

African Research Review

An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 3 (4), July, 2009

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

Urashi Waterfall Ecotourism Development and Cultural Challenges in Dikenafai, Ideato South Local Government Area, Nigeria (Pp. 261-274)

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Abstract

The study examined the cultural challenges posed by the Urashi Waterfall ecotourism development in Dikenafai, Ideato Local Government Area, Nigeria. Data for this study were collected through questionnaires using non structured method, and complemented with observations, focus group discussions and in- depth interviews. A total of 100 respondents separated by gender, village settlement, location of residence and generation were sampled. One focus group discussion separated by age and gender was conducted in each village. In all, four focus group discussions were conducted. Destruction of the Urashi shrine, felling of all merchantable trees in Urashi enclave, felling of 'evil trees' in Dikenafai community, and division of the community members based on religious interests were

indicated by all respondents (100.0%) as cultural challenges (100.0%) posed by ecotourism development in Dikenafai. Consequently, Dikenafai community is vulnerable to erosion menace (100.0%) and exposed to scorching sun rays (100.0%) as many economic and shade trees (100.0%) were destroyed. All respondents (100.0%) are afraid of landslide in the Urashi enclave due to erosion, hence accepted that erosion control measures should be embarked upon to safe the situation. However, majority of the respondents (66.0%) are not willing to embark on afforestation project as it is not part of their culture coupled with land scarcity. All female discussants (50.0%) and majority of the male discussants below 40 years (21.88%) supported the religious exercise. About 68.76% including all female discussants indicated that the cultural conflict would have no effect on tourist visitation. However, some (40.0%) respondents are afraid that the Urashi deity may seize the flow of the Urashi water, while others (60.0%) perceived that the religious exercise would rather fasten the rate of flow of the Urashi water while maintaining its attendant purity.

Keywords: Cultural challenges, Urashi waterfall, Sacred forest, Forest resources, Community participation, Conservation, Empowerment, Dikenafai, Community, Ecotourism.

Introduction

There is no part of the world without attractive virtues. No wonder the Atlas of Nigeria (2001) maintains that tourism potentials are fairly evenly distributed in Africa. However, Ijeomah (2007) observed that some areas may be more endowed than others. Perception of the local people towards identified tourism Potentials; packaging of these tourism virtues into products together with the management and marketing of the products, are functions of culture and attitude of the people. Though Cross River State look like a miniature Nigeria in endowment of biodiversity and ecotourism potentials, its popularity as a tourism state is anchored on the fact that the people of the State are hospitable; conscious of the fact that their state is a tourism state; and are therefore ready to be part of the 'tourism movement'. Edet and Ijeomah (2006) reported similar case about Plateau state, particularly before the September 2001 crisis. Contrarily, Kamuro (1996) documented that the Masai from Loita Hills in south west Nairobi have been fighting a fierce battle to prevent an indigenous forest known as Naimina – Enkiyio or the forest of the lost child from being turned into an ecotourism destination. According to Kamuro (1996) the Masai people are determined to preserve

their sacred forest, which for generations has been under their management and control, and carefully kept as a sacred place for worship and communion with Masai deities

Ecotourism thrives only where the challenges it poses could be overcome. Basically among these challenges are environmental (Ijeomah *et al*, 2005), economic (Ijeomah and Aiyeloja, 2007) and cultural challenges. Acceptance and willingness of the people to participate in tourism attracts political support of the local authority and guarantees cultural peace – a condition that must be fulfilled for tourism to thrive (tourism cannot thrive in crisis).

Overcoming cultural challenges could be difficult but quite vital for success to be achieved in tourism; because culture, apart from being complex could be relatively problematic as a social regulator of peoples' life. In some communities culture forbids the use of light in even tourist lodges while in others it forbids none members of the community from visiting their streams and sacred forests. In some localities, culture may not allow pregnant tourists to enter ecodestinations that are close to shrines. According to Taylor (undated) as cited by Ijeomah (1998) 'Culture is that complex whole which include knowledge, beliefs, morales, laws, customs and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of the society'. Taylor emphasized that culture determines, regulates, measures, prescribes, affects and influences traditions and channels human behaviour. Put in another way, culture and traditions define the norms of the society which guide public policy makers in their decisions. The withdrawal of cultural acceptance and support of the activities of Shell British Petroleum by the Ogonis of Rivers state led to the extermination of Shell British Petroleum from Ogoni land. Projects hardly succeed when their principles negate the culture of host communities especially when it concerns utilization of natural resources.

In the course of this work, religion is considered an integral part of culture. Before the advent of modern religion, several virgin forests existed and were culturally managed. Some were sacred forests which acted as gene pools; where various plant and animal species were conserved. Through modern religion, most of these sacred forests were cleared and converted to sites for building places of worship, thus leading to loss of biodiversity. The few remaining virgin forests are the riparian forests (Ijeomah *et al*, 2007). Olawoye (2003) opined that the consistent conservation of these forests can only be ensured if the people would have a stake in its conservation. On this

basis, Ijeomah *et al* (2007) suggested that conversion of such forests, particularly the one around the Urashi Waterfall in Dikenafai community to ecotourism sites would open up the community for development; and generate revenues to provide individual and communal needs.

This was accepted as most people of Dikenafai seem to be enlightened about tourism and therefore, were interested in the colossal benefits from tourism. However, the success of ecotourism in the Urashi Waterfall is faced with lots of religious challenges. The study therefore examines the religious challenges posed by the Urashi Waterfall ecotourism project; impact of religion on Urashi Waterfall ecotourism; and attempts to proffer solution to the conservation problems posed by modern religion in the community.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Dikenafai, a rural community in Ideato South Local Government Area of Imo state, Nigeria. The area lies on latitudes 5°40'N and 6°00'N and longitudes 6°55'E and 7°10'E. Dikenafai is bounded by Okwelle, Abba, Umudi, Isiekenesi and Okwe communities of Imo State (Ijeomah *et al*, 2007).

Information for this study was mainly collected through questionnaires using Non – structured method, and complemented with observations, focus group discussions (FGD) and in – depth interview with purposively selected people who are quite knowledgeable about the community, and witnessed the cultural conflicts or religious awakenings that were experienced in Dikenafai in December, 2006.

A total of 100 respondents were sampled among indigenes of the community in such a way that 25 respondents were from each of the major four villages that were impacted; 50 respondents live in cities while 50 were local residents in Dikenafai; 50 respondents were males while 50 were females; and only those who were in the community in December 2006 – the period of the new religious awakening (cultural conflicts) were sampled.

One focus group discussion separated by age and gender were conducted in each village in such a way that males below the age of 40 years, males above 40 years, females below the age of 40 years and females above the age of 40 years were represented by 2 persons each as was done by Omonona *et al*

(2000), Hassan *et al* (2003) and Ijeomah *et al* (2007). In all, four group discussions were conducted.

Eight village members attended each group discussion. The focus of the discussions was on 'cultural conflicts in Dikenafai and its impacts on tourists' visitation to the Urashi Waterfall ecodestination'. Data obtained were analysed using descriptive statistics.

Results and Discussion

Socio – Economic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 depicts the socio – economic characteristics of respondents as analysed with regard to sex, religion, village, educational qualification, place of residence, age group and occupation. Equal representation of the four major villages (25.0%); males (50.0%) and females (50.0%); and location of residence (50.0%) implies that all interest groups were involved and information obtained are authentic and not bias. Table 1 also shows that 50.0% of the respondents lived in the cities while 50.0% live in the village which means that they should have good knowledge of what happens in the villages and other communities therefore can critically compare cultures and religious activities. Educational qualification portrays that majority of the respondents (38.70%) have above Higher National Diploma Certificate /Degree and above, which implies that they can reason critically and comparatively.

Even the 10.00% that are non literates could probably be vast in local culture. Age of respondents ranges from 21 to 29 years and above 70years; with 30 – 39 Years (23.00%) and 50 – 59years (22.00%) sequentially taking the lead. This shows that majority of the respondents are mature, are in their active ages, and can differentiate between good and bad in their judgment. The fact that the respondents cut across many professions shows that they are broad minded and experienced.

Cultural Challenges in Dikenafai Community

Destruction of Urashi shrine, felling of all merchantable trees in Urashi enclave, felling of several trees in Dikenafai community and division of members of the community based on religious interests were indicated by all (100.0%) respondents as cultural challenges posed by Urashi Waterfall ecotourism development (Table 2). The Urashi shrine which was formerly a cool environment shaded by trees was exposed as all the shade trees were felled. All merchantable trees inside the Urashi enclave (a valley of about 30

metres depth) were felled, thus destroying the ever emergent forest level that is common in tropical rainforests. However, the undergrowth were left as the major remaining vegetation level inside the valley.

The sound of power chain saw that lasted for hours during the felling process probably scared away all the big animal species in the forest that formerly produced some natural sounds.

Felling of trees was extended to Orie ukwu market square and even the villages; where all the trees tagged 'demonic' were felled down. The entire community became divided on the basis of those who supported the spiritual exercise and those who did not.

All respondents (100.0%) indicated that the exercise was a religious practice introduced by modern religion which was yet to be fully established in the community (Table2).

The highest impact was experienced in Umudike village (100.0%) (probably because it started from there), followed by Umuchoke (48.0%), Umuafai (26.0%) and Nkahu (21.0%) (where it ended). The fact that all respondents termed the cultural disturbance 'religiously motivated' could be because such deforestation exercise and wanton destruction of traditional artifacts have not happened before, in the community. It can also be ascribed to the fact that same kinds of impacts were experienced in nearby communities such as Okwelle, Isiekenesi, Umuobom and Ntueke where the same religious teachings were administered.

Felling of shade (obstructive) trees along major roads brought about unimpaired visibility. The community became well exposed to erosion (100.0%) and scorching effect of sun rays (100.0%). Many economic trees (100.0%) were destroyed (Table 2).

It was observed in a census of *Chrysophyllum albidum* (G.Don) in Umudike village that the religious exercise did not favour existence of the species as only about two *Chrysophyllum albidum* (G.Don) trees were left standing (may be by mistake). Consequently, The market price of *Chrysophyllum albidum* (G.Don) fruit increased tremendously in a community where the species was not formerly harvested due to its abundance but only culturally allowed to fall under gravity (Ijeomah and Ogara, 2006).

Respondents' reaction on the Dikenafai religious exercise

Both those who supported the action and those who did not support were afraid of landslide in the Urashi enclave due to erosion, hence accepted that erosion control measure should be embarked upon to safe the situation (Table 3). However, majority of the respondents (66.0%) were not willing to embark on afforestation project as it is not part of their culture (Table 3). Besides, indigenous economic trees take many years to start fruiting coupled the fact that there is scarcity of land in most communities in Imo State (Agbeja, 2003). Similarly, Ijeomah and Ogara (2006) noted that even though the people of Dikenafai noticed the fast disappearance of *Pentaclethra macrophylla*, they made no effort to protect the species from extinction.

Consequent upon the destructions, some respondents (40.0%) were afraid that the Urashi deity may stop the Urashi water from flowing, others thought that the religious exercise would make the Urashi water flow faster while maintaining its unique purity.

Due to the deforestation in Urashi enclave, Urashi water is visibly seen gushing out from rocks similar to the observation of Ijeomah (2007) concerning Assopfalls of Plateau State, Nigeria. Prior to the religious exercise, it was culturally a taboo to look at the rocks from where the water flows. Division of members of the community into two interest groups generated controversies. More than 80.0% of members of the community living in cities returned and discussed the 'destruction of age – old forest resources by religious fanatics'. Being a festive period (December) when most Ibos like returning to their communities for celebrations, the community became well populated and socially active. Meetings were frequently held as early as 2.00 am and as late as 12.00 midnight.

Assessment of Respondents Support for Destruction of Demonic Trees

Analysis of support for the religious exercise based on gender and age depicted that all female discussants being 50.0% of sampled population, and majority of the male discussants below 40 years of age (representing 21.88% of sampled population) supported the religious movement insisting that the Urashi environment would still be good for tourism after the religious exercise especially if supporting attractions are properly introduced, with the entire tourism product packaged in such a way that different religious beliefs are accommodated. This can be attributed to the fact that the religious group which administered the modern and strange religious teachings were jointly

introduced by the females and the youths in their quest to eliminate obstacles to community development. This can also be ascribed to the fact that women and youths easily accept change as they are hardly custodians of culture. This agrees with the work of Sustainable Tourism Report (2006) that Zapara culture of Ecuador is in danger of disappearing because the youths lack knowledge of Zapara culture.

Contrarily, all male respondents above 40 years of age (representing 25.0% of sampled population) were against the destruction of the Urashi enclave claiming that the relics of the Urashi including the shrine, and its environment are unique virtues important for development of tourism in the vicinity. This cannot be unconnected with the fact that adults, particularly males, do not easily accept changes but like maintaining a *status quo* which conforms to the work of Ijeomah and Ogara (2006). Moreover, adult males are always custodians of cultures and traditions more than youths and women. This agrees with the documentation of Sustainable Tourism Report (2006) that seven Zapara elders, probably the males, (out of a population of three hundred and fifty) who remain in Ecuador are the holders of knowledge about the language, forests and Shamanish traditions including spiritual and healing practices that utilize herbs from their forests.

Perceived Impact of the Religious Exercise on Tourist Visitation

Table 4 revealed that the division of members of Dikenafai community into two interest groups concerning destruction of trees in the Urashi enclave would not in any way hamper tourist visitation when the ecodestination is developed for tourism. This can be related to the fact that historically, Dikenafai has been a peaceful community. Besides, indigenes of Dikenafai hardly visit the Urashi for tourism, probably due to over familiarity with the site, and their vast knowledge of the history of the Urashi deity. With about 90.0% of members of the community being Christians, they may dislike visiting shrines for tourism purpose unlike in India where majority of people take pleasure in visiting shrines, art treasures and temples (Eltringham, 1984; AME, 1995). Nevertheless, the proponents of the religious exercise may change their attitude towards visitation of the Urashi environment for tourism since they perceived that the spiritual effect of the Urashi deity has been destroyed by the religious exercise.

Conclusion

Tourism development, particularly ecotourism is bound to face series of cultural challenges because of individual differences in a community. More so, ecotourism sites are always in rural areas and the bond between rural people is stronger than that which exist among urban people, hence there will always be reactions and conflicts when decisions are taken, due to closeness of the actors. Nonetheless, the differences should be amicably resolved on time to maintain cultural peace and patronage. Development of workable policies for the management of the Urashi Waterfall Ecotourism in Dikenafai requires some politics because of different interest groups. Development of Urashi Waterfall tourism could be realized as the major patronage will be from none indigenes of Dikenafai community. Moreover, both those who supported the deforestation exercise and those who did not support it are indirectly encouraging tourism development though from different perspectives.

The people of Dikenafai should be encouraged through churches and traditional institutions (particularly, women organisations) to embark on effective reforestation exercise to safe the community from erosion menace. Economic trees should also be planted as they help in sustaining the economies of many households at strategic periods of the year while contributing positively in balancing the nutritional requirements of rural people.

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Table 1: Socioeconomic Characteristics of Respondents (n=100)

Variables	Respondents	Percentage
Gender	Male	50.0
	Female	50.0
Religion	Christianity	89.0
	Paganism	11.0
Village	Umudike	25.0
	Umuafai	25.0
	Umuchoke	25.0
	Nkahu	25.0
Educational Qualification	Non literates	10.0
	First School Living Certificate	13.0
	WASC/GCE/O Level	27.0
	Diploma/OND	12.0
	HND/Degree	31.0
	Higher Degree	7.0
Residence	City	50.0
	Dikenafai	50.0
Age Range (Year)	21-29	8.0
	30-39	23.0
	40-49	18.0
	50-59	22.0
	60-69	12.0
	70 and above	2.0
Occupation	Civil Servant	4.0
	Trading	24.0
	Teaching	15.0
	Farming	17.0
	Banking	5.0
	Students	28.0
	Others	7.0

Table 2: Cultural Challenges Posed by Urashi Waterfall Ecotourism Development Project in Dikenafai

Variables	Percentage
Cultural Challenges	
Destruction of Urashi Shrine	100.0
Felling of merchantable trees in Urashi enclave	100.0
Felling of 'demonic' trees in Dikenafai Community	100.0
Division of members of the community based on religious interest	100.0
Reasons for felling trees	
Religious	100.0
Cultural	57.0
Political	18.0
Economic	0.0
Affected Villages	
Umudike	100.0
Umuafai	26.0
Umuchoke	48.0
Nkahu	21.0
Kinds of impact on Dikenafai community	
Visibility	100.0
Exposure to erosion	100.0
Exposure to sunlight	100.0
Destruction of economic trees	100.0
Increase in market price of star apple	84.0

Table 3: respondents' Reaction on the Religious Exercise in Dikinafai (N=100)

Variables	Percentage
Support of the exercise	
In support	68.0
Not in support	32.0
Fears about the Urashi enclave	
Landslide due to erosion	100.0
Obstruction of water flow by Urashi deity	40.0
Willingness to plant trees	
Willing	34.0
Not willing	56.0

Table 4: Assessment of Respondents Support for Destruction of ‘evil trees’ based on gender (n=32)

Variable	Supported (%)	Not in support (%)
Male below 40 years	21.88	3.12
Male above 40 years	0	25.0
Female below 40 years	25	0.0
Female above 40 years	25	0.0
Total	71.88	28.12

Table 5: percentage assessment of cultural impact on tourism visitation based on age and gender of discussants (n=32)

Variable	Negative	Positive	Indifferent
Male below 40 years	3.12	6.25	15.63
Male above 40 years	6.25	0	18.75
Female below 40 years	0	9.38	15.63
Female above 40 years	0	6.25	18.75
Total	9.36	21.88	68.76