Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity

A Complementary Contribution to the Global Biodiversity Assessment

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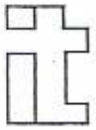

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Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity

United Nations Environment Programme

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Cultural and spiritual values of biodiversity in West Africa: the case of Benin and Côte d'Ivoire (Jeanne Zoundjihekpon and Bernadette Dossou-Glehouenou)

In West Africa, for thousands of years, peoples have established and preserved social behaviour patterns in order to control the relationship between nature and society and to promote the sustainable use of natural resources. Social practices over the years gradually confer important cultural and spiritual values on biodiversity, expressed in beliefs about divinities identified with diverse elements of the universe, and the veneration of ancestors.

Soothsayers are the exclusive intermediaries for these divinities or spirits, which people have to respect for the preservation of social and natural order because 'in these cultures...whether traditional or exotic, people are related to Nature through invisible links which lead each person to preserve or affect the order of things' (Toffin 1987). Thus, the health of individuals and the social order are conditioned by the quality of the relationship between society and nature. Relationships with natural resources are controlled by prohibitions on food, plant species used for fire, or areas such as sacred woods.

In ancient African civilizations, nature was perceived as the residence of ancestors who 'control the behaviour of living people and are therefore permanently present among them' (Coulibaly 1978). This justifies the veneration of nature and the existence of taboos protecting natural resources such as sacred areas.

Prohibitions derive from laws instituted by religious chiefs who ensure their effective application through systems of control and punishment. According to Dossou (1992), these laws are based on prohibitions requiring the peoples of a given geographical area not to consume or use all their resources in order to avoid their exhaustion. These prohibitions favour a distribution of resources, and are supported by spiritual and cultural thinking.

For example, access to forests is regulated, and forbidden to non-initiates. In particular, these restrictions apply to fetish forests, graveyard forests, initiation forests and protected water areas. According to Dossou (1992), fetish forests are often places for gathering, exchanging and testing religious chiefs and medicine men, while graveyard forests are places where they bury the bodies of those who have died tragically through accidents, drowning, burning or infectious diseases such as smallpox. Initiation forests are kept by secret groups (*Oro, Kouvito, Zangbéto*) who are in charge of educating young villagers and maintaining social order according to the rules and discipline of the locality.

These are not ordinary woods. According to Loucou (1984), 'the sacred wood is situated generally near the village. Of a quite small area, 2 to 4 hectares and often round, this 'wood' is a portion of forest in the middle of a savannah region. It is a sacred area which divinities and ancestors are supposed to visit permanently; a sanctuary where an altar is erected for sacrifices and where the paraphernalia of rites is stocked, where education is given to initiates and where certain village ceremonies take place. In order to preserve the inviolability of this sacred area, local people often build false access paths'.

Sacred woods, created by human beings, often serve for initiation rites and also conserve biodiversity. According to Coulibaly (1978), 'sacred woods are natural islands spared by human beings; they are relics, witnesses of the ancient flora which occupied the area before human habitation; even during the dry season, apart from some species such as the silk-cotton tree and the baobab tree, the whole sacred wood is still green and dark. The survival of these woods can be explained by their sacred characteristics. They are, in fact, intangible, inviolable areas: no one dares go there for game hunting'.

For the Aoua people in Côte d'Ivoire, Fairhead and Leach (1994) indicate that the goddess Assié prescribes certain environmental and agricultural activities. In so doing, the regulations designate those who will be in charge of clearing and cultivating which part of the land outside the village, they determine the breaks with culture, and forbid some animals or the cultivation of certain plants, including rice. They consider that the cultivation of rice will lead Assié to withdraw her control of fertility (rain and fire) which will result in the destruction of the environment and to the collapse of human society.

In West Africa, socio-economic activities in relation to nature in general and biodiversity in particular, such as agriculture, hunting and fishing, are ruled by prohibitions, totems or sacred areas which occupy an important place in the spiritual life of traditional African peoples. These activities, when based on religious beliefs, help in the preservation of people's health and harmony while allowing for the traditional management of flora and fauna.

For coastal peoples, the great fishing period (May to October) is initiated by an opening rite over the 'Aby' lagoon, sometimes carried out simultaneously in the different areas (Ibo 1996). The priest of the spirit called Assohon opens the fishing in May and closes it in October (Perrot 1989). Sacred catfish of Sapia are sheltered in the Dransi River which is formally forbidden to fishermen. Together with sacred crocodiles from Gbanhui, all the aquatic species are covered by food prohibitions to the villagers. During the day dedicated to sacred and venerated crocodiles, it is forbidden to go to the Yonyongo River.

In traditional societies, the lives of men, women and children are partly subject to prohibitions covering animals and plants, which are all aspects of biodiversity. The respect or non-respect of prohibitions can be a matter of life or death. Outside of the role played by religion in prohibitions, the ones mentioned here constitute forms of rational planning and management of natural resources. It is important to stress that urbanization and religion are factors that can distort or transgress traditional laws. Even if some prohibitions are losing ground today with the extension of cities and modern life, certain practices are still in force and inviolable, and contribute to the preservation of biodiversity.

This volume on *'Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity'* presents a sample of the vast array of threads that make up the tapestry of our cultural and spiritual diversity. Some of the articles are philosophical or historical, others are scientific or legal, and some are accounts of personal experiences and beliefs. All are equally enlightening.

Whatever we may think about any particular aspect of this tapestry, it is important for us to contemplate it. If we are to conserve the cultural and natural bounty on earth, we must learn more about it and about the nature of our interactions with that bounty. Taken together, the articles bring out the multi-dimensional challenges that biodiversity conservation poses, not only to policy-makers and scientists, but to all of us.

This volume has one principal message. We must resolve to weave the life-sustaining customs of all diverse groups on earth into a resilient fabric that will protect the sanctity of all life.

Klaus Töpfer
Executive Director, UNEP

The dominant scientific and economic forces assume that traditional communities must change to meet "modern" standards, but indigenous and traditional peoples feel the opposite must occur: science and industry must begin to respect local diversity and "Sacred Balance". Contributions throughout this volume support this position, and it may be that their views reflect those of the vast majority of people living in industrial, "modern" societies.

Global discourse would lead us to believe that conservation of biological diversity is of highest priority. If that were indeed so, then it is clear that highest priority should be given to the protection of those remaining cultures and societies that are struggling to preserve the precious biodiversity that remains in their care.

Darrell A. Posey
Editor

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