Influence of Traditional Taboo Practices on Natural Resource Conservation in Uli, Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State Nigeria; Sustainable Community Development.

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Introduction

Environment is defined as the combination of natural resources (plants, animals, streams, air and forests) living and non-living things, things made by man and the inter-relationship between these as well as various circumstances which surround people on earth (Tairu, 1998). Environmental protection and resource management have conventionally been given importance all over the world and this increased in recent time. Industrialization, urbanization and changing lifestyles over the years adversely affected the environment through pollution and environmental degradation (Benley, 2010); hence the need for sustainability and conservation. The most commonly cited definition of sustainability is from the World Commission on the Environment and Development; as meeting the needs of current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987). This definition succinctly conveys a long-term future orientation (Smith, 1993) and acknowledges an ethical intergenerational obligation to the satisfaction of human needs. There is a growing concern all over the world for the environmental problems that are brought about by the many years of misuse of resources. The overuse of these resources has resulted in disasters such as soil erosion, desertification, and loss of cropland, pollution, deforestation, ecosystem degradation and the extinction of many species (Anoliefo et al., 2003). The concern is more apt in the developing economics like Nigeria, where environmental protection and sustainable use of natural resources are not made an integral part of the developmental programs and planning. The present mentality is not to protect the environment as some kind of museum (Anoliefo, 2010), but to see it as a complex system that can be made to achieve productive requirement in such a way that its utilization for development does not compromise its potential to meet the needs of the future generation (Anoliefo et al., 2003). Sustainable development implies a dynamic balance between maintenance (sustainability) and transformation (development) (Robinson et al., 1990); both directed toward human needs. The WCED definition however provides an incomplete representation of the sustainability concept. The term development with its apparent emphasis on physical projects, activities and technology, implies a narrow range of instruments for advancing sustainability. The term sustainability is less confining. Any characterization of sustainability should encompass the different sustainability forms-economic, social and ecological (Goodland, 1994) and reflect the dynamic nature of sustainability (consistent with evolving ecological, social and economic process and condition) (Niu et al., 1993). Sustainability should not be viewed simply as a maintenance function. It should progressively reduce and eliminate unsustainable attribute of human and natural system (Goodland, 1994). Sustainability is conservation and maintenance of ecological integrity (Bosselmann, 2010). The word sustainability is derived from the Latin word “sustinere” (tenere-to hold, sus-up). However, since the 1980’s, sustainability has been used more in the sense of human sustainability on planet earth and this has resulted in the most widely quoted definition of sustainability and sustainable development. The UN definition is not universally accepted and has undergone various interpretations, what sustainability is, what its good should be, and how these goods are to be achieved are open to interpretation.

Nigeria as a developing country is faced with many environmental problems, a country endowed with abundant mineral resources and arable land. Development of her economy has included efforts at industrializations and increased oil and mineral exploitation (Anoliefo et al., 1999). Increased agricultural activities have led to indiscriminate deforestation, soil compaction, and erosion due to the use of agricultural equipment and pesticides not suited for the tropical soil in
the country. Prior to these developmental efforts, the traditional Nigerian communities had ways of utilizing natural resources without abusing the environment to an appreciable extent (Anoliefo et al., 1999). This had traditionally resulted in communities living in pristine environment suitable for human beings. Among the rural people of the world, preservation of the environment is inextricably linked to the culture of such people. This is found in the people farming system, care of the land, forest, wild life, trees and streams. These rural or indigenous people are those who are the original or oldest inhabitants of an area or region, who have lived in a traditional homeland for many generations (Toledo, 2000). The indigenous communities have evolved ways of living in harmony with their environment through the traditional understanding of nature and natural phenomena. In Nigeria and especially among the Igbo communities; cultural values were safeguarded through the use of traditional taboos practices (laws) and sanctions. These practices were used to preserve sacred groves for the ultimate aim of better management and conservation of the natural resources (Anoliefo et al., 2003).

Environmental laws are laws or measures instituted by man to protect the natural resources (trees, forests and rivers) so that they can be conserved for maintenance and for future use. Environmental laws and policies have saved some trees but the forests are being lost as critical global issues including climate change, biodiversity loss and ecological footprint continue to worsen. Existing laws and policies mitigate the ecological damage inflicted by industrial economies and western type lifestyle. Environmental laws occur at both the international, national level as well as at the community levels, where traditional laws were meant to protect the people’s natural resources. At the community level, environmental laws are like religious politics, where some natural resources are seen as deity, shrines or sacred groves and members of the community respect them partly for the values accruing therof and the consequences when not adhered to. Where the government uses legislative measures, the community uses traditional laws and deity to protect important natural resources. This study therefore investigated the influence of traditional laws in the sustainable preservation of the environment, using Uli, Ihiala local government area of Anambra State, Nigeria as a case study.

Materials and Methods

Study Site

Plate 1. First & second authors at the fringes of the ‘Atammiri’ forest.

Plate 2. First author by the public end of the ‘Atammiri’ river
Background of the Study Site: The study site was Uli; a town in Ihiala local Government Area (LGA) of Anambra State. It is a town of historic importance situated at the extreme southeast corner of Ihiala LGA. The neighboring towns are Amaofuo (formerly a village in Uli town), Ihiala, Amorka, Ubulu, Ozara, Egbuoma and Ohakpu. Uli extends westward to the confluence of river Atammiri and Enyinja and across Usham lake town down to the lower Niger region. A major institution in this part of the country, Anambra State University of Science and Technology, is located in Uli. The town is historic because, during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), the Biafran Airport was located on a land strip at Umuchima village, Uli. The airport played a key role as the only gateway into Biafra from outside the then ‘nation’. The people of Uli are predominantly Christians, though there are some adherents of Africa traditional belief referred to as “Ndi Odinana” meaning the people that obey the traditions of the land. The vegetation of Uli town is typical of the rain forest zone (lat. 5˚47 N, 6˚52 E and the total area of 98.8 sq m (256 km²). Uli is at the extreme boarder of Imo State eastward, comprises four communities, each consisting of different villages, kindred and families. According to the 2006 Nigerian census, the population of Uli was 124, 567. Uli people are mostly subsistent farmers; each village has one or two streams close to them, where they get water for drinking and for other uses. The traditional ruler of Uli town is the” EZE”, who governs in council with his chiefs. The traditional Prime Minister ensures the enforcement of the environmental laws; said to have come from the ancestors. In the organogram of leadership, each village has a village Chief/Head. Each kindred also, has its own head as well as each family.

Study Methodology

The major mode of information gathering employed in the present study was the use of questionnaires. The respondents were all indigenes of Uli town above 40 years (Table 2); so as to get information about the town concerning events before the civil war. The data collected were non-parametric.

Four main instruments of data collection were adopted in this study, they are

- In-depth interviews in both English and Igbo languages.
- Visual observation.
- Literature as secondary source of data.
- Distribution of questionnaires.
- Collection and identification of some preserved plant specimens.
- Photographs of some preserved trees and streams.

Distribution of Questionnaire

Sixty (60) questionnaires were distributed to the four communities that make up Uli town. There are thirty two (32) villages in the four (4) communities but for the purpose of this study, thirty (30) villages were used. Fifteen (15) questionnaires were distributed in each community, two (2) were completed in each village, except Umuaku, which is the largest community with thirteen (13) villages.

Administration of Questionnaire
The questionnaires comprised 18 questions, administered to both the literate and the non-literate, to honestly complete. Prior to that, a full explanation of the objectives of the study was given to the respondents. The questionnaires were completed in English language. In the case of the non-literate individuals, the author made a translation of the item in the Igbo language, as he is also Igbo and an indigene of Uli. Majority of the persons interviewed were above 50 years of age (Table 3) and are indigenes of the villages in Uli.

Sites Visited

The sites visited included Obinaakaba Eziama in Eziama community, where the Attammiri forest is located. The Attammiri River was visited and photographs were taken (Plate 2), where permitted. In Ihite community, Okwukwuoba forest located in Amamputu was also visited. In Umuoma community, Ihuala Ndigungwu forest was also visited, although the forest had been degraded. The author was not permitted to enter the Attammiri forest, because of wild animals and the folk tales associated with it, access was granted up to the periphery (Plate 1) of the forest. Some of the preserved trees within residential areas were also documented. The High Priest of the shrine of each community was visited, although none of them allowed the author to photograph any of their worship items. They only gave the author some of the samples of the preserved trees for identification and explained the traditional uses of the tree species.

Results

Traditional Laws and the Preservation of Sreams, Trees and Forests

From pre-war period until the time of the study, Uli town had many traditional laws (Table 3), which influenced the preservation of tree species (Table 1), forests and streams. These natural resources were preserved as sacred groves or had a traditional belief systems associated with them. Infringements of these traditional laws were regarded as abomination and appeasement came in the form of ‘sacrifices’. If the appeasement was not done, the offender would remain under a perpetual curse. Some of the items in the traditional laws that were used in the preservation of trees, forests, streams and sacred groves in Uli were

- Bush fire was then not allowed at all, especially in virgin forests.
- It was an abomination to defecate, urinate or engage in domestic washings in the portion of the stream for drinking.
- It was an abomination to cut down any economic tree or forests designated as a sacred groove.
- It was an abomination to kill a python in Uli town. The python was a revered reptile. This species of python is about one meter (1m) long and purple-blue in colour. It is called “Eke Attammiri” meaning the python that belong to “Attammiri”. The Attammiri is the ‘strongest’ deity in Uli with a forest dedicated to it. The people of Uli welcome this python into their homes and usually ‘offer’ it kola any time it comes “for a visit”. This python scavenges for rats and other household pests.
- Traditional Laws protected 15 major tree species (Table 1) in Uli town. The trees had tradition laws protecting them
- Stealing of yam was an abominable act in Uli and the penalty was to ostracize the person from the community. Upon death, the yam-thief barnished from the town would not be...
buried but dumped at the Attammiri forest. Yam is a respected food tuber among the Igbo, because the production is laborious and as such it attests to the strength of a man.

Murder is an abomination and its penalty was an outright banishment from the town.

**Sacred Grove and Forests**

Right from the pre-independence era, Before the war, there were three different major sacred grooves in the four communities that make up Uli town. The one in Eziama community is the “Attammiri” meaning ‘river that never dries’. It is a virgin forest and has remained intact as at the report of this study. The forest in Umuoma community is the “Ihua La Ndiegungwu” meaning the ‘front land of the community’. In Ihite community, it is called “Ogwugwuoba” meaning the ‘dignity of the land’. In the pre-war days (before 1967) period, people revered these shrines and were not allowed to enter the forests either to farm or fell trees. During that period, the forests remained intact and the war had no negative impact on them. According to the respondents, even with the war; at a time when people were busy running for their lives, they were still conscious of the traditional laws on grooves. Since the end of the war, because of civilization and modernity, two out of the three forests have been tampered with, that is “Ogwugwuoba” and “Ihua La Ndiegungwu” but “Attammiri” is still intact. The two mentioned above have been adversely affected by the ‘new ways of doing things’. A typical case would be that of the “Ogwugwuoba” forest of Ihite community, which was cut into in 2009 by a religious sect. The Sect, in defiance to warnings, cut down trees at the end of their community based gospel crusade, but mysterious deaths and other misfortunes in the community caused the sect to abandon further encroachment into the forest. A similar incidence occurred in Umuoma community at the “Ihua La Ndiegungwu” in 2003. Currently, despite the restriction on this forest, people still do go into it to either farm or fell trees. This subtle disregard for the traditional laws gradually emboldened people into clearing this forest and are presently using the land for house construction and farming activities. In Eziama community, the sacred grove there serves as the central and most ‘powerful’ shrine in Uli town, that is, the “Atammiri” and neither modernity nor religion has had adverse effect on this forest. The repercussion from the ‘Atammiri’ forest on trespassers is often swift, severe and unexplainable and as such indegines and visitors do not dare enter this forest. The trees, animals and indeed the germplasm of the forest remain intact. The ‘Atammiri’ forest is a typical example of a virgin forest in this part of the world as no human activities have been recorded there.

**Streams**

Before the war, rivers and streams located in Uli town were very clean, very good source of drinking water and for other domestic activities. The people depended on the streams in their communities and villages for water. In Eziama community, they made use of the Attammiri river (Plate 2), which has its source from the Attammiri forest (Plate 1). In Umuoma community, the stream that flows through, along the villages that makeup this community is the “Nsoakwu”, meaning ‘the avoider of palm oil’. In Ihite community, the Attammiri river flows across, into the Ugwuta Lake in Imo State. During the war, people depended on the streams observing the traditional laws that protected the streams. After the war, with urbanization, boreholes and wells presently exist in some of the villages. This has not made the laws protecting the stream less effective because the rural communities still make use of these streams. Modern ways of living
has no significant adverse effect on the use and maintenance of the streams. This is because the cultural practices and taboos associated with the streams are still in place, adhered to and the streams are still kept clean and maintained by the people. There is no record of any major industry in Uli, which channels its effluent into any of the streams. The areas around the streams were kept clean by the women and children. People, however, no longer depend solely on the stream the way they did during the pre-war and because of the presence of pipe borne water.

Road Construction and felling of Trees

The pre-independence and pre-war Uli town had the bicycle as its major means of transportation. Although bicycle ride is still in use today, but majority of the people now use motor cycle and cars. Because of this development, the local track roads have now given way to the enlarged asphalt tarred roads. The construction of these roads led to the felling of trees. A typical example would be the felling of the Iroko tree (*Milicia excelsa* (Moraceae), located at Ihite community axis of the Okija-Uli express road. This revered tree was cut down by the NIGER CAT Construction Company, though after a lot of appeasement sacrifices were made by the construction company before the commencement of the road construction. In Ndiakaba village within the Umuaku community, a *Ceiba pentandra* tree was cut down for another major road construction. The modern times have now created avenues for the felling of trees, such that the once-traditional spacious family compounds have given way to crowded modern apartments. With this kind of pressure on land, buildings now spring up in half-hazard manner, not properly planned and appear too close to each other with the result that houses become poorly ventilated. Pressure on land also has led to massive deforestation. A situation like this has become prevalent in Uli since 1970. Statistical analysis shows that traditional laws have helped in protecting the Attammiri forest (P<0.05) unlike other parts of the town where trees were cut down indiscriminately for one reason or the other.

Industry and Waste Management

The wastes generated in the pre-independence Uli town and presently in some communities, have remained biodegradable. These substances were kept as compost and later used as manure. Other wastes generated from the local industry included kernel for fuel, inflorescence for lighting; all from the palm oil production industry. Wastes from the basket making industry included dried cane used for firewood in cooking. The local industries in Uli are the Palm Oil production and Basket Weaving industries. There is also the Nigeria Starch Mill industry located at Ugwurugwuala Village in Eziama Community. The Marketing office of the Oil Palm industry is also located at Ugwurugwuala. Baskets are assembled at the Central town square called “Uli centre” for transportation to various parts of the country. These industries are usually located and operated far away from residential areas, so that their effluents could be disposed of with minimum adverse effect on the residential areas. The site where the oil mill liquid wastes flow into, are where the oilmill fibre press is dumped and is a place people go to collect the edible mushroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Tree species identified as preserved using traditional laws.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The study documented fifteen (15) tree species preserved using traditional laws and beliefs;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newbouldia laevis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treculia africana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaeis guineensis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthocleista vogelii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milicia excelsa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irvingia gabonensis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brachystegia eurycoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baphia nitida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canarium schweinfurthii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialium guineense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrysophyllum albidium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceiba pentandra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khaya grandifoliola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cola nitida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pterygota spp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fifteen (15) tree species were preserved using the traditional laws (Table 1) which were believed to have come from the ancestors. Violations of these laws attracted severe punishment from the gods. Some of these include; Ambiaya albidium (Udara in the local Igbo dialect), Irvingia gabonensis (Ugiri), Cola nitida (Oji), Brachystegia eurycoma (Achi). The fruits from these trees must not be plucked from the tree but must be allowed to ripen and drop on their own. According to Uli tradition, it is an abomination to pluck fruits from the preserved trees; as they were said to represent productivity. Milicia excelsa and Khaya grandifoliola are sturdy trees in the town and of economic value. Éleais guineensis is an economic tree and because most of the local useful products come from this tree, much respect is given to it. Women are generally forbidden from climbing any tree, but even if a woman may climb any other tree, it must not be the palm tree. The fruit bunch of the Bread fruit (Treculia africana) must be allowed to mature and drop before using it as food. Ceiba pentandra and Brachystegia eurycoma were two important trees that were not disturbed in Uli. According to the respondents, cutting any of them down would attract sudden death and disasters. The kola nut (Cola nitida), as well as the Newbouldia laevis (Ogirisi), were all preserved trees in this town. The Ogirisi is used as a fence/boundary tree and wherever it is planted for boundary issues, it should not be uprooted or else the gods of the land would kill the person. Anthocleista vogelii was preserved, because it was believed that the ancestors kept it there to protect the people from evil attack. The tree was seen as a gift from the ancestors. Khaya grandifoliola and Lovoa trichiliodes were regarded as trees which symbolized greatness or great personality; nobody touched them and whenever any of the branches fell, it meant that a great man had just died or would soon die. Milicia excelsa and Ceiba pentandra were used as shrines. Dialium guineense occurred mainly in the fringes of the ‘Attammiri’ forest. The reverence given to these trees have decreased over the years. People in Uli now fell those trees only when they are found within their personal compounds and/or their lands. However, no one has so far dared to cut, fell or disturb the trees in the preserved forests.
Endangered Species

The study further showed that in Uli town, only two (2) tree species are under a serious threat, and could be classified as being endangered. They are Milicia excelsa (Moraceae) and Brachystegia eurycoma (Fabaceae) (Table 7). The respondents stated that the two tree species were once numerous in Uli town before and during the Nigerian Civil war, but because of development and religion, they were cut down for one project or the other. Uptill the time of this study, these two tree species were only seen at the protected areas such as ‘Attammiri’ Forest.

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

The data obtained during the study were subjected to the descriptive statistical analysis and the interpretations shown below.

Table 2. Age distribution of respondents involved in the completion of questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (year)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-70</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-80</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-90</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90-100</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 &amp; ABOVE</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results showed that 55% of the respondents were within the age bracket of 60-70 years, 87% were above 60 years.

Table 3. Responses on whether laws existed that protected the forest, trees and streams in Uli.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Slightly agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;60 years old</td>
<td>5 (8.33)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (8.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 – 80 years old</td>
<td>45 (75)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>45 (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;80 years old</td>
<td>10 (16.67)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10 (16.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60 (100)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>60 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The numbers in parenthesis represent the values in percentage
All the respondents strongly agreed that there were laws that protected the forest, trees and streams in Uli town.

Table 4. Responses on whether the civil war had adverse effect on forests and trees in Uli

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Slightly agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;60 years old</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (8.33)</td>
<td>5 (8.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 – 80 years old</td>
<td>2 (3.33)</td>
<td>2 (3.33)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41 (68.33)</td>
<td>45 (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;80 years old</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10 (16.67)</td>
<td>10 (16.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2(3.33)</td>
<td>2(3.33)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>56(93.33)</td>
<td>60 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The numbers in parenthesis represent the values in percentage

Some 93% of respondents strongly disagreed that the civil war had adverse effect on the forest and trees in Uli.

Table 5. Are the traditional laws protecting the forests and trees still effective or were they compromised by the civil war?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Strongly effective</th>
<th>Slightly effective</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Slightly Compromised</th>
<th>Strongly Compromised</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;60 years old</td>
<td>3(5)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2(3.33)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (8.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 – 80 years old</td>
<td>31(51.67)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4(6.67)</td>
<td>10(16.67)</td>
<td>45 (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;80 years old</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10(16.67)</td>
<td>10 (16.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34(56.67)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6(10)</td>
<td>20(33.34)</td>
<td>60 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The numbers in parenthesis represent the values in percentage

The study showed that, though the traditional laws were still effective after the civil war, there had started a gradual but increasing compromise in losing effectiveness.

Table 6. The respondent’s view on the cause(s) of loss of respect for the traditional laws in Uli

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Development and Civilization</th>
<th>Immigration</th>
<th>Civil war</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;60 years old</td>
<td>1(1.67)</td>
<td>1(1.67)</td>
<td>2(3.33)</td>
<td>1(1.67)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (8.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 – 80 years</td>
<td>34(56.67)</td>
<td>9(15)</td>
<td>1(1.67)</td>
<td>1(1.67)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>45 (75)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The causes of the loss of respect for the traditional laws protecting the forest and trees in Uli were Civilization and Religion.

**Table 7. Tree species which could be regarded as endangered in Uli town.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Endangered sp</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Brachystegia eurycoma</em></td>
<td>54</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Melicia excelsa</em></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

The pre-independence and civil-war-period Uli town was very rich in natural (forest) resources. The area is a tropical rain forest zone characterized by five different stratification layers typical of rain forest; from the emergent trees to the herb layer. The forests had abundant important trees such as *Milicia excelsa* (Iroko tree), *Chrysophyllum albidum* (African star apple), *Treculia africana*, *Irvinga gabonensis* (the bush mango), and *Elaeis guineensis* (palm tree). The trees are of economic, nutritional and medicinal value. The present study showed that the effectiveness of the traditional laws protecting the natural resources was not adversely affected by the civil war (Table 5) and as such the people had continued to respect these laws. In recent times people had become bold at challenging some of the traditional laws as it affected their needs. This boldness could be traceable to civilization and religion (Table 6). Christianity had emboldened some communities and as such become indifferent to the traditional laws and taboo practices. Felling of trees in the non-protected areas had become common practice in Uli but those in places like the ‘Attammiri’ forest are still intact. People cut down trees to build houses, to avoid accidental fall because of wind, dislike of a tree as abode for ‘evil spirits’ or because of developmental projects as construction of roads, bridges, building of schools, hospitals and pipe-borne water.

The Sacred Groves in Uli town included ‘Attammiri’, ‘Ogwugwuoba’, ‘Ihualamuoma’ ‘Ndiegungwu’. The groves are associated with ancestral shrines, being patches of climax vegetation preserved through ancient practices where local people protect the forests to avoid the wrath of its resident deity enshrined in their traditional laws, belief, and taboos practices. The groves helped preserve plots, housing, as well as rare, endemic and endangered plant and animal species. Vegetation in the Sacred Groves in Uli is typical of tropical rain forest with several tiers of trees, climbers, shrubs and understory. The ‘Attammiri’ forest and river (Plate 1&2) present unique network of ecological systems that are closely linked with the life and culture of the people. Religious and cultural beliefs promoted the sustainable use of the natural resources. The Sacred Groves are abundant in, and wildly distributed with families of plants such as, Fabaceae, Euphobiaceae, Annonaceae, Apocyanaceae, Poaceae, and along with a large number of Gymnosperm, (Pteridophyte, Bryophyte) and several Mushrooms. The Groves also support the
growth and the conservation of species of plants that may grow in that region as a result, they are 
essential as sources for forest regeneration in the surrounding area. Whereas all the plants in the 
Grove may not necessarily be medicinal or of much use to man, but they have a place in the 
ecology of the area. Many of them harbour the last of several buds and animal that may have no 
other refuge except in that particular place. The protected forests help to maintain the water 
table, ‘attract’ rainfall and control flooding. It was reported that local people have a wide 
knowledge of the ecosystem they live in, and ways to ensure that natural resources are used 
sustainably (Toledo, 2000). These local people referred to, as pre-modern or traditional, evolved 
taboos and sanction employed to control the use of the ecosystem. The sanctions have the 
‘divine’ authority and so were very effective deterrent to environmental degradation in Uli 
before the advent of Christianity. Ebibgo, 1995, reported that the Igbo believed in the almighty 
creator called Chukwu (meaning the big God) and the unseen spirit of the dead (Mmuo); the 
Mmuo had the power to inflict punishment for evil acts or reward good deeds. It was not out of 
place that the Igbo, revered the resources that provided them means of livelihood; as these could 
only come as benevolence from Chukwu. The forest is the singular resource that if destroyed, 
could bring disaster not only to the immediate community but also to the world at large 
(Anoliefo et al., 2003).

The study of strategies used by the past to solve environmental problems has revealed the urgent 
need for the introduction of measures that would help bring under control the menace of 
environmental pollution. Except for some chemical pollutants introduced into the environment 
due to life style, waste materials in this part of Nigeria; Uli town inclusive, to a large extent are 
still agricultural, are biodegradable and recyclable. A heap of debris in a market place or by the 
roadside in the city, if completely sorted out, will result in wastes that are about 60% or more 
biodegradable (Anoliefo et al., 2003). This fraction does not require sophisticated measure for 
their recycling or bioconversion (Fasidi et al., 1996). Appropriate technology is a powerful tool 
that can be used to evaluate and upgrade indigenous technologies for waste utilization and 
recycling (Anoliefo et al., 2003). One of the good examples is the report of (Okhuoya et al., 
1998) on the effective use of some such wastes in the cultivation of a Nigerian edible mushroom.

Conclusion

Result of recent traditional laws and policy reforms indicate that nations are seeking the overall 
goal of ecological sustainable development and ecological integrity through the improvement of 
environmental laws and policies aimed at land degradation management and forest conservation 
(Benjamin, 2006). There is the challenge of not only industrialization, liberalization and 
urbanization, but also to make sure that fresh air and clean water are available to people. This is 
possible only by active participation both by the government and by the people in resource 
conservation and management. This requires political will, education and a change in the 
mindset of the people at large. Government is encouraged to incorporate culture into its plan for 
development. All operations and projects should be based on greening the environment. This is 
the only means of maintaining the path of sustainable development in places like Uli town. The 
introduction of the global conservation instrument (environmental laws and policies) and
enforcement of these laws under civil and criminal act, will substantially benefit this objective (Bell and Gilliray, 2000). Finally, for effective implementation of environmental and traditional laws that protect the trees, streams and forests, cultures of the different tribes in Nigeria should be revisited for evaluation and studies to enable their integration into modern practices that will make the environment more sustainable. Forests form the greatest pillars of life on earth and their destruction inevitably lays the foundation for the obliteration of life on earth. The present study thus articulates information in the global community, that places like the Atammiri Groves in Uli, Nigeria, still exist and need combined efforts with the indigenes to properly and in a more sustained manner conserve them for the benefit of humanity.

References


