

Sacred Groves, Spirituality and Sustainable Development in Northern Ghana

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Abstract

Since creation, mankind has strived to maintain a positive relationship with nature by preserving and making certain specific trees, water bodies, highlands and other places sacred. The practice of keeping sacred groves is one of the ways which promotes this human, ecological and spiritual connection. These groves, considered to be one of the oldest forms of habitats protection is believed to have the capability of providing the basis for understanding the nature of ecosystems which existed in a given area before the activities of human beings. These groves have dotted the map of Ghana and are in no small way contributing to preserving biodiversity and meeting the spiritual needs of the people. However, it is realised that increased population densities and the pressure on land with poverty have had major impacts on some of these groves. Most common is the degradation of the vegetation cover and the shift in land use of these significant sacred sites for farming and settlement purposes which gravely affect their nature in the northern part of the country. This paper provides an insight into the current structure, content and functions of these groves by way of assessing their role in promoting spirituality and sustainable development in Northern Ghana. A descriptive study based on primary sources, mainly interviews and secondary sources, reports, textbooks and articles, is used to generate data for the analysis. This paper revealed that in examining the nature of sacred groves, information should not be limited to only plants and animals but also water bodies. The paper also revealed that though sacred groves are of importance to

Ghanaians, the government is doing little to legally protect these areas. The paper further argued that modern development projects usually located near groves is not a kind of punishment (as such areas are believed to be evil) but rather for protection. Therefore, it is concluded that these groves, founded on local practices need to be protected legally and also recognized by governments, researchers and all those involved in the environment debate.

Keywords: sacred grove, spirituality, sustainable development, taboos, biodiversity

Introduction

In recent times, environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation and degradation, pollution among others have become major topical issues in global debates. From the publication of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962), through to the historic United Nations Conference on Human Environment (1972) down to the *Our Common Future* (1987), and subsequent international conferences and world summits all about the natural environment, a conclusion has been reached that environmental problems are no longer minor issues.

However, measures put in place to address these environmental problems have not achieved much. This therefore necessitates the need for alternative local measures to be adopted to help address the menace. By way of proposing, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992) recognizes in Principle 22 of the Rio Declaration that "Indigenous people and their communities, and other local communities, have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices....." One of these traditional practices that preserves natural habitats and maintains biodiversity is the practice of keeping sacred groves. According to Dudley et al, (2009), sacred groves are the abodes of totemic animals and plants, and also one of the oldest forms of habitats protection in the world. Campbell (2004) sees them as the protection of forests by local religion and or cultural agents, with this protection either being partial or full. He added that sacred groves are usually controlled by a local priest who together with the community drawing from their beliefs demarcates certain lands as holy. When some

areas of vegetation believed to have spiritual and ecological values are preserved through taboos and sanctions, such areas are referred to as Sacred Groves (Agyepong et. al, 1999 cited in Barre, Grant and Draper, 2009).

The presence of sacred groves in Ghana has been captured by Hens (2006), who argues that these groves range from some few square meters to several hectares. He described such areas as places where hunting, farming, tree cutting and fire wood burning are forbidden. To throw more light on their nature, Karem (1985) stated this elsewhere:

It is amazing that a man can guarantee one hundred per cent protection to trees against bush fires in the case of Sacred Groves all over Northern Ghana; he fears them, highly venerated them or even make sacrifices to them, especially in solitary trees in Northern Ghana; our people in the north will seldom damage dawadawa (*Pakia bicolour*) or Shea butter (*Butyrospermum parkii*) trees. An offender is sent directly to the chief's house (Karem 1985 cited Decher 1997).

However, the absence of institutions coupled with population explosion and other factors has threatened their existence in recent times. This was expressed clearly by Sheridan (2009) who indicated that “indeed the trees in these groves—and the social institutions built upon them—face serious threats from local demand for fuelwood and global demand for tropical hardwoods. In many areas, axes and chainsaws have replaced sacrifices and initiation ceremonies” (p.75). In addition, globalization and colonization of third world socio-economies have contributed to eroding some of these indigenous cultural practices and values that sustained ecology and livelihood in the past (Van Shiva, 1997 in Apusigah, 2011). Similarly, with the influence of Formal Education and Christianity, and the integration of traditional societies into global consumer markets, traditional practices are gradually being lost. To add, Apiah-Opoku (2007) argues that it is difficult influencing the attitude of policy makers and bureaucrats about the importance of these indigenous practices. These views indicate the extent to which these indigenous environmental practices are being threatened particularly in recent times.

Having gone through existing literature, it is realised that some studies have been conducted extensively already as shown above focusing on the role of these groves with regard to nature and biological conservation. However, the spiritual dimension has been shallowly discussed. Also, less has been studied about their contributions to

sustainable development. It is against this background that the paper seeks to provide information about these sacred groves in Northern Ghana.

Methodology

The main objectives of the paper are to: (i) assess the current nature of sacred groves in recent times; (ii) identify the ways by which they promote Spirituality and Sustainable Development; (iii) identify factors that pose as threats and suggest ways of sustaining these groves.

Considering the nature of the paper, a descriptive approach was taken to allow for an in-depth study of the subject matter. Sacred groves by nature are relics of the local people's traditional practices, and because they are not universal and static, there is always the need for a careful discussion of the topic. Information about these groves is mostly sacred and uncommon which calls for fewer respondents but detailed discussions about the subject matter. Therefore, it was realised that most of the objectives of the paper could best be addressed by primary data (not underscoring the importance of secondary data in the study). Therefore, fieldwork was conducted by the author in four purposively selected communities in the Kassena Nankana Municipality in the Upper East Region of Ghana. An examination of the tools relevant to gather such data revealed that the following tools could be useful in this process.

Firstly, to get this special and uncommon information about these groves, key informants were contacted through face-to-face individual interviews. This group of people included the land lords controlling the four groves in the study communities. Elders and clans' heads who participate in rituals and sacrifices and make decisions pertaining to the groves were also considered in this category. These are people by virtue of their age and positions in the study communities have uncommon and special knowledge about the groves. Questions for this section were unstructured; this was to grant the informants a high degree of freedom to discuss all that pertains to these groves and to also probe during the interview process. The information needed from these people included the history of the groves, the content of these groves, the kind of sacrifices and rituals that are normally performed inside these groves, the spiritual prowess of these groves and the threats to these.

Secondly, individual interviews were conducted to solicit general information about the contributions of these groves to sustainable development. Information regarding the spiritual importance of these groves particularly in recent times was also obtained through interviews.

Questions here were semi-structured. This was to grant informants some degree of time and freedom to express themselves, considering the nature of study. It must be added that most of the informants in these communities are illiterates and that also called for this approach of getting the information. Considering again the nature of the topic, the author, through convenient sampling, chose seven (7) informants from each community for the interviews.

Another tool employed to obtain primary data was observation. This tool was used to assess the physical components of these groves. Though the author was not allowed to enter these groves as it is a taboo for outsiders and particularly women, she stood some distance away to catch a glimpse of these groves. The author also tried to observe the kind of land use patterns that characterized the areas of land near these groves. The paper also benefitted from secondary data as literature from text books, journal articles and other scholarly writing was reviewed. The map of the study municipality was obtained through secondary means.

Touching on the study areas, it is realised that these communities are located in the Kassena Nankana Municipality, one of the thirteen municipalities in the Upper East Region. The municipality has Navrongo as its political and administrative capital. The municipality is bordered on the North by Burkina Faso, the Bongo District and Bolgatanga Municipality to the East, West Mamprusi District to the South and to the West are the Builsa South and the Kassena Nankana West Districts (www.kassenanakana.ghanadistricts.gov.gh).

Located within the Guinea Savannah, the municipality is considered one of the most environmentally degraded municipalities with a high population and increased pressure on land in the northern part of the country yet, it can proudly boast of these groves. The choice of these communities was influenced by the fact that, people in the three communities are often regarded to have a strong connection with mother earth (land). These three (3) communities do not wield any chieftaincy power but appear powerful as a result of their ownership and control over the land. In other words, they are usually regarded one of the autochthonous groups of people in the Kassena Nankana Municipality. The communities studied are: Telania, Manchoro, Saboro and Bavognia (though this community owns and controls land and also wields chieftaincy power, it is often not considered strongly connected to mother earth compared to the first three communities) in the Kassena-Nankana Municipality of the

Upper East Region. Telania, Bavognia and Manchoro communities are located in a big village called Navro-Pungu.

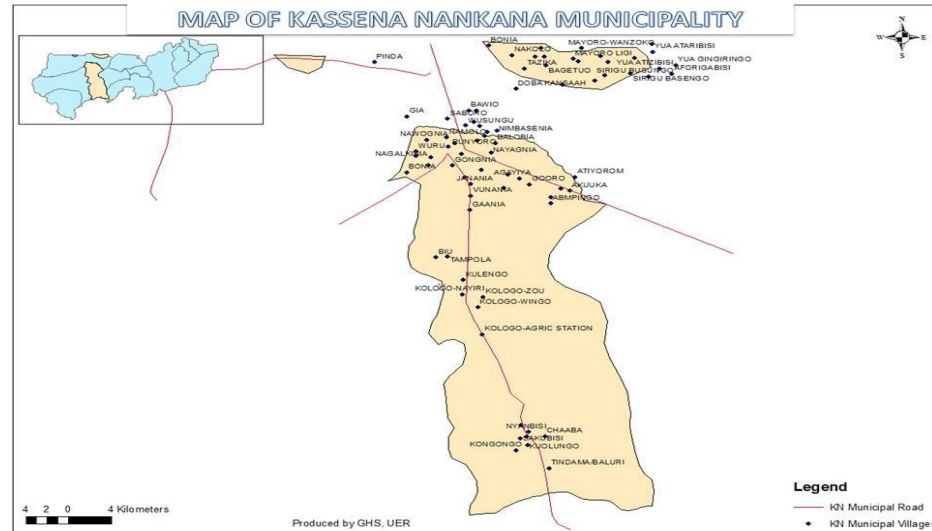


Figure I: Map of the Kassena-nankana municipality in the upper east region

Results and discussion

Description of sacred groves

From the data gathered, it was revealed that all the four study communities have at least one sacred grove. Sacred groves in all these communities are called *Tangwana* for plural and *Tangwam* for singular. Historically, all the groves in the study communities are believed to be created by God at creation, and this deepens the spirituality of the people. The landlord at Saboro said this: *when God created the earth, the next thing he made was a tree*. Thus these groves date back to creation. Regarding the content of these groves, all informants mentioned that there are trees like the Baobab, the Shea, Air Bony, Dawadawa, Shrubs among others found in the groves. The Baobab tree is the commonest tree found in most of the groves and is regarded as highly economical. Animals like tigers, pythons, snakes, squirrels and others are found in the groves. In fact, one of the groves in Telania called *Baare* located in the bush where the Navrongo Solar Panel Plant (the largest in West Africa) is located, is believed to have two (2) tigers and that during the construction of this plant, the security men at

the site at night saw a huge tiger coming out of the grove, roaring and the security men had to take cover. An additional feature of these groves highlighted by informants is the presence of water bodies like ponds in these groves with those groves particularly in Telania being an example.

All the groves in the study communities are controlled by landlords known in Kasem (the language spoken by the people of the study communities) as *Tiga-tinna* for plural and *Tiga-tu* for singular with the exception of Manchoro. While the landlords in Saboro, Bavognia and Telania are considered substantive landlords because they control the land, the landlord at Manchoro only makes sacrifices and leads in rituals at the groves under his jurisdiction but has no control over the land. The land on which his groves stand is owned by the *Telania Tiga-tu*. The earth priest at Manchoro is called *Tiga-yingeno* (a mediator) assigned him by the *Telania Tiga-tu*. Interestingly, the chief of Bavognia is also the landlord of these groves. The *Telania Tiga tu* wields more power than the rest of the landlords because of the size of his land and his ancestral lineage. The people of Telania are believed to have emerged from a cave or a hole in the ground thus considered themselves as the autochthonous people with the rest being settlers. With the exception of the landlord at Saboro and Manchoro who are elderly, the rest are young with the *Telania Tiga-tu* being a boy (less than 10 years).

Table 1: showing the nature of groves in the study communities

Community	Names of Sacred Groves	Number of Sacred Groves	Common features	Person in charge
Telania	Chaane, Baare, Sinya, Bakougo, Teobadeo, Nyiinboa, Togewa, Tangwomjwara, Wontenga, Nanzare-teo, Nyuure, Abei-teo	10	Trees, ponds, wild animals, birds	Tiga-tu (Land lord)
Manchoro	Teitigah, Kanzongono, Giida, Kayelebuga	4	Ponds, trees, birds	Tangwam -nyingeno (priest-mediator)
Bavognia	Kachinga, Jomsongo, Nayomsana,	3	Trees, ponds and birds	Bavognia-Pe (Chief /landlord)
Saboro	Tintii, Togse, Kansa, Baobab tree in front of the landlord residence and another somewhere	5	Trees, birds, animals	Tiga-tu (landlord)

It was realised that most of the sacred groves here have their names in *Nankane* (though as earlier on stated, the people speak *Kasem*). This confirms the point that the people around Navrongo have their ancestral root from the Nankane people. Also, it was realised in the study communities that a single tree is considered a grove and in Telania; these trees are believed to have sprung out of the graves of their forefathers. From the data presented above, it was further noticed that despite the fact that a lot of sacred groves exist in these areas, their roles and contents are different as well as their level of spiritual prowess. Those groves in Telania particularly the major ones appear more spiritually powerful than the other groves in Manchoro and Bavognia. The presence of ponds in these groves is a significant feature which also contributes to defining their nature in this part of the country.

However, the contents of these groves have degraded particularly with regards to the number of animals in them. The climatic conditions in these areas also affect the vegetation cover and the availability of water in the ponds particularly in the dry season. The size of land for these groves is also diminishing, a situation attributed to development activities and population increase. Also, almost all places designated as paths for the gods in the groves have been taken over for settlement and farming purposes.

Sustaining sacred groves

Sacred groves in the study communities are sustained mainly through the promotion of values and institutions as explained below.

Sense of ownership

These groves represent among other things, legitimate resource ownership, which explains why they have been in existence since creation. The people in these communities see the groves as their own. Therefore, measures like belief systems and taboos are put in place to protect their use. They are regarded as a common property with numerous benefits, thus institutions are created around these resources to define ownership and access to the benefit streams. An old man from Telania said this: *the sacred groves belong to us; we inherited them from our forefathers and we must make sure that our children also come to meet them.*

Define people's identity

Sacred groves are expressions of these people's identity which is embedded in their culture. These groves define the ancestral root of the local people and their relationship with nature. In the study communities, the people are identified easily based on the names of sacred groves found in their location. This is something that the people are proud of and they do not hesitate to state their connection with these groves. This is so particularly with the people of Telania. An informant from Telania said this: *I am a child of a grove, we are the indigenous one.*

Communal living

The existence of these groves binds the people together as those of the same decent. They share the resources and the other benefits associated with these groves together and this in turn promotes the sustainability of these groves. For instance the people of Telania are seen as one united by their groves. During rituals, clans' heads and other important people in the community are invited to participate. Food, particularly meat after sacrifice, is shared among the people including any passers-by who are not from that community

Groves are treated as living entities

The people believe that spirits, gods and their ancestors live in groves. Therefore, strive to ensure their sustenance. This explains why bushfires and the felling of trees are not allowed in there. It is believed that every living thing represents a soul and once that thing is destroyed, life (grove) ends. At Saboro, the landlord admitted that the reason why the groves are disappearing is because of the interference of modernity and development activities like the construction of roads through or near some of these groves where some sacred trees are felled to make way for construction. Thus, once a sacred tree is felled, life in the entire grove is affected, hence, the gradual disappearance in biodiversity at these sites.

The ethics of care/stewardship

The landlords, clans' heads and elders are those responsible for making decisions that have to do with the physical and spiritual development of these groves. It was established that when it becomes necessary to weed around the groves, everyone in the community convenes

at the landlord's house to undertake such an important exercise. As said earlier, some of the groves in Manchoro and Telania have ponds inside them and the landlords admitted that sometimes they people mobilise themselves and de-silt those ponds.

Choosing landlords

This position is not open to the public to compete for as it happens in modern politics. It is sacred so leaders are chosen by the gods and it is usually a virgin boy from the house of the previous landlord as in the case of the Telania people. In this same community when a priest dies, a young virgin girl is made to act until a substantive landlord is chosen. In Saboro, the position is usually occupied by the eldest person in the house in charge of the groves. In Manchoro, leadership rotates from one clan to another. Usually, an elderly person holds such a title. They lead in sacrifices and rituals. In Bavognia, whoever is made enskinned the chief, occupies this position.

Institutions and sacred groves

According to the landlords of these groves, taboos and belief systems serve as the most commonly used tools used for the protection of these groves. However, taboos and practices vary from grove to grove. Perspective discussions from members of the study communities yielded a general list of taboos regulating these groves: no fire is allowed near the grove, if anything, fire belts are created round the groves; nobody must pass near the grove around 6 o'clock in the evening because the gods come out at that time to eat. An informant at Telania said this: *when you are going somewhere at that time you have to change your route, you cannot pass through Chaane*: children out of ignorance can chase birds into the groves but adults are not supposed to do so; no weeding inside the grove; no farming on areas designated as paths or pavements for the gods of the groves; no fetching of fire wood in the groves. An informant at Manchoro said this regarding the fetching of fire wood in the groves: *if you cut down wood from the groves, you will not be able to bring it from your head when you get home unless you return it to the grove*. An informant in Telania added this: *you cannot fetch firewood at Chaane and Baare unless you don't want your life*; women are forbidden from entering the some major groves unless there is Trial by Ordeal, however, those with ponds are accessible to them particularly at those times when water is scarce.

In line with Sheridan's (2009) description of sacred groves, it can be re-echoed that these groves contain important resources. Land is generally considered a great asset and these groves cover several areas of land and this explains why the landlords are regarded sometimes more powerful than chiefs. The fact that these groves do not only contain plants, animals, water bodies but also occupy land creates in the local people that sense of ownership hence the need to protect them. It is realised that these groves are not owned by individuals or families but whole communities. This makes it a collective responsibility of every member of that community to protect them from wanton destruction like bush fires, and also maintain them by weeding. Also, efforts are being made to ensure that taboos regarding the use of the groves are observed to the letter. The nature of these groves demands a leader who must be chosen spiritually. This position is not competed for but a sole decision of the gods after a series of sacrifices and rituals have been performed and consultations made with the gods through the soothsayer. Landlords are seen first as servants of the gods and their spiritual role must supersede any other thing. This style of choosing landlords ensures that such leaders do not pursue their own interests but that of the gods. All these values are being upheld by the local people.

On the part of institutional development it is realised that since 1947, formal rules and regulations have been made to protect biodiversity particularly at nature reserves and other protected sites all over the world. For instance, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature noted to have first used the term Sustainable Development was formed with institutions such as the Convention on Biological Diversity following suit, all aim at protecting the biodiversity. Ghana has not been left out, however, most of these formal arrangements, have not had any major impacts. For instance, the Forest Ordinance for the protection of forests including reserves of 1972 was passed, yet not much has been achieved. There is up to date no specific law in the country safeguarding indigenous resources and practices such as sacred groves. Thus, common properties like these are protected through informal arrangements in the form of values, norms and taboos enshrined in the belief systems of the people. However, they are not strong enough to ensure compliance particularly in this era of modernity and many religions as they lack legal backing. Thus, these beliefs/taboo are no longer strong enough like in the past to get people to comply (Ntiamao-Baidu, 1995 in Sarfo-Mensah and Oduro 2007).

Sacred groves and spirituality

The immediate importance of these groves to the people is about their spiritual needs, as mentioned by all the informants. The groves provide materials that protect the local people spiritually. An informant at Telania said this: *some children are initiated at the groves and given names. A talisman is then hung on their neck; it is only removed (sole prerogative of the earth priest or landlord) and returned to the grove when the person dies. That talisman provides spiritual protection for that person.*

Also it was revealed that when calamities such as droughts, epidemics or famine strike, the gods at the groves are consulted to ascertain the causes. The necessary rites are then performed to appease the gods or ask for their intervention. The four major groves at Telania are widely believed to have the powers of bringing rain during drought. An old man at Telania said this: *Navro-pio (chief of Navrongo) once came to our house and together with the earth priest from Manchoro and our landlord, sacrifices were made and it rained to end the drought at that time.*

Another spiritual role of the groves is that they facilitate justice (Trial by Ordeal) or judging witchcraft. Witchcraft cannot be handled by the modern law court; however, it is possible in the groves. When a young man is seriously sick and is believed to have been bewitched, he together with his clan members is taken to a grove where rituals are performed to identify the person responsible for his ill health. The culprit is then advised to leave the soul. *Chaane* in the Telania community is noted for performing such functions because it is located right behind the landlord's house.

Furthermore, the groves give powers to the landlord to enable him protect and govern his people. Through rituals, the landlord is fortified by the spirits that dwell in these groves and this makes him supernatural. *He sees what the ordinary person cannot see;* said an informant at Saboro.

Lastly, these groves provide protection to people at gatherings. For instance, areas that are not far from groves are allocated for building of community social facilities such as schools and health centres. In Manchoro and Bavognia, primary school blocks are built some meters away from some groves. This guarantees the students protection from these groves when at school.

The worship of nature is something that is not limited to Africa. According to Swamy et al, (2003), in Indians, it is believed that there is godliness at places that have natural beauty. In an Indigenous African setting, the belief in gods and spirits is considered paramount. One can only become successful through the help of gods, ancestors or spirits (Boonzaaijer and Apusigah, 2008). It is widely perceived in Ghana that forests serve as abodes of spirits like dwarfs (Abiw, 1990 in Sarfo-Mensah and Oduro, 2007).

The people of the study areas believe that there are gods in the groves which they communicate with through the soothsayer just as they make sacrifices to those gods through the landlord. Rituals and sacrifices are performed in the groves seeking blessings from the gods. The people revere all that is present inside the groves. The people see these groves as communally owned. The groves remind the people of life after death. They believe that their ancestors are also living in those groves and so will their souls be when they die.

Sacred groves and sustainable development

Firstly, these groves serve as a source of indigenous or local knowledge. This body of knowledge is accumulated through experience within the local context. These groves reflect the nature of the people's world view and offer the local people the opportunity to interpret the world in their own way. This knowledge is developed based on the people's relationship with their land or nature. Knowledge about biodiversity in the local environment is accumulated with the help of the contents of these groves. As noted earlier, every grove has its own history, taboos and belief systems. The background of the grove is linked with the history of the people. Indigenous knowledge is built around these groves and passed on from generation to generation through oral tradition. These groves serve as a reflection of the local people's culture and knowledge. For example, an old man at Telania said this: *if you know nothing about our groves then you are ignorant of the practices of our ancestors. Our forefathers lived in there as we are told. The groves represent our history. I look at the groves and recollect all that my father taught me about my ancestors.*

Secondly, the physical features of these groves offer materials for development which span generations. These groves host different plant species that serve medicinal purposes. Also, these groves have ponds and

streams which do not dry up even in drought, giving constant supply of water for domestic use and for agricultural purposes. The chief of Bavognia stated that the *Nayonsana* grove supplies water to his people during most of the year. The earth priest at Manchoro and the landlord at Telania also mentioned this and added that any time these ponds and streams are silting, the people are mobilised to de-silt them and as a result there is always water for drinking.

Patches and strips of land considered to be paths or walkways are preserved for the gods in these groves to use. In the study communities, it is realised that paths are designated for the gods or spirits in the groves to use. These areas link one grove with another. These areas have been preserved and remained so for centuries. These areas offer security to the future generation in terms of land. *We believe that the gods pass through such areas when they are visiting one another, we don't touch such places, I grew up and met these places;* said the chief of Bavognia.

Places near groves are reserved and readily made available for development projects. Usually, due to the reverence given to groves, surrounding areas of groves are not always put to permanent use. For instance, they are not used for settlement though they may be used for subsistence rainy season farming. Such areas remain fallow and are made available for any development project when there is the need. An example is the Solar Panel Plant (largest project in West Africa) near *Chaane* in Telania. But for the presence of *Chaane*, such an area would have been converted to residential use and such a project of that importance would have eluded the people.

The term Sustainable Development was first used in the World Conservation Strategy 1980, by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature but became widely known as a result of its usage by the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) in 1987. This term is not new to traditional societies who's practices since creation have recognised the need to conserve biodiversity not only for present use but for the future. The term which describes "...meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development Report, 1987, p.43) have long been visualised in the efforts of the local people to maintain a positive relationship with nature for several generations to enjoy.

As seen from the presentation above, one sees sustainable development being promoted through local knowledge generation and transmission of sound environmental protection, preservation of land through the use of values and institutions for current and future economic use and lastly and most importantly the spiritual role of these groves in promoting justice, inclusion and sharing of common benefits.

Threats to Sacred groves

There are a host of factors, which according to the informants, pose as threats to the existence of these groves. These include the following:

The presence of other religions

The influence of other religions especially Christianity constitutes a threat to the survival of these groves. All informants admitted that Christianity is a major threat to the existence of these groves. The owners of these groves practice Traditional African Religion (Animism). However, with the influx of other religions especially (Christian) activities of the Roman Catholic Church, many people have almost abandoned their ancestral practices. The landlord at Saboro said this: *when you ask a child to catch a fowl for you to make sacrifice he will refuse not to talk of him participating in the slaughtering. An informant who resides in Telania but from Wusungu said this: where are the gods in the groves these days? People have lost faith in those groves. Things have changed now. We are children of Jesus Christ now.*

Population pressure

As a result of population explosion, there is now pressure on land especially for settlement and for farming. This is a serious situation at Telania where some patches of land declared as paths for the gods are gradually being occupied by some community members. It must be stated that most of these occurrences happened in Telania when the previous landlord was alive and he sold most of these lands. This, according to the informants, led to his untimely death.

Poverty

Sustaining sacred groves involves sacrifices and rituals. Animals are slaughtered, pito is brewed and other items made available. It was easy to come by these things in the olden days. But, poverty, coupled with population increase limits the resources at people's disposal and this affects

the rate at which sacrifices are being made to the gods, which in turn influence the relationship between the gods in the groves and the people. An informant at Bavognia said this: *It is expensive these days to make sacrifices to the gods as some of us cannot afford fowls.*

Interference of the formal institutions (the police)

It was established from the interviews with informants that the modern way of executing justice interferes a lot with the management of sacred groves in these communities. This is because less recognition is being given to informal institutions nowadays. When people break taboos and are punished by the traditional authority, the police interfere and most often, culprits are made to go free. This makes traditional institutions and leadership appear weak at enforcing taboos and belief systems to protect sacred groves.

It can be said that these groves are not without challenges; their mere existence is being threatened by the aforementioned points. The use of values and institutions in protecting these groves in this era of development seem inadequate. This therefore calls for policy measures and legislation in the country to help sustain them.

Conclusion and recommendations

From the study areas, sacred groves are not defined only in terms of tree cover, but also include water bodies, an important feature common with all the study communities. Secondly, it is evident that the spiritual role of these groves is primary; they are not just forest reserves or relics of ancient forests but places where sacrifices and rituals are performed for various reasons as earlier on discussed. The spiritual prowess of these groves make the landlords in Manchoro, Telania and Bavognia hesitant to accept that trees can be planted in these groves to boost their contents. It only takes good leadership without external interference; the gods at the groves will automatically replenish the tree cover in there.

Furthermore, it was realised that the practice of keeping sacred groves has been a way of promoting sustainable development as these groves do not only contribute to generating, storing and transmitting local knowledge but also preserve some resources such as land for the future generation to also benefit from. Sacred groves are thus considered indigenous practices which deepen the local people's spirituality and promote sustainable development

It is recommended that, for these groves to survive, governments, researchers and all those involved in the environment debate must recognize the importance of traditional practices by integrating them into main stream development initiatives. Formal organizations or agencies should not under value or interfere with indigenous practices regarding justice, as they pose as a threat to the protection of these sites. For instance, they police and the law courts instead of interfering must coordinate and cooperate with the local authority. The local people who are becoming new converts in the churches should be enlightened by agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency about the difference between religion and culture or tradition. Finding new faith does not mean abandoning one's good cultural practices. Norms and taboos have almost lost their significance in protecting these areas for lack of legal backing; these should therefore be given the necessary attention to make them function effectively.

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