CULTURAL VALUES AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF NATURAL RESOURCE EXPLOITATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study examines how oil extraction in Nigeria's Niger Delta disrupted indigenous environmental values and what this means for sustainable development. While research has documented physical environmental damage, less attention has been paid to how extractive industries systematically undermined indigenous ethical frameworks and how those same values might point toward fairer resource management. The research aims to document indigenous environmental values, analyze ethical problems from extraction, and propose culturally grounded solutions. Using Environmental Racism theory (Bullard, 1990), which explains how corporations locate hazards in communities with colour, the study draws on a systematic review of academic articles, reports, and policy documents analyzed through thematic content analysis. Findings reveal that indigenous cultures possess robust environmental ethics embedded in elderly-based governance, taboos, and spiritual world views that historically ensured sustainability. These values conflict with extractive practices marked by environmental racism, corruption, community marginalization and desecration of sacred spaces. Communities resist creatively through spiritual engagements with oil and cultural performances yet remain trapped in the "resource curse" paradox. Recommendations include legal recognition of indigenous stewardship systems, mandatory cultural impact assessments, community consent protocols, corporate accountability, and educational integration of indigenous ethics. The study concludes that sustainable resource governance requires not technical fixes alone but fundamental revaluation of cultural knowledge as ethical resources for environmental justice.

Keywords: cultural values, environmental ethics, natural resource exploitation, Niger Delta, environmental racism

Introduction
Nigeria is sitting on a ton of natural wealth, oil and minerals, but after sixty years of digging it up, the people living on top of that wealth are often poor, and their environment is trashed. The Niger Delta is the perfect example: it's a symbol of how resources and riches, do not automatically mean a good life for locals. The paper argues that to really understand this mess, you can't just look at economics or broken regulations. You have to look at culture and ethics. Before colonialism, Nigeria's many ethnic groups had their own ways of treating the environment with respect, through religion, community rules, taboos, and thinking about future generations (Nwankwo, 2022). That was their indigenous environmental ethics. Then industrial extraction showed up.

Whether under colonial rule or later with multinational companies, this new system pushed those old values aside. It's all about quick profits, individual gain, and outsiders calling the shots. This hasn't just poisoned the land and water; it's also caused what scholars describe as "ethical dislocation," meaning communities got cut off from their own moral compass for how to treat nature, which led to social breakdown and loss of culture (Ikeke, 2024). So, the point is: you can't fix this with better technology or stricter laws alone. You have to rethink the whole cultural and ethical side of how resources are managed. The article digs into how traditional values were sidelined, how communities are fighting back or adapting, and what kind of ethical approach could lead to a fairer, more sustainable future. It's aimed at both academics and people making real world policies.

Conceptual Clarifications

Cultural Values:

Cultural values are the shared principles, standards, and priorities that guide how a particular group of people behaves and sees the world. They represent what a community considers good, right, desirable, and meaningful. These values are passed down through generations via socialization, rituals, story telling, and community practices. In Nigeria, cultural values are incredibly diverse, reflecting over 250 ethnic groups, yet certain common themes emerge when it comes to the natural environment. Indigenous Nigerian cultural values about the environment typically include several connected elements. First is the principle of stewardship: the understanding that humans are caretakers rather than owners of the land and its resources. This stewardship is often understood in religious terms: the land belongs to the ancestors and the deities, and the current generation holds it in trust for future generations (Ahiamadu, n.d.). Second is the value of communalism: resources belong to the community collectively rather than to individuals, and decisions about resource use are made through community processes involving elders and representatives of different groups (Nkanta, 2024). Third is the principle of reciprocity: humans must maintain proper relationships with the nonhuman world, with animals, plants, rivers, and forests, through appropriate rituals, prohibitions, and sustainable practices (Ohenhen & Abakporo, 2024). Fourth is intergenerational responsibility: the obligation to preserve the environment's ability to support future generations (Nwankwo, 2022). These values aren't just abstract ideas. They're embedded in concrete practices: taboos that prohibit fishing during spawning seasons, sacred groves where forests are protected from exploitation, agricultural systems that maintain soil fertility through crop rotation and fallowing, and governance structures that allocate resource access according to customary law (Adebayo & Olaniyi, 2020).

Ethical Challenges:

Ethical challenges are situations where moral principles are contested, violated, or strained by competing demands or interests. When it comes to natural resource exploitation, ethical challenges arise when the drive to extract resources conflicts with fundamental moral norms about human well-being, environmental protection, justice, and respect for communities. The ethical challenges of resource exploitation in Nigeria have many dimensions. They include questions of distributive justice: who benefits from resource wealth and who bears the costs of extraction? They include issues of procedural justice: do affected communities have genuine voice in decisions that affect their lives and environments? They

include questions of corrective justice: when harm occurs, are victims adequately compensated and environments restored? They include issues of human rights: do extractive activities violate rights to health, water, food, and a healthy environment? (Amnesty International, 2018). And they include questions of intergenerational justice: what do current generations owe to future generations who will inherit degraded environments? (Ikeke, 2024).

These ethical challenges are made worse by what scholars call the "resource curse" or "paradox of plenty," the observation that resource-rich countries often end up with worse development outcomes than resource poor countries, including slower economic growth, weaker democratic institutions, and higher rates of conflict (Ogundiya & Amzat, 2021). Nigeria perfectly illustrates this paradox: despite earning hundreds of billions of dollars from oil since the 1970s, the country continues to struggle with poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment, while oil-producing regions suffer severe environmental damage.

***Natural Resource Exploitation*:**

Natural resource exploitation means extracting and using resources from the natural environment for human purposes. While all human societies exploit natural resources to some degree for food, shelter, energy, and materials, the term carries implications of intensity, scale, and often unsustainability. In the Nigerian context, natural resource exploitation primarily refers to the industrial extraction of crude oil and natural gas in the Niger Delta, as well as mining of solid minerals such as coal, tin, limestone, and gold in various parts of the country (Maduekwe, 2022). The scale and nature of resource exploitation in Nigeria have been shaped by historical forces.

Colonial extraction established the pattern: resources were extracted for the benefit of colonial powers, with minimal attention to local impacts or development. After independence, this pattern continued under new management: the Nigerian state became the main beneficiary of resource revenues, but the extractive logic, rapid extraction, outside control, and minimal local benefit, remained largely unchanged. Multinational corporations, working in partnership with the state, have been the primary agents of extraction, bringing capital, technology, and access to global markets, but also bringing practices and standards that often fall below what would be acceptable in their home countries (Okonkwo, 2021). The result has been what Amnesty International (2018) describes as "one of the most polluted places on Earth." Thousands of oil spills, decades of gas flaring, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and contamination of water and soil have transformed the Niger Delta landscape and destroyed the livelihoods of farming and fishing communities.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Environmental Racism theory, developed by Robert Bullard in the 1980s - 90s, as its analytical framework. Bullard's (1990) work demonstrated that hazardous waste sites and polluting industries are deliberately placed in communities of colour and low-income areas through corporate and governmental decisions that reinforce racial inequality. The theory refers to minority communities facing disproportionate environmental hazards while being excluded from decision-making and denied equal regulatory protection. This happens through targeting politically weak communities, uneven enforcement of laws, exclusion from policy processes, and the systemic devaluation of minority lives in institutional decisions.

Applying this to Nigeria's Niger Delta reveals patterns of differential treatment: multinational corporations operate with lower standards than in their Western headquarters, exposing Nigerians to practices like gas flaring and obsolete equipment that would be unacceptable in white, wealthy societies (Okonkwo, 2021). The theory explains three key features of Nigeria's extractive landscape: systematic regulatory failure where laws exist but aren't enforced; political marginalisation of oil-producing communities; and the ideological assumption that Nigerian lives matter less than Western lives (Ikeke, 2024). It connects local pollution experiences to global patterns of racial and economic inequality, showing how technical decisions reflect larger power structures. For this study, the theory is relevant in three ways: it explains why Nigerian communities suffer disproportionate environmental harm; it reveals these harms as moral failures of recognition rather than just technical problems; and it positions indigenous cultural values as resources for resisting environmental injustice.

Literature Review and Methodology

The academic writing on natural resource extraction in Nigeria is vast and spans everything from environmental science to anthropology, law, and ethics. A lot of it focuses on the Niger Delta, and certain themes keep coming up. One major thread is the sheer scale of environmental damage and what it means for human rights. Amnesty International's (2018) report, for example, lays out how companies like Shell and Eni have left oil spills unchecked for decades, turning the Delta into one of the most polluted places on Earth. That pollution isn't just an environmental problem; it's a human rights crisis. It destroys farmland and fisheries, poisons drinking water, and exposes whole communities to toxins from gas flaring. Some scholars have pushed this further by framing it as environmental racism: the idea that these harms keep falling on Black and minority communities because their lives are treated as less valuable (Okonkwo, 2021). The same companies that clean up fast in Europe see no urgency in Nigeria.

On top of this, there's a growing body of work on indigenous knowledge and how Nigerian communities historically managed their environment in sustainable ways. One interesting example is what researchers call the "giraffe principle" among Ogba and Ekpeye communities. It's an ethical framework rooted in elder-based governance that emphasises sharing resources fairly, compensating for what you take, and being a good neighbour (Ahiamadu, n.d.). That stands in stark contrast to what one scholar calls the "graft principle," the extractive, take-what-you-can approach of multinational corporations (Nwankwo, 2022).

Other studies show how traditional farming practices prioritised crop diversity without chemicals, how northern communities developed clever water harvesting techniques, and how fishing villages along the Delta used taboos to prevent overfishing (Nkanta, 2024). These weren't just practical techniques; they were expressions of deeper values around stewardship and responsibility to future generations. Research on places like Oke Imesi Ekiti describes this knowledge as "a living reservoir of wisdom" that still has a lot to teach us if we're willing to listen (Adebayo & Olaniyi, 2020). But communities haven't just sat back and watched their environment collapse. The literature also explores how they resist and respond.

One fascinating study looks at what it calls "oily life worlds," how people in the Delta have integrated crude oil into their spiritual and cultural frameworks (Ohaegbulam & Yusuf, 2023). Beyond armed resistance or court cases, some communities have reimagined oil as a spiritual force, something that shapes rituals of both healing and extraction. It's a way of taking

a toxic, destructive commodity and repurposing it within local systems of meaning (University of Groningen, 2025). Another study on Ogoni land shows how traditional performances carry deep ecological knowledge and become a form of protest in themselves (Ohenhen & Abakporo, 2024). These cultural practices aren't just folklore; they're active tools for speaking back to power. Then there's the governance side of things. The literature is pretty clear that Nigeria's regulatory systems have failed.

The oil sector has been captured by elite politics and corruption, and the laws that do exist are rarely enforced (Ogundiya & Amzat, 2021). Amnesty International's (2018) work shows how companies operate with impunity, breaking Nigerian laws and international standards without consequences. The "resource curse" idea explains part of this: instead of oil wealth bringing development, it's fueled conflict and environmental ruin. Studies on mining around Abuja tell a similar story: operations go ahead without community consent, sacred sites are destroyed, and the people affected, who were already marginalized by decades of exclusion, struggle just to be heard (Maduekwe, 2022; Resource Centre for Human Rights & Civic Education, 2025).

So, what's missing? Despite all this work, there are still gaps. First, while we know indigenous environmental knowledge exists, we don't have enough on how it's being actively used right now to resist extraction or build alternatives. Second, the ethical side of things is often hinted at but not really grappled with, there's not much in the way of clear moral frameworks for judging extractive practices (Ikeke, 2024). Third, we need better connections between cultural values, ethical problems, and actual policy solutions. Fourth, while environmental racism has been useful for understanding the Niger Delta, it hasn't been applied much to other parts of Nigeria or other extractive industries (HEDA Resource Centre, 2025). This study tries to fill those gaps by pulling everything together, culture, ethics, and policy, into one coherent analysis.

On the methodology side, this is a qualitative study based on a systematic review of existing literature and thematic analysis. That approach makes sense given the goal of synthesising knowledge from different fields and spotting patterns across diverse sources. The data comes from peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports like Amnesty's, policy documents, legal analyses, and news reports. The search focused on work published between 2000 and 2025, with a preference for recent scholarship that speaks to current issues. Sources were included if they were relevant to resource extraction in Nigeria, engaged with cultural or ethical dimensions, came from credible academic or institutional sources, and were in English. Both theoretical studies and empirical research were fair game.

The analysis followed a standard process for thematic content analysis. First, an initial read-through to get a sense of the big themes. Then coding, some codes came from the theory, like "environmental racism" or "community resistance," and others emerged from the texts themselves, like "oily life worlds" or the "giraffe principle." Those codes were grouped into larger categories matching the study's main sections: cultural values, ethical challenges, community responses, and governance. From there, patterns and contradictions were identified across sources, and finally, everything was interpreted through the lens of environmental racism theory to shape the conclusions.

Of course, there are limitations. This is a literature review, not original fieldwork, so it can't capture things that haven't been published or voices that don't make it into academic or institutional writing. Focusing on English-language sources might mean missing insights in

local languages. And while the Niger Delta gets the most attention because that's where the extraction is heaviest, the findings might not translate perfectly to other regions or industries. Even so, the study offers a solid synthesis that should be useful for both researchers and policymakers trying to make sense of this mess.

Cultural Values and Ethical Challenges of Natural Resource Exploitation in Nigeria

Indigenous Cultural Values and Environmental Ethics

Nigerian indigenous cultures embody sophisticated environmental ethics that have guided human-environment relationships for generations. These ethics are not abstract philosophical systems but are woven into everyday practices, community institutions, and spiritual beliefs. Understanding these cultural values is essential for grasping both what has been lost through extractive industries and what resources remain for building more just and sustainable alternatives.

Elder-Based Stewardship and the "Giraffe Principle":

At the heart of many Nigerian indigenous environmental ethics is the principle of elder-based stewardship, the governance of land and resources by elders who hold authority by virtue of age, experience, and closeness to the ancestors. As one researcher explains, among Ogba and Ekpeye communities of the Niger Delta, "there has been in this region an ethic of holistic stewardship which people exercised in all matters of land ownership and use" before oil extraction began (Ahiamadu, n.d., p. 89). This stewardship is based on what he terms the "giraffe principle": "a tripartite ethic of sharing, based on a win-win situation, on a compensatory use of land, and on good neighbourliness illustrated through a just, fair and equitable human response to an emerging social and economic reality" (Ahiamadu, n.d., p. 92).

The "giraffe principle" works through several mechanisms. First, elders allocate land and resources according to principles of fairness and need, ensuring that all community members have access to what they need to live. Second, resource use is governed by norms of sustainability: certain areas may be closed to exploitation during critical periods, certain species protected, and certain practices prohibited to prevent resource depletion (Nkanta, 2024). Third, disputes over resources are resolved through community processes that prioritise reconciliation and restoration of relationships over adversarial confrontation.

Fourth, the principle embodies intergenerational responsibility: resources are held in trust for future generations, and current use must not compromise the ability of descendants to meet their own needs (Nwankwo, 2022). These practices are grounded in a worldview that sees land not as a commodity but as a living entity with spiritual significance. As the researcher notes, among the Igbo, "the land is a living entity created by God and capable of detecting whatever wrongs are committed on it by its inhabitants" (Ahiamadu, n.d., p. 94). Offences against nature are understood as offenses against the land, the ancestors, and the elders violations that require ritual reparation to restore harmony. This spiritual understanding of environment provides powerful sanctions against unsustainable practices: the fear of supernatural punishment reinforces social norms of environmental care.

***Taboos and Sacred Spaces*:**

Across Nigerian cultures, taboos and sacred spaces play crucial roles in environmental protection. Taboos, prohibitions against certain actions, often backed by religious sanctions, regulate human interactions with nature. Certain animals may be protected from hunting; certain plants protected from harvesting; certain areas protected from entry or exploitation (Ohenhen & Abakporo, 2024). These taboos, while often expressed in spiritual language, frequently encode ecological wisdom: protecting species during breeding seasons, preserving forests that prevent erosion, maintaining water quality by prohibiting certain activities near water sources.

Sacred groves represent one of the most important expressions of indigenous environmental protection. Throughout Nigeria, communities maintain forest areas that are protected by religious sanctions, sites of rituals, burials, or spiritual significance where exploitation is prohibited. These sacred groves have inadvertently become important reservoirs of biodiversity, preserving native species and ecosystems that have been destroyed elsewhere (Adebayo & Olaniyi, 2020). The protection is not primarily ecological in intention; it is religious, but the ecological effect is real and significant.

***Community-Based Resource Management*:**

Indigenous resource management is typically community-based rather than individualistic. Resources belong to the community collectively, and decisions about their use are made through community processes involving elders, family heads, and representatives of different social groups (Nkanta, 2024). This community framework serves several ethical functions. It ensures broad participation in decisions affecting community members' lives. It prevents the concentration of resource benefits in the hands of a few. It maintains resources for collective rather than private benefit. And it embeds resource decisions in relationships of accountability and mutual obligation.

Analysis of Nigerian cultural practices highlights how "many Nigerian communities have traditions of shared resource management, where local elders or councils make decisions about the use and distribution of natural resources" (Nkanta, 2024, para. 4). This "communal system helps curb overexploitation by emphasizing the need to sustain resources for future generations, reinforcing a stewardship mentality." In fishing communities along the Niger Delta, for instance, "some traditional fishing practices and community-enforced taboos limit overfishing" (Nkanta, 2024, para. 6).

***Intergenerational Responsibility*:**

A fundamental principle of indigenous environmental ethics is responsibility to future generations. Resources are understood not as the property of the current generation to use or abuse as they wish, but as a heritage to be preserved and passed on to descendants (Nwankwo, 2022). This principle finds expression in proverbs, rituals, and practices across Nigerian cultures. Land cannot be sold permanently because it belongs not only to the living but also to the unborn. Resources must be used sustainably because children and grandchildren will need them. Decisions must consider not only immediate benefits but also long-term consequences.

This intergenerational orientation stands in sharp contrast to the extractive logic of industrial resource exploitation, which prioritizes immediate profit over long-term

sustainability. The ethical framework of indigenous cultures asks, "What will we leave for our children?" The extractive framework asks: how much can we extract now? The conflict between these orientations lies at the heart of the ethical challenges of resource exploitation in Nigeria (Ikeke, 2024).

Ethical Challenges of Natural Resource Exploitation

The introduction of industrial resource extraction has created profound ethical challenges that affect Nigerian communities at multiple levels. These challenges are not merely technical problems to be managed but fundamental moral questions about justice, rights, responsibility, and what it means for people to live well.

***Environmental Racism and Disproportionate Harm*:**

The most fundamental ethical challenge is the disproportionate burden of environmental harm borne by oil-producing communities, particularly in the Niger Delta. As one scholar argues, this pattern constitutes environmental racism: "the deliberate, disproportionate, and unfair treatment of 'others' by allowing them to suffer greater and more grievous environmental risks and burdens, as the 'other' is seen as inferior in certain regards, especially in terms of race, colour, or culture" (Ikeke, 2024, p. 5).

The evidence for environmental racism in Nigeria's extractive sector is compelling. Multinational oil companies operate with standards in Nigeria that would be unacceptable in their home countries (Okonkwo, 2021). Gas flaring, the burning of natural gas associated with oil extraction, has continued for decades in the Niger Delta despite being illegal and despite international norms prohibiting the practice. Obsolete equipment, inadequate maintenance, and slow spill response times characterize operations in Nigeria in ways they would not in Europe or North America. When spills occur, clean-up is delayed, inadequate, or simply never happens. Amnesty International's (2018) documentation reveals the scale of the problem: "Every year, hundreds of oil spills damage the environment and devastate the lives of people living there. Neither the powerful actors in the oil industry nor the Nigerian government have yet been able to put into practice lasting solutions that prevent the spills and then clean them up effectively" (p. 5).

The result is that Niger Delta communities suffer ongoing environmental and health harms that would not be tolerated elsewhere. The ethical dimensions of environmental racism extend beyond the immediate physical harms. Environmental racism communicates a message about the value of Nigerian lives and communities: that they matter less, that their suffering is less significant, and that their environments are less worthy of protection (Ikeke, 2024). This message is itself a form of harm, an assault on dignity and recognition that compounds the physical damage of pollution.

***Violation of Fundamental Rights*:**

Resource exploitation in Nigeria has systematically violated fundamental human rights. The right to health is violated when communities are exposed to toxins from oil spills and gas flaring, leading to respiratory diseases, skin conditions, cancers, and other health problems (Amnesty International, 2018). The right to water is violated when oil spills contaminate drinking water sources, forcing communities to rely on polluted water or travel long distances for clean water. The right to food is violated when pollution destroys fisheries and agricultural

lands, undermining livelihoods and food security. The right to a healthy environment, recognized in many international agreements and increasingly in national constitutions, is violated by the systematic degradation of Niger Delta ecosystems.

These rights violations are not accidental or incidental but are systematic and ongoing. They result from decisions by corporations and governments to prioritize extraction over protection and profit over people. They continue despite legal prohibitions, despite documented harms, despite community protests. The persistence of rights violations in the face of evidence and advocacy represents a fundamental ethical failure, a failure to recognize and respect the basic entitlements of Nigerian citizens (Ikeke, 2024).

***Dispossession and Loss of Livelihoods*:**

Resource extraction has dispossessed communities of their lands, waters, and ways of making a living. Farming and fishing, the traditional occupations of Niger Delta communities, have been devastated by pollution. Farmlands are contaminated by oil spills, making cultivation impossible or dangerous. Fisheries are destroyed as fish populations decline or become contaminated (Amnesty International, 2018). Communities that once fed themselves and generated income through agriculture and fishing now struggle for survival.

This dispossession is not merely economic but cultural. Livelihoods are not just ways of making a living but ways of life, embedded in relationships, knowledge, and identity. When farming and fishing are destroyed, communities lose not only income but also the practices, knowledge, and social relationships that constituted their way of life (Nkanta, 2024). The loss is cumulative: each generation that cannot practice traditional livelihoods represents a break in the transmission of knowledge and skills, a weakening of cultural heritage.

***Desecration of Sacred Spaces*:**

Resource extraction has desecrated spaces of cultural and spiritual significance. Oil facilities are sited without regard for sacred sites; pipelines run through areas protected by taboos; spills contaminate waters used for ritual purposes; gas flares light up skies where ceremonies once occurred (Ohenhen & Abakporo, 2024). This desecration represents a profound ethical violation, an assault not only on physical environments but on the meanings and relationships that make those environments significant.

A town hall meeting at a Nigerian university revealed how deeply spiritual dimensions are implicated in resource extraction. Traditional rulers recounted how "oil extraction could only happen in the early 1990s after community cleansing rituals were conducted to appease the local deities who hitherto hindered oil discovery" (University of Groningen, 2025, para. 3). Further research revealed that such rituals are not recent but "date back to the origin of oil extraction in the country. In 1955 a ritual was conducted at the Onem shrine in the Otuogidi community, which enabled the flow of oil from Oil Well 1 in the Otuobagi community" (University of Groningen, 2025, para. 4). These historical practices demonstrate that extraction has always had spiritual dimensions and that the desecration of sacred spaces represents a rupture in relationships that communities struggle to repair.

***Corruption and Elite Capture*:**

The ethical challenges of resource exploitation are made worse by corruption and elite capture of resource revenues. Analysis reveals how "Nigeria's oil sector has long been shaped by elite politics and systemic corruption," with regulatory frameworks failing to protect host communities and elites exploiting the sector for personal gain (Ogundiya & Amzat, 2021, p. 45). The "resource curse" literature documents how oil wealth has fostered corruption rather than development, with revenues diverted to private accounts rather than invested in public goods.

This corruption has multiple ethical dimensions. It violates the rights of citizens to benefit from their country's resources. It undermines democratic accountability by concentrating wealth and power in elite hands. It perpetuates poverty and underdevelopment by diverting resources from public investment. It enables environmental degradation by weakening regulatory enforcement (HEDA Resource Centre, 2025). And it fosters cynicism and distrust, eroding the social fabric and making collective action for change more difficult.

***Marginalization and Exclusion*:**

Oil-producing communities have been systematically pushed aside from decisions about resource extraction. Despite bearing the costs of extraction, they have limited voice in decisions about where and how extraction occurs, how revenues are distributed, and how environmental harms are addressed (Health of Mother Earth Foundation, 2025). This exclusion violates principles of procedural justice, the right of affected communities to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

The exclusion operates at multiple levels. At the community level, consultation processes are often superficial or manipulated, with communities informed of decisions already made rather than genuinely consulted. At the state level, oil-producing areas lack the political power to influence policy; their representatives are outnumbered and out-manoeuvred. At the national level, resource governance is dominated by elites with little connection to or concern for oil-producing communities (Ogundiya & Amzat, 2021). The result is what one community declaration describes: "Divestment from OML 26 is occurring without the community's knowledge or consent" (Health of Mother Earth Foundation, 2025, para. 2).

***Cultural Disruption and Loss*:**

Beyond the physical and economic harms, resource extraction has disrupted indigenous cultures and contributed to cultural loss. When environments are destroyed, the practices and knowledge embedded in those environments are also destroyed. When livelihoods are lost, the social relationships organized around those livelihoods are disrupted. When sacred spaces are desecrated, the spiritual meanings attached to those spaces are diminished. When communities are displaced or fragmented, the passing down of culture from one generation to the next is interrupted (Ohenhen & Abakporo, 2024).

This cultural disruption is an ethical harm in its own right, separate from the physical and economic harms. Cultures are not static museum pieces but living systems of meaning, practice, and relationship that provide their members with identity, purpose, and belonging. When cultures are disrupted, people lose not only their environment and livelihood but their sense of who they are and where they belong. The ethical challenge is to recognize this

cultural dimension of harm and to ensure that responses address not only material needs but cultural and spiritual well-being.

The Paradox of "Oily Life worlds": Resistance and Entanglement

Communities in extractive zones do not simply passively suffer these harms. They respond, resist, and adapt in complex ways that reveal both the resilience of indigenous cultures and the depth of their entanglement with extractive systems. Research on "oily life worlds" in the Niger Delta illuminates these complex responses, showing how "communities in the Niger Delta have responded to crude oil extraction and pollution in a plurality of ways beyond armed resistance, lawsuits, and protests" (Ohaegbulam & Yusuf, 2023, p. 2).

The concept of "oily life worlds" captures how oil has become integrated into everyday life, culture, and spirituality in the Niger Delta. The researcher argues that "decades of crude oil extraction in the region have engendered new 'oil-cultures' that are embedded in everyday life and enable communities to reanimate crude oil and gas as symbols of geo-cultural identity and resources for economic, medicinal, and spiritual purposes" (Ohaegbulam & Yusuf, 2023, p. 5). This integration represents a form of agency, communities actively making meaning and finding ways to live with oil, but also reveals how deeply oil has penetrated community life. Particularly striking is the spiritual dimension of these entanglements.

The research reveals how "crude oil features prominently in everyday spirituality, shaping extractive and healing ritual practices." This "reimagining of crude oil as a spiritual force demonstrates the agency of spirits in extractive spaces, as well as the agency of communities in negotiating and re-purposing toxic capitalist commodities into resource for local spiritual healing, protection and symbolic identities" (Ohaegbulam & Yusuf, 2023, p. 8). Communities are not simply victims of extraction but active agents who incorporate oil into their cultural and spiritual frameworks, transforming a toxic commodity into something that can be used for healing and protection. However, these entanglements are deeply paradoxical.

As participants in a town hall meeting noted, "while entanglements with oil have enabled communities to negotiate their daily lives with the toxicity of crude oil extraction, this in itself reflects the crudity of oil" (University of Groningen, 2025, para. 6). The Vice Chancellor of the university captured this paradox powerfully: "the oil is being taken away by the oil companies, what is left behind is the crude which the Niger Delta people are entangled with. We are left with the crude life" (University of Groningen, 2025, para. 7). This "crude life" is characterized by contradiction: communities are simultaneously enriched and impoverished by oil, empowered and disempowered, connected to global systems and abandoned by them.

The artisanal refining of crude oil, "Kpo-Fire", exemplifies these contradictions. Participants attributed its spread to "perennial scarcity of petroleum products in the creeks of the Niger Delta, resource ownership contestations, and localized responses to longstanding discontent" (University of Groningen, 2025, para. 8). Communities turn to illegal refining not primarily from criminal intent but from necessity, seeking survival and asserting claims to resources they consider theirs. Yet this activity compounds environmental damage and exposes communities to additional risks.

The paradox of "oily life worlds" reveals both the resilience of indigenous cultures and the limits of that resilience. Communities draw on cultural resources, spiritual frameworks, community solidarity, and adaptive practices, to make life possible in devastated

environments. But these same adaptations can entangle them more deeply in extractive systems, making them complicit in ongoing environmental damage while failing to secure the benefits of extraction. The ethical challenge is to recognize and support community agency while also addressing the structural conditions that constrain that agency and shape its expressions.

Results and Discussion

The analysis reveals that Nigerian indigenous cultures possess robust environmental ethics rooted in stewardship, communalism, reciprocity, and intergenerational responsibility, principles embedded in social institutions, taboos, and worldviews like the "giraffe principle" documented among Ogba and Ekpeye communities (Nwankwo, 2022). Industrial extraction systematically disrupted these frameworks, creating "ethical dislocation", the separation of communities from their moral environmental guidelines (Ikeke, 2024).

The extractive model prioritises profit over sustainability, individual wealth over community well-being, and external control over local decision-making. This has produced systematic ethical violations. Environmental racism operates through disproportionate pollution of Niger Delta communities, with practices tolerated that would be unacceptable in Western countries (Okonkwo, 2021). Amnesty International (2018) documents how oil spills destroy farmland, fisheries, and water sources, violating rights to food, water, and health. Communities face dispossession, desecration of sacred spaces, and revenue capture by corrupt elites (Ogundiya & Amzat, 2021).

Communities respond through complex agency, not just armed resistance and lawsuits, but cultural adaptations. Research on "oily life worlds" shows how communities integrate oil into spiritual frameworks, reimagining it as a force for healing and protection (Ohaegbulam & Yusuf, 2023). Ogoni traditional performances embody ecological knowledge and become sites of resistance (Ohenhen & Abakporo, 2024). Yet communities remain trapped in a paradox: adaptations like artisanal refining compound damage while deepening dependence on extractive systems (University of Groningen, 2025).

Despite disruption, indigenous cultural values persist and offer resources for alternative futures. Studies of Oke Imesi Ekiti demonstrate indigenous knowledge as "a living reservoir of wisdom" for environmental resilience (Adebayo & Olaniyi, 2020, p. 12). Theoretically, environmental racism theory illuminates patterns of disproportionate harm in Nigeria, though the Nigerian case requires extending the framework to address postcolonial contexts where African lives are systematically devalued (Okonkwo, 2021; Ikeke, 2024). The concept of "oily life worlds" captures the complexity of community experience beyond victimhood/resistance binaries (Ohaegbulam & Yusuf, 2023).

Practically, findings suggest communities should reclaim cultural values as resistance tools. Civil society must complement legal advocacy with support for cultural resources. Corporations face ethical inadequacy in operating with lower standards in Nigeria, environmental racism requires adherence to global best practices everywhere (Amnesty International, 2018). Policymakers need fundamental reform, as Nigeria's extractive sector suffers from elite politics, corruption, and regulatory failure (Ogundiya & Amzat, 2021).

Mining operations similarly proceed without consent, destroying livelihoods and cultural sites while marginalizing original inhabitants (Maduekwe, 2022; Resource Centre for Human Rights & Civic Education, 2025). Policy directions include legal recognition of

indigenous governance systems; mandatory cultural impact assessments; free, prior, and informed consent protocols; benefit-sharing mechanisms; and accountability measures ensuring access to justice, clean-up requirements, and corporate liability (Health of Mother Earth Foundation, 2025; HEDA Resource Centre, 2025). These are not merely technical but ethical, embodying principles of recognition, participation, and redress essential for just resource governance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered for addressing the cultural and ethical challenges of natural resource exploitation in Nigeria. These recommendations are directed at multiple stakeholders, government, corporations, civil society, and communities, recognizing that meaningful change requires coordinated action across sectors.

1. The government should pass laws giving traditional rulers and community councils official legal standing in decisions about oil and mining on their land and protect sacred sites from being bulldozed.
2. Companies should be required to conduct cultural impact assessments alongside environmental ones, examining how a project might affect traditions, sacred places, and local ways of life. No project should go ahead if it's going to trash what makes a community who they are.
3. Oil and mining companies must get free, prior, and informed consent from communities before starting work. That means talking to the right people, in languages people understand, and giving communities enough time to actually discuss things.
4. Toughen the laws so companies can be properly sued and penalized when they mess up, making it easier for communities to take them to court. Hold them to the same standards they follow back home.
5. Teach indigenous environmental values in schools and universities, and make sure government policies actually reference and draw on this knowledge. Frame these values as assets, not ancient history.

Conclusion

This study looked at how oil and gas drilling in Nigeria's Niger Delta region has hurt local communities and the environment. Before big companies came, local cultures had strong traditions of taking care of nature. But large-scale oil extraction has broken those traditions, causing pollution, health problems, and loss of land and sacred places. Even though communities are suffering, they are fighting back in their own ways, through protests, art, and finding ways to survive. But it's tricky because sometimes their survival strategies, like illegal oil refining, make the pollution worse. They are stuck depending on the very thing destroying them. The main point is that real solutions can't just be technical fixes. They need to respect and learn from the traditional knowledge and values of local people. The study concludes that the wisdom of these communities is a powerful tool for creating a fairer and more sustainable future.

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