connection between nature and divinity. This connection will promote local environmental consciousness and sustainability in the Niger Delta troubled space. No wonder, Ikenga-Metuha (1985) posits that, the relationship between nature, life, universe, and humanity fosters a profound interconnectedness, uniting human existence with nature's rhythms and species, creating a mutually sustaining bond.

Obviously, the ethics requires complete dedication on behalf of all living and non-living elements in the environment, as well as all life, and as a result, man

must become concerned about his surroundings. The appropriate disposition for concern, growth, and positive change exists. No one who is influenced by the ethics of respect for life can consider other human beings as objects or continue to do things that imperil the human race, animal kingdom, and natural vegetation, as Schweitzer feels is so frequent today. This is based on the observation that the Earth, the only place in the universe known to sustain life, is gradually losing its life-supporting capacity as a result of man's incompatible actions.

Therefore, Albert Schweitzer's ethics is an alternative way; a form of decolonial ecology for rescuing the people of the Niger delta region from the current environmental problems and disasters. According to Schweitzer, the modern state brutally pushes its dominance over the individual to the point that the person can no longer effectively dispute public policy. It forges ahead mindlessly, preventing the vast majority of its citizens from adopting a critical attitude toward it. Once there is an objection in operation, stakeholders and shareholder including government and the military will posse sanctions, the outcome will be loss of lives from people of the region, burning communities and settlements which will in turn affect both biotic and abiotic elements occupying the environment.

The ethics serves as a crisis ethic since it advocates for a drastic shift in policy to address the ongoing catastrophe that modern man faces. Schweitzer's ethic is radical in that it will not compromise with any alienating force that disrupts, harms, or destroys life. This alternative approach will function as the cognitive framework through which people interpret their surroundings, significantly shaping their engagement with the natural world. Consequently, environmental consciousness within African societies is deeply influenced by religious perceptions, which position human beings as active participants in the intricate web of relationships that define their environment (Akpan & Okpe, 2018, p.92).

In light of this, only the ideal man, influenced by respect for life ethics, can preserve the decaying Niger Delta region and contribute to environmental sustainability in the face of rising global environmental issues. Reverence for life necessitates, as the ideal of man's material and spiritual being, that he strives to be honest with himself and to take a sympathetic and helpful interest in all the life that is around him, with the fullest possible development of all his faculties and in the widest possible freedom, both material and spiritual. In his earnest concern for himself, he must always keep in mind all the responsibilities that are his lot, and so, whether. There should always be before him as real human nature the task of

being ethical in the profound world- and life-affirming reverence for life (Schweitzer, 2008, p.291).

Maathai (2007) draws attention to a typical scenario in her author-biography as she shows the connection between reverence and sustainability in traditional society. Her approach which aligns with Schweitzer's grants intrinsic worth to nature through spiritualization, reflecting the African tradition of sanctifying cherished entities. Her perspective underscores the profound reverence and deep-seated appreciation for the land and environment inherent in African worldviews— an ethos rooted in the principle of sacredness. This reverence forms the foundation of an unwavering commitment to environmental stewardship (Ogaga & Egule, 2024, p. 95). Undoubtedly, this is significant to resolving the Niger Delta region's environmental problem, and while several efforts are made in this area, in principle, more mental activity is required to put it into practice. Ironically, the Niger Delta is one of Nigeria's worst affected regions in terms of energy. The oil boom is gradually coming to an end and the only option is agriculture, and now the fertility of the land is at the mercy of the petroleum industry. However, the ethics will continue to motivate man to find the will to do what ought to be done, and offer beams of hope for both today and the future generations of the Niger Delta even when oil is no more.

Therefore, Albert Schweitzer's ethics emphasizes humans' responsibility to show concern for all life, including animals, plants, aquatic bodies, and abiotic elements. His assertion "I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life which wills to live" highlights the interconnectedness of all life (Schweitzer, 1947, p.248). Schweitzer's ethics values all living entities, promoting solidarity, preservation, biodiversity, and environmental protection. He acknowledges the world's inherent struggle, where one life thrives at the expense of another, but advocates for thinking individuals to promote solidarity and minimize harm. Schweitzer's perspective rejects anthropocentric views, recognizing humans as part of an interdependent system, and emphasizes preserving humanity and liberating other existences from pain. His ethics offers an alternative approach with sustainability principles, considering all lives morally significant and promoting harmony within the earth community.

Schweitzer encourages humans to engage with the world spiritually, feeling connected to all life within their reach, offering assistance, and finding happiness in preserving and promoting life (Schweitzer, 1947, p.266). His ethics of reverence for life presents a radical perspective, inviting us to reevaluate moral views on life and the environment. He advocates for an activist stance on

environmental issues, discarding apathy, and considering future generations' well-being. Schweitzer's philosophy emphasizes humans' reliance on the environment, highlighting the impact of environmental changes on human survival (Schweitzer, 1947, p.261).

Scholars argue that socio-cultural practices strengthening human-nature bonds are essential for environmental protection. Gumo et al. (2012) note that African thought and philosophy on resource utilization are spiritually-based, influencing conservation efforts and resource control. Spiritual worldviews consider natural entities sacred, promoting ecological balance and rational use of resources. As Gumo et al (2012, pp.527-528) state, "Such sacred places or phenomena can never be abused... the biodiversity of the surrounding ecosystem becomes protected". This approach ensures sustainable use of animals and plants, guiding resource utilization, conservation, and environmental protection.

Significantly, Schweitzer's work rejects anthropocentrism, leading to various eco-centric schools of thought like biocentrism, ecocentrism, and deep ecology. Adopting his perspective could greatly benefit the Niger Delta's environmental sustainability. Implementing Schweitzer's "respect for life" principles can alleviate the region's environmental catastrophe. His ethics prioritize harmony between humans and nonhuman species, avoiding conflicts of interest. This approach doesn't mean humans cannot consume nonhuman resources, but rather promotes a connected relationship where humans thrive alongside nature. It allows for cultural values and goal achievement while prioritizing sustainability. By adopting Schweitzer's principles, the Niger Delta can become more sustainable, benefiting both humans and the environment.

Conclusion

Albert Schweitzer's philosophy emphasizes humanity's moral obligation to respect and preserve all life, including the environment. He believes every life is sacred, and distinctions between lives are only made when necessary. This perspective encourages a shift from apathy to action in addressing environmental issues, recognizing the intrinsic value of all living beings and the environment. Schweitzer's "reverence for life" ethics: opposes anthropocentric traditions, urging respect for all nature, sees the environment and inhabitants as having intrinsic value, not just utility for humans, acknowledges practical necessities, but emphasizes minimizing harm and injury to life and encourages stewardship and respect for all life, living and nonliving. To conclude therefore, adopting Schweitzer's philosophy can lead to a more sustainable and harmonious

relationship with nature, addressing challenges like pollution, erosion, and climate change. But also lead to a more lovable, equitable, just, and productive environment. Hence, internalizing Schweitzer's respect for life principle, the Niger Delta region can move towards a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with nature.

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