

# Effectiveness of Indigenous Beliefs as Innovative Strategy to Conservation of Natural Resources in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Rural people depend almost entirely on local innovation in form of specific skills and knowledge essential for their survival. The innovation in this study is the local belief that the forests serve as habitat to some *gods* and *deities* worship by the people for protection and healing. This study therefore investigated effectiveness of such indigenous beliefs as innovative strategy to conservation and protection of cultural heritage. The two sacred forests selected for the study include *Igbo Igunnko* (meaning *Igunnuko* sacred forest) and *Igbo Oro* (*Oro* sacred forest) located at *Balogun* and *Ososun* respectively. Respondents for the study were sampled from households in the two villages. Through the local belief system, fear of entering into the sacred forests was created in the mind of the villagers. Firewood collection and hunting of wild animals as well as fishing are not permitted in the sacred forests. Two major activities carried out in the sacred forests include religion or cultural activities. People in need of consultation to the gods are accompanied into the forest by the Chief priest or local herbalists who then carry out the necessary cultural or religion activities. Sacred landscapes may not be specifically designed for nature conservation where they exist, yet they can play a key innovative strategy in protection of threatened and endangered forest diversity. This needed to be adequately integrated in modern science to facilitate development of local economy.

**Keywords:** Forest custodian, taboo, Indigenous knowledge, forest protection

## INTRODUCTION

From the time immemorial, indigenous peoples in many parts of the world imbue headlands, springs, trees and forest with religious meanings (Lauwrence, 2003). Recent studies have shown that Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in the form of “ethno-ecological knowledge is faced with danger and diverse challenges” (O’ Donoghue *et al.*, 1999). This view on IKS is sending signals that we should be careful in the way we utilise the natural environment as a result of the future consequences.

Many discussions implicitly or explicitly assume that biodiversity conservation is possible only within protected areas. Yet most of the world’s biodiversity is in areas used by people (Berkes and Folke, 2002; Berkes, 2004). What they fail to recognize is that spiritual explanations often incorporate important ecology, conservation, and sustainable development strategies (Johnson, 1992). Local people have incentives to conserve biodiversity when their livelihoods depend on a multitude of products and values produced by biodiversity (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2005; Dudley and Phillips 2006). Hence, to conserve biodiversity, we need to understand how human cultures interact with landscapes and shape them into cultural landscapes. In fact, to a large extent, the world’s biodiversity depends on maintaining patterns of resource use that facilitate the continued renewal of ecosystems.

Rural people depend almost entirely on local innovation in form of specific skills and knowledge essential for their survival (Rao, 1996; Lauwrence, 2003). One of such innovation is sacred forests that connect people with their values. Cultural belief in support of the establishment of sacred forest is part of the livelihood of rural poor. The role that indigenous people play in

protection and conservation of forest through their cultural belief in southwest Nigeria has been emphasised (Babalola and Kumoye, 2009). Despite the interdependence of local people and sacred forests, a decline in the areas of sacred forest has been documented (Adesiji et al, 2012; Infield and Mugisha, 2013). The consequence of this is that many of the people's indigenous knowledge systems built over the years as well as the endemic forest diversity are at the risk of becoming extinct with the loss of sacred forest (Jepson and Canney, 2003).

This study therefore investigated effectiveness of indigenous beliefs as innovative strategy to conservation and protection of cultural heritage in Nigeria. It is envisaged that findings of the study will be an update to existing body of knowledge on efficacy of local and indigenous belief in protection of remnant of natural resources such as forest forests that houses the remaining endemic and threatened biological diversity in developing countries. This information is pertinent to designing institutional intervention on integration of local knowledge to facilitate development.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted in Ifo Local Government Area (LGA) located in Ogun State, Southwest Nigeria. Ogun State is situated between 7°00' north and longitude 3°35' east with land area of 16,409 km<sup>2</sup>. The dominant ethnic group in Ogun State is Yoruba, comprising mainly the Egba, the Yewa, the Awori, the Egun, the Ijebu and the Remo. The Yoruba people are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa with origin from Nigeria. The Yorubas are in constant consciousness and acknowledgement of God's divine lordship over the whole earth, and have a number of deities which they believe serve as intermediaries between them and the supreme god (Babalola, 2009). Though the two dominant religions in the study area include Christianity and Islam, traditional religion are still practiced by some of the people especially at the rural areas.

The two sacred forests selected for the study include *Igbo Igunnko* (meaning *Igunnuko* sacred forest) and *Igbo Oro* (*Oro* sacred forest). The *Igbo Igunnko* was selected due its famous with the masquerade known as "*Igunuko*" while the *Igbo Oro* is famous with "*Oro*" a mystical god. The forests are link together by a river known as "*Oso'ro* River". The two villages close to the forests and with history directly linking them to the forests are *Balogun* and *Ososun*. These villages share the same historical background, cultural practises, and belief in the two sacred forests.

Respondents for the study were sampled from households in two villages around the sacred forests. In each of the households, structure questionnaire was administered to the head of the households. Male head was targeted due to the regard that the villagers give to issue relating to cultural activities. Male are seen as the custodians of cultural activities and are always referred to when information on such activities are requested. In situation where the male head could not be found, the questionnaire was administered to the next most senior member of the household. Preference were given to women with many years of experience in the household in places were male were not found.

The questionnaire was aimed at generating information on effectiveness of the indigenous and cultural beliefs in sacred forests. A total of eighty copies of the questionnaire were administered in the two selected villages; forty in Balogun and another forty in Ososun villages. However, seventy one copies were eventually considered adequate for analysis and interpretation. Due to

the similarity in the cultural beliefs of the two villages and sharing of the same sacred forests and river, data collected were pooled together for analysis and interpretation. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages and presented in cross tabulation.

In-depth interview and field visits to the two sacred forests were embarked upon for appropriate observation. This is a follow-up to the information provided in the questionnaire by the villagers. Since visitors and strangers to the communities are not allowed into the sacred forests, the researchers and the assistants could only observe the sacred forests from the edges and from a distance.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### ***Indigenous Knowledge as innovative strategy for protection of forest***

The innovation in this study is the local belief that the forests serve as habitat to some *gods* and *deities* worship by the people for protection and healing. Some of the communities also believe that the gods in such forests is the foundation of their community, while some believe that the gods protect them against attack from their enemies during the period of war as well as protection against sicknesses and diseases. In addition, the gods that promote bountiful harvest as well as those that prevent barrenness are believe to resides in scared forests thereby leading to establishment of settlement adjacent to such forests. These gods are worshiped and at the same time appeased depending on the prevailing situation. Some festivals and rituals are also carried out by the people on annual basis within the forests.

In most of the villages, there are custodians of the forests. The custodian is sometimes given the title of “Chief Priest” put in charge of the sacred forest. Getting the title of forest custodian is through family lineage. A family is responsible for producing the Chief Priest; this is a long standing tradition passed down through generational inheritance. The priest is responsible for offering sacrifices and takes the lead in other religious activities within the forests. Any other activities carried out without the consent of the priest within the forests is a violating of the local rules and said to be a *taboo*. The offender when caught is subjected to punishment ranging from banishment to payment of fine and rendering of sacrifices to appease the god.

### ***Effectiveness of the Indigenous Beliefs in support of the sacred forests***

Effectiveness of the indigenous belief in support of sacred forest was evaluated. Through the local belief system, fear of entering into the sacred forests is created in the mind of residence of villages adjoining the sacred forests. Not all the people are allowed to enter into the sacred forests except under some conditions. From the responses of sampled village dwellers (Table 1), 77.5% indicated that only custodian of the sacred forest are permitted to enter into the forest while remaining 22.5% indicated that indigenes of adjoining villages may also enter into the forests. Further interviews revealed that special permission must be obtained to enter into the forest. Strangers to the villages are not allowed to enter into the sacred forests. This condition also holds when people are to make sacrifices to the god and during festivities. People in need of consultation to the gods are accompanied into the forest by the Chief priest or local herbalists who then carry out the necessary cultural or religion activities.

### ***Activities in the sacred forests***

Two major activities carried out in the sacred forests include religion or cultural activities (29.5%) and collection of medicinal plants (29.5%) by some herbalists or the forest custodian. Firewood collection and hunting of wild animals as well as fishing are not permitted in the sacred forests. Although some villagers engage in hunting and firewood wild fruits collection are carried out at edges of the sacred forest. On the contrary, fishing in Oso'ro River is totally prohibited and a serious offence. None of the sampled respondents indicated that the villagers involve in fishing. Fishing is considered as the most grievous taboo for anyone to commit in Oso'ro River, located in the sacred forests. In the past, the punishment for fishing is death. Majority of the villagers in *Balogun* and *Ososun* are aware of this taboo and guide against committing it. The fishes in Oso'ro River are believed to belong to the river goddess that is responsible for healing of the children and healing women from infertility. Fishing as a taboo in river has also been reported elsewhere. For instance, prohibition of fishing in *River Osun* at Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove in Southwest Nigeria was reported by Babalola and Kumoye (2009). River Osun is believed to be inhabited by “*goddess of fertility*”, people are therefore prohibited from fishing in the river.

**Table 1:** Conditions and people that are allowed to enter into the sacred forests

Questions	Frequency N = 71	Percentage
Are people allowed to enter into the forest?		
<i>Yes</i>	8	11.3
<i>No</i>	63	88.7
What set of people are permitted to enter into the forest?		
<i>Indigene of the village</i>	16	22.5
<i>Custodian to the sacred forest</i>	55	77.5
<i>Strangers to the village</i>	0	0

As identified by Adesiji and Babalola, the cultural and religion activities carried out by villagers in the sacred forests include:

- 2.2.1. *Igunuko festival*: This is dedicated to worshipping of “*Igunuko*” masquerade.
- 2.2.2. *Village rituals and sacrifice*: These are performed based on the need or if there is unusual sicknesses or mishaps in the villages.
- 2.2.3. *Coronation of a new king*: this is one of the activities carried out in *Igbo Oro* when a new king is to be installed. It is a top secret ritual that only the initiates partake in.
- 2.2.4. *Women fertility ritual*: This is specifically organized in *Igunuko* forest for women that are barren or cannot produce children.
- 2.2.5. *Initiation of the forest Priest*: this is carried out during initiation of new Chief Priest who will serve as the custodian to the sacred forest. It is marked with *Oro* festival that is celebrated in *Igbo Oro*.
- 2.2.6. *Burial rite for the forest custodians*: when the initiated custodian to the forest is dead, rituals are made in the sacred forest to appease his soul before the final burial.

## CONCLUSION

The study has revealed effectiveness of indigenous belief in protection of community forests. The beliefs in support of sacred forests have evolved over time and central to the livelihoods and religion of local people. Sacred landscapes may not be specifically designed for nature conservation where they exist, yet they can play a key innovative strategy in protection of threatened and endangered forest diversity if adequately integrated in modern science. There is therefore the need for adequate recognition of effectiveness of indigenous belief as an innovation that can facilitate development of local economy.

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