

Income-Generating Activities, Towards a Micro-Economy Paradigm: A Principle of Conservation of the Wewere Sacred Forest in the Commune of Bembereke

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Abstract

This research focuses on the rehabilitation of the sacred forest of Wèwèrè in the commune of Bembèrèké. In a mixed-method framework, it employs qualitative techniques such as document review, observation, and unstructured interviews, along with their respective tools such as reading sheets and templates/ guides. In addition, a quantitative technique of questionnaire-based surveying was conducted using a questionnaire as tool. The sampling process involved purposive sampling for key informants and simple random non-probabilistic sampling for the choice of the local populations dwelling around the sacred forest. A total of 95 individuals constituted the sample for this research, which aims to analyse the governance model of the pilot project supporting the rehabilitation of the sacred forest of Wèwèrè through content analysis. The findings of this analysis indicate that the responsibility for monitoring the physical integrity of the sacred forest belong to the Sinandouwirou sociocultural group. However, in order to enhance the effectiveness of the surveillance, the stakeholders have established a new paradigm that facilitates the development of Income-Generating Activities (IGAs) within the sacred forest.

Keywords: income-generating activities, paradigm, rehabilitation, sacred forest, Wèwèrè, Bembèrèké

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I. Introduction and Justification

In the Republic of Benin, sacred forests represent an indigenous form of flora and fauna conservation and habitat preservation in as in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (P. Swamy, 2003). They are remnants of ancient forests that must be preserved at all costs due to their multiple benefits to the community. Several factors contribute to their degradation, including population growth, deforestation, forest fires, uncontrolled expansion of settlements, erosion of traditional religious beliefs, weakening power of religious leaders, and aggressive agricultural practices (K. Koukou, K. Adjossou, and K. Hamberger, 2005). However, traditional Beninese societies have made significant contributions to the protection of natural resources through their relationship with nature. Despite their considerable size, these forests, located outside of protected areas, are rarely considered in national strategies for environmental and forest management in Benin (C. Alferi, 2010).

It is evident that cultural exploitation of forests did not pose any threat to the integrity of the space or its natural components for decades. However, anthropogenic threats and demographic pressures are currently the primary factors contributing to the desacralisation and exploitation of resources in these ecosystems (C. Garcia, J.P. Pascal, and C. Kushalappa, 2006). Considering these examples, it is crucial to take appropriate measures tailored to each local context; otherwise, Benin's valuable ecological knowledge and natural resources that have helped preserve the remaining forests may be lost forever, as environmental destruction has transnational adverse effects. It would be highly advantageous if these wise traditional principles and beliefs could be translated into modern scientific strategies, sound ecological practices, and public communication techniques to ensure that invaluable values are preserved in these mature forests.

Given these realities, authorities at various levels, in synergy with local stakeholders, must have a vision for the sustainable management of endangered forests in the area of this research to contribute to biodiversity conservation through combating anthropogenic actions that lead to climate change impacts on the environment.

"Forests play a significant role in the management of natural resources and biodiversity conservation at the local and even country level in developing countries" (P. Zoungrana, 1995, p.98). In fact, during the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002, it was recommended to implement supportive measures for conservation, responsible resource management, and law enforcement in developing countries. The summit emphasised the need to support forest use for economic growth while ensuring their preservation as fundamental resources. Sustainable management of biological resources has become a major concern in all regions of the world in the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (K. Kokou and A. Kokutse, 2006). As a result, sacred forests have now captured the interest of the scientific community. Some authors believe that their preservation is an alternative for biodiversity conservation, as these sacred spaces are often considered as models of nature conservation (L. Sawadogo, 2013, p.15).

There are approximately 2,940 sacred forests in Benin covering an area of 18,360 hectares. Seventy percent (70%) of these forests are less than one hectare, 18% are between 1 and 5 hectares, and 12% are larger than 5 hectares (V. Agbo and N. Sokpon, 2010, pp.542-543). In regions with low forest cover like Benin, the significance of sacred forests in preserving remnants of ancient forest vegetation and their biological diversity has been the subject of several studies. It should also be noted that in certain regions of Benin, "sacred forests are the only witnesses of the forest heritage" (D. Juhé-Beaulaton, 2010, p.25). These forests play a considerable socio-cultural and ecological role, sometimes hosting water sources on which villages depend throughout the year. Sacred forests have been better preserved compared to state-protected forests until recent times. According to D. Juhé-Beaulaton (2005, p.69), "Faced with land pressure and socio-cultural changes, these forests are currently experiencing rapid and massive degradation, leading to a reduction in their size, or even complete disappearance and biodiversity loss." Thus, some sacred sites are protected through endogenous practices, free from any anthropogenic pressure. Many plant and animal species have been preserved in these sacred woods. The main factors that have protected sacred forests from destruction are related to the fear of their deities, associated rituals, and their multiple cultural and religious uses. Unfortunately, today the power of traditional chiefs and priests of the deities established in these sites has significantly declined. Faced with the resurgence of exogenous religions, the authority of those managing these places is diminishing. This observation leads K. Kokou and A. Kokutse (2006, p. 406) to state: "Some traditional religious leaders become followers of imported religions. This dual practice undermines and may lead to the loss of traditional values related to the conservation of sacred forests." Tradition, far from being an obstacle to environmental protection, is one of the best guarantees for preserving ecosystems and biodiversity over time. Therefore, environmental considerations cannot be separated from the actions of the people that occupy, transform, and manage a given space.

What is worth noting is that for several years, the research area has been under significant demographic pressure due to the high reproduction rate of the local population.

To address this situation, various stakeholders have introduced a new paradigm for the management of the Wèwèrè sacred forest by promoting the development of income-generating activities (IGAs) in its vicinity. In this research, the concept of paradigm represents a worldview, a way of seeing things, and a new approach or model that enables women to anchor themselves in the microeconomy through income-generating activities such as gardening, fish farming, and beekeeping.

II. Research Methods and Materials

Indeed, this mixed-method research is conducted using qualitative techniques, including document review, observation, and unstructured interviews, along with their respective tools such as reading sheets, grids, and interview guides. Additionally, a quantitative technique, namely questionnaire-based survey, is employed using a questionnaire as its tool. Sampling is carried out using the reasoned choice technique for privileged informants, while simple random and non-probabilistic sampling methods are used to reach the neighbouring populations around the sacred forest. In total, 95 individuals constitute the sample for this research. Furthermore, to enhance the scientific rigour of this study, content analysis and the theories of strategic analysis of organizations (SAO) by M. Crozier and E. Friedberg (1977), as well as the analysis of logic of action by H. Amblard, P. Bernoux, G. Herreros, and Y.-F. Livian (1996) have been employed to better understand the behaviours of actors in the given context.

III. Findings and Discussions

The current state of the Wèwèrè sacred forest reveals that its eastern part is integrated with the settlements of the Bembèrèkè-West district, located at the heart of the Ouénou-Bénou classified forest. "It is a sacred forest that derives its name from both the stream that flows through it from the mountains to the south side of the locality and the deity Wèwèrè, whose spirit resides in an Iroko tree located at the core of the sacred forest" (statement by K. G., a sage of the locality, February 2022).

Formerly, in terms of delimitation, the Wèwèrè sacred forest extended over an area of 15 hectares. However, today it has been reduced to 1 hectare, 95 ares, and 99 centiares, limited to the north by the Ouénou-

Bénou classified forest, as well as its western and southern sides. It is situated in the Bembèrèkè-Centre district, at the heart of the classified forest, and shares its northern, western, and southern borders with the Ouénou-Bénou classified forest. It is worth noting that only the eastern part is connected to the Bembèrèkè-Centre agglomeration. This forest is irrigated by the Wèwèré stream, which flows through it from the mountains to drain water towards the southern side of the area.

Historically, the Wèwèré sacred forest is an inheritance left by the ancestors of two clans, namely the Mougou and the Naré. Access to the sacred place is permitted to anyone without distinction of gender or initiatory rank. As for prohibitions, it is forbidden to approach the sacred place while perfumed, due to the presence of bees. Likewise, any sacrifice of a red rooster or black hen is prohibited to avoid angering the spirits. Within the Mougou and Naré lineages, the priest of the deity is alternatively chosen to perform various sacrifices, based on the decision of the wise men of the king and the cult leader (traditional chief) of Bembèrèkè. The selection criterion is based on the clear willingness of the candidate to flawlessly assume the function. Upon ascending to the throne, the priest takes on the name "Sinan Douwirou," which has given rise to several "Douwirou" families in Bembèrèkè. In the Bariba tradition of Bembèrèkè, *douwirou* means "horse's head." Indeed, the *Douwirou*, apart from their role as a priest of the deity, held authority in the royal palace of Bembèrèkè, and one can imagine that due to their functions, they held a status akin to that of a minister of state. They used the same horse as the king and always stayed ahead of the king during all his outings. They were the trusted person of the king, an emissary in external relations of the kingdom. The current Sounon Douwirou is Gani Chabi.

The organization of the Wèwèré sacred forest and its income-generating activities represent a new paradigm for its rehabilitation.

All means are being employed to achieve the rehabilitation of the Wèwèré sacred forest since this sacred forest is our history, our culture, and our identity. Therefore, it is only natural that all social strata are mobilized to achieve the set objectives. In this regard, there is no harm in women being at the heart of this sacred forest (Statement by S. M., collected on 09/01/22).

A careful examination of this verbatim reveals that the Wèwèré sacred forest holds significant importance in the eyes of the Bembèrèké population to the extent that they perceive it as their identity, culture, and history. This analysis is supported by P. Brubaker (2001: 6-7), who defines identity as:

"[Identity] refers to the position occupied in a multidimensional space defined by particularistic categorical attributes (race, ethnic group, sex, sexual orientation). According to instrumentalist theory, it refers to the position occupied within a social structure conceived as universal (for example, the position occupied in the market, in the occupational structure, or in the mode of production). Understood as a specifically collective phenomenon, identity denotes a fundamental and consequential similarity among the members of a group or category. This similarity can be understood objectively (as an inherent similarity) or subjectively (as an experienced, felt, or perceived similarity). This similarity is supposed to manifest itself in solidarity, inclinations, common consciousness, or collective action. This usage of the term is particularly encountered in the literature on social movements, gender division, race, ethnicity, and nationalism."

To support this author's illustration, P. Vidal (1903, p.829) shares a similar perspective by stating that "the age-old interaction between humans and nature and the deep-rootedness of culture in a place are sources of social reproduction and representation that are difficult to transform into an assimilating force of that place." Therefore, the presence of the Wèwèré women's group at the core of the sacred forest organization reflects their long-standing interaction with the forest itself, as well as their cultural and religious roots.

Within the organization of the sacred forest, the women's group comprises approximately fifty (50) individuals. Their activities carried out on the banks of Wèwèré include vegetable gardening. The following photos further illustrate these activities.



Photo 1: Association of Women from the Sacred Forest of Wèwèrè
Photograph: Joslyne Hountondji, January 2022

This image (1) highlights the association of women actively engaged in the rehabilitation of the sacred forest of Wèwèrè. Comprising fifty members, the association is led by a president, a secretary, and a treasurer. In reality, all these women engage in gardening activities, which serve as sources of income along the riverbank. The subsequent image serves as tangible evidence of these facts.



Set 1: Photos of Lettuce Beds and Lettuce Seedlings
Photograph: Joselyne Hountondji, January 2022

Observing this set of pictures, it is evident that the women involved in the rehabilitation of this sacred forest create lettuce beds on which they plant lettuce for sale. Each woman in the association has at least five lettuce beds in Wèwèrè. Ten percent of the lettuce sales from each bed are saved in the association's fund.

This income-generating activity contributes to the balance and socio-economic development of the women's association in Wèwèrè. This is reflected in the words of Mrs. R, a woman in her fifties: "Thanks to this activity we carry out here, it's an opportunity for us to gather as women and exchange about everything and nothing. Also, I would like to emphasise that this activity allows me to meet my basic needs without relying on my husband. The activity helps to make the site more sustainable."

Deciphering these statements, it is obvious that the activity practiced by the women's association plays a crucial role in their social and economic well-being, as well as the sustainability of the site through gardening. In light of this analysis, income-generating activities (IGAs) are essential in the rehabilitation of the sacred forest. IGAs refer to small economic activities benefiting disadvantaged social groups, which do not require significant financial investment but yield income to meet the biological and social needs of the family. These activities include trade, product transformation, craftsmanship, and gardening (L. Michel, 2007, p.15).

A women's association or group is legally defined as an organization whose members pursue a common goal other than sharing profits. In principle, those who share such a goal are allowed to form an association to achieve it. This principle of freedom of association was implemented by the law of July 1, 1901 (L. Michel, 2007, p.17). In the context of this research, the women's association is a structure that brings together women engaged in IGAs at the heart of the sacred forest, sharing common aspirations.

In addition to the women's association, there is the Wèwèré Youth Association. The young people of the community are united within a framework known as the Wèwèré Youth Association. Through this association, the youth participate in reforestation sessions in the sacred site and maintain tree seedlings. It should also be noted that some of them are involved in fish farming. The images below provide further information.



Set 2: Reforestation of the sacred forest Wewéré after an awareness session
Photograph: Joselyne HOUNTONDI, January 2022

Through these images, it can be observed that young individuals gathered in Wewéré to attend an awareness session on the importance of rehabilitating the sacred forest. Following this session, they mobilized themselves for the maintenance and watering of the plants.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that the youth association engages in profitable fish farming activities on the site. The subsequent set of pictures (Set 3) highlights the reality of these activities.



Set 3: Water Pond and Fish Products
Photograph: Jocelyne Hountondji, January 2022

At first glance, this set reveals a developed area with water and fish, where a young woman is feeding the fish. The second image shows a young man holding a large fish weighing approximately 10kg. This fish is caught from the developed water pond.

Observing the data, it is revealed that the investigated actors have estimated a perfect organisation around the pilot support project, where each actor plays a crucial role in the rehabilitation of the sacred forest of Wèwèré, accounting for 97% agreement.

Furthermore, verbatim statements have corroborated these data, as the conveyed idea suggests that without organisation among the actors, the project will not achieve successful outcomes.

In the Republic of Benin, sacred forests constitute an endogenous form of environmental conservation (P. Swamy, 2003). In light of the preceding information, one can conclude based on the principles of organisational theory, which state that any organisation requires actors with defined roles within the system (M.

Crozier and E. Frieberg, 1977, p.27). It is this organisation around the forest that has allowed the different groups to implement income-generating activities (IGAs) as a new paradigm.

IV. CONCLUSION

Sacred forests in Benin, once stigmatised during the political revolution from 1975 to 1990 as the birthplace of witchcraft, have suffered massive destruction with the loss of numerous tree species and hindered regeneration. The relevance of preserving these sacred forests lies in their potential importance as relic forests, genetic nurseries, and medicinal plant gardens, widely used in Benin. The development and harmonious management of these sacred forests, as natural heritage, remain fundamental in the face of anthropogenic pressure on their resources due to the weakening of traditional power, which was previously known as proven environmental custodians. This destruction is also attributed to the influence and sabotage of revealed religions and the uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, hunting, and fishing. Thus, it is imperative to develop a logic of protection and appropriate management to revalorise the sacred model of traditional power governance. Furthermore, this research aiming to analyse the governance model of the pilot project supporting the rehabilitation of the sacred forest of Wèwèrè has identified various problems summarised as follows:

- Existence of vices in the governance and management of the sacred forest of Wèwèrè.
- Distortion of the site due to the implementation of income-generating activities.
- Significant reduction in the area of the sacred forest of Wèwèrè (from 15 hectares before to less than 2 hectares today).

Based on the results, it can be said that in the Republic of Benin, sacred forests represent an endogenous form of flora, fauna, and habitat conservation.

Undeniably, this work on the governance of the pilot project supporting the rehabilitation of the sacred forest of Wèwèrè leads to the following conclusion: a new paradigm has emerged, which is the practice of income-generating activities, specifically a conservation paradigm for forests, such as the one observed in Wèwèrè today.

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