

Abatete Traditional Land Use System and The Colonial Land Use

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Abstract- Land use systems in traditional Abatete community in Southeastern Nigeria have witnessed significant changes as a result of the influence of colonial land use policies. This work looks at the evolution of land use vis-a-vis Abatete history. It focuses on traditional land tenure systems as well as the impact of role played by the colonialist on land ownership and management. The paper features the shift from communal land ownership to individual land titles under British colonial leadership. This has led to fragmentation of land and conflicts. Mores so, adoption of certain crops: cash crops and commercial agriculture affected traditional subsistence farming practices in Abatete. The paper therefore, emphasizes the urgent need for a full understanding of the socio-economic as well as environmental implications of colonial land use policies aimed towards shaping current land use patterns in the region.

Indexed Terms- Land, Land Use, Land Use System and Colonial Land Use

I. INTRODUCTION

Land use system could be seen as the way to which land is utilized and managed for various purposes which includes; agriculture, forestry, urban development, conservation and recreation. Pendrill *et al* (2019). It involves planning, regulation and allocation of land for different activities with the aim of achieving sustainable and efficient use of resources, Liu and Zhao (2013). Land Use System in Abatete and the Land Use practices by Colonial masters are two distinct systems that need to be studied. The Abatete Land Use System could be likened to a traditional or customary land tenure system which has been in

existence for years among the indigenous people of Abatete. In contrast, the Land Use practices by the Colonial masters were however, introduced by the British colonizers during the colonial era, the primary aim is to exploit the resources of the land solely for their economic benefit.

The Land Use System in Abatete is distinct and characterized by communal ownership and management of land with land rights which is being passed down from generations through another within the community. It is based on principles of stewardship and love/respect the people had for the land while maintaining focus on sustainable agricultural practices as well as land conservation. In contrast, the need to extract resources for export was the driving force deployed by the Colonial masters. In effect, this led to the implementation of large-scale mining operations that displaced indigenous communities and the resultant disruption on the traditional land management practices.

The juxtaposition of these two land use systems; Colonial and the Indigenous is believed to providing valuable insights into the evolution of land management practices, its impact on the environment, livelihoods as well as social structures of local communities. Through examination of the differences in land tenure, resource management and conservation approaches between the Land Use System in Abatete and the Land Use practices by the Colonial administration, one can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that conspired to influence land use patterns in Nigeria and attendant implications possess for sustainable development.

This work aims to explore the historical context, major features, outcomes of the Abatete Land Use System and the Colonial Land Use practices. Also, to be added is the challenges and opportunities for integrating traditional and modern land management approaches in contemporary Nigeria. Through the analysis of the strengths as well as limitations of these two systems, this study is dedicated to enlightening policymakers, researchers and practitioners on strategies that could be deployed for promoting sustainable land use practices which will ultimately benefit both the environment as well as the local communities.

II. LAND USE PRACTICES

The traditional land use practices in Igbo land, a region in southeastern Nigeria, is a deep reflection her rich cultural heritage and a deep concern to the environment and sustainability, Opata and Asogwa, (2017). The Igbo people have before the colonial masters developed intricate systems of resource management, land tenure and agricultural practices that have sustained their communities for centuries, Ogbu, (2013). Here the key aspects such as land ownership, farming methods, communal land management and spiritual beliefs are highlighted.

Land Ownership and Tenure:

In Igbo land, land ownership is traditionally bestowed on/vested in families or clans, while land is considered a community resource rather than individual/ personal property, Ifediora, (2014). The allocation of land is most times based on lineage ties, Ifediora, (2014) and customary laws while elders play a key role in resolving disputes and ensuring equitable access to land, Oshikoya and Ifediora, (2022). Land tenure systems in Igbo communities are characterized by a combination of communal and individual rights with families been holders of usufructuary rights to land whereas the community retains overall control.

Farming Systems/Method:

Agriculture is believed to be the main pillar of traditional land use practices in Igbo land while farming serves as the main source of livelihood for appreciable part of the population. The Igbo people in most cases practice a mix of subsistence – mixed farming. They cultivate a variety of crops which

include; yams, cassava, maize and vegetables. The Traditional farming methods in Igbo land are oftentimes labor-intensive and incorporate organic practices such as intercropping, mulching and crop rotation this is to help maintain soil fertility and as well enhance crop yields, Ilechukwu & Umeodinka, (2016).

Communal Land Management:

In communal land management, the fundamental principles in traditional Igbo land use practices are solidarity and cooperation and this features a communal ownership of land that fosters collective decision-making and resource sharing, Obioha, (2008, Opata & Asogwa, (2017). In many traditional Igbo communities, land is managed through age-grade unions or associations, village councils/Chief or lineage heads. They oversee the land allocation; resolve disputes arising from land allocations and helps in the regulation of land use practices in order to ensure sustainability. Community members join forces together on land preparation, planting and harvesting. They promote social cohesion and mutual support.

Spiritual Beliefs:

Traditional Igbo land use practices are linked with spiritual beliefs and cultural rituals that emphasize the sacredness of the land, the interconnections of humans, nature and the ancestral spirits. The Igbo people believe in the existence of deities and ancestral spirits in the land as such ceremonies such as land blessings, libations as well as sacrifices are performed to appease the spirits of the land more so; they invoke their blessings for a bountiful harvest. Eneji *et al* (2012). These spiritual beliefs in land serve to instill a sense of reverence and stewardship for the land, thus promoting conservation and sustainable land use practices.

III. IMPACTS OF THE COLONIAL LAND USE SYSTEM

The land use system practiced by the colonial masters in Abatete had significant environmental, social and economic impacts on the community. At this colonial era, land tenure systems introduced by the British authorities altered traditional land ownership and use practices in Abatete. This had a huge impact on the

environment, social structures and economic activities of the community.

Social and Economic Impacts

The social and economic impacts of historical events and developments on communities are thorough and extensive. It shaped the identity, livelihoods as well as the overall well-being of the people.

Social Impacts:

Cultural Heritage: Historical events and traditions play a crucial role which is shaping the cultural heritage of communities. This tradition which is passed down through generations including cultural practices, rituals and customs helps in defining the identity of a community as well aids in providing a sense of belonging for its members. Cultural heritage most times serves as a unifying force which fosters social cohesion and helps in promoting a shared identity among community members, Bajec, (2016).

Community Cohesion: Historical events can strengthen or even weaken the social fabric of a community. A good historical practice such as shared victories, cultural achievements, or collaborative efforts, contributes in fostering a sense of unity and solidarity among community members, Conversely, negative historical practices/events such as conflicts, displacement and discrimination can fracture social bonds and thus leading to divisions within a community.

Education and Knowledge: Historical events can serve as a storehouse of knowledge and wisdom and they are passed down from one generation to another, Puntscher et al (2014). So, understanding the history of a community helps to provides valuable insights into its evolution, struggles, victories/triumph and values, which is valuable for the collective identity and decision-making processes. Knowledge of the history helps community members develop a sense of pride in their heritage; it instils a sense of responsibility for preserving the peoples traditions thus, empowering them with the knowledge needed to navigate contemporary challenges, Bajec, (2016).

Economic Impacts:

Education and Knowledge: Historical events can serve as a storehouse of knowledge and wisdom and they are

passed down from one generation to another(Shetler, 2010)(Puntscher et al., 2014). So, understanding the history of a community helps to provides valuable insights into its evolution, struggles, victories/triumph and values, which is valuable for the collective identity and decision-making processes. Knowledge of the history helps community members develop a sense of pride in their heritage; it instils a sense of responsibility for preserving the peoples traditions thus, empowering them with the knowledge needed to navigate contemporary challenges, Bajec, (2016).

Agriculture: The historical development of communities has in most cases been closely interconnected with agriculture. Agriculture has always been a primary source of livelihood for many societies throughout history. Agricultural practices, farming techniques and land ownership systems that were inherited have shaped the economy of communities. In addition, it has influenced social hierarchies and determined access to resources. Agricultural traditions play a crucial role in food security, environmental sustainability as well as rural development, (Obioha, 2008). It has been impacting the well-being of communities and their economic resilience.

Trade and Commerce: Historical events which include the establishment of trade routes, the markets development and interactions with neighboring communities have greatly influenced the economy of many societies. Commerce and trade has always been crucial part of the economic growth of communities thus, allowing for the exchange of goods, services and ideas including the creation of economic opportunities for residents, Eravwoke & Imide, (2013).

Urbanization and Development: The historical path of communities most times results in or leads to urbanization and infrastructure development. More so, growth in population, advances in technology and economic activities has led to transformation of the rural settlements into urban centers, Liang & Yang, (2019). Urbanization brings about challenges and opportunities, these influences social dynamics, cultural practices and economic activities in communities.

Environmental Impacts

During the colonial, the British Colonial authorities implemented land use policies and systems that had significant impact on the environment in many communities with Abatete inclusive. The introduction of new land tenure systems had far-reaching implications on the environment.

Deforestation and Land Degradation:

Deforestation and land degradation was one of the major environmental impacts of colonial land use in Abatete. The colonial masters encouraged the establishment of cash crop plantations for example; palm oil and rubber. This in turn led to the clearing of large tracts of land. This act of extensive deforestation not only destroyed the forest ecosystems that are valuable but it also led to increased risk of soil erosion. Other implications were; the loss of natural vegetation which in turn disrupted local water cycles. This led to changes in pattern of rainfall and also contributed to environmental imbalances.

Loss of Biodiversity:

There was a loss of biodiversity in Abatete due to the conversion of natural forest areas into monoculture plantations. Native plant and animal species were displaced or destroyed. This led to a decline in local biodiversity. This singular loss of biodiversity had far-reaching effects on the ecosystem; it impacts soil fertility, pollination as well as the overall ecosystem. The displacement of indigenous plant species also led to a loss of traditional knowledge and cultural practices that were linked to the local environment.

Water Pollution and Contamination:

The advent of cash crop plantations in Abatete also had far-reaching impacts on water quality. The introduction and the heavy use of chemical fertilizers including pesticides on these plantations led to contamination and water pollution. This affected the local water sources and aquatic ecosystems. The contaminated sources of natural water supplies do not only posed a health risk to local communities but also caused a great harm on the aquatic life and biodiversity in the community.

Social Displacement and Conflict:

The displacement of local dwellers (indigenous populations) from their ancestral lands to make way

for cash crop plantations led to social uproar, loss of cultural identity and conflicts over land ownership. The loss of access to ancestral land including resources also undermined community cohesion this in led to increased poverty and social inequality.

Exploration and Comparison

Traditional and colonial land use practices in Abatete Nigeria have had clear-cut impacts on the environment. This reflects different approaches to resource management, land tenure systems as well as agricultural practices.

Traditional Land Use Practices:

Land use practices in traditional Abatete society were deeply interlaced with the culture, customs and beliefs of the indigenous people. The Abatete society relied much on communal ownership of land with the practices such as rotational farming, agroforestry as well as traditional conservation methods. The traditional land tenure system in Abatete involves communal ownership where there is shared responsibilities aimed at managing resources sustainably. The locals had a strong connection to the land hence; they see it as a sacred entity that needs to be preserved for future generations.

The traditional land use practices in Abatete features a diversified agricultural system which promoted biodiversity and soil fertility. The common practices were crop rotation, intercropping and mixed farming and helped maintain soil fertility as well as prevent monoculture. On the other hand, Agroforestry played a crucial role in land use in the traditional Abatete society. Trees provided shade, aid nutrient cycling and serves as a habitat for wildlife. Traditional conservation practices observed such as; sacred grounds (forests) and taboo areas protected biodiversity hotspots. This in turn ensured the sustainable use of natural resources.

Colonial Land Use Practices:

The coming of colonial powers in Abatete brought about applicable changes in land use practices that was driven by economic interests as well imposed a new system of governance. The land tenure systems introduced by the colonialist includes; private ownership of land, displacement of traditional communal ownership and restricted access to

resources from the indigenous population. They promoted cash crop cultivation such as; palm oil, cocoa and rubber for export markets. This leads to the conversion of forests and farmland into monoculture plantations.

Land use practices introduced by the colonial masters in Abatete featured intensification of agriculture, deforestation and the decline of the traditional ecological knowledge. The diversion of attention on cash crops for extractive industries resulted in turn resulted in the loss of soil fertility, biodiversity loss and natural habitats destruction. Large-scale land acquisitions by colonial authorities and European companies led to land grabbing and dispossession of local communities, disrupting the social fabric and traditional land management practices in Abatete.

Comparison of Impacts:

The perceived impacts of traditional and colonial land use practices in Abatete could be compared in terms of their effects on conservation of the biodiversity, soil fertility, water resources and resilience of the community. The traditional land use practices in Abatete led to the promotion of agro ecological principles that helped in the maintenance of soil fertility. It supported diverse ecosystems as well as aided the preservation of cultural heritage. The communal land ownership promoted a sense of shared responsibility and intergenerational stewardship. In addition it ensured the sustainable use of natural resources.

In contrary, the land use practices operated by colonialist in Abatete focused more on profit-driven activities which led to environmental degradation and social inequality. The conversion of forests into other uses, exploitation of natural resources as well as land dispossession aided what can be termed as marginalisation of the indigenous communities thus; it disrupted traditional land management systems. The ecological impacts of land use pattern operated by the colonialist in Abatete were deforestation, soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, and water pollution. These undermine the resilience of local ecosystems and the populations' well-being.

IV. ABATETE CURRENT LAND USE SYSTEM

In traditional Abatete community, the family land is owned in a certain prescribed manner by the head of the family. This head of the family is usually the oldest member of same and he is recognized as the holder or custodian. This eldest member of the family holds the same in trust for the rest members of the family. However, he must seek the opinion of the principal members of the family before taking decision on land. The principal members of the family in turn are expected to act in same manner. The implication of this is that it is only a family land cannot be sold except with the consent of all those entitled (descendants) to part of the family land. Individual members there cannot claim ownership to any part or whole. An individual member of the family has no expendable interest in family property hence; it is only the entire family that can transfer its title to any person.

The family land in the Abetete community is believed to be created by first settlement in which it was believed too that the forefathers were the first to settle on a piece of land after which they claimed ownership after a lengthy period of time. Generations coming after were meant to believe they were there first settlers. Hence, there was no written evidence to further buttress that. In traditional Abatete society, it is generally believed that the land should exist to provide for the children and children's children to come. In contrast especially in the recent times, family land can be acquired via sale by the use of money meant for the family to purchase a land. The purchase of a family land is a respected process. According to the customs demand, after the purchase of a land a tradition known as (Igbu Ewu Ani) is observed. This is accordance with the dictates of the customary law which provides that rights to a land have changed hands.

Another mode of creation is through a will hence, a family land can be created in an instance when a testators would request that all his children be made to jointly own a piece of land with or without words of partition. There is this saying that that words of partition be stipulated to avoid future disagreement with the (Obi – which is meant for first born) elders house going to the eldest son, (Ulo Nri) goes to the

youngest son, while the middle children have the share of the remaining piece of land.

The management of a family land solely rest on the shoulder (DI OPARA) who the oldest male of the family in which right and ownership is vested. He is usually referred to as the owner of the land. In effect, the powers and rights of ownership of family land are vested in him and are exercisable by him for and on behalf of the family. The oldest child takes responsibility of the management and control of the land. His duty is to preserve family property from any unlawful interference and encroachment. The family head is not expected to use the land for personal reason hence he can only transfer his right upon partition. The implications are that the family head cannot sale, alienate and transfer the family land to another person without the consent of all the family members being sought and granted.

The determination of a family land in Abetete community is by partition (Oke Ani). This is the act of sharing of family property among the members of the family. Sharing of a family land convey the rights and ownership of that land. Where there is partition of family property, each person becomes an owner of a part allocated. Partition is expected to result from a mutual agreement amongst members of the family who agreed to partition the family property.

In the Abetete community, selling of family especially to outsiders is frowned at. So, family land cannot be transferred to another person this is because they believe that a land should remain within the family as the forefathers the first settler intended it to be. These days, some family transfers all of her its interest in the family land to another person usually by way of sale. These sales also feature Igbo Ewu Ani in accordance with the customs. A sale and transfer of family land is valid where the transfer of title has been agreed upon by the all principal members of the family.

CONCLUSION

Comparing traditional land use practices in Abatete and that of colonial masters provides useful insights into the ecological impacts to resource management and agricultural land use/practices. The practice in Abatete no doubt is shaped by indigenous knowledge

and cultural values. It in addition, emphasizes communal ownership, sustainable resource management and spiritual beliefs. The colonial land use systems on the other hand places priorities on economic interests, private ownership and large-scale agriculture. This had led to environmental degradation as well as social displacement. Arising from this paper is the identification of importance of community participation, issues on sustainable resource management and indigenous knowledge aimed at ensuring ecological sustainability. Traditional land use practices in Abatete is a typical demonstration of the resilience of local communities targeted towards adapting to changing environmental conditions as well as preserving their cultural heritage. Under the colonial land use systems in Abatete, there was the highlight on the need to address the legacy of colonialism including its enduring impacts on land tenure, distribution of resource and environmental justice. To this end, there is for future research to include investigating the long-term effects of traditional and colonial land use practices on community resilience. More so, studies can conducted to explore the role of indigenous knowledge systems towards enhancement of the sustainable land use practices. From the lessons learned from this paper, more research is needed that will contribute to the development of policies and strategies which will ultimately support ecological sustainability, preservation of the cultural heritage and social well-being.

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