

## The Role of Customs and Taboos in the Conservation of Agogo Pond in Chito Stream in Ukum Local Government Area of Benue state

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### ABSTRACT

The study investigated the roles of custom and belief practices used in the conservation of Agogo pond in Chito stream in Ukum Local Government Area of Benue state, Nigeria. Purposive sampling technique was employed in the selection of six villages. From each of the selected villages, 9 households were randomly selected. In each household, two members (a male and a female) were selected based on their willingness to interact with the researcher. Data for the study was collected using semi-structured questionnaire. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data. The result of the study revealed that 51.9% were male; the average age of the respondents was 45.98±19.775; majority 64.8% of the respondents were farmers while 36.1% had non-formal education. The pond is the major source of water to the community; it is also the source of fishing, source of spiritual function, as well as medicine. The major taboo about the pond is the believe of the presence of spirits in the pond. Six rules were made towards the use of the pond, which are water from the Pond should only be fetched with calabash; no objects should be thrown into the Pond; women on their menstrual period should not use the pond; foot wear should not be used while fetching water from the Pond; no bathing inside the Pond and no illegal fishing in the pond. Violation of these rules attracts 6 sanctions, among which as; beating by spirits, starvation, sting by bees, dumbness for days, swelling of the body, punishment by community. Christianity and modernization have no effect on the beliefs system of the people of the area as they still keep faith in their belief and customs in conserving and protecting the pond to continue to supply water to the community. Age ( $\beta=0.81$  with odds ratio Exp ( $\beta$ ) of 1.084) and period of residence ( $\beta=1.420$  with odds ratio Exp ( $\beta$ ) of .242.) had non-significant positive influence on respondent's perceived knowledge about the rules governing the use of the pond. Education had non-significant negative influence on respondent's perceived knowledge about the rules governing the use of the pond ( $\beta=-1.441$  with odds ratio Exp ( $\beta$ ) of 4.223).

**Key words:** Pond, belief, restrictions, sanctions, customs

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### INTRODUCTION

Almost every traditional setting or community has what they hold sacred either as a place for the presence of their god(s). Ogunjinmi *et al.* (2009) submitted that in African societies there abound various socio-cultural factors, religious beliefs, taboos and norms regulating the consumption and utilization of natural resources. The records about the role of traditional beliefs in the conservation of natural resources abound and date back to creation (Berkes *et al.*, 2000; Turner *et al.*, 2000; Shastri *et al.*, 2002). Traditional conservation ethics are capable of protecting natural resources as long as the local communities have a stake in it. According to Rim-Ruke *et al.* (2013), the traditional belief system holds the ascription of supernatural powers to objects called gods and goddesses in Nigeria. The major tenet of African traditional religion and belief system lies in the believe that the abode of the gods and goddesses are located in rock, streams, pond,

trees, land or anywhere within the community (Rim-Ruke *et al.*, 2013). The gods vent their anger on whoever defiled such places; hence, the cultural system holds all the precepts of the laws of the gods to a very high esteem (Shastri *et al.*, 2002). The taboos and beliefs have legal backing in the rules and institutions of the communities which are strong enough to make people obey the religious and cultural regulations (Venkataraman, 2000). The role of traditional beliefs in the protection of natural resources is reflected in a variety of practices including sacred groves and sacred landscapes. For instance, in Cross River state there is hardly any community without a sacred groove, evil forest, sacred pond, evil stream, or forbidden forest where some parts of the environment are delineated for the worship of the gods (Eneji *et al.*, 2009). Among the Tiv people of Benue state, there is hardly any community without traditional beliefs. Dagba *et al.* (2013) reported 18

totems which included animal, plants and shrines/deities among the Tiv people of Benue state Nigeria.

In emphasizing the value of traditional African cultural practices in natural resources management, Kideghesho (2009) stressed that though traditional beliefs were previously regarded as inferior or incompetent, they are now receiving global recognition as an important complement to existing conservation strategies. He further submitted that this recognition, however, is still inadequate within official conservation policies.

It is worthy therefore to note that some of the remaining natural forest areas and water sources in Nigeria are being conserved consciously or unconsciously through the role of customs and beliefs; which should be improved by educating the people on the importance of conserving these resources. In order to achieve this; there is need for adequate information on traditional knowledge-based system of conservation and practices. This study investigated the roles of custom and belief practices used in the conservation of Agogo pond in Chito stream in Ukum Local Government Area of Benue state; Nigeria.

## METHODOLOGY

### The Study Area

Agogo natural pond is located on Chito stream near Chito village in Ukum LGA of Benue state. The local government is located between longitude 09°37' and 09°45' East and latitude 07°33' and 07°41' North. According to 2006 National Population Census the Ukum LGA has a population of 216,930; out of which 108,226 are male while 108,704 are female (NPC, 2006). Ukum LGA is made up of 13 council wards. The LGA shares boundaries Eastward with Wukari LGA of Taraba State, South-East and South-West with Katsina-Ala and Logo LGAs of Benue State.

Ukum LGA is inhabited predominantly by the Tiv people with few Ibos and Hausas. The people of Ukum are mostly Christians with few practising African traditional religion (ATR). The people are predominantly farmers, some of the crops grown in the area include yams, guinea-corn, soya beans, groundnut, bambara nut, cassava, sweet potatoes, beniseed, ginger, pepper, orange and mango (Ikyaagba *et al.*, 2014).

The LGA is situated in the Guinea Savanna ecosystem of Nigeria, which is characterized by scattered trees of medium height, tall grasses and shrubs of different species. Tree species predominantly found in the area include, *Daniellia oliveri*, *Vitex doniana*, *Azizelia africana*, *Prosopis africana*, *Vitellaria paradoxa*, *Khaya senegalensis* and *Parkia biglobosa*. The area experience tropical climate with two (2) distinct seasons; the wet and dry season. The wet season starts from April to October while the dry season starts from November to March. Annual rainfall ranges

from 1,200 to 1,500 mm. The temperature is generally high and ranges from 22 to 30°C (Ikyaagba *et al.*, 2014).

### Data collection and analysis

All the villages close to the pond were covered in this study. Purposive sampling technique was employed for the selection of six villages; Agogo, Gwanger, Chito, Hur, Ishangesha and Korpenda. From each of the selected village, 9 households were randomly selected. In each household two members were selected based on their willingness to interact with the researcher. Data for the study was collected using semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was validated through a pre-test. The validated questionnaire was reproduced and administered to 108 respondents selected for the study. In each of the selected household; respondents were selected and questionnaire were administered on them to elicit information on the role of customs and taboos in the conservation of Agogo pond. Conservation features and other available information were identified through personal observation with guidance from the community leaders; household heads and families.

The questionnaire had a combination of closed- and open-ended questions regarding background information (age, period of residence, gender, level of education, religion, occupation and marital status). Questions were also asked on the use of the pond, rules guiding the use of the pond, belief about the pond, enforcement of the rules and sanctions. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 17.0) was used for the quantitative data analysis. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, mean and percentages were used to describe the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents and other variables. Inferential statistics was done using Binary logistic regression to analyse binary dependent variables. Mann-Whitney U test was used to test for the significant difference between male and female knowledge about the pond.

## RESULTS

### Demographic characteristics of the respondents

The results of the study revealed that 51.9% were male while 48.1% were female. A good percentage of the respondents (53.7%) were above 41 years while 46.3% were 40 years and below, the average age of the respondents was 45.98±19.775 years. Table 1 also revealed that 36.1% of the respondents had no formal education while 65.4% of the respondents had one form of formal education or the other. The major occupation of the respondents was farming (64.6%), only 0.9% of the respondents indicated that they were hunters.

**Table 1:** Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Freq	%
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	56	51.9
Female	52	48.1
<b>Age group</b>		
1-20yrs	5	4.6
21-40yrs	45	41.7
41-60yrs	36	33.3
61-80yrs	14	13
81 above years	8	7.4
Mean year	45.98±19.775	
<b>Period of residences</b>		
1-20	5	4.6
21-40	45	41.7
41-60	36	33.3
61-80	14	13
81 above	8	7.4
<b>Education</b>		
Informal	39	36.1
Primary	29	26.9
Secondary	34	31.5
Tertiary	6	5.6
<b>Occupation</b>		
Civil servant	3	2.8
Farming	62	64.8
Hunting	1	0.9
Trading	16	14.8
Others	18	16.7

**Uses of Agogo Pond**

According to the results of the study presented in Table 2, 62% of the respondents agreed that they make use of the Pond, while 38% do not make use of the Pond. Mann-Whitney U-test showed no significant difference at (p>0.05) between the male and female in the use of the pond. The result of the study also revealed that 97.20% of the respondents agreed that there is no discrimination in the use of the Pond, everybody irrespective of tribe, age, sex or religion is free to use the Pond while 5.0% of the respondents held contrary views but could not state those prevented from using the Pond.

**Table 2:** Uses of the Pond

Variable	Yes		No		df	H-test	P-value
	Freq	%	Freq	%			
Do you make use of the Pond?	67	62	41	38	1	1200.00	0.85
Is everybody allowed to make use of the Pond?	105	97.2	3	2.8			
Do you fish in the pond?	51	49	53	51	1	1139.5	0.496
Is there any special rule guiding fishing in the Pond?	85	78.7	23	21.3		1153.5	0.558

On the use of the Pond for fishing, only 49% of the respondents agreed that they fish in the Pond while 51% say they do not fish in the Pond. However, there was no significant difference (p>0.05) between fishing in the pond by the male and female gender. Although some of the respondents opined that they do not fish in the Pond, majority (78.7%) of the respondents stated that fishing in the Pond is guided by special rules. Mann-Whitney U-test showed no significant difference between male and female response. Five uses of the pond were listed by respondents who admitted to be making use of the pond (Figure 1). A good number (45%) of the respondents believed that the pond is only useful to them as a source of water, 22% believed that the pond is useful to them in so many areas.

**Taboos and rules governing the use of the Pond**

Majority 88.9% of the respondents agreed that the Pond has special taboos attached to it, 7.1% of the respondents were of the opinion that there is no taboo attached to the Pond, while 4.0% had no comment about the issue (Table 3). There was no significant difference between male and female opinion about taboos attached to the Pond P < 0.05. About 73% of the respondents believe that the Pond housed spirit as well as some unusual animals and fish. Some also believe that water from the Pond can cure disease (Figure 2).

The result of this study as shown in Table 3, revealed that 92.9% of the respondents stated that there are rules governing the use of the Pond. There was no significant difference (p>0.05) between male and female opinion about the rules governing the use of the Pond. Six rules governing the use of the Pond as stated by the respondents in all the six communities includes; fetching water from the Pond should only with calabash; no object should be thrown into the Pond; women should not use the pond during their menstrual period; foot wear should be worn while fetching water from the Pond; bath should not be inside the Pond and illegal fishing should not be undertaken in the pond. Violation of these rules attracts sanctions. The six (6) sanctions mentioned by respondents were beating by spirit, starvation for days, sting by bees, dumbness for days, body swellings and punishment by the community (Table 4).

**Table 3:** Taboo and rules governing the use of the Pond

Variables	Yes		No		No comment		df	H-test	p- value
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%			
Is there special taboo attached to the Pond?	88	88.9	7	7.1	4	4	1	1192	0.681
Are there rules governing the use of the Pond?	92	92.9	4	4	3	3.1	1	1155	0.263

Majority of the respondents (72.2%) were of the opinion that enforcement of rules governing the use of the Pond is through the combined efforts of the community and the spirit believed to live inside the Pond. About 19.4% of the respondents stated that enforcement of the rules on the use of the pond is by community while 8.4% had no comment about the issue (Table 5).

**Table 4:** Rules on the use of Agogo pond and sanctions against violation

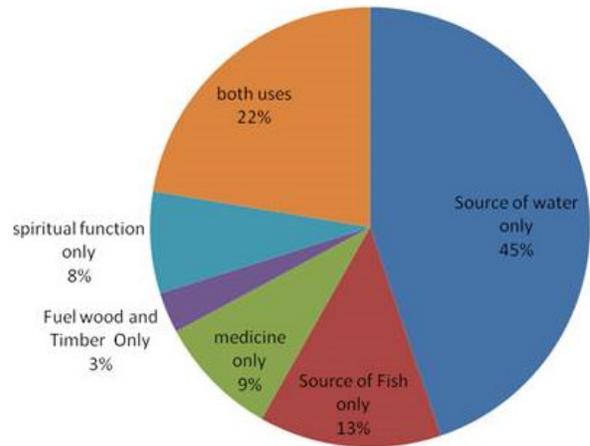
Rules	Sanctions
Fetching of water in the pond with only calabash	beating by spirit
No illegal fishing in the pond	Starvation
No woman on menstruation will fetch water in the pond	sting by bees
removal of foot wear before use of the pond	did not talk for days
No throwing of stone in the pond	body swell up
No bathing in the pond	punish by community

**Table 5:** Enforcement of the rules governing the use of the Pond

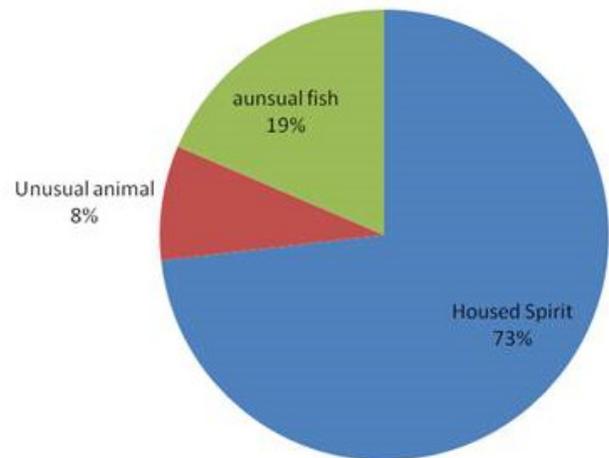
Variables	Freq	%
Who enforces rules governing the use of the Pond?		
Community	19	19.4
Community and spirit	71	72.2
No comment	9	8.4

**Table 6:** Beliefs about the Pond

Variables	Yes		No	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
Do people still believe in the taboos about the Pond?	91	84.3	17	15.7
Do traditional beliefs and customs help to conserve the pond?	91	84.3	17	15.7



**Figure 1:** Various uses of Agogo pond



**Figure 2:** Belief about Agogo Pond

Majority of the respondents (84.3%) reported that people in this area still believe the taboos and keep all the rules governing the use of the Pond, 15.7% stated that the people no longer believe the taboo about the Pond. On traditional beliefs and customs as agents of conservation of the pond, majority (84.3%) of the respondents agreed that the

**Table 7:** Perceived factors influencing respondents' knowledge about the taboo surrounding Agogo Pond

Variables	$\beta$	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.	Exp( $\beta$ )
Age	0.081	0.074	1.197	1	0.274	1.084
Education	-1.441	0.591	5.939	1	0.015	4.223
Period of residence	1.42	1.423	0.995	1	0.318	0.242
Constant	-6.105	2.422	6.352	1	0.012	0.002

observance of traditions and customs can help, 15.7% were of contrary opinion (Table 6).

### Factors influencing respondents perceived knowledge about the taboo surrounding Agogo Pond

The results presented in Table 7 showed that all Wald statistics were non-zero values, which implied that there was interaction (i.e. relationship) between the dependent (Perceived taboo of Agogo Pond) and independent variables. Age of the respondents had a non-significant positive ( $p>0.05$ ) influence on the respondents' perception rules and taboos governing the use of Agogo pond. The regression coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of 0.081 with odds ratio Exp ( $\beta$ ) of 1.084 indicated that a unit increase in age will lead to an increase in the likelihood of perceiving the taboo by a factor of 1.084.

Years spent for formal education had non-significant negative influence on respondents' perceived taboo surrounding the Pond. The ( $\beta$ ) coefficient was -1.441 with odds ratio Exp ( $\beta$ ) of 4.223 indicating that increase in the years of education will lead to a decrease in likelihood of the Perceived taboo in the study area by a factor of 4.223.

Duration of residence in the area had a non-significant positive regression coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of 1.420 with odds ratio Exp ( $\beta$ ) of 0.242. This indicates that the chance of perception of values of forest resources will increase by a factor of 0.242 for a unit increase in the period of stay in the area. In other words, increase in the number of years of residence of the respondents in the study area increases the likelihood of the Perceived taboo in the area

## DISCUSSION

### Uses of Agogo Pond

Agogo pond is a major source of water to the surrounding communities of Agogo, Gwanger, Chito, Hur, Ishangesha and Korpenda which was demonstrated by high number of uses the pond is put into and the high proportion of respondents who make use of it. This underscores the importance of water bodies like natural pond, stream, spring, natural wells and rivers to the rural communities in Nigeria. Similar situation was reported in Okorobi village in Ethiopie East Local Government Area of Delta State where the popular *Obi* Lake was the main source of water

for drinking and domestic purposes in the community (Rim-Ruke *et al.*, 2013). Anoliefo *et al.* (2015) also reported the value of stream to rural people of Uli, Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State Nigeria. Oduma-Aboh (2015) reported a similar situation among Igumale people in Ado Local Government Area of Benue Sate, Nigeria.

### Taboo surrounding Agogo Pond

The belief that strange spirits are present in Agogo pond is in consonance with the statement of Rim-Rukeh *et al.* (2013) that gods and goddesses live in rock, streams, pond, trees, land or anywhere they so desire to live within the community. This belief is a major instrument used for the conservation and maintenance of the pond as nobody is ready to be punished, especially by spirits. This result is also in agreement with the statement of Dagba *et al.* (2013) that traditional belief and taboos exist in every community of Tiv people and this can be effectively harnessed for natural resources conservation. Shastri *et al.* (2002) stressed that Traditional African societies obey environmental ethics that help in regulating their interactions with the natural environment. It is clear that this traditional belief system remains the only major factor guiding the people's conduct towards the use of the Agogo pond and sustained it to this time. This agrees with the submission by Diawuo (2015) who reported that traditional belief systems are capable of protecting and improving the natural environment in many rural communities provided the local communities have interest in the resources in such environment.

### Rules, Enforcement and sanctions

There is no traditional belief system, such as taboo and totem without sanction for violation. Diawuo (2015) argued that the issues of restrictions or prohibitions on the use of natural resources and sanction for violation was initiated by God in Genesis. The rules governing the use of the pond in the study area are similar to the one reported in Ase village in Ndokwa East Local Government Area and Okorobi village in Ethiopie East Local Government Area both of Delta State (Rim-Ruke *et al.* 2013). In Ghana, Diawuo (2015) reported several restrictions or prohibitions based on traditional belief in natural resources use. Violations of the rules governing the use of Agogo pond are not without

sanctions, these sanctions guide people's conducts in the use of the pond. Nobody is willing to be punished by spirits hence strict observation of the rules by the rural people. Kideghesho (2008) argued that the reason behind the success of traditional belief systems in conservation is the belief that non-compliance with regulations or taboos governing sacred species or sites amounts to catastrophes such as disease outbreaks, death, severe drought, pests or loss of assets. Similar situation was reported in Ase village in Ndokwa East Local Government Area and Okorobi village in Ethiope East Local Government Area both in Delta State (Rim-Ruke *et al.*, 2013). As reported by Diawuo (2015), no matter the reason for such practices, one certain thing is that the water resource in the community is conserved.

### **Current state of belief about the Pond**

Scientists (Appiah-Opoku, 2007; Eneji, *et al.*, 2012; Diawuo, 2015) believe that Christianity and modernization have great influence on traditional belief systems in Africa. They believe that Christianity and modernization have diminished the significant role(s) played by the traditional beliefs in natural resource conservation, management and community development. Modernization sees African Traditional Religion (ATR) belief systems, worship and practices as rather inimical to the growth, unity, peace and cohesion of communities (Appiah-Opoku, 2007). The results of this study revealed that people of the study area still keep faith in these beliefs and customs in conserving and protecting the pond to continue to supply water to the community, even though many of them were educated Christians. This is an indication that there is still hope for the role of traditional beliefs in management of natural resources in Africa. This agrees with submission of Kideghesho (2009) that traditional African belief systems once considered to be inferior or incompetent, are being given recognition as important complements of existing conservation strategies.

### **Factors influencing respondents perceived knowledge about the taboos surrounding the Pond**

The socio-economic status of local community is known to have significant influence on the types of activities they are engaged in, as well as the impact on different types of interactions toward their natural resources (Schwartz and Caro, 2003; Al-Subaiee, 2016). It is evident from the results of this study that the socio-economic variables of the respondents such as: age, length of residence and education had positive association with respondents' knowledge about rules governing the pond. This agrees with the conclusion that indigenous knowledge of natural resources in a community varies according to individual attributes of age, education, gender, ethnicity, social and economic status, roles and responsibilities in the home and community, profession, aptitude and intellectual ability,

and control over natural resources (Grenier, 1998; Holt, 2005).

It was also evident from this study that most of the educated people were youths with little knowledge about the uses of the pond. This explains the negative regression coefficient for education, as their education did not translate into knowledge about the pond. This agrees with the submission by Appiah-Opoku (2007) that modernization sees traditional belief systems, worship and practices as rather inimical to the growth, unity, peace and cohesion of communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study was able to demonstrate that traditional beliefs and customs are still very vital in the conservation of natural resources in rural African society. It also showed that Agogo natural pond is of great value to the people of the community, it has so many uses to which the people put pond to. The study established that the pond has rules and sanctions which regulate its use. As much as possible, the people the rules are kept by the people because of the belief that the pond harbours spirit and nobody is ready to face the wrath of the spirit. This is vital instrument used in the maintenance of the pond over the years. The belief that modernization has eroded the position of traditional beliefs in the conservation of natural resource was proven otherwise. As people of the area still keep faith in these beliefs and taboos in conserving and protecting the pond to continue to supply water to the community, even though many of them in respective of the religion and education back ground. Further researches are required to documents many of such beliefs in other communities in order to harness their potentials in the conservation of natural resources.

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