

SACRED GROVES- THE FORGOTTEN TRADITIONAL BOTANICAL GARDENS IN TROPICAL AFRICA

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Ladies and Gentlemen

I am highly privileged to extend to you, the warm greetings from Ghana and the continent of Africa and again thank the Congress organisers- Botanic Gardens Conservation International and the Viera y Clavijo Botanic Garden of Gran Canaria, Spain for making funds available for me to attend this all-important Congress.

It is my hope that my contributions will go a long way to promote conservation education among botanic gardens and traditional conservation managers.

The theme under discussion "Sacred Groves- The forgotten Traditional Botanic Gardens in Tropical Africa" may appear strange in our situation, especially when one considers the unfamiliar nature of sacred groves and how they can be related to botanic gardens.

The purpose of this paper is to look at the Congress theme- Cultivating Green Awareness, from the traditional conservation practice point of view.

In the presentation, effort will be made to show what sacred groves are

and the way they support conservation practices and traditional education in general.

Again, the vital connections between sacred groves and botanic gardens will be shown. Further, some highlights will be thrown on how modern economic development and changes in traditional beliefs have affected sacred groves in diverse ways. Finally, recommendations or suggestions will be made in respect to the future of sacred groves and botanic gardens in developing world in an attempt to stimulate national and international understanding among participants.

SACRED GROVES

Sacred groves may be considered as small pockets of residual closed-canopy forest, sometimes near human settlements which are scattered throughout African countries.

They are considered as "Sacred" or "Fetish" groves because they are forest preserved for local socio-cultural reasons, primarily religious purposes.

Sacred groves in effect are areas often associated with cultural and rituals such as rain-making, sacrifices to totems, earth spirits and burial grounds. Within their boundaries members of the community are prohibited from performing certain specified activities which may include hunting, gathering, wood cutting, cultivating, grazing and many others.

Many have been allocated special dwelling places (streams, lagoons, forests) that are usually left undisturbed and only visited for important life cycle ceremonies- ie. puberty rites, religious rituals or secret society meetings.

Sacred groves vary in sizes- at times varying between the size of a living room to hectares of untouched forests. They abound in different areas in Africa and Asia.

In Ghana for example the nearly one-hectare sacred grove in Malshegu Community is the largest in the northern part of the country while the smallest among others is sited in the middle of a road in Cape Coast, Central Region of Ghana.

The community has preserved these forests for nearly 300 years by establishing and enforcing land use rules and practices designed to safeguard the abode of the guardian fetish.

Except for taking cuttings to propagate new sacred trees, most groves are inviolable. Any clearing or cutting is regarded as sacrilege and treated as a

serious anti-social act requiring expiation.

It is a general rule that, "No one is to disturb a grove and a leaf can not be picked from such a tree" according to Saberwal (1970).

These measures restrict human interferences, limit the use of forest products and protect them against natural disasters and other events including annual bushfires.

They have enabled groves, originally open canopy forest to develop a partially closed canopy which is usually striking in the semi-arid surroundings.

Importance of Sacred Groves in Africa

By protecting the grove, the people derive many benefits in addition to the spiritual rewards of serving their faith. Some of these are as follows:

MEDICINAL PLANTS

The medicinal plants and herbs collected by traditional medicine men and "prophets" serve important health needs for the community.

There are some scarce herbal species that can only be found in fewer sacred groves in Africa. Groves serve as refuge and repository just like botanical gardens where at times a large variety of fauna and flora and numerous native species found nowhere else

in such concentrations (either small or large) exist.

The groves maintain a higher biodiversity than the open-canopy forest where there are no restrictions on their use.

SEEDS

The groves like botanic gardens are important source of seeds and also serve as seed dispensers.

In Africa, this is vital to the traditional shifting cultivation practices. The traditional shifting cultivation practices invariably involving slash-and-burn methods destroy species, seeds and the environment in general. Endangered species found in the groves are left undisturbed and can bear fruits, produce seeds and seedlings which are frequently used in establishing new sacred groves.

WATER SHEDS

In most cases, sacred groves serve as watersheds and protect water sources. According to Dr. C. Dorm-Adzobu and Okyeame Ampadu-Agyei, G. Veit (1991) where even groves are small, their presence ensures that the water table remains high in the immediate area.

WIND BREAKERS

Sacred Groves also protect settlement from wind and rain storms, bushfires and other climatic hazards in most cases.

CENTRES FOR TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

Like botanic gardens, sacred groves are used as centres where the young generations are taught names of trees, herbs and the various illness that they are able to cure.

More frequent has been the ceremonial transfer of power from one generation set to another- referred to as rites of passage ceremonies - for circumcision and elderhood.

This, by tradition is the period when children of age, are initiated into adulthood. Elders impart to the young ones the culture and history of their communities by way of oral teachings and demonstrations in their groves.

These rites are very important in traditional societies of Africa because they are used as periods of socialization process to educate the younger generations about plants and animals, folks stories, history of tribes and traditional occupations which are related to nature and the environment- ie. hunting and farming.

Lessons about seasons which are usually indicated or ushered in by flowers of certain trees and plants are taught during these ceremonies. These were very helpful in traditional societies where recording of time and seasons were virtually non-existent.

The calm and uninterrupted conditions prevailing in sacred groves just

like botanical gardens create the needed atmosphere for learning in traditional societies.

The present state of Sacred Groves

Modern economic activities, increasing population growth and foreign debts in developing Africa have given rise to over-exploitation and hence resource shortage.

People are always looking for ways to secure fuelwood and other forest products and land for settlement. All these have contributed to severe encroachment on the once protected groves.

In Ghana alone, it is believed that a greater percentage of existing sacred groves got burnt during the severe drought seasons of 1980's through bushfires.

A lot more continue to be destroyed to make room for development. There has been the realisation that these practices affect the groves and the environment in general and hence every effort to halt this trend must be put in place.

Sacred groves are real and important and as a result, indigenous communities in Africa and Asia have held them in high esteem for many centuries, this stems from the useful role they have played in conservational practices just like botanic gardens.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 recognised and supported this idea as stated in principle 22 of its declaration.

"Indigenous people and their communities and other local communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognise and duly support their identity, culture and interests and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development.

The foregoing therefore makes it imperative for everyone to take a serious look at the traditional conservation practices and to make sure that they are preserved.

SUGGESTIONS

There is the need for policy implications that are supported by research from sacred groves- these include government recognition, both at the national and sub-national levels; of the importance of effective local level natural resource management. This can greatly increase the ability of communities to safeguard their natural resources.

- Traditional communities seeking to protect sacred sites threatened by non-believers need the support and backing of the government and the

entire populace for the legal authority to implement and enforce traditional resource management strategies and practices.

- Community initiatives in resource management can benefit from the timely input of technical expertise and assistance from trained government officials particularly with regard to improved management practices and techniques.
- There is the need to give recognition to the importance of traditional religious beliefs in areas or countries where local natural resource management are involved to empower communities to take greater control of their resources- ie. through

educational programmes etc.

Finally, there is the need for the northern and southern countries to pull resources together to research into sacred groves and botanical gardens in the south, with a view to promoting them. Identified groups- ie NGOs and a lot of others can assist in programmes to support botanical gardens and all forms of indigenous practices that conserve the environment in general.

This will go a long way to improve the existing conditions in botanic gardens in some countries of the South to set up educational units to promote education in botanic gardens in general.

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