

Did Forestry Education in Africa Begin 50 Years Ago?

David Okali

Department of Forest Resources Management

University of Ibadan, Ibadan

d_okali@yahoo.com

Introduction

The Department of Forest Resources Management, University of Ibadan, celebrated 50 years of its existence in 2014. For the occasion, a symposium, titled '50 Years of Forestry Education in Africa', was held on 24 April, 2014. Contributors to the symposium were allowed to speak on any topic of their choice that was consistent with the theme of the symposium. The present article draws largely from a contribution made at that symposium, and is produced here to offer its content to a wider audience of readers.

Establishment and significance

There is no dispute that the Department of Forest Resources Management, University of Ibadan, was established about 50 years ago, and was the first centre for the education of professional foresters in Africa. It is also not in dispute that the department received and trained students from all over Africa and beyond, in the first few decades of its establishment, to underscore the fact that for a long time this department remained an important international centre for education in forestry. Before the establishment of the department, the professional cadre of forestry staff in Nigeria, both Nigerians and non-Nigerians, were all trained overseas. The bulk of the professional staff were expatriates anyway, and came already trained in their countries; the few older Nigerian professional staff were also trained abroad, while most of those who joined after the University College Ibadan (UCI) became functional, received part of their training in allied disciplines like general science or botany in Nigeria, before proceeding overseas to acquire professional training in forestry. Virtually all professionals in the forestry service in Nigeria since the foundation of the department are direct or indirect products of the department.

It is worth celebrating such a singular contribution to forestry development in Nigeria, and indeed Africa, and it is appropriate to congratulate all who have been

part of this contribution. But, what this contribution would rather like to do on this occasion is draw attention to the often neglected practice of forestry that took place before Africa's development became dominated by external influence. As distinct from formal forestry, attention is directed to what is generally referred to as 'traditional forestry', for which there must also have been some form of training or education, so that while we celebrate the contribution by the department to forestry education over the past 50 years, we also reflect on what this education, or indeed forestry development in the country, might have been, if the education had been built on our traditional experience. There is a tendency to neglect the education associated with traditional forestry and assume that education in forestry is only about that associated with the forestry practised from colonial times.

Ordinarily, given the mindset, to which we Africans have been conditioned, the issue is hardly relevant. We have a mindset which ignores or downplays the traditional African past, and can readily accept that there was no 'forestry', let alone 'forestry education' in Africa before Africa made contact with the outside world. We have a mindset which downgrades the forestry efforts of our traditional past, to the extent that we often find statements which, by saying that 'organized conservation in Nigeria' started with the colonial practice (Aminu-Kano & Marguba, 2002), imply that our traditional efforts at forest conservation were not organized! (see Okali, 2003).

What is forestry? What is forestry education?

When we discountenance what our people did in the past in using their forest land, we are forced to ask: 'What is forestry?' and 'What is forestry education'? Even without deep search, knowledgeable people all understand 'forestry' to be concerned with the management of forests to yield forest resources for the benefit of humankind. We use the term 'forest' to refer to all land not under crops as in agriculture, or built over for human occupation together with the necessary infrastructure for human living, as in settlements. By 'forest' we mean all wild land; hence, we practise forestry, and obtain forest resources from 'forests' in the strict botanical sense of the word, and from all wild lands, right up to savanna and desert lands.

The Dictionary of Forestry, by the Society of American Foresters (1998; <http://dictionaryofforestry.org/dict/term/forestry>), defines 'forestry' as . . .

... the science, art, and craft of creating, managing, using, conserving and repairing forests and associated resources to meet desired goals, needs and values for human benefit'. It goes on to explain that 'modern forestry generally embraces a broad range of concerns, including ecosystem services, by assisting forests to provide timber as raw material for wood products, wildlife habitat, natural water quality management, recreation landscape and community protection, employment, aesthetically appealing landscapes, biodiversity management, watershed management, erosion control and preserving forests as 'sinks' for atmospheric carbon dioxide.

When we discountenance what our people were doing in the past, are we saying that before the influence of the outside world, African people, who traditionally live close to forests and wild lands, did not manage or use their forests for at least some, if not all, of the above benefits? Were they not practising forestry when they managed their forests to yield benefits which sustained them? Did they not conserve forests so that the whole landscape remained so heavily forested that the common way of describing the people was to call them 'forest dwellers', 'bush people'? Did the traditional forest users not have to be trained (educated), at least informally, in the art of managing their forests? Just to be sure that one was not deluding oneself as to the meaning of 'education', 'googling' the term revealed that

Education in its general sense is a form of learning in which the knowledge, skills and habits of a group of people are transferred from one generation to the next through teaching, training, or research.

The knowledge and skills of forest use and management must have been transferred down generations in traditional African settings to explain the continued existence, management, use and conservation of forests over millennia, in such a way that until the onset of the colonial experience, some 200 years ago, much of Africa remained extensively forested.

So, there was forestry, and there was forestry education, before there was external influence, and long before the department in the University of Ibadan was founded about fifty years ago, albeit not in the formal sense to which we Africans have all been conditioned to limit our perception of forestry. Failure to extend the perception of forestry beyond formal forestry, to what African people were doing before

contact was made with the outside world, especially before the colonial experience, disposes us readily to accepting that there was no forestry education before the department in the University of Ibadan was founded. If we say that education in formal forestry started in Africa about 50 years ago with the establishment of the department in the University of Ibadan, we would, at least, be acknowledging and giving some status to traditional forestry that had existed in Africa before contact was made with the outside world. Traditional practices of forestry may have been rudimentary, lacking the systematic, reductionist and analytical approach that we associate with formal forestry, nevertheless, pre-colonial conservation practices were uniquely developed in response to the environment and culture of the people.

Neglecting the past and back

Actually, the neglect and abandonment of traditional forestry is a colonial legacy, starting in Nigeria from the time Governor Moloney and his successor Governor Denton, together with the first professional forester appointed to the Nigerian forestry department, H. N. Thompson, foisted on the country what can be called a pan-West African forestry practice (Fairhead & Leach, 1998), largely derived from experience in India and Burma, which totally ignored and obscured traditional forestry. The primary motive for the introduced forestry was, no doubt, to organize and formalize the management of forests for exploitation, principally of timber, but also other products like rubber and resins, for overseas markets. Forestry was virtually associated only with timber production and marginally with other tangible benefits. The holistic view of forests in traditional forestry, with multiple objectives, intricate links of forest ecology with society and the institutional mechanisms for controlling use and conserving forests were at once jettisoned. Colonization and development imperatives, based on command and control governance procedures—forest reservation, appropriate administrative structures, regulatory and enforcement institutions and manpower development approaches—all became elements of formal forestry. Only in recent decades has the failure of formal forestry to sustain forest production or even stem deforestation and forest loss, in which Africa leads the world (FAO, 2009), compelled widespread questioning and re-examination of the tenets and much of the practice of formal forestry, with a concomitant renewal and increase of interest in traditional forest practices and traditional knowledge (see e.g., IUFRO, 2009).

The trend towards acknowledging the benefits of traditional forest practices is

reflected in the increasing attention to decentralization of governance, the admission of joint forest management and community-based forest management as options, an increasing emphasis on the potentials of incorporating indigenous knowledge (IUFRO, 2009) and the tendency towards outright devolution of responsibility to communities in community forest management. It began with expanding the objectives of contemporary forestry beyond just timber production, to recognizing non-timber forest products and other forest uses and, ultimately, to appreciating forests for all the ecosystem services they provide. This trend, though very welcome, can only culminate in an approximation to traditional forestry. It can never be an adequate substitute for forestry developed originally on traditional practices that had, as observed in Fraser (2013), developed over many years, out of local responses to challenges and opportunities produced by a variety of social, environmental and economic changes.

Wider Implications

The shortcoming, this attitude of ignoring, neglecting or downplaying our past, is by no means peculiar or limited to forestry. It is much more widespread and, in fact, pervades all of what we call development, and is held by some to be a major reason for the slow pace of development of Africa, a major reason why, despite the enormous endowment of natural resources and the growing complement of highly educated people and intellectual capital, Africa has remained largely underdeveloped. Evidently, we, the educated African elite, that should have provided leadership in exploring our past to distil from it insights that should guide our contemporary development so that it responds better to our environments and is aligned better with our cultures, have failed to do so. As a consequence, the development models that have been pursued in Africa, since colonial times, and sadly even more so since the continent gained independence and began to manage her own affairs, in trying to catch up with the rest of the world, have been weak because they draw little from our indigenous knowledge, accumulated over millennia of living in our African environments and under our African cultures.

Centuries of conditioning by the outside world, mostly the Western world (300 years of slavery and 200 years of colonization), has ensured that the educated African elite, have a mindset that rejects the African past as not being worthy of serious consideration, in conformity with the negative views foisted on Africa by the outside world (see OSIFA, 2013). Centuries of conditioning have created in the African

mind what Prof. D. T. Okpako, in his book, *Malaria and Indigenous Knowledge in Africa* (Okpako, 2011), recently described as 'a mental barrier' or 'a brick wall' that separates the educated African from his traditional past. The inferiority complex engendered in many-an-African by the negative image painted of the African past, which the educated elite have failed to counter because they are blocked from taking their past seriously, is viciously reinforced by the poor performance of post-independence African states in managing their affairs, and by the overwhelming ease with which Western technology, ostensibly, provides the ready means of meeting our daily needs for survival.

Africans need to redress all of this; we need to work more with insights gained from a closer study of our traditional ways of doing things. We need at all times to reflect a deeper consciousness of our past in every field of endeavor, especially in the educational field, so that we elevate our past, *eliminate the inferiority complex that develops in the growing mind and build the confidence and boldness to freely interrogate our past* with a view to learning from it how to be more effective in addressing our present day challenges (Fraser, 2013).

The next fifty years

The main plea in this brief presentation is for us to go back to a critical study and analysis of traditional forest land use practices. Over the next fifty years, I think the Department of Forest Resources Management, University of Ibadan, should significantly extend its lead by making other groundbreaking contributions in incorporating traditional ideas to strengthen forestry practices. The department took the first decisive step in 1975, when it abandoned the colonial over-emphasis on timber production as the main goal of forestry, and changed its name from the Department of Forestry to the Department of Forest Resources Management, to accommodate and emphasize other goals of forestry as well.

The department made its first significant contribution by pioneering the development of agroforestry. By this, the department brought into the mainstream of modern forestry the traditional practice of the integrated use of forest land for both agriculture and forestry. Many probably do not know that the new discipline of 'agroforestry' literally had its origin from the department at University of Ibadan, through the study by Dr. K. F. S. King, one of the pioneer staff of the department. Dr. King studied and reviewed the old forestry practice of 'taungya' and reported his study as *Agri-Silviculture*, published as Bulletin No. 1 of the Department of

Forestry in 1968. In the early 70s, following the severe droughts of 1969 - 1973 that devastated the Sahel region, the dean of department then, Prof. Larry Roche, who championed the broadening of the vision of the department from forestry to 'Forest Resources Management', picked up King's study and promoted it internationally as an important contribution to resolving the competition between agriculture and forestry and problems of land use, towards a greater production from land, to stave off the kind of hunger and famine experienced with the Sahelian droughts. The culmination of that campaign was the establishment of the International Council (now Centre) for Research in Agroforestry (ICRAF) in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1977, with Dr. K.F.S. King as its pioneer director.

In the same way, the next fifty years should see the department making more of such fundamental contributions to forestry practice. This can happen readily by stopping the downgrading, but instead deepening the study, of traditional ways of using forest land. Much can be learnt, for instance, from analyzing the holistic view that is maintained of forest land and its use for multiple objectives, at the same time that forest land is allocated for distinct purposes, as was traditionally common in the forested southeastern parts of Nigeria, and possibly also other parts of the forested south where farming and collection from the forest dominate the rural economy.

In southeastern Nigeria generally, forest land was traditionally available for use for agriculture, hunting, and the collection of forest products that ranged from large logs for dug-out canoes; outdoor seating logs (*ogwe* in Igbo language) in village squares; large wooden gongs (*ikoro* in Igbo) for rallying communities or relaying messages across long distances; totem posts and similar objects. Smaller wood pieces were used in building, fencing and general construction, as well as for fuelwood, food, artefacts and medicine. Forest land was also used for cultural and religious rites. Because of the predominant bush-fallowing/land rotation farming system, the harvestable products came with flexibility from both forest and farmlands. Farmland existed in small patches of predominantly arable crops with a few forest elements and patches of forest regrowth at various stages in the fallow phase.

High forest was reserved and set aside from farmland, but was available to be excised in portions from time to time to augment farmland. It was from the high forest that large logs were extracted when needed, and such extractions were communally organized and executed. The periodic excision of high forest to add to farmland was also communally executed. Reserved forest land could be further demarcated for different purposes, as in the example of Oboto forest land in Ondo

State, described by Okali and Amubode (1995), where the forest was demarcated into areas set aside separately for hunting, the collection of medicinal plants and for burial of people who died of little understood causes like lightning strike, small pox, etc.

It is significant that in many parts of southeastern Nigeria, sacred groves are the only remnants of the original high forest to be seen now.

Another important feature of traditional forest practice, and perhaps land use in general, was the predominance of communal patterns of ownership and control of forest land. Available land was owned and controlled by defined communities, who organized the use and protection of the land. Every member of a community had a claim to community land and could have access to a piece of land for appropriate use. Growing up in the village, I was fascinated by the collective approach to bringing portions of high forest to use for farming. On an agreed date community members would troop out to clear the appointed portion, and the cleared forest land was then shared among families of the community. Families then shared their portion among their members so that every household received a share. Later in life, when one had ceased to live in the village, I was even more fascinated to be taken to the farm by a family member and to be shown my own allocation—a few rows of prepared mounds—being used on my behalf by the family member! Despite the obvious limitations to this mode of land use, there must be lessons to learn at least in the communal pattern of use of common property.

Concluding remarks

When celebrating 50 years of forestry education in Africa by the Department of Forest Resources Management, University of Ibadan, we should bear in mind that a good part of our total forestry experience remains to be brought into the mainstream of our forestry education. There is a lot we can learn from the traditional ways of managing forest land to enrich and perhaps stabilize forest practices. There is need to overcome the mindset, which regards pre-colonial experience as unworthy of serious consideration, and seeks instead to gain from that experience ideas that may help to better address present day needs. The Department of Forest Resources Management, University of Ibadan, which pioneered the mainstreaming of 'agroforestry' into contemporary forestry, should aim, by the time it celebrates the next fifty years, to bring up from traditional practices at least two such groundbreaking ideas into contemporary forestry practice.

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