

**CONFLICTING RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND ENVIRONMENTAL
RESOURCE CONSERVATION IN THE NGAS COMMUNITY OF
PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA**

BY

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ABSTRACT

Various religious practices in the world could be very helpful towards environmental resource conservation. This survey investigates the environmental conservation ethics of African Traditional Religious practices of Ngas land in Kanke Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. The researchers purposely selected 15 villages from Kabwir District of Kanke Local Government Area for the survey. Issues investigated include the role of traditional religious practices of the Ngas people in identifying and designating some locations as "protected areas" and how the advent of Christianity, a newly introduced religious practice, led to systematic and gradual disappearance of these protected areas. Findings show that the traditional religious practices significantly contributed towards environmental resource conservation in almost all the Ngas communities. These protected reservoirs contain biodiversity (flora and fauna), caves and scenic formations which are strictly prohibited from human exploitation as part of environmental resource protection. The advent of Christianity as a new faith however, disapproved of these protected enclaves for the fact that they serve mainly the idol worshippers. These protected areas are therefore on the verge of disappearance. A very good number of them have now been exposed to intensive exploitation for farming, fuel wood harvest, timber extraction, grazing, hunting and bush burning. Against these findings, the researchers strongly recommend that Christianity, a new religion should imbibe the ethics of environmental protection through the modern day laudable afforestation programmes. Such areas could be protected and used for tourism, recreation, research and education among other benefits. Further research on the disappeared species of flora and fauna, and the disappearing shrines or sacred lands have been recommended.

Key Words: Religion, Shrine, Sacred Land, Protected Area, Biodiversity, Conservation and Ngas

INTRODUCTION

African Traditional Religion normally requires putting aside a sacred place where certain rituals are performed. In the same vein, it is also culturally necessary that every village or hamlet in Ngas community ought to have a sacred land an exclusively reservoir to be used by the royal head of the community. Shrines and sacred lands were therefore very common in Ngas lands. These protected reservoirs are strictly prohibited from all forms of human exploitations except for the acceptable and prescribed uses. For instance within the shrine and sacred lands no one farms, fetches firewood or timber, grazes or hunts there. Women are specifically prohibited from entering the shrine and no one is allowed to set fire on the shrine or sacred land. Any encroachment or default attracts severe punishments. The concept of designating protected areas such as shrines and sacred lands is therefore a well articulated ethical practice among the Ngas people and this concept contributes immensely in the protection of environmental resources.

Environmental education will remain incomplete until it includes cultural values and religious imperatives. To control further endangerment of the environment for the future of humanity, Dwivedi (1998) called for the acceptance of new ethical order for environmental protection where world religions can play important roles in creating born-again psyche which respects nature and its resources. To this end, he noted that while some religions principles and practices have been able to protect the environment from man's greed and his exploitative tendencies, others in their own light are not helpful in environmental conservation. There is therefore a yearning for a return to some ethical values, as found in some religions, which can save humanity from the greatest peril that confronts it if they have to face the challenge together (Ram and Vijay, 2001, *B*).

A review of the stand points of some major religions on environmental conservation has been done by some scholars. They found that some religions attribute supernatural powers to plants, animals, the sun, moon, wind and water bodies. Such religions respect these natural elements. (Kushwah and Kumar (1999, 2000a). In the same vein, Omare (2010) opined that indigenous African traditional religious knowledge on environmental conservation is crucial in sustainable environmental conservation. In his study involving the Isukha religious believe in western Kenya, findings shows that African religion plays a role in environmental conservation. It regulates the utilization of environmental resources and creates awareness of the kind of environmental resources available. Meanwhile, Palmer (2006) reporting on Buddhist and Daoist believe in China showed that because of the inherent sacredness of places such as Hua Shan, Tai Shan, Emei Shan or Qingqing Shan, had survived in a better ecological state than comparable areas which were not considered sacred by the general population. Also Deb (2006) commenting on the

role of religious ethics in biodiversity conservation in India observed that, indigenous religious traditions in India seems to have promulgated an ecological ethics, built around the dependence of the indigenous communities on local biodiversity. Exogenous and relatively modern religions like Islam also have taken certain local hues from the indigenous traditions of biophilia. Thus, several Sufi shrines have sacred trees and groves, visited by both Hindus and Moslem devotees. The religious idiom seems to be considerably effective in popularizing messages of ecological movements.

Prior to the introduction of Christianity in Ngas land, majority of the Ngas people occupying Pankshin and Kanke Local Government areas of Plateau State were predominantly engaged in "African Traditional Religious" practice, with idol worshiping, as their main religion. The African Traditional Religion is popularly known among the Ngas as "WapKum." It brought the people together under one faith and believe that the idols they worshipped were the divine providers and protectors of lives, wealth, health and all forms of livelihoods. They worshiped the idols through different rituals, sacrifices, festivals and ceremonies. For instance, the "mosler" and "moslun" festivals are usually celebrated before the beginning of rainy season to seek for god's favor to bring forth very fruitful farming season as well as good health for the farmers. Similarly, before the commencement of the harvests, another festival known as "mostar" is celebrated to thank the gods for good yields and good health.

However, when Christianity was introduced in Ngas land about 100 years ago, it was widely embraced by most Ngas people as their new found faith. The new religion disapproves the African Traditional Religious practices with its shrines and sacred lands. These protected enclaves are seen to mainly serve and support idol worshiping. Thus, most communities that have accepted the new religion had to disapprove of shrines and sacred lands. This resulted in exposing the hitherto conserved shrines and sacred lands to all forms of exploitation such as farming, grazing, hunting, wood extraction etc.

Shrines and sacred lands vary in sizes. They range from a few square meters to several hectares. But no matter the individual size, the myriads of them in Ngas land could cumulatively add up to significant conservation and protection reservoirs. The disapproval and gradual disappearance of shrines and sacred lands in Ngas land has therefore resulted in the substantial loss of biodiversity. It is against this background that this study seeks to find out how the newly introduced Christian faith and values

The need to identify and enumerate the number of designated shrines and sacred places and to find out their current uses also forms the main thrust of this paper.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Study area

This study is limited to Kabwir District which is the largest district in Kanke Local Government Area of Plateau State. Located on latitudes $9^{\circ} 12''$ N and $9^{\circ} 30''$ and longitudes $9^{\circ} 33''$ E and $9^{\circ} 45''$ E it has an area coverage of about 800 sq/km, with an estimated population of about 40,424 people (2006 census). Kabwir District is located in the eastern foot of the leeward side of the massif called the Jos-Plateau. The area experiences two seasons: wet and dry seasons. The district is a plain dotted with hills (inserrbergs).

Over 98 per cent of the local government area is predominantly inhabited by the Ngas tribe. The district comprises of well over 40 hamlets or small villages the inhabitants of which were engaged in African Traditional Religious practice as their main religion before the advent of Christianity. In African Traditional Religious practice, a shrine is the sacred place where rituals are performed. The idols which are worshipped are also domiciled in the shrine. Hence, in each of the village communities, there is at least a shrine and a sacred land. The inhabitants of the district are predominantly agrarian communities mostly specialising in the production of such crops as millet, guinea corn, maize, acha, beans, cassava, vegetables and the rearing of domestic animals such as cattle, goats, sheep, dogs, pigs and poultry. As an agrarian community, it becomes increasingly very difficult for the people to embrace and strictly uphold the concept of conservation as in preservation of shrines and sacred lands especially when people no longer worship idols. Most communities that have embraced a new religion, Christianity would therefore quickly disapprove of the shrines and sacred lands and open them up for other human exploitations such as agriculture among many others

Data collection

The research made use of primary data via field observation and oral interviews in 15 villages purposely selected. This technique is most suitable because the researchers had specific features to look out for in any selected village. The questions asked were well structured to elucidate required information. The purposely selected villages include Tuwan, Kudus, Dawaki, Kudum, Chikan, Gochom, Kabal, Tungon, Komdereng, Bolkon, Gyangyang, Kulla, Lur, Kubut and Rong-Tungzung. In each village the royal heads, chief priests (suwari) where African

Traditional Religion is still practiced, Christian leaders and elders were selected for the interviews.

Data analysis

The research made use of simple descriptive statistical technique. It employed the use of percentage score and mean. This is in conformity with the nature of the data generated by the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was to investigate the role of traditional idol worship in environmental protection and how a new religion, Christianity has changed this concept. The results show that each of the fifteen (15) sampled villages had at least one or more shrines. Each village also had at least one or more sacred lands. This statistically means that all the fifteen (15) sampled villages had a total of thirty (30) shrines and sacred lands. However, at the time of this survey only seven (7) of the sampled villages (Dawaki, Gyangyang, Bolkon, Kabal, Kudum, Lur and Tungon) are still actively practicing African Traditional Religion. The remaining eight (8) villages (Tuwan, Chikan, Gochom, Kudus, Kulla, Komdereng, Rong-Tungzung, and Kubut) have abandoned their traditional religious practice in favour of Christianity. Consequently, these latter villages had equally abandoned their shrines and sacred lands which are being put to other uses while the former villages still maintain their shrines with two of them (Kudum and Gyangyang) still maintain their sacred lands. Proportionately, eight (8) shrines out of fifteen (15) have been abandoned, while not less than thirteen (13) sacred lands have disappeared. In other words not less than twenty one (21) out of the over thirty (30) protected areas (shrines and sacred lands) or more than two-third of them have been abandoned and converted to other uses. Two reasons were given for the abandonment. First, the new religion, Christianity disapproves of such reservoirs which are enclaves for idol worship. Secondly, sacred lands have been converted to other uses as a result of escalating population increases and shortage of lands.

The researchers estimated the total land area covered by the protected areas (shrines and sacred lands) and arrived at over 37 hectares which if all of them were brought together could have been a relatively large game sanctuary or reserve. Further investigation reveals that the abandoned shrines and sacred lands are now being exploited as farm lands, grazing lands, hunting grounds, fields for timber and fuel wood extraction, village squares and thatching grass grounds among other uses. The rich biodiversity of these otherwise protected areas has fast disappeared. Some plant and animal species which were found in these reservoirs are no longer in sight as the emerging land uses are no longer in harmony with their conservation. Respondents

were quick to mention that some animal species such as monkeys, baboons, antelopes, hyenas, guinea fowls, hares and some plant species such as mahogany and silk trees among others which use to be found in abundance have either become endangered or extinct.

The practitioners of the new religion, Christianity, and the traditional idol worshippers all regretted the disappearance of the biodiversity (flora-fauna) due to the conversion and exploitation of protected reserves. The elders recounted the abundance of biodiversity in their localities when they were young, but due to the wanton exploitation, many important species of plants and animals mentioned above have either disappeared or have been endangered. The younger generation only gets to hear the names of these species of animals and plants that dominated the Ngas land but cannot catch a glimpse of them as they are all gone or are very rare to come across.

The researchers further asked the respondents what they were doing to remedy the situation. All the respondents regretted that practically the situation is irredeemable. One notable thing from the survey was that in the whole study area (15 villages) there was not a single exotic forest reserve in sight. Some exotic economic trees such as mango, neem, pears etc have however been introduced in the communities. Poultry and piggery are also practiced in the villages to augment protein food intake. The researchers also noted that Christians, community development associations, corporate organizations and individuals in the study area have not even contemplated apportioning some lands for modern day re-a forestation. This is an ugly trend and unless something is done and done quickly, the Ngas land will continue to suffer extinction of biodiversity due to abandonment or conversion of protected areas for other uses without any commensurate alternative provisions.

The findings of this survey have shown that idol worshipping, which has been the traditional religious practice of the Ngas people in the recent past, has been instrumental to the practice of conservation through designation of protected reservoirs, shrines and sacred lands. This finding confirmed that of Palmer 2006, and Deb 2006 on the role of traditional religion in conservation. This is also in line with the United Nation's (UN) call for environmental resource conservation. Such practices by a religious group could, in no small measure, supplement the local, regional, national and global struggle for resource conservation which will meet the goals of sustainability, a global challenge. It is highly regrettable to find out that some species (biodiversity) which hitherto were preserved in the sacred reservoirs have disappeared. Even if such protected reservoirs no longer serve religious purposes, they ought to be preserved for other purposes such as historical sites, research, educational, tourism, and recreation, air cleansing and biodiversity protection among others. Change of religion could lead to change of ethics,

concepts, practices and faith, but all religions must come to terms in the crusade for environmental resource protection. In the brink of resource depletion and extinction, every religion MUST imbibe the ethics of preservation which is the key to sustainable livelihood.

It is not just about preserving our traditional and religious sacred places, but the new wave in the contemporary world is environmental enhancement through practices such as resource invention and rejuvenation via reintroduction of exotic and old species in our environment. For instance a new religion or local communities can introduce exotic forest reserves in their domains no matter how small they are and this can include tree planting and beautification projects around the vicinity of public or worship places. The protections of scenic and historical sites are all efforts that can instill environmental respect and discipline among traditional communities and religious bodies.

The findings of this survey show that unless something pragmatic and proactive is done, the communities in Ngas land will in the near future suffer outright extinction of rare species which hitherto have come under high exploitation and abuse. Species found to have disappeared will hardly be reintroduced in the natural way, except through captive breeding which is an enormous task. Alternatives which include a forestation, introduction of exotic species which can adapt to the local environments are the only viable solutions to the degraded environments. These alternatives, according to researchers, should as a matter of urgency be imbibed quickly to avoid the total relapse of the Ngas land environments.

CONCLUSION

This study has appraised the role of religion, specifically the African Traditional Religion, and the culture of the Ngas people in environmental resource conservation. They had achieved this through the designation of protected lands, the shrines and sacred lands respectively. These protected enclaves were strictly prohibited from human wanton exploitation tendencies, except for the prescribed uses. A new religion, Christianity, which is sweeping across the Ngas land, is however frowning at such traditionally protected reservoirs. This has resulted in rapid abandonment of the shrines and sacred lands which have come under indiscriminate exploitation. The reserved biodiversity in these sacred reservoirs have therefore come under endangerment or fast extinction. Sadly, it is noted that alternative solutions to the emerging trends are weak and pragmatic efforts are required to save Ngas land from total environmental decay. This conclusion cannot be without a call for an in-depth study into the species of flora and fauna that have been threatened or gone into extinction in Ngas land.

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