

Roles of and Threats to Yoruba Traditional Beliefs in Wilderness Conservation in Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract—The Yoruba of southwest Nigeria are constantly conscious and acknowledging of God's divine lordship over the whole earth. This fact keeps them aware that they ought to be careful how this earth is treated. Yoruba religion and mythology is a major influence in West Africa, chiefly in Nigeria, and it has given origin to several New World religions. The Yorubas have a number of deities that they believe serve as intermediaries between them and the supreme god. This paper focuses on the roles of and threats to Yoruba beliefs in wilderness conservation in southwest Nigeria. Sacred groves and wilderness are seen as symbols of identity for all Yoruba people and probably the last in Yoruba culture. Recent development resulting from urbanization and differences in the beliefs of modern religions like Christians and Islam (with belief in Almighty God) and Traditional religions (with belief in Deities) have led to reduction of wilderness. Vast areas of some wilderness have experienced significant reduction through their conversion to infrastructural facilities, worship venues, and prayer camps. This is advancing at an alarming rate. Effort should therefore be geared toward protecting the remaining wilderness. It is noteworthy to mention that this paper neither shows preference nor condemns any religion over the other but rather creates awareness of the contribution of traditional beliefs among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria to biodiversity conservation. Recommendations of ways to harmonize the beliefs with other religions are also noted.

Keywords: wilderness, Osun sacred grove, Christianity, Islam, traditional beliefs, Yoruba, deity

Introduction

Humans use forests for many purposes, and the products derived from forests, and their benefits, are referred to as 'forest goods and services' (MEA 2005). Generally, the services fall into four groups: supporting, provisioning, regulating, and

cultural services (Diaz and others 2005; Fischlin and others 2007). With a rich knowledge and practical understanding about the use and conservation of animals, plants and the ecosystem as a whole, traditional knowledge systems and associated practices, embedded in traditional cultures, have become the social and technical foundations for mutual coordination and sustainable development for local inhabitants and their local environment (Xu and Liu 1995; Zhang 1995; Pei 1996; Rao 1996).

Several recent studies have drawn attention to the role of indigenous knowledge and cultural beliefs in biodiversity conservation (Rao 1996; Liu 2006; Louman and others 2009; Luo and others, in press). Indigenous people in many parts of the world imbue headlands, springs, trees and forests with religious meanings (Lauwrence 2003). For instance, the interrelationship between traditional culture and biodiversity conservation has been documented over the last 10 years in China (Chen and others 2008; Pei 1996; He and He 2000; Xu and Liu 1995). These studies have documented how, through historical processes, local ethnic groups have developed very close interrelationship with local animals, plants and forests, and formed distinct diversified indigenous knowledge systems and traditional cultural beliefs. Cultural sites, particularly sacred sites, are ecologically unique and important for conservation on varying scales of landscape, community, and species (Salick and others 2007). In their study on the role of traditional beliefs of Baima Tibetans in biodiversity conservation in China, Lou and others (in press) found that the perspectives of community people toward the function of sacred trees, mountains, and animals are diverse. Over half of a local community regard the worship of the Mountain God, sacred trees, and animals as connected with environmental protection. They believe that if they can protect the sacred mountain and sacred trees well, then this will protect the village and wildlife of the forest, and also bring rain and provide general protection of the environment. Other people in the study of Lou and others (in press) acknowledge the role of a sacred mountain and sacred trees for wildlife and the environment, but they consider their protection important mainly to bring good luck and fortune, and to avoid the God's punishment.

A problem for integration of traditional beliefs is the refusal of many scientists to recognize traditional ecological knowledge as science because of its spiritual base, which they regard as superstitious and fatalistic (Ogunade 2005). Many discussions implicitly or explicitly assume that biodiversity conservation is possible only within protected areas. Yet most of the world's biodiversity is in areas used by people

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(Berkes and others 2000; Berkes 2004). What they fail to recognize is that spiritual explanations often incorporate important ecology, conservation, and sustainable development strategies (Johnson 1992). Local people have incentives to conserve biodiversity when their livelihoods depend on a multitude of products and values produced by biodiversity (Bhagwat and others 2005; Dudley and others 2006). Hence, to conserve biodiversity, we need to understand how human cultures interact with landscapes and shape them into cultural landscapes (Davidson-Hunt 2003). In fact, to a large extent, the world's biodiversity depends on maintaining patterns of resource use that facilitate the continued renewal of ecosystems. Many traditional systems of forest use do this, showing subtle understandings of how forest ecosystems work. The study of cultural landscapes and indigenous use of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) provides an arena in which discussions of biodiversity, traditional management systems and cultural landscapes can be brought together.

Sacred Groves

There is a growing interest in the natural world, and protected areas provide us with opportunities to interact with nature in a way that is increasingly difficult elsewhere. They give us space that is otherwise lacking in an increasingly managed and crowded planet (Dudley 2008; Stolton and others 2008). Protected areas also represent a commitment to future generations (Borrini-Feyerabend and others 2004). Most people also believe that we have an ethical obligation to prevent species loss due to our own actions. This is supported by the teachings of the large majority of the world's religious faiths (Dudley and others 2006). Protecting iconic landscapes and seascapes is seen as being important from a wider cultural perspective as well, and flagship protected areas are important to a country's heritage (Dudley and others 2006).

Sacred groves vary in size from a few hectares to a few kilometers. Protected by local communities as being the sacred residences of local deities and sites for religio-cultural rituals, they have served as valuable storehouses for biodiversity. Sacred groves are forests that have been protected since the ages by traditional societies. In the past, sacred groves were present in numerous parts of the world on nearly every continent, and were entities held sacred by communities with different religions and different forms of economic and social organization. Most of the world's sacred groves have disappeared and few remain today (Anup 2006).

The concept of 'sacred' species provides a basis not only for natural resource management, but also for rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems with community participation. Thus, a system of incentives needs to be worked into the system to reward communities for conserving sacred groves. Sacred groves perform useful environmental tasks not merely for the immediate vicinity but for a much larger audience. Given the importance of sacred groves, a look at their conservation status is necessary. Of late, a decline in traditional beliefs has led to a decline in practices and rituals associated with sacred groves (Anup 2006).

Results of a comparison between sacred groves and formal reserves have shown that sacred groves shelter a high diversity of medicinal plants and have more vigorous regeneration of trees than do formal reserves (Boraiah and others 2003).

Sacred groves also have higher tree species diversity than do formal reserves (Bhandary and Chandrashekar 2003; Jamir and Pandey 2003; Ramanujam and Cyril 2003).

Osun Sacred Grove

There are many sacred groves in southwest Nigeria with varying sizes, species compositions, and cultural/social relevance. The principle behind these sacred groves is pro-conservation. Osun-Osogbo sacred grove located in Osun State, Nigeria, was selected for this study. In 2005, UNESCO named the sacred Osun grove a World Cultural Heritage site (Wikipedia 2009a; UNESCO 2009). This inscription was the culmination of a 50-year campaign spearheaded by a group of artists, Yoruba priests, and an Austrian artist named Susanne Wenger. The Osun cultural festival is a unique annual celebration in honor of the river goddess, popularly called Osun. The festival has acquired an international status witnessed by both domestic and international tourists. River Osun was believed to have provided the water of life that saved the inhabitants of ancient Osogbo town from hunger, pestilence, and religious war centuries ago. It is still believed to provide protective guidance today. The annual celebration is, therefore, done in reverence and appreciation of the goddess of fertility.

Yoruba Religion and Mythology

The southwest states of Nigeria are dominated by Yoruba tribes. Yoruba people are actually one of the largest ethnolinguistic or ethnic groups in West Africa. The majority of the Yoruba speak the Yoruba language. The Yoruba constitute about 30 million individuals throughout West Africa and are found predominantly in Nigeria, at approximately 21 percent of its total population (Wikipedia 2009b).

Yoruba religion and mythology is a major influence in West Africa, chiefly in Nigeria, and it has given origin to several New World religions such as Santería in Cuba and Puerto Rico and Candomblé in Brazil. 'Itan' (tale) is the term for the sum total of all Yoruba myths, songs, histories, and other cultural components. These mostly originate from the 'ese' (verses) of the *Odu Ifa*. After the Oya empire collapsed and the region plunged into civil war, ethnic Yoruba were among the largest in number of African people who were enslaved and taken by European traders to Cuba, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Haiti, Trinidad, and the rest of the New World (chiefly in the 19th century). The enslaved Africans carried their Orisha religious beliefs with them. These concepts were combined with preexisting African-based religions, Christianity, Native American mythology, and Kardecist Spiritism into various New World lineages: Lucumí (Cuba, Puerto Rico), Oyotunji (U.S.), Anago (Nigeria), Candomblé (Brazil), Umbanda (Brazil), Batuque (Brazil) and Kaaro oojire (Nigeria) (Wikipedia 2009b).

Yoruba deities include "Oya" (wind/storm), "Ifá" (divination or fate), "Eleda" (destiny), Orisha or Orisa "Ibeji" (twin), "Osanyin" (medicines and healing) and "Osun" (goddess of fertility, protector of children and mothers), and Sango (God of thunder). The places of worship (shrines) could be in towns or forests. When the shrines are outside the towns, it is forbidden for non-adherents to enter such places except during open festivals. At times, such places are permanently

out-of-bounds to female gender. One is the “*Oro*” festival where females are neither allowed to enter the shrine nor witness the festival (Wikipedia 2009b).

The Yoruba Beliefs and Wilderness Conservation

The Yoruba of southwest Nigeria are constantly conscious of and acknowledging God’s divine lordship over the whole earth. They also believe that “man is a tenant on God’s earth” (Idowu 1978). This fact keeps them aware that they ought to be careful how this earth is treated. The idea that God is the Creator of the Universe is held by most religions of the world. The argument that the Universe is created and designed by a Being is further supported and demonstrated by ontological and ideological arguments (the philosophical theories that all of creation is designed for a purpose) (Ogunade 2005). This Being is invisible, ubiquitous, and immortal. The idea of the creation of the Universe and all that is there is fundamental to the basis of the religious beliefs of Yoruba people. Respect for the environment has always been with them.

The Yoruba do not usually tamper with nature carelessly (Ogunade 2005). Despite the indiscriminate destruction of forests and the unsustainable harvesting of forest products, the traditional cultural system of the studied communities showed evidence of in-situ conservation. The fact that the respondents believed that trees such as *Adansonia digitata*, *Bombax buonopozense*, *Newbouldia laevis* and *Melicia excelsa* are sacred and are preserved in their natural environment buttresses this fact. Plants like *Newbouldia laevis* are considered very important in Yoruba culture, most especially for installation of ‘Oba’ (King), traditional rulers, and chiefs. Such plants, among others, are highly protected and prevented from going into extinction. The establishment of shrines and groves where cutting is prohibited is highly contributory to conservation and biodiversity of these communities. The fact that indigenes could mention some plants as scarce and becoming rare to collect contradicts the belief by the indigenous people that plants are always available in the forests for collection.

Modernization has taken its toll on this aspect of wilderness conservation, just as it has affected all other aspects of the Nigerian life. All features in nature are created and placed there for a significant purpose. The sole aim is to create a healthy and beautiful habitat for human beings. Some of these natural features also serve as abode for a category of the divinities (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979). These are no more than personifications of natural forces and phenomena. For instance, the myriad spirits (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979) that populate the world of the Yoruba are associated with hills, mountains, rivers, rocks, caves, trees, brooks, lakes, and thick forests. These features are later termed sacred groves. The Osun grove in Osogbo, whose forest and river are forbidden for hunting and fishing, is an example of care for the environment (Ogunade 2005). The environment and the people are in close relationship in such a grove.

Because of the spiritual presence that is palpable in the Yoruba community and the environment, any violation of nature’s integrity requires some rituals to appease some of the spirits that dwell in the environment. This view is difficult for the West to understand (Some 1999). Attempts to protect and preserve the environment in the West are often for aesthetic and sometimes

economic reasons. This Western influence has devastated and choked most of our cities in Nigeria of their once beautiful habitat. This is not the case in the villages where life is green and healthy. Indeed, longevity is a direct consequence of a fresh and unpolluted environment.

Furthermore, the Yoruba concept of the environment is all-embracing; the humans, animals, plants, and “non-living beings” form the entire human society or community. Therefore, for a peaceful co-existence of all of these beings, the humans, who consider themselves to be in charge, must be careful not to provoke or destabilize their environment and their “co-tenants.” For instance, the tiniest of insects is regarded as having rights to life, while the chameleon is a sacred being that cannot be killed in Yorubaland (Ogunade 2005).

Another dimension to the interconnectedness between the Yoruba and their environment is the step they take in rituals to correct a violation in nature. The Yoruba see the physical world as a reflection of a more complex, subtler, and more lasting, yet invisible, entity called energy (Ogunade 2005). It is as if they are the shadows of a vibrant and endlessly resourceful intelligence, dynamically involved in a process of continuous self-creation. Nothing happens here that did not begin in that unseen world. If something in the physical world is experiencing instability, it is because its energetic correspondents have been experiencing instability (Some 1999). The Yoruba understanding is that the material and physical problems that a person or community encounters are important only because they are an energetic message (Opoku 1978) sent to this visible world. Therefore, people go to that realm to try to repair whatever damages are being done there, knowing that if things are healed there, things will be healed here (Ogunade 2005). Ritual is the principal tool used to approach that unseen world in a way that will rearrange the structure of the physical world and bring about material transformation. They are usually very careful about what they do with nature because rituals are also expensive (Ogunade 2005).

Finally, adherents of Yoruba religion fully appreciate the fact that many human catastrophes have their origin in the misapplication of science and technology. Thus, they think of the ecosystem as reciprocating, to keep its action in balance. In this light, their activities are guided by the *Orisa* and the benevolent beings. They also appreciate the great difference between this Yoruba belief and practice and that of the West where there are ideas and feelings that nature could be tamed and the environment controlled scientifically.

Threats to Traditional Beliefs in Wilderness Conservation

Religious institutions address the moral and ethical challenges of human society (Awoyemi 2008). Anthropologists of religion, such as Rappaport (1979, 1999), consider religion a primary regulator of human behavior and capable of controlling impulses toward short-term individual gain in the interests of the long-term collective good. Religion sets the context for pivotal decisions and daily living for many Africans (Awoyemi 2008).

In this study, the two commonly practiced and identified modern religions in such local communities are Christianity and Islam. In sub-Saharan Africa, Christianity is a dominant

force, with the majority of countries that lie in critical areas for biodiversity conservation heavily populated by Christians (Central Intelligence Agency 2007). Recent development resulting from differences in the beliefs of the Christians (with belief in Almighty God) and Traditional religions (with belief in Deities) have led to reduction of the areas of wilderness. In the past, entrance into some highly endemic sacred wilderness and forests for any activities were protected by traditional beliefs. The local communities are of the belief that certain gods reside in such scared places (forests, rocks, rivers, etc.), therefore, only visitations by the local priests and selected people were allowed to make sacrifices and other rituals. These practices have indirectly served for pro-conservation that facilitates wilderness protection. However, in recent times, traditional beliefs tend to be on the decrease as people who have converted to the modern religions see these beliefs as superstitions and fallacy.

In recent times, some of the potential future Chief Priests and custodians of sacred groves have been converted from the traditional religion to modern religion. Anup (2006) also discovered that there was a decline in traditional beliefs, leading to a decline in practices and rituals associated with sacred groves. Moreover, vast areas of some wilderness have experienced significant reduction through their conversion to worship venues. The wildernesses have been seriously destroyed by the modern religions with the belief of casting out "evil spirits" from such places. Another dimension to this is the pressure from modern religions to create secluded places in the form of prayer grounds and camps at the expense of many forest lands and landscapes. These developments, which are advancing at an alarming rate, are located in places far from civilization where the remaining endemic wilderness can be found. Effort should, therefore, be geared to protecting the remaining wilderness, which is invariably the local heritage.

Conclusions

As the impacts of modern religion on wilderness are advancing, efforts should be geared toward protecting the remaining forests and landscapes. The foundations of these modern religions actually supported conservation and protection of natural resources, but recent developments are contradictory. Efforts should be initiated to conserve the remaining wilderness, while conversion of wilderness into any religious activities detrimental to conservation ethics and efforts should henceforth be prevented. There should be harmony between traditional worshippers and modern religion worshippers on biodiversity conservation, as we all share the same environment and ultimately share the consequences of its wanton destruction.

If humanity wishes to create a better environment and attain greater comfort, as well as to achieve appreciable advancement in civilization, humans should discontinue the practice of wanton felling of trees, desist from uncontrolled breaking of rocks and mountains, and end all forms of harshness to nature of any kind. Indeed, this is an era when care for the environment can no longer be considered unnecessary. Care for the environment is very important if we are to have a peaceful, healthy and beautiful world. Instead of wilderness encroachment and destruction for development of worship centres, existing open fields, stadiums, public auditoriums,

halls, etc., could be recommended as alternative worship grounds to these religious bodies if they need places for special programmes.

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