

**EXPLORING THE STRENGTH OF
INDIGENOUS CULTURE IN PROMOTING
ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

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Abstract

Since gaining independence, Africa, particularly Nigeria, has been actively striving for sustainable development through various environmental development programmes. However, limited progress has been made due to the exclusive reliance on Western systems of knowledge for development. This paper examines the methods of promoting environmental sustainability by using the latent potential inherent in indigenous culture. The relevance of indigenous culture for environmental sustainability has been identified. Indigenous culture refers to the knowledge systems and practices of traditional societies, which are based on their experience and adaptation to the local culture and environment. The paper suggests that contemporary environmentalists should continue conducting awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of indigenous culture in maintaining the environment. Additionally, modern conservation organisations should incorporate traditional knowledge systems into their efforts to conserve natural resources and manage the environment. Furthermore, it is crucial to

acknowledge and involve the indigenous culture, commitment, and participation of local communities from the very beginning of environmental projects or policies, implementation, and during the evaluation processes of such projects/policies.

Keywords: Environment, Indigenous culture, Environment-related cultural practices, Resources conservation, Environmental sustainability

Introduction

The pursuit of sustainable development across several dimensions of human existence has resulted in increasing emphasis on the environment and other global societal concerns. Sustainability is attained by the harmonisation of economic, social, and environmental factors in the pursuit of progress and enhanced well-being. This is due to the fact that the desired quality of life is now not only dependent on a higher economic standard of living, but also closely connected to social and ecological sustainability. Every person, just like all other living species, depend on the environment for their existence, expansion, and maturation. The high-caliber environment is essential for producing a favourable and hale atmosphere that promotes human well-being and productivity.

The presence of humans throughout prehistoric times has had a lasting and detrimental impact on the ecosystem and its resources. Currently, the world is facing unprecedented ecological concerns due to the increasing and ongoing human activities on Earth. These difficulties include global warming, loss of the ozone layer, climate change, pollution, health issues connected to the environment, floods, erosion, and several others (Olorunfemi, 2020). The consequences of humanity's ruthless treatment of the environment are significant globally, particularly in emerging nations. Nigeria, similar to several other developing nations globally, encounters a range of environmental predicaments including drought, desertification, floods, deforestation, erosion, and depletion of natural resources, among others.

There is growing worldwide concern regarding the effectiveness of environmental organisations in their efforts to maintain the environment and the outcomes they have accomplished so far. It is well acknowledged that many environmental initiatives aimed at environmental management have fallen short of expectations. The near failure of this project may be primarily due to the insufficient acknowledgement of indigenous culture, the lack of commitment or little involvement of the host communities from the initial stages of planning to the execution and assessment of the environmental programme. There is evidence that certain socio-cultural practices have promoted the preservation and control of the environment and its natural resources. Wahab (2020) states that traditional African communities adhere to environmental ethics to regulate their interactions with the natural world and environment.

The notion of the earth's genesis and its constituents has considerable significance in the fundamental cultural convictions of indigenous societies. The indigenous population has continually shown a profound commitment to environmental preservation (Omoleye, 2015). Culture is believed to influence how humans perceive and address environmental challenges. It is important to highlight that in several communities in Nigeria, indigenous taboos with corresponding punishments have successfully governed the exploitation of the environment. Culture shapes people's cognitive interpretation of the universe. For example, the contrast in the comprehension cum mentality of tribes regarding concerns as regards the surrounding such as dendrology, undomesticated animals, hygiene, and maintenance would not only influence their behaviour but also influence their willingness to embrace or reject environmental laws associated with these subjects. The reason for this is because people's compliance with environmental intervention projects is mostly dependent on social ideals. The evolution and differences in environmental engagement across various cultures are mostly determined by values orientation (Folaranmi, 2014).

Recently, extensive research has mostly concentrated on environmental security, climate change, and the significance of

indigenous knowledge (culture) in attaining sustainable development. This is shown by the inclusion of a section on indigenous knowledge in the Inter Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fifth Assessment World Development Report (WDR, 2015). Furthermore, comprehending the essence and significance of indigenous knowledge in relation to climate change adaptation is a novel domain of cooperative inquiry, including indigenous peoples, local communities, and scientists.

Nevertheless, despite the crucial functions of indigenous knowledge and practices in maintaining the well-being of individuals in their surroundings and its significance in the developing global knowledge economy, there are currently limited formal connections between indigenous culture and environmental sustainability in the modern academic and policy discussions. The extensive reservoir of cultural knowledge and practises, with the ability to contribute to Western understanding and growth, as well as the creation of a sustainable environment, has not received the credit it deserves.

Research on the influence of indigenous culture in fostering a sustainable environment might provide valuable insights for the formulation of environmental policies that uphold traditional wisdom and traditions. This paper explores the potential of indigenous culture in fostering a sustainable environment, based on the given premise.

Indigenous Culture and Environment : The Linkage

The term “culture” is derived from the German word “Kultur,” which refers to civilization. The idea of culture, like other social concepts, has been defined in many ways. Terry (2005) defines culture as the collective knowledge, beliefs, values, and physical possessions belonging to every individuals and passed down from one generation to another. Oluchi (2018) argues that culture is both organic and supraorganic. The recognition that culture is dependent on human individuals for its survival classifies it as organic, whereas the persistence of culture even after an individual’s death categorises it as supra-organic. Despite the

comings and goings of many individuals, culture perseveres. Culture encompasses both tangible and intangible aspects. Being tangible means that cultural artifacts such as antiquities, buildings, drums, cuisine, clothing, etc. may be seen physically. Non-material culture encompasses intangible elements of a society, including music, morality, folktales, religion, customs, taboos, and other non-physical aspects. From a scientific perspective, it is often characterised as the whole manner in which a group of individuals live their lives (Falana & Ojo, 2012).

Literally, The term “environment” refers to the immediate surroundings or conditions in which anything exists. An individual’s environment comprises all entities, whether animate and inanimate, that exist within their immediate vicinity. The term “environment” encompasses all the physical resources and situations, both natural and artificial, that have an impact on the survival and growth of an organism. The global awareness of the environment and its vital significance to human activities and ongoing survival began to increase after the 1972 United Nations’ global summit on human environment held in Stockholm, Sweden.

According to Chime (2015), human beings exist in two separate realms. The first realm encompasses the natural world, including plant life, both domesticated and wild animals, highland and lowland areas, bodies of water, climatic aspects, and other components that are considered to be inherent gifts of nature and are thought to predate human existence on Earth. Humans are an essential component of the ecosystem. The second realm refers to the artificial world, which encompasses the creations intentionally manufactured by humans using science and technology for the aim of enhancing their comfort and promoting a tranquil lifestyle. Artificial environments include many social organisations, like family and religion, as well as material structures like bridges, roads, automobiles, and houses.

Indigenous people and traditional communities worldwide have cultivated a profound and distinctive bond with the lands, waterways, and surroundings in which they reside and engage.

Recently, it has been evident that maintaining this long-standing relationship with the environment would be advantageous for the management of resources and the preservation of environmental security. Indigenous knowledge, in contrast to western science, tends to be holistic rather than reductionist, and is often transmitted orally rather than via written records. Indigenous knowledge often proves to be more pragmatic than theoretical, acquired only via extensive firsthand experience (Oliver, 2019; Smith, 2017). Indigenous knowledge is empirical in nature, relying on observation and experimentation. People who generate and use traditional knowledge employ the same cognitive processes as those involved in Western practical science (Simon, 2017).

Indigenous African culture exhibits a strong interdependence between the environment and its inhabitants. The people must not treat natural phenomena in the environment recklessly. In Nigeria, namely among the Yoruba people, it is necessary to get permission from the landowner before excavating the land, regardless of the reason for doing so. They hold the concept that the earth has a life essence. Supporting this perspective, the Igbos commemorate the mother earth (soil) by celebrating the arrival of fresh yam in a rite known as the “New Yam Festival”. This is mostly done to recognise the importance of the Earth’s outermost layer in producing food.

Describing indigenous culture as a friend of the environment is not an exaggeration. Devotees of traditional culture often engage in tree reforestation and conservation efforts. Local communities use indigenous methods to effectively govern their surrounding environment, ensuring the long-term viability of vital resources such as water, soil, and forests. They believe that the environment, which has the ability to adapt ecologically, should be encouraged. The cornerstone of community coping practices has been crucial in enabling flourishing societies to endure environmental extremes for generations. Cultural practices have a significant impact on individuals’ understanding, conduct, and decisions about the environment. Culture dictates the specific

kind and extent of the interaction that ought to exist between individuals and their surroundings. Local culture and regulations in many regions have prioritised environmental conservation, significantly shaping individuals' perspectives and approaches to addressing environmental issues.

Continuing from the last point, culture influences individuals' perspectives of the world. For example, variations in the understanding and beliefs of different tribes regarding surrounding matters such as dendrology, undomesticated animals, hygiene, and maintenance will not only impact their behaviours but also affect their acceptance or rejection of environmental policies related to these issues. This is because individuals' adherence to environmental mediation projects largely relies on societal values. Values orientations are the primary factors that determine the formation of and variations in environmental participation across different cultures (Mustapha & Adekunle, 2020).

Environmental Sustainability: The Potentials of Indigenous Culture

Culture, pertaining to the customary behaviours of a society, might impact individuals' practices about environmental health. Olanrewaju and Adepoju (2021) did a research on popular Nigerian tribes and discovered that the indigenous practices of these communities often encouraged positive environmental behaviours and aligned with contemporary environmental promotion initiatives. They assert that folklores, words of wisdom, and songs highlight the significance of proper disposal of human waste, overall cleanliness, and the value of personal hygiene.

For instance, the indigenous songs:

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| (a) | <i>We ki o mo</i> | <i>Take your bath and be clean</i> |
| | <i>Gee ekanna e</i> | <i>Cut your nails</i> |
| | <i>Jeun to dara l'asiko</i> | <i>Eat good food on time</i> |
| | <i>Ma jeunju</i> | <i>Do not overfeed yourself</i> |
| (b) | <i>Imototo lo le segun arun gbogbo</i> | <i>Sanitation can wipe away all diseases</i> |

<i>Imototo ile, imototo aso,</i>	<i>Home sanitation, cloth sanitation,</i>
<i>Imototoo unje,</i>	<i>Food sanitation,</i>
<i>Imototo lo le segun arun gbogbo</i>	<i>Sanitation can wipe away all diseases</i>

preach the relevance of surroundings and individuals' hygiene.

The human environment encompasses both biotic (living organisms such as humans, animals, and flora) and abiotic (non-living elements including rocks, rivers, sunshine, and air) components. Thus, in order to maintain a state of peaceful coexistence among living and non-living entities, those who consider themselves exceptional (dominant) must exercise care to avoid endangering the other residents of the ecosystem. As an instance, the Yorubas demonstrate profound reverence for even the tiniest insects, to the point that they provide them nourishment whenever they encounter them in various locations such as bush paths, farms, or forests. According to Omoleye (2015), it is widely accepted that insects have their own lives and some people think that certain insects might bring good luck. Furthermore, drivers, particularly in the Yorubaland region, have a tendency to reduce their pace while seeing animals such as ducks, lambs, and others on the road. If inadvertently, they collide with a duck, they promptly stop and place monetary compensation, along with any other items, on the deceased water fowl. Failure to comply with this may result in fatal accidents (Oladipupo & Adesupo, 2012).

In corroboration to the belief of the Yorubas on the animals' right to life, this indigenous saying is said as regards insects:

Yi ese re siapakan, ma se te kokoro ni
Kokoro ti iwo ko le da, Olorun lo le da.
Side step your feet, do not step on that insect
The insect you can not create, God can create it.

This indigenous saying and several other mature and amicable proverbs influence the conduct and deeds of the native people towards other residents in the surroundings. No matter how absurd it may look like, this is the method by which indigenous knowledge and wisdom are transmitted.

In the traditional African perspective, environmental resources such as land, water, animals, and plants are not only seen as economic inputs for production, but also have a sacred position within the natural world. Specific sites possess a distinct spiritual importance and serve as venues for rituals and offerings, such as consecrated groves, sanctuaries, peaks, boulders, slopes, waterways, and bodies of water. These areas often exhibit significant biodiversity and are characterised by well-preserved woods that are maintained by the local population.

For instance, the Osun grove in Osogbo, housed by forest and river is considered a sacred site dedicated to the river goddess. The river, purportedly composed of a concoction of many medicinal herbs known as *agbo*, is used for the purpose of healing ailments and facilitating fertility among infertile women. Similarly, the Ibadan hill (Oke-Ibadan) and Olumo rock (Oke-Olumo), regarded as the dwelling places of the spirits of hill and rock, offered significant assistance to the local inhabitants. These natural formations served as sanctuaries, shielding them from enemy attacks during times of war. Furthermore, they continue to bestow blessings and abundant resources upon the indigenous people, as documented by Oladipupo and Adesupo (2012). Similarly, the locals in Erinjiyan-Ekiti believe that the sacred fish river, Erin Ayonigba, represents the goddess of prosperity. In Ibadan, the age-old sacred crocodile is worshipped at Oje (Dele's house). Additionally, the indigenes of Igbeti worship the sacred hill called Ageble, while the hills of Orole and Olosunta in Ikere-Ekiti are also revered and worshipped. Each year, these spirits are commemorated via various natural elements that serve as their dwellings (Aremu, 2021).

Furthermore, the use of indigenous knowledge for conservation has a tendency to impact several aspects of the environment, including biodiversity, forest preservation, land utilisation, and management. These areas are crucial for the restoration of plant life and the breeding of animal species (Moronkola & Abiona, 2017). Conservation practises are crucial for indigenous cultures since they protect the long-term viability

of natural resources, therefore ensuring their availability for future generations. For example, the plant and animal life in holy or prohibited woods and rivers will be accessible for future generations to see.

Furthermore, the indigenous people protect and conserve many of these natural resources, which then function as cultural tourism sites or hubs for both domestic and foreign visitors. Notable geographical features in Nigeria include Orole and Olosunta hills in Ikere-Ekiti, Idanre hill in Ondo state, Obudu mountain resort in Cross River State, Ado-Awaye suspended lake, Awhum and Olumirin Waterfalls in Enugu and Osun (Erin-Ijesha) states respectively. There are also OkeOgun and Yankari National Parks in Bauchi and Oyo states respectively. The Ikogosi warm spring is located in a dense forest with tall trees surrounding the confluence, while the Ikenga virgin forest in Anambra state is known as the only untouched forest in Nigeria (www.nationsonlinenewsng.com). Cultural tourism centres are meticulously maintained to enhance the visual appeal of the surroundings.

Continuing from the previous point, it is crucial to emphasise that in many Nigerian communities, particularly in Nigeria, traditional taboos and their associated punishments have played a significant role in regulating the improper use of the environment. Chukwu (2020) notes that social taboos are present in all civilizations worldwide. According to him, these taboos are the fundamental element that guides their behaviour in exploiting natural resources. Traditional natural resources management is influenced by indigenous cultural practises, norms, and legislation. These rules and restrictions are often established in religious or cultural doctrines and superstitions and maintained by prohibitions. Within the realm of natural resources management, they bolster the long-term viability of the ecosystem and its resources. Nevertheless, the significance of these social taboos in the preservation of biodiversity has not received the appropriate acknowledgment (Ajasa, Omoladun & Adesina, 2019). The Osun

holy grove has a high level of biological variety and serves as a habitat for several endangered plant species, including uncommon herbs and medicinal plants (Ajasa, Omoladun & Adesina, 2019). Additionally, it is a designated UNESCO World Heritage site located beside the Osun River. Osun's water is claimed to possess the ability to enhance fertility in infertile women. Therefore, both are regarded as holy natural components that are prohibited from being illegally logged or used for garbage disposal. Erin Ayonigba is a sacred river located in Erinjiyan Ekiti. It is home to a colony of sacred catfish, which are considered holy and should never be harmed or consumed. If all other catfish from polluted rivers are depleted, it is expected that Erinjiyan catfish will remain accessible for future generations to see. Furthermore, the inhabitants of Ijebu-Ode are prohibited from striking or thrashing the land, bushes, trees, and grasses without purpose, since they have the potential to get irritated and retaliate while those individuals are sleeping. Similarly, they are advised against mistreating rivers, streams, and other water bodies (Omoleye, 2015). Likewise, several individuals inside the community are prohibited from engaging in the act of killing or consuming some creatures, including snakes, turtles, monkeys, crocodiles, fish, birds, and various others. Within these cultures, engaging in the act of killing or consuming these prohibited animals often results in severe consequences. These and several other socio-cultural taboos significantly contribute to the preservation of biodiversity and natural resources on a wide scale.

Continuing from the previous point, the traditional African cultivation method known as *tassa*, which involves indigenous irrigation systems, has achieved significantly greater success compared to the World Bank African Project. This large-scale modern irrigation project has consumed millions of dollars but has not proven to be sustainable in Niger Republic. *Tassa* is a conventional technique of irrigation including the excavation of holes of 20 to 30cm in width and depth throughout the cultivated field, followed by the construction of a tiny dam around the field. Subsequently, crops are sown over the whole expanse. As a result,

when precipitation occurs, the cavities have the capacity to retain the water and distribute it accordingly based on the plant's water requirements. The plant has the ability to absorb an adequate amount of water till it is ready for harvest. Niger consists of 75% arid desert terrain and has been used for generations (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2022). A conventional environmental researcher performed a study on this customary irrigation technique, using two identical plots of land for the trial. One parcel of land lacked the implementation of tassa method, but the other parcel had tassa technique implemented on it. Furthermore, identical millet grains were sown on both plots. At the time of harvesting, the plot of land that did not use the tassa method produced 11 kilogrammes of millet per hectare, but the plot that utilised the tassa technique yielded 553 kilogrammes of millet per hectare. The outcome of this experiment clearly demonstrates that indigenous cultural practises enhance soil fertility and ensure the viability of agricultural activities, particularly during the harmattan season and intense sunlight (Adepoju, 2018).

Conclusion

Research scientists and traditional environmentalists have recognised the significance of indigenous knowledge and practises for promoting a sustainable environment. However, it is concerning to note that there have been minimal or no substantial efforts made to integrate these into formal environmental policy and decision-making processes. Hence, it is imperative to reassess the fundamental tenets of our African native culture to aid in the preservation of natural resources and the advancement of environmental sustainability, as a result.

Suggestions

The present day traditional environmentalists should embark on day-to-day sensitization programmes which would showcase the relevance of indigenous environment-related culture to environmental sustainability. Modern conservation organisations, agencies and partners should integrate traditional knowledge systems into their conservation activities and

programmes. Also, right from the conception stage of an environmental project to its implementation, and the evaluation of such project/programme, the host communities' culture, commitment and participation should be duly recognised. Furthermore, favourable environment-related cultural practices should be encouraged and sustained among the indigenes. For sustainable environment to be achieved, a paradigm shift is required, hence, the government, non-governmental actors and other environmental stakeholders should use indigenous knowledge to drive environmental sustainability efforts in Nigeria.

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