

CONSERVATION AND YORUBA FOREST TABOOS Research Note

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In Nigeria, as well as in many other developing countries in Africa, the revival of traditional methods of forest conservation is now being advocated. Indigenous knowledge is passed from one generation to another as part of the cultural norms of society. It is thought that some beliefs and practices could still serve as disincentives against the exploitation of forest resources in developing countries.

The Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria have many myths which explain the origin and behaviour of phenomena in their environment and daily life (Oso, 1977). Predominantly farmers, they depended on the forest for a number of products, both woody and non-woody. The communal land holding system, whereby land tenure and maintenance are vested in the community which could be a lineage, a village, an age-set, a religious group or a cooperative and association, as defined by Cornea (1985), is common in Yorubaland.

Method

Four rural communities, which are still far from urban influence, were selected from each of the core Yoruba-speaking states of Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo and Ekiti. In each community, six elderly individuals who had maintained domicile for a continuous period of 30 years or more were selected and interviewed with the aid of a semi-structured matrix. Each respondent was asked to recall the forest taboos in the community and also to provide conservation justification for the application of such taboos.

The occurrence of tree species identified in the myths was determined within a 500m radius from each community and recorded on an abundance scale defined by Bongers *et al.* (1988) as follows: less than 5 individuals as rare (R), 5 to 10 as occasional (O), 11-30 as frequent (F), 31 to 100 as abundant (A), and over 100 individuals as very abundant (VA).

The current acceptability of taboos was determined by interviewing twenty individuals of different age-groups in each of the sampled communities.

Results and discussion

A total of ten taboos was found to be currently observed in the sampled communities. Each of the taboos constitutes a historical disincentive used in the conservation of forest resources in the communities. These taboos are discussed below:

1. Some natural forests were described as the habitat of (evil) spirits and deities.

Exploiters of products from such forests would incur the wrath of the spirits. Punishments ranged from misfortunes, strange and incurable diseases, attacks by wild animals, to sudden death.

2. Some forests were designated *igbo-oro* or *igbo-igbale* by the communities, meaning forests where sacrifices and rituals were made to appease the gods. Consequently, women and children were prohibited from utilizing the resources from such forests. Offenders were fined a range of items which included several kegs of palm wine.
3. Visits to forests by pregnant women and women of child-bearing age were prohibited. It is believed that demons in the forests are capable of afflicting erring women with *abiku*, i.e. children that die soon after birth.
4. Some aboriginal forests are used as a cemetery for those who died mysteriously and/or tragically. These include pregnant women, suicides, widows or widowers who died soon after the death of the spouse, hunchbacks, albinos, *abiku* etc. These forests are excluded from exploitation. It is believed that whoever ventures into these forests risks sudden death for himself or his family.
5. Some features within the forest communities were regarded as demi-gods who served as intermediaries between human beings and gods. These features included rivers, lakes, streams, rocks, valleys, mountains etc. The demi-gods dislike pollution of any kind; hence the forests surrounding them are protected from exploitation.
6. Pregnant women were forbidden to use *Alstonia boonei* for fuel. Offenders were liable to give birth to babies with shrinking bodies. This tree is known as *Ahun*, meaning "to shrink".
7. It is forbidden to use *Myrianthus arboreus* for fuel. Offenders are liable to the payment of heavy fines which vary from one community to another. This tree is known as *igi ade* in Yoruba, meaning "crown tree". The Yoruba have high respect for their kings, and thus their crowns. Offenders often incurred the wrath of the gods.
8. *Spondias mombin* can be used for fuel only by old people with gray hair.
9. It is forbidden to use *Newbouldia leavis* for fuel and staking, because its leaves are used during the conferment of chieftaincy titles in Yorubaland. This tends to conserve the species.
10. Seedlings of some trees designated *igi orisa* (trees of the deities) must not be destroyed. These trees will serve as the future abode of the deities. Such trees include: *Anogeissus leiocarpus* (Plate 1), *Brachystegia nigerica*, *Ceiba pentandra* (Plate 2), *Cordia platythyrsa*, *Erythrophleum suaveoleus*, *Harungana madagascarensis* (Plate 3), *Khaya grandifoliola* (Plate 4), *Nauclea diderrichii*, *Milicia excelsa* (Plate 5), *Stereospermum acuminatissimum*, *Sterculia oblonga*, *Sterculia rihynopetala*, *Termianalia ivorensis*,

Terminalia superba (Plate 6), *Celtis zenkeri* (Plate 7), *Trema guineensis* (Plate 8), *Trichilia heudelotii*, *Triplochiton scleroxylon* and *Uraria picta*. Farmers plant their crops near these species and tend them along with their crops. This could be regarded as the precursor of the *taungya* systems in Yorubaland.

Many of the above listed taboos affected women. In Yoruba culture most of the household duties fall to women; hence they are more involved in gathering forest products than men. Most of the taboos were therefor meant to discourage excessive exploitation and ensure a sustainable supply of forest products for both present and future generations.

All the species identified in these taboos were observed to be very scarce in all the communities sampled in this study. Similar tests conducted on the belief of respondents in the above-listed taboos (Tables 1, 2 and 3) revealed that most respondents still believed in them. Most of these were people below 40 years of age, educated and adherents of Christianity and Islam.

Results from this study tend to correlate with observations made by Subhadira *et al.* (1981) in an earlier study carried out in Thailand.

The current acceptability of these taboos in Yorubaland constitutes a disincentive to the over-exploitation of forest resources in Yorubaland.



Plate 1. *Anogeissus leiocarpus*

Table 1. Acceptability of forest taboos

Age Class (Yrs.)	No. of respondents	Still observing the taboos
<20	42 (18%)	36 (86%)
20-40	107 (45%)	85 (80%)
41-60	68 (28%)	54 (79%)
>60	23 (10%)	18 (78%)
Total	240	193 (80%)

Table 2. Religious inclination of respondents still observing forest taboos

Age	Number	Christian	Muslim	Other
<20	36	13 (36%)	18 (50%)	5 (14%)
20-40	85	45 (53%)	32 (38%)	8 (9%)
41-60	54	27 (50%)	25 (46%)	2 (4%)
>60	18	12 (67%)	6 (33%)	0 (0%)
Total	193	97 (50%)	81 (42%)	15 (18%)

Table 3. Literacy status of respondents who still observed forest taboos

Age	Number	Literate	Illiterate
<20	36	36 (100%)	—
20-40	85	82 (96%)	3 (4%)
41-60	54	48 (89%)	6 (11%)
>60	18	8 (44%)	10 (56%)
Total	193	174 (90%)	19 (10%)

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Plate 2. *Celtis zenkeri*



Plate 3. *Ceiba pentandra*



Plate 4. *Harungana madagascarensis*



Plate 5. *Khaya grandifolia*



Plate 6. *Milicia excelsa*



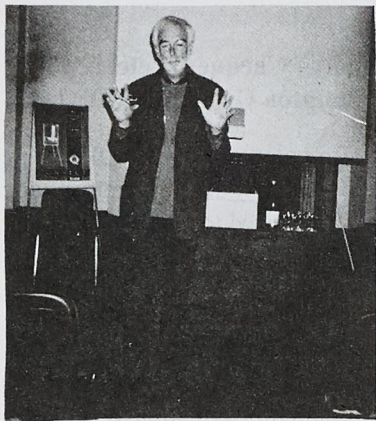
Plate 7. *Terminalia superba*



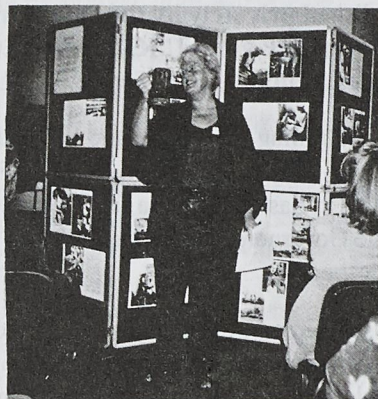
Plate 8. *Trema guineensis*

THE BRISTOL SYMPOSIUM

September 27th and 28th 2003



Professor John Picton warms to his theme



Liz Moloney proposes a toast to Michael Cardew.



Professor Simon Ottenberg solemnly declares



Professor James Gibbs, Soyinka aficionado,
with David Roberts of the British Council