

Full Length Research Paper

Cultural and socio-economic perspectives of the conservation of Asanting Ibiono Sacred Forests in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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Culturally, sacred forests have been an integral part of many Africa traditional societies for centuries. For decades, these traditions have encouraged community driven nature conservation attitudes and have ensured the conservation of native biodiversity, supplying non-timber forest products (NTFPs), supporting ecological, religious, cultural and socio-economic functions. This long standing tradition is on the decline today as a result of development, population pressure and changes in religious beliefs. This study examines the cultural and socio-economic variables that facilitate the conservation of the sacred forests in Asanting village in Ibiono Ibom Local Government Area (LGA) in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Seventy five (75) respondents were selected for this study using snowball sampling and stratified sampling techniques, and were used to collect the quantitative and qualitative data through a questionnaire survey and ethnographic research approaches. Descriptive statistical techniques were used to analyze the primary data collected. The results show that 73% were male and 27% were female, 60% were literate while 40% were traders and 33% were farmers with 4% less than 30 years old. All the respondents belong to a single religious group (Christianity). Majority of the respondents (79%) had favorable attitudes towards the concept of conservation of the fragments of sacred forest through cultural practices. Fourteen percent of the respondents agreed that they need to conserve the sacred forest because of its regulating, provisioning, social/cultural and supporting services. Moreover, a large proportion of the respondents (71%) generate income from various activities carried out within the sacred forests, thus, contributing to their livelihoods economy. However, changes in religious beliefs and the need for development had a negative effect on the conservation attitude of majority of the respondents, leading to the destruction of two sacred forests in the village. The integration of the traditional knowledge system in enlightenment campaign and application of community based approach toward conservation issues will therefore ensure a better conservation attitude in the community and Nigeria in general.

Key words: Sacred forest, conservation, biodiversity, cultural and religious beliefs, traditional knowledge, Asanting Ibiono, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Sacred groves are forest patches conserved by the local people through socio-cultural and religious practices. This religious and socio-cultural practice has enabled sacred groves to harbour a rich biodiversity of flora and fauna

and has played a significant role in the conservation of biodiversity (Khumbongmayun et al., 2006; Khan et al., 2008). Culturally protected forest fragments, popularly known as sacred groves, are often relics of original

forests that covered many regions in Africa and South-Asian countries because of its cultural and spiritual significance (Ormsby, 2012; Ray, 2011; Page et al., 2009; Khan et al., 2008; Salick et al., 2007).

In the past, the indigenous people developed a variety of useful resource management practices such as sacred forests and these have continued to exist in tropical Africa, Asia, South America and other parts of the world (Agbo and Sokpon, 1999; Appiah-Opoku, 2007; Pruthi and Burch Jr, 2009; Ray, 2011). Development and changing socio-economic conditions, land use practices and unsustainable exploitation have started transforming these patches of forest leading into various stages of degradation (Anthwal et al., 2006; Ray, 2011; Udoakpan et al., 2013). Eneji et al. (2012) and Appiah-Opoku (2007) emphasized that indigenous belief systems or knowledge form a fundamental part of traditional knowledge which serves as a very effective and important tool in protecting sacred groves which have become victims of development, wide spread Christianity and population pressure. Furthermore, indigenous beliefs are not just a relic of the past but something that is needed today and may be needed in future for the conservation of natural resources in local communities (Appiah-Opoku, 2007).

Eneji et al. (2012) reveals that the infiltration of Christianity which saw nothing good in African traditional religious system have continued to encourage an unsustainable attitude toward the conservation of sacred groves. This is equally contributing to the eroding of indigenous African traditions and beliefs which were instituted by our ancestors to conserve the biodiversity from extinction through the establishment of sacred forest (Eneji et al., 2012; Ormsby and Edelman 2010). The concept of establishing sacred forests and groves has long been interlinked through a traditional knowledge system of biodiversity protection with traditional fetish beliefs and taboo serving as an incentives conserve natural resources (Eneji et al., 2012; Ormsby and Edelman, 2010; Khan et al., 2008; Khumbongmayun et al., 2006). Ormsby and Edelman (2010) affirmed that sacred forests are becoming vulnerable to the changing values and practices of the people around them. The Asanting Ibiono sacred forests is being managed by a chief priest who oversee the relevant sacrifices to the gods/deities and also guide the people into the forest during the various festivals carried out in the sacred forests. Similar practice was observed by Ormsby and Edelman (2010) in the Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary Ghana. These practices have encouraged and acted as an incentive for the conservation of the sacred forests in Asanting Ibiono community.

Asanting Ibiono sacred forests are used for various activities like the initiation of young men into the Ekpe cult which is symbol of transition from adolescence to adulthood in Ibibio culture, masquerade ceremony, celebration of new yam festivals and crowning of new paramount ruler and chiefs in Ibiono Ibom Kingdom and this tradition

have being in existence for over 100 years according to the local people. It is only the initiated people that are allowed to participate in the socio-cultural play called masquerade ceremony which is used to celebrate important landmarks like new yam festivals, coronations of a new paramount ruler and burial of chiefs/village heroes in the Ibibio Kingdom and elsewhere in South Eastern, Nigeria. Non initiates are not allowed to be directly involved in these socio-cultural play.

Eneji et al. (2012) also noted that it is unfortunate that all this important strategies for natural resources conservation and management based on these traditional religious beliefs system (sacred forest or groves) and socio-cultural practices have almost been completely eroded away from the acculturation and enculturation of almost all African communities by continually embracing Christianity as a way of worship which sees nothing good in African way of worship and have termed it evil doom and fetish where witches and wizards dwell and need to be destroyed in order to give way to more spiritual way of worship.

The conservation of these natural resources is of utmost importance for the survival and sustenance of mankind (Pruthi and Burch Jr, 2009). Most recently, the protection of nature for religious purposes has gained attention in conservation literatures (Eneji et al., 2012; Ray, 2011; Rao et al., 2010; Pruthi and Burch Jr, 2009; Soury 2007). This is due to the urgent need for the sustainability of forests in order to preserve their regulating, supporting, provisioning and social/cultural functions in the face of present environmental changes. It has been observed that most rural households in rainforest regions of Nigeria depend heavily on the collection of forest based non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as African giant snails (*Achatina achatina* and *Achatina fulica*), leafy vegetables (*Gnetum africanum*) and forest food resource like *Irvingia gabonensis* and *Irvingia wombolu* from sacred forests (Eneji et al., 2012; Rao et al., 2011; Garret, 2007).

These forest based resources are more abundant in sacred forests than in forest reserves or open forests due to the richness and diversity of tree species and biomass in sacred forest (Agbo and Sokpon, 1999; Anthwal et al., 2006; Salick et al., 2007; Soury, 2007; Rajendran and Agarawal, 2007; Khan et al., 2008; Rao et al., 2011). Thus, this study was carried out to examine the cultural and socio-economic variables that affect the conservation of the remaining fragments of the sacred forest in Asanting Ibiono community in order to complement the existing knowledge on the conservation and management of sacred forests in Nigeria.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

The study was carried out in Asanting Ibiono community in Ibiono

Ibom Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria Figure 2. Asanting Ibiono community is located in the humid and sub-humid tropical climate of Southeastern Nigeria. Asanting Ibiono community is located in the Eastern axis of Akwa Ibom State between latitudes $5^{\circ} 00' - 6^{\circ} 21' N$ and longitudes $8^{\circ} 20' - 80^{\circ} 80' E$. The annual temperature ranges from an average minimum of $25.5^{\circ} C$ to average maximum of $30.5^{\circ} C$. The rainfall pattern has a characteristic bimodal distribution with peaks usually in June and October and the period of low precipitation in August with four months of dry season starting from November ending March. Currently, the rainfall pattern is dramatically changing. This may be due to environmental changes which have made it possible for rainfall to prolong up to December and even January as sometimes the pattern cannot be predicted. Asanting Ibiono community boasts of being among the communities with the largest remaining fragments of sacred forests in Akwa Ibom State.

Originally, Asanting Ibiono community had seven fragments of sacred forest namely: Akai Ayara, Akai Eka eyen, Akai Itiat Akai, Akai Idip Ekpe, Akai Usung Iwoud, Akai Mkponk and Akai Edem Akai. Akai Itait Usung Ibok is the largest of all the sacred forest in Asanting Ibiono village and is about 2.5 ha, the others are between 0.5 and 1.5 ha. Akai Ayara and Akai Eka Even which is twice the size of a football field have been destroyed to give way for developmental projects which are most pressing to the community such as a secondary school and a women development center. Community dependence on forest resources for their livelihood has drastically reduced due to the degradation of the sacred forest. These fragments of the sacred forest are buffered by subsistence farmlands, houses and oil palm plantations Figures 1 and 2.

Structure and method of data collection

Semi-structured questionnaires, open-ended interviews, participant observation, transect walk and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were used in collecting quantitative and qualitative data for this study and this was complemented with other ethnographic research approaches. The study was carried out from December 2012 - February 2013. The respondents were randomly selected using village register through the assistance of the village chief. The interviewee were also selected using a variety of other approaches like key informant, snowball sampling and stratified sampling (Rubin and Babbie, 2008; Bernard, 2011; Angelsen et al., 2011). In all, a total of 75 respondents were selected for the study based on their knowledge of the sacred forests in their community. The questionnaire was administered with the assistance of a field guide who translated the language of the questionnaire to the respondents. Descriptive statistical techniques was used to analyze the data collected using percentages and frequencies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic characteristics of respondents

Seventy-three percent of respondents were of the male while 23% were female. The age class of respondents indicates <31 years (47%), 31-50 years (27%) and >51 years (27%). The educational status of the respondents was categorized into four groups: Non-formal were those who cannot read and write; primary, those having 1-6 years of formal education; secondary, those having 6-12 years of post primary education; and tertiary, those having Ordinary National Diploma (OND), Higher National Diploma (HND), National Certificate of Education (NCE),



Figure 1. Akai Idip Ekpe sacred forest in Asanting Ibiono community.

graduate and post-graduate degrees according to Nigeria educational system. Sixty percent of the respondents had secondary education, while 27% had primary, 13% had tertiary and 0% for non-formal education. The relatively high educational status of the respondents level of education, implies that they possess the ability to participate effectively in conservation activities if fully involved.

All the respondents belonged to a single religious group indicating a very high preference for Western religion and abandonment of the traditional African religion. Ormsby and Edelman (2010) and Eneji et al. (2012) affirmed that Christianity influences the eroding way of African traditional beliefs and weakens the protection and conservation of sacred forests /groves in African. The largest proportions of the respondent (40%) were traders, followed by farmers (33%) and civil servants (27%) (Table 1).

Cultural perspectives of sacred forest in Asanting community

The sacred forests in Asanting community have continued to play a very important role in the preservation of their culture and conservation of the biodiversity. From investigation during the study, it was observed that the sacred forests are still used for the coronation ceremony of the paramount ruler and chiefs of Ibiono Ibom Clans and masquerade ceremony. The celebrants are made to pass through Akai Itiat where certain sacrifices are performed to the deities in order to appease their

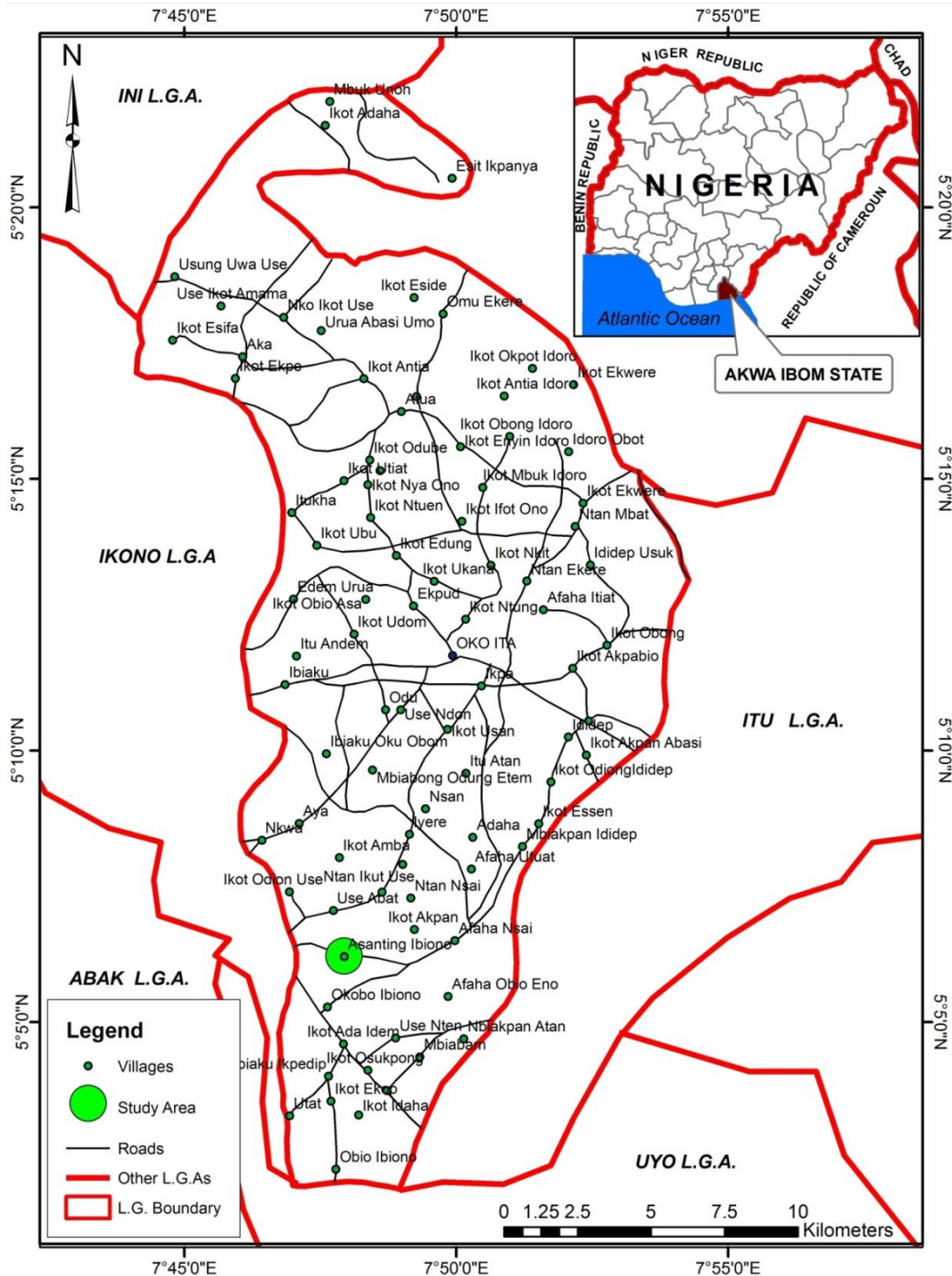


Figure 2. Map of Ibiono Ikom Local Government area showing the study area.

ancestors who have equally passed through the same path, seeking their guidance and protection before being finally crowned. This sacred forest leads to a river called Idipekpe where the celebrants take their bath for purification from all their sins in order to be just and right to

rule over their subjects as directed by their ancestors. Moreover, during the masquerade ceremony, it is in Akai Idip Ekpe (the forest of the masquerade) that the elders invoke the spirit of the Ekpe masquerade, which is a socio-cultural play used to celebrate important landmark

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents.

| Variables | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Sex | | |
| Male | 55 | 73.33 |
| Female | 20 | 26.67 |
| Age distribution | | |
| < 30 years | 35 | 46.67 |
| 31-51 years | 20 | 26.67 |
| >51 years | 20 | 26.67 |
| Educational level | | |
| Non-formal | - | - |
| Primary | 20 | 26.67 |
| Secondary | 45 | 60 |
| Tertiary | 10 | 13.33 |
| Religion | | |
| Christianity | 75 | 100 |
| Muslim | - | - |
| Traditional | - | - |
| Occupation | | |
| Farmer | 25 | 33.33 |
| Trading | 30 | 40 |
| Civil servants | 20 | 26.67 |
| Total | 75 | 100 |

events like new yam festivals, coronation of new paramount rulers, chieftaincy title celebration, burial ceremonies of chiefs or village heroes and other seasonal celebrations in Ibibio kingdom as well as in other parts of South Eastern Nigeria. It is accompanied by songs, ceremonies, dances and cultural drama (Okodo, 2012). The masquerade ceremony is a wonderful example of African art; it is ordinarily the representation of the ancestors in human world and has the potential of manipulating man as source of entertainment, social controller, religious reflector and among others (Okodo, 2012). The most distinguished and highest of all other masquerade is the Ekpe masquerade and its members are only men. Masquerade also symbolizes the celebration and the return of the ancestors who come out occasionally to bring messages to their people from the spirit world (Enendu, 2004; Okodo, 2012) and they have continued to be identified with communities in relation to ceremonies and festivals.

In Asanting Ibiono community, the masquerade ceremonies occur between July, September and December of every year but because of changes in cultural and religious beliefs, this socio-cultural event have been receiving little attention lately. It is speculated by the villagers that inside the forest, there is a stone which act

as totem at the middle of the forest, where the elders perform sacrifices to the deities to seek for their permission to carry out the masquerade ceremony, and at the entry of the sacred forest there is, another totem made of concrete where the elders and chief priest perform the final sacrifices to their ancestors in order to take charge of the masquerade ceremony before the masquerade festival kicks off. The Akai Idip Ekpe is divided into two fragments namely; the Akai Anen Ekpe, where the initiation of the masquerade festival takes place and Akai Mang Ekpe is where the actual festival takes place. During the new yam festival, the Akai Ibok usung Akai is the largest and strictly protected from outsiders and is allowed entry with guidance of a chief priest who performs some sacrifices to deities or gods and equally to their ancestors before the entire community will start eating the new yam. These sacred activities have encouraged the conservation of the biodiversity in the Asanting Ibiono community and will continue to do that as long as these traditional rites are observed and followed by the people.

Type and uses of sacred forest in Asanting community

Majority of the respondents (57%) agreed to the sacred forests being used for fetish purposes, convent (35%), cemetery (29%), fetish and community (43%), fetish and cemetery (15%) and 7% for fetish, cemetery, community and convent (worship) (Table 2). This indicates that the respondents are aware of the types and uses of the sacred forest in their community. Majority of respondents also affirmed that the fragments of the sacred forest that exist in their community are as old as their community which is over 100 years of age and were used as a burial ground for people who died mysteriously and also to serve as a symbol of cultural institution in the community

The importance of the sacred forest in Asanting community

In Table 2, majority of the respondents agreed that the sacred forests help in controlling erosion (11%), serving as water catchment areas (10%), and provision of habitat for animals and plants (12%) and tourism potential (9%). The attraction of people from far and near to the sacred grooves for site seeing and movie production has generated income to the community through provision of temporary employment for its people who serves as field guide. Madeweya et al. (2004) states that eco-tourism has the potential to help preserve and enrich local indigenous culture, not only in the short term, but also from a trans-generational long term perspective. Ormsby (2012) noted that sacred groves represent a place where tourists can experience and learn about both ecological and cultural aspects of a conservation area

Table 2. The importance of the sacred forest to the community.

| Variable | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|-----------|----------------|
| Checking of erosion | 65 | 11.02 |
| Serves as water catchment | 60 | 10.02 |
| Provision of habitat for animals and plants | 70 | 11.86 |
| Serves as seed bank | 65 | 11.02 |
| For genetic resources | 60 | 10.17 |
| Providing place for initiation and blessing | 40 | 6.78 |
| Provision of shelter for their deities | 45 | 7.63 |
| Acting as place for worship | 40 | 6.78 |
| Acting as place for ceremonies | 20 | 3.39 |
| Acting as cemetery or burial place | 35 | 5.93 |
| As source of livelihood | 40 | 6.78 |
| Tourism | 50 | 8.47 |
| Total | 590 | 100 |

and the designation of some sacred sites as World Heritage sites provides additional protection to the sites by attracting international recognition and funding opportunities (Schaaf and Rossler, 2010) and will increase its tourism potential when managed in a sustainable manner. Honey (2008), Ormsby and Edelman (2010) and Ormsby (2012) affirmed that ecotourism provides incentives for the local people to conserve a resource by providing an alternative and or supplementary means of livelihoods.

Basic forest resources from sacred forest in Asanting community

Majority of the respondents (16%) identified fuel wood timber for multiple uses (16%), forest food (NTFPs) (16%), medicinal plants (16%), forage for livestock (14%), hunting (games) (15%) as the major forest resources derived from the sacred forests in their village (Table 3). This is an indication that the sacred forest in the village provides them with their basic needs and therefore increases their livelihood and food security at subsistence and cash level, thus, agreeing with the observations of Salick et al. (2007) and Ray (2011) that sacred forest also help in improving the livelihood of its surrounding communities.

Conserving sacred forests in Asanting for income generation

Majority of the respondents (20.37%) believe that better protection of the sacred forest using relevant laws with sanction will help in controlling bush fires during the dry season and illegal logging activities to increase income generation from the sacred forest. The only sanction recorded during this study was on the restriction in the

Table 3. Basic forest resources derived from the sacred forest in Asanting community.

| Variable | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Fuel wood | 65 | 16.25 |
| Timber for multiple uses | 65 | 16.25 |
| Forest food (NTFPs) | 65 | 16.25 |
| Medicinal (plant) | 65 | 16.25 |
| Forage for livestock | 55 | 13.75 |
| Hunting (game) | 60 | 15.00 |
| Other , specify | 25 | 6.25 |
| Total | 400 | 100 |

entry of the sacred forest (Table 4), the villagers were only allowed to enter into the forest on market days which come up once in two weeks. This has helped to reduce extraction intensity of the NTFPs and other products extracted from the sacred forest. Secondly, the villagers by law are not allowed to extract timber products or cultivate crops within the sacred areas. If anyone is found contravening these laws, he/she is made to perform some sacrifices or pay a fine as determined by the elders and chief priest or will be afflicted with diseases and which can only be cured through sacrifices to the gods.

Also, 16.67% of respondents believe that establishment of a Forest User Group (FUG) in their village will help ensure better management of the sacred forests to increase the income generating activities from the sacred forest like extraction of NTFPs. However, only few of the respondents (3.7%) believe that enlightenment campaign and restriction of hunting activities will influence the productivity of the sacred forest to increase their income generation. This opinion is contrary to the observation of Baral and Gautam (2007) and Gillingham and Lee (1999) that education/enlightenment campaign can positively

Table 4. Conservation measures for increased productivity.

| Variable | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--|------------|----------------|
| Better protection using relevant laws with sanctions | 55 | 20.37 |
| Tree planting | 40 | 14.81 |
| Develop forest user group | 45 | 16.67 |
| Control bush burning | 55 | 20.37 |
| Control of illegal logging | 55 | 20.37 |
| Enlightenment campaign | 10 | 3.70 |
| No hunting | 10 | 3.70 |
| Total | 270 | 100 |

affect the conservation attitudes of the people. If actually Baral and Gautam (2007) and Gillingham and Lee (1999) assertion is true, then there will be need for massive and effective enlightenment campaign to be carried out in the community to create more awareness on the need to conserve the biodiversity of the forest to ensure productivity.

Attitudes toward conservation of sacred forest in Asanting

About fourteen percent (majority) of the respondents supported the conservation of the fragments of the sacred forest in the village for heritage purposes, ecological values and the preservation of their culture/customs. They also equally upheld (12.90%) conservation of the sacred forest for income generation, utilization of medicinal plants and wood resources of the forest.

According to Sigu et al. (n.d) sacred forest are protected and conserved through a combination of taboo, prohibition beliefs and restrictions. Sanctions are imposed against those who contravene these taboos and in some instances the culprits are made to perform certain rituals. This act has promoted the conservation of most of the sacred forest (Ray, 2011) and ensured high species richness and diversity of most of the globally rare tree species (Hamilton, 2002; Khan et al., 2008) Table 5.

Conclusion

Conserving and protecting the sacred forest in Asanting Ibiono community rest solely on the local people/residents. Western religious practices (especially Christianity) and need for development could lead to the degradation of the sacred forests. This is evident in the conversion of the two fragments of sacred forest in the village for the building of secondary school and women development center. The infiltration of Western religion which sees nothing good in African traditional religious

Table 5. The need to conserve Asanting sacred forest.

| Variable | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|------------|----------------|
| Heritage | 65 | 14.25 |
| Future generation | 60 | 12.90 |
| Climate amelioration | 45 | 9.67 |
| Medicinal plant | 60 | 12.90 |
| Peace and protection | 45 | 9.67 |
| Ecological values | 65 | 14.25 |
| Custom | 65 | 14.25 |
| Wood resources | 60 | 12.90 |
| Total | 465 | 100 |

system have encouraged an unsustainable attitude toward the conservation of the sacred groves by declaring sacred forests as a domain for evil spirits and fetish ground which must be destructed in order to purify the community. This has equally contributed to the eroding of indigenous traditional values which were instituted by their ancestors in order to conserve forest biodiversity from extinction. Creation of adequate awareness is hoped to reduce the negative beliefs toward the sacred forests especially among Christians. This can equally be done through reorientation of the younger people to participant in the traditional activities of the community in order to preserve the forests.

However, it was observed that there is still need to conserve the sacred forest in order to preserve its regulating, provisioning of social/cultural and supporting functions which the local people acknowledged. Moreover, there is need to carry out more elaborate studies on other sacred forests in Nigeria in order to examine their cultural and socio-economic significance. This will encourage the conservation and sustainability of remaining sacred forest and groves. Enactment of relevant laws with stringent penalties to compliment local taboos and preservation of the indigenous cultures will not only ensure environmental sustainability but also preserve our indigenous cultures which are fast eroding due to globali-

zation and religious influences.

Recommendation

1. Integration of traditional knowledge systems in environmental education especially in primary and secondary schools to reorient the younger generation.
2. Local people should be involved in the management of the sacred forest using community led approaches. This will promote understanding of the environmental values of sacred forests and community ownership.
3. Enlightenment campaigns targeted at religious groups will help to sustain the provision of goods and services sacred forests provide for the people.
4. The fragment of sacred forests in Asanting village need to be clearly and properly identified, surveyed, demarcated, mapped and documented and supported with relevant legal instruments of the state government to ensure protection of the enclave and sustained availability of its goods and services.
5. Since the sacred forest in Asanting could have tourism potential, it will be important to develop eco-tourism facilities to attract more tourists, thereby encouraging the conservation of the sacred forests.

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