



**FOREST AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN SAPELE, OKPE KINGDOM, DELTA STATE,
NIGERIA**

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Abstract

In pre-literate Okpe community, the forest was a veritable tool of rewarding conformist or punishment for offenders. To maintain harmonious relationship, practices that offend collective conscience were avoided, while behaviours that contradict accepted norms were severely sanctioned. The forest and restraining practices helped maintained relative peace. Previous studies focused more on the socio-economic use of the forest, while few dwelt on its role as institution of social control. Thus, this study focused on the forest and its usefulness as social control institution in Okpe Kingdom, Delta State, Nigeria. Environmental precedence theory provided the framework for explanations. From five major communities that make up Sapele local government area, total of 369 participants were randomly selected Sapele (91), Elume (85), Amukpe (71), Ozum-Okokporo (61) and Ugorhen (61). Sapele Local government was purposively selected for the research due to industrial scale deforestation which now subject the community to high rate of crime and social disorder. The questionnaire collected data on the implications of deforestation on Okpe women, five focus group discussions comprising eight participants each, 10 key informants among household heads/women, 15 in-depth interviews with chiefs/forest custodians were conducted. Quantitative data were analysed using relative frequency. Qualitative data were content analysed. As social control measures, deviants were subjected to isolation, shaming and ostracism in the forest. Obviously, larger aspects of Sapele social control mechanism revolved around the forest. Before the onset of industrial scale deforestation, beliefs that spirits, demons and cosmic forces which govern wellness, peace and prosperity are resident in the forest were unopposed. Therefore, forests were used as a medium for placating ancestral spirits and deities to attain peace and wellness or otherwise punishment for deviants.

Keywords: Affliction and Development, Deforestation, Forest, Health, and Sexuality

1. Introduction

Larger aspects of Sapele culture which constituted beliefs and values that defined the people's identity, political, psychological, health, economic lifestyles and integrative relationships revolved round the forest (Obono 2016). Before the onset of industrial scale deforestation, beliefs that spirits, demons and cosmic forces which govern wellness, peace and prosperity are resident in the forest were unopposed (Rim-Rukeh et al 2013). Therefore, forests were used as a medium for placating ancestral spirits and deities to attain peace and wellness. Undisturbed forest deities were beatific, tender, serene, and ecstatic to members. At the same time, they are wrathful, fearsome and maleficent to deviants. These deities represented the powers and energies which surrounded spiritual observances governing human life (Tonukari, 2014). Deified trees like *Ejokpa*, performed economic and spiritual functions in Sapele. Evil omens were averted because forest based spiritual forces communicated with the *Ogwedion* (priest to the Orodje's shrine). The priest in turn, informs the



Orodje of any imminent danger (Tanyanyiwa and Chikwanha, 2011). Appropriate preparations and rituals were made to maintain the status quo.

As part of Okpe beliefs, the death of a pregnant woman was an abomination that heralds calamity. Death of pregnant women was a rare occurrence and when this occurred, the deceased pregnant woman was buried un-ceremoniously in the forest. To avert this, young maidens were protected from indulging in risky behavior. Conversely, adult pregnant women enjoyed social support and were regularly fed with forest derivatives to reduce congenital problems and neonatal death (Anon 2016). These regulated efficiently, the weight of pregnant women and increased the chances of the baby's survival. Thus, there was drastic reduction in the level of congenital related abnormalities and casualties during child birth. Incantations and libations were carried out in the forest to decipher the destiny of a new baby-*Erhu* (Ori), and the personality that has been re-incarnated. These friendly, cheap, easy and accessible health related practices lost their place due to deforestation and introduction of consumer based modern healthcare services (Owumi 1989).

Still birth babies in Okpe land were inserted into pots and thrown into the evil forest called *aho* or *eqwarode*. It was believed that this practice would forever restrict the babies from rebirth or reincarnation. This act was also believed to safeguard the health of the mother and her subsequent deliveries. Members who died "abominable" deaths especially those with evidence of swollen bellies were summarily dumped at night inside evil forests traditionally known as *Aho*, among Okpes, *Ajofia* among Igbos and '*Igboirunmale*' or *Igboho*, among the Yorubas. It was believed that souls of evil people would find blissful repose in the forest and that the practice will discourage reoccurrences (Anon 2016). Native healers (Óboh) sought healing powers from the forest and also scavenged for human parts useful for prevention and cure of diseases. Among the Yorubas, it was believed that felling of trees in a forest inhabited by lords and wizards of the forest known as *Oso Igbo* will cause one of the trees to fall on the perpetrator leading to injury or death. These beliefs defined social status, social roles and responsibilities reinforced by the fundamental belief that deforestation increased the prevalence of diseases and ill-health (Owumi 1989).

To maintain social cohesion and total wellness, practices believed to attract afflictions were avoided. The whirlwind god *Azziza* (*Oso Igbo*) which could be beneficent or malevolent was revered as lord and wizard of the forest (Rim-Rukeh, Ierhievwie and Agbozu 2013 and Tonukari, 2014). Taboos served as discrete and identifiable boundaries to outsiders. Forest derivatives satisfied their material, psychological and spiritual needs. The forests were used as warehouses, religious temples, legal edifices, religious sanctuaries, offices and a place used for convenience activities (Rim-Rukeh 2013).

2. Literature Review

In Sapele society, high value was placed on forests and deforestation was criminalised. To preserve these forests and vital resources basic taboos (*Uhrui*) were grafted to prohibit indiscriminate use. Community members were made to believe that there is a supernatural connection between the forest, their beliefs and maintenance of individual's health. Reverence for and adherence to forest related beliefs discouraged deforestation. These beliefs helped in the conservation of forests (Kennedy, Dombeck and Koch, 2014). These practices enhanced the security of cultural heritage and identity and constituted informal control measures on forest usage. However, alterations in the forest and the attack against the beliefs derogated the sanctity of taboos which had in the past preserved forests, peace and wellness. The onset of deforestation weakened their beliefs and disrupted lifestyles (Calame-Griaule. 1967).



According to oral history and mythology, forests were potent means of relieving the community from evil as well as maintaining wellness. Illness aetiology was traced to the violation of taboos prohibiting indiscriminate use or unwholesome activities in the forest. Violations of these taboos were attributed to negligence on the part of Orodje, Ekakuro and other forests custodians (Tonukari 2014). These negligence or failure in penalizing an offender constituted imminent danger for the offender and the entire community. To avert this, sanctions were enforced and purification rites-exorcism was performed for offenders. This study proposes the thesis that loss of traditional moral values and individualism in Okpe kingdom, exposed the forest and related beliefs to destruction and modification (). Alterations to and attacks on traditional beliefs weakened traditional industry, peaceful identity, exclusive autonomy and the traditional health practices. These dramatic changes in the environment posed great challenges to established ways of life. Because of the fundamental alteration in health beliefs and related practices, this study investigated adaptation strategies to the increasing social diversities, economic complexities, and the interrelationship between forests, the environment and traditional healthcare, spiritual and religious practices (Ekwund 1966).

The gap- there exist a gap in using the forest as means of social control. Since the onset of large scale deforestation, the native customs and rituals are relegated. This has led to high crime rate and disorderliness in the community.

2.1 The Problem

There exist high rate of crime due to industrial scale deforestation which have diminutive effect on the indigenous beliefs and rituals practices. The cultural beliefs and indigenous practices, which once sustained the forest, became untenable with the onset of large scale deforestation which commenced in 1940 (Tonukari, 2014). Deforestation altered the forest and dis-approbated its sacredness for the performance of restorative health practices. As deforestation increased, observance of ritual practices declined. The forest was no longer serene and safe for observing rituals which were exclusive preserve of few. The forest became a haven for carrying out unwholesome practices such as hoodlum taking refuge in the forest before and after their criminal activities This study examined the use of the forest as measures of social control in Sapele, Delta State, Nigeria.

2.2 Theoretical Framework-The Environmental Precedence Theory

The Environmental precedence theory places emphasis on the importance of the environment in people's livelihoods and their right to the use of the environment. Obono (2016:184) introduced the theory of environmental precedence as a theory which views the physical environment as 'the predictor of social, political, economic and cultural systems' The theory of environmental precedence shows how Sapele history is traced by understanding environmental imperatives. Forest shows geographical origins and migratory trajectories of Sapele people. The origin and functions of the social institutions of beliefs and forest related rituals are best understood within the domain of ecological perspective. In reality, all human activities are engrained in the environment. Thus, outside the concave of environment, man loses sense of humanity, existentialism and relevance. The environment is the predictor of social, political, economic and cultural system (Oka, 2016). The environment supports life sustaining activities. The precedence of the forest lies in its irreplaceable role of being a haven for the veneration of ancestral spirits. The forest was central institution through which health and other "main concern" were met.

The status quo was later intercepted by nascent capitalist forces of industrial scale deforestation. Deforestation and the changes introduced by merchants dowsed indigenous institutions and ushered in a modern phase of civilization. This phase was characterized by market-oriented and unfriendly practices which are antithetical to conservative beliefs and forest practices.



All social institutions and order previously formed on the basis of environmental capacity are altered by alterations of the environment (ibid). The connection between the environment, social institutions and social order are evident in the consequences of alterations of the ecology on living things. Conservative beliefs and practices are directly linked to their ecology. Hence, alteration in the environment impact directly on the institutions and its constituents. Because no ecological zone was fully self sufficient in the past, there was exchange and diffusion of ideology and resource. This cross boundary transactions led to environmental alteration and forest scarcity. Scarcity created intolerable crisis which upturned the social order and health status of the people.

The theory has been criticized based on the fact that it situate human existence and its sustenance largely on the environment. Despite this criticism, this theory has to be relevant due to undeniable fact that, major human needs are generated from the environment. This theory has been applied to many researched work. For example Obono in his work, the Nature of social order, institutions and environmental precedence in Africa detailed the use of the forest in maintaining order in society.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The research design adopted is descriptive and cross-sectional. This enabled the effective investigation, documentation and description of findings as they are.

3.2 Research Setting

The study was conducted in Sapele, Delta State, Nigeria. While 369 respondents were randomly selected, five major communities that make up Sapele LGA were purposively surveyed. The study area was chosen because of unsustainable deforestation which impact negatively on women who depend largely on the forest for their daily up keep. Sapele is surrounded by thick forest and heavy vegetation. It is located in the Southern region of Delta State in Nigeria. They are predominantly farmers and artisans. The region is a seaport which served as exports terminals to timber, and lumber, rubber and palm kernels. Sapele forest is rich with shallow roots plants that harbour and provide feed for fishes as a fishery hub. It is a home of industries that manufacture rubber, charcoal, palm oil and timber. They are noted for speaking Okpe and a unique style of Nigerian Pidgin English. They also have slangs that are peculiar to the region. They have cultural affinity with the Edo (Ediod) speaking people of Nigeria.

3.3 Study Population

The research participants were titled-chiefs, household heads, women, forests administrators, health workers and religious adherents who were aged 40 and above. Inclusion criteria were age and residency. Those who were aged 40 and who are resident in Sapele were co-opted for the study. Thus, those below 40 years and who are not resident in Sapele were excluded.

3.4 Procedure

Multi stage sampling techniques which utilized both probability and non-probability sampling methods was adopted in the selection of the communities and respondents. First stage: stratified sampling technique was used in grouping the communities. Second stage: Using simple random sampling method, five clans each were selected from the five major communities in Sapele LGA. Random selection was used in co-opting 421 participants amongst household heads, chiefs, women, religious and forest custodian. Snowball method was used to select TMPs, religious and titled Chiefs.



3.5 Method of data collection

Qualitative and quantitative instruments were triangulated for the collection of primary and secondary data. Among 421 respondents, quantitative data were gathered with the use of open ended questionnaire. Qualitative data was generated from 52 respondents with the use of IDI and KII.

3.6 Method of data analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed with the use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 15. Quantitative data was analyzed using relative frequency and qualitative data was content analyzed.

4. Result

4.1 Data Presentation

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Variables	Percentage responses
Mean age of respondents	52±1.0
Male respondent	55.0%
Female respondents	45.0%
Christians	67.0%
Traditionalist	15.0%
Muslims	13.0%

The mean age of respondents was 52±1.0 years. More than half (55.0%) were male. While 67.0% were Christians, 15.0% were traditionalists and 13.0% were Muslims. Majority (90.0%) endorsed forest and related beliefs as important for maintaining personal/family health and social order. As social control measures, deviants were subjected to isolation, shaming and ostracism.

4.2 Discussion of Result

4.2.1 Forest and Social Control

A total of 94.9% of the participants revealed that the beliefs in the forest as an abode of mysterious forces made the forest a haven of safety. The forest was a palace of refuge in time of danger and offenders who ran into the forest were protected from police arrest. Members of the community protected their forests because they served as safe sanctuaries for members. Sacred grove of trees was adorned with traditional objects to prevent entry of intruders into the forest. According to a respondent:

in the history of Okpe, e get one tree way dem they call Agalokpe. When enemies they come into the community to fight, the tree go dey shout, e go dey call his sons and daughters, my people make una come oooo. The people go run come hide for d back of the tree. While the people hide behind the tree, one shukushuku leave way dem dey call ewewe go spread to cover the road. The enemy no go see them as dem they hide behind the leave. Notin like Agalokpe tree again. To hide for bush now na risk. IDI Male, Age 74, Sapele, 27/09/2014.

The tree described above called *Agalokpe* prevented invaders with evil intentions from coming into the community. The tree would raise an alarm and give a signal for the community to take cover. While the people take cover behind the tree, a thorny leaved tree called '*ewew*' spreads out to cover the entrance to the community. The leaves of the tree envelop them to the point that they become invisible to their enemies.



The above respondent also revealed that, "in the past we make two entrance doors. One at the front and the other located at the back unlike the modern-day building which have only one entrance. When police or enemy are after any one, one easily dash into the forest from the back. The 'shukushuku' planted at the back restrained people from going after the offender". Similarly, the *uhimi* tree which looks like a goal post is constructed at the entrance of the village, here the *eqhuase* is suspended on it. The *eqhuase* sounded an alarm whenever there was perceived danger. Also, according to a TMP, to ensure the security of warlords, materials from the forest relics useful in preparing able bodied men for war. Also, hydra headed charms that forbid many acts were prepared and administered on warriors in the forest. According to him;

To fortify our able-bodied men for war, they were confined in the forest for days before the war time. some leaves were given to them to chew before they go for war. we also cut some for their body. Staying in the bush prevents them from relating with anything that neutralizes the charms and amulets. These beliefs which we practice protected men right from home, at war till they return in victory. Today those products and use of forest for staying from anything that neutralizes charm is destroy because of deforestation and new way of life. IDI Male, Age 74, Sapele, 14/09/201.

From the above excerpts, before war, warlords were confined in the forest for days. They were fortified with mixtures of forest derivatives before setting out for war. The confinement prevented them from engaging in emotional relationship or other affairs which are capable of neutralising the protective charms and amulets. These beliefs and practices protected them right from the home, to the war front and till they return in victory. Today the use of the forest for observing abstinence has been destroyed due to industrial deforestation. Accounts pointing to the use of the forest to prepare for war were corroborated by respondents who are retired force man and other youths within the community. They revealed that, in the past, they refrained from several activities and retreated into the forest in order to safe guard the potency of their charms and weapons. Also, the forest served as place of asylum for men when their wife (ives) are under menstruation. They spent a few days in the forest to protect themselves from any form of temptation that could lead them into relating with their wife during her monthly circle. It was a taboo to relate with a woman while menstruating and wife was also forbidden to cook for her husband. According to a respondent,

'my wife no dey cook for me chop during her circle, that was the culture my father thought me. We no dey sleep for the same bed if not the ancestor go kill you'. They are considered to be unclean. Also, women were not allowed to enter some forest during their time of menstruation. Modern lifestyle don destroyed all the restricted practices that protect and prolong life. Now adays, young people meet when the woman is in her period. These These that we forbid, that they do now they shorten the life span of present generation. IDI Male, Age, 74, Amukpe 07/09/2014.

Another respondent shared more insights on the response above. The participant revealed that;

Men then rest and even received visitors inside the forest where they can quietly have fun and comfort during the monthly circle of their spouse. This is because in the old days, parents and their son maintained common hut. Men were punished for relating sexually with their wife or concubines in their



matrimonial bed during menstrual circle. This is seen as an abomination that can afflict the offender. IDI 09/09/2014

Prior to 1940, the forest served as a means of punishing and reforming offenders. Unlike the modern institutions where deviants are incarcerated and subjected to dehumanizing punishments, offenders were punished in the forest. The forest served as informal means of penalizing, reforming, re-socializing and empowering offenders without necessarily inflicting physical injury on them. Deviants were made to clear and maintain large portion of the forest. In serious cases, they were made to farm and produce food crops in the forest for the elders and members of their age grades. Although offenders were ostracized from the community, the forest served as a safe and peaceful abode for offender.

In preindustrial Sapele, forests were used to immortalize ancestors. Some trees were totemized as emblem of their deceased family members. The tree(s) earmarked for this purpose were left untouched. This protected the forest, for example a respondent noted that:

Palm grove trees known as Edjokpa divinity and Eezeokpe tree were decorated with red cloth. They are revered by the members of the community in Okpe. We believe that it is our mother which has protected our fore fathers, hence it is totemized. These trees are not used as fire wood or planks. The Edjele (witch doctor) and Oboh (healers) offers libation for protection, peace and progress on a regular basis on behalf of the entire community. IDI 05/09/2014.

Religious ceremonies in honour of the Edjokpa divinity lasted for three months. During these periods, nobody was allowed to enter the forest because it was believed that there would be calamity such as afflictions and death. Ohimi tree at Adane Orokerpe symbolized wellness. Medicinal preparation known as *Egba* was hanged on Ohimi tree. The sacrifices of dogs (*Erahko*) and other animals were sacrificed to the tree. It was believed that these preparations, annual sacrifices and the communal consumption of the food would enhance productivity and wellness.

Resources from the forest were used to erect beautiful edifices and houses. The forest also served as a shelter and shield for members. According to a respondent "the spirit (*Erhi*) in the forest whispers when there is a looming calamity. During traditional times, property kept in the forest was considered safe secured because according to a participant, "you cannot see and touch another man's property inside the forest, it is forbidden". The *Oturama* (Sword), earthen pot or red cloth were used in earmarking forests to safe guard them and the properties. The relevance of the forest for security of property was emphasized by a key informant who revealed that;

before one fit beat chest that his property in the farm is safe because you no fit see another man, property touch am inside the bush, we forbid it. we use Oturama (Sword) and earthen pot or tied cloth on forests to protect our things inside bush. If anyone no respect am e go take e head carry am. If you dey go church you come do otherwise break ancestral custom, you go take your head carry am. you go die, the juju go kill you" KII Male, Age, 74, Amukpe 09/09/2014.

Hence, the consciousness of instant judgement and death sentence from the gods through ezaze *Okpe'* (taboo) and *'IrueriwofoOkpe'* (okpe traditional practices) minimised stealing of people's property. Disputes, conflicts and killing over land which is common today were minimal because of these beliefs. Reiterating the role of the forest for social control a respondent stated that:



the spirits of the ancestor and deities were seen as guardians of infants. The idea that spirits comes to steal or kill children who misbehave because they are not properly trained compelled parents towards taking proper care of their children. They are taught the traditions of the land. we teach them how to behave. KII Female, Age 49, Abeke- Sapele 04/09/2014.

Forest deities and ancestral spirits were seen as guardians of infants. The idea that the spirits escapes into the forest with children who misbehaved compelled parents to giving proper attention and care to their children. They socialize them along the collective norms and values. In other words, moral values and proper up bringing were paramount unlike today where children are left to peer educators and modern gadgets where they are exposed to more negative socialization. According to a participant restriction placed on unlawful trespass and exploitation of the forest persist till date because:

In Okpe land, we do not only use the forest as source of Esireurhe (root), Awo re irhe, agbo (concoction of roots and barks) and Iyori (antidotes) but they are also used as means of maintaining ancestral myths that safeguards our core values and beliefs. According to our tradition, noble rites are celebrated under sacred trees. In ourland, also important meetings are held under sacred trees. Holding meeting under the serene atmosphere of trees ensures the easy invocation of the spirit that ensures peaceful deliberation and the wellness of constituent members and the entire community (avware). IDI 06/09/2014

4.2.2 Sexuality and Forest Rituals that served as Social Control

Generally, forests were considered to harbor cosmic forces which are potent in boosting productivity. The people associated women's reproductive illnesses with ancestral afflictions. Therefore, culturally, women's sterility was adduced to ancestral afflictions which are traceable to indiscriminate act that contravenes the taboos. A woman declared to be afflicted by spirits is subjected to elaborate rituals in the forest to propitiate the ancestors and ward off the spirit tormenting them. Sexual relations in the forest were highly forbidden. According to a participant in an in-depth interview;

mating in the forest was seen as a taboo. Young children of this generation indulge in this bad attitude anyhow in the forest, Just as it is a sin to carry out some activities inside the church, so it was for forest. IDI Male, Age 62Ajojordo-Sapele 17/10/2014

This assertion was confirmed by (61%) of the participants who revealed that sexual relations in the forest were considered a taboo and an abomination. Deviants were exposed, shamed and married women caught engaging in this act were isolated until they have performed ritual cleansing. In modern times, taboos prohibiting sexual relations in the forest are no longer respected. To buttress this point, the respondent stated that any woman caught in this act was stripped naked and all sorts of ugly elements are tied to her neck. These objects make rattling sounds and are accompanied by jesting songs composed in her name to ridicule her. This is recited after her as they proceed to the forest where she will be further subjected to humiliating rituals of cleansing. This ritual discouraged indiscriminate expression of emotional drives which is rampant today. But when men are caught in the same act they are made to pay damages or are flogged. Promiscuous men who have concubines lament that their wives subject them to shame and diseases.



On marital taboo, unlike among the Toda in India where women are allowed to indulge in extramarital affairs, (94%) of the participants recounted that before the civil war in Okpe, custom strictly forbade married women to engage in extramarital affairs. Beating of husbands by wives was considered an abomination redeemable by cleansing in the forest. Many foreigners and indigenous men fornicated ('muke') and committed all manners of atrocities (*Umumu and Oru kuruku*) inside the forest with young girls and married women. In the past, promiscuous woman was severely punished because their acts were believed to endanger the lives of her husband and her children except redeemed by rituals.

According to a respondent, "if a man discovers the "unfaithfulness of his wife he must not hide her because the ancestors will kill him". The effect of an unfaithful woman is synonymous with the proverb which says *uria bon ovo de ghworo, kote 're cheko*. That is (when one finger gets soaked in oil, it spreads to others). It suffices to say that the promiscuous act of a woman affects her husband, children, extended family and community members. The gravity in the effects of an infidelity act of a woman gives room for zero tolerance. The above summation was confirmed by a respondent who revealed;

that young children of today believe that ancestors do not understand English-Ehimiehoyobo. That is why young children do what they like and they die any how today because the tradition is alive and active. if the woman die in the process of confessing her sin, she is taken to the forest for burial. The men who was involved in the act with her will pay a token as reparation for damage IDI Male, Age 56, Amukpe 09/27/2014

Acts of infidelity were reported to the family and the promiscuous woman was expected to confess her sins before the kinsmen of her husband. If in the process of confessing to infidelity she dies, her corpse is taken to the forest for burial. The man who committed the crime with the woman is summoned to pay damages. But in modern days, women engage in extra marital affairs with impunity while in their husband's house. Some participants revealed that those who are involved in this act "get water that was used in washing dead bodies from the mortuary to bath themselves". This cleanses them from their sin and it covers the consequences of their act. Worst still, they confess to pastors, they are given some prayers for the atonement of their sin without the knowledge of anyone. Responses revealed that,

indulging in extra marital affairs is accompanied by procurement of charms to blind fold husband or silence him, push away family/ community, rumor mongers, or to trap the man of her choice as well as extorting the amount of money they want. These were rare in the past. These were rare in the past. IDI Male, Age 56, Amukpe 09/27/2014

A participant revealed that people who died in a river that are in the forest was buried at the bank of the river to prevent affliction from falling on the family and the community. Burying them at the bank of the river is believed to prevent reoccurrence. In modern times, this practice has ceased and people who die inside the river are buried in town today. This deviation is believed to have increased afflictions and evil occurrences within the community because the goddess of the river torments the relatives. They believe that the goddess continues to visit the town to claim the remains of those who died around the river. This assertion was confirmed by an opinion leader; who revealed that;



those who died inside river in the forest are seen as properties of that river. the victim must be buried by the side of the river. The relations of the deceased are required to buy some items to perform sacrifices for the god(s) of the river and its chief priest(s). IDI Female, Age 39, Amukpe 04/09/2014

According to these beliefs, in the past even a member of the royal family who according to custom is entitled to an elaborate funeral, must be buried quietly buried at the bank of the river. The relations of the deceased are required to buy some prescribed items to appease the god(s) of the river and its chief priest(s).

The consciousness of the sacred nature of the surrounding rivers in the forest encouraged coordinated behavior that was geared towards averting misfortunes. This curtailed activity around river found in the forest. Streams and rivers and fertile land around the river were endowed with thick forests of and animals. As at the time of conducting this research, participants complained that the communities have lost their basic source of good water to deforestation and transportation of logs. The river which served as source of portable water, storage facility and cheap source of proteins is now commercialized. Also, suicide was considered an abomination and taboo. According to a key informant;

those who died by hanging themselves are buried inside the bush. While those who attempted hanging but survived are ex-communicated until they perform sacrifice for their actions. The community expects them to offer some sacrifice to free themselves before the family and community associate with that person. KII Male, Age 48, Amukpe 05/09/2014.

Acts of attempted suicide and homicide attracted grave sanctions in Sapele. According to a key informant “those who died by hanging themselves are buried inside the forest. While those who attempted hanging but survived are ostracized until they are made to atone for their actions”. They go through rituals of purification for conceiving or attempting suicide. This is done before family and community members can associate with such a person.

The above response corresponds with research carried out by Parrinder (1962) where hunters and others who committed willful murder against anyone outside war in the forest were ostracized into the forest. Libations, oaths taking, supported by spiritual observances performed for the victim are believed to restore wellness. The above findings correspond with Parrinder’s claims which assert that forests practices are associated with the beliefs and reverence for mysterious supersensible pervading energy, powers, and potencies found in the forest (Parrinder 1962). Also in consonance with Radcliff-Browns findings on funerals, Okpe people believed that the benefits associated with proper disposal of corpses of those who abominable deaths were for the living. They believed that all those connected with the deceased would be afflicted if adequate measures are not taken to dispose. As a rule, at the demise of a relation, the cord of oneness (*Avware*) has to be broken. Breaking the cord also protected them from affiliating with the forces which claimed the life of the deceased relation. If the relationship is not broken, peace and security eludes the living because of the connection. Practical expression of and adherence to these beliefs reflected their core values. To maintain normalcy, observation and IDI excerpts reveal that;

before, some forests are reserved. Burial grounds for evil people/strangers were provided to limit their spirit from relating or disturbing others members of the community. But now, they are buried in the community. Ancestors hate



those kind of things. All these things they disturb our people and is claiming lives without them knowing. IDI Male, Age 62, Elume, 19/09/2014

To maintain peace, strategic forests and burial grounds were reserved for the purpose of burying evil people/strangers. Here, their spirits are forever restricted from relating with others in the community. According to 23% participants, the people condone the burial of evil people in the community. This act fetch them affliction because they believed that if an evil person or stranger is buried within the community, the possibility of reincarnating with their evil acts abounds. To "keep their *Erhi* or *uhoho* (spirit or replica) perpetually bonded in the grave, they are buried in the forest known as 'burial ground' or "evil forest" (*Eqwarode*). This also protects innocent persons from being afflicted by their aggrieved spirits which it is believed to become because of the young age of the deceased.

In Sapele community, they believed that disposal of deceased persons in the forest without proper rituals would cause their spirits to abandon their grave and roam as ghost. This occurs especially when the remains are not disposed deep into the forest. The use of the forest for the ritual cleansing, maintenance or restoration of wellness was an inseparable aspect of their lives. Just as people rely on hospital for wellness today, the people relied on the forests for wellness in the past.

Another forest related belief which restrained crime was that the properties of wicked, mischievous persons whose lifestyles threatened the lives and peaceful co-existence of people in the community were not inherited. Their properties were considered to be contaminated by their evil acts and believed to attract ill luck. Thus, their properties were deposited in the shrines (*ogwa edion*) inside the forest. Hence, families monitored and restrained the activities of their family members. Children of those whose parents died abominable deaths lost respect and dignity in the community. They live in perpetual sham and even when they become prosperous; they are often reminded of the past. This forced people to conform with the norms that instil peace to maintain sanity and the integrity of their family name.

In the past, final judgement of the deceased starts with interment in the forest. Dumping the dead unceremoniously in the forest was believed to have implications on their final destination (eternity). Also, the lives of the children left behind are believed to be controlled by evil spirits. In most cases, according to a participant, "dem no dey get head". Even when they are fortunate to be established, people make references to the past to recall their history". This fear promoted orderliness and good spirit in the community. The ills associated with property of evil people were revealed as:

inheriting the properties of a wicked, mischievous persons whose lifestyles threatened peaceful co-existence of people in the community was forbidden. Their properties were considered evil capable of attracting ill luck. The properties were deposited in the shrines (ogwa edion) inside the forest. Hence, families monitored and restrained the activities of their family members. Children of those whose parents died abominable death lose their respect and dignity in the community. They live in perpetual shame. Even when they become rich; they are often reminded of the past. This restrained majority to maintain sanity and the integrity of their family name. In the past, judgement and final abode of the deceased starts with interment in the forest. Dumping the dead unceremoniously in the forest has implication for their place of rest and the lives of the children left behind. In most cases, 'dem no dey get head'. Even when they are fortunate to be established, references are made to the past to



recall their history. This fear promoted orderliness and good spirit in the community. IDI Male, Age 62, Oton- Sapele, 09/24/2014.

In the old days, sexual affairs and marriages between close relations was a taboo. These relationships were considered to endanger the life of the woman, the man and the children which are product of such union. According to participants, it heralds mysterious illness and death of the maiden, the children or both. Their affair was considered evil and perpetrators were sanctioned accordingly. If any member of the family dies in such situation they are buried in the forest. If discovered that a member participated in such relationship, they were taken into the forest for ritual cleansing after which the affair was terminated. However, in recent times, close relatives intermarry and sacrifice animals to appease the gods. This occurrence is rampant because the awareness of affinity which was derived from closeness degenerated. Incest increased because collectivism gave way to individualism. Respondents emphasised that irrespective of the sacrifices performed to appease the gods to exonerate the parties, things do not go well with them on the long run. They hold the belief that physical or invisible forces are galvanised to work against them.

In Okpe community protective rituals were carried out in the forest and placed in their living rooms. They were kept in living rooms to attack enemies who entered the family with negative intentions. This was the traditional means of securing their lives and properties. They entrusted their lives to the deities and hid valuables objects in home altars dedicated to deities. Through the deities, prayers were offered to God before they carried out any activity. During their monthly menstrual circle women were not permitted to share the same roof with these deities. It was believed that the spirits of the deities were sensitive to blood and that any individual with blood had encroached on the deities' territory. In annoyance, the deity would afflict anyone who has encroached on their territory and power. Hence, during their menstrual periods women who lived in homes with these gods were mandated to relocate to a small hut adjacent to the forest. These huts were built to harbor young girls and house wives during their circle. Also, intermittently, ritual cleansing of the family compounds was performed and the materials which are believed to take away death and bad luck were thrown into the forest. Due to deforestation, these practices could no longer be observed and the people believe this is responsible for their present afflictions.

According to a participant, the alien culture we delved into is the foundation for the destruction of our beliefs and the forest. Those who confess are set free. This gave other courage. Let's not destroy the good aspect of beliefs. FGD Extract Male, Age 47, Oton Sapele, 13/09/2014.

The change in the status and the role of women presented a gory situation. While modern woman claim that they were marginalised, responses revealed that they maintained and enjoyed their boundaries in the past. Their needs were met with hectares of land provided for their farming activities. Handful of women was given freedom to engage in the sale of cloths and production of ogogoro. Shelter and safety was never a problem. They were not allowed to veer out of the care of their husband and immediate/extended family. In-laws played major roles in the affairs of their children unlike the recent practices where social workers, house maids and nannies dominat the affairs in the homes. This stresses the finance of modern couples. Security was provided for women as long as they maintain a humble baron position that is expected of them. Using the McClelland theory of needs, satisfaction which is the measures of scaling the self actualization of individuals, responses revealed that women were self actualised in their crude state of subordination. Western modernization now present Okpe woman as subjugated personalities because modern rational and criteria has classified them as subjugated class.



Ostensive as it appears, the above assertion was confirmed to be true because lands that were given to the women to cultivate were on rent-tenancy. Today, working class wife can acquire landed properties and cars. This presents a basis on which the authority of men is now challenged no matter how complimentary the roles are played. In the past, women never meddle in the affairs of men. Presently, woman tail their men and harass both the innocent and the guilty. Like a one chanced motor car, which is meant to carry only one passenger, the man is discouraged from caring for those who are outside the nucleus of the nuclear family. Men are coerced to chorus I surrender and this must be displayed before their spouse on daily basis to enjoy peace as a family. Okpe women who spare no suspects have developed poisonous venom with which they harm suspected intruders' like concubine including unwanted family members (Mother, father, and sister or brother in-law). Although this is seen as beneficial to nuclear family in this present age, this is not good enough as Africans who cherished oneness.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Forest served as means of controlling unwholesome practices and behavioural manifestation. Due to the onset of industrial scale deforestation, the forest is no longer tenable in performing its function as a means of social control. Irrespective of the changes, the forest still served as means of controlling antisocial practices and behavioural manifestation. Unsustainable deforestation should be avoided. The traditional beliefs and restraining taboos should be revamped to ensure forest sustainability.

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