

The influence of rituals and taboos on sustainable wetlands management: The case of Matobo District in Matabeleland South Province

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Matobo district is renowned for a lot of rituals and taboos due to its association with the Njelele “sacred” shrine, which for a long time housed u *Ngwali*, the Ndebele spirit medium. Although the district lies within agro-ecological four which is characterised by erratic rainfall, the presence of well-managed wetlands has saved the local communities from the debilitating effects of droughts. The study sought to find out the role played by the rituals and taboos on wetland management in Matobo District. The study made use of a qualitative research method. Forty participants selected through random and snowball sampling methods were interviewed on the influence of the rituals and taboos on wetlands management. The majority of the participants 80% felt that rituals and taboos that are embedded in the indigenous knowledge systems of the Ndebele society, have contributed much in sustainable management of wetlands. Few of the participants (20) % felt that scientific methods should be used in the sustainable wetlands management. The study recommends that both the indigenous knowledge systems and the scientific methods be integrated for sustainable wetlands management systems that are able to sustain the livelihoods projects of the local communities.

Key words: rituals, taboos, sustainable management and wetlands.

INTRODUCTION

Matobo District is renowned for a lot of rituals and taboos due to its association with the Njelele “sacred” shrine, which for a long time housed “uNgwali”, the Ndebele Spirit Medium. Taboos and rituals play a vital role in the management of natural resources. Men is the focal point on the conservation and exploitation of natural resources. People living both in rural and urban areas relied on natural resources for survival, and as a result they designed the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in the form of rituals and taboos to protect their resources.

Rituals and taboos are mostly practiced in the Ndebele and Shona cultures, and wetlands are preserved through this way. Taboos play a vital role in the shaping of environmental ethics in the Ndebele culture. According to Peters (1973) education is the transmission of the worthwhile knowledge. The worthwhile knowledge in the Ndebele culture is the transfer of the rituals and taboos to the next generation as a way of conserving their natural resources. Gelfand (1973) notes that, in the Shona Culture, information is passed from one generation to another. This also applies in the Ndebele culture.

It is the responsibility of the entire community to manage its resources through the Indigenous Knowledge Systems such as rituals and taboos rather than to depend on Environmental Management Act (EMA). The EMA does not implement the role of traditional leaders on the management of natural resources. This has turned wetlands into, “open-access” natural resources, (Gadzirayi, et al, 2006).

The research focused on how the use of rituals and taboos benefits the people of the Matobo District. The main aim was that the Community should see the benefits rooted in their culture, norms and values. The people of the area need to optimise their resources through proper use and management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wetlands are fragile ecosystems which reignite sensitive and sustainable management if they are to continue to provide their range of functions and benefits, (Gadzirayi, et al, 2006). Wetlands are areas of marsh, permanent or seasonal water that is static or flowing, (Ramsar, 1971). Wetlands are one of the most valuable ecosystems, performing a variety of important ecological functions yet fragile ecosystems which require sensitive and sustainable management if they

are to continue providing their range of functions and benefits, (Kaaya, 2008)

Wetlands are essential a source of water vapour. Wetlands have important primary functions on the regulation of hydrology, water purification and flood control, and coastal wetlands can help to alleviate the impacts of storm surges, (Moses, 2008). Further, wetlands have aesthetic values and significant eco-tourism potential, (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005 in Moses, 2008)

The local community depends on wetlands for many agricultural activities. Wetlands have an essential role in food security, especially during the dry season or in drought periods, when dry land farming which is limited to the rain season cannot adequately cater for the community needs, (Kaaya, 2008)

Matabeleland South is a drought threatened area. Farmers mostly migrate their cattle from areas such as Plumtree in search of better pastures in the wetlands of Matobo Area. Majule and Mwalyosi, (2005), in Kaaya, (2008) also point out that, socio-economically, wetlands are acknowledged to support family livelihoods through crop production and grazing pastures.

Besides the intervention of the government on the management of natural resources through the EMA, local people can reap in their Indigenous knowledge in form of taboos and rituals for excellent management of their resources. Roggeri (1995) in Kaaya, (2008) described traditional wetland knowledge as those interventions or techniques which integrate the objectives of development with the maintenance of wetland functions and values. Farmers can practice intercropping and catch cropping in order to conserve moisture in the soil. Farmers can also make use of cover crops to reduce evaporation from the soil.

Taboos are explained by Aschwanden (1987) as a rule or prohibition which is based on a certain weltbild, and is charged with symbolic meaning. Taboos bind much more that one must strongly believe in certain values, symbols and beliefs. Taboos also control the social aspects of life. The weltbild according to Aschwanden, (1987) refers to the controllable situation of the society.

Taboos can be in form of totemism. Totemism is a conservation strategy that aims to create a harmonious relationship between tribal groups and the natural environment, (Behera and Nath, 2005 in Dit 2009). Among Indigenous tribes e.g the Pengu of India, people pay great respect to trees and animals where their totems were derived.

They are prohibited from killing, injuring or eating the resources from plants and animals of their own totem. It is also believed among the Pengu of India that removal of all grass from the earth or removal of bark that results in the death of the tree might bring a curse or even death to the perpetrator, (Behera and Nath), 2005 in Dit, 2009)

Rituals such as prayers and cultural ceremonies, involving for example, first foods, are usually performed before undertaking hunting /gathering trips and eating, (Dit 2009). Such ceremonies are held when the crops are mature or ready for human consumption. Before the ceremony, no child is permitted to touch or eat any crop from the fields, (Kileff and Clive, 1970). Also Ancestral beer known as “Mabira” in the Shona culture can also be carried out in relation to the changing seasons. (Murphee, 1969). These ceremonies are directed at the powerful tribal spirits (Mhondoro) or (Ngwali), the Ndebele spirit medium since they control the rainfall, the access or absence of which will ruin a good crop, (Manjeru, 2009). This indicates that the ripening of the crops is credited to the ancestors of the tribe and they will continue bringing more rains to sustain wetlands.

The rain making ceremony can also be practised to sustain the wetlands. The rainmaking ceremony is the ancestral worship for the reason of rainfall. Manjeru, (2009) notes that, in Motsai Communal Area of Bikita District, Masvingo, Chief Mabika, together with his people sometimes brew beer in the late days of November if the rains have not yet approached the earth. The rainmaking ceremony is practised to exacerbate rainfall, (Gombe, 1998). The rainmaking ceremony is usually done at sacred areas like Matonjeni, Domboshava, Great Zimbabwe and others. Gelfand (1966) stated that sacred areas like Matonjeni were used by King Lobengula to ask for rains from his father King Mzilikazi who was buried at this place. This area is known as Matopos by the Ndebele, but initially “Matonjeni” (Mabwedziva) was used by the Shonas before the arrival of the Ndebele into the area, (Manjeru, 2009).

Taboos are also used to protect water sources or wetlands. The water from the sacred wells is fetched by water gourds Metal objects and blackened clay pots are not allowed to collect water from the wells, (Risiro, et al, 2013). It is believed that the wells have got “nzuzu” (mermaids) such if offended, water sources may dry up. People are also not allowed to kill aquatic animals such as frogs, (Risiro, et al, 2013). This will also cause the drying up of water sources.

The Study Area

The study was conducted in Matobo district of *Ntunjambili*, which lies 60km South East of Bulawayo. The district is renowned for a lot of rituals and taboos due to its association with the Njelele “sacred” shrine, which for a long time housed *uNgwali*, the Ndebele spirit medium. Although the district lies within agro-ecological four which is characterised by erratic rainfall, the presence of well-managed wetlands has saved the local communities from the debilitating effects of droughts.

Methodology

The study used the qualitative research method, making use of structured interviews. Forty participants selected through random and snowball sampling were interviewed on their views on the role played by rituals and taboos on wetlands management. Site visitations and observations were undertaken by the researcher to validate the responses given by the participants.

Results and Discussions

The general picture that came from both the interviews and observations indicated that rituals and taboos play a very critical role in the district of study. The participants stressed that the community has managed to instil the sense of “sacredness” of the wetlands in the district. “The wetlands are kept out of people by strict taboos and rituals and all the community members adhere to this view religiously”. (Village headman 2013. Personal communication)

Interviews with participants were largely based on the taboos and rituals practised by the community members in the wetlands management. The taboos and rituals that are being practised in the district include, totemism, observance of sacred places, and ceremonies.

One major taboo pertaining to the wetlands management is the forbidding of people to do agricultural activities close to the wetlands. “Akuvunyelwa ukulima kumbe ukugamula izihlahla duze lamaxhaphozi” (Interviewee 2013). We are not allowed to do agricultural activities or to cut down trees close to the wetlands. Thirty-eight (38) participants stressed that is a taboo neither to do agricultural activities nor to cut down trees close to the wetlands. Although the participants could not give the specific distance to be observed, observations by the researcher revealed that the distance is about fifty metres. The reasons that were given by the participants are that the

trees and forests that are close to the wetlands are the habitant of the “gods” so they are not to be disturbed, least the “gods’ become angry and dry the wetlands as a punishment to the community.

The killing of aquatic organisms within the wetlands and the surrounding areas, was also noted as a key taboo on the wetlands management. The reasoning for this was that some of the spirit mediums dwell within these aquatic organisms and killing them would amount to killing the “gods” that safeguard the community and the natural resources that are within it.

As the wetlands are considered the dwelling place for the “gods” of the district, no dirty or any pollution should be put into the wetlands. On drawing water from the wetlands it is a taboo to use any blackened containers, to bath or do laundry on the wetlands. Twenty-eight participants indicated that mysterious events have occurred on individuals who attempted to disregard this taboo. The most preferred water drawing instruments are the indigenous water goards, although of late people are allowed to use clean metal containers.

The first fruit ritual is observed before the harvests from the fields can be harvested. The participants were unwilling to disclose the details of this ceremony. “Akutshelwa muntu lokhu, kufanele uzibonele” (Village – head 2013). Noone is to be told, the proceedings of this ritual, you should be there to see it yourself. The participants strongly believe that the strict observance of this ritual and others has seen their wetlands remaining functional, even during the hardest droughts that have affected the area.

While the majority of the participants (80%) felt that the rituals and taboos play a pivotal role on the sustainable wetlands management, there were few participants (20%) who felt that rituals and taboos are baseless myths that have been perfected by a certain group of traditionalists. These participants feel that the community should now adopt the scientific management skills instead of relying on rituals and taboos. Among those calling for the move towards the scientific management paradigm, were christians who also felt that they are forced to observe certain rituals that are contrary to their christian beliefs and are always being threatened by evictions from the district if they do not comply with these rituals and taboos.

Conclusion and Recommendations.

From the findings it can be seen that the role played by rituals and taboos in the sustainable wetlands management in Matobo District is of immense value. It has been demonstrated that possessing such

knowledge and the capacity to adapt and apply it in the face of changing environmental and social conditions, calls for social resilience, which the people of Matobo seem to have. The food security that the district enjoys can solely be explained on the use of their indigenous knowledge skills, and their ability to accurately pass it on to other generations.

The research however, would recommend that the district also brings in the scientific management skills on board. It is the view of the paper that if the two management paradigms are used complimentary the output would be positive to the community as far as their wetlands management is concerned.

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