

African Traditional Cultural Values and Beliefs: A Driving Force to Natural Resource Management: A Study of Makonde District, Mashonaland West Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Natural resources in Africa are in jeopardy of depletion as a result of increasing demographic pressure and climate change. Sustainability of the natural resource base can be achieved through adoption of traditional cultural values and beliefs. This research was conducted in Makonde District, Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe. The research is qualitative in nature and employs the empirical case study research design through adopting the descriptive approach to data. The research involved description of knowledge, behaviors, perceptions and attitudes of the people in the Makonde District on cultural values and beliefs for the sustainable management of natural resources. The results of the study indicate that cultural norms and values such as totems, taboos, traditional ceremonies, and the formation of the old age group committees as well as the role of the spirit mediums have an impact of the conservation of natural resources namely tree species, water resources, forests, minerals and some sacred groves in Makonde district. Therefore, we recommend that traditional leaders should be a vital cog whenever natural resources management policy is crafted by central government. We also recommend cultural values and belief should be integrated into the development plans of the country.

Keywords: natural resources management, cultural values, beliefs, sustainability

1. Introduction

African traditional cultures and beliefs are vital in achieving sustainable natural resource management. Natural resources, both renewable and non renewable are critical in building the economy of every country, yet they are in jeopardy of depletion. Sub-Saharan Africa, with the highest fertility rate in the world, faces increasing demographic pressure on its natural resource base (Franzel *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, as a result of climate change; natural resources such as wetlands, fisheries, fresh water and forests are in attenuation whilst the fertile lands are being degraded and species are almost becoming extinct. Thus, it is important that natural resource management adopt a holistic approach that incorporates the traditional values aimed at ensuring the sustainability of the natural resource base.

Cultural values are an essential component of every society and they act as checks and balances in the management of natural resources (Verschuuren, 2010), and they form the basis for decisions and strategies in many practical aspects of human life (Shackleton *et al.*, 2010). Cultural values are based on oral history, ecology, geographical knowledge and administration (Karadzandima, 2002). It is critical that these cultural values be passed to younger generations. One way in which the cultural values are passed is through the traditional informal education which was provided to the younger generations, by their grandfathers, grandmothers, uncles, aunts and other elders in the community (IUCN-ROSA, 2001). The dissemination of cultural values to future generations facilitates continued existence or preservation of particular plant and animal species that are important elements of culture. This contributes towards ensuring that natural resources are conserved (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2003).

Correspondingly, sustainable natural resource management is essential in the fight against poverty. For instance, access to natural resources provides a crucial contribution to livelihoods, a buffer against poverty and an opportunity for self employment (Wynberg, 2002). Similarly, services such as clean water supply also serve

urban populations, and hundreds of millions of urban dwellers derive part of their income from urban agriculture (Smit *et al*, 1996). This dependency brings with it a strong motivation to conserve natural resources. Moreover, this essentially mirrors a strong linkage between natural resource management and poverty reduction.

Lately, traditional cultures and beliefs in Africa have tended to be undervalued as communities adopt modern scientific practices in the management of natural resources. However, there has been a realisation that traditional culture and beliefs represent a fundamental component of natural resource management. Gidgal *et al.*, (1993) affirms that the importance of traditional knowledge in the achievement of sustainable development is being gradually accepted globally. In Zimbabwe the Convention on Biodiversity which was adopted in 1992 provides a framework for application of traditional knowledge in the management of natural resources. In line with this, the Environmental Management Act [chapter 20:27] Section 116 (2e) specifies that the responsible Minister may: “identify, promote and integrate traditional knowledge into conservation and sustainable utilisation of biological diversity of that locality.”

This supports that traditional cultures and beliefs are increasingly becoming of great significance. In Zimbabwe, cultural beliefs play an important role in the conservation of natural resources, for example, local communities understand that their survival depended on living in harmony with their natural resources and their environment (Karadzandima, 2002). In order to maintain that harmony, the communities develop local based knowledge systems which incorporate family histories, taboos, symbols, myths or legends, rituals, sounds or dances, festivals, proverbs, poetry or literature (Kanowski and Williams, 2009) as well as drama and folklore (Kideghesho, 2009). All these conservation ethics are passed by word of mouth (International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2001). The cultural values have accumulated for over a thousand of years and became encoded in everyday human practices (Berkes *et al*, 2000, Kanowski and Williams 2009, Kideghesho, 2009). Moreover, In Zimbabwe for example, the Shona and Ndebele tribes regard certain plant species for example *Burkea Africana* and *sclerorya* as sacred. Therefore, such specified species could not be tempered with in any way. The belief was that the ancestral spirits use such tree species to reach people. So the cutting or destruction of such trees would detach people from their ancestors, thereby spelling doom to the tribes (Tanyanyiwa, 2011).

Various natural resources have certain cultural values and beliefs that are attached to them. Thus, the question that emerges is: to what extent do cultural values and beliefs contribute towards sustainable natural resource management? This paper outlines some cultural values and beliefs of the Shona people in Zimbabwe. It further explores how the cultural values and belief influence the management of natural resources namely water, forests, animals, birds and mountains.

1.2 Materials and methods

Makonde district is located in Mashonaland West province of Zimbabwe. The province is located in agro-ecological region II where rainfall is above 900mm per year and small scale farming is the major activity in the area. Mashonaland West Province has 6 districts and has a total population of 148 819 (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2012). In the district there are two *Shona* main tribes which are the *Korekore* and the *ZeZuru*.

The research is qualitative in nature and employs the empirical case study research design through adopting the descriptive approach to data. The research involved description of knowledge, behaviors, perceptions and attitudes of the people of Makonde on cultural values and beliefs for the sustainable management of natural resources. In this research, phenomenology was a critical strand as we tried to gain access to the words of the Makonde Chief and headmen based on their experiences through a series of interviews. Thus, for data collection, the Chief and six headmen were interviewed. We selected these interviewees because they were all old aged (65⁺years) hence they were familiar with the cultural values and beliefs of the land. Thus, the element of ethno-history was considered as we desired to scout about the cultural past of the Makonde land. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed and then analysed.

1.3 Research Findings

The results of the study indicate that there are various cultural norms and values that in turn have an impact of the conservation of natural resources such as tree species, water resources, forests, minerals and some sacred groves in Makonde district. The values are mainly based on traditional beliefs that have been there since time immemorial. These include the totems, taboos, ceremonies, and the formation of the old age group committees as well as the role of the spirit mediums.

1.3.1 Forest Management

Sacred places are still common in the Makonde district. The most sacred forest in the district is the *Bunga* forests

which engulf the *Bunga* Mountains. These forests contain a great diversity of indigenous trees such as *Mubvamaropa* (*Pterocarpus erinaceus*), *Musasa* (*Brachystegia spiciformis*), *Munhondo* (*Julbernardia globiflora*), *Muchakata* (*Parinaria Curatellifolia*), *Mumvee* (*Kigelia africana*), *Muonde* (*Ficus Sycomorus*), *Mupfuti* (*Brachystegia boehmii*), *Mutara* (*Gardenia Thunbergia*), *Mukarati* (*Burkea Africana*), *Munyii* (*Berchemia discolor*), *Mutohwe* (*Anzania garckeana*), *Mukuyu* (*Ficus sycamores*). In these forests, especially under the *Ficus sycamores* and *Brachystegia spiciformis* is where rituals such as rain making ceremonies are done by *Mambo* (Chief) and the *Svikiro* (spirit medium) called *Nyauswa*. Thus, *Ficus sycamores* and *Brachystegia spiciformis* tree species are extremely valued by the community as they believe that their god (the Rain Giver) and ancestors reside in those trees. According to local inhabitants destroying these trees means destroying the habitat for their ancestors who protects and supply for their needs. This fosters protection and conservation of the trees. Bearing a resemblance to Makonde district cultural beliefs, the region of Masvingo also holds traditional ceremonies under the *Muchakata* (*Parinaria Curatellifolia*) tree where their ancestors are believed to reside (Tanyanyiwa and Chikwanha, 2011). Where such beliefs are valued deforestation is non-existent. Therefore, as local people aspire to respect their ancestors, conservation is unconsciously promoted by the communities. Thus, belief in supernatural agencies plays an important role in local people's conformity to the norms controlling forest use (Sasoka and Laumonier, 2012).

In regards to forest management, the interviewees also cited that the *Bunga* forests are sacred such that if one gets there with the intention to harvest wild fruits such as *mazhanje* (*Uapaca kirkiana*) and *chakata* (*Parinari curatellifolia*) for sale, they will be lost before leaving the forests. Similarly, the interviewees indicated that if people harvest huge quantities of *hohwa* (mushroom) for sale and not for household consumption, they would get lost whilst in the middle of harvesting the mushroom. It was also said that once a person says something defamatory about the wild fruits or mushroom they will disappear in the forest. This means that fruits are only eaten right away in the forest and once one is satisfied they cannot carry some fruits home. It was indicated that if a person goes into the *Bunga* forest with the intention to cutting down trees or collect fuel wood they will not be able to reach their destination as they would meet a numerous snakes along the way. Alternatively, they would meet a huge snake which will be crossing the path to the forests. This was said to give a warning that their intention is unacceptable by the spirits.

In light of these findings, we deduce that cultural beliefs hinder commercialization of natural resources which result in overexploitation of the resources. Thus, such beliefs act as regulatory measures towards conservation natural resources. This corresponds to the assertion by Sasoka and Laumonier, (2012) that resource and habit taboos supported by supernatural enforcement mechanisms have functions similar to those of formal institutions for nature conservation. Additionally, our research results correspond with the findings of Rusinga and Maposa, (2010) who found out that the Ndau people of Zimbabwe, through the observance of taboos, were and still are able to control the indiscriminate harvesting of forest products, protect water sources and species of spiritual, nutritional and medicinal value and even rare species. Therefore, taboos are important as they obstruct over-exploitation and plunder of resources. This permits regeneration of resources and guarantee sustainable utilization of resources. Thus, the conservation of sacred natural sites yields improved results for conservation of biological and cultural diversity (Verschuuren, 2010).

1.3.2 Water Management

There are also sacred points along *Angwa*, *Rwashaanje*, *Piriviri*, *Sungwe*, *Nyavira* and *Sanyati* rivers. It is believed that the sacredness of some of the river points lies in the belief that there are some river gods or *Njuzu* (mermaids). Interestingly, the interviewees highlighted that water never dries up at the sacred water points. It was highlighted that people cannot use soap for bathing, use tins with soot or metal containers for fetching water in the sacred water ponds. If people disobey these regulations, it was indicated that soap, tins or their clothes would disappear in the river. Additionally, in the district, there are sacred caves known as *Chirorodziva* (*Chinhoyi*) caves. At the base of the caves is a pool whose water cannot be fetched. It is also unacceptable by the spirits in the caves to throw stones, objects or any form of litter. It was indicated that if one tries to throw stones or litter, these objects will not get to the water, they would disappear in the air before they reach the water in the pool. Consequently, it is believed that the penetrator would disappear and only reappear after certain rituals had been done. It was also emphasized that the water in the pool never dries up or decrease its level.

Other notable water sources are natural springs known locally as *Tsatse* or *Zvinyukwi* or *Zvitubu*. It is a taboo for sick people to go and fetch water from those sites. Interestingly, people who are viewed as unclean, such as menstruating women and lactating women were not allowed anywhere near the springs. Again, fetching water from the using containers that have been previously used on fire which contains some black, sooty substance was prohibited. If any of these taboos was not observed, it was said that the source of the water would eventually dry

up or even dry up at once.

From these findings, one can deduce that the cultural beliefs have a regulatory effect in controlling the utilization and management of water resources. Thus, the cultural values and beliefs act as a mechanism for controlling water pollution. At the same time the cultural beliefs instill terror such that people refrain from noncompliance. Moreover, a close analysis of some of the taboos reflects a discriminatory treatment among women because of their biological nature. Although, some of the values depict a discriminatory system the intention was to prevent of water degradation as a result of pollution or siltation.

1.3.3 Fauna Management

There are also some wild animals that were said to be sacred in the district. These were *shato* (python) and *Haka* (Pangolin). It was indicated that it is an offense to kill the python and if someone kills it they would be haunted by various types of snakes at their homesteads unless the spirits are appeased through a penalty which will be directed to the spirit mediums by the Chief. The pangolin was also said to be a rare and sacred animal in the district. It was explained that if one finds it, they have to take it and give it to the chief. If they do not give it to the chief and instead consume it, bad luck would fall upon them until they confessed their crime. After the confession, the lawbreaker is supposed to pay a fine as stipulated by the Chief and a cleansing ceremony would be done to confiscate the bad luck.

Totems (*mitupo*) are a critical cultural aspect used in fauna management in the district. The Shona people value their totems such that they greet each other using their totems. Most, if not all of these totems are in the form of animals and birds such as *Humba* (both wild and domesticated pigs), *Hungwe* (birds), *Nzou* (elephant), *Moyo* (heart), *Shava* (Eland), *Shumba* (lion) *Mhara* (Impala) and many others. It was emphasized that people cannot eat their totem. For instance, if one's totem is *Hungwe (Bird)*, then they cannot eat bird meat and any other forms of birds such as the ostrich or chicken. If they eat the meat, it was indicated that some people may develop skin diseases or will lose all their teeth.

From these findings, we deduce that cultural values and beliefs are critical in fauna management. It is a push towards prevention of extinction of fauna. Wide World Fund, (2005) affirms that, species that have high subsistence or economic value to communities have attained sacred value over time as a result of the central role that they play in peoples' lives. Thus, the cultural value and beliefs people attach to given resources foster conservation efforts. Moreover, cultural values and beliefs oblige people to live in harmony with nature, thus sustainability is promoted.

1.4 Challenges: Erosion of Cultural Values and Beliefs

A critical examination of the cultural values and beliefs in Makonde district indicates that cultural values are of significance when introducing participatory and sustainable development processes (Warren, 1992). This means that cultural values should be incorporated in all development plans. For example, the interviewees believe that one of the reasons the 2000 and 2002 land reform programs in Zimbabwe were not a success is because the land occupiers failed to observe the cultural values and beliefs of where they had been given land. New land occupiers would cut trees for sale, mine some minerals such as gold and fetch water in sacred places. Dewalt (1994) argues that the importance of cultural values lies in the fact that they are flexible which means that they are able to adapt to new conditions and incorporate outside knowledge. Thus, cultural values and beliefs can easily be integrated into development programs because of their flexibility and adaptability to change. This is essential as this promotes acceptability of the development programs by the local communities.

Although cultural values and belief are important in natural resource management, there are factors that limit their continual existence and adoption. Due to globalization, most of the traditional values and beliefs are no longer being practiced. According to Kasongo (2010) with globalization if the new incoming culture dominates the local culture, it creates conflict between the two cultures. Thus, although globalization results in economic and social development (Huwart *et al.*, 2013), it has brought changes in the culture of some communities.

Moreover, the emergence of colonial powers has resulted in decay of some of the cultural practices (Wahab *et al.*, 2012). Although colonialism brought positive developments in Africa, cultural changes were also brought about. Arowolo (2010) asserts that colonialism distorted the a tempo of cultural growth. Thus, younger generations consider cultural values and beliefs as myths that are backward and outdated. This is because the younger generation has adopted the western culture which they deem as more superior than their own cultures. More so, the older generations who are have knowledge of the cultural values and beliefs are not passing them to the younger generation. Therefore, cultural values and beliefs have eroded and lost significance.

1.5 Conclusions and Recommendations

This research sought to demonstrate the important role that is played by cultural values and beliefs in managing natural resources in an era characterized by plunder of the natural resources and the shunning of traditional African cultural values and beliefs. Using the Shona traditional values and beliefs an example, the study has shown how cultural values and beliefs are crucial tools for sustainable management of all natural resources like water, forests and wild animals. Traditional African cultures therefore have systematic methods of managing natural resources. On their own, cultural values and beliefs are forms of social innovation that can be used for natural resource management not only for the existing generations on the African continent but for posterity as well.

In light of the research findings, we recommend that traditional leaders (chiefs and headmen) who today are still the most veritable repositories of African traditional values and cultural beliefs should be a vital cog whenever natural resources management policy is crafted by central government. Furthermore, cultural values and belief should be integrated into the development plans and programs of the country. It is also vital that the young generation be educated on the traditional values and beliefs. Thus, primary and secondary school syllabuses should comprehensively address African cultural values and beliefs.

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