The Environmentality of Shrines: Case of Gonde Malende (Shrine) of the Tonga People of Southern Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Religious beliefs, traditional beliefs, cultural mores and practices play a crucial role for the successful conservation of the environment and specific organisms in the developing countries (Ngara & Mangizvo, 2013). This paper emerged from an investigation of the environmental value of the main shrine of the Tonga people of Zambia; the Gonde Malende. The study reveals that the shrine has been a sanctuary for both fauna and flora, and other inanimate components of the environment. Also, the conservation of various environmental entities has had a reciprocal benefit to the conserver and the conserved. Taboos, prohibitions and punishment have been the central tools enabling protection of the area from degradation. Interviews and observations were used for data collection. I recommend use of Malende as an environmental value clarifying resource, and relevant local and government authorities, and non-governmental organizations should collaborate in sustaining the grove. Also, environmental Conservation Institutions should earnestly consider infusing indigenous strategies in their work.

Keywords: Gonde, Malende, shrine, environmental sustainability

INTRODUCTION

The *Gonde Malende* is the main shrine of the Tonga people of Zambia. The shrine is located in Monze District and it transcends geographical confines of the land of the Tonga (O'Brien & O'Brien, 2007). Gonde Malende is the burial site of the second and third chiefs of the Tonga people (Kanene, 2011). It influences the production, distribution, and management of natural goods (Kakoma, 2007) through rituals performed there and the rules that govern it. The rituals involve appeasing the ancestral spirits through gifts, dancing around the shrine, making socio-ecological requests and celebrating *butebuzi* (harvest) and the calling of rains (*Ibid*). There are numerous taboos associated with this shrine which have immensely contributed to environmental sustainability of its location, the *Gonde.* Out of the Gonde Malende, was born the Gonde Ceremony which has played an educative role over the meaning of the Malende and the broader culture of the Tonga (Kanene, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role that has been played by the Gonde Malende in conserving the environment. The research examined various aspects of the shrine from an environmental sustainability perspective. The rationale being that the lessons of environmental sustainability from the study may be replicated elsewhere and that the indigenous methods of conservation may be appreciated by those who will read this document.

PERSPECTIVES FROM LITERATURE

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), in his argument for a viable eco-centric environment states that a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community, it is wrong when it tends otherwise. It is here where environmental conservation

endeavors of the *Gonde Malende* find value. According to Anial et al. (2014), traditional African belief systems have strong elements of conservation techniques that can be adopted for effective conservation of natural resources and the protection of the environment. They further argue that in every traditional African setting each community has what they hold sacred as the ancestral home of their forefathers. Some objects are conserved because they of being symbolically important in the course of indegenous community's existence. Therefore, groves famous for preservation of wildlife species have developed in these sacred sites. For instance, sacred groves of the Ugunda chieftaincy in central Tanzania when inventoried to compare woody species richness and taxonomic diversity with those of forest plots in a state managed Forest Reserve, sacred groves had greater woody species richness and taxonomic diversity than the state managed Forest Reserve (Mgumia & Oba, 2003). Anane (2010) agrees by saying that sacred places in nature, shrines, stand out as vegetation-rich ecosystems compared to their surroundings which are frequently degraded landscapes. Traditional societies recognize and appreciate the beauty of nature leading conscious efforts of installing mechanisms to check deforestation, pollution to land, air, and water. Additionally, society teaches pride in their ancestry, the pride that fosters admiration and reverence, and suggests regulations for the conduct of life, hence revering their burial sites. In various communities specific trees are regarded as sacred due to the numerous functions which may include providing shades and medicines. The above insights highlight the fact that traditional societies have cultural resources that can easily support environmental ethics (Decher, 1997).

Shrines have a religious implication which laudably infuses environmental conservation. According to Mbiti (1969), 'Africans are notoriously religious' implying that religion permeates and penetrates the whole life of an African. African traditional religion is oriented towards preservation of life and promotion of a healthy environment that enhances life. As far as traditional African culture is concerned, all its members have a religious and moral obligation with regard to the environment as they know that to destroy the environment means to destroy the human person (Bakanja, 2010).

Bakanja (2010) furthers asserts that environmental conservation is not a recent phenomenon in indigenous African communities. Africans have always believed that everything that belongs to the ecosystem and the environment has a strong spiritual meaning for humans, hence necessitating conservation. For instance, certain trees could not be felled because they were considered sacred as they possessed healing powers; this ensured the preservation of forests. Outside Africa, Anane (2010) cites India and elsewhere in indigenous Asia where sacred groves are a very ancient, widespread, and important traditional system of environmental conservation that long precedes more recent Western strategies for protected areas.

Sponsel (2008) says, among diverse indigenous people, areas with attributes distinguishing them as extraordinary, usually in a spiritual sense, are considered sacred. The designation of a natural area as sacred has promoted the conservation of its associated biodiversity thus, contributing to the development of community-based protected areas. Such sites have fostered reduction of human environmental impact, thereby culminating in the protection of environmental endowments (Anane, 2010). Furthermore, Martin (2000) and Nair (1981) have observed that sacred sites have variously been attributed as having resident deities and spirits, storing rare and extraordinary flora and fauna, thus, considerably aiding the protection of wildlife and other biological resources.

Sacred sites are protected, conserved and maintained through a combination of taboos, prohibitions, beliefs and restrictions which are rules defining access and behavior. Anane (2010) adds, universally burning, fuel-wood gathering, and tree felling are forbidden in these

Leena and Luna International, Oyama, Japan.
(株) リナアンドルナインターナショナル, 小山市、日本.
ISSN: 2186-8492, ISSN: 2186-8484 Print
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sacred sites. Ultimately, Awedora (2002) and Sponsel (2008) advance, environmental conservation strategies that incorporate culture and nature are likely to be more effective than the top down imposed ones.

Shrines usually comprise stands of trees or patches of forest that local communities conserve primarily because of their religious importance and also because of economic, medicinal, social, and cultural functions. Some plant species in sacred groves may provide emergency foods during periods of drought, crop failure, and famine. Salick et al. (2007) in a remote sensing study indicated that in sacred sites habitats with greater species richness, diversity, and endemism are more prevalent than in randomly selected non-sacred sites.

With the realization of the environmental sustainability contribution of indigenous, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples sets out the individual and collective rights of the native peoples. It calls for the maintenance and strengthening of their cultural identities, and emphasises their right to protect their lands resources and to pursue development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations (UN, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

The study sample was selected using purposive sampling (snowball) to ensure an inclusion of only relevant individuals regarding environmental components of the shrine and their interpretation. The sample comprised traditional leaders of the Tonga, elderly persons, also some members of Staffs from Mukanzubo Tonga Cultural Centre. Face to face interviews were employed for in-depth data collection. Participant observation was conducted for visual impression of environmental elements of *Malende*. Data was classified under similar themes for easy analysis.

Environmental Elements in the Ceremony

Earlier discourse in this paper highlighted that Lwiindi Gonde ceremony is the major cultural celebration of the Tonga people of Southern Zambia. The ceremony name is compound expression of two Tonga terminologies, Lwiindi and Gonde. Of relevance to the study is 'Gonde'. According to 80% of the respondents, the term Gondemeans a thick jungle or dense forest. My physical verification of the assertion, regarding the meaning of Gonde, concurs with the response of the 80% above. The researcher observed that Gonde is a dense forest of various forms of undisturbed vegetation whose size is slightly over 2 square kilometers.

The study understood that there were a number of underpinning factors to this unique pocket of apparently pristine nature. Most of the respondents indicated that the forest was an outcome of many years of indigenous environmental knowledge practice among the Tonga people. Majority of respondents attributed the presence of tall luxurious indigenous trees in the *Gonde* (forest) to the rule forbidding the cutting of trees, burning, and breaking of twigs from the forest. In fact, in order to maintain the sanctity of the grove, it was a taboo to carry out any form of deforestation or cutting grass from the *Gonde* or performing sexual activities there. It was revealed that the most fundamental basis for the conservation of the jungle is housing of the graves of the second and third chiefs of the Tonga people, Moonze Mayaba and Moonze Nchete Ilya Mabwe, respectively. Additionally, Gonde was reported to have been the location of the home of the first chief. The importance attached to these first three chiefs, prompted the Tonga to have this site as their main shrines *(Malende)*. In fact, Anial et al. (2014) reveals that the significant attribute of the belief systems that rest on the ascription of supernatural powers to some parts of the environment as the home of the gods has significantly helped to conserve the natural environment. The protection of these areas from

utilization, exploitation and use explicitly encourages conservation of environmental resources. As a consequence, a large portion of vegetation around that area has not been tampered with. Any form of contempt of the taboos and rules governing the shrine resulted in regrettable consequences to the offender or the community. Among which were mysterious death, hefty payment of livestock, and/or outright banishment from Tongaland or withholding of rains by the gods, and outbreak of strange diseases. Anial et al. (2014) observes that traditional institutions played a key role in ensuring that those who break the rules are punished through religious believes, moral sanctions and a range of sacred and cultural practices, hence, ensuring natural resource management.

The Gonde is not only a vegetation conservation area but also famous for wildlife preservation as observed during the research. The community established a rule restricting hunting of wild animals from the forest. Actually, if during hunting from the nearby bushes, an animal entered this area, hunters were not allowed to pursue it any further. Disobedience to this rule attracted a fine of black colored livestock accompanied by any suitable punishment which in some instances would mean expulsion from the chiefdom. Therefore, the area developed into an important sanctuary for wild animals such as rabbits, rats, impala and a few others. As asserted by Anial et al. (2014), forbidden areas and totemic items/objects associated with worship immensely promoted conservation of resources. Also, Millar (2004) states that in sacred places trees and plants are allowed to grow undisturbed and reptiles, birds, fish and animals could have free living without fear of poaching or interference by man. Ngara and Mangizvo (2013), reveal that among the Shona of Zimbabwe it was equally a taboo to hunt or poach animals within or running into a sacred forest because they belong to God and the ancestral spirits. Also in Indonesia, Reed and Carol (2004) suggest that Iban sacred forests contain more game than non-sacred forests, a finding similar to Decher's (1997) study of biodiversity of small mammals in Ghana's sacred sites. This has been made possible through mainly taboos that restricted access to these sites to particular activities and members of a community (Millar, 2004).

Besides, it was illegal to hunt birds from the grove. This led to an availability of a high population of various species of birds. A good proportion of the residents within close proximity of the *Gonde* (forest) attested to the forest's being a good haven of a diversity of species of birds. The researcher, essentially, had the luxury of witnessing an array of bird flocks retire to the forest at sun set.

The study also unveiled snakes as being among the most prominent environmental features of the *Malende*. In response to why a high number of the reptiles, nearly all the respondents stated that snakes were a manifestation of the *Mizimo* (ancestral spirits; their gods) at the *Malende*. These gods were reported as manifesting themselves in form of snakes. They called the snakes as '*Bami Bamalende'*, meaning, 'the kings of the shrine'. According to Mrs. Clara Hakapoko, one of the oldest respondents, the 'Kings of the shrines' were mainly noticeable during moments of veneration such as prayers for rain and harvest. This was her verbatim:

> "aaba *Bami bakali kulibonya ciindi notwakali kupailila mvwula, kwakali kunga nzonka mpati kapati yatalika kuzemba mumasamu aaya malamfu. Kusaanguna inga guwo pati lyaunga, masamu a zungaana, mpona mulabona biyo muzoka mupati wabbuka, aaba Mbami Bamalende"* (these Kings would mainly appear during our prayers for rain and good harvests; they would show up in form of long, big snakes in these tall trees. Before appearing, they were preceded by a mighty wind, that violently shook the trees. Eventually, big, long snakes, the Kings of the shrine, would show up in the trees in view of all people present).

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ISSN: 2186-8492, ISSN: 2186-8484 Print
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Ngara and Mangizvo (2013) had a similar finding among the Shangwe. He says the Shangwe perceive snakes as symbolic of their ancestors who performed different roles when they were still living beings. Therefore, due to the belief that snakes in this locale were an expression of the ancestral spirits; it was prohibited to kill them. The belief that gods or spirits dwell in such natural resources as trees, hills, rocks and certain animals is confirmed by Awedora (2002). The ascription of supernatural powers to portions of the environment and protecting such places through taboos helps in conserving the environment and protecting natural resources (Anial et al., 2013). This could be an explanation to there being a high population of the reptiles.

Around these Tonga Shrines, a specific indigenous tree species, *Lwaanga*, was very common. Many tree species are found in the shrines (Anial et al, 2014). When asked to explain the prominence of this particular tree genus, most respondents conceived that the trees were planted in the area by the custodians of the shrines (*Beetwa and Baleya* clans; the loyal clans of Moonze chiefdom). They narrated that it carried some spiritual significance and serviced the shrines through offering shade to it as this species was green through much of the year. The tree was also said to be the habitat of the spirits. This is a finding similar to that of Ngara and Mangizvo (2013) that trees were homes to the Shangwe's rain spirits. Further enquiry on the prominence of the *Lwaanga* tree species revealed that planting it at the shrine was a form of conserving it. Its preservation was necessitated by its being of great demand among the local people. They used the tree mainly for fencing of gardens, orchards, homes, and marking of boundaries; this utility value was dictated by its ability to grow easily once planted. Additionally, the tree species was used for various construction purposes among the local inhabitants. The locals would make wind breakers, individual and family or communal in shrines in form of huts from it.

The other tree species that was very common in this forest was locally called *muntowa*. They explained that the tree had a very important medicinal value; currently people in the area use its leaves to make tea, while the roots and barks are used to cure malaria and many other ailments including dysentery and diarrhoea and some livestock diseases. Furthermore, tea made from its leaves is said to be capable of boosting hemoglobin levels. The tree's utility value could also be traced in its ability to cure a variety of livestock diseases more so that the Tonga community was the leading pastoral faming ethnic group in Zambia **(**O'Brien & O'Brien, 2007). Kanene (2010:53) confirms the medicinal value of the *Muntowa* when he posits "extracts from the *Muntowa* (backs, leaves, milky liquid) were used by the spiritualists among the Tonga to heal various human and livestock diseases". Thampson (2005) alludes to the arguments above by stating, in various traditional communities specific trees are regarded as sacred due to the numerous functions which may include providing shades and medicines.

Another highly noticeable article at the shrine were unique types of stones (pebbles), sort of granite in nature, which the locals referred to as *kaili.* The *Kaili* was reported to be a special type of stone that the first chief of the Tonga, Nchete Ilya Mabwe, would occasionally crush and eat, hence, the name *Ilya Mabwe*, meaning the 'Chief who eats stones'. The shrine presents numerous quantities of this pebble whose original source was testified to have been Mount Lwiili located more than 30 kilometers from the Shrine. It is not very clear how huge boulders were transported to the *Malende*. Anyhow, Awedora (2002) and Marcessen (1994) advise that Tonga's philosophy of life is aimed at the perpetuation of all objects, both animate and inanimate. The fact about the usefulness of rocks among the local people was clear. A number of the informers observed that the rocks had an important medicinal element. They revealed that individuals under any type of spiritual attack could simply have a concoction of the *kaili* administered to them for healing. The segments of the stones were also believed to

possess medical elements that could be used for non-spiritual health ailments even in modern times. It was no wonder a number of these stones were brought to this place to preserve them from being exhausted on the basis of their being highly demanded by the local communities. Mrs. Clara Haakapoko posited that the stones at the shrines could mainly be used for medicinal purposes at critical times, especially in instances of a disease outbreak (such as smallpox in olden days and measles in both olden and recent times) in the community. This is implied by Anial et al. (2014) when they say fruits, nuts, leaves, soil, stones, water, roots, bark of trees and grasses are sources of herbal medicine.

One other element that stood out from the Gonde Ceremony was the exhibition of maize cobs to some rainmakers. An enquiry into its meaning led to the majority of the interviewees saying that the cobs were presented as a form of appreciation to the rain giver (God) through the ancestral spirits (Mizimo). One of respondents even cited a proverb of the Tonga People "*utalumbi mubwa*" interpreted as 'one who never appreciates is a dog'. The proverb emphasized the cultural phenomenon among this ethnic grouping that all favors we receive are simply by the grace of the giver. The second commonest interpretation of the presence of the maize cobs was about seed preservation. According to some respondents, every year during the Lwiindi Gonde ceremony, choice maize cobs were presented before the crowd of the attendees with a message of the need to preserve seed of the choicest of the harvest of the year. To justify the reason for seed conservation, an elder respondent advanced the following proverb of the Tonga people: "*nkondo ngukavwumbu*" meaning, war comes unexpectedly. The proverb was a means of alerting the Tonga that rains may come before they were fully prepared for the planting season. Hence, they needed to always have enough backup seed for planting in instances of a dramatic onset of the rain season. During this time the local people were instructed on how they could preserve the seed without the danger of it being destroyed by pests. Through this strategy was testified as having been at the helm of sustaining most of the indigenous seed varieties and crop to date.

The Gonde ceremony prominently features a group of people normally clad in black attire who the respondents called the loyal clans of chief Moonze; the priests. Besides being custodians of the *Malende*, they functioned as rain predictors and as rainmakers. Haverkort and Millar (2004) agree with the finding above by arguing that in most traditional communities, there exist varieties of traditional leaders, specialists and spirit mediums. The rainmakers' role of predicting seasonal rainfall pattern has not diminished even in modern times. During each ceremony, a member of this clan is allocated space to tell the public about the year's rainfall forecast. Most respondents held that his prediction has been by and large accurate. As matter of verifying the assertion, I attended the 2010 and 2013 ceremonies. In the 2013 ceremony, the 'rainmaker' warned the patrons not to plant early maturing seeds of maize because rains would be above normal and would prolong. As could be ascertained from annual rainfall distribution figures of 2013/2014 season in Southern Zambia, their predictions could, generally, be described as accurate as it generally tallied with the annual rainfall figures released by the Zambia Metrological Department (2014)**.** This attests to the reliability of indigenous methods of rainfall predictions. The rainmakers' spiritual role in stopping and making rains can impact negatively or positively on the available natural resources. The rain maker can avert negative rainfall situations through sacrifices. Therefore, in natural resource use and management the relevance of rainmakers and shrines cannot be overemphasized (Haverkort & Millar, 2004). The statement simply argues for the significance of the rainmaker in environmental sustainability as they are believed to influence rainfall availability for the wellbeing of the environment. As the entire of Gonde wildlife demands favorable rain distribution to thrive, positive rainfall authority of the rainmakers cannot be overstated.

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ISSN: 2186-8492, ISSN: 2186-8484 Print
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CONCLUSION

The study has evidence of the significance of the Tonga shrine (Malende) for environmental sustainability. In the face of the ever rising degradation of natural environment, the world may take a leaf from indigenous methods of conserving the environment. Traditional methods could be helpful in preserving and rehabilitating the environment that has been degraded by exploitative actions of environmental resources by humanity. The Gonde Malende is an important environmental resource for environmental sustainability education thus all effort must be made to have it sustained.

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