

African Research Review

An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 6 (2), Serial No. 25, April, 2012

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070--0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v6i2.11>

Environmental Philosophy and Suffering in the Niger Delta

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Abstract

The environmental suffering, violence, and degradation that the Niger Delta is undergoing have remained unabated. There is no gainsaying the truth that the Niger Delta is suffering. There is also the reality that much of the sufferings and abuses to which the Niger Delta peoples and its environment are subjected are manmade, avoidable and unjustified. The environmental problems that have pervaded the Niger Delta include oil spillage, gas flaring, corporate deforestation, poverty, loss of biodiversity, etc. Oil companies in their prospect for oil and gas resources have also caused a lot of human rights violations and deprived people of their right to water, a healthy environment, livelihood, indigenous ancestral sites, etc. Environmental philosophy, this paper argues using the critical analytic method, can play a vital role in ameliorating environmental suffering and degradation in the Niger Delta. The concerns of environmental philosophy, especially indigenous environmental philosophies can help re-vision the human-earth relationship. The paper concludes that philosophy as a discipline that began from wonder about nature must restore that idea by wondering afresh about the natural environment of the Niger Delta with the aim of restoring a friendly relationship with the earth.

Key words: Environmental philosophy, environmental suffering, Niger Delta, oil, gas, and human rights

Introduction

The task of this paper is to argue that environmental philosophy has an important role to play in combating ecological or environmental suffering in the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta region is one of the most devastated regions in the world. Since the discovery of oil and gas resources in the Niger Delta, the region has suffered from pollution of land and rivers as a result of oil spillage, oil wars and conflicts between various ethnic groups and oil multinationals, poverty and joblessness, death of marine and other organic life both on land and streams, a polluted ecosphere, and death of peoples and their cultural values. Ukpak (2001:27) is right to state that: “the Nigerian ecosystem has been degraded not only by deforestation but also by oil spills, gas flaring and sundry activities deriving from oil production, as experienced in the Niger Delta. Oil spillage is a frequent hazard to the economy of the Niger Delta. It often destroys farm crops and farmlands, aquatic life as well as the flora and fauna of the entire region.” Amnesty International (2009:21) corroborates the predicament that people in the Niger Delta faces when she states that:

People living in the Niger Delta have to drink, cook with, and wash in polluted water; they eat fish contaminated with oil and other toxins - if they are lucky enough to still be able to find fish; the land they use for farming is being destroyed because of the lack of respect for the ecosystem necessary for their survival; after oil spills the air they breathe reeks of oil and gas and other pollutants; they complain of breathing problems, skin lesions and other health problems, but their concern are not taken seriously and they have almost no information on the impacts of pollution.

That the people of the Niger Delta and the environment are suffering should not be disputed. The painful reality is that this suffering and violence done the peoples and environment of the Niger Delta is avoidable or at least could be minimized to the barest minimum, since it is important at times to exploit for oil. When there is environmental degradation or deterioration, it is not only human persons that suffer

but also non-human lives. In order to justify this study, a conceptual analysis of the basic terms will be done; thereafter it will be argued that the environmental suffering in the Niger Delta is unjustifiable and then the role that environmental philosophy can play in alleviating or combating environmental suffering in the Niger Delta will also be examined before making some concluding reflections.

Concepts: discussion and analyses

It is pertinent to define and clarify the following concepts: environmental philosophy, environmental suffering and the Niger Delta. Bellamy (2007:153-154) says the environment is “that which surrounds an individual or a community; at any point in its life cycle both physical and cultural surroundings....the environment includes air, water, soil light, temperature and the presence or absence of other organisms.” Hook (2008:77) states that “in modern times, the environment refers to the entire global system.” This includes “everything from the outermost reaches of the atmosphere to the Earth’s inner core. Inherent within this are all the factors that influence the environment from its geology to fauna and flora as well as the prevailing climate” (Hook 2008:77).

The next term that requires clarification is philosophy. Philosophy can be conceived in various ways depending on one’s school of thought. But in general, critical philosophy has to do with asking hard questions about all of reality and providing coherent and clear ideas on those questions. Sodipo (2004:16) writes that: “Philosophy is reflective and critical thinking about the concepts and principles we use to organise our experience in morals, religion, in social and political life, in law, in psychology, in history, and in the natural sciences.” Indeed, philosophy is a critical and rational probing into the realities of human knowledge and wisdom. Depending on the areas of life that philosophy probes into, you can have various forms of applied philosophy such as philosophy of law, philosophy of mathematics, environmental philosophy, etc. It should be noted here that environmental ethics is a subset of environmental philosophy. Environmental philosophy is also called eco-philosophy, as it is concerned with ecological wisdom on the human relationship to the natural world.

Since a central argument of this paper is that environmental philosophy can play a role in combating environmental suffering in the Niger Delta, it becomes crucial to understand what environmental suffering is. When the

term environmental suffering is used, it is inclusive of the suffering that humans, other animate organisms, and inanimate elements in the environment experience. Inanimate elements in the universe include soil, rocks, rivers, etc. It is relatively acknowledged arising from the works of Singer (1993) that animals have the capacity to suffer and experience pain. It may not be of the same degree and kind as human persons, but they do suffer. When you subject animals to inhumane treatment, they run away from the scene if there is an opportunity to escape. The real question is whether other things in existence such as rocks, mountains, rivers, etc can suffer. The paper is of the opinion that these other forms of life can suffer. Here it is important to examine the meaning of the term, suffer or suffering. *The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* (2004) defines the word 'suffering' as having to do with mental or physical pain or bearing of pain, distress, damage or loss. There is no doubt that the land and other elements in the land can be damaged. Implicit in the United Nations (1992) enunciation of the rights of humans to a healthy and conducive environment to human flourishing is the idea that human persons can cause damage or harm to the environment or elements in the environment that should enhance human flourishing. Hill, Knitter, & Madges (1997) corroborate the reality that environmental suffering is taking place on the planet earth. They affirm that human exploitation of resources is strangling Mother Earth and that though the industrial revolution brought its own benefits, it has caused tremendous profiteering and consumerism that is bleeding the planet to death and causing ecocide.

Environmental suffering should be seen in an organic form. When any aspect of nature suffers, all of nature suffers. While it is debatable whether inorganic elements can suffer, the fact remains that any harm or damage done to the land or rivers as a result of oil exploration subject the entire environment to suffering. Oil spillage can cause damage to soil fertility. It can also do damage to the streams so that the streams may no longer have the capacity to carry fishes. It can damage medicinal and pharmaceutical plants and trees. When such elements as soil, water bodies, and trees cannot fully release their teleological possibility and potentials for the entire wellbeing of nature, it could be said that they are undergoing some degree of suffering, and as they form part of the constituent of the environment, the environment is suffering. African traditional philosophies of nature saw an intricate and inseparable link between human persons and all of nature. Man was not set apart from nature. The fact of human persons being integral parts of nature is

corroborated by Native American philosophies of nature. Regarding Native American philosophies of nature, Simpson (2004) opines that man was not only seen as part of nature, but man was nature. Things like plants, animals, and even so-called inanimate things are considered as living things. He notes that the Haudenosaunee sees all things including plants, animals, trees, water as having roles and responsibility. In many African cultures, Mother Earth was seen as alive and capable of fertility. This implies that the earth could be harmed or made to suffer. When the earth is made to suffer as a result of human irresponsibility and devastation of the earth, it cannot nourish man and other creatures to its fullest potentials.

A mindset that is simply built on western capitalist epistemology may see nothing wrong in what is happening to the Niger Delta and other lands in terms of oil and gas exploitation since the land is simply seen as a commodity. The Niger Delta is not simply a resource and a commodity. The Niger Delta is not simply a land. The Niger Delta is a land of peoples, cultures, and the values that the people who inhabit it have carried through the centuries. It is a land enriched with biodiversity that is presently experiencing endangerment to its species and cultures as a result of oil and gas exploitation. The Niger Delta is the southernmost area of Nigeria. It is called the Niger Delta, because it is the area through which the river Niger empties into the Atlantic Ocean following the shape of a delta. It covers about 75,000 square kilometres and the largest wetland in Africa and one of the largest in the world.

This delta has been exposed to various hazards and challenges arising from oil and gas exploitation. The hazards and challenges have caused untold sufferings to the peoples and environment of the Niger Delta. It is partly in line with these negative impacts that this paper argues that the untold sufferings that have been meted out to both the peoples and natural environment of the Niger Delta is unjust and cannot be justified.

Environmental suffering in the Niger Delta: can it be justified?

The environmental suffering in the Niger Delta cannot be justified. In the first place no form of unjust and inhumane suffering can be justified. Oil multinational companies have committed untold human rights violations in the Niger Delta. When there are human rights violations, the immediate consequence is the suffering of the people and the environment. No human right violations should be justified. Amnesty International (2009: 12) noting the situation in the Niger Delta states that:

Human rights monitoring bodies, and international, regional and national courts, are increasingly recognizing poor environmental quality as a causal factor in violations of human rights. The most common examples include pollution of water, soil and air, resulting in violations variously of rights to an adequate standard of living, to adequate food, to water, to adequate housing, to health and to life.

The oil multinationals care little for people's lives, property and values. What matters to them is the oil that they are prospecting for to enhance their profits. There is no doubt that the environment of the Niger Delta is undergoing stress and ecological passion. The land is crying and people are dying. Amnesty International (2009:14) argues further that:

For the people of the Niger Delta, environmental quality and sustainability are fundamental to their overall wellbeing and development. According to UNDP, more than 60 per cent of the people in the region depend on the natural environment for their livelihood. For many, the environmental resource base, which they use for agriculture, fishing and the collection of forest products, is their principal or sole source of food. Pollution and environmental damage, therefore, pose significant risks to human rights. According to a study carried out by a team of Nigerian and international environmental experts in 2006, the Niger Delta is "one of the world's most severely petroleum-impacted ecosystems". They stated: "The damage from oil operations is chronic and cumulative, and has acted synergistically with other sources of environmental stress to result in a severely impaired coastal ecosystem and compromised the livelihoods and health of the region's impoverished residents.

The environmental suffering in the Niger Delta is preventable and avoidable. The suffering that the peoples and environment of the Niger Delta are passing through is unjustifiable. It should not be accepted anywhere. It comes out of high negligence and corporate social irresponsibility. Almost every report on the Niger Delta states that poor standard of operation that oil multinationals use in their work is the ultimate reason for the untold

hardships experienced in the region. In order to save cost, they do not follow the same high standards that they follow in the Western world. They use corroding and obsolete equipment in their oil fields that are bound to fail. Reposts of oil spill are not quickly attended to by the oil companies. The Amnesty International (2009:21) further categorically relates that

In 2001 the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Commission) stated, "pollution and environmental degradation to a level humanly unacceptable has made living in Ogoni land a nightmare." Similar pollution and environmental degradation is experienced across much of the oil producing areas of the Niger Delta. It is important that the impact of the oil industry on the environment in the Niger Delta is understood as occurring in a context where the livelihoods, health and access to food and clean water of hundreds of thousands of people are closely linked to the land and environmental quality. As the cases and data presented in this report will make clear, the environmental damage that has been done, and continues to be done, as a consequence of oil production in the Niger Delta, has led to serious violations of human rights. People living in the Niger Delta have to drink, cook with, and wash in polluted water.

The point is that the damage caused to the people and environment of the Niger Delta is unacceptable and cannot be justified. The suffering and pain has continued unabated. The UNDP

Human lives, cultural values, ecosystemic balance and the wellbeing of the land are more important than profits. The oil multinationals operate from an economic paradigm in which what matters to them most and more than anything else is economic benefits. They accept hook, line, and sinker the words of Gail L Cramer and Clarence W Jensen (1985: 279,259) who wrote in an economic textbook that:

Natural resources are all those resources provided by nature including land, water, minerals, plants, animals, and humans themselves. A natural resource has value only when an economic use has been discovered for it...Natural (or other) resources in themselves have not value; they are

valued, and command a price, only because they are capable of producing goods and services people want and willing to pay for.

This mindset has caused much devastation to the planet. Rolston (1988) critiques the economic capitalist mindset by affirming that it needs to be overthrown and replaced by a primary environmental ethic that sees intrinsic value in the natural world and works for the preservation of flora and fauna even as it meets the moderate needs of human persons.

Another way in which oil multinationals have caused damage and suffering to the land of the Niger Delta is through deforestation. The oil companies have no concern for people's neighbourhood and values. They dig into people's farmlands, ancestral sites, and rivers felling down trees and other covers upon the land. You see almost in every area in the Niger Delta, pipelines crisscrossing people's backyard, fences of primary schools, and community grounds. Hundreds if not thousands of trees are felled every year to make way for oil pipelines. Not only are trees felled, the bio cultural diversity of the area is destroyed. What the oil companies are doing could be termed corporate deforestation. The consequences of corporate deforestation are grave. Simpson (2004:131) is on target when she notes the evils of corporate deforestation thus: "animal habitats are destroyed; sacred areas are ruined; trap-lines are rendered unproductive for decades....traditional plants and medicines are destroyed....Traditional economies are destroyed, and governments and industry justify their actions by producing a few jobs while raking in large profits." The fact is that destruction of people's cultural values, medical plants, and sacred sites should never be justified in the name of economic development. Development should be holistic and inclusive of people taking part in the decisions that affect them and not government and oil companies from above imposing on them their own model of development.

Many of the consequences of oil and gas exploration are not natural emergencies or disasters. They occur as a result of sub-standard procedures and use of obsolete equipment, as earlier noted. It is a well attested fact that the oil multinationals follow lower standards in their drilling for oil in the Niger Delta. They dare not follow such standards in other countries in Europe and America. It takes oil multinationals time to respond to occurrence of oil spillage. The recently concluded report on the Niger Delta by the United Nations reveals that.

Environmental suffering caused by human persons not that caused by forces of nature such as earthquakes, hurricanes, Tsunami, etc cannot be justified for to justify it will be justifying human irresponsibility on planet earth. All indigenous religious and philosophical traditions such as that of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Native American Culture, Islam, etc all perceive human persons as having responsibility to preserve and protect the earth. Environmental philosophy as will be noted later has also emphasized the human obligation to preserve and keep the earth.

Much of the suffering done to the environment of the Niger Delta arises from human greed and consumerism. Simpson (2004) makes the point that environmental issues within formerly colonized territories are justice issues for the remote root of environmental degradation of these lands goes back to colonialism and colonial policies. Can colonialism ever be justified? While it is true that European adventure into native lands may have brought some benefits, those benefits pales into insignificance when compared with the brutal devastations of indigenous philosophies, theologies, values, and knowledge that it caused. If these societies were left on their own they would have reached a level of development comparable with many western societies. Since colonialism cannot be justified, the consequent destruction or capitalist mindset that is rooted in market values and cares less about the environment cannot be justified. Some of the damaging impact of the colonial adventure and contemporary global capitalistic invasion of native land through oil exploration is clearly put forward by Nwagbara (30 November 2011) when he argues:

So, the control of nature and ecological dominance have become a question of economic priority to the West, whose activities have unleashed damaging environmental consequences to the periphery: loss of biodiversity, deforestation, industrial pollution, floods, loss of soil nutrients such as phosphorous, nitrogen and potassium through the export of fibre and food to the cities – known in the Marxist parlance as “metabolic rift”, regional climate change, historically-conditioned overpopulation, squandering of natural resources, civil disobedience, environmental violence, and socio-economic problems, among others.

Many aspects of oil exploration in the Niger Delta offend against human dignity and personhood. Oil companies place very little value on the human lives of the indigenes and inhabitants that surrounds their oil facilities. While their oil facilities and premises are inundated with modern facilities and air-fields to fly out their workers, the indigenes live in degrading and dehumanizing poverty, hunted by diseases and health conditions caused by oil spillage and gas flaring. Another problem with oil exploration is well stated by Bunker (1985:25) thus: “When natural resources are extracted from one regional ecosystem to be transformed and consumed in another, the resource-exporting region loses value that occur in its physical environment. These losses eventually decelerate the extractive region’s economy; while the resource-consuming communities gain values and their economies accelerate.”

Environmental philosophy and the Niger Delta

The issues raised by environmental philosophy are crucial to addressing the environmental suffering and condition in the Niger Delta. There are many paradigms in environmental philosophy. These include the land ethic, the theory of natural intrinsic value, deep ecology, moral standing for trees and rocks, animal liberation, eco-liberation theology, and, the various indigenous traditions.

The paper will not highlight the content of all these theories; it suffices to note that at the heart of most of these theories is the need to extend ethics to include caring for and protecting the earth. It is not only human persons that count. Human persons should overcome anthropocentrism and become ecocentric. The wellbeing of all life on earth, not only human life matters. This invariably implies that the primary consideration when it comes to oil and gas exploration should not simply be the benefits to human persons. As Rolston (1989) frontally argues, philosophy should help human persons in the Niger Delta to rethink their relationship with the land. Gore (1992:220) also propounds that: “unless we find a way to dramatically change our civilisation and our way of thinking about the relationship between humankind and the earth, our children will inherit a wasteland.” The land is a living community, not simply a resource. It behoves philosophy, the discipline that is devoted to critical thinking to help people especially those in public office and those who control the oil multinationals companies to rethink their attitude and activities in the Niger Delta. Philosophy can help re-envision a new human-earth relationship. When you think of the ecological

degradation taking place in the Niger Delta, it would be right as Rolston (1988) puts it that there is not yet an adequate ecological ethics in the region. That ethics is very important in the human relationship with the earth cannot be underestimated for “power without ethics is profane and destructive in any community” (Rolston, 1988: xii). Yet the ethics that should be searched for is not simply inter-human ethics but inter-ecosystemic and inter-planetary ethics which embraces all life and realities in the entire universe.

In the light of the awareness about environmental crisis that gained prominence from the 1960s, environmental philosophy was given birth to as a sub-discipline of philosophy to address the challenges such crisis poses. As it is, philosophy is a pre-eminent discipline that probes deeply and asks critical questions about reality. Environmental philosophy will help people in the Niger Delta and elsewhere to realize that:

Earth does not belong to us; rather we belong to it. We belong on it. The challenging philosophical question for the new millennium is how we humans belong in this world, not how much of it belongs to us. The question is not of property, but of community. Biospheric Earth is really the relevant survival unit. And with that global vision, we may want to return to our regional landscapes, and think of ourselves as belonging there too, with a deeper sense of place. (Rolston, 2010:571)

In the Niger Delta peoples’ struggle for environmental self determination and the restoration of their ancestral homeland to its former beauty, environmental philosophy in the Niger delta need to identity with the peoples’ struggles. For philosophy to be relevant in the Niger Delta, it must return to its birth phase. Philosophy must wonder afresh about the natural world and the cosmos. When philosophers in the Niger Delta begin to wonder about what is happening to a land that was once aesthetically good and had more than enough capacity to meet the needs of its inhabitant, then they will become more relevant to the needs of the peoples of the Niger Delta. The issues raised by environmental philosophy should not be ignored in the study of philosophy or any other discipline in the Niger Delta. These issues are crucial to the survival of the culture, peoples and environment of the Niger Delta. Only an environmentally sustainable Niger Delta can ensure that justice is done to future generations and that a healthy environment is guaranteed for the present generation. For the avoidance of doubt the issues

raised by environmental philosophy include the followings: the earth does not simply exist for human utility, the earth is not simply a resource, endangered species need to be preserved, biocultural diversity should be promoted, the well being of human and non-human life should feature at the foreground in all business decisions, indigenous people should have an active stake in the development of their territories, etc.

Conclusion

The reality that there is environmental suffering taking place in the Niger Delta is indisputable. It ought also to be noted that much of this suffering is manmade and preventable. Since it is manmade and preventable, it behoves all human persons and disciplines to be concerned and take concerted effort to combat environmental suffering. As noted, environmental philosophy can be a handmaid and serve as a midwife for a new Niger Delta that is healthy and enhances the flourishing of all life since it takes into cognizance the indigenous cultural traditions, the land ethics, the theory of natural intrinsic value, eco-liberation ethics, and other related considerations which see human persons and other non-human lives in the entire ecosystem as one inter-connected whole.

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