

TRADITIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT SACRED TREES AND AMONG THE ANNANG PEOPLE OF AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Traditional religious practices and beliefs are often described using derogatory terms. Beliefs about sacred trees or their veneration in Annang traditional society are classified as idol worship by many adherents of other religions. In fact, venerated trees are commonly seen as playgrounds for witches and wizards in Annangland. These beliefs contradict the traditional relevance attached to sacred trees as well as the essentiality of trees to the ecosystem. Therefore, the study articulates the belief in sacred trees in Annangland with a view of identifying trees adjudged to be sacred, as well as identify the eco-spiritual relevance of the beliefs in sacred trees in Annang society. To achieve the aim of the study, the researcher purposively selected and interviewed custodians of Annang customs and traditions from Etim Ekpo, Ukanafun and Abak Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State. The study reveals that *Ayop Ilem, Ekom, Ukum, Akanah, Ukpah, Nnung Nung, Nkubia, Unorh and Ukum*, are some of the trees that are revered in Annangland. The study identifies that sacred trees have eco-spiritual relevance by virtue of serving spiritual functions, such as being the dwelling place for the spirits of ancestors and deities and adding value to traditional religious rites and rituals, as well as serving as channels for adherents of traditional religion to communicate with the deities and ancestors. At the ecological level, sacred trees boost biodiversity. The study concludes that deforestation due to fear of fetishism and the dearth of information on sacred trees in Annangland threatens the beliefs and as such must be discouraged. The researcher recommends that traditional rulers in Annangland should encourage afforestation and reactivate traditional taboos to prevent deforestation in Annangland. The Department of Forestry of the Ministry of Environment and Solid Minerals should domesticate the action plan contained in Goal 15 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and expedite a state-wide implementation of the National Forest Policy of 2020.

Keywords: Belief, Sacred Trees, Annang Culture

Introduction

Historical facts and various data gathered over the years prove that there exists a robust foundation of knowledge related to sacred beliefs in trees in Africa. There are however observed arguments concerning these beliefs that they are rooted in the abstract state and hard to be verified as conveying empirical truths. Oftentimes, religious beliefs are seen as ideas and concepts that are subjective and should be dismissed. In traditional societies like the African societies where there are wide array of beliefs; belief in the sacred nature of natural phenomena is very prominent and such belief finds a locus point in the cosmology of the people. This denotes that in many cultures, sacred phenomena are set apart – that is venerated due to the beliefs hovering over them. For instance, rivers, mountains, trees, animals and celestial bodies such as the stars, moon and the sun are venerated.

However, it is important to note that adherents of traditional religion often link their beliefs to mythologies, religious experiences or divine disclosure and communicate same to successive generations through oral history as in the case of Africa or written form where there are religious writings. There is the common belief that “nature spirits” are delegated to phenomena on earth. According to Britannica (2021), in the indigenous religions in the Africa's west coast, human spiritual environment is functionally structured by means of personified natural powers, or nature spirits. The power inherent in these phenomena are often venerated and viewed in sacred spectacles.

Furthermore, in Annang ethnic sub-group - a cluster of Ibibio culture, sacred beliefs exist concerning natural phenomena such as: rain (elim), forest (akai), thunder (oduma), ravine (abedeng), mountain (obod), streams and rivers (ilim ye inyang). Belief in the sacredness of trees is one of the beliefs in traditional Annangland. However, due to cultural and social change, the relevance of belief in sacred phenomena is being undermined. The belief is often categorized as idol worship. Based on this background, the researcher is inquisitive to identify the intricacies of the beliefs in sacred trees in Annang traditional culture. The crux of the study revolves around identifying the rationales that give impetus to the beliefs in sacred trees in Annang culture; the kinds of trees that are deemed sacred in Annangland as well as identifying the socio-spiritual relevance of the beliefs in Annang society.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study was to examine the traditional beliefs about sacred trees among the Annang people of Akwa Ibom State. The specific objectives are to:

- i. identify the trees that are adjudged to be sacred in Annangland,
- ii. examine the rationales and underlying beliefs for the veneration of trees in Annangland
- iii. analyze the socio-cultural and spiritual relevance of sacred trees in Annang traditional society.
- iv. assess the ecological significance of sacred forests and sacred trees in Annangland.
- v. examine the underlying challenges confronting the preservation of sacred trees in Annangland in the face of religious change and modernization.

Methodology of the Study

The research design adopted for the study is the descriptive survey. The design was adjudged to be apt in enabling the researcher investigate beliefs held about sacred trees and groves in Annangland. The researcher depended on ethnographic data obtained through participant observation, primary and secondary sources.

The primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with respondents who were purposively sampled. The respondents were custodians of Annang traditions, including family heads, elders, chief priests, and traditional rulers from Ukanafun, Abak, Etim Ekpo, and Ukanafun Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State.

In addition, secondary data were sourced from journal articles, books, theses, unpublished sources and online materials. The analysis of the data was done thematically using the interpretive and descriptive methods. The analysis was based on identifying trees classified as sacred, as well as highlight the spiritual, socio-economic, and ecological relevance of sacred trees in Annangland.

Conceptual Clarifications

A belief is the aggregate mental conviction that a thing or an idea is true. At the general and personal levels, beliefs are often believed to be influenced by divine experiences, events or environmental factors as well as empirical processes. Other scholars from philosophical, psychological and theological standpoints have attempted to elucidate the concept of belief and one of the earliest attempts was made by David Hume who sees belief as a vivid or lively idea. Britannica (2021) expanding the idea of David Hume hints that a belief is a mental attitude of acceptance or assent toward a proposition without the full intellectual knowledge required to guarantee its truth.

Coleman *et al* (2018:278) explaining from the psychological perspective, reiterates that religious beliefs are just convictions about the divine, religious entities or events. Beliefs are cognitive associations between objects (God) and existential concept (real or imaginary) or truth- value concepts. Uso-Domenech and Nescolarde-Selva (2006:4) explain that belief systems define what is good or valuable, substantive and orientative, ideological and prescriptive.

Belief in the sacredness of trees is one of the commonest beliefs in traditional cultures and very much in many modern societies. A tree is a woody plant that regularly renews its growth. According to Berlyn *et al* (2021), trees represent the majority of the earth's terrestrial biomass. The biosphere is dependent on the metabolism, death, and recycling of plants. Trees have been grouped in multifarious ways but the most common classifications are "the softwoods and hardwoods." Other taxonomy of trees hinges on division into shrubs, undershrubs; vines and woody trees.

The emphasis on planting of trees in the modern society is even equated to the religious emphasis placed on trees in traditional culture. While modern emphasis on trees hinges on its importance in environmental protection and economic benefits, the belief in trees in traditional societies is based on the premise that trees have spirits. The concept of Animism developed by E. B. Tylor gives further explanation to the veneration of trees. Ekpo (1999:38-39) explains that animism denotes a recognition of the existence of spirit as apparitional entities which dwell in material things and one capable of going in and out of the body or material object. In this case, the material body is only a resident place for the spirit and any danger done to the material object does not affect the spirit who can transfer its abode to another similar object. Ekpo (1999) further explains that a case study is common in the Yoruba culture where the African Iroko Tree is regarded as the resident place of certain kinds of spirits.

On the other hand, Frese and Gray as cited in Dafni (2006:1), explain that trees are parts of nature that represent life and the sacred continuity of the spiritual, cosmic, and physical world. A tree is often used to symbolize a deity or other sacred beings, or it may stand for what is sacred in general. For Borokini (2016:57), the most common significance of trees is their veneration as gods or as representatives of gods, and their use in religious rituals and spiritual ceremonies. Trees are often used to represent deities or ancestors, serve as mediators or as links to the metaphysical world of the spirits, and are associated with a people's beliefs in life in the hereafter.

Sacred trees are the outcome of tree veneration which Agabje-Williams in Borokini (2016:57) explains as establishing shrines under sacred trees or tying clothes around the tree trunks which symbolizes historical consciousness. Frese and Gray in Dafni (2006:1) assert that through the association with particular

religious or historical events, an individual tree or species of tree acquire(s) the symbolic significance of the events as part of its meaning. A society's religious beliefs about the kinds of trees that are sacred generally depend on the nature and number of trees found in the territory. If trees are plentiful, the forest as a whole will also be an important part of the religion's spiritual beliefs and rituals."

Furthermore, Hughes and Chandran in Dafni (2006:1) have already noticed that sacred groves developed originally in traditional societies, are linked in a web of spiritual relationships with their biophysical environments. Trees have always been regarded as the first temple of the gods, and sacred grove as their first place of worship - sacred groves were held in utmost reverence. In this study, the working definition for sacred trees tilt to the opinion of Grag in Borokini (2016:52) who highlights that sacred trees are those which are subjected to practical manifestation of worship, adoration and profound veneration to honour a deity or please a bad spirit, demon or any other ghostly creature. Sacred trees provide sanctuary for spirits, remind present generations of ancestors or protect a sanctified place from willful damage and exploitation.

The idea of sacred trees is not peculiar to Africans alone; historical antecedence indicates that virtually all cultures venerate trees. A case scenario is found in the Greek mythology where Dryads - nature spirits, are believed to live in oak trees. Dafni (2006:46) reports that tree worship among Jews is a new trend which appeared in the last two decades. Almost all the trees worshipped by Jews are revered already by Muslims and grow in the vicinity of graves of Jewish personalities regarded as righteous. However, Dafni's (2006) study further reveals that in the Christian sector, tree veneration is quite rare, and individuals seldom visit sacred trees. If they do, they generally do so far away from the public eyes and alone, without any public or family being present at the event.

Moreover, the Vedas and the Upanishads which constitute the Hindu sacred texts, make frequent reference to sacred trees, referring to them as the most important living forms on earth. This contributes to the gradual change of the cultural perception of the trees. They are worshipped by tribal animists and are considered the abode of the gods by many other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Adherents of these oriental religions decorate the trees as an aspect of ritual or veneration (Planthunter, 2014:6).

In Nigeria, belief in sacred trees is very prevalent especially in Yoruba, Edo and Igbo cultures. Borokini (2016) reports that attaching charms to the trunks of iroko trees is a very common practice throughout South-western Nigeria. Furthermore, rituals are also offered to iroko trees in different Yoruba communities. In addition, the Igbo people of Nigeria also venerate trees. As often depicted by traditional Nollywood movies, there are evil forests and trees adjudged to be sacred.

Furthermore, Daniel *et al* (2016:260) report that in Efik and Ibibioland, sacred groves such as *Awuk* for *Idiong*, *Ekpo*, and *Ekpe* cults are known to be powerful traditional law enforcement agencies. Sacrifices are performed in the groves to appease the ancestors/gods either as a consultation for an action to be taken, information for guidance, or presentation of items earlier requested from an offender. There were also purpose specific groves (some of which had few trees) like the *Iso Idim Ekpo* meaning 'the head from which Ekpo's stream flows.

Ethnography of Annangland

The Annang people are a sub-set of the Ibibio ethnic group. Historical records by historians and

ethnographers link the origin of the Annang ancestors with the migration of the Ibibio people. Forde and Jones in Ukpong (2007:1) classify Ibibio into six sub-groups comprising Eket, Oron, Ibemo, Efik and the Annang as well as the Ibibio. Noah (1980), Esen (1982) and Udo (1980) agree that the Annang people are part of the Bantu stock that migrated to the present location in Nigeria. Hence, the Annang people are seen as a Semi-Bantu people whose ancestors migrated across the Cameroon mountain estimated by Talbot in Ukpong (2007:1) to be during 7000 BC. The variations in the dialect of the sub-groups do not counter the origin of the people. Ukpong (2007:4) attributes the situation to occupation of different settlements of the sub-groups.

According to Udonata and Ekanem (2011) as well as Essien (2011), the etymology of “Annang” is rooted in the cosmological origin *Anaan*, which means vastness. The worldview of the Annang people is that of a people inhabiting a “vast universe where they have to struggle for survival. In their struggle for survival, they exhibit a common sense of prowess, heroism and doggedness. This doggedness and courage determine or underlie the nature of an Annang person.” This sense of courage plays out in the common saying: *Agwo Annang ade agwo uko*. The people of Annang are found in eight Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State namely: Abak, Essien Udim, Etim Ekpo, Ika, Ikot Ekpene, Obot Akara, Oruk Anam and Ukanafun.

Geographically, the works of Udonata and Ekanem (2011) as well as Essien (2011) indicate that the Annang people occupy the North-Western territory of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, which span to the Cross River Basin between latitudes $4^{\circ}.25'$ and 7° North and longitudes $7^{\circ}.15'$ and $9^{\circ}.30'$ East. At the northern part, Annangland shares boundary with Ibi and Ikono Local Government Areas, and Ikot Abasi Local Government Area is at southern boundary. At the western frontier, Annangland has Abia and Rivers States as neighbours, while at the eastern region is bounded by Uyo and Mkpatt Enin Local Government Areas. Essien (2011:25) highlights that “there is a mean annual rainfall of 2030-2540mm. Annangland has a tropical climate with wet and dry seasons. The wet season spans between March to October when the monsoon winds blow from the South-West. The dry season spans between November to February when the harmattan (ekarika) blows from the North-East.”

Table 1: Info-graphic of Annang People

L.G.A	Headquarters	Clans	Wards	Villages
	Abak	5	10	91
	Afaha Ikot Ebak	7	11	135
	Utu Etim Ekpo	5	10	76
	Urwa Inyang	3	10	78
	Ikot Ekpene	2	11	47
	Nto Edino	3	10	71
	Ikot Ibritam	9	13	165
	Ikot Akpankuk	5	11	86
Total		39	86	749

Source: Essien (2011:35)

Traditional Belief in Sacred Trees in Annangland

The Annang people just like other Ibibio sub-groups, believe in the Supreme Being referred to as Awasi Ibom (a linguistic variation of Abasi Ibom). The common belief is that the universe (ererimbot) comprising anyong, ishong and inyang (the sky, the earth and ocean) are created by Awasi Ibom. Essien (2012) asserts that the Annang people came to know the existence of God through reflections on the universe. These include: a) when they considered the vastness of the universe and its completeness in everything, b) due to limitations and powerlessness of the people at the face of daunting challenges and c) forces of nature point to the fact that there is a Higher Force in the universe. Drawing inference from Mbiti's opinion concerning the notion of God in Africa, Ebong (2012) elucidates that in traditional Annang society, everything has religious or spiritual undertone, hence, the Annang people are a religious people.

There are many beliefs in Annangland, these beliefs include: belief in *Awasi Ibom* as the Supreme Being; belief in *Nnem* (Deities), belief in *Mme Ete Ete* (Ancestors) as well as the belief in mysterious powers. The Annang people believe that natural phenomena such as the sun (utin), rivers and ocean (irim ye inyang), trees and forest (mme eto ye akai), mountains (mbod) and even the road (usung) have spirits indwelling them. The section of this study is concerned with Annang traditional belief in sacred trees. From written sources, it has been established that the primal reason why a people set aside a tree or group of trees as per forest, is the belief that the tree or trees are abode of the spirit(s). Hence, there are sacred trees and sacred forests reserved for *mmiam*, *ekpo* and other spirits. To the Annang people, the trees (eto) or forests (akai) are set aside for plethora of purposes such as swearing of oath.

Data Presentation

Table 2: The Spirits related to Trees and Forests in Annang Culture include

Annang gods	Description	Location of residence	Traditional duty
Nnem akai	god of the forest	The forest	Protection of the forest
Esien emana	reincarnation deity	The forest	In charge of reincarnation
Ekpenyong	god of the wood	The wood	Protecting the woods
Iso Ekpo	spirit of the masquerade	Forest (awuk or akai)	The guidance spirit for masquerades
Idio Inwang	goddess of farm	The farm	Responsible for good harvest

Source: Field study 2021 and Essien (2011:91-92)

Table 3: Some Sacred Forests in Annangland

Sacred Forest	Location
1. Eka Anwa Ubak	Ukanafun Edem Inyang, Ukanafun L. G. A.
2. Akai Anwa Ibok	Ntak Ibosit, Oruk Anam L.G.A.
3. Utai Ikot	Ikot Akpakpan, Etim Ekpo
4. Anwa Ekud	Abat Town, Etim Ekpo LGA

Sources: Field study 2021 and Daniel *et al* (2016:255)

Table 4: Some Sacred Trees in Annangland

Source: Field Study (2021)

Sacred Trees	English Name	Description
Ayop Ilem	Palm Tree	Residence for the Deity of palm tree
Ekom	African Walnut Tree	Accommodates the Spirit of longevity
Ukum	West African Rosewood	Revered because it accommodates the spirit of the dead. The wood is used in making coffin.
Akanah	African Oil Beans Tree	Residence of the spirit of war
Ukpah	God's Tree (Alstonia Boonei)	Traditional gong- <i>obodom</i> are made from the tree. It is used in communicating with the spirits and the community
Nnung Nung	Not identified	Has Supernatural and healing ability
Nkubia	Mahogany Tree	Residence for the spirit of Ekpo Masquerade
Unorh	Not identified	Produces sacred water for healing of ailments.
Anyan	(not identified)	Associated with ancestral spirits

Ekom (African Walnut Tree)



Ukpah (God's Tree)



Ukum (African Rosewood)



Akanah (African Oil Beans)



Nkubia (Mahogany)



Interpretation of Data on Veneration of some of the Sacred Trees started

i. Historical facts about Eka Anwa Ubak the community forest in Ukanafun

According to Chief Friday Jumbo Udo (Pers. Comm.) (2021, November 22), Eka Anwa Ubak is a forest formally described as *Eka Anwan Inyioho Nte Ami* (my mother-in-law is not tall as I am) has tiny leaves on it. The adherents in a bid to consecrate and reverence or venerate the tree, plant some hard trees to surround the entire Eka Anwa (the main tree in the forest) as a sign of respect and security. Such trees planted around the Eka Anwa include: Nnung Nung, Ekom and Ukpah. These security trees were planted according to the families in the village – Ukanafun Edem Inyang. Three Ekom (Walnuts) by Ata Essien Family, Ikot Inyang Family, Nto Akan Family. Members of the different families always pour libation, say their prayers at the stand of their family to the family gods on Offiong Aran Market Day to celebrate the deity.

ii. **Anyan Tree:** In a personal interview with Chief Robinson Sunday (Pers. Comm.) (2021, November 22) at his residence, the respondent explained that history has it that the tree is a powerful one attached to ancestral spirits. The bark of the tree is also medicinal. It is believed that a herbalist once went to peel the bark of the tree for medicinal purposes, after cooking the bark of the tree in a pot, the following day, snakes were seen in the pot. Sacrifice was offered to appease the god so that the snakes could disappear from the pot. The tree was once sawed down but it rose up again as it were. Mothers of twins were not allowed to pass by the road where the tree stood to avoid continuous flow of menstruation for life. Traditionalists perform their rites at the stand of the tree to avert bad cases affecting the community. The belief is that if sacrifices were not offered to the tree, it would swallow commuters and passengers who ply the road without the bodies being seen.

iii. **Ayop Ilem (the Deity of Palm Tree):** In a personal interview with Friday Jumbo Udo (Pers. Comm.) (2021, November 22) at his residence, the respondent explained that the palm tree is harvested once a year and the harvester is always prepared ritually between 7-14 days to equip him for the harvest. The harvester of the palm tree must leave his home within this period to live with the Chief Priest of the land. During this period of preparation, the harvester must not have sexual intercourse. When the *Ayop Ilem* is harvested, adherents have to at least receive a seed of the fruits to extract oil and keep it for his household. The belief is that once an adherent has the oil on the body or food, evil spirits and untimely death are put at bay. Ceremonial rites are performed on the day of the harvest to thank the deity for giving life.

iv. **Ekom (African Walnut):** Chief Robinson Sunday (Pers. Comm.) explained that the *Ekom* tree is classified as a hardwood in nature and it has a life-span up to 250-400 years if afforestation is encouraged. Due to the longevity of the tree, many adherents deem it fit to shelter their lives in the tree for protection hence the saying – *Agwo oduk eto ami* - which implies that “men have abide in the tree.” The belief is that the tree can open its stem to accommodate the people in the days of war, during adversity or at the instance of impending danger. The Ekom trees are usually planted on the land close to the house so that offerings and libations can frequently be made to celebrate the deity. Ancient pot (clay pot) that the bottom has worn out is used in caging the tree to symbolize helmet. The *Ekom* tree planted close to the house is a subset of the big deity at the local shrine where the Chief Priest resides. It

is believed that adherents must reach the age of 80 (eighty) before they can plant a deity.

v. **Nkubia (Mahogany):** Chief Robinson Sunday (Pers. Comm.) explained that traditional play like *Ekpo* masquerade is not done as simply as any other play. The mask of the masquerade is made specifically from Nkubia tree. Only religious functionaries are obliged to use traditional drinks while chanting and pouring libation on the mask to prevent the *Ekpo* Masquerade from destruction and damage. The essence of pouring the libation before one wears the Nkubia mask is because the Nkubia tree has underserved spirit of local gin (Akaikai)

vi. **Akai Anwa Ekud (formally Ikud Itiaba Forest):** According to Chief Esoh Udom Essien (Pers. Comm.) (2021, November 22), the location of the forest was formally a plain farmland that was often cultivated for years without afforestation. The emergence of the forest was as a result of the experience the community had during a planting season. After clearing of the said land and fire set in preparation of planting; after two market days, a canoe with seven types of hard trees (Ukum, Akana, Ekom, Nnung Nung, Ukpah, Unorh and Ayop were found) growing inside. These seven trees were grown to full size to the point that one could access the top from the canoe as base. This was a mystery that amazed the people in the community. Hence, a diviner was consulted. The findings of the consultation revealed that the trees were for peace and harmony.

- That the trees were rejected somewhere else and was about to be destroyed, hence the trees transported themselves through the canoe to have life in the land. The trees had taken refuge in the land. As a sign of acceptance, offertories and libations were made on *Offiong-aran* Market Day
- Consultation and counseling were conducted for people on the same *Offiong-aran* Market Day
- All edible things given to the deity are consumed the same day
- Money given to the chief priest or brought to the deity as appreciation can be saved
- Warriors from the community usually go to the forest for protection when they leave for wars and return to dedicate their success
- Drinks were continually kept by the trees for adherents who would want to drink.

Discussion on Eco-spiritual and Socio-economic Relevance of the Sacred Trees in Annangland

Trees whether a single stand or a group of trees that constitute a forest has/have always offered humanity and the society a wide array of benefits that cannot be undermined. The relevance of trees to man has led to the perennial campaigns to encourage planting of trees and the reservation of trees. There are global plans as well as national policies capturing the planting and reservation of trees. These global plans and national policies are borne out of the understanding of the socio-economic and bio-diverse relevance of trees. Hence, in this section of the study, the relevance of sacred trees in Annangland is explored. The relevance is articulated using the following strands:

i. **Spiritual Relevance:** The primal relevance of sacred trees in Annangland is that “majority of the sacred forests are perceived to serve as 'home' for the spirits of ancestors or that of those who died under questionable or atrocity related circumstances” (Daniel *et al*, 2016:259). According to Chief Robinson Sunday (Pers. Comm.) (2021, November 22), sacred tree such as *Ekom* is believed to protect the lives of aged men who decide to house their spirits in the tree for safety. Aged men can cover their lives in the trees for protection. Sacred trees communicate the value of reverence to the

community and serve as relics and symbols of traditional religion.

- ii. **Socio-Economic Relevance:** As hard wood, some of the sacred trees serve as a good source of timber and sculpture for the community. *Ukum* tree is used in making casket or coffin for the funeral of a departed one. The ancestors believed that this is the most qualified wood that can house the departed spirit from roaming. *Ukpah* is used in making traditional gong (obodom) which is played either in the shrine or market square. It helps to carry information to the subjects. The pitch sound from the *Obodom* is compulsive enough to draw the spirits to the gathering of the adherents. The trees generate income for the Chief priest and defend the community from unseen forces and powers that can be destructive to life. Prevent unforeseen death or premature death. Craft men in Annang land use the *Nkubia* tree to make masks for masquerade plays within the State.
- iii. **Therapeutic Relevance:** Traditional medical practitioners in Annangland use the roots, bark and the leaves of the sacred trees to heal ailments. The leaves of *Nkubia* (Mahogany tree) according to Ukpong (2007:233) are often used as enema for the treatment of acute diarrhea and dysentery. “The bark of the *Ukpah* tree is crushed and applied to snake bites” (Fred-Jaiyesim and Ajibesin, 2012:467).
- iv. **Eco-relevance:** One of the direct benefits of afforestation is that it boosts biodiversity. Sacred trees and forests undoubtedly boost the survival of life in the ecosystem and helps in cushioning the effect of global warming. As captured by Goal 15 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sustaining life on land – forest, ground and animals encourages biodiversity, and when there is deforestation, biodiversity is lost and this inadvertently leads to low crop production. This opinion corroborates with the explanation of Friday Jumbo Udo (Pers. Comm.) (2021, November 22), that sacred trees boost soil fertility and encourage increase in crop production. On the part of Ekpo (2008:75), the roots of forest plants absorb water from surface and layers of the soil, the water absorbed is transferred into the atmosphere, where it eventually condenses and falls as rain.

A Critique of the belief in Sacred Trees in Annangland

Beliefs are often contestable propositions or ideas. The belief in sacred trees in Annangland is one of the traditional beliefs that are undermined by those who do not support the belief. The challenges facing the conservation on sacred trees and forests as identified by the study range from dearth of data on the trees deemed to be sacred and deforestation which destroys the sacred trees preserved in Annangland. With traditional taboos which were initially used to protect sacred trees being eroded, individuals who do not believe in the sacred nature of the trees find no restraining rules. Destruction of sacred trees for agricultural purposes is also the challenges observed. Although there are still few sacred groves in Annangland, many sacred forests are destroyed to build schools and churches. A typical example is the destruction of the *Akai Nkuku* in Ikot Ekpene for the construction of Ritman University. The forest which was owned by Nto Akpan Edu and Nto Akpabio families was initially cleared for farming before Ritman University acquired it (Effiong, 2020).

The negative beliefs about sacred trees is enmeshed in the notion that fetish practices are often carried out in the sacred grove or around the trees. Witches and wizards are believed to hold meetings at night on top of trees venerated. This mostly leads to individuals contacting the Church to pull the trees down (The case scenario being the impending court case between traditionalists and a Church in Abat Town of Etim Ekpo due

to the pulling down of some sacred trees). Due to modern perceptions held as regard to the belief in sacred trees, some practitioners have to hide and continue their practices while others syncretize the belief with new religious affiliation. However, from the study, it is evident that the belief in sacred trees in Annangland is relevant in multifarious ways. The study has identified the socio-economic and eco-spiritual relevance of the belief. The study sums that preservation of sacred forest and trees is an important way of conserving traditional religious heritage of the Annang people as well as promoting biodiversity which is a *glocal* necessity. Undermining the belief or terming the reverence of sacred trees as idolatry is rather a conclusion reached from subjective emotional evaluation.

Conclusion

The study was undertaken to evaluate the belief in sacred trees in Annangland with particular focus on identify the trees adjudged to be sacred, the rationales motivating the reverence of the trees and the eco-spiritual relevance of the trees in Annangland. The descriptive study reveals that trees such as *Ukum*, *Akanah*, *Nkubia*, *Ekom*, *Unorh*, and *Ayop Ilem* are some of the trees revered as sacred in Annangland. The study further reveals that the reasons why trees are deemed sacred are because some of the trees have been hearing the petitions and prayers of the people; the trees are deemed not to be ordinary trees but possess supernatural attributes, the trees are seen to be the residence of the gods as well as carrying supernatural powers capable of solving life's challenges. However, there is a decline in the belief, which has resulted in the destruction of some of the sacred forests in Annangland. This has constituted a problem to indigenous religions and the ecosystem.

Recommendations

The study therefore recommends that:

- i. The Traditional Rulers in Annangland should encourage afforestation and reactivate traditional taboos to check deforestation in Annangland.
- ii. The Department of Forestry of the Ministry of Environment and Solid Minerals Akwa Ibom State should domesticate the action plan contained in Goal 15 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and expedite the state-wide implementation of the National Forest Policy of 2020.
- iii. Village Heads in Annangland need to hold frequent town hall meetings to educate younger generations of the eco-spiritual and economic importance of the sacred trees.
- iv. The Akwa Ibom State Council of Chiefs should be alert and reject political gimmicks of imposing traditional rulers on the people by the Executive arm of government. During the study, some of the traditional rulers approached could not give out precise data concerning the sacred trees in Annangland due to the fact that individuals without holistic knowledge about indigenous culture of Annangland are being made traditional rulers.

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