

REVERENCE FOR LIFE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN NIGERIA: AN INDIGENOUS AND
PHILOSOPHICAL REAPPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Albert Schweitzer's ethical principle of Reverence for Life and its relevance for environmental ethics in Nigeria. It introduces Schweitzer's Biocentric ethic, which holds that to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil, alongside Nigerian indigenous worldviews that traditionally honor the sacredness of land, life, and nature. There are a lot of environmental challenges in Nigeria such as oil pollution in the Niger Delta, deforestation, loss of biodiversity and desertification in the North. Despite these challenges ethical reflections on the human nature relationship remains marginal within environmental governance and philosophical discourse in Nigeria. The major problem herein is the utter disregard for life, especially non-human life. The concern is that African countries, including Nigeria, have so far failed to articulate sustainable ethics to curb the excessive abuse of life, particularly non-human life. Using; analytical methods, this article finds that destruction and devaluing of life stem from human insatiable greed and egoism. For this reason, it argues that Albert Schweitzer's principle of reverence for life offers a strong ethical basis for environmental accountability in Nigeria. It also examines the alignments between this principle and indigenous African worldviews, suggesting a culturally embedded approach to rethinking environmental justice that bridges philosophy, religion and practice.

Keywords: Reverence for Life, Anthropocentrism, Ethics, Indigenous Philosophy

Introduction

Nigeria is currently confronted with profound environmental challenges that threaten both human wellbeing and ecological sustainability. Oil spills and gas flaring in the Niger Delta, desertification in the northern regions, deforestation across forest belts, urban pollution, and climate-induced displacement have combined to produce what may rightly be described as an environmental crisis.¹ These ecological problems are not merely technical or economic; they are deeply ethical in nature. They reveal a crisis in how humans understand their relationship with nature. Much of Nigeria's environmental degradation can be traced to an anthropocentric worldview that treats nature primarily as a resource to be exploited for human benefit. In this perspective, forests become timber reserves, rivers become waste channels, and land becomes an object of unrestricted economic extraction. Ethical concern is largely limited to immediate human interests, while non-human life is assigned only instrumental value.² This moral orientation has contributed significantly to environmental injustice, particularly for vulnerable communities whose livelihoods depend directly on ecological stability.

Albert Schweitzer introduced the concept of reverence for life. He believed this ethical principle to be his greatest contribution to humankind. The concept emerged after World War I (1914–1918), a time when Schweitzer observed the decay of Western civilization manifested by a great discrepancy between human responsibility and intellectual development. The environmental crisis that erupted from the war is understood to have caused a loss of human consciousness, destruction of life and a general disregard for life's inseparable nature. This crisis motivated Schweitzer to formulate his ethical principle of reverence for life, based on the fundamental experience that "any life that wills to live should know it; it exists in the midst of other life that wills to live".³

Looking at the Nigeria widespread environmental challenges which various legal and institutional frameworks exist to tackle, they often fail to connect deeply with the morals and indigenous cultural fabric of the people. Schweitzer, as an environmentalist, considered any act of destruction to be unethical. He viewed any country that prioritizes material development while ignoring moral and spiritual development as "a ship with defective steering gear heading for a catastrophe".⁴ This description resonates with how development is sometimes pursued in parts of Nigeria, where

moral and spiritual values of the citizenry may be neglected. Schweitzer believes that the spiritual and moral state of a people contributes more to the perfection of the individual and community than mere material development. In his biocentric philosophy of reverence for life, he asserts that all humans and all other species are members of the earth, part of an interdependent system, and that all creatures pursue their own ends in their own ways. This aligns with the African concept of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness and holistic well-being. Schweitzer upholds that no creature is better than another.

Recently, the governance practices in Nigeria were believed to challenge the dignity of life because of that; around October 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump described Nigeria as a “Country of Particular Concern (CPC)”⁵ with respect to human rights, underscoring a troubling truth about how nations today can prioritize economic productivity at the expense of individual freedom and moral reflection. Human insatiability, greed, egoism and lack of ethical consideration across all spheres of life are like a cancer on the dignity of life. Environmental ethics, as a branch of philosophy, offers a framework for understanding human responsibilities to the natural world. However, many of these frameworks originate in Western thought and may not resonate with African cultural realities. This article suggests an alternative approach: rethinking environmental justice through the lens of reverence for life, a concept rooted in universal human experience and indigenous African philosophy. The work flows in sections, it starts with introduction, follows the second section explanation of key terms; and then the third section analyze environmental crisis in Nigeria. The fourth section Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Nigeria. The fifth section examines causes of deteriorating reverence for life; while the sixth section discusses the effects of this deterioration; and the final section offers solutions and concludes the discussion.

Explanations of Keywords

Reverence for Life: Reverence derived from the Latin reverential, meaning honor or respect. In other words, reverence refers to treating someone or something with profound respect. Reverence for life involves treating life with love, commitment and consideration. It affirms the ethical principle often called the Golden Rule “give to others the measure you wish to receive”⁶ in return. When applied to life, reverence holds that every form of life deserves respect and that disrespecting life in any way is unethical. The concept of reverence extends beyond religious figures to respect for elders and respected persons in society. In a broader sense, it encompasses respect and appreciation for the natural world’s inseparable value and promotes sustainable practices and ethical behavior that prioritize environmental justice. Reverence for Life is a philosophical principle which originated with Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer proclaimed that “I am life that wills to live in the midst of life that wills to live”⁷ a slogan meaning that one’s own life is tied to the lives of others, and that all living things have an inherent will to live. He derived from this the ethic that “ethics are responsibility without limit toward all that lives”⁸. In practical terms, Schweitzer argued against the idea shared by some traditions that killing animals or destroying nature is morally neutral. According to Schweitzer, once one affirms life as sacred, causing needless destruction of any living thing becomes unethical. This stance challenges Western anthropocentrism by ascribing equal respect to all life forms.

Anthropocentrism: Anthropocentrism is derived from the Greek anthropos (“human”) and kentron (“centre”), and refers to a worldview that regards human beings as the central or most significant entities in the universe.⁹ René Descartes’ famous dictum cogito, ergo sum (“I think, therefore I am”) led him to argue that human rationality distinguishes humans fundamentally from other beings.¹⁰ This rationalist emphasis contributed to an anthropocentric outlook that often justifies human superiority over nature.¹¹ Anthropocentrism also has deep roots in Judeo-Christian traditions; for instance, the biblical account of creation in Genesis 1:26–27 presents humans as created in the image of God and granted “dominion” over the earth.¹² Historically, this notion of dominion has been interpreted in ways that legitimize the exploitation of nature on the assumption that human needs override those of other forms of life.¹³ This is the view that humans are the primary holders of moral value. Steiner defines it as “the view that human beings are primary and central in the order of things”.¹⁴ As well as many other Western philosophers such as Aristotle to Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Heidegger, etc drew rigid boundaries between humans and other beings, often to exclude animals and plants from moral standing. Descartes argued that animals are mere “machines” without reason or feeling. This is a stance later philosopher called anthropocentric because it denied moral value to nonhuman life.¹⁵ In contrast, African environmental philosophy explicitly rejects strict anthropocentrism. It acknowledges a holistic view of life as recognized by Kelbassa in the work *Society & Culture: African Environmental Philosophy, Injustice and Policy* that African thought renounces anthropocentrism and promotes a holistic view of the world and life.¹⁶ In these regards, humans are seen as part of an interconnected cosmos, not detached masters. Kelbass also accounts that in African ontology human beings are in and part of a vibrant interconnected whole from which they cannot detach

themselves. Land is not the private property of individuals. Human beings are caretakers or stewards of the land. Thus, African ethics extend moral concern to animals, plants and future generations, insisting we preserve resources for both human and nonhuman beings.¹⁷

Ethics: Ethics concerns universal moral principles guiding human behavior. Immanuel Kant defined ethics as “a set of universal principles that applies to all human beings, regardless of context or situation”.¹⁸ Ethics in an environmental context examines our moral obligations toward the natural world. It raises questions such as: What respect do humans owe the environment? What duties do we have to protect non-human life? This awareness grew notably during the 1960s, especially after publications like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* exposed the environmental impact of industrial chemicals.¹⁹ Ethics addresses the moral implications of our actions within the ecosystem, guiding us to consider right versus wrong conduct in our interactions with all living beings.

Indigenous Philosophy: Philosophy is the rational inquiry into the fundamental questions concerning existence, knowledge, and values. For centuries, non-Western systems of thought were dismissed as myth, folklore, or religion rather than philosophy proper. As pointed out by Hountondji, Indigenous philosophy represents a body of reflective thought developed by indigenous communities to make sense of their world and guide human conduct. They argue that there is marginalization of African thoughts by the western approach. This marginalization reflects epistemic injustice rather than philosophical deficiency.²⁰ So Indigenous philosophy is not merely a cultural artifact, it is a living intellectual tradition embedded in language, customs, proverbs, rituals, and social practices. Oruka defined Indigenous philosophy as the reflective and systematic thought arising from the lived experiences, worldviews, and historical realities of indigenous peoples. That which is rooted in local contexts and transmitted largely through oral traditions rather than written texts.²¹ Unlike Western philosophy, which often emphasizes individual rationality and abstraction, indigenous philosophy is typically communal, practical, and holistic. Wiredu recognized that in African philosophy, knowledge is not conceived as the possession of isolated individuals but as something validated within the community.²² This communal orientation challenges Cartesian epistemology, which prioritizes individual consciousness as the foundation of knowledge.

Environmental Crisis in Nigeria

Even though we have environmental policies and land use act in Nigeria, Nigerians have failed to abide by these rules and agencies directly involved in monitoring and implementation are not helping matters because most often they collect bribe only to turn blind-eye on environmental abuse.²³ The environment provides all life support systems with air, water and land. This support improves life in the society. Nigeria’s environmental crisis is inseparable from its ethical use of land. National Policy on Environment pointed out the following;

It is a truism that development will be meaningful if it does not increase a country's vulnerability to environmental impacts. If a nation's environmental foundations are depleted, its economy may well decline, its social fabric may deteriorate, and its political structure may even become destabilized. The environment is, however, a complex and interactive system consisting of the atmosphere, land surface and bodies of water, as well as living things. The degradation of an element of the environmental system will have positive or negative feedback effects on the others. In the case, human induced increased injection of carbon-dioxide into the atmosphere has resulted in global warming with its consequent large variability in climate in the form of extreme weather events that are generating floods and massive erosion of land. Thus, the environment must be managed in a coherent and integrated manner through the implementation of a well formulated policy structure.²⁴

Environmental crisis in Nigeria is at high because of inappropriate regulations of land use. Favoritism of elite, misappropriation of land and many other factors. Chidimma Okeke in an article with *Daily Trust* recognized that Nigerian environment has been challenged by several menaces, which it has continued to struggle to bring to a halt over the years now. While the struggle to address them continues to gain momentum, the reality on the ground seems to leave much to be desired. Floods were attributed to infrastructural inadequacies, and unsustainable use of the environment, improper waste disposal methods among others. The article pointed out further that; It’s no news that issues of Flooding, waste management, open defecation, drought, pollution, erosion, landslide, desertification, extinction of wild animals, illegal tree felling, and emission of greenhouse gases among others have been ravaging the Nigerian environment, though it is not peculiar to it alone as they have become a global phenomenon.²⁵ In other words, gas flaring, oil spills, and water contamination have resulted in chronic health problems, loss of farm land and social

unrest. These harms are often justified in the name of national development, revealing a utilitarian calculus that prioritizes economic gain over ecological integrity.

In the same line, Erondu and Nwakanma noted also that Nigeria's oil wealth has come at a steep ecological cost: as mentioned earlier "widespread oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation have caused major ecological harm" in the Niger Delta. These harms have immediate human impacts, such as polluted water and health problems, and also threaten biodiversity. In the north, erratic rainfall, desertification and rising temperatures undermine agriculture and food security. Urban areas suffer from air and water pollution, while poor waste management leads to contaminated cities. Socio-political factors like weak governance, corruption, and poverty complicates environmental protection. The interplay of these issues deepens human insecurity and strains relations between communities and the land. For instance, conflicts over resources in the Niger Delta and insurgencies in the north are linked to ecological stress. Morally these practices represent a failure to recognize the intrinsic value of both human and non-human life. Environmental harm is treated as an externality rather than a moral wrong. The absence of strong environmental ethics within governance structures perpetuates injustice, particularly against vulnerable communities.²⁶

Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Nigeria: A Case of Igbo Nso-Ala

The International Society for Environmental Ethics observed that the ethical engagement with environmental issues remains minimal within Nigerian philosophical discourse and public policy. Environmental matters are often treated as technical or economic challenges rather than moral ones. Formal scholarship in environmental philosophy in Nigeria is still emerging and remains limited in scope.²⁷ Elechi argues that the issue with Nigerians environmental ethics is the lack of understanding of the environment's intrinsic value: "the relationship between man and the environment must be one in mutual dependency and harmony ... excessive exploitation of the environment by man must be avoided and the environment seen and appreciated from its intrinsic worth"²⁸ This suggests that Nigerians need an ethical reorientation: one in which humanity learns to live in balance with nature rather than dominating or exploiting it. In practice, too many actions have undermined ecological harmony. A case where deforestation for firewood or expansion of farmland often proceeds with little regard for regenerating forests or protecting soil. Fuel-wood gathering and slash-and-burn agriculture, common in rural areas, can open the way to desertification. Urban sprawl and unchecked industrial pollution of air and water resources. In line with this, Schweitzer's vision of reverence for life may offer a crucial counterbalance to anthropocentrism. Yet, for it to resonate in Nigeria, it should be connected to familiar cultural values

Traditional Nigerian cultures have long embodied forms of reverence for life in their beliefs and practices. These cultures foster ethical attitudes that accord respect to nature and emphasize humans' place within a sacred order. In Igbo cosmology, the earth (Ala or Ani) is a sacred moral authority. Ala is not merely a source of fertility but also the custodian of moral order. Actions that harm the land are considered abominations with spiritual and communal consequences. This worldview embeds environmental responsibility within religious and moral life. Sacred groves, taboos, ritual observances, and communal land tenure systems function as indigenous mechanisms of environmental regulation. These practices reflect a deep recognition of the intrinsic value of nature and the moral obligation to preserve it for future generations.

In other words, In the Igbo tradition of southeastern Nigeria, the Earth itself is sacred through the deity known as Ani or Ala. Ala is considered the supreme earth goddess and guardian of morality. She enforces a complex code of order, called nso-Ala, which includes taboos (nso) and moral proscriptions. Violation of nso-Ala such as killing forbidden species, desecrating sacred land, or committing murder is believed to bring communal calamity unless expiated.²⁹ In practice, this means certain animals, plants or acts are strictly prohibited. Many Igbo clans are possessing totems (sacred emblems) such as the python, monkey or ram. In communities where the python is a clan totem, it is believed to be a taboo to harm or kill a python; even an accidental death of a python requires elaborate burial rites equivalent to those for a human. Similar taboos protect monkeys, tortoises, certain trees and other creatures.³⁰ These taboo rules effectively function as local conservation laws.

Nso-Ala combines theological belief with ethical practice. Ala (theological agent) is worshipped and propitiated, but nso-Ala itself operates as an environmental ethic. It inculcates in the community the idea that nature must not be violated. As Ignatius Chukwurah clarified, Ala's moral code "categorically specifies what constitutes nso-Ala (the Earth's nso and aru). When broken, this misconduct must be redressed and cleansed by the offender to restore the community to the pre-nso state".³¹ In other words, if a community pollutes a river or fells a sacred tree, Ala's sanction requires ritual or reparations to heal the land. These beliefs regulate behaviour in ways that align with

reverence for life, making even mundane activities like farming or hunting subject to ethical constraints. No formal “science” underlies these rules, but they are enforced socially and ritually. More importantly is that the communal ontology underpins this system because the earth belongs to ancestors and future generations as much as to the living, all must take part in its care.³²

Causes of Deteriorating Reverence for Life in Nigeria

The decline of reverence for life in Nigeria is driven by multiple factors, including colonial legacies that de-sacralised nature, consumerist economic models, weak governance, corruption, and moral individualism. These forces have eroded communal responsibility and normalized environmental exploitation. The decline in respect for life is not attributable to one specific cause; rather, it results from the combined impact of moral, social, economic, and political shortcomings.

- ❖ **Man’s greed and egoism:** Human insatiable greed drives exploitation of nature. In Nigeria, as in other countries, many people strive to become wealthy, often at the environment’s expense. Throughout history, humans have exploited nature; from using fire to domesticate animals and cultivate land but the scale of exploitation has grown immensely. The endless pursuit of more resources often blinds people to the damage being done to other life forms. In our today’s world, emphasis is on wealth, success, and material acquisition. Human value is often measured in terms of productivity, economic usefulness, or social status. This instrumental view of persons contradicts the moral principle that human beings should always be treated as ends in themselves.³³
- ❖ **Failure in the system of governance:** Weak governance in Nigeria contributes to environmental neglect. As political leaders fail to recognize and manage systemic risks such as climate change, conflict, and pollution, environmental concerns are sidelined, Nigeria will still succeed in her fight against social disorder if and only if when Nigerians begin to hold their leaders accountable.³⁴ As well as, governmental neglect or corruption can lead to policies that favor short-term gain over ecological health. This lack of political will and effective policy implementation undermines respect for life. In other words, when political leaders engage in corruption, injustice, and abuse of power without accountability, society receives the implicit message that human life and rights are expendable. Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the “banality of evil” shows how systemic injustice can normalize moral wrongdoing and indifference to human suffering.³⁵ Poor governance often results in insecurity, inadequate healthcare, and weak legal systems, all of which undermine reverence for life.
- ❖ **Disrespect for the rule of law:** When laws are not enforced and justice is ignored, there is little accountability for actions that harm life. The common lament “Where is the justice?” reflects frustration with a system where symbols like Lady Justice (blindfolded with scales) fail to uphold fairness. This breakdown of justice erodes social trust and reverence. As Schweitzer warned, any society that does not preach and prioritize equity and fairness is like a ship with defective steering gear, heading towards catastrophe.³⁶
- ❖ **Moral Relativism:** This is the belief that moral values are subjective and dependent on individual preference or cultural context. As societies move away from shared moral standards, actions that were once clearly regarded as morally wrong, such as violence, exploitation, and injustice, are increasingly justified or normalized. This ethical fragmentation weakens collective respect for human life and dignity.³⁷ According to Akpuogwu and Eruka, the role of intention and asking the question “WHY” is crucial in moral relativism. Why are Nigerians afraid of objective truth and believe that their personal perspective is good enough to justify their action? We can easily deduce that their intention is what is galvanizing their action either because of selfish desires or lack of moral will. Moral relativism has resulted to loss of communal values, integrity and solidarity. In many communities, radical individualism has replaced communal responsibility wiliness to act justly. This shift undermines empathy, mutual care, and collective concern for human person.³⁸ To reinstate reverence for life, it is essential to undergo an ethical re-orientation, implement effective governance, uphold robust family and community values, utilize media and technology responsibly, and renew our dedication to moral and civic education.

Lack of Environmental Justice on Reverence for Life

Environmental injustice deeply impacts health, economy, and society, perpetuating inequalities and hindering true sustainability. Ignoring environmental justice issues has serious consequences, not only for the affected communities but for society as a whole. These consequences can be categorized into several areas:

1. Desertification: This is the degradation of land into desert. Desertification reduces biodiversity and productivity, making regions uninhabitable. It leads to food insecurity, as farmland becomes barren, people cannot grow crops or

graze animals, forcing migrations. Such may be assumed to be the origin of herder–farmer conflicts in Nigeria. There is some part of northern Nigeria that is linked to desertifying land, which leaves agricultural areas unproductive. Displaced people migrate to more fertile regions, increasing population pressure and poverty. Such resource scarcity fuels conflicts and undermines community well-being. This condition; that is lands degraded by human neglect ultimately reflect a society with diminished reverence for life, where the environment can no longer sustain its inhabitants.

2. Health and Human Well-Being: Communities affected by environmental injustice often face disproportionate exposure to pollution, toxic waste, unsafe water, and poor sanitation. These conditions lead to higher rates of respiratory diseases, cancers, infant mortality, and reduced life expectancy. These are preventable sufferings which reflect a moral failure to respect human life and dignity. When social structures allow environmental harm to persist in vulnerable communities, life is reduced to a utilitarian value rather than treated as sacred or inviolable.³⁹

3. Social Inequality and Moral Degradation: Persistent environmental and land injustice reinforces existing social hierarchies based on class, race, or geographic location, an example is what is happening Abuja as regards to land use and environmental degradation and we can see the power tussle among the elites over land and land use.⁴⁰ When society tolerates the unequal distribution of environmental risks, it normalizes indifference toward the suffering of others. This indifference corrodes moral consciousness and weakens collective responsibility, making it easier to justify harm to both humans and non-human life. Over time, society loses its ethical sensitivity to injustice and violence against life.⁴¹

4. Intergenerational Injustice: Environmental injustice does not only affect present populations but also threatens future generations. Pollution, climate change, and resource depletion impose long-term consequences on children and unborn generations who have no voice in current decision-making. This failure to safeguard the future undermines reverence for life by denying the moral obligation to preserve conditions necessary for continued human and ecological flourishing.⁴²

Conclusion

This work contends that Nigeria’s environmental crisis is fundamentally an ethical crisis arising from the erosion of reverence for life. By integrating Albert Schweitzer’s biocentric ethic with indigenous Nigerian especially Igbo environmental philosophy, it demonstrates that sustainable environmental practice requires moral reorientation rather than purely technical or economic solutions. Dominant anthropocentric attitudes have legitimized ecological degradation, environmental injustice, and intergenerational harm by denying the intrinsic value of non-human life. In contrast, indigenous ethical systems such as nso-Ala embody a holistic moral vision in which land, life, and community are sacred and mutually sustaining. When read alongside Schweitzer’s principle of unlimited responsibility toward all living beings, these traditions offer a culturally grounded framework for environmental justice in Nigeria. The recovery of reverence for life, rooted in indigenous values and reinforced by contemporary environmental ethics, is therefore essential for ecological sustainability, human dignity, and the moral renewal of Nigerian society.

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