

5

Folklore and conservation in Nigeria: using PRA to learn from the elders

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• Background

Before the advent of Western religion and education, local people spent much of their time learning traditional law enforcement from the elders. For example, in many communities, it was taboo to kill the elephant, python or land snails. Certain wild trees were traditionally never cut down (see Figure 1). But Western education and religion have often failed to understand that communities, through folklore and taboos, have the capacity to protect wildlife and the forests. Western culture has tended to separate the young from tradition. This project attempted to discover the elders' knowledge of traditional beliefs and taboos and their application to natural resources protection.

• Discovering tradition using PRA

Traditions can be rediscovered by re-establishing local peoples' link with elders. This project used students from the Federal University of Agriculture, Umudike (FUAU) to work with the elders of some Nigerian communities.

To prepare the students for traditional information gathering, a special briefing session was held before the start of the Easter holidays, with 32 second-year students. This focused on folklore and the use of traditional institutions and societies to protect the forest and wildlife. The students were asked to use the Easter holidays to interact more closely with the elders of their various communities.

It was suggested that they should initially make detailed enquiries from the elders of

their communities on various aspects of folklore. Semi-structured interviews were used to examine: historical laws and how they are maintained, traditional institutions that were responsible for maintenance of law and order, organisation of the institutions, how law-breakers were punished and how folklore and taboos were used to conserve natural resources. The students were asked to listen carefully to stories told by the elders and ask for their meaning .

Other PRA methodologies were used by the students. For example, transect walks with the elders revealed the use and significance of natural resources and objects which people regarded as deities. The students also used trend and change analysis to explore chronologies of how customs and practices have changed over time. In particular, the students explored the causes of such changes. At the end of their consultations with the elders, the students wrote their reports and presented them at a seminar the following term.

• Using taboos and folklore to manage natural resources

In many rural communities of Nigeria, some wild animals are believed to be emblems of clans or people. For example, the Crocodile (*Crocodilus* sp.), the West African Python (*Python regius*), and land snails (*Archachatina* spp.) are believed to have clan or human relations. These animals are tabooed and very rarely killed. Pregnant women are not allowed to eat the meat of wildlife species, such as the tortoise (*Kinixys belliana*), which have features and traits that the elders would not like transferred to offspring. Plants are often believed to have supernatural powers since the

gods and spirits of the land and communities are said to live in the trunks of large trees.

Figure 1. The Iroko tree (*Milicia excelsa*) is a sacred tree among many communities of South-eastern Nigeria and traditionally is rarely felled



• Maintenance of taboos and folklore

In many of the villages that the students visited, taboos and folklore are maintained. The tree *Newbouldia laevis* is a permanent feature near village shrines. The Cocoyam species (*Colocasia esculenta* and *Xanthosoma mafaffa*), which are believed to have the power to ward off evil spirits, are common elements of compound/backyard farms. The cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), a tree believed to harbour the gods of the community, is commonly seen in the village playgrounds. These taboos and folklore are maintained through sacred societies which are always headed by the chief of the village.

For example, in Orom and Owom villages, the Ebirambe society is a traditional institution which the elders use to give instructions about taboos and folklore to the younger generations. In these villages, it is normally obligatory for

the male children of every family to be members of the sacred societies.

The change and understanding the cause

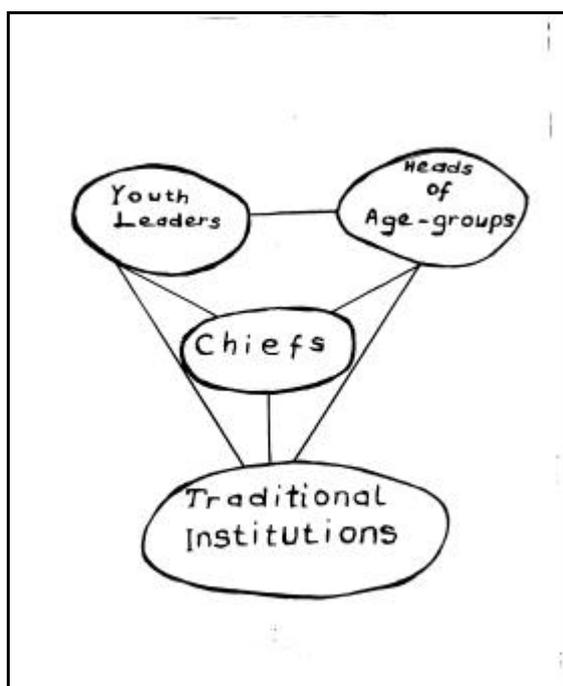
In 1914 Nigeria became one entity by the amalgamation act. In addition to new religions, formal legal systems were established and a formal police force put in place to enforce the new law. In 1960 Nigeria gained political independence from Britain, and in 1967-1970, there was a civil war. Soon after the war, the oil boom years (in the 1970s/80s) brought a lot of revenue to Nigeria. This meant mass migration of youths from rural areas to the big cities. This severed the links between the villages and urban centres, and between the elders and the youths. Both formal and traditional laws became difficult to enforce.

Restoration of authority

Despite the influence of Western culture and religion on local people, some village chiefs still maintain the traditional law and order through folklore. In these villages, the paramount ruler (government chief) has no power over the villagers. This is because the elders of the villages, who are traditionally installed by the villagers themselves, restore their authority by enforcing law and order through traditional institutions (folklore). What is interesting here is that the traditional societies which village chiefs use to restore authority are those institutions which, to date, are very much respected and even dreaded by the people, including those who have been educated.

At the village level, the chiefs work closely with heads of age-groups and youth leaders (see Figure 2) to ensure that every male child is initiated into these societies that uphold folklore and traditional beliefs. During festive periods, the urban youths who occasionally join their rural counterparts do not like to be left out and simply join, at least for the time they are in the village.

Figure 2. The role of traditional institutions in village life



According to the Cross River Rural Participatory Forestry Project (1994), the village chiefs use youth organisations, age-groups, powerful traditional institutions and women's organisations to restore authority. These institutions protect their own forests and place sanctions on disturbed land. The youth organisations are dynamic and formulate policies for the village council (chiefs, elders, age-group leaders, women leaders and youth leaders). The key to this is that these youths act in accordance with the rules and dictates of folklore, which form the foundation upon which traditional societies were built.

• Concluding remarks

A unique feature of folklore is its continued existence among people who have been exposed to Western education and religion. Folklore explains and brings out, in fine details, the traditions of a people that are unique and persistent.

Some folklore may be regarded as superstitious beliefs and situations associated with them mere coincidences. But beliefs can play a positive role in society since strict observance of the rules can bring about the orderly behaviour of people. Of immense potential benefit to society is the effective use

of these beliefs for the conservation of the forests, land and wildlife. The many wildlife species that are in existence today may provide evidence of the effectiveness of the taboos placed on them by our ancestors.

It is common knowledge in Nigeria that the post-colonial law enforcement is not working effectively in forest resource conservation. Thus it makes sense to review traditional values with an aim of incorporating them into the nation's education system. This can help the younger generation of Nigeria to maintain law and order in the society. One thing that must be stressed here is that although Nigerians may flout Western laws, they very much dread and respect traditional beliefs. Participatory research can help us understand these beliefs and apply them for the more effective management of natural resources.

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REFERENCE

- Cross River Forestry Project (1994). Working paper no.9, Forestry Headquarters, Calabar, Nigeria.