



ETHICS, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE WAKIRIKE (OKRIKA) PEOPLE OF NIGER DELTA, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA.

Chikodi Josiah Wachukwu, Ph.D

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Faculty of Humanities,
Rivers State University,
Nkpolu- Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt.
Email: chikodi.wachukwu@ust.edu.ng
080355002677, 08077365353

and

Iyoyo, Wilfred Iyoyo

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
Faculty of Humanities
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt,
Rivers State, Nigeria
Email: fredokuru20@gmail.com
07039184082

Abstract

This paper focuses on the Wakirike (Okrika) in the Niger Delta. The paper will show how ethics, culture, and environment intersect. Cultural values shape environmental ethics, and sustainable environmental practice requires ethical frameworks rooted in culture. The rate of environmental degradation in Wakirike, by extension Nigeria, is alarming; this trend has become a source of concern to every well-meaning individual. This is very worrisome, owing to the fact that if the environment is not safe, the inhabitants and other species, including our cultural heritage, will be in danger. Our environment is depreciating on a daily basis as a result of unwholesome practices such as deforestation, gas flaring, oil exploration, and unethical cultural practices, stealing, widowhood practice, and homosexuality.

Keywords: Wakirike, Ethics, Culture and Environment

Introduction

The environment is the physical and spiritual context for human life, culture, and morality. Among the Wakirike (Okrika) people of Rivers State, Nigeria, the creeks, rivers, and mangroves are not just economic resources but essential to identity, spirituality, and ethics. Hitherto, the Niger Delta faces stark environmental crises. This paper scrutinizes how ethics, culture and environment intersect in Wakirike, arguing that sustainable environmental practice must be rooted in indigenous ethical frameworks. As the Wakirike proverb warns: "The River that forgets its source soon runs dry." Culture appears to be one of the very common issues of human existence. Its emergence in human history is traced back to the time of early Homo sapiens. Culture is one of the universal basic facts of existence. It is part of humanity and, so functional, that it is likely to be one of the commonest words in the disciplines of humanities



and the social sciences. There is also the common use of culture in ordinary life activities, outside academics. The environment, simply put, is our immediate surrounding which consist of the natural world or ecosystem. Ethics is the philosophical study of moral phenomena, investigating questions about what is morally right, wrong, good, or bad. It acts as a structured, rational framework that goes beyond subjective feelings or strict legality to shape society by establishing normative principles for conduct, character, and institutions. In 2026, ethics serves as a crucial, evolving "compass" necessary for navigating complex technological, environmental, and cultural challenges. Core ethical concepts include:

1. Justice: fairness in treatment and distribution of benefits/burdens.
2. Stewardship: responsible management of what is entrusted to you.
3. Rights: entitlements people have, e.g. right to a clean environment.
4. Duty/Obligation: what we are morally required to do.
5. Virtue: character traits like honesty, respect, and compassion.
6. Consequences: whether an action produces good or harmful outcomes.

Conceptualization of Terms

Ethics

Ethics refers to moral principles that govern conduct and define right from wrong. Environmental ethics extends this to human-nature relationships. Key ethical concepts include:

1. Stewardship: Human responsibility to “work and keep” the earth (Gen 2:15, Ps 24:1).
2. Justice: Fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens.
3. Intergenerational duty: Obligation to preserve the environment for future generations.

Culture

Culture encompasses shared beliefs, values, rituals, and social norms of a people. For Ninian Smart, culture is expressed in the ‘cultural and social dimension’ of religion, how beliefs are embodied in community life. Wakirike culture is maritime, with festivals, taboos, and oral traditions tied to the waters

.

Environment

The environment comprises land, water, air, flora, fauna, and the ecosystems that sustain life. For the Wakirike, the environment is the mangrove swamps, creeks, and fisheries of the Wakirike people Island and mainland.

Wakirike

The Wakirikes are a group of about 364,788 (estimate, 2017) people who consider themselves as ‘not different’. The Wakirike people (also called Kirike people or Okrika people) are part of the ethnic Ijaws in Rivers State, Nigeria, that inhabit the Southern-most part of the country, the Niger Delta estuaries. Currently Wakirike population is 528,000 (estimate, 2025/2026): There’s no official 2024/2025/2026 census yet in Nigeria - the last national census was 2006.



All current figures are projections/estimates. 2025/2026 projection: 528,000. This uses a 2.3% annual growth rate from the 2006 census figure of 222,285.

Statement of the Problem

The rate of environmental degradation in Wakirike by extension Niger Delta, Nigeria is alarming; this menace has become a source of concern to every well-meaning individual. This is very worrisome, owing to the fact that if the environment is not safe, the inhabitant and other species including our cultural heritage will be in danger. Our environment is depreciating on daily basis as a result of unwholesome environmental practices such as deforestation, gas flaring, oil exploration and unethical cultural practices like stealing, widowhood practice and homosexuality. Historically, their ethics were embedded in culture to protect the environment. Revered natural spaces where Wakirike communities observe strict taboos in honour of spirits or deities are now desecrated. These taboos prohibited felling trees or fishing in certain areas, incest and so forth. Our ethical values were held in high esteem; there was harmonious coherent between morality, culture and environment.

Research Questions

1. What do we do to reawaken the oral traditions, proverbs and folktales that transmitted ecological wisdom among Wakirike people?
2. What measures do we need to put in place to encourage afforestation, regulate fishing season and mangroves as fish nurseries?

Objectives of the Study

1. To reawake Oral Traditions, proverbs, songs, and folktales that transmitted ecological wisdom. The safety of Wakirike waters was tied to the "future" of the people.
2. To set up or establish customary laws that will regulate fishing seasons and protect mangroves as fish nurseries and discourage deforestation.

Empirical Review

Practices like gas flaring and obsolete equipment will not be tolerated in Western countries where oil companies are headquartered. "Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free. Oil is a resource that numbs thought, blurs vision, and corrupts. The concept of oil expresses perfectly the endless human hallucination of wealth achieved through lucky accident, through a kiss of fortune and not by sweat, anguish, hard work" Honorable Minadiki, I.F (2026, February 3rd) personal interview.

According to Leopold, Aldo. A Sand County Almanac (1949) 'land ethics', argues humans as part of the ecological community with obligations to soil, water, plants and animals. Leopold's 'land ethics' is the core idea from the 'final essay of A Sand County Almanac' (1949). It redefine ethics to include the soil, water, plants and animals, not just humans. Leopold argued that traditional ethics only governs relations between individuals and society. The land ethic 'enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals or collectively: 'the land'. He saw the land as a biotic community and humans as 'plain members and citizens' of it, not conqueror. The land ethic mirrors many indigenous Wakirike practices in Niger Delta;

- 1) Integrity: keeping mangroves, creeks and fish stocks intact not just exploiting them.
- 2) Stability: avoiding practices like gas flaring and oil spills that disrupt the ecosystem.
- 3) Beauty: preserving the aesthetic and cultural value of the riverine landscape tied to Wakirike identity.

Environmental pollution and gas flaring in Wakirike, Niger Delta violate Leopold's land ethics because they break the integrity and stability of biotic community for short-term gain or profit.

The Niger Delta region is the crude oil and natural gas hub of Nigeria with several networks of product pipelines which has created a social problem which has affected the environment adversely and inculcate the culture of the product of stealing oil products which negate our ethical teachings of dignity of labour. Empirical ethical analysis, Asserts that gas flaring and obsolete equipment in the Niger Delta would not be tolerated in Europe. Calls for environmental justice. Holmes Rolston III (1988), is a leading figure in environmental philosophy. His 1988 book *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* argues that nature has intrinsic value independent of human use, and that this generates direct moral duties toward ecosystems, species and landscapes useful for framing sacred rivers/mangroves as having moral standing. Rolston rejects strict anthropocentrism. He argues that value is not only what human's project onto nature but is also discovered in natural processes themselves. Ecosystems, species and even individual organisms have value in themselves because they are centers of life, creativity and systemic integrity. Where Wakirike proverbs say 'the river that forgets its source soon runs dry', Rolston gives the philosophical grounding: the river has value in itself and harming it is wrong even if humans gain short-term profit.

Theoretical Review

A theory is a set of assumptions, propositions or accepted facts that attempts to provide a plausible or rational explanation of cause and effect (causal) relationships among a group of observed phenomenon. This paper is anchored on Cultural Ecology Theory that explain how environmental crime translates into cultural erosion. (Julian Steward, 1955) posits that a society's cultural core is on its social organization, rituals, and belief systems which evolves adaptive response to its environment. Cultural Ecology Theory explains how environmental degradation disrupts cultural systems. When that environment is rapidly degraded, the material base of culture collapses and symbolic systems become maladaptive. Applied here, induced pollution of creeks constitutes an environmental shock that destabilizes the cultural landscape in which are enacted, severing the ecology-ritual nexus that sustains Wakirike identity. For the Wakirike people of Rivers State, cultural core was built around the Niger Delta creeks and mangroves. Steward opined, that you cannot restore Wakirike ethics and culture without restoring the environmental base that support them.

On the other hand, the integration of Cultural Ecology and Social Disorganization provides analytical precision for a mechanism of cultural dispossession rather than mere environmental crime. Cultural Ecology explains why polluted creeks and collapsed fisheries threaten rites that require immersion and festival financing; Social Disorganization explains why bunkering wealth and violence divert youth from apprenticeship and subordinate customary authority. The literature exposes that environmental studies stop at ecosystem



damage and security studies stop at conflict, while Wakirike ethnographies stop before the post-2015 intensification of artisanal refining (SDN, 2019).

Methodology

The study was conducted in Wakirike Rivers State, Nigeria. Methodology is the core of any research work. It is very essential because without it nothing can be done. Therefore, to determine how Ethics, Culture and Environment collaborate: An Analysis of the Wakirike (Okrika) People of the Niger Delta, Rivers State, there is need to embark on this research work. It aims to clarify the procedure for the research, especially regarding the method of collecting and analyzing data. This study covers three local government areas in Rivers State respectively. Wakirike clan is one of the ancient city states of the Niger Delta; it existed as an entity with its rich culture. The clan is made up of three (3) Local Government Areas in Rivers State namely:

1. Okrika Local Government Area (WALGA)
2. Ogu/Bolo Local Government Area and
3. Part of Port Harcourt City Local Government Area, by the Hargrove agreement of 18th May 1913 between leading chiefs and headmen of the various communities which owned Port Harcourt on the one hand (Opuogulaya 1975). The clan is made up of nine (9) major towns and over 100 villages.

These three local government areas make up the Wakirike ethnic extraction. Wakirike is an umbrella name for all Okrika-speaking people in Rivers State, Nigeria.

The 2006 census determined the population of the Wakirike Local Government Areas of the Rivers State of Nigeria was 222,285. An estimated 145,000 Okrika natives live elsewhere around the world. The population of the study comprises of 222,026 persons which are made of the nine clans that constitutes the Wakirike nation. 2025/2026 projection: 528,000. This uses a 2.3% annual growth rate from the 2006 census figure of 222,285.

The research made use of 222,026 persons which comprises the nine clans in Wakirike as the sample size of the study. This was achieved through convenience sample. I chose this sample base on the ease of accessibility. It will be practically impossible to access everybody in Wakirike, so I used this technique to access those who are readily available in Order to collate my information.

The instruments and methods of data collection were basically through primary and secondary sources.

Primary Sources

Data here were gotten through personal interview and group discussion. The interview method involved engaging the interviewee one on one with relevant questions which is related to my area of research: cultural anthropologist, expert in oil industry, environmentalist, historian's business men and women were interviewed. I also took part in Ethics, Culture and Environment related programme and discussion on air (Liquid Gold on 97.7 Love FM and Sister Stations, Port Harcourt) and group discussion with friends and family members etc.



Secondary Sources

It is the act of building on existing research work with the aim of filling in the gap. The basic source is literature review. I also made use of newspapers, gazettes, articles and journals and also online materials etc.

Method of Data Analysis

The method of data analysis for this research work is qualitative analysis. It is the most frequently used method in Humanities and in the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies. According to Iwueze (2009) "qualitative method aims at understanding through examinations, description and interpretation of documented evidence, data and information from secondary sources". The analysis and presentation of the data was done through the application of Cultural Ecology Theory that explain how environmental crime translates into cultural erosion. (Steward, 1955) posits that a society's cultural core is on its social organization, rituals, and belief systems which evolves adaptive response to its environment. This theory will help us to establish the collaboration between ethics, culture and environment.

Discussion of Findings

The Wakirike People: Culture and Traditional Environmental Ethics

The Wakirike are an Ijaw sub-group in Rivers State with a rich marine heritage". Historically, their ethics were intertwined in culture to protect the environment: Sacred Relationship with Water. Rivers were seen as life-giving flow and ancestral hub. This created an ethic of respect and restraint.

Taboos and Sacred Groves: Across the Niger Delta, sacred groves are 'revered natural spaces' where communities 'observe firm taboos in honour of spirits or deities'. These taboos proscribed felling trees or fishing in certain areas, resulting in 'higher biodiversity' and active regeneration. These taboos help to preserve our culture and environment via ethical teachings transmitted to Wakirikes by their progenitors.

Livelihood Ethics: Before oil exploration, 'land was fertile both for fishing and for farming'. Customary law regulated fishing seasons and protected mangroves as fish nurseries or bed.

Oral Tradition: Proverbs, songs, and stories transmitted ecological wisdom. The health of Wakirike waters was tied to the 'future' of the people. As riverine people, we are inseparable from our nautical cultural norms which is imbedded in environment, and culture is encompassed in our traditional ethical teachings. These practices show that Wakirike culture contained an indigenous environmental ethic: nature as sacred trust, not commodity.

Environmental Degradation in Wakirike: The Ethical Crisis

The rate of environmental degradation in Wakirike is alarming. Causes are both external-industrial and internal-cultural damages.



Some unwholesome Industrial Practices includes:

Oil Exploration and Spills: The Niger Delta records 240,000 oil spills annually, degrading 60% of arable land. 2004 Shell pipeline leak caused oil to spread and fire to destroy mangroves.

Gas Flaring: Flaring releases toxins, causing respiratory disorders in 35%-45% of exposed communities. Farmers testify: If you plant crops, gas will destroy them, crops are no longer productive.

Deforestation: Mangroves are cleared for oil infrastructure, destroying fish breeding grounds. Result: 70%-80% of small-scale fishers face livelihood loss and redundancy.

Scholars label this act "environmental racism". Practices like gas flaring and obsolete apparatus 'will not be tolerated in Western countries' where oil companies are headquartered. The ethical issue is injustice: Wakirike bears the burden while others take the profit.

Some unethical Cultural Practices:

The paper also pinpoints internal practices that harm community and environmental practices in Wakirike:

Stealing: Erodes communal trust needed for collective resource management. Stealing makes the environment unsafe for the inhabitant, stealing is as a result of moral decay.

Widowhood Practices: Some harmful rites dehumanize women, violating ethical concepts of dignity and justice (Micah 6:8). Women most times are kept in isolation especially widows accused of killing their husbands, they not allowed to associate or interact with the society or their love ones. Harmful widowhood practices still persist till date: this practices have subjected widows to various degree of inhuman treatment.

Homosexuality: Listed in the abstract as a concern within the cultural-ethical discourse of the community. In beginning (Gen 1:1-27) God created male and female, not Adam and Steve nor Eve and Delilah. Sodomy is now rampant in the society contaminating our environment and eroding cultural and ethical norms thereby endangering the younger generation.

While industrial harm is greater in scale, internal ethical decay weakens cultural resilience to external threats.

The Intersection: How Culture Shapes Environmental Ethics

Culture as Ethical Source: Wakirike taboos historically functioned as 'informal management systems' that conserved useful species. Fear of deities and community sanctions enforced compliance.

Ethics as Cultural Critique: Ethics also judges culture. Not all tradition is sustainable. An ethical framework rooted in justice must challenge both oil pollution and harmful widowhood rites.

Environment as Cultural Loss: When creeks are polluted, 'there are no more fish' and festivals tied to water lose meaning. Environmental degradation = cultural heritage in danger.

Thus, the three are inseparable: Environmental breakdown erodes culture; cultural breakdown enables environmental abuse; ethics is the bridge to restore both.



Recommendation

Sustainable environmental practice requires ethical frameworks rooted in culture. For Wakirike:

Integrate Indigenous Knowledge: 'Co-existence of community-based conservation through traditional norms as well as formal government legislation offers assurance for long-term preservation'. Sacred sites should gain legal protection.

Environmental Justice: End environmental racism. Enforce same operational standards in Niger Delta as in Europe. 'Promote environmental justice and mitigate the environmental problems'.

Cultural Reformation: Community and religious leaders should address unethical practices like stealing and harmful widowhood rites, using scriptural ethics of dignity (Gen 1:27).

Restoration Ethics: 'Protecting rivers from pollution, restoring mangroves, and regulating fishing are vital'. Religious organizations (Churches), NGOS and schools should teach 'creation care' (Gen 2:15).

Documentation: Elders should 'document oral histories, preserve songs, and teach traditional crafts' to transmit eco-ethics to youth.

Conclusion

Ethics, culture and environment crisscross profoundly among the Wakirike people. Cultural values historically shaped the protection of ethics that sustained the environment. Today, unwholesome practices such as deforestation, gas flaring, oil exploration, and internal unethical practices have created an alarming rate of degradation. If the environment is not safe, the inhabitants, other species, and Wakirike cultural heritage will be in danger. The way forward is not to abandon culture, but to salvage its ethical resources while challenging its excesses. As the proverb says, remembering our source will keep the river from running dry.

Reference

- Tonwe, A. D. & Aghedo, I. (2013). *Amnesty for Sustainable Peace and Development in Nigeria's Niger Delta: Panacea or Palliative?* Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa (Volume 15, No.5-6, 2013).
- Royer BlackMore and Alan Reddish (1996). "Global Environmental Issues" Hodders Headline Plc, 338 Euston Road, London W1P9HE.
- Okurebia, S. & Daniel, E. (2014) *Management of Amnesty Programme for Sustainable Livelihood in the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria: Challenges and Policy Action.* Journal of Business and Management (IOSR-JBM) Volume 14, Issue 3, PP 36-42
- Okoli, A. C. (2013). *The Political Ecology of Niger Delta Crisis and Prospects of Lasting Peace in the Post-Amnesty Period.* Global Journal of Human Social Science, Vol.13 Issue 3 Version1.0

Newspapers – all Newspapers cited in the work both hard and soft copies etcetera.



- Isoun T. T. (2001). *Environmental Challenges of the Niger Delta* in Ozon-Eson, P.I. & Ukiwo U. (eds.) *Challenges of the Niger Delta*: Port Harcourt: Centre for Advanced Social Science (CASS)
- . E. D. W. Opuogulaya (1975). *The Cultural Heritage of the Wakirike (Okrika people)* Port Harcourt: C.S.S. Press
- B. A. Obuforibo (2012). *Ground work of Okrika History*. Sama stationary limited 76 Harold Wilson Drive, Borikiri, Port Harcourt.
- Amu L. A. O. (1982). *A review of Nigeria's oil industry*. Unpublished lecture delivered at the Nigerian Institute of International affairs, August 2nd, 1982.
- Ikeke, M.O. (2024). *Environmental Racism in Nigeria's Niger Delta: An Ethical Appraisal* Phronimon_.
- Onyekwelu, J.C. et al. (2022). *The socio-legal protection of sacred groves and forest reserves in southwestern Nigeria*.
- Berkes, F. (2012). *Sacred ecology* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- PubMed. (2024). *The interplay of oil exploitation, environmental degradation and health in the Niger Delta: A scoping review*.
- Wikipedia. (2025). *Okrika: Population data from Rivers State Primary Health Care Management Board*.
- <http://CityPopulation.de>. (2022). *Okrika LGA Population Projection*.
- Joshua Project. (2025). *Okrika People Profile* (www.joshuaproject.net)
- Multi-disciplinary journal, the year published, 2023.
- Ngozi N. Iheanacho (2013): *Culture, Development and Religious Change*. Stepson Printing House, Port Harcourt.
- Holmes Rolston III (1988), *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*, Temple University Press, USA.
- Aldo Leopold (1949). *A Sandy County Almanac: The Land Ethic*, publishers Oxford University Press, New York
- Julian Steward (1955). *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*. University of Illinois Press.
- The Holy Bible (The Book of Genesis, Psalm, Micah etc).



Appendix

S/N	Name of interviewee	Age Bracket	Occupation	Title	Place of interview	Time	Date
1	Napoleon Ibaibia Adda	55 – 70	Retired. Civil Servant	Chief (Late)	25 Peace Garden, Igboni Street, Abuloma, Port Harcourt	7:12am To 8:12am	3/12/2017
2	Hellen Sokari A. Okujagu	50 – 65	Lecturer Ignatius Ajuru, University Of Education	Prof.	Office (Professor of Early Childhood and Primary Education)	11:30am To 12:10pm	27/04/2026
3	I F. Minadiki	45 – 57	Business Man	Hon.	Bolo Town, Ogu/Bolo L.G.A	11:55am To 1pm	25/01/2026
4	Promise I. Opu-Amabo	60 – 75	Retired Civil Servant	Elder	8 School Road, Okuru-Ama, Port Harcourt	10:30am To 11:55am	4/11/2025
5	Solomon M. Tamunokonbia	55 – 70	Retired Contract Staff Shell	Elder	Egweme Street, Okuru-Ama Port Harcourt	5:30pm To 5:55pm	21/11/2025
6.	Mina Charity S. F. Okuru	70 – 85	Retired Community Health Worker, r/s, Prt Harcourt	Senior Citizen	6 School Road, Okuru-Ama Port Harcourt	4pm To 5:30pm	25/04/2026