

Chapter Eleven

AFRICAN ECOSYSTEM AND TABOOS

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Executive Summary

The ecosystem which basically entails the interconnectedness of organisms with each other and their environment has over time been at risk of human activities, which due to selfishness or carelessness harmed these organisms and the environment which they exist in mindlessly. Taboos, on the other hand, deal with prohibitions triggered by cultural practices and beliefs which are regarded as sacred. It is, therefore, implicit that taboos play a very big role in the conservation and protection of the ecosystem. Using the methods of critical analysis and evaluation, the researcher finds out that taboos are mainly related to cultural ethics and values and are overlooked by modern day man who has blindly embraced the modern education without reference to them. The researcher suggests, therefore, that emphasis should be laid on these taboos which are favourable to the preservation of the ecosystem and as such replicate them as standing law to protect the ecosystem and some of its defenceless inhabitant from going extinct.

Keywords: Taboos, Ecosystem, Culture, Ethics, Value, Conservation.

Introduction

A taboo is an implicit prohibition on something (usually against an utterance or behaviour) based on a cultural sense that it is

excessively repulsive or, perhaps, too sacred for ordinary people. Such prohibitions are present in virtually all societies. On a comparative basis, taboos, for example related to food items, seem to make no sense at all, as what may be declared unfit for one group by custom or religion may be perfectly acceptable to another.

An ecosystem (or ecological system) consists of all the organisms and the physical environment with which they interact. These biotic and abiotic components are linked together through nutrient cycles and energy flows. Energy enters the system through photosynthesis and is incorporated into plant tissue. By feeding on plants and on one another, animals play an important role in the movement of matter and energy through the system. They also influence the quantity of plant and microbial biomass present. By breaking down dead organic matter, decomposers release carbon back to the atmosphere and facilitate nutrient cycling by converting nutrients stored in dead biomass back to a form that can be readily used by plants and microbes.

The role of local communities and local ecological knowledge in the management of natural resources and ecosystems has received increasing attention in recent years. Local ecological knowledge refers to a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief of the relationships of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment, reflecting the dynamic way in which people organise perceptions of flora, fauna, ecosystem processes, culture beliefs and history (Berkes and Folke 1998; Berkes et al. 2003; Gadgil et al. 1993). Such knowledge is often tacit, and its transmission and practical implementation is frequently accomplished through the prescriptions of social institutions, such as rituals and taboos (Colding and Folke 2001). The institution of taboos is a universal

regulator of human behaviour. Colding and Folke (2001) consider some taboos to be integral parts of 'invisible' systems of resource management that often show a functional similarity to the institutions of formal nature conservation. Specific-species taboos regulate the utilisation of particular species and are usually inclusive prohibitions, banning exploitation of a particular species at all times. The rationale behind the existence of specific-species taboos vary, ranging from notions of the species being toxic, being perceived as religious symbols, as well as being avoided due to their behavioural and physical appearance. In an analysis of seventy specific-species taboos, about 30 per cent, predominantly reptiles and mammals, were found to be involved species recognised as 'threatened' by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (Colding and Folke 1997). While this may be an unintended consequence, the enforcement of taboos may have a direct impact on species conservation. Taboos and other forms of informal institutions have, however, seldom been incorporated in biological conservation schemes, partly due to narrow definitions of what constitutes conservation (Berkes et al. 2003; Colding et al. 2003).

Taboos form an integral part and parcel of the cultural morality of the different communities around the world and has been a way of allowing all things exist fairly in the ecosystem. For the ancient man, environmental taboos have a pivotal moral role toward the ontological wellbeing of both the individual person and the environment at large. Prohibitions and restrictions through taboos on unsustainable use of certain plant species, forests, mountains, rivers, pools and nonhuman animals, among other ecological species in the ecosystem, is not a new epistemology to the world at large, but today these ancient way of conservation seems to have been forgotten as a result of the impact of the full weight of the domineering influence of

colonization and globalization. That notwithstanding the world today possess much that is worth retaining and our prospects is to save a good deal of it in succeeding generations, and this can only be possible if corrective measures are taken to revive these taboo.

The Relationship between taboos and the environment

Taboos are 'avoidance rules' that forbid members of the human community from performing certain actions, such as eating some kinds of food, walking on or visiting some sites that are regarded as sacred, cruelty to nonhuman animals, and using nature's resources in an unsustainable manner. For the Shona people, taboos are understood as specific rules that forbid people from performing certain actions, otherwise the performance of such forbidden actions is a negation of the moral code that govern human conduct. It is, therefore, only wise to say that taboos are linked to philosophy as a branch of axiology called ethics.

The society have always looked at the environment as a very important and inseparable part of the human community. The environment is important to the well-being of the individual. Thus, the communitarian nature of society can be understood in the context of the moral relationship that is struck between the individual and the environment through the observance of taboos. Such teachings complement and cement a good moral relationship between the individual person and the environment. Though Mbiti's (1969) contention that "I am because we are", is anthropocentric as it characterizes the relationship between the individual and his society, it can also be applicable to the relationship between the human community and the environment. In this context, the society is what it is because of the existence of the environment that provides it with some of its needs and wants. Tatira (2000) rightly notes that "the Shona people realize the importance of preserving the

environment as a factor in overall development. This knowledge is manifested in some of the taboos that control child behavior in relation to the environment." Thus, taboos are ethical tools that do not only foster good human relations, but also promote good relations between human beings and nature.

However, the world communitarianism does not end at the level of the human community, as Mbiti seems to imply. The individual human person or the communities of human persons do not live separately as moral islands, neither do they live in a moral vacuum. Rather, human persons actually live, and ought to live, in harmony with the environment. Therefore, taboos, just like those of any other social grouping, must be understood as moral rules that regulate human behavior, especially as it impacts negatively on the environment. In this regard, taboos are meant to make the individual adjust his interests so that they conform to those of the society and the environment at large. It can be proposed that the 'I' in Mbiti's declaration "I am because we are" should take on board the interests of the individual human persons, while the 'we' becomes a broader term referring to the human community and the environment. Such a conception of the relationship between the human society and the environment fosters a sound environmental ethic that does not only take into account the well-being of the individual and his community, but also that of the environment, and this well-being is being fostered by taboo. The environment should be construed as an end in itself in a similar way that human beings are perceived, rather than viewing it as a mere means to some human ends. Thus, taboos have an esoteric role towards nature if considered in terms of their embedded environmental role that they play.

Besides being a source of environmental ethics, taboos also cultivate a concept of wholeness between the human community

and the environment. By and large, observance of the environmental taboos brings about a sustainable use of the environment and takes into account its wholeness. Thus, Ramose (1999) notes that: "The principle of wholeness applies also with regard to the relation between human beings and the physical or objective nature. To care for one another, therefore, implies caring for the physical nature as well. Without such care, the interdependence between human beings and the physical nature would be undermined." The idea of wholeness of the human being in relation to the environment as enshrined in taboos is important in fostering a sustainable use and preservation of the various natural resources, such as water sources, natural vegetation, wildlife, and endangered non-human species.

The World Ecology and Management

The term "ecosystem management" was formalized in 1992 by F. Dale Robertson, the then Chief of the U.S. Forest Service. Robertson stated, "By ecosystem management, we mean an ecological approach... that must blend the needs of people and environmental values in such a way that the National Forests and Grasslands represent diverse, healthy, productive and sustainable ecosystems." A variety of additional definitions of ecosystem management exist, although definitions of this concept are typically vague. For example, Robert T. Lackey emphasizes that ecosystem management is informed by ecological and social factors, motivated by societal benefits, and implemented over a specific timeframe and area. F. Stuart Chapin and co-authors highlight that ecosystem management is guided by ecological science to ensure the long-term sustainability of ecosystem services, while Norman Christensen and co-authors underscore that it is motivated by defined goals, employs adaptive practices, and accounts for the complexities of ecological systems. Peter Brussard and colleagues opine that

ecosystem management balances preserving ecosystem health while sustaining human needs.

As a concept of natural resource management, ecosystem management remains both ambiguous and controversial, in part because some of its formulations rest on contested policy and scientific assertions. These assertions are important to understanding much of the conflict surrounding ecosystem management. Professional natural resource managers, typically operating from within government bureaucracies and professional organizations, often mask debate over controversial assertions by depicting ecosystem management as an evolution of past management approaches.

A fundamental principle of ecosystem management is the long-term sustainability of the production of goods and services by ecosystems, as "intergenerational sustainability is a precondition for management, not an afterthought". Ideally, there should be clear, publicly-stated goals with respect to future trajectories and behaviours of the system being managed. Other important requirements include a sound ecological understanding of the system, including connectedness, ecological dynamics, and the context in which the system is embedded. An understanding of the role of humans as components of the ecosystems and the use of adaptive management is also important. While ecosystem management can be used as part of a plan for wilderness conservation, it can also be used in intensively managed ecosystem.

Sustainable ecosystem management approaches have been used by societies throughout human history. Prior to colonization, indigenous cultures often sustainably managed their natural resources through intergenerational Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). In TEK, cultures acquire

knowledge of their environment over time and this information is passed on to future generations through cultural customs, including folklore, religion, and **taboos**.

The desire for more integrated policies, expressed in the 1990s, has not yet, or only to a very limited extent, become practical in reality. Nature and environment policies are still predominantly sectoral, and limited in spatial and temporal coverage (for a comprehensive analysis, see De Jong, 2006). Moreover, there has been an increasing opposition against 'green' politics, which has manifested itself in the call for the inclusion of social and economic aspects in nature and environmental policies, in other words, a sustainable approach.

Today's question is whether the concepts of sustainable development, integrated ecosystem management, and integrated coastal zone management (ICZM) can provide solutions to these problems.

Although the concept of sustainable development already emerged in the 1980s, it has gained momentum with the adoption of national sustainability strategies at the beginning of the 2000s. Integrated ecosystem management was already proposed by scientists in the first half of the 1970s (Ruivo, 1972). The concept has been further elaborated since and promoted by ecologists (Christensen et al., 1996) and broadened from being mainly ecology-oriented to also encompass cultural, historical, and socioeconomic aspects (Dronkers and De Vries, 1999; Grumbine, 1997; Visser, 1999). There exist many definitions of integrated ecosystem management (Christensen et al., 1996; EC, 1999; Grumbine, 1997; Nordic Council, 1998; Yaffee, 1999) from which several shared elements can be distilled: integrated application of all ecosystem aspects (chemical, biological, physical, and anthropogenic); integration of administrative

sectors (cross-sectoral approach); and involvement of stakeholders. It was at the beginning of the 2000s that the concept was embraced by politics. ICZM may be regarded as a specific type of integrated ecosystem management. Also, ICZM is not a new concept (compare Sorensen, 2005), but has been mainly the subject of academic research. With the publication of the EU Recommendation on ICZM (EC, 2002), the concept has become much more tangible.

Effect of Taboo in the Conservation of Ecosystem

In the traditional African society especially in Igbo society, taboos played significant and positive roles. They provided a set of rules serving as a moral guidance or a law in the community. These laws unintentionally helped a great deal in the preservation of lands and wildlife. Every moral system requires the existence of guiding principles, source(s) of motivation, and some grounds for objectivity. Even though formulated as 'negative' principles stressing 'do not...' and teaching people about what was not acceptable in the society, by implication, they were also pointing out to the actions that were supposed to be done. By preventing people from doing wrong things, they were helping them to focus on what was encouraged in the society.

In a society where there are no police, taboos served as a guardian of moral values. To a certain extent, they were better than modern law enforcing agencies, because, in most cases, breaking of a taboo was associated with an automatic punishment – one did not have to be caught to be punished. They helped in the upbringing of children who grow to meet these taboo practices and thereby follow them and by so doing preserving the world ecosystem. They could be described as 'teaching aids' when explaining some moral principles to them. When one lacked an intellectual ability to impart the importance

of some moral principles, taboos were a useful way of transmitting the same value from a different perspective.

Those values, worded as taboos played an indispensable role in the control of the way people use the wildlife, for instance, some part of the world feels that some special trees are worshiped as gods or a particular animal; the Idemili people of the Igbo tribe of Africa believes that pythons are sacred and should be respected. They believe that when one mistakenly or intentionally kills a python, he or she must perform a full burial right for it. It is therefore seen as a taboo to commit such and this has gone a long way in protecting such animal in their community; likewise, the Indians worship different animals ranging from monkeys to elephant and a few other unmentioned examples. Some societies see some trees as sacred and therefore never try to use its branches for fire wood or any commercial purpose. In the ancient Igbo tradition some enormous areas of land are regarded as sacred like “the evil forest”, as it is popularly called. It is never cultivated, hunted nor entered except on special approval or condemnation.

These taboos governing the use of wild species are still present in many societies. A system of prohibitions known as ‘fady’ is central to Malagasy culture. It has been observed that fady that relates to the use of natural resources in the eastern rainforests of Madagascar play an important conservation role. Prohibitions ranged from strict taboos in which a species or area was forbidden by the ancestors to social norms that concerned acceptable behaviour when harvesting wild species. Strict taboos offered real protection to threatened species, such as the lemur *Propithecus edwardsi* and the carnivore *Cryptoprocta ferrox*. Taboos also reduced pressure on some economically important endemic species by preventing their sale or limiting the harvest season. Despite their value for conservation, the taboos did not

appear to originate from attempts to sustainably manage resources.

Replication of Taboo in Modern Day Conservation of the Ecosystem

With the coming of the white men the effectiveness of taboos became very irrelevant. Laws appeared the most effective way of protecting our ecosystem, but ironically these laws were not as effective as the taboos because people bypass the law through bribery and corruptions and sometimes get away with the harmful activities even without being noticed. A large number of others are ready to bear the consequence of paying the fine when caught.

It is important to note that taboos were perceived to have immediate implication on the family, generation or even the health of the person in question. The effectiveness of these taboos was such that it works even without the offender being seen by anyone. It is necessary that these taboos are reintroduced and strongly abided by. The communities around the world should resurrect these taboo practices and be backed by the laws of the different countries around the world. This replication would enable an effectiveness in the conservation of the ecosystem. The younger generation should be aware of these taboos and their implication as it is believed by the community. Every member of the community should also look out for the offenders and bring them to book by the law this way the law would be working hand in hand with the taboos for a more effective conservation of the ecosystem in a changing world.

The protection of the ecosystem should be a collective effort that combines both the olden days' traditional way of conservation and the modern day planned conservation method. This way the

world ecosystem would have little or nothing to fear as regards to its protection and sustainability.

Conclusion

The role of taboo in the protection of our ecosystem cannot be over emphasized. This paper has pointed out the indispensable contributions of the ancient taboo practices on the ecosystem. It has also shown that these taboo practices might be the most effective way of conserving the ecosystem. The researcher is therefore encouraging the resuscitation of these taboo practices for the benefit of our ecosystem. An indebt study on the different taboo practiced in the different local environment is also encouraged so as to enable a more effective ecosystem management.

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