Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction 2

2.0 The Failure of the Current Transactional Model 4

3.0 Idemili Case as Social Technology 5

4.0 From Crisis Management to Organisational Atonement 6

5.0 Learning to Bury the Python and Conclusion 8

Description of key words

Nwadiana: A descendant through the maternal family

Eke**:** Python

Onye Ozi: Messenger

Nne Anyi: Our Mother

The Ingenuity of Atonement: What the Funeral of a Sacred Python in Anambra State, Nigeria Teaches Us About Next Generation Innovation.

Ègbè bèlù, ùgò bèlù; nke sì ibe yà èbèlà, nku kwàà yà

Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too, if one says no to the other, let its wing break

1.0 Introduction

Reflecting on the theme of the essay, I remembered an incident that occurred in the early 2000s, when I visited my grandmother in the remote town of Awgbu in Orumba North Local Government Area (LGA) of Anambra State. While I sat in her living room, enjoying the special treatment reserved for a Nwadiana, a python suddenly slid through the open doorway and silently coiled itself up in a dark corner of the house. I jumped on the chair and screamed for help. Surprisingly, I noticed that my grandmother and my other aunties in the room did not panic. My grandmother quietly spoke to the python in a calm voice, subsequently guided it onto a long stick, and safely placed it outside. At the time, I thought my grandmother was fearless and possessed some mystical powers. Years later, I realised why she acted that way. My grandmother acted that way not because she had supernatural powers or loved pythons, but because she was obliged to. In many Igbo communities, including Anambra State, the python (Eke) is sacred and mostly linked to a deity like Idemili. It represents a living relationship between the people and the land they inhabit, and serves as an invisible social fabric that holds the entire community together. [1,2, & 3] So when my grandmother gently moved the python outside, she honoured the community's covenant of living in harmony with non-humans, as illustrated through the popular Igbo adage above.

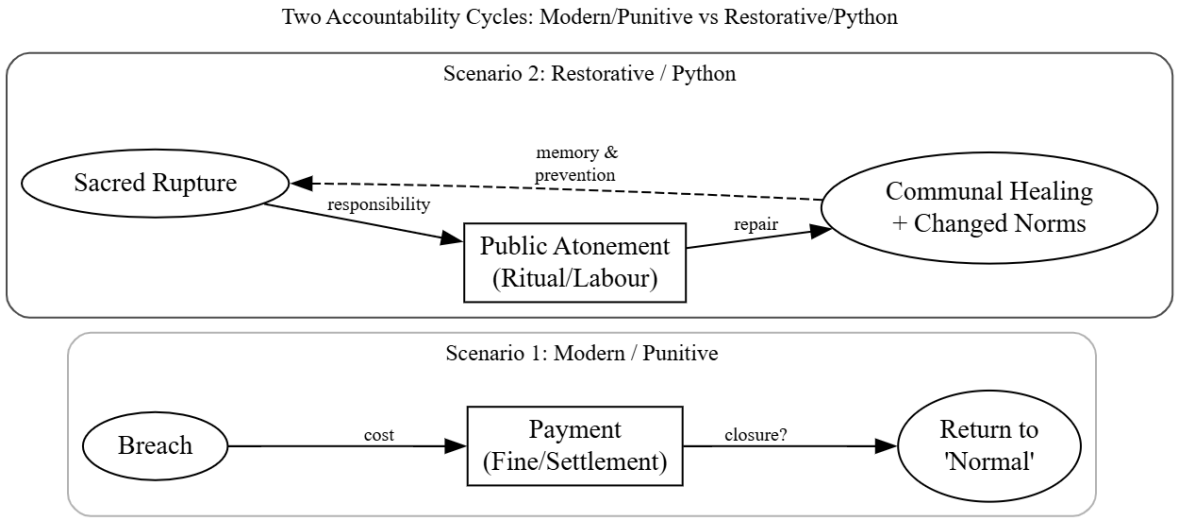
But what happens when this sacred covenant is breached? For example, in 2025, an elderly man was paraded in Idemili, Anambra State for killing a python. According to a local news source: "*The man walked around the street, singing a threnody they compelled him to sing, with the python hung round his neck, while the visibly angry youths follow him around with canes and*

[1] Ephraim-Chukwu, Anthonia Chinyere. "Evaluating Totemism in Some Igbo Culture Areas as an African Belief System." Odezuruigbo Journal 5, no. 1 (2021): 39–40

[2] Ife. (2025, August 11). 5 sacred animals in Igbo culture and their deep meanings. Nnewi City. https://nnewicity.com/5-sacred-animals-in-igbo-culture-and-their-deep-meanings/

[3] Ezeme, I. (2025, May 7). Animal totems in Igbo culture: Sacred symbols and spiritual significance. Ozikoro. https://ozikoro.com/animal-totems-in-igbo-culture-sacred-symbols-and-spiritual-significance/

clubs, flogging and making videos of him."[4]. Given what the python represents, killing it even by accident indicates a disruption in the community's social and moral order. Thus, to appease the community, offenders are usually compelled to perform a ritual of atonement, like conducting a funeral for the killed python as if it were a human being.[5, 6] What appears as a cultural taboo, is in fact, a sophisticated governance system that is rooted in true accountability and justice. This raises questions like: What would it mean for modern organisations to operate in a similar moral logic? What implications does it have on leadership?



Source: Author's illustration

Peter Drucker argues that organisations are social organs and not just profit generating machines, [7] but this leaves an open question: What should organisations do when they harm the society that they ought to serve? Moreover, Drucker through his management as a liberal arts proposition reframes management as not just a quantitative endeavour, but as a humanistic discipline[8] Given this insight, there is a need to rethink management from solely a science of metrics to a practice of meaning-making. For example, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria which has historically been faced with massive oil pollution, we can measure the cost of clean-

[4] Okafor, I. (2025, August 22). Anambra community youths parade old man with cane for killing sacred python (video). 247 UReports. https://247ureports.com/2025/08/anambra-community-youths-parade-old-man-with-cane-for-killing-sacred-python-video/

[5] Rapheal. (2025, September 24). Why we don't kill, eat python in Idemili – Monarch. The Sun Nigeria. https://thesun.ng/why-we-dont-kill-eat-python-in-idemili-monarch/

[6] Emedolibe, N. (2023, September 9). Idemili: Nigerian community where pythons get 'befitting' funerals when killed. Daily Times Nigeria. https://dailytimesng.com/idemili-nigerian-community-where-pythons-get-befitting-funerals-when-killed/

[7] H., P. (2006, July 11). Drucker on corporate responsibility. World Bank Blogs. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/psd/drucker-on-corporate-responsibility

[8] Cohen, W. A. (2023, July 31). How to apply management as a liberal art. Process Excellence Network. https://www.processexcellencenetwork.com/business-transformation/articles/how-to-apply-management-as-a-liberal-art/

up which is estimated at $150 billion annually[9], but we cannot quantify the loss of trust over the years, illustrating Drucker's point.

This essay argues that modern management must move from transactional accountability to what I term as organisational atonement; a practice inspired by the Igbo cosmology, where restoration demands putting the hard physical labour to repair the broken social and ecological relationships. Organisational atonement is not an apology; it is a process that requires organisations to acknowledge harm, publicly identify with and make genuine physical efforts to repair the lost relationships they have damaged. Specifically, the essay proposes five steps for organisational atonement which includes: acknowledgement, defining harm, public mourning, repairing, and reintegration.

2.0 The Failure of the Current Transactional Model

In most modern legal systems, if someone mistakenly kills a protected animal, the system or enforcement officials (e.g., Police) resort to imposing fines on the culprit as a means to compensate for the loss as captured in the figure below. However, fines and settlement like we see in the "*polluter pays principle*," are merely innovations in accounting that creates transactional gap, rather than innovation in responsibility. By settling for only fines, we indirectly assume that we are just dealing with only a financial loss. But what of the cultural, social and spiritual losses incurred as a result of ecological destruction? For example, in August 2021, Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) agreed to pay $111 million as compensation to Niger Delta communities in Nigeria, for its oil spill activities in the region over the years.[10] While this was widely celebrated in the media, the payment did not restore polluted rivers or the loss of trust between the corporation and the communities. In a nutshell, the payment acted as a fine and not as reconciliation or healing; it was just the price they (Shell) were willing to pay for their oil spillage in affected community, and not a genuine effort to repair the devastated landscape and traumatised society.

Moreover, this essay argues that resorting to only transactional accountability in periods of ecological ruin is rooted in Taylor's scientific management principle which prioritises efficiency and control. [11] Financial liabilities like fines paid to affected communities are passed down to shareholders or covered by insurance. Executives who make the law rarely feel it

[9]Essen, C. (2025, July 31). Oil spill: Niger Delta clean-up may cost FG $150 billion yearly. The Guardian Nigeria. https://guardian.ng/news/oil-spill-niger-delta-clean-up-may-cost-fg-150-billion-yearly/

[10] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58181836

[11] Psychology Town. (2025, September 9). *Scientific management: Revolutionizing workplace efficiency through psychology*. https://psychology.town/industrial-organisational/scientific-management-workplace-efficiency-psychology/

because the costs are absorbed as cost of doing business. In light of this, we need to move from how we define harm to how we extract accountability from the perpetrators psychologically. Meanwhile, in the relentless pursuit of scale and efficiency, we have stripped away the sacredness of many things. Things like nature, workers' mental well-being, or citizen's privacy and data are now treated as variables to optimise, risks to hedge against, or as externality to be priced out. For example, in 2019, Facebook was accused and fined of $5billion for the breach in the data of over 500 million users globally.[10] What is the modern equivalence of funeral or atonement for this disruption? It is usually a well-articulated statement by team of lawyers, and a fine paid to regulatory bodies. But this is where the gap lies. If fines are merely transactions, what would transformation look like? How do organisations repair trust, restore damage landscape, and successfully reintegrate into societies that they harm?

As Drucker warns, the greatest danger in times of turbulence is to act with yesterday's logic.[11] Fines are yesterday's logic, applicable to a world where the focus is to price everything, with little emphasis on finding meaning or building trust. In view of this, the next generation innovation demands that we shift our attention towards organisation's creative ability to restore the social and ecological fabric when the systems inevitably fail.

3.0 Idemili Case as Social Technology

Given the shortfalls of the current punitive system, it is important to look for other working alternatives, and this is what makes the sophisticated and decentralised Idemili case study very important. The python in this case acts as a high functioning environmental management system. Also, it is important to highlight that the value of what is protected (python) is embedded in the very identity of the people. In fact in some communities, python are referred to as Nne Anyi (our mother), or Onye Ozi (messenger from the spirit world). So, no amount of fine can truly compensate harming pythons in these communities. So what happens when someone harms them (i.e., pythons) and cannot write off with only fines? How does the community handle the sacred rupture? This leads to organisational atonement that this essays advocates drawing on the Idemili model. As highlighted earlier, in Idemili, a physical burial is conducted for the departed python. [6] Extending this to the modern corporate world, the funeral in the case study presents an opportunity to revive communal responsibilities on both individual and organisation levels. It brings every member of the community together to acknowledge the disruption, and actively participate in re-building the invisible social fabric together. This is

[10] https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-ftc-record-penalty-mark-zuckerberg-2019-5

[11] Caldwell, L. (2025, November 12). *The same but different: As turbulence continues, manufacturers must dare to re-write the rules*. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/lisacaldwell/2025/11/12/the-same-but-different-as-turbulence-continues-manufacturers-must-dare-to-re-write-the-rules/

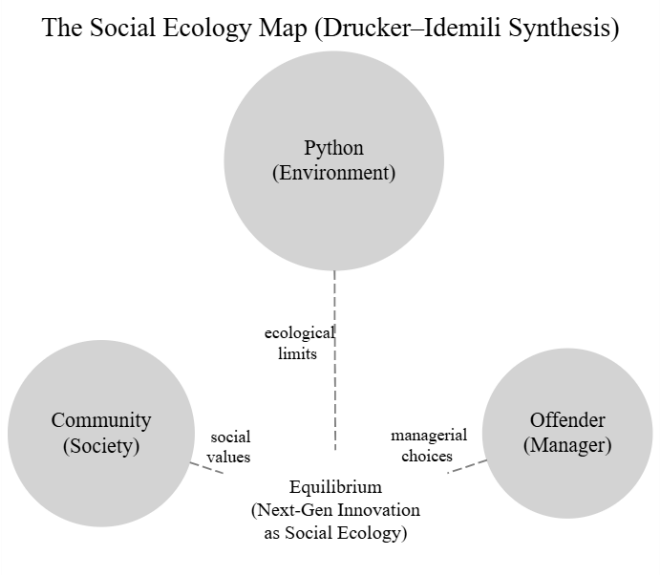
different from the current punitive system where fines and legal settlement are negotiated from corporate boardrooms, with little or no physical involvement of leaders who contributed to the ecological harm.

Nonetheless, the Idemili logic has some drawbacks. For instance, organisations might just perform being remorseful while continuing their ecologically harmful activities elsewhere. Moreover, even in Idemili, factors like the rapid spreading influence of Christianity, urbanisation, and changing values also create tension. For instance, some villagers question if these rites should still be performed in this civilised and modernised world? This raises a question of what civilisation and modernisation truly means? Yet, this tension between communal responsibility and modern drive for efficiency is global and justifies the need for this proposal. We are all trying to understand how to live in a modern world without losing our humanity. Moreover, Drucker's idea of social ecology invites leaders to see indigenous practices like the Idemili's case as a source of management knowledge. If management is liberal art, then it must learn not only from economics or statistics, but from indigenous cosmologies too. So, Idemili offers such lesson.

4.0 From Crisis Management to Organisational Atonement

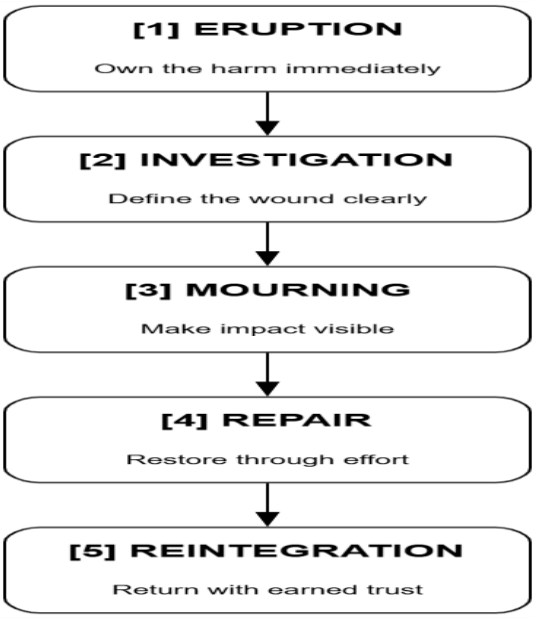
To extend a village funeral into global corporate space is not straightforward and easy. For instance, in the Facebook data breach case, how and where do we gather over 500 million victims to restore trust and discuss ways forward? What would atonement look like at this scale? Would it require Mark Zuckerberg to face millions of victims, not through statement, but in public accountability? Moreover, organisations are only legal beings incapable of genuine moral reflections. In this light, solely focusing on Idemili's logic risks substituting the hard core metrics which is used to hold organisations accountable. At the same time, fines alone has failed as seen in the Niger Delta case study. So what is the way forward? Perhaps, balancing the restorative vision of the Idemili tradition with the social ecology idea of Peter Drucker might

be the missing piece that organisations need to move forward as depicted in the diagram below:



Source: Author's illustration

In a nutshell, organisational atonement is not a substitute, rather it is a complementary layer to regulatory layer and ESG compliance. But before I proceed, what does this organisational atonement look like in practice? For example, in the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and Niger-Delta case study that I cited earlier, where SPDC through the current frameworks paid a compensation fee to the community. Applying the five steps of organisational atonement as illustrated in the diagram below, means that first, senior decision makers like board members, executives, CEO, etc., would immediately confess and acknowledge the oil spill activities in the region, without necessary resorting to legal means to minimise the harm. After acknowledging the oil spill, the senior officials would not sit back at the headquarters in Lagos or Abuja, rather they would visit the affected communities like Ogoni in Rivers State, where they will dialogue with members and leaders of the communities to define the exact shape and depth of the oil spill. Instead of the top-down remediation schemes, communities co-define what harm and restitution would look like. In the third stage, the major leaders and actors in SPDC who authorise the spill would be publicly named or identified. Drawing on re-integrative shaming theories, the goal here is not to humiliate these leaders but for them to confront the psychological weight of the collective loss. In the next phase, these actors and leaders named would physically join the clean-up exercise. At this point, compensating victims and disappearing into the thin air, like it is done in the current corporate crisis management is not the goal. The actors and organisation must be physically involved in the process of clean-up to earn the support, trust, goodwill and social licence of the people again. Lastly, organisations re-enter the community with earned humility.



Source: Author's illustration

Nevertheless, organisational atonement is not a substitute for hard technical work. In places like Ogoni, the soil and water must be cleaned according to rigorous scientific standards. No amount of public apology can remove the hydrocarbons from the soil. So organisational atonement do not outrightly reject scientific and legal prescriptions, rather it ensures that leaders do not hide under these instruments to perpetrate ecological harms without true accountability. Another thing I thought about is how corporate structures might change if we adopt organisational atonement. Organisations might need to have new departments, new budgets, and new executive officers like a Chief Restoration Officer (CRO). The CRO will be tasked with designing and leading atonement processes like apology, and community building, in close collaboration with community leaders.

5.0 Learning to Bury the Python and Conclusion

In my current work in a small academic team, I often think about what consequences look like when someone's mistake harms the group? Do we treat it as a technical flaw or recognise that trust has been breached? Even at individual levels, the question is the same: is our response only a transaction, or also a transformation? The global crises like environmental pollution, data breaches, etc., are amplified versions of these individual tensions. Fines and regulations are important but without moral values and care for the community, these interventions are insufficient.

This essay challenges businesses to move from the current punitive model to actually fixing the damage they cause. If accountability does not involve the organisation making sacrifices like

giving up comfort, then it is theatrics. Throughout, this essay has called for the rethinking of next generation management, from just speed and efficiency in the market to considerations of more social values like integrity, aligning profit with justice. This aligns with Drucker's idea of protecting human dignity. Additionally, we have looked at massive corporate tragedies like the oil spill in Niger Delta. Companies must act as restorers. The goal is not about a quick press release, but about doing the hard, painful work of restoring social order. Finally, burying the python is not hiding the evidence, it is about owning up publicly and facing the shame and going through the painstaking process of restitution, including a respectful public funeral for the past's failure. It does not erase history but it lets the community to heal, because tomorrow's market belongs to the most humane companies. Ultimately, the future of leadership is not about outrunning past mistakes, but having the courage to repair them and restore our shared humanity.

AI Disclosure

I used Gemini to proofread my draft, rephrase a few awkward sentences for clarity, and make grammatical corrections. All conceptual work, ideas, examples, and framing are entirely my own.