

**OIL, TECHNOLOGY, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION: AN ESSENCIST
DIAGNOSIS AND PRESCRIPTION**

BY

Professor (Barrister) Samuel Asuquo Ekanem

Department Of Philosophy
Federal University Wukari
Taraba State, Nigeria,

Jennifer Emejulu

Federal University Of Lafia
Nasarawa State, Nigeria
And

Yohanna, Amachondi Hikon

Department Of Philosophy
Federal University Wukari
Taraba State, Nigeria

Abstract

This article employed Essencism, which is a philosophical framework pioneered by Samuel Asuquo Ekanem (2005), diagnosed the existential and ecological crisis in Nigeria's Niger Delta, which is an oil-rich but environmentally ravaged region. By exploring the ideological underpinnings of oil extraction, technological enframing, and environmental injustice through an essencist lens, this paper advanced a prescription centered on ontological realignment, technological poiesis, and environmental justice enshrined in metaphysical recognition. It asserts that genuine sustainable development requires reclaiming humans' spiritual-physical essence, harmonizing technology with nature, and embedding indigenous and customary wisdom in policy and praxis. The paper concludes with actionable philosophical prescriptions that include legal pluralism, community-based energy sovereignty, and essencist education to catalyze ecological restoration and human flourishing.

Introduction

The Niger Delta stands as one of the most paradoxical regions on Earth. This verdant wetland, which is home to over twenty million people and over forty ethnic groups has served as the engine driving Nigeria's petro-economy. However, despite its abundant flora, fauna, and cultural richness, the region experiences systemic poverty, environmental ruin, and social instability. Indeed, the Delta has witnessed thousands of oil spills, pervasive gas flaring, widespread loss of arable land and fish habitats, and dramatic health consequences for its inhabitants that clearly qualifies it as a modern "ecocide" zone.¹ Shell's own spill records, United Nations (UN) reports, and court rulings attest to the scale of devastation; for instance, between 1976 and 2001, more than 6,800 significant oil spills occurred, releasing millions of barrels of crude into the ecosystem.²

How can philosophy help make sense of such paradox this simultaneous abundance and destitution? This paper argues that Essencism, a philosophy propounded by Samuel Asuquo Ekanem offers a uniquely insightful framework, built on core tenets such as the duality of human essence (both physical and spiritual), the divine nature of architecture and technology, and an African-centered metaphysical vision, Essencism proposes that the Niger Delta crisis is, at root, an ontological rupture—a dissonance between essence and existence.³

Through diagnosing the crisis as one of metaphysical alienation of nature, technology, and self; Essencism offers a pathway toward restoration. It envisions a sustainable development rooted not merely in economic metrics, but in teleological alignment and harmonizing human flourishing with ecological balance, communal spirit, and sacred purpose. This paper presents both a diagnosis and a prescription within Essencism's deep philosophical contours.

II. The Emergence of Essencism

Essencism originated in Samuel Asuquo Ekanem's 2005 doctoral dissertation, titled *A Philosophy of Education for Technological Development in Nigeria* (University of Calabar). In his follow-up work, "*Philosophical Foundation of Curriculum Development in Nigeria: The Essencist Model*" (2014), Ekanem and Ekefre positioned Essencism not only as curriculum design theory, but as a broad metaphysical system rooted in indigenous cultural insight and rooted in the word "essence": "that which makes a thing what it is."⁴

The philosophy rests on three foundational pillars:

1. Duality of human essence (physical–spiritual): Ekanem argues that humans are both materially and spiritually constituted beings. This duality empowers humans to transcend material finitude while maintaining deep connection with the natural world—thus weaving together practical ingenuity and metaphysical meaning.⁵
2. Divine endowment of techno-agency: Essencism recognizes technology not as accidental, but as divinely endowed, which is an expression of human stewardship and creativity. Ekanem traces this back to the ontological narrative of Genesis and Qur'anic traditions: humanity was granted dominion and capacity to name, tend, and transform the world.⁶
3. Homegrown, African-centred ethos: Eschewing Western paradigms that fracture existence into fragmented specialties, Essencism calls for a universalizing yet culturally anchored conceptual framework. It seeks to rediscover African values through balanced personalities that fuse science, ethics, spirituality, and communal responsibilities.⁷

In contrast to reductionist Western models, Essencism asserts that scientific and technological development divorced from metaphysical orientation dehumanizes both nature and humanity. As the paper "*The Gap Between Scientific and Technological Development in Africa*" argues: without rediscovering Africans' spiritual essence, the region remains trapped in a scholarly–technological impasse.⁸

III. Oil, Extractive Logic and Technological Enframing

The philosophy of Essencism critiques technology not as a neutral instrument but as a radical mode of revealing, one that can distort our relationship with Being. Drawing on Heidegger, we see that modern technology enframes the world as a "standing-reserve", which resources are to be extracted, exploited, and measured, and these clearly encapsulate the technological logic of the instrumental framework.⁹ In the Niger Delta, this enframing is manifest as oil becomes the essence, the central value, eclipsing ecological, spiritual, and communal flourishing.

Essencism diagnoses this as a form of ontological alienation. By fixing oil at the center of meaning, technology severs communities from their essence. Commodification of land, water, fish, and spirit is justified through techno-economic castes.¹⁰ Technology here becomes a tool of domination rather than care; instead of facilitating flourishing, it perpetuates ecological imbalance and dispossession.

The statistics show that, between 1976 and 2001, 6,817 spills released three million barrels of oil into the environment, decimating ecosystems and people's spiritual livelihoods.¹¹ Shell's infrastructure, often outdated and under-maintained, fractures pipelines, devastates mangroves, and contaminates watercourses while oil revenue flows upward, bypassing locals.¹² Essencism reveals that this is not merely economic injustice, but a metaphysical misrecognition: land and water cease to be be-ing and become mere inventory.

In order to counter this, Essencism calls for a reorientation, which involves a re-sacralization of Earth and an ethical stewardship of technology. Technology must become *poiesis*, a revealing that honours the intrinsic value of beings.¹³ In practical terms, this requires that infrastructural systems restore their relationships with place and meaning—repairing pipelines is insufficient unless local communities reclaim their ontological agency in deciding how technology is integrated into their landscapes.

IV. Environmental Justice as Ontological Restoration

Typical discourses around environmental justice in the Niger Delta such as corporate social responsibility and legal settlements operate at the level of compensation without addressing the metaphysical rupture. Essencism posits that true justice consists of ontological restoration of recognizing rivers, lands, and communities as rightful bearers of sacred essence.

This view resonates with African metaphysics grounded in *ubuntu* and spiritual ecology. The Ijaw people's traditional appeal to Egbesu, their deity of justice, configures warfare and environmental defense as cosmic acts of ontological recalibration.¹⁴ Similarly, the Ogoni struggle as embodied by Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP was not merely a fight for economic rights, but for recognition of land's sacred status.¹⁵

Environmental justice, under Essencism, moves beyond distributive and procedural parameters to include the following:

- i. Epistemic recognition: accepting indigenous wisdom and spiritual paradigms as valid knowledge in governance (Ogwu; Walker & Day).
- ii. Spiritual repair: participating in rituals to acknowledge ancestral ties to land as a necessary dimension of remediation.
- iii. Communal agency: empowering communities as co-authors of environmental policy, and not passive recipients of corporate or governmental charity.

By restoring ontological belonging, Essencism transforms environmental injustice into a journey of metaphysical healing with a journey that revalues ecosystems and reinstates human solidarity with nature.

V. Sustainable Development as Teleological Re-Alignment

In the Niger Delta, sustainable development has too often masqueraded as mere economic growth or infrastructural expansion, which is an approach that is insufficient from an Essencist standpoint. Instead, Essencism demands a teleological re-alignment, grounding development in the intrinsic essences of human communities, ecological systems, and spiritual realities.¹⁷

A. From Growth to Flourishing

Essencism critiques conventional development metrics such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), investment inflows, and the Human Development Index (HDI) as inadequate proxies for genuine flourishing. Instead, it revives Aristotelian *telos*: human and ecological systems demand ends aligned with their essential natures. It references the

African metaphysical tradition, which views the land, water, and heavens as agents participating in a broader cosmic purpose.¹⁸ Ongoing exploitation of oil, in contrast, yields short-term gains that betray long-term existential collapse.

B. Principles of Essencist Teleology

Essencism outlines key principles for realigning development trajectories and these are:

1. Regenerative Technological Integration:

Technologies should restore rather than dominate ecosystems. Closed-loop agro-ecological systems, bio-remediation fields, and clean micro-grids exemplify interventions that respect natural rhythms and teleological complexity.¹⁹

2. Curricular Transformation via Essencist Education:

Essencism clearly demands knowledge that synthesizes spiritual wisdom, technical expertise, and ecological empathy. Advancing sustainable futures requires graduates who embody ethical-technological stewardship.²⁰

3. Legal Pluralism and Indigenous Ontologies:

Integrating customary laws, spiritual covenants, and eco-centric legal frameworks will restore the region's teleological coherence. Recognition of indigenous rituals connected to the land, river-blessings, sacred groves, and communal land-tenure systems ensures that law emerges from, rather than disrupts, ontological harmony.

C. Concrete Pathways to Teleological Harmony

Community-Owned Renewable Micro-grids:

Decentralized solar and bioenergy projects that are orchestrated through Essencist governance to realign communities with local ecological essences while reclaiming agency over energy and purpose.

NDDC Environmental Competency Programs:

Training staff in environmental stewardship, inclusive worldview, and ecosystem ethics embodies teleological reorientation. As the NDDC leadership commented: "sustainability ... must be integrated into every aspect of our economic activities".

Dialogical Land and Water Governance:

A participatory platform where elders, spiritual custodians, engineers, scientists, and youth co-author development plans ensures that teleology is grounded in relational ontology and not abstraction.

VI. Case Applications

A. Ogoniland Remediation and Ontological Reckoning

The United Nations Environmental Programme's 2011 assessment of Ogoniland revealed catastrophic pollution: creeks saturated with heavy hydrocarbons, groundwater tainted, and mangroves murdered (UNEP 1). Despite a ₦1 billion cleanup initiative launched in 2018, activists warn that oil drilling resumption undermines justice, lamenting that "pollution that ought to be addressed has not been addressed". Essencism interprets this as continued ontological foreclosure: land retains its damaged status as a "standing-reserve" rather than being restored as a living entity. A meaningful Essencist intervention here would involve full ecosystem revival, inclusive sacred rituals, and Ogoni-led governance before, and not after, any drilling resumes.

B. Renewable Micro-grids in Umuolu: TechNology as Poiesis

The Umuolu community's solar mini-grid—installed by YEAC-Nigeria offers 90 kW to 262 households, replacing generators that perpetuated pollution (PunchNG; Tribune Online). This qualifies as poietic technology: it reveals energy sovereignty, ecological harmony, and alternative livelihood grounded in communal essence. In Essencist terms, this micro-grid is a step toward technological redemption, offering youths a communal role and enabling ecological reverence through non-extractive innovation.

C. Legal Empowerment: Women-Led Environmental Justice

Female community actors, empowered through Kebetkache's mock tribunal and legal training, have made formidable strides in confronting gas-flaring and spill polluters such as Shell and Agip (VanguardNigeria; EnvironewsNigeria). Their embodiment of ontological agency resonates with Essencism's insistence on participatory justice that recognizes women as stewards of both family and ecosystem.

VII. Essencist Praxis: Diagnosis and Prescription

A. Diagnosis: Ontological Maladies

1. Metaphysical alienation: the Niger Delta's lands and waters are estranged from their ontological essence, treated as mere bleed sources for the global economy.
2. Technological enframing: oil infrastructure reveals an instrumental worldview that extinguishes local ways of being.
3. Ecocide and social disenfranchisement: decades of spill-induced cancer, deforestation, and community disruption signal deeper existential collapse.
4. Knowledge disenfranchisement: the marginalization of indigenous and women's ecological wisdom suppresses alternative ontological perspectives.

B. Prescription: Restoring Essence through Practice

1. Ontological Education: Integrate Essencist curriculum across Delta schools and universities, merging technical skill with metaphysical literacy and environmental stewardship.
2. Technological Reciprocity: Implement micro-grids, agro-ecological technologies, and community-managed reclamation—all co-designed by locals and technical experts to affirm ecological telos.
3. Legal Pluralism: Enact laws that recognize tribal land laws, sacred grove protections, and rituals as legitimate forms of environmental regulation.
4. Ritual Ecology: Restore rituals—river blessings, tree planting ceremonies—to spiritually mend rupture, acknowledging land as kin rather than commodity.
5. Public Philosophers: Position philosophers as facilitators between communities, technocrats, and policymakers that could help actualize Essencist discourse in public fora and shape policy frameworks.

VIII. Conclusion

The Niger Delta crisis is not devoid of solutions but it is metaphysically unhinged. Essencism crafts a diagnosis of existential rupture and prescribes a journey toward teleological re-alignment. Rather than treating technology and development as end goals, they should become means to rediscover relationships among being, land, and community. In nurturing ecological essence, regenerating technological humility, and restoring systemic justice through spiritual recognition, the Niger Delta can flourish as a beacon of philosophical renewal.

Essencism thus offers not only a critique of extractivism but a reclamation of ecological purpose with a pathway for sustainable development that recognizes essence as the heartbeat of justice, technology, and community.

Footnotes

1. Wikipedia, "Environmental Issues in the Niger Delta."
2. Ibid.
3. Samuel Asuquo Ekanem, "Philosophical Foundation of Curriculum Development in Nigeria: The Essencist Model"; Samuel Asuquo Ekanem et al., "The Gap Between Scientific and Technological Development in Africa."

4. Samuel Asuquo Ekanem and Ekefre, "Philosophical Foundation of Curriculum Development in Nigeria," 1.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 2; Studocu, "Essencism."
7. Studocu, "Essencism."
8. Ekanem et al., "The Gap Between Scientific and Technological Development in Africa."
9. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 3.
10. Ekanem and Ekefre, "Philosophical Foundation...", 2.
11. Wikipedia, "Environmental Issues in the Niger Delta."
12. Ogwu; Aunty.
13. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*.
14. Wikipedia, "Egbesu."
15. Wikipedia, "Ken Saro-Wiwa"; "Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People."
16. Ogwu; Walker and Day.
17. Ekanem, Aboh, and Oweh, "Essencism as an African Paradigm," 220.
18. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.
19. Lucian Chukwu; Niger Delta Development Commission initiatives.
20. Ekanem and Ekefre, "Philosophical Foundation..."
21. UNEP, *Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland*, 2011.
22. *PunchNG; Tribune Online*.
23. *Vanguard Nigeria; Environews Nigeria*.

Bibliography

Agyeman, Julian, Robert D. Bullard, and Bob Evans, eds. *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World*. London: Earthscan, 2003.

Ekanem, Samuel Asuquo. "A Philosophy of Education for Technological Development in Nigeria." PhD diss., University of Calabar, 2005.

Ekanem, Samuel Asuquo. "Philosophical Foundation of Curriculum Development in Nigeria: The Essencist Model." *Journal of Education and Social Research* 4, no. 3 (2014): 265–271.

Ekanem, Samuel Asuquo, Magdalyn Aboh, and Kidzu T. Oweh. "Essencism as an African Paradigm Towards the Salvation of the Environment." *European Journal of Sustainable Development* 6, no. 3 (2017): 220–233.

Ekanem, Samuel Asuquo, and Chinenye Precious Okolisah. "The Gap Between Scientific and Technological Development in Africa." *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy* (2018): 79–94.

Heidegger, Martin. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated

by William Lovitt. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969.

Ramose, Mogobe B. *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*. Mond Books, 2002.

UNEP. *Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland*. United Nations Environment Programme, 2011.

Watts, Michael. "Resource Curse? Governmentality, Oil and Power in the Niger Delta." *Geopolitics* 9, no. 1 (2004): 50–80.

Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.