

A SYSTEMIC VIEW OF THE VALUE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION: THE CASE OF BONO TAKYIMAN, GHANA

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ABSTRACT

From a systemic point of view it can be understood that the physical environment is important to every living being because it supports and protects life. It contains the ecosystem of which humans, animals and trees interact. All living organisms depend on the environment for survival. With the increase in world population, pollution, and climate change, environmental conservation has become the dominant concern of everyone: individuals, communities, nations, governments and international organisations. From time immemorial the indigenous people of Bono Takyiman in Ghana have depended on their cultural beliefs and practices to conserve the physical environment. Although the indigenous conservation approach of the Bono is based on traditions, the practice is in tandem with modern scientific methods of environmental protection. In fact the indigenous people seem to be ahead of others in environmental awareness and the general concerns of environmental degradation. Using the relevant literature on environmental conservation, this paper discusses two major approaches which the indigenous people of Bono Takyiman employ in protection of the environment. In the paper I set out to share with others from so-called developed and developing countries alike this indigenous orientation to saving the environment. I discuss the worthiness of the approach and I consider lessons that can be learned from it for our way of addressing the Anthropocene.

Keywords: systemic, physical environment, indigenous, anthropocene, conservation

INTRODUCTION

The physical environment is important to every living being – humans, animals and plants alike – because it supports and protects life. The physical environment contains the ecosystem in which living and non-living things e.g. humans, animals, plants, mountains, rivers, rock and soil interact. The mutual and natural relationships for survival among humans, animals and plants occur in and depend on the physical environment, the natural habitat. Burns (2011:132) is more than apt when he posits that individuals are inseparable part of a system and that dysfunctions are the result of a mismatch between individual's skills, knowledge and environmental demands. The rapid increase in population in the various countries of the world puts too much pressure on the physical environment. The current human population at the beginning of this millennium stands at 6.055049 billion people (World population prospects, 1998), a figure that has serious ramifications for the caring capacity, protection and conservation of the physical environment. With the increase in world population, pollution, and climate change, environmental protection

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and conservation must be the dominant concern of everyone: individual human beings, communities, nations, governments and the international community. The competition for space as the result of increased population and the concomitant human activities, some of which are harmful, degrade the physical environment and therefore negatively affect life. In most parts of the so-called third world due to unmanaged human activities the biodiversity has been under threat from environmental catastrophes ranging from erosion, wildfire, deforestation to hunting. In Ghana, in general, very large expanse of the land used to be deciduous forests but over population and its concomitant crop farming, lumbering and other human activities have caused pollution environmental degradation.

Among the Bono the chiefs use culture, traditional beliefs and practices to stop people from encroaching on all the lands as a strategy to preserve and conserve the environment. From time immemorial the Bono indigenes have depended on cultural beliefs and practices to conserve the physical environment but the practice seems to be under threat because of increased in population and knowledge. Although their indigenous conservation approach is based on traditions, the practice is in tandem with the objectives of modern scientific methods of environmental protection. Hindle, Anderson, Gibson and Kayseas (2005:1) attest that around the world indigenous peoples are struggling to build their 'nations' and improve the socio-economic circumstances of their people. The Bono is a conservative ethnic group which preserves and strengthens traditional values and apply these to socio-economic activities. The Bono people engage in subsistence agriculture where they use traditional methods to produce food to feed their families. The Bono blend their agricultural practices and cultural heritage to secure the physical environment. The indigenous protection of the environment from degradation (resulting from deforestation) increases rainfall for food production in the area. In fact the Bono indigenes seem to be ahead of others in environmental awareness and the general concerns of environmental degradation.

In spite of the importance of the physical environment to life there are some individuals and organizations among the Bona and indeed all over the world who in pursuit of profit pay little or no attention to its conservation. In modern day Ghana lumber men do not plant trees after felling the matured ones. In the same way people engaged in surface mining cut into the earth, heap soil and neglect their responsibility to level the place and thus causing environmental destruction. Touching on the urgent need to protect the environment Brown (2015:12) challenges COP21 which will meet in France in December 2015 to seriously negotiate for the drastic reduction in the level of greenhouse gas emissions because as he puts it 'time is not on our side'.

Leaning on his experience and the relevant literature on environmental conservation, the author discusses the major approaches which the indigenous people of Bono Takyiman employ in protecting the physical environment. The objective of the paper is to share with others from the developed and developing countries alike this indigenous orientation to saving the environment. The worthiness of the indigenous approach is discussed for other developing countries to consider and learn lessons from it as (we) humans seek ways of addressing the Anthropocene.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper is grounded in the General Systems Evolutionary theory of which Laszlo, Mosulli, Artigiani and Csanyi (1993) are the chief proponents. The theory is an action oriented systems approach that has emerged from evolutionary processes in nature and society. Laszlo & Krippner (1998) described a system as a complex of interacting components together with the relationships among them that permit identification of a boundary-maintaining entity or process. The indication here is that the world or the physical environment is a system of integration of various sub-systems. In such a system humans make meaning of their physical environment and how its structures function in relation to each other. Von Bertalanffy (1968:38) adds that the interaction and relationship can lead to a much-needed integration in scientific education.

The concept, evolution, may be described as a gradual development usually from a simple to a more complex form. Evolution is therefore a process of development, change or transformation to a better or improved desirable state or situation. The theory posits that human societies evolve or change through convergence to progressively higher organizational levels (Laszlo et al., 1993). As a group of people live in an area they naturally interact with the natural environment. The line that separates the aspects of a system from those of its environment tends to blur as the unit of observation moves from natural and designed physical systems to human and conceptual social systems (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998:2). The theory postulates that the description of evolutionary trajectory of dynamic systems as irreversible, periodically chaotic and strongly non-linear fits certain features of the historical development of human societies. This description of the evolutionary processes has some elements which increase the exploitation by the systems for free energy in their environment. Marten (2001:121) puts it succinctly that the people make sense of the complexity that surrounds them by carrying hundreds of images and 'stories' in their minds about themselves, their society and their bio-environment- how each of these is structured, how each functions and interrelationships among them. In reality what evolves in peoples' environment constitutes their world view- i.e. the perception of themselves and the world around them.

The evolutionary systems theory is based on the integration of the relevant principles of the general systems theory which provides people with the knowledge and understanding of how human beings and their societies act in a constantly changing environment. The theory provides a conceptual foundation for theories and principles of evolutionary consciousness, evolutionary action and evolutionary ethics. It suggests that human destiny can be placed in human hands since it postulates moving toward conscious evolution strategies by which to guide the sustainable development of human communities(Laszlo, etal 1993).

SOME INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION PRACTICES AMONG THE BONO

The Bono are very religious and based on their religious beliefs they have accumulated wisdom to organise their values, perceptions and behaviour. The belief in and practice of African religion provides them with a sense of awe and respect for things larger than themselves e.g. God, earth and the universe. As Marten (2001:12) intimates, religious beliefs are a source of meaning; they

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tell us what is important in our lives. Religion also offers moral codes or guidelines about rights and wrong and rules of behaviour. The importance of moral codes for human-environment interaction is the balance they promote not only between the desires of each individual and the needs of others but also between short term desires and long term considerations such as a concern for future generations (Marten, 2001). Religion is a very powerful tool for ethnic groups to organise their perception of the world. The Bono for example are integral part of their physical environment and believe that negative actions against the environment come with divine sanctions hence they treat nature with care and respect in order to avoid punishment from the spirits of the land.

The Bono are traditional and predominately peasant farmers who till the land for livelihood. The religious beliefs and the values of the Bono and their cultural practices permeate all their activities. These include the activities in the physical environment i.e. the interaction of the people with the physical environment. The Bono rural women interact daily with the physical environment and therefore know it better because they collect fire wood for fuel which is essential for survival (Mosala-Wright and Mokotong, 2000:12). In view of their frequent interaction with the physical environment the rural women play active role in the context of socio- economic development and environmental conservation. As people who till the land for livelihood or engage in peasant farming activities, animal rearing, hunting and harvesting plants for traditional healing of all sorts of ailments they interact with the physical environment- land, soil and forest farming- on regular basis. The constant interaction with the environment does not only make the Bono close to nature but also enables them to use their cultural and religious beliefs to protect and conserve the physical environment on which they survive. The Bono traditional farmers have designed their agricultural ecosystems to take advantage of natural processes instead of fighting nature. Marten(2001:61) attests that the component species in an ecosystem survive because they fit together in a way that enables the whole system to provide the necessary resources for each species.

There are many ways the Bono practically do things to protect the environment. One practice relates to their veneration of the river god- *Tano*. The River *Tano* (small god) takes its source from the hills around the traditional capital- *Takyiman*. *Tano* is a state god venerated from time immemorial because of the belief that the spirit of the river protects the Bono state. Geographically the river surrounds the traditional Bono state capital- *Takyiman*- and one can not enter the town by road (except from the eastern part) without crossing the river. In the ancient times the River protected the Bono Kingdom from being conquered by warring kings and nations. The Bono believe that their defeat by the Asante Empire around the 17-18 century (Adu Boahen, 1975) was because they were taken unaware from the East when a trusted ally, the Nkoranza chief, betrayed them.

The belief in River *Tano*'s spiritual protection makes the Bono venerate the god- *Tano*- to the extent that they do not to kill any fish from the river. Being an important protector the Bono do not like to expose the River to the scorching sun. The belief is that the spirit of the river thrives under shades of trees hence the people's livelihood activities should not encroach on the River basin. This resulted in the growth of forest along the *Tano* basin within the Bono-*Takyiman* area. The traditional belief is that any one who offends the River *Tano* would receive divine punishment from the god, *Tano*. In line with this the Bono do not farm or cut trees at least 500

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metres to the river Tano. Obedience to this divine or religious decree means that human activities, particularly farming, must not encroach on the river basin. The belief is that those who disobey this would receive punishment on him/herself and family. The fear of spiritual punishment and the respect for the river god has saved the river from drying up because there is a forest around its basin throughout the Bono Takyiman area, which is the catchment area for the River. Most of the rivers which are not protected shrink or dry up but the Tano River is always full of water. Although in recent years Christianity and Western education seem to erode the strong fear and veneration for the Tano god the typical Bono does not take the Tano god for granted despite the profession of the Christian faith. When many deaths occurred in a particular village where some farmers encroached on the Tano basin to grow tomatoes the incident was regarded by many as the punishment from the god and the chiefs had to pacify Tano through the slaughtering of a number of sheep.

Tradition has it that the ancient Bono kings were buried in a special place called *amanfo mu* (place of the ancestors). The Bono bury their kings and chiefs with gold ornaments and people are banned from entering the place of the ancestors. Since time immemorial the area was demarcated and preserved as a sacred place for the spirit of the ancestors. The area which is about 3 hectares of land has become a thick forest where no one is allowed to enter or farm. The traditional authority has imposed very strict rules to govern the community forest and any trespassing is regarded as disturbing the tranquility of the spirits of the ancestors and culprits could be punished. Through the cultural practice of keeping the spirits of the departed kings in the forest the physical environment comprising a land of about 3 hectares have been conserved and protected for centuries. Only the traditional priest is allowed to enter the place during the annual festival to pour libation to the spirits of the ancestors on behalf of the chiefs and the people of the Bono-Takyiman state. The worthiness of these indigenous approaches assist the Bono to seek ways of systematically addressing the Anthropocene.

LESSONS FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

The physical environment constitutes an ecosystem where humans, animals, plants, and non-living things live, interact and depend on each other. In the contemporary modern world dramatic increase in population has led to competition for space and utilization of the physical environment. Human activities- farming, housing and infrastructure construction- wittingly and unwittingly destroys the environment. For example, overgrazing, cultivation, lumbering and pollution lead to environmental degradation and destruction. These human social and economic activities covertly or overtly cause environmental destruction and very often most humans do not make efforts to protect the land when they engage in various socio-economic activities. In recent times the natural upheavals such as flooding, extreme drought, epidemic and their concomitant loss of life are blamed on environmental neglect and destruction by humans.

Individual countries, international organisations and world leaders meet in various forums to discuss and map out ways of protecting the environment in which life thrives. There can be no specific way of protecting or conserving the environment. It can be scientific or cultural because in my view the end justifies the means. Whatever peaceful approach that can secure the judicious and sustainable use of the environment should be encouraged. It is against this stance that developing countries with limited resources should take a lesson from the Bono of Ghana

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and use their culture, traditions, indigenous beliefs and practices to protect the physical environment. By putting culture at the fore of human activities and interaction with the environment as portrayed in this paper could be the best way of utilizing the physical environment – land, forest and other organisms-sustanably. The worthiness of the Bono cultural approach to environmental protection and conservation offers lessons to other developing communities, ethnic groups and nations who are grappling with the problems of environmental degradation.

CONCLUSION

Culture encompasses the beliefs, traditions, values and the way a particular ethnic group (people) lead their lives. It permeates all the activities and practices of the people such as language, speech, farming, rituals, ceremonies and what the people wear or eat. The value of culture and traditions of the Bono permeate their interaction and engagement with the physical environment. The discussion has so far outlined and analysed the worthiness of the Bono indigenous approaches to systematically seek ways address the Anthropocene. The paper therefore concludes that since culture is the way of life of people any effort or intervention to conserve and protect the physical environment in the developing countries that does not take cognisance of or focus on the cultural practices of the people would be a futile exercise. To be able to systematically address the problem of environmental degradation sustainably developing communities should look back to their culture for guidance. Developing countries need to use every possible approach to stem the tide because as Brown (2015) asserts the impact of climate change has no respect for borders. Its consequences span generations and it is distinctively irreversible because once a treshold is breached there is no going back.

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