

Original Research Article

Managing environmental destruction/degradation using traditional, cultural, spiritual traps: the tale of the Dagaaba and Birifor

Abstract

The environmental laws seems not to be effective in protecting the environment. The article looked at alternative ways of protecting the environment from destructions/degradation. This article used observation, narration, primary data from the role traditional/cultural traps are playing in environmental conservation in the Dagaaba and Birifor communities. The paper identified that the Dagaaba and Birifor people have a rich indigenous cultural system which help in environmental conservation and protection of the ecosystem. The paper concluded that the environmental taboos, the fear of the wrath of gods have helped the Dagaaba and Birifor to conserve some portions of their land from destruction. However, the method is not effective in minimizing bushfires as the fire has the propensity to escalate from one community to other. The traditional/cultural/spiritual traps can be adopted to minimize illegal mining which is destroying the forest reserves, land, air, water bodies and the ecosystem in Ghana. The traditional/cultural/spiritual traps are effective in managing environmental destruction.

Key Words: Spiritual, Traps, Dagaaba, Birifor, Anthropogenic, Phenomenological, Ethno-methodological

Introduction

Environmental degradation is seen as the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources which includes all the biotic and abiotic element such as air, water, soil, plants, animals, and all other living and non-living element of the planet earth, that form our surrounding (Maurya et al. (2020). Kaledzi, (2021) opined that the forest areas have shrunk five times in 100 years. Anthropogenic activities like illegal artisanal and small-scale mining, inappropriate agricultural practices, urbanization and industrialization are destroying water bodies, aquatic lives and the air we breathe (Bawakyillenuo, 2020).The destruction of the environment has led to extinction of some species of living elements. These have equally led to land degradation, pollution of the natural air/ water/land, global warming and deforestation. The air, water and plastic pollution affect health and hygiene; illegal mining, improper solid waste disposal, and contaminated sites release hazardous chemicals; land degradation, deforestation heavily impact livelihoods and limit growth and development (Srivastava & Pawlowska, 2020). These equally have the propensity to cause prolong drought, water shortage and inadequate plants and animals in the ecosystem if not managed well. As warned, the natural resources underpinning the success of Ghana must be protected, sustained and managed for the future (Srivastava & Pawlowska, 2020).

Most rural people in Ghana depends on agriculture for survival. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (2002) has indicated that the agricultural sector have employed about 70% of the rural labour force, contributes 45% of the GDP, accounts for over 55% of the foreign exchange earnings and is responsible for meeting over 90% of the food needs of the country. Poor land management leads to land degradation (Srivastava & Pawlowska, 2020); polluted air and water affects human and animal health (Bawakyillenuo, 2020) and felling of trees and bushfires

destroys the forest and grassland thereby reducing transpiration, precipitation and rainfall (Plaut, et al, 2013). Therefore, the rural people whose livelihood depends on agriculture suffer when the environment and the ecosystem are not well protected and therefore, allowed to be destroyed or degraded.

Most governments in the world have several policy and legislative instruments to protect the environment. However, ineffective implementation coupled with lack of political will, have left the land, air, water resources, plants and other natural resources in an increasingly alarming state (Bawakyillenuo, 2020). According to Mbiti (1969) cited in Saani, (2016), “the African is notoriously religious”. For most African communities all aspects of nature, plants and wildlife and water bodies are under the mystical tutelage of ancestral spirits and guardian animals. People are therefore mandated to use natural resources sustainably on behalf of these spirits. The application of environmental taboos are intended for the ethical use of the environment. These taboos help keep people away from further depleting the environment. The Dagaaba and Birifor people have a rich indigenous knowledge system which help in environmental conservation.

The Dagaaba and Birifor located in the Upper West Region of Ghana and the southern part of Burkina Faso believed the gods reward and punishes. These rewards include eschew from sicknesses, inexhaustible material gains, ability to conquer enemies, etc. The punishment from the gods, ancestral spirits are characterized with an incurable sickness and death. The symbol of any traditional/cultural/spiritual element placed on a land, trees, living or non-living object in the environment has a positive or negative connotation to a Dagaaba or Birifor. Therefore, these people collectively adopted traditional/cultural/spiritual/ traps to protect and sustain the environment. As Srivastava and Pawlowska, (2020) suggested, it is better to act now to protect the ecosystem and the impact of the environmental degradation on vulnerable people, especially in the Ghana. It is

also key to understand the importance of well-informed community norms that seek natural justice, transparency and discipline. Therefore, the Dagaaba and Birifor belief in: taboos, totems, sacred groves, deities (rain god, hunch back, water god, earth god) and curses. These beliefs and deities are employed to complement the environmental policies to protect the environment.

If the exotic methods are failing, resort to the traditional methods to combat environmental degradation. In the Dagaaba and Birifor cultural setting, certain natural features like trees, rivers, mountains and animals are considered sacred and should be conserved. The 'Benge' grove/forest in Wogu located in upper west region has been dedicated to the gods of the land and no body enters there to cut any wood or hunt without performing certain rituals or sacrifices. Therefore, the living and non-living elements are protected. The 'Wetuo' land located around the northern part of Nadowli along the N1 road on Nadowli-Babile road is a land which forbid hoe, axe and other metallic objects. Therefore, the land, trees and other shrubs are protected and therefore are in their natural state. The Dahiile mountain located between Hamile and Fielmuo in the upper west, Ghana is forbidden for people to farm or hunt around. The curses surrounding the mountain protect all the living and non-living species on the mountain. The Ombowira is a mountain in Nadowli-Kaleo District which have a gorge located at the eastern part of the mountain with water which contain fish that are forbidden to be harvested without any ritual. The python, crocodile, hedgehog, aligator, etc are animals the Dagaaba and Birifor believed they played roles in the lifes of their forefathers. These animals are highly revered and protected from any danger. A dagao/Birifor who sees a jackal berry stick with three white stocks/broom sticks, three white stones with feathers fixed on a land dare not fetch sand, farm, fell a tree, or kill any animal on that land. This means there is a curse on the land and anybody who violates the curse suffers punishment, including death. Tress with traps such as black marks, thunder mark

(serpentine flat rod), dry okro, gourd, moulded clay and many more are avoided for fear of thunder striking, epilepsy, barrenness, hunch back and many more. A dead fowl floating in a river is an indication that the river has been cursed and anybody who unlawfully enters the water for fishing/mining is bound not to survive. All these seek to sustain and protect the biotic and abiotic elements in the environment.

Methodology

This is a phenomenological, ethno-methodological study which transcends the importance of beliefs, primacy and objectivity of consciousness with regards to the surrounding. Our knowledge in beliefs and everyday world inheres in social order as the world is socially ordered (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Therefore, phenomenological, ethnomethodology study concerned with the world of everyday life and how people make sense of their everyday world. According to Burrell and Morgan (1979) cited in (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, (2007), phenomenological, ethnomethodological indicates the relationship between actions and statements in social context producing them and the way the meanings are interpreted. Therefore, traditional/cultural/spiritual traps are actions or statements related to social context that are stated/shown explicitly. Violation of the invocations of these has a dared consequences of which the perpetrators are afraid to pursue.

This article used observation, narration, primary data from the role traditional/cultural traps are playing in environmental conservation in the Dagaaba and Birifor communities. Other secondary information are sought from articles, papers and publications regarding environmental degradation.

Cultural Traps

Rain gods

The sign of rain god invoked on a land, tree, mountain and other natural resources are shown with either a serpentine flat rod, dry okro, three white stones, or jackal berry stick with white stock/broom stick. All sacrifice to invoke or dispel the wrath of the rain god is on a local roof. It is believed that violation of this god bring thunder which kills the offender.



Fig 1: The Rain god in Dapuori, Nadowli-Kaleo District in Upper West Region-Ghana

The Water gods

Invocation of water gods is done publicly and the fowls thrown into the water. Anybody who secretly goes into the water to fish or do mining must follow the due processes to perform sacrifice to cleanse themselves or suffer death in water.



Fig 2: A pond with crocodiles located in Wa Kunbiehi upper west region, Ghana believed to have spirits capable of rewarding and punishing people wrongdoers.

Taboos/totem

Every community in the dagaaba/Birifor land revered or adored a particular animal for playing key role in the life of their for-fathers. These animals are not ill-treated; and for that matter they can be seen roaming freely in the community, such as the red pidgin for the people of Nuorung, Goli-Nuorung, crocodile for the people of Kumbiehi, python for the people of Nadowli and mud fish for some people in Jirapa and their related clans.

Conclusion

There are still virgin lands in the Dagaaba and Birifor setting that are yet to be exploited. The environmental taboos and the fear of the wrath of gods have necessitated the ethical use of the environment. The traditional/cultural/spiritual traps are effective in managing environmental destruction. However, the method is not effective in minimizing bushfires as the fire has the propensity to escalate from one community to other. The traditional/cultural/spiritual traps can be adopted to minimise illegal mining which is destroying the forest reserves, land, air, water bodies and the ecosystem in Ghana. The Dagaaba and Birifor people have a rich indigenous cultural system which if adopted wisely may help in environmental conservation and protection of the ecosystem.

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