

Totemic Beliefs and Biodiversity Conservation among the Tiv People of Benue State, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Biodiversity depletion has been a major problem in many communities of the world including Benue State, Nigeria. The use of indigenous beliefs by some communities has been reported to assist in the conservation of biodiversity. Therefore, this study was conducted with the aim of identifying such beliefs that have been used or are still being used as tools for biodiversity conservation by the Tiv tribe of Central Nigeria. Both in-depth interview with key informants (IDI) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) methods were used. In the case of IDI, traditional rulers as custodians of the peoples' culture were purposively chosen while in FGD, elders among households were chosen. It was found that 18 totems which included animal, plants and shrines/deities exert significant influence in the conservation of biodiversity in the study area. Therefore Totemism should be used pari-pasu with other conventional methods to conserve biodiversity.

Key words: Totem, biodiversity depletion, indigenous beliefs, conservation.

Introduction

A totem is an animal, a plant or any other natural object believed to be ancestrally related to a tribe, clan, family or group of people as a tutelary spirit. (Mariko, 1981). Totems are found among different clans and tribes in various African communities. For example, in Zimbabwe, the Shona people have 25 different totems, (Murombedzi, 2003). Totemism is therefore a complex of varied ideas and ways of behaviour based on a worldview drawn from nature. There are ideological, emotional, reverential, and genealogical relationships of social groups or specific persons with animals or natural objects, the so-called totems. For instance, people generally view a totem as a companion, relative, protector, progenitor, or helper, and ascribe to it superhuman powers and abilities, and offer it some combination of respect, veneration, awe, and fear. Most cultures use special names and emblems to refer to the totem, and those it sponsors engage in partial identification with the totem or symbolic assimilation to it. There is usually a prohibition or taboo against killing, eating, or touching the totem.

Biodiversity Conservation as a Practical and Ethical Imperative

Biodiversity loss has been a major concern to mankind, especially during the last quarter of the previous century (WWF, 2005). This concern culminated in the "Biodiversity Convention" that was opened for signature at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 1992. Since then different international fora, including the Beijing Conference for Women in 1995 echoed the problems of continuing environmental degradation. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) that was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, August-September 2002, stated that in spite of significant efforts, the loss of biodiversity worldwide was continuing at an unprecedented speed and that a reverse in this on-going decline should urgently be realized (Hens and Nath, 2003).

Halting the unnatural rate of decline of biological diversity – species, ecosystems and genetic diversity, is one of the critical challenges of the 21st century. For example, the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD) (article 8j) calls for parties to respect, preserve, and apply knowledge and practices of indigenous and local communities relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity (UNCBD, 2007). There are many practical reasons for conserving biodiversity, for the benefits it can bring to us in terms of new foods, medicines and other materials and for the environmental services supplied by natural ecosystems. The survival of endangered species and ecosystems depends on long-term participation and understanding of local populations (Oates, 1999). Because of the close relationship between cultural diversity and biodiversity, traditional knowledge systems should play an important role when developing species conservation and management strategies (Caldecott *et al.* 2005, Hens 2006). Despite these recommendations, few studies have investigated traditional beliefs concerning endangered primates and how they could be integrated into conservation strategies (Saj *et al.* 2006).

Totemic Knowledge and its Contribution to Conservation in Nigeria.

It has been acknowledged in the findings of Eneji *et al.* (2009) that deforestation, illegal hunting, grazing which pose a threat to wildlife populations are major problems facing Nigeria. Based on the services provided by these biological resources for both human and other living things, it has long been recognized that the abundance and existence of these forest resources are under serious threats from human activities. Many management

techniques have already been adopted to conserve and manage these forests, but the results so far seem to be at best a mirage.

The interplay between belief systems and nature is complex and deeply rooted, recognition of this link has grown enormously in the last few years (WWF, 2005). Local people have developed a variety of consistent resource conservation and management strategies in tropical Africa, Asia, and South America in the past (Appiah-Opoku, 2007). In some African societies, for example, Totems were often the basis for laws and regulations, it was a violation of cultural and spiritual life to hunt, kill, or hurt an animal or plant totem. Totems are found among different clans and tribes in various African communities. For example, in Zimbabwe, the Shona people have 25 different totems Murombedzi (2003). According to Eneji *et al.* (2012) in Africa and indeed Nigeria, the traditional belief system holds the ascription of supernatural powers to objects called gods and goddesses; The belief system is that the gods protect the community members from harm, famine, barrenness, impotence, drought, epidemics, and war among others. The gods avenge their anger on whoever omits or commits any flaw for which their presence forbids, hence, the cultural system holds to a very high esteem all the precepts of the laws of the gods (Shastri *et al.*, 2002). The species that were regarded as sacred multiplied because clans associated their survival with a totem animal and never allowed that animal to become extinct. Totemism thus became an effective tool of conserving wildlife. In most parts of Africa especially West African countries, these are very practical systems of indigenous strategies for the management and conservation of our natural environment within the rural communities (Eneji *et al.* 2012). This is mainly because totems are viewed as part of the kindred, and it was believed that these totems shared blood with the ancestors. To hurt a totem was tantamount to hurting the community's ancestors. In honouring the totem animal, it was forbidden that anyone from the tribe, clan or group, hunts or harms it (Magalah *et al.* 2007). Based on beliefs against killing or hurting totems, it is said that totems played a significant role in biodiversity conservation. Eneji *et al.* (2012) observed that these beliefs and strategies are passed on to those who become initiated into adulthood in the community during the rites of initiation. He maintained that the beliefs are often enshrined in religious or cultural beliefs and superstitions and enforced by taboos. The taboos and beliefs have legal backing in the rules and institutions of the communities which were strong enough in the past to make people obey the religious and cultural regulations (Venkataraman, 2000; Cox, 2000).

In almost every traditional African setting or community, each community has what they revere or hold sacred either as the presence of their gods or their goddesses, or there is a very important role such objects played in the course of their existence and history. The belief in chimpanzee as “totem”, that is animal into which human beings could transform is also common in many localities in the forest zones of Nigeria (Ogunjemite, 1998; Ayeni and Mdaihili, 2003). In Nnewi, Awka and Mbaise communities in South east zone of Nigeria, python is man’s friend, the killing of python is an abominable act, so it is held sacrosanct. Among the Ngas of Plateau State, Nigeria, it is believed that the spirit of the gods lives in Python and that it gives protection to the people. The Tiv people regard the green snake as a totem. They believe that the snake assisted them in crossing the River Congo in Central Africa, so they see it as a friend and do not kill it. Among the Ngas and Gumei in Plateau State, Mahogany tree is regarded as sacred, that a lot of sacrifices must be made to fell it. In Umuaro, the male deer (stag) is a totem because it did something for the community. In the whole of Cross River, there is hardly any community that exists without a sacred groove, evil forest, sacred pond, evil stream, or forbidden forest where some part of the environment is delineated for the worship of the gods (Eneji *et al.*, 2009; Tiwari *et al.*, 1998). In Bekwarra, (Gakem) of Cross River State, the road runner (anyiribom) is not killed. Ancient legendry has it that during war, the bird follows the trail of Gakem people and wipes their footprint so that the enemies may be prevented from tracing their direction and attacking them (Eneji,2012).

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected through In-Depth Interviews with key informants (IDI) and Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) with traditional rulers and elders of purposively selected villages in seven Local Government Areas (LGAs) perceived to be richer in totemic beliefs out of fourteen LGAs within the Tiv ethnic territory. Seven first class cefs were engaged in IDI and seven focal groups made up of ten elders each were involved in the FGDs. In addition, secondary data was obtained from literature reviews. The different totemic beliefs among the Tiv people of Benue State were documented as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Totemic beliefs among the Tiv people of Benue State in Nigeria.

S/No	Totem	Scientific/ Botanical Name	Belief(s)	Effect on Biodiversity
1	Green Snake (Ikyarem)	<i>Ophiodrys vernalis</i>	Believed to have helped the Tiv people to cross River Congo in Central Africa.	Population of the snake is high and the snake is not killed by the Tiv people.
2	Wild Custard Apple (Hur)	<i>Annona senegalensis</i>	It is believed to prevent snake bites and if bitten by mistake, the leaves are used for the treatment of such bites.	The tree is highly conserved and the demand for it by households is very high.
3	Witch bird (Imburukutuutuu/Ngur ukutuu)	<i>Culculus senegalensis</i>	It is believed to give bad luck to whoever that eats it.	Its population is high because it is not eaten by adults except by children.
4	Pubescent Edible Gardenia (Ibohough)	<i>Gardenia erubescens</i>	It is believed to protect humans from being attacked by elephants when hidden under it (<i>G.ellis</i>) or holding its branch.	It is well preserved among the Tiv people.
5	Big rat (Ikyor)	<i>Cricetomys gambianus</i>	It is believed that when the animal is seen particularly in the daytime, it is a sign of bad omen. (A member of the family may die.)	It is not killed or eaten if seen. Its population is conserved.
6	Short eared Owl Mtsaan	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	When this bird cries around your compound, somebody is likely going to die.	As many people do not eat this bird, its population is preserved.
7	Kpikyegh	<i>Psorospermum corymbiferum</i>	The Tiv people have the belief that when you use this species as fuel wood, all the fowls (chicken) in your house will die.	As the tree is not used as fuel wood and also not used as timber, the stocking density is protected.
8	Rabbit head (Alom)	<i>Lepus capensis</i>	The people of Tonguv District of Katsina-Ala Local Council believe that if anybody from their locality eats the head of rabbit, the person will become mad although other parts of the rabbits are delicacies.	There are reduced hunting activities for rabbits, hence stable population of rabbit in that area.
9	Spotted blind snake (Ivervese)	<i>Typlops punctatus</i>	When a pregnant woman eats this snake, its believed that the new born baby will not see well during the day, but will only see better at night. Pregnant women do not eat the snake.	Although the effect here is not pronounced, at least the snake population is not adversely affected.
10	Ishase-uagh	<i>Uapaka togoensis</i>	It is a shrine tree, both the upland and lowland species around streams.	It is a no-go area therefore, highly protected.
11	Owl (Ivungu)	<i>Bubo poensis</i>	The Tiv people do not eat this bird. They believe that it is a witch bird. They also do not throw stones at it. If you stone it, you will die.	It has relatively increased its population (biodiversity).
12	Pygmy Squirrel	<i>Myosciurus</i>	The women especially pregnant	It has helped to

	(Agagbur)	<i>pumilo</i>	women do not eat this animal. It is very ugly with bow legs. Is believed that, the child will resemble the animal if a pregnant woman eats it.	conserve its biodiversity.
13	God's Rock/God's Foot-print (Kwuokia-Orim / Kwuowhere-Orim).	Not applicable	Monument/Shrine believed to distinguish the Tiv tribe from other tribes..	The preservation of the forest or vegetation around the rock has positive effects on the biodiversity. It is a traditional way of conserving biodiversity.
14	(Ikwong) Deity	Not applicable	It is believed to protect the people, and it cleanses and heals them from sicknesses. It is also believed to protect the interest of the tribe.	Protection of the forest around the shrine is traditional way of biodiversity conservation.
15	(Omari) Small multi-coloured striped snake	-	It is belied that it brings bad omen to whoever sees it.	The species of the snake will not go extinct since it is rarely killed.
16	Parrot (Allor).	<i>Pisthacus erithacus</i>	It is believed to bring bad omen in the community whenever it cries.	The non-killing of this bird is conservation friendly and it helps in the biodiversity conservation.
17	(Okpakpen) Star insect.	-	Its presence in the house is a sign of the coming of a guest (Visitor). So whenever the insect is sighted, the person is happy that he or she is going to have a visitor.	The insect is not killed, hence its population within the ethnic group is conserved
18	(Okpo-One) Stream		Treasure of the community. The people do not eat the fishes found in this stream.	Restriction of fishing activities in the stream conserves the fish in the stream and other living organisms in the stream

DISCUSSION

Eighteen (18) totems commonly believed among the Tiv people were identified and documented. Majority of the totems (11) were animal-based while 4 plants were noted and three other sites were also noted. This implies that more animal species have cultural protection in the ethnic group than plants species. It was noted that all totems had high level of protection as the people completely complied with the beliefs and protected them (Venkataraman, 2000, and Cox, 2000). The beliefs were said to be observed by the people because they each carried penalties or adoring values such that inhabitants preferred to rather keep than violate them.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Totemism is an important tool in biodiversity conservation and management within people groups. This is a veritable natural resources protection tool as local institutions and structures provide full protection to totems. The Tiv people of Central Nigeria provide full protection to the totems within their ethnic territory, thus the plant and animal totems in the area are less threatened compared to other useful species in the area. This method of conservation should be encouraged as there is no element of coercion in it. Documentation of totemic beliefs is

highly recommended in all ethnic groups in order to identify plants, animals and sites under cultural conservation and protection. Scientific investigation of local claims/beliefs on important species and sites is needed for scientific validation and value addition.

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