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Sabaot Traditional Practice and its impact on Environmental Management in Mt. Elgon Sub-County

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Abstract
The rate at which the Sabaot traditional practices are being marginalized and even getting lost remains a major concern among the Sabaot community because of its positive impact on environmental management. The objective of this study was to analyze the Sabaot traditional practices and their impacts on environmental management in Mt. Elgon sub-county. The target population for the study was 400 households. The sample of 120 was selected. Snow-balling technique was employed to obtain the 18 Sabaot community elders (sages). Purposive sampling was used to obtain the two 2 chairmen of Kony and Mosop sub-dialects of the Sabaot community. The 100 household heads were selected using stratified random sampling. Data was collected by use of questionnaires and interview guides. The content validity of the instruments was accomplished by expert input from the supervisors. A pilot study was conducted in Kongit sub-location. Quantitative data was analysed by use of descriptive statistic while qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis. The study found that there were the traditional beliefs and practices among the Sabaot that were crucial in forest conservation and management. The study revealed that there has been a decline in the protection of flora and fauna as traditional practices have been declining in regard to the use of prohibitions. The study further found that traditional practices with proven utility are still capable of enhancing environmental management. The study recommends the traditional best practices in environmental management be rekindled, recorded and preserved.
Key words: *Sabaot Traditional practice, impacts, Environmental Management*

Introduction

Environmental degradation, conservation and management has gradually come to dominate the center stage in the development fora after the first United Nations Conference on Environment (UNCED) held in 1972 in Stockholm, Sweden. By 1983 when the UN set up the world committee on environment and development, environmental degradation which earlier had been seen as a side effect of industrial wealth got to be understood as a matter of survival for developing countries (Opschoor et al., 1999, WRI, 2006 and UNEP, 2006). It could perhaps be due to the above that the Brundt Land Commission set up in 1987 put forward the concept of Sustainable Development- that is to say "an approach that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs" as a programmatic mode of development as opposed to the previous one that was simply based on economic growth with little or no regard to the environment. The Brundt land Commission Report appears to have paved way for the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro aimed at bringing the world to an understanding of the approach that would support socio-economic development and prevent the continued degradation of the environment (UNEP, 2008).

To attain sustainability in environmental management and enhanced livelihoods, the agenda 21 of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) conference emphasized on the need for governments to work towards incorporating traditional environmental management knowledge into contemporary socio-economic development programmes (Burgess, Amico Holes and Underwood., 2006, UNEP, 2006).

In Africa, a number of environmental policy reports such as a report by Wright (2009) seem to reveal that many communities in Africa since time immemorial have relied on their traditional norms to conserve the environment with great success. The said norms which included beliefs in mystical powers, socio-cultural and socio-religious beliefs and values were holistic and focused on land, forests and rivers and whose strict adherence to enabled members of the concerned communities to sustainably utilize various natural resources World Bank (2005). According to Getz *et al.* (1999) the application of traditional knowledge contributes to equality, security and empowerment of local communities as well as to the sustainability of natural resources. Similarly, incorporating

local knowledge into natural resource management decisions reduces the social barriers to participation and thus enhances the capacity of the local people to make choices to solve their problems (Pandey, 1998).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role of Traditional Practices in Forest Conservation and Management

Traditional communities worldwide have developed over several decades a wide range of vegetation and wildlife management practices that continue to exist in parts of tropical Asia (Pandey, 1998), South America (Atran *et al.*, 1999*;* Gomez Pomba and Kausa, (1999), Africa (Getz *et al.,(*1999); Infield, (2001), and other parts of the world (Berkes,1999). Accordingly, indigenous communities observed ethics that often helped them regulate interactions with the various elements of fauna and flora resources within their territories, as reported by Callicot (2001). According to UNEP (2008) the traditional knowledge that comprises information and technologies which people in a given community have developed overtime and continue to develop is useful in sustaining the community and its culture as well as in maintaining the genetic resources of the community.

Studies by Pandey (1998); Atran *et al.,* (1999); Berkes (1999) and Getz *et al.* (1999) indicate that the indigenous natural resource management practices evolved through the historical interaction of communities and their environment thereby giving rise to practices and cultural landscapes such as sacred forests and groves, sacred corridors and a variety of ethno forestry practices.

Arising from the above, the indigenous communities were thus able to ensure a continuous increase in the number of the flora and fauna resources while at the same time benefiting from their products (World Bank 2005). Thus, today, despite modernity, indigenous floral and faunal conservation knowledge continues to survive in many communities such as those found in many parts of Asia and African continents though often in reduced forms (UNEP, 1999; Deb and Malhotra, 2001).

According to Thomas (2002), traditional medicine in developing countries is the only affordable and accessible healthcare of choice or at the very least a critical stop-gap measure before the patient consults a modern health facility or medical practitioner. The preference for traditional medicine is due to its affordable prices, relative accessibility, local availability, trust in efficiency as well as the emergence of new and incurable diseases such as diabetes, HIV and AIDS and cancer that are yet to get an effective cure from modern medicine Lashari (1994). On the other hand, Green (1994) contends that traditional medicine is preferred due to its fundamental concept of balance-that is to say between the mind and body, between different dimensions of individual bodily functional needs, between individual /community and environment as well as between the individual and the universe. In Africa, traditional medical practices include diverse health practices, remedies, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plant, animal and mineral products, spiritual therapies and charms and also utilizes a variety of techniques, media and approaches to diagnose treat or prevent illness UNEP (1999, 2008). In view of the foregoing, indigenous traditional medicinal knowledge has been widely used in enhancement of human and animal health among various local communities with great success as pointed out by UNEP (1999).

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out at Mt. Elgon sub-county. Mount of Kenya. Descriptive research design was applied in this study to analyze and describe the impact of Sabaot traditional practice on the environmental management in Mt. Elgon Sub-county. Data was collected through the use of questionnaires and interview schedules. The target population of the study was 400 households. A total of 120 respondents were sampled for the study. Snow-balling sampling technique was employed to obtain 18 key respondents from the Sabaot community elders (sages). Purposive sampling was used to obtain 2 chairmen of Kony and Mosop sub-dialects of the Sabaot community. The 100 respondents from household heads were selected using stratified random sampling. Quantitative data was analyzed by use of descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages while qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The study sought to establish the customary practices of the sabaot that were used to conserve the environment in Kenya's pre-independence era. According to the findings, 60% of the respondents agreed that the customary practices among the Sabaot community played crucial role in forest conservation and management during Kenya's pre-independence era. The study found out that the Sabaot community had a customary practice on environmental conservation that was ordered around a Sabaot system referred to as bororiet (pl. bororishek) system. These boroshek were Tingei, Chebogos, keberer, Kabeywa, Kuborit and Kamatimbai.

The study found out that the Sabaot community besides having been traditionally cattle herders; they also practiced hunting and gathering. As hunters the Sabaot custom did not allow killing of pregnant wild animals. The study found out that the customary practice of honey hunting varied according to the nature of the support but the traditional technique was a very strenuous, laborious and demanding job. The study established that honey hunters had to climb steep cliffs or ascend tall "bee trees" by hand - made ladders during the darkness of the night then keep away the bees with smoke before cutting away the comb completely for collecting honey. It was established in the study that the hunting of wild animals and wild honey was done by adult men and that young boys were not allowed to hunt because they could violate the above norms and destroy fauna. This is agreeable to the World Bank (2005) who points out that the indigenous communities were able to ensure a continuous increase in the number of the flora resources while at the same time benefiting from their products

The study established that folktale was used in the Sabaot community to create awareness in the conservation of environment through folktale before independence. The study found out that during the years preceding Kenya's independence, different clans within the Sabaot community highly upheld the use of folktale telling tradition as a daily preoccupation. Through the use of folktale method, the grandmother (gogo) created an environmental awareness that facilitated natural environment resource conservation through oral traditions such as, riddles, proverbs, tales, legends, songs and myths.

Through riddles, proverbs the children would be taught on the reasons why to protect trees for bee forage namely; Toposwet (Croton macrostachys), Kembeliet (Combretum collinum/ molle) and Tungururwet (Flacourtia indica). Through tales, legends the children were taught on the conservation of trees that were used traditionally during meetings namely Simotwet (Ficus thoningii) and Mokoywet (Ficus ngalocarpus). Through songs and myths the children were taught on the conservation of septet tree (Podocarpus falcutus) which was used traditionally for shelter. It was through songs that the children were taught that if for instance the Podocarpus falcutus tree fell, it was a bad omen and therefore a traditional ceremony would be done to appease the spirits by burying the tree with grass. As darkness engulfed, the study found out that children would retreat to their grandmothers' huts to be told tales. Through this oral traditional practice, the young were taught that all trees that produce nectars and pollen were not allowed to be cut because the bees used their nectar to produce honey. Some of these trees the study found out were Segertit tree (Ilex mitis) and Borowet tree (Dombeys rutundifolia).

The study found out that use of folktale as a traditional practice shaped the attitude of the community members into appreciating and respecting trees of medicinal significance. Through this method, children were taught on the importance of not cutting trees of medicinal value by embracing, songs, proverbs and stories related to it. Some of these trees of medicinal significance were Armotit tree (Prunus Africana), Tungururwet tree (Flacourtia indica), Bumetet (Ekibegia capensis), Cheptuiyet (Diospyros abysinica), Marambajet tree (Acacia abysinica) and Bekeriontet tree (Olea capensis) commonly known as Elgon teak. Other trees of medicinal significance include; Moab warwa tree (Rhamnas prionoides), Bumetet tree (Ekibegia capensis), Cheptuishek tree (Euclea divinorum), Chesamisiet tree (Creteva adonsonii), Sikiriet tree (Bersema abysinica), Cheptuiyet tree (Diospyros abysinica), Tegandet (Arundineria alpine), Tungururwet tree (Flacourtia indica), Kwiriondet tree (Teclea nobilis), Torotwet climber (Rhicissus infausta), Topong'wet tree (Vanguara infausta), Tapurwet (Vanguara madascarensis), Legetetuet tree (Casrissa spinorum), Sokwondet tree (Warbugia ugandensis), Seswet tree (Acacia tortilis), Manuet tree (Ricinus cuminis), Tagamamik climber fruit (Rubus volkensii) and Toposwet tree (Croton macrostachys).

The study found that conservation of medicinal plants in particular appeared to have enjoyed a special place and preference during folktale among the Sabaot community members. The grand mother would perform a tale on each folktale-performing occasion by taking children through for example why harvesting of young plants for medicinal use was not allowed in the Sabaot community and the reasons why harvesting of mature plants for medicinal purposes was allowed. The study established that in each bororiet, there were areas within the river designated for circumcision rituals. In this area, the study found out that the initiates were subjected to a traditional ritual which included being immersed into the river before being taken for final step of facing the knife. The study found out that this designated site of the river was considered a sacred place and cutting of trees in this area was prohibited.

In addition, the study established that wetlands were the other place where rituals were performed. The study found any form of destruction to a wetland was traditionally prohibited. It was established in the study that incases of drought a person who was born following twins was taken to the wetland and a ritual was performed and it was believed that a heavy rainfall would follow thereafter. The study found out that because of this

traditional belief, wetlands remained intact and undisturbed. The study found out that, the decline in traditional practice has led to wetlands in Mt. Elgon being destroyed due to modern threats such as commercial development, industry, urbanization, agriculture, invasive species and creation dams.

The study revealed that some traditional beliefs that assisted in the conservation of flora and fauna. Some floras were never felled due to the fact that they were considered sacred. Some of such species the study found out included Kokorwet tree (Erithrina tomentosa) which was used by elders in Kony a sub-dialect of the Sabaot community in making oath during disputes Other trees used in presiding over such oath in Mosop were Kureshet tree (Euphobia carendebrum) and'Kipsikiriet tree (Bersema abysinica). The study also established that Lonkirwet tree (Cordia monoica) was considered sacred traditionally within the Sabaot community and was used for cursing the social misfit. The study found out that because of the belief that these trees are sacred, they were prohibited for use as firewood, for house construction or any other use other than the traditional purpose of oath.

Further, the study established that the area of the forest inhibited by Columbus monkeys, were prohibited traditionally from being cut down. The study found out that it was believed that if in the process of cutting a tree, the Columbus monkey/s (Mongeshet) jumps from tree to tree glibbering that was considered a curse to the person cutting the tree. The study found out that if a person was in the process of cutting a tree, then the columbus monkey/s chatter/s angrily, the person was suppose traditionally to stop the action, but if one would continue cutting the tree, even after hearing the screech from the monkey/s a curse would befall him.

The study established that the Sabaot culture strictly prohibited its members from acting or behaving in a way that was deemed to be destructive, harmful or posing a threat to the survival of the elements of the ecosystem. The study found out that any community member(s) found to have violated any form of prohibition would be fined a cow, goat, or both, besides other forms of punishment. This is agreeable to Callicot (2001), who points out that indigenous community observed ethics that often helped them regulate interactions with the various elements of fauna and flora resources within their territories.

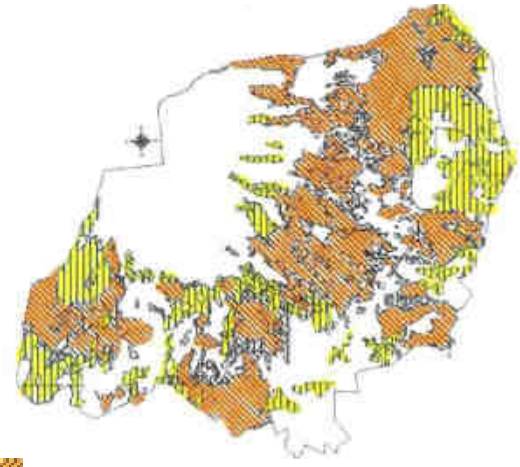
The study established that every Sabaot clan has a totem (tiong'ndo ab areet) and that traditionally members of the clan do not eat, kill or trap the animal which is their totem. The study established that totem vary significantly over Sabaot clans. The study found out that clan totems (tiong'ndo ab areet) range from mammals (leopard, elephant, lion, monkey, buffalo) birds (falcon, raven, pied crow, crane bird) to insects. The study established that some trees were protected from deforestation because of its value to the totem, for example the study established that there was a belief that if a person climb Simotwet tree (Ficus thoningii), then that person would not be harmed by an elephant (beliontet) because this tree produced herbs and leaves eaten by the elephants and this led to the conservation of the Ficus thoningii tree. The study found that there was a belief that an intimate relationship existed between the totem animal and the clan and that is the reason why members of the clan for example Kapchemichir or Kaptomato whose clan totem is elephant (beliontet) do not eat, kill or trap elephants. Because of this traditional practice, the Sabaot community was able to conserve fauna with great success. This concurs with the report by Wright (2009) who pointed out that many communities in Africa since time immemorial have relied on their traditional norms to conserve the environment with great success.

The study found out that the forest cover on Mt. Elgon has been on the decline since 1960. It was revealed that from 1960s and 1999 indigenous forest cover declined by a third from 53,281 ha (49% of the protected area) to 35,140 ha (33% of the protected area). In the same period, the area of Shamba on the mountain increased from zero to 9,582 hectares. Figure 1 below shows indigenous forest cover in the 1960s. The photographs revealed that approximately 5,000 ha of the Forest Reserve in the Chebyuk area had been encroached, and cleared for agriculture, following the initial excision.

Indigenous forest 1960

Figure1. Indigenous forest on Mt. Elgon, 1960s (Source: MEICDP, 2001)

Figure 2 below shows indigenous forest in 1999 and shows where indigenous forest has disappeared on Mt Elgon between the 1960s and 1999. Most of the indigenous forest loss has occurred in the Chebyuk area, though a sizable loss has also occurred near the northern edge of the Forest Reserve.



Indigenous forest 1999

Indigenous forest loss 1999

Figure 2. Change in Indigenous forest cover on Mt. Elgon 1960s – 1999 (Source: MEICDP, 2001)

The study found out that agricultural land in the Chebyuk area had increased by 3,686 hectares from the Forest Reserve in 1974. The photographs revealed that approximately 5,000 ha of the Forest Reserve in the Chebyuk area had been encroached, and cleared for agriculture, following the initial excision.

CONCLUSION

The study established that traditional practice such as use of customary practice, folktale, ritual; beliefs and totems have been used by the Sabaot community members in managing the environment with varying successes. The study concluded indigenous forest has disappeared on Mt Elgon between the 1960s. It is observed that traditional best practices with proven utility are still capable of enhancing environmental management (use, care and improvement) among rural communities such as the Sabaot. The study recommends that there is need to rekindle record and preserve traditional best practices in environmental management in communities such as the Sabaot.

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