

TRADITIONAL CONSERVATION PRACTICES: GHANA'S EXAMPLE

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Abstract

*The African traditional concept of land ownership as expressed by Dr. J.B. Danquah (1968) enjoins the living to manage and conserve the environment for future generations, while they have to account for their stewardship to the ancestors. This concept shaped our perception of the environment. Thus the African, through his relationship with nature, usually clothed in religion and which resulted in reverent attitudes towards nature, helped him to develop a body of knowledge which eventually made him the caretaker of his environment. Responding positively to the dictates of nature, he regarded the Earth (Asase) as 'Mother' (Asase Yaa/Efua), the provider and sustainer of life. Man, therefore, offered prayers before cultivation and celebrated 'harvest festivals' such as Homowo (Ga), Ohum (Abuakwa) and Odwira (Akuapem) to commemorate the generosity of Mother Earth. In order to allow the earth to continuously play its motherhood role and to enhance the biodiversity, man developed a body of laws and regulations known as taboos to regulate his relationship with his environment. Furthermore, he developed farming systems and fashioned farm tools, which helped him to sustain the biodiversity. However, the introduction of market economy in Africa through cash crop farming, Christianity and Western education, unleashed an unprecedented assault on the environment, which resulted in the degradation of the environment. Sub-Saharan Africa is a living testimony of a degraded biodiversity. Meanwhile, the African population seems to be caught up in the drama of things, as they do not seem to have adequate alternatives available to them for the enhancement of the biodiversity. Imposition of legislation to enhance the biodiversity is likely to worsen the predicament of the people. Therefore, contemporary biodiversity*

*conservation needs to take into account alternative economic activities, which will relieve the land from the constant pressure it is being subjected today.*

## **Introduction**

Environmental degradation has been a major concern to mankind, especially during the last quarter of the twentieth century; which culminated in the Rio Conference on the Environment in 1992. The Beijing Conference for women in 1995 articulated the same concern on the environment. Locally, there have been several fora on the environment. In all these cases, the fora have expressed concern on the accelerated degradation of the environment and the need to conserve the environment for sustainable economic development aimed at the survival of mankind in the biosphere.

The environment as the home for man provides a number of services. Out of these services, four major ones shall be identified for our discussion.

- 1) There are the extractive resources for the production of consumer goods and services: They include all activities geared towards production, which often lead to the degradation of the environment; for example, farming activities and the exploitation of mineral resources.
- 2) Natural amenities for recreational use: such as waterfalls, lakes etc.
- 3) Space to live in, where man has created settlements, ranging from hamlets to megacities
- 4) Space for wastes, provided by man.

These services which man exploits for his existence end up creating environmental hazards for man himself. It is said that the blind march for science and technology has been responsible for most of the environmental problems. Even in non-industrialized countries such as Ghana, man's bid to make a reasonable living has resulted in the creation of environmental hazards. For example, in order to feed the population, farmers have succeeded in disturbing, permanently, the biodiversity. Farmers are aware of this disturbance (Abayie Boateng 1996).

One aspect of human existence, which continues to cause so much damage to the environment, especially in developing countries including Ghana, is population growth. As human numbers increase, there arises the need to employ more resources to feed, clothe and provide them with infrastructure such as human settlements, roads, farms and factories. In the countryside, large human numbers have resulted in the degradation of the forest environment: thus forests have given way to secondary and degraded forests, then to savannas and finally to Sahelian conditions. Today, man's awareness of these environmental changes has resulted in our planning strategies which do not only seek to concentrate attention on the socio-economic benefit of projects, but also seriously consider the effects such projects may have on the environment. In this way we see the relevance of the environmental Protection Agency and the environmental impact assessment (EIA).

## Why Do We Have To Worry About the Environment

We have seen how the environment is being degraded leading to the destruction of the biodiversity. This makes the above question quite relevant. For one reason, the environment does not belong to the present generation alone. The environment is a legacy which the living, that is, the present generation, is enjoined to leave for posterity better than it was found. Danquah (1968) wrote:

*Thus in our culture we do not only hold in trust for the present and the future generations all the natural resources on which our welfare and continuance of the community depend, but also are accountable to the ancestors for the proper management of the resources (p. 120).*

It is reported that the late Okyenhene, Nana Ofori Atta I also said:

*I conceive of land as belonging to a large family of which many are dead, a few are living and countless ones are yet unborn (p. 99).*

This very statement is also credited to a Nigerian Traditional Leader (Elias, 1956).

The import of these statements is not only the land tenure system which appears uniform in Africa, but more importantly the concern for the proper management and the conservation of the environment and the resources contained therein. The philosophy, which these statements postulate, underpins our quest to conserve the environment.

At the Rio-Summit in 1992, the Secretary General of UN, Boutros-Ghali expressed the same idea as Danquah:

*What we do here, we do for our grand children and beyond for future generation.*

The Beijing Conference (1995) recorded the concerns, which have been expressed earlier on. Part of paragraph 246 states:

*.... Awareness of resource depletion, the degradation of natural systems and the dangers of polluting substances have increased markedly in the past decade. These worsening conditions are destroying fragile eco-systems and displacing communities, especially women, from productive activities and are an increasing threat to a safe and healthy environment... the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of*

*consumption and production....*

The Statement continues in paragraph 248:

*Governments have expressed their commitment to creating a new development paradigm that integrates environmental sustainability with gender equality within and between generations.*

Now we have a fundamental obligation to ensure that the environment bequeathed to us must be left in a better shape than we met it. Perhaps on the day of judgement one may have to account for one's stewardship in the management of the environment.

**The Place of the Earth in African Tradition**

In the African cultures God is regarded as the creator *Oboadee* (Danquah 1968; Rattray 1923; Busia 1951, 1954) while the *Earth* is referred to as *Mother, Asase Yaa/Asase Efua*, the provider and the giver of life. The sustainer of human life. Indeed, the Earth has a spiritual power. It is her spirit that makes plants grow; besides, she has the power of fertility. Man's dependence on the Earth is preserved in the poetry of the drum language as Busia (1954) recorded:

*Earth condolences!  
Earth, condolences!  
Earth and dust,  
The Dependable One,  
I lean upon you.  
Earth, when I am about to die,  
I lean upon you.  
Earth, while I am alive,  
I depend upon you etc. (p. 195).*

Men's dependence on the Earth is further actualized during libation prayers. Thus in all libation prayers the *Earth* is mentioned next after God, the Creator.

*Oh God the Creator,  
I show you a drink.  
Earth Yaa take a drink,  
Let me avoid all accidents ... etc.*

So goes a libation prayer before a farmer cultivates any piece of land. These libation prayers were the result of the realization of man's close relationship with nature. This relationship with nature was clothed in religion, which tried to guide man's behaviour in his environment. Furthermore, it resulted in man's reverent attitudes towards nature. A farmer portrays

this attitude through the following libation prayer:

*It is now farming season  
I am going to start weeding after which planting.  
Please let me have bountiful harvest this season.  
Protect me and my labourers from cutlass wounds.  
Let me be at peace any time I am here.  
This is your drink ooo! (Nana Abayie Boateng – through observations)*

Unfortunately, people trained in western ways of life have misunderstood the African and his way of life and have described these attitudes in derogatory terms such as ignorance and superstition. Today, however, there is the realization that these beliefs rather implied knowledge that human beings are caretakers of nature, whose very existence depended on the maintenance of what Opoku (1978), calls "cosmic harmony with nature." Nature needed to be safeguarded if the people are to continually live and enjoy its benefits, through the utilization of its resources. It is precisely for this reason that the African regarded the earth as Mother and therefore, should not be prostituted. Therefore, in order to safeguard the sanctity of the earth and the phenomena in it, man instituted laws and regulations.

#### Traditional Conservation Methods

The laws and regulations which man instituted were aimed at allowing the Earth to continuously play its *motherhood* role and to enhance the biodiversity. The body of laws and regulations are known as taboos. Each locality, or community or traditional area had its own sets of taboos. It is possible to assemble the most common taboos:

- i) Taboos on economic trees such as *Odum* (*Chlorophora excelsa*) and *Africa Mahogany* (*Kyaya ivorensis*) were regarded as trees with spirits and which should, therefore not be felled without some rituals being performed.

Busia wrote:

*An Ashanti craftsman will endeavour to propitiate certain trees before he cuts them. He will offer an egg, for example, to the Odum tree, saying, "I am about to cut you down and carve you; do not let me suffer harm" (p. 194).*

Through this taboo these economic trees were preserved. Some of the trees which fell into this category were tall palm trees (*Betene- Elaeis guineensis*) (*Osese – Funtumia sp.*) (for carving stools). Also the Shea Butter (*Butyrospermum parkii*) and the Dodowa (*Sterculia tragacantha*) trees, in the Northern Savanna zone. There were other trees which were not regarded as economic trees but had other relevance for environmental purposes such as *Akandodie* (*Bombax buonopozense*) and *Onyina* (*Celba pentandra*) trees in the forested

areas and the *Baobab (Adansonia digitata)* in the Savanna zone.

Among some northern ethnic groups, such as the Dagomba and the Mamprusi, there are chieftains in charge of the economic trees to ensure that the trees are not cut or destroyed, in any way.

- ii) Days of Rest known as taboo-days during which the land was expected to rest. People had to obey this taboo since such days had been regarded as *Nnabome*, "bad days" (Abayie Boaten 1993, p. 46). Each locality had its day of rest. The belief was that the spirit of the earth should be allowed to rest. In the same way some rivers/streams had specific days during which people should not fetch water from them.
- iii) There was a taboo against the clearing of the vegetation right up to the edges of streams and rivers. Farmers were enjoined to leave a strip of land of *Abasafa aduasa*, that is "about 30 metres", which should not be cleared at both sides of streams and rivers. The benefit of this conservation method was quite obvious to any environmentalists. The people were aware that this could check excessive evaporation from the rivers and streams.
- iv) The coastal ethnic groups also had their taboo days during which there was to be no fishing. The day set aside was Tuesday, the day the sea god, *Nana Bosompo* was expected to rest.
- v) In addition to this was a long period during which no fishing was expected to be done in the lagoons. This resting period coincided with the period when the fishes in the lagoons lay their eggs. Such knowledge about the seasons in which were hedged in the various taboos was a well-known phenomenon among the indigenous peoples (Abayie Boaten 1990, pp. 21 – 27).

Apart from the apparent fear, which these taboos instilled in the people due to the question of spirits, there were also physical sanctions attached to them. Since the sanctions had to ensure the propitiation of the spirit(s) involved, they called for the spilling of blood. Therefore, the culprit who infringed any of the taboos had to offer a sheep plus two bottles of schnapps. The charge was deterrent enough to scare people from infringing or breaking the taboos. In addition to this, the people were convinced of the sanctity of the taboos, therefore, they did not deliberately break them.

- vi) Farming system – perhaps the best-known conservation method, which the traditionalists practised, was the bush fallow system. This system allowed a cultivated piece of land to rest for a period long enough for the recuperation of the fertility of the soil. This practice was consistent with the Biblical injunction which states that,

"In the 7<sup>th</sup> year there should be Sabbath of solemn for the land" (Leviticus Chapter 25: 4).

The people were convinced of the efficacy of this agro-practice. It has, therefore, persisted till today. However, they have now realized that the practice is efficient only when the population is low. Today, as a result of much pressure on the land, the bush fallow system is no longer efficient. A reasonable fallow period of ten years is now reduced to between three to five years in low populated and less than three years in high-populated localities, thus leading to poor yields and the breakdown of the biodiversity.

A study of the Boti Falls area in the Eastern Region came out with a painful truth of deteriorating biodiversity as a result of long pressure on the land (Abayie Boaten I, 1996).

*The general knowledge about the area is that due to a long period of pressure on the environment as a result of high population growth, the biodiversity is broken down. This has adversely affected the natural phenomenon of the Falls, which now stop flowing during the dry season. Some of the old fellows of the areas remember that about forty years ago the Falls used to flow throughout the year. They are aware that the present situation is due mainly to their own system of making a living from the environment.*

- vii) Farm implements – the type of tools which the traditional farmers fashioned and used reflected both the level of their technology and their perception of the environment. The hoe, the cutlass and the dibble stick, which dominated the agricultural landscape, were quite suitable for the fragile tropical soils. Indeed, the use of these simple tools coupled with the low population contributed to sustaining the fertility and conserving the biodiversity.
- viii) Sacred Groves – these are pieces of land set aside for spiritual purposes. They ranged from a few metres to several acres in sizes. These groves are reputed to be the abodes of some respected traditional spirits. The groves had existed over the years because of taboos associated with them. Often people were forbidden to enter the groves, except when there was a ritual to be performed. Unfortunately, many of these groves have been encroached upon because, the fear which used to be associated with them, does not seem to operate now. Today, it is only the human element of traditional sanctions that is sustaining the rest of the groves. The spiritual sanctions in most cases do not operate due to the new social order which colonialism, western education and Christianity ushered into this country. Nevertheless, the remaining sacred groves serve as botanical museums from which a lot can be learned about the original biodiversity of our countryside.

## **The Environment in the New Social Order**

The introduction of the triumvirate of Colonialism, Western Education and Christianity made a great impact on the environment. Colonialism established a sustainable social order in which a sustained population growth was the result. It also introduced commercial agriculture, which departed from the former subsistence economy. Formal Western Education contributed to a new technological awareness, which equipped the people to effectively exploit the resources in the environment. Lastly, Christianity dealt a deadly blow to the traditional beliefs. The combined forces of these three alien phenomena unleashed an unprecedented assault on the environment, resulting in the degradation of the country's environment.

Over the past forty years the environment has changed so much that both flora and fauna, indeed the ecosystem, have been adversely affected. The fragile tropical soils have been further degraded leading to poor yields of crops. This problem is being compounded by the indiscriminate use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides for the production of commercial food crops and vegetables. In addition to the agro-chemical, the use of heavy-duty tractors for plowing further destroys the fertility of the soils. A typical example is the **Yaa Asantewaa State Farm** near Ejisu in Asante where the tropical moist semi-deciduous forest was turned into savanna vegetation, which is seen today.

The Ghanaian farmer, like his counterpart in the sub-region, is aware that things are not the same as they used to be. He is aware of the changing pattern of the rainfall regime. He knows that the low rainfall is partly due to the poor vegetation. Meanwhile, he seems to be caught up in the entire drama, as he appears not to have an effective alternative for the enhancement of the biodiversity.

## **Epilogue – The Way Forward**

Our new way of life, bestowed on us by the triumvirate, will continue to influence our attitude vis-à-vis the traditional way of life, which is regarded by many as mundane and retrogressive. Formerly taboos were enough to control people's attitudes towards the environment. Now, how do we police our forest reserves, the sacred groves, the water sheds of rivers and streams? How do we ensure the fertility of the soils? How do we ensure the greening of the environment in the face of farming activities and logging, both legal and illegal? How do we ensure a sustained biodiversity of the environment as we introduce exotic plants like the teak for our afforestation programmes?

These and other relevant questions should evoke a re-awakening spirit in all of us to critically examine the traditionalists and their general perception of the environment. I am aware that their traditional conservation methods are no longer applicable, since they are obsolete. However, there is one fundamental thing we can learn from them. That is, to regard the land not as a mere economic asset, to be milked without due regard to the entire ownership system. Indeed, the land should be regarded as a legacy bequeathed to us and

which we will have to leave for posterity. Should it not be our concern now to ensure that we leave it in a better shape than we met it? I believe that we shall be accountable to a superior power for our stewardship on this earth.

The traditional farmers have no answer to the on-going deteriorating processes of the environment of which they are painfully aware. However, for their survival, they will continue to eke out a living from the land. The survival of the farmers is the survival of the nation. Fortunately, the scientists have the answers to the environmental problems and we must put them into operation to save the land and our civilization. This is an urgent call.

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