

Traditional Belief Systems and Environmental Sustainability in Bayelsa State: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

The importance of environmental sustainability especially in Africa cannot be overemphasised since the environment provides her economic and religious needs. It is based on this reason that this qualitative study was designed to investigate the traditional belief systems used in preserving the environment in Bayelsa state using Sagbama as a case study. The Cultural Ecology Theory postulated by Julian Steward served as the theoretical framework for this study. This study using purposive and snowball sampling techniques sampled a total of 20 persons from three selected communities in Sagbama LGA, namely: Ogobiri from the Mein clan, Tungbo from the Tungbo-Ebe clan, and Bulu-Orua from the Tarakiri clan. Primary data for this study was gathered through the use of an in-depth interview (IDI) structured based on the research objectives, while data analysis was done using thematic content analysis. Findings from the study indicated that the most prevailing belief systems concerning the environment are relative to lakes, forests, and animals (*Akpolokia*, *Imbiere*, and *Oka*). Also, belief systems regarding lakes, forests, and animals have aided in the sustainability of the environment through the use of various taboos and restrictions. It is, therefore, recommended that there is a need for the revitalisation of healthy traditional belief systems and cultural practices that promote the management, preservation, and conservation of natural resources for environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Environmental Sustainability, Traditional belief systems, Cultural ecology, Environmental taboos, Sagbama

Introduction

Traditional societies have existed for many centuries before the significant change occurred in the 18th century (Anwana, 2008). These societies formed a close relationship with natural resources within religious, moral, cultural, political, economic, and ecological boundaries. Some were able to preserve biodiversity traditionally before the onset of state-controlled natural reserves, wildlife, and national parks. Examples of such are bounded areas called sacred ecosystems or sacred landscapes. As noted by Awanan (2008), this traditional way of managing natural resources was sustainable for hundreds of years. Sacred ecosystems are ubiquitous, being found in several Amerindian, Asia-Pacific, European and African cultures whose indigenous cultures are known to combine certain ecological ethics into producing a world view of humans

being as a part of nature. They are not particularly associated with any specific religion, but they have a strongly religious context and are influenced by traditional local beliefs. Indigenous people, therefore, in their association with nature, live in environments imbued with symbolic significance where such landscapes are considered as cultural constructions rather than just biological diversity. Cultural symbolic landscapes are evident from several works on sacred ecosystems, such as those of the Malshegu sacred grove of Ghana in particular and these landscapes represent some of the few remaining areas of closed-canopy forest in the country's northern savannah Eco-region. This could mean that for biodiversity dependent on such habitat for survival, the sacred grove would serve as a sanctuary for biodiversity, in consonance with its function as a social/cultural symbol to the people, establishing the relevance and dualist function of sacred landscapes. Also relevant is the argument of Anwana (2008) suggests that spiritual beliefs could be motivators for positive outcomes on conservation and perseverance.

Thus, the environment in most rural societies is one of the most essential aspects of the human relationship with the external world. It is on this note that the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) [1992] advocated for the transformation of the ethics of respect and love of the earth in people's lives which the belief system of the people has retained as central to their value system. This position was further buttressed by Cooper and Pamler (1998) who stated that indigenous people have lived in unity with their environment providing them with their economic, social, and religious needs for many years. Thus, the attitude of people towards the environment has been that of respect, guided by ecological wisdom. Wolfgram (2006) added that this respect is shown through the preservation of practices maintained and manifested through traditional modes of agricultural practices (e.g shifting cultivation, mixed farming, and agroforestry) and other traditional belief practices like totemism and ancestral worship (Sibiri, 2014; Eneji et al, 2012).

Similarly, in Sachdeva's (2016) study, he concluded that viewing natural resources as sacred may lead to a diminished perception of environmental risk such as pollution. Adu-Gyamfi (2011) also concluded in his study that indigenous beliefs and practices are more earth-friendly and consistent with biodiversity than that of modern or western ways of life and that they represent the best chance for successful ecological practices that enhance ecosystem conservation.

Furthermore, Narayanna (2013) analysed the role of religion in sustainable development and found out that cultural practices aid sustainable development through values that serve as potentials for social and ecological activism in the realm of self-development. This is why among Africans, religion has been a source of environmental preservation and protection even though abuses also exist. Indigenous people recognise and understand their place in the local environment bearing in mind that nature or the environment has a spiritual dimension attached to it. Because the Africans recognise that spirits inhabit nature, there is a tendency to nurture and take care of it (Grim, 2001; Kanene, 2016).

According to Lssozi (2012), African communities have rich environmental cultures that can be understood by listening to their myths, taboos, stories, proverbs, and beliefs and also by observing their symbols and rituals. For example, amongst some indigenous African communities, the association of some animals and plants with spirits has enabled environmental sustainability. Essentially, amongst the Igbos of Nigeria, there are taboos associated with some rivers and forests to safeguard them from pollution, abuse, and exploitation (Obiora & Emeka, 2015). There is also the strict observation of moral order amongst traditional societies whereby people observe some ecological ethics such as not to defecate near streams where drinking water is fetched. It is believed that contempt for this prohibition attracts severe sanctions from the deity who owns the stream (Obiora & Emeka, 2015).

Hence, cultural practices according to Aniah, Aasogienana, and Bonye (2014), are consistent with the current preservation of practices. The ascription of supernatural powers to a portion of the environment and protection of such places through taboos has helped in preserving the environment and protecting natural resources as well as water species. Aniah, Aasogienana, and Bonye (2014) therefore view the following cultural practices as having a positive impact on the effect of environmental preservation:

1. The demarcation of a portion of the environment as home of the ancestral spirit (sacred groves, ponds, earth, shrines)
2. Aquatic resource. For instance, it's a belief that water species like crocodiles are to not be killed; these practices encourage the perseverance of these life forms.

3. The practice of forbidding people from consuming some species of animals also encourages the preservation of totemic animals and objects. Such totemic life forms are pantheon.

While the above studies are very relevant in understanding how cultural practices can lead to environmental preservation, there still exists a reasonable gap. First and foremost, most of the studies above are theoretical. Also, most studies on traditional practice and environmental preservation have largely been concentrated in Asian countries. While few studies exist in Nigeria, they have also largely focused on the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Thus, this study has been designed to cover this gap by investigating how the people of Bayelsa state use traditional belief systems to preserve their environment.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Ecology Theory

The Cultural ecology theory can be largely attributed to Julian Steward who also coined the term. Cultural ecology theory focuses on how humans adapt to their social and physical environments using cultural tools.

This theory considers the sphere of human culture not as separate from, but as interdependent with ecological processes and natural energy cycles. According to Jack (2017), cultural theorists like Karl Bulzer and David Stoddard focused on flows of energy and materials, examining how beliefs and institutions in a culture regulate interchanges with the natural ecology that surrounded it.

A major point is that any particular human adaptation is in part historically inherited and involves the technologies, practices, and knowledge that allow peoples in an environment (Indigenous Knowledge System). Furthermore, the Sacred Sub-strand of cultural ecology produced by Berkes in 1999 provided a more acceptable cultural relationship with the environment. It seeks lessons from traditional ways of life in order to shape a new environmental perception for dwellers. This particular conceptualization of people and environment comes from the various cultural levels of local indigenous, traditional knowledge about species and place, resource management system using local experience, social institutions with their rules and

codes of behaviour, and a world view through religion, ethics, and broadly defined belief systems (Jack, 2017).

In light of this, the cultural theory expresses the underpinnings of the existing relationship between the natural environment and the development of human culture and societal progress. This relationship is hinged on the interdependent processes of cultural change in that culture change is induced by adaptation to environmental changes and this is reflected in the changes in technologies and methods used to exploit the environment and all patterns of human behaviour/culture associated with the use of the environment.

Hence cultural ecology perspective is closely knitted to indigenous environmental knowledge studies, indigenous environmental practices, perception, values and by extension, sustainable resources use patterns and biodiversity preservation and conservation.

Material and Methods

This case study's qualitative design was conducted among 20 adult residence in various communities located in Sagbama Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The choice of the study area was based on the fact that Sagbama LGA in Bayelsa State has one of the largest sacred grooves and totems in Bayelsa State. The inclusion criteria for respondents who participated in this study include adult members of the various communities that have spent at least ten (10) years in their communities. The rationale behind this is that these sets of persons will have more knowledge about the sacred belief practices that have long been used to preserve the environment.

Since the study is qualitative, the sample size was made up of 20 persons which were gotten through the use of the point of saturation. Though, the study had initially proposed a sample size of 30 persons. In selecting the sample for the study, a multi-stage sampling technique which comprises of both the probabilistic and non-probabilistic sampling technique was adopted. First, the cluster sampling techniques were used to cluster Sagbama into six (6) clans which include Kunbowei clan, Kabo-Owei clan, Tungbo-Ebe clan, Trakiri clan, Obion clan, and the Mein clan. Secondly, a purposive sampling technique was used to select communities that possess both land and water bodies. Additionally, a purposive sampling technique was still used to select communities with sacred forests and water. Thus, three communities were selected from three

clans namely; Ogobri from the Mein clan, Tungbo from the Tungbo-ebe clan, and Bulu-orua from the Tarakiri clan. Finally, a snowball sampling technique, where an elderly person was identified in each community and asked to recommend someone else who has spent up to ten years and have a vast knowledge of sacred places in their communities.

Primary data for this study was gathered through the use of an in-depth interview (IDI) structured based on the research objectives, and presented to respondents to express their views, opinions, and observations on the subject of matter. Hence, the questions covered in the IDI schedule include; prevailing sacred belief practices, beliefs relating to water bodies and their preservation, forest practices and forest preservation, and practices relating to animals and animal preservation. The interview was conducted in the native Ijaw language and later translated before the data analysis was done. The data analysis method for this study was based on thematic content analysis. In doing this, data gleaned from this study were analysed and arranged into themes based on the objectives of the study.

Validating the research instruments was done by experts from measurements and evaluation in both the department of sociology and faculty of education, while a pilot study was conducted to determine the reliability of the instrument. This was done through an initial administration of the research instrument to respondents from the other three communities in Sagbama LGA which were not part of the selected communities in the study area. Thus, their response indicated that the questions in the IDI schedule were well understood. To ensure that the study conforms with global ethical standards, the following ethical standard was observed; respect for persons, non-maleficence, anonymity, confidentiality, etc.

Results

Socio-demographic Profile of the respondents

This section of the study presents the socio-demographic profile of the respondents ranging from age, sex, marital status, educational level, occupation, religion, average income, etc. From table 1 below, the majority of the respondents (40%) in the study are those who are more than 50 years of age. Other categories of age can be found in table 1. Also, more than half of the respondents (55%) were male, while 45% were female. Additionally, extrapolating from table 1 below, half of the respondents (50%) were married, this is followed by those who were single (40%).

Table 1: Socio-demographic Profile of the respondents

Variables	Frequency (N = 20)	Percentage (% = 100)
Age		
Less than 30 years	4	20
30-40	3	15
41-50	5	25
51 and above	8	40
Gender		
Male	11	55
Female	9	45
Marital Status		
Single	8	40
Married	10	50
Divorce/Separated	1	5
Widowed	1	5
Religion		
Christianity	14	70
Traditional Religion	6	30
Occupation		
Unemployed	8	40
Fishing/Farming	3	15
Civil Servant	3	15
Artisan	1	5
Trading	5	25
Education		
No formal Education	3	15
Primary	1	5
Secondary	9	35
Tertiary	7	45
Average Income (Monthly)		
N5,000-N10,999	5	25
N11,000-N20,999	5	25
N21,000-40,999	8	40
N41,000 and above	2	10
Duration of stay in Community		
10-15 Years	4	20
16-24	7	35
25-30	4	20
Above 30 years	5	25
Numbers of Children		
1	3	15
2	5	25
3	2	10
4	4	20
5 and above	6	30

Furthermore, findings from the study indicated that the majority of the respondent were Christians (70%). More so, the study revealed that most of the respondents (40%) are those who are unemployed. Further analysis from the table above indicated that about 45% of respondents

have acquired tertiary education. The income distribution of the respondents further shows that about 40% of respondents earn 21,000-40,999 monthly. More so from the table, 35% of the respondents have stayed up to 16-20 years in the community. Finally, findings from the study revealed that majority of the respondents (30) has 5 children and above.

Prevailing Sacred belief systems concerning the Environment

From the findings, as regards the sacred belief system, the study revealed that almost in all sampled communities in the study, the most prevailing belief systems are about lakes, forests, and animals. However, these beliefs differ from community to community thus, having different names and meanings. For instance, a participant from Tungbo community specifically opined thus;

The community has different beliefs that preserve their lakes, forests, and animals, this belief is a preserver of the water bodies, land, and animals (Male IDI, Tungbo community).

Another respondent in Bulu-Orua asserted that;

The community's belief is centred on forests, animals, and lakes, and that the belief system preserves these as totems in the community (Male IDI, Bulu-Orua community).

In Ogobiri community, a respondent stated thus;

The community's belief is based on lakes, forests, and animals that we the people see as gods that protect the people of this community (IDI, Female IDI, Ogobiri community).

Sacred Beliefs Relating to Water Bodies and its Preservation

From the findings concerning the sacred belief system relating to the preservation of water bodies, the study revealed that all the communities sampled in the study had beliefs regarding sacred lakes. Nevertheless, these beliefs differ from community to community. For instance, the name of the sacred lake in Tungbo community is called "*Akpolokia*", in Ogobiri it is called "*Imbiete*" and in Bulu-Orua it is called "*Oka*". In Tungbo according to the respondents, the lake represents their ancestry and it also brings prosperity to the people in the community. An elderly woman thus opined that;

The Akpolokia lake, which is the greatest of all the lake represent our ancestry and it also represents prosperity for us as a people (Female IDI, Tungbo community).

In Ogobiri community, respondents stated that the lake belongs to the gods of the land and therefore before anything could be done in the lake there must be sacrifices done by the worshippers of the lake. A respondent asserted thus;

The lake is mysterious and nobody goes to the lake unless a date that has been agreed upon by the community (Male IDI, Ogobiri community).

In Bulu-Orua community, it is said that the lake brings good fortune to the people. Hence, a middle-age lady stated that;

The Oka Lake brings good fortune looking at how the lake was found, so the people value the lake and thus we need to preserve the lake (Female IDI, Bulu-Oruah community).

In ascertaining the duration and continuity of this belief, most respondents stated that the practice has endured as long as they can remember. While with regards to the continuity of the belief, the respondents indicated that while the practice is still very much in vogue, it is only a few traditional adherents that continue with practices associated with lakes. In Tungbo, a respondent narrated thus;

The belief has lasted from the days of our forefathers up till now, but because of Christianity, most people do not value the belief system again. Only a few still participate in these practices (Female IDI Tungbo community).

Another respondent in Bulu-Orua also has this to say;

The belief has been there and most people still practice it and value it, but it is not as it was during the time of our forefathers (Male IDI, Bulu-Orua community).

In Ogobiri, one respondent stated thus;

The belief has lasted since the days of our forefathers up to date. But in respect to its continuity people are no longer interested in these practices unlike in the olden days when there was no Christianity (Female IDI, Ogobiri community).

From the findings regarding how the belief systems have affected the preservation of these water bodies, the respondents from different communities stated that these belief systems aid in the

preservation of these water bodies through the use of various taboos and restrictions. Thus, a respondent in Tungbo community stated that;

Because of the restrictions and taboos on the "*Akpolokia*" lake, this lake is preserved, until such a time when people are permitted to go to the lake. During this period, people often catch a large number of different species of fish (Female IDI, Tungbo community).

A respondent still, added that in Bulu-Orua;

The preservation of the lake through restrictions affects the water bodies because later when permission is granted, a product from the sacred lake is taken in large quantity (Male IDI, Bulu-Orua community).

According to the findings from this study, penalties associated with violation of these beliefs range from incurring the wrath of the gods, fine, etc. In Tungbo, a respondent stated that;

Anyone, who violates these beliefs and go to the lake outside the time agreed upon will appease the gods or else mysterious things will happen to the family of the defaulter until they make sacrifices (Male IDI, Tungbo community).

In Ogobiri, a respondent recounted that;

There are no actual penalties meted out on the people who violate this belief. However, since it belongs to the gods, they punish offenders as they see fit sometimes through sickness (e.g. swollen stomach) or mysterious death in the family of the offender. These punishments could sometimes be averted if the offender confesses and make sacrifices to appease the gods (Male IDI, Ogobiri community).

In Bulu-Orua, another respondent reported that 'offenders are made to pay fines in monetary terms to the worshippers of the lake' (Male IDI, Bulu-Orua).

Prevailing Belief System on Forest Preservation

Gleaning from the findings concerning the sacred belief system relating to forest and its preservation, the study observed that all the communities sampled in the study have a belief system regarding sacred forests. However, these beliefs also differ from community to community. In Ogobiri for instance, a respondent opined thus;

The belief systems about the sacred forest are mysterious. Some of our forests have mystical creatures at such, they are out of bound for ordinary people (Female IDI, Ogobiri community).

In Bulu-Orua community, a respondent also narrated that;

The belief system about the sacred forest is different, there is a forest for farming, to bury the dead, etc. In farming, when farming is done for a while, we leave the land to another land for the previous land to regain its former nutrient (Male IDI, Bulu-Orua community).

Similarly, another respondent in Tungbo community indicated that;

The sacred forest is evil and thus nothing is done in this place asides burying the dead. But there are also forests where people go for different purposes (Female IDI, Tungbo community).

Going by the findings, the study revealed that the belief has lasted for years and the practice continues. But there are some changes in the different communities. For instance, a respondent in Tungbo community opined thus;

The belief has lasted right from the day of our forefathers up until now. Those places are still left the way they are but are only used for specific purposes (Female IDI, Tungbo community).

In Ogobiri community, a respondent indicated that;

The belief has lasted for long, but due to Christianity, where some Christian fathers came to pray for the land, some parts of the forest have been developed. However, some parts of the sacred forest remain till date, hence, some still adhere to practices relating to these forests (Male IDI, Ogobiri community).

Just like the sacred lakes, punishment for violating forest beliefs attracts punishments ranging from fines, punishment from the gods themselves etc.

Prevailing Belief System on Animals Preservation

Again, all three sampled communities have sacred belief systems relating to animals or totems. In Tungbo community the totem is a crocodile (*Egiere*), in Ogobiri it is a snake especially a cobra (*Dringbia*), while in Bulu-Orua it is a snail. The nature of these beliefs is on sacred animals. According to an elderly woman;

The cobra called Dringbia in this community symbolizes the gods of our land and as such nobody is allowed to eat or kill it. Also, these gods bring about prosperity and victories during wars to those that worship it (Female IDI, Ogobiri community).

Another respondent in Tungbo indicated thus,

The crocodile which we call Egiere represents the gods of our forefathers and as such is not to be killed let alone eaten. It is the Egiere that protect the people of this community from danger and misfortune (Male IDI, Tungbo community).

Discussion of Findings

Findings from this study affirm previous studies on the role of traditional belief systems in environmental preservation. Findings from this study conform to that of Tatira (2000) whose findings indicated that animals (python) were major totems in the African belief system. This assertion was similarly buttressed by Rim-Rukeh et al, (2013) who opined that traditional religious beliefs are sources of preserving natural resources reflected in varieties of practices including sacred groves and lands.

Furthermore, this study found out that sacred lakes were major sacred belief systems used in the preservation of water bodies through the use of taboos. This finding is supported by the work of Obiora and Emeka (2015) who asserted that indigenous African communities use taboos associated with some rivers to safeguard them from pollution, abuse, and exploitation. Also, Lssozi (2012) affirms that African communities have a rich environmental culture that can be used to preserve their water bodies.

Additionally, this study indicated that the sacred forest was a major sacred belief system used in the preservation of the forest. Thus, there are restrictions from using certain forest resources. The study of Duri and Mapara (2007) in Zimbabwe also noted that sacred forest and mountains reserved and preserved for certain ceremonies and relevant taboos helped in preserving them. They added that institutional prohibitions, such as taboos were designed to develop positive social attitudes towards the environment.

Finally, findings from this study on the use of sacred animals as sources of environmental preservation are consistent with the work of Lumor (2009) who stated that totems are used in the Akan province of Ghana to preserve animals from going into extinction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, it can be concluded that traditional belief systems have been very useful in the sustainability of the environment of Bayelsa state despite the industrial activities that are currently threatening the environment. Thus, lakes, forests, and animals which serve as totems are key traditional belief systems that have existed for a long time and were used in preserving the environment. Based on this conclusion, this study recommended that; firstly, there is a need for a revitalisation of healthy traditional belief systems to promote the management, preservation, and conservation of natural resources. Again, environmental managers (EPA, Forestry Commissions), and modern political institutions and communities should encourage the practice of the belief systems that enhances the conservation and management of natural resources, this will enable communities where resources are found to participate in the management of the environment.

Furthermore, the government and other institutions and stakeholders interested in conservation should motivate communities that are still practising belief systems that preserve the environment by giving such communities incentive packages in the form of developmental projects. Finally, traditional authorities should implement strict moral and physical sanctions to violators of cultural environmental heritage.

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