



Research article

Indigenous Festivals as a Tool for Forest Preservation and Cultural Revival in Nigeria

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Abstract

The United Nations states that more than four million hectares of African forests are being cut down annually. Policies being taken by governments to combat this scourge have continued to hit brick walls. However, in precolonial African societies, forests were significant in the sustenance of the lives of the people, insects, and animals that dwelt therein. The trees in the forests serve as medicinal herbs and also provide shelter for the metaphysical beings believed to determine the existence of the living. People lived in forested terrains as a result of the close relationship between the African and his natural environment. Festivals were celebrated to venerate the forests and solidify man's kinship with the woods. However, a question that is pertinent at this juncture is: what could be responsible for the massive deforestation of trees and the disconnection of the African from his natural environment on the continent? What alternative solutions could be used to replace the top-down approaches instituted by the government? This study examines the trajectory of the disconnection of the African from his natural environment and investigates the factors responsible for this displacement. I argue that policies formulated by the government are not enough to mitigate deforestation and displacement of communities. The contention here is that Threats of fines and other punitive measures were no deterrent to people cutting down trees to sell. Also, with the failure of the government's policies on the preservation of forests, indigenous communities impacted by deforestation should employ traditional festivals to promote the conservation of forests and improve traditional medicine. The Edegerode festival of the Sapele people in Nigeria is used as a paradigm of this study.

Keywords: Deforestation, forest preservation, forest conservation Edegerode Community, Indigenous Festival, Performances, Traditional Medicine.



Climate Action, Life on Land

Introduction

Many countries around the world have vast forest areas. However, according to the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (2022), more than half of the world's forests are found in only five countries (Brazil, Canada, China, the Russian Federation, and the United States

Article History: Received: 15 December 2023. Revised: 08 February 2024. Accepted: 08 February 2024. Published: 10 February 2024

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Citation: Adjeketa, B. Shireku, A & Obado, O.T. (2024). Indigenous Festivals as a Tool for Forest Preservation and Cultural Revival in Nigeria. *Rupkatha Journal* 16:1. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n1.07>

of America). Nigeria is one of those fortunate enough to have abundant forest resources, including lumbers (Aghanenu, 2021). In the *Nigeria Forest policy* statement of 2006, Nigerian forest estate is spread across the five primary biological zones-the Freshwater/Mangrove, Lowland Rainforest, Derived Savanna, Guinea Savanna, and Sudan/Sahel zones-in around 445 gazetted Forest Reserves (p3). There are also 4,600 plant species in the nation, 707 of which are indigenous. Deforestation of the remaining natural forest and the wooded wetlands is currently endangering the conservation of this unique biodiversity, which should be ensured.

To generate roofing wood and other wood products, mankind has altered forest resources throughout history. Since the year 2000, the rate of deforestation has increased dramatically in Nigeria, notwithstanding the exploitation of other natural resources (Friday, A.O et al 2015). In attempting to protect the forest resources, Nigeria implemented a *National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan* in 2004. According to the principles of ecological sustainability and social equity, the strategy envisions a Nigeria that incorporates biodiversity conservation into a truly national program of sustainable development to significantly reduce poverty, create a secure future, and assist in the growth of the Nigerian biodiversity industry for the benefit of the country's economy and community (p. 6). Nonetheless, the *Nigerian Federal Ministry of Environment* states that it is concerning how quickly Nigeria's forest resources are being lost. In a 2006 statement published in the approved national forest policy, the yearly rate of deforestation decreased from 14.9 million hectares to 10.1 million hectares between 1980 and 1990, with an average of 3.5%. This corresponds to the nation losing between 350,000 and 400,000 hectares of forest area annually. This contributes significantly to the deterioration of the soil, pollution of the water, siltation and drying up of water bodies, changes in the microclimate, and extinction of plants and animals. The Nigerian government's objective of keeping 20-25% of the land covered by forests for the benefit of the local, national, and international environments is not supported by these trends (Approved National Forest Policy, 2006).

The Nigerian National Forest Policy of 2006 which included an updated summary and analysis of the nation's hardwood vegetation has also hit brick walls. The lack of implementation of the 2006 forest policy in the area of production, preservation, and conservation has placed its high forests woods, bushlands, plantations, trees on farms including other woody vegetation resources under threat of extinction. With these growing negative trends, therefore, Samuel (2011), believes that certain indigenous institutions- such as traditional festivals would be important for maintaining efficient systems including the preservation, and conservation of forests in Africa.

Numerous workshops, seminars, conferences, and critical studies going on around the world on environmental protection and sustainability a doubtless proof that deforestation is a global problem facing humanity. The need to urgently set up workable yardsticks for environmental and forest protection is emphasized. This prominence in eco studies is born out of the fact that discourses in environmental protection and sustainability keep addressing ecological problems facing humanity (Adekunle Olatumile 2019, p.32). The about 3.4 million hectares of net forest lost per year in Africa for the period 2005–2010, is also a call for all concerned stakeholders to come to forest rescue (Larcom, et al, 2006). Despite the establishment of forest policies and laws supporting sustainable forest management in many African countries, sadly, forests are disappearing at a rapid pace (Larcom, et al, 2006).

Drawing from Samuel's (2011) proposition and because of the inadequacy of many central governments in Africa, Nigeria to be precise, to put an end to deforestation, the study proposed using traditional festivals as a medium to combat deforestation in Nigeria. The use of festivals to combat ecological issues hopes to be effective because indigenous people have so much respect for traditional festivals as having implications on their environment, health, and their existence. The fact that the majority of traditional African people believe in the powers that regulate the natural spaces is further evidenced by the way that festival performances address ecological challenges. But first, the study looks at the effect of deforestation on non-timber forest products in Nigeria and examines the roles and functions that traditional festival performances in Africa play in either combating or encouraging the act. Using the Edegborode festival performance, as a case study, the research presents an analysis of ways through which policy frameworks in Nigeria can benefit from festivals and how a wide audience can be reached with eco messages to create awareness.

Traditional Institutions and Deforestation in Africa

Adekunle (2009) mentioned that going by unfolding events of natural disasters, "the issue of environmental protection and sustainability need to continue to dominate global discourse" (p32). Studies such as that of Acemoglu (2014) on deforestation around African communities suggest that the different institutional structures that govern natural resources are related to the rate of deforestation due to the lack of or poor institutional checks and balances on the performance of local leaders. Larcom, et al (2006) investigated the role pre-colonial institutions play in deforestation in Africa and stated that deforestation remains a significant problem in much of the developing world. They came out with the theoretical proposition that precolonial African institutions had a detrimental effect on natural resources because village elders granted access to forest resources for communal cultivation and deforestation. The main focus of their study was to look specifically at the relationship between the succession rules of village heads (local chiefs) and current rates of deforestation. The outcome of their research was as follows: Higher levels of deforestation are currently found in areas where local leaders were chosen based on their "social standing".

The present rates of deforestation in Africa are persistently correlated with pre-colonial systems. Village chiefs still have a significant influence on environmental results due to the institutions that oversee their tenure and access to natural resources. There is a statistically significant correlation between current rates of deforestation and the succession rules for local village heads. Larcom, et al (2006) study is optimistic that indigenous organizations that date back to pre-colonial times are still crucial to the management of natural resources in Africa till the 21st century. Relatedly, Acemoglu et al (2001) empirical study on *The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development* found that fewer checks and balances on the authority of local chiefs result in worse consequences for the economic growth of their people. Burgess (2012) acknowledged that this is mainly because of their propensity for self-serving behavior, which is made feasible by their control over natural resources and territory.

Klopp (2012) looked into the reasons for deforestation in Kenya's South Nandi and Karura Forests. Researchers Brown and Makana (2014 p3) have also examined the deforestation in the

Democratic Republic of the Congo's northeast. Their findings agreed with the previously mentioned ones. According to Brown and Makana, small-scale lodgers in the northeast of the Congo were responsible for deforestation, having paid "traditional chiefs" for logging permits. In Kenya, however, forests are allocated to lodgers in exchange for political support as they are frequently a part of the aristocratic patronage networks. The influence of precolonial institutions on contemporary metrics of institutional efficiency in Africa and the developing world is becoming more widely recognized. Higher levels of deforestation are currently found in areas where local leaders were chosen based on their social standing. There is compelling evidence of a persistent correlation between precolonial African institutions and contemporary deforestation rates. In Africa, village chiefs still have the last say over who can access natural resources. The organizations that control their tenure have a big influence on the state of the environment. There is a statistically significant correlation between current rates of deforestation and the succession rules for local village heads (Larcom et al, 2006).

Effects of Deforestation on NTFPs in Traditional African Communities

The vast array of items obtained from forests other than fuelwood and timber are known as non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Deforestation has greatly affected the preservation and production of these FPs in African local communities. Bark, roots, tubers, corms, leaves, flowers, seeds, fruits, resins, honey, fungus, and animal products including meat, skins, bones, and teeth are examples of African non-timber forest products (ANTFPs). In Africa, some NTFPs are grown in farmers' fields but most of the time, they are gathered from forested regions. They serve "as a source of money as well as food and medicine for local dwellers. NTFPs are exchanged on local, regional, and global marketplaces and eaten in households in both rural and urban areas" (Central African Regional Program for the Environment, 2001). For many rural communities, non-timber forest products offer a sizable source of eatable fruits and vegetables, fodder, medication, and financial revenue. More than 150 native woody plants from Nigeria's different vegetation zones, for example, have been found to provide food goods for both humans and animals (APNFP, 2006). Many Nigerians, especially those in the local areas view the woodlands as a kind of pharmacy where they may find plant components to cure various illnesses. In other regions, the forest provides useful resources including honey, chewing sticks, wrapping leaves, and cane or rattan, which are used to make baskets, chairs, and other furniture. Sapphia products used to make mats and ropes are also found in the non-timber forest in Africa (Approved National Forest Policy, 2006 p9).

Forest products (FPs) serve a great role in traditional health care in Africa. Tinde van Andel (2006) stated that according to the World Health Organisation, over 4 billion people receive their primary healthcare from traditional plant-based medical systems. Historically, only traditional healers and their apprentices were allowed to harvest therapeutic herbs from the forest. However, as a result of rapid urbanization, large cities are becoming hubs for the demand for traditional medicines originating from rural regions on the outside of national borders. Large amounts of plant material are being gathered by commercial harvesters and sold to urban dealers or herbalists by an increasing number of unofficial sellers. The populations of wild medicinal plants are under more strain as a result of this transition from subsistence usage to commercial commerce. The

local herbalists are concerned that their supply of raw materials may become so limited that they will have to purchase the necessary bark, roots, and leaves from city vendors as many of these medicinal woods are being eroded by deforestation.

Malawi is a good example of how important medicinal plants are to conventional medicine. In 1987, there were only about 35 doctors employed, compared to an estimated 17,000 traditional healers. In Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana, and Southern Africa, comparable patterns are also observed. Egypt is the world's fifth-largest exporter of medical plants and the most significant exporter of medicinal plants from Africa. According to estimates, South Africa's domestic medicinal plant trade is worth between US\$ 6 and US\$ 9 million annually. In Natal, some 7.5 million plant units from more than 600 species are marketed each year. Online retailers are increasingly offering medicinal plants from South Africa for sale. Since traditional healers are consulted by the great majority of Africans, the national market for medicinal plants is thought to be more significant than the export industry (Tinde, 2006). However, in Nigeria, the reduction and non-availability of some of these products are a result of massive deforestation and illegal logging taking place in many of its rural regions.

Traditional Festivals in Africa

There is always something that a human civilization celebrates. Hardly any African community exists without a festival to celebrate the living, honour the ancestors, venerate the dead, introduce or celebrate a successful planting season, protect the water bodies and the environment, conserve and utilize natural resources, etc. Hence, scholars have said that "Africa has been tagged a festival continent" (Kadar and Yoa, 2004, Adekule, 2009). According to Ejikemeuwa (2002), "a festival is generally a joyful period set aside for celebration. It is an event organized by a particular community or group of people to commemorate a remarkable event in their historical life. It is used to portray the uniqueness or the identity of a people" (p. 69). For Okpadah (2018), African festivals are socio-historical constructs. They are a salutation, a commemoration a documentation, and the historicification of the past. He further cited Adeoye that most of the festivals are ritual festivals based on the remembrance of some heroes, their deeds, and events of immense significance. For Amankulor (1982), some festivals celebrated the reincarnation of the dead back into their families, where they continue life a second time. In the cyclic worldview shared by the Igbo for example, the living eventually becomes the dead, and the dead become the yet-unborn. In Odo, one of the festivals celebrated in some parts of Igbo land, Nigeria, men and women masquerades represented the returning dead who spend up to six months with the living (Amankulor 1982, p47). The celebrations of traditional festivals in Africa are therefore prehistoric.

The main purpose of a festival in Africa is to celebrate. People from Africa are often seen to be joyous. They celebrate several social activities including festivals (Ejikemeuwa 2022, p67). According to some individuals, violence and cruel customs are hallmarks of African traditional celebrations. That traditional African festivities are fundamentally bad (Nold 1989). A lot of people now dislike the beloved traditional African festival celebration. The introduction of the Islamic and Christian faiths into Africa is a primary cause of this classification. Many Africans attend Western festivals like Christmas, Easter, Id ul-Fitr, and Milad an-Nabi, while pushing back African traditional celebrations under the pretext of being Christians or Muslims, claiming that all aspects of

traditional African festivals are idolatrous and idolizing (p. 68). Adjeketa (2019) added that “many festivals in Africa and Nigeria especially, have fallen into a state of coma. The reason behind this, he claimed is that some of the festivals are disliked by many because of their root in traditional religion. He further mentioned that, because of the impossible unbroken ties between traditional religion and festivities, most people termed the exercise a fetish. The idea of traditional festivals being a fetish has become more popular for two possible reasons: 1) the lack of value that the people and the government in particular have for festival activity and 2). The Christianization of modern Nigerian society (p. 146). However, traditional festivals in Africa are communal events that are custom-established. They involve “carefully thought-out programs that express gratitude, joy, or extreme hedonism” (Nold 1989).

From an alternative perspective, traditional festivals signify noteworthy events where a community comes together every year to commemorate, pay tribute to, and express gratitude to the creator, the celestial beings, and ancestral beings for their support and guidance (Nold 2000, Samuel, 2011). Festivals in Africa are often associated with supernatural forces that dwell either in waters, invisible spaces, or forest areas. The culture or beliefs of the people are found in these festivals. While it may be difficult for many non-Africans to “understand some cultures and or belief system of the people as expressed in these events, they should recognize that African festival performances contribute to the revival of indigenous knowledge and cultures that were previously marginalized and demonized (Samuel, 2011, Ngoma, 2001). Over time, some genres of dance, music, and art in Africa have gained popularity at the expense of native customs. Festivals are thus one tactic to bring ancient customs back to life. Their stories contained positive lessons relevant to nation-building. They are a reminder for refuting decadent morality and upholding positive morality within societies.

For their significance, some governments, over the years have formulated policies and initiatives that attempted to establish favorable conditions necessary for festivals to serve as forums for communication with responsibility bearers. With these initiatives, some African communities (in Ghana, for example), have taken the advantage to discuss development initiatives with lawmakers and policy officials (Nukunya, 2003). Indigenous institutions, such as traditional festivals, have over the years become very important for maintaining efficient community organization, communication, and accountability mechanisms in host communities because some government policies and programs do not adequately address the needs and wants of the people.

Moushumi (2022) researched significant rituals and festivals in Africa, particularly in Indian communities whose central focus is to fight against deforestation activities. In his report, she stated that “from India to Kenya and the Colombian Amazon, communities are channeling age-old beliefs and traditions into conservation, using their cultural connection to nature to save carbon-absorbing forests and build livelihoods that rely on keeping trees alive. She further reported that In Lukaiya, India, an annual ritual has been performed for the past 20 years. In performing the ritual, people pledged to protect the forest from the axe and the saw. They claim that each of the trees in the village is seen as a member of the family that made up the community. Villagers dare anyone to cut down any of them. Once a tree is ritualized, in Jharkhand's Simdega district, India, its protection becomes the responsibility of all the villagers. Hence, if villagers spot any loggers, they surround the encroachers, seize their tools, and take them to the village head to face a penalty, usually a ban on using the water in local streams or grazing their cattle in village

pastures. The village head might then offer to lift the ban if the logger devotes some time to protecting the forest. The idea behind the festival was to create a sense of ownership and belonging towards the forests and to convert erstwhile tree fellers into tree protectors. Reporting on the festivals/ritual benefit to farmers, Moushumi (2022) further stated that the tree protection festival helped boost forest cover across communities (Jharkhand) in India between 2005 and 2020. Farmers who participated in the festival every year in Sukhdeo Prasad, for example, said "revitalising the local forest has led to the return of various plants and wildlife and helped feed nutrients back into the soil". Farmers can grow multiple crops throughout the year, including maize, rice, vegetables, and wheat. These festivals/rituals are therefore a crucial reform to the future of farming in some Indian communities. Forests have improved productivity in the fields of those villages hosting the festivals/rituals, thereby motivating the youth to stay and work in their village, rather than migrate out in search of work Moushumi concluded.

Edegborode Community and its Annual Festival

Okpe is one of the most populous cultural groups/ethnic nationalities in the Delta State of Nigeria. It populates the central senatorial district of Delta state, geopolitically called Delta Central (Benedict and Christine ND, p. 35). Okpe has over 23 communities with rivers and fast forest areas. This ethnic nationality inhabits the hinterland of the lower reaches of the Niger Delta, between longitude 50 301 and 600 251 East, and Latitude 60 and 50 151 North in what is known as Delta State of Nigeria for their neighbors they have Benin to the North, the Ijaw to the South, the Ukwuani (in Aboh Division) to the East and the Itsekeri to the West (Erivwo 1991, p2-3).

Edegborode is one of the several Okpe settlements in Sapele, Delta State, Nigeria. Edegborode's population consists of small-scale tradesmen, farmers, and fishermen. One unique characteristic of the community is that they celebrate a set of annual festivals, ranging from youth play to very complicated adult performance, which is celebrated every December 25th and a repeat performance on January 1st every year separately from all other Okpe general festivals (Kenneth Eni, 2011 p26). Other than that, they are exactly like all other Okpe people. The community is among the many communities in Sapele, Delta State that possess several water streams and vast forest area. In general, the Edegborode people celebrate the festival first, to give thanks to their ancestors for helping them to enter a new season or year, and second to educate the younger generation about the strength and frailties that have befall the community in the past.

Edegborode community-owned and celebrates the popular Edegborode festival in Okpe land. Two to three weeks before the festival day, several dancing and drumming ensembles are observed in the evenings. Most of the time, these rehearsals take place in the hallowed grooves. It is forbidden for non-initiates to take part in the rehearsal process. Every year, Thousands of people attend the event, including politicians, so extensive preparation is required in advance. For the performing group to put on a spectacular show, each member worked extremely hard during the rehearsal phase. The festival which brings in over 4,000 local tourists, provides some revenue for the neighborhood's traditional area and local development (Adjeketa, 2023). Most importantly, the celebration makes the Edegborode people stronger spiritually and more capable of Agricultural achievement in the upcoming year.

The festival was a time to give gratitude to God, the Almighty, and to appease the gods of the forest and water, as well as the ancestors or ancestral spirit. This event also gives residents the chance to see their family at least once a year when they travel home. Unresolved conflicts and miscommunications are resolved during these sessions. As a result, this fosters harmony and tranquility both inside the family unit and across the community. The event contributes to the dissemination, preservation, and global projection of Okpe culture. On this occasion, tourists are taught the local dances, music, drumming, and artwork.

The festival has three narratives. The first is the presentation of the fight for sustenance and life in the ocean between the Agbakara (a crocodile mask) and Oloda (a shark mask). The two water creatures got into a brawl after a particularly hard downpour. These aquatic beings must find food for their brood when the rain stops. However, the Agbakara masquerade chooses to eat the Oloda masquerade and his kids because there is not much food left in the sea for him and his family. The Oloda and his family can flee from the grip of the Agbakara by chance.

The skills granted to man by supernatural forces to create healing herbs and powerful charms to ward against bad forces are dramatized in the second half of the show through songs and dance. Man receives powerful charms to ward against evil energies from aquatic powers that cooperate with terrestrial forces. This aspect of the performance is jam-packed with music, drumming, and songs. The head priest pours libations to the gods and begs them to guide the performance to a successful conclusion as the masquerades emerge from the grooves. Reciting incantations, he dances around the performance area blowing the white local chalk. As part of the performance, the audience sings, and the masquerades to dazzle and amuse the crowd with their dance. Subsequently, the head priest and one of the masqueraders exhibit the effectiveness of traditional medicine. To gather medical leaves, the Obo enters the forest and asks the audience for bottles, which he then smashes on a mat. After the forest leaves are applied to his body, the chief priest sleeps on his belly on the broken bottle, and the masquerades leap on his back and dance wildly without hurting the chief priest.

Another narrative is dramatized in the evening. The story concerns how a wood spirit prevented an emigrant from cutting down his place of dwelling and punished the local villagers for giving a permit to the old man to cut down a community tree. In the narration, an old man enters the play at the beginning, pleading with the village elders to let him down a tree that is quite close to the town so he may use it to carve a boat for his fishing business. The outsider is not to be told by the elders that the feared fairy, 'Okuyaye,' resides on the mentioned tree. The elderly men in the community were given money, alcohol, and customary kola nuts before they allowed him to cut down the tree. He is brutalized by the fairy "Okuyaye" on his first try. When he tells the elders about his experience with Okuyaye, they reject his account and instruct him to proceed with cutting down the tree. He had the same outcome on his second and third efforts. Feeling frustrated, he returns to the elders and requests a reimbursement of his funds, only to be turned down and sent away. He curses the community before departing from the community. Later on, after Okuyaye gets angry and starts following and whipping the ladies of the village on their way to the farm, the old man's curse comes to pass. They leave the community in search of a new settlement when it becomes risky for them. The three-act drama is presented in conversation with traditional drumming and background music for the songs.

Edegborode Festival Performance in Forest Preservation and Cultural Revival

The land tenure system in Okpe is mostly family-based but in the case of Edegborode, and a few other villages in the kingdom, it is consolidated (Kenneth, 2023). Whatever the case, deforestation in the precolonial Okpe kingdom is exemplified in the Edegborode festival performance. Below, the paper examines the role of three (3) main personalities and their involvement in either encouraging and or abhorring deforestation in the land. These personalities are 1). the local elders, 2). the emigrant old man and 3), the Okuyaye forest spirit.

Certain forest trees are revered and used as frequent religious symbols in various African communities, much like in others, it is customary to wrap red or white fabric around the trunks of sacred trees (Andrew, 2013) that are located close to villages in Okpe. This indicates that a few of these trees are also used in religious rituals (Mbiti 1990, pp51, 73, 92). Several of these trees are big, old, and have been in existence for more than a century. These trees have significant differences from forest trees but are also used for timber. Like in other African communities, there are some forest woods believed to host supernatural beings in Okpe. Such trees include *Ohimi*, *Izuokpe*, *Uloho*, and *Ishakpa*. Spirits are believed to reside in these trees. Some of them make up the community's sacred grooves while others serve as forest-reserved trees. It is customary to offer water, leftover food on the day of the performance like dog or goat heads, and locally brewed gin (Ogogoro) for the spirits that dwelt in those trees that make up the community's sacred grooves (Andrew 2013). According to Andrew (2013, p. 3), it is impossible to separate the African people's cultural practices from their religious practices, which include incorporating forest trees. By caring for trees in the present, they help to memorialize the past and develop and preserve a cultural landscape for the populace. The Edegborode Festival features one such sacred forest tree which in its entirety is a representation of the forest trees in Okpe land.

Much like other trees in the forest, the tree presented in the festival is believed to be very ancient; in this instance, the personified spirit - *Okuyaye* residing within the tree is a benefactor to the entire town; the tree is looked after by a selected old man or *Obo* and his lineage. The Edegborode people use the name, *Obo*, to represent a traditional chief priest whose specialty is in the application of traditional medicine for healing. The *Obo* plays the same role as the *Dibia* among the Igbos and the *Babalawo* as it is popularly known among the Yoruba's (Adjeketa, 2023). But, by implication, the entire community whose ancestors founded the locality. Because their ancestors planted the tree, the family (community elders) is usually granted this position of protecting forest trees from foreign invaders. Africa is believed to be a spirit-filled world (Bona, 2017 p78). These spirits in one way or another affect the activities of human beings, animals, and plants" (Nnamdi, 2009 p28). Expressing the nature of spirit in the African cosmos, Bona Ikenna Ugwu, (2017) sitting Nnamdi Onuigbo (1975, p174) said that an African's existence is filled with everything and everywhere that involves the presence and activity of spirits. Spirits reside in farmlands, marketplaces, hills and mountains, bushes and woods, rivers and streams, crossroads, and homesteads. These locations are often governed by a ghost or group of spirits. Therefore, in African religion, spirits are everywhere; no part of the ground, no object, or any creature is without a spirit, or cannot have a spirit of its own. As a result, there are spirits of trees, or spirits that live inside trees. He added that in Africa, the idea that objects, people, and places are sacrosanct stems from the conviction that spirits occasionally occupy and possess them. These objects, or places

serve as both conduits for spiritual communication and means by which the spirits express themselves (Bona 2017, p79). Community elders in precolonial times take responsibility for every social economic and religious activity in the community. Much like many other communities in pre-colonial Africa, forests in Okpe land are controlled by village elders who are responsible for giving permits of occupancy both to indigents and emigrants. Occupant permits are usually given free to indigents but with a price to non-indigents. However, not all requested portions are given to non-indigents. But because of selfish gains, the Edegborode elders accept money, drinks, and kola nuts from the old man and permit him to go ahead to fall one of the forest trees. Their action correlated with previous studies (Larcom, et al 2006, Acemoglu 2001, Klopp 2012) that precolonial elders in local communities are responsible for the deforestation activity in Africa, which has led to poor traditional health care systems as a result of the non-availability of NTFP. The rural people (traditional doctors) who see the woodland as a kind of pharmacy where they collect herbs to treat different sicknesses have been thrown into a state of bankruptcy as the forest is being eroded by lodgers who got approval from community rulers.

Ancestral spirits in precolonial Africa are custodians of moral consciousness in the community. However, in many post-colonial African communities, ancestral spirits have become morally insolvent as a result of the fact that some moral problems such as stealing, incest, sorcery, witchcraft, killings, maiming, adultery, false oath, and lots of others have assumed dangerous and unprecedented dimension. These moral problems which are supposed to attract sanctions by the ancestors or spirit are allowed to soar and remain unchecked (Kobytoff, 1971, p.129). The case is different with the Okuyaye, the forest ancestral spirit of the Edegborode people who live in one of the trees. This prevented the old emigrants from cutting down their home forest tree and flogging any person who passed the forest to the farm. His actions prove that not all spirits especially forest ones are morally bankrupt in precolonial societies as insinuated by some scholars (Kobytoff, 1971). The Okuyaye ancestral spirit functioned to protect the Okpe-Edegborode forest from foreign invaders and pave the way for the villagers to utilize the forest sustainably as they celebrate their bond with the natural world.

Conclusion

The protection and conservation of African forests and their products have been greatly affected by deforestation activities, especially in local communities. This research showed that the exploitation of natural resources by colonial powers represented by village elders and illegal lodgers has caused deforestation, habitat destruction, and species extinction, in many African communities that have depended on forests for the source of their traditional medicines, livelihood, and cultural practices. The pace of deforestation activities in Africa is correlated with various institutional frameworks that oversee natural resources because there are insufficient or ineffective institutional checks and balances on the actions of local authorities. Government policies on deforestation have not also succeeded in the areas of forest preservation and conservation. Many communities especially, in India have engaged in festivals and rituals to combat deforestation activities.

While many African festivals revolve around planting and harvesting, involving the prayer of the gods for protection and abundant harvests for the particular season, the Edegborode

festival with the inclusion of forest spirits connects the necessity of preserving forests, forest wood, and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) for traditional medicinal purposes with the consequences of attempted deforestation. It is therefore impossible to overstate the importance of the Edeborode traditional celebration for community development.

Further, the festival elevates and reevaluates African culture and values, it gives credibility to their “relevance, established and sustained the authentic African identity” (Gabriel 2015 p97). In addition to entertaining, it fosters harmony and tranquility. Further, the festival's “deforestation component is important to today's global culture” (Ejikemeuwa 2022, p 79). Like other Traditional festivals, the Edeborode festival celebration is associated with their Traditional Religion (TR). Because of the strong ties between the Traditional Religion and the traditional festival, it is challenging for those who do not believe in African Traditional Religion (ATR) to accept the traditional festival celebration (Idolor 2024). Going forward, the festival preserves and upholds essential elements of Okpe culture, including drumming, dance, art, music, belief systems, values, conventions, and traditions. While it emphasizes the use of NTFPs in traditional medicine, importantly, it advocates for forest wood preservation through the intervention of forest spirits. In addition to safeguarding and preserving local cultures, the festival serves as a forum for communication with those who carry out deforestation activities in the locality. An avenue for traditional leaders and service providers in a forum to examine their actions regarding deforestation activities in the area and fervently advocate on behalf of the community to legislators, non-governmental groups, and governments on forest development policies that affect them.

The Edeborode festival is yet to get international recognition like its counterparts (Benjamin, 2012, Apenda, 2015, Hafeez, 2023). Like these established traditional festivals in Africa, local community leaders and elders including lawmakers in Nigeria could use the festival platforms to not only improve the transmission of morals values, and belief systems to tourists and to pass on folklore to the younger generations but also to set a standard against deforestation and its implication on the eco-system.

The Way Forward

Certain traditional festival events throughout Africa and beyond should be planned to include environmental conservation and reforestation as part of its central subject. The results of such a prearranged event would ultimately conclude in action plans that would allocate tasks and obligations to different community stakeholders as well as those beyond to save the natural forests and by extension the ecosystem. If these festivals are intentionally prepared for their celebration with such specific action plans after the celebrations, the events might surpass their traditional duties.

A forum that includes members of the community, traditional authority, youth, government officials, politicians, and non-governmental organizations should be incorporated into traditional festivals across Africa to discuss the need to preserve the natural forest for environmental preservation. This might take the shape of campaigns, community action planning, the management of development and deforestation-related concerns during the year, and an

action plan for the upcoming year which may require volunteers to work with forest guards to patrol for loggers. Elders and young people in each community would take advantage of the chance to re-evaluate their support for unauthorized lodgers and to set up a resolution for the upcoming year. The productiveness of such an action plan would be in restoring forests, improving soil, boosting biodiversity and local income as well as gaining additional hectares of forest cover.

Similar indigenous performances must be supported by the government in order to inspire citizens to take up conservation on their own. When the government fails, locals should turn to the use of traditional methods, such as festival performances and rituals, to preserve trees, revitalize the nearby forest, and deter strays from trespassing into the village in search of food.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding Disclosure

No funding was received for this research.

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