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An overview of rural landscapes and traditional landscape management in Nigeria

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Abstract

African rural landscapes are characterized by various elements. In Nigeria, there are several types of rural landscapes. Local communities believe that some of these landscapes are sacred in nature. Such landscapes and could be denoted by buildings (shrines) and demarcated areas around them, landscape features (streams, forests). Other landscapes are connected to historic events, in some cases, they are remnants of urban landscapes that have changed due to demographic shifts. This contribution from the Nigerian national committee will present examples of some rural landscapes and traditional landscape management in Nigeria. Nigeria’s two World Heritage sites - Sukur Cultural Landscape and Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove - are internationally renowned for the traditional methods and management systems of conservation that have sustained their landscape values from generation to generation.

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INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, the inhabitants have always known how to organise and give form to their physical environment; how to make their presence in the world perceptible; and also, how to celebrate the values in which they believe in. This is evident not only at a cultural level but also essential, as a social construct within the cosmic pantheon of their lives as artefacts. Being part of this intangible aspect, it can equally be said that the resultant heritage sites are expressions of a living relationship between the realm of the person making shelter, within sacredness, and its context. Through a process of individual and community choices these sacredness have been accumulated and assembled in fluid clusters to create a total synergy, a household, as a world of lived experiences constituted as a rich composite of actions, re-actions and identity culture which included the well being as sacred.

South West Nigeria

Osun-Oshogbo: Sacred forest, Grove and water body

Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove is located in Osogbo, Nigeria. The Grove is 75 hectares of undisturbed rainforest, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2005. This sacred sanctuary forest vegetation is believed to be the mythical abode of the Osun (river goddess) and other Yoruba deities such as Oya (wife of Sango the god of thunder), Onile (god of the earth), Ogun (god of iron), Ela (god of peace and reconciliation), Esu (god of natural justice), Obatala (god of creativity) and Sapoona (god of open spaces).

Osun, goddess of fertility, is believed to have been one of the wives of Sango that metamorphosed to a river. The Osun river is believed to possess powers of healing, curing infertility and barreness. Devotees worship her and perform other traditional activities to different deities on a regular basis.

Figure 1. Votary virgin girl carrying calabash of appeasement (arugba)
© O. Adedayo, 2016
The grove is the ancestral home of Osogbo people, the origin of Osogbo kingship institution and foundation of Osogbo kingdom. These are represented by two traditional palaces. The first palace is where the first King, Larooye (also called Ataoja) of Osogbo and his people settled and made covenants with the goddess to live together in peace. After a while, the goddess instructed the people to move out of the grove and establish their homestead in the present Osogbo town. She further instructed the people to come to the river bank every year to give her gifts and committed to protecting and blessing the people. The grove also serves as the seat, and initiation venue, of traditional Ogboni cult where members hold weekly meetings and consult the god of earth before taking decisions on the problems of the grove and Osogbo community.

The grove also contains different shrines, sculptural works, monumental artworks to preserve, protect, honor, celebrate and remember other gods and goddesses. One of these is the Iya Maapo Statue, a monumental sculpture representing the goddess of women entrepreneurship and might. Many sculptural works, created to protect the sanctity of the living spirits in the grove and promote traditional activities of the original inhabitants of the forest, line the main road and paths in the grove. The worship of Ifa is an important element in the Yoruba divinatory and cosmological system and this contributes to the well-being of the grove and Osogbo community.
Traditional laws, myths, taboos and customs continue to be applied to protect and preserve the grove and its components from threats. As plants and animals in the grove are regarded as totemic children of Osun goddess, activities such as fishing, hunting, poaching, felling of trees and other unwholesome activities are totally prohibited in the grove. The traditional worshippers and devotees maintain the intangible heritage through spiritualism, worship and symbolism at different shrines and worship points located in the grove. However, the community’s traditional responsibilities and cultural rights are exercised through the King or Ataoja and his council while a constituted management committee, comprising of various stakeholders, implement policies and activities for the sustainable management of site.
The annual Osun–Osogbo festival is held in the grove in July/August as a way of returning to the ancestral home thus renewing the mythical bond of association between Osogbo people and the river goddess. During the festival, a virgin girl is chosen from the royal family, to carry the calabash containing the contents of appeasement to the goddess at the bank of the river. Osun devotees also play significant roles in decorating the calabash and guarding the maid through her journey from the palace in the town to the grove. The king pays homage to the goddess and his ancestors at the palace in the grove also decorated for the occasion. The votary virgin girl takes a rest at the grove palace after performing the ritual presentation of appeasement to the goddess. These activities have helped to maintain the inner authenticity of the palace and originality of functions of the votary virgin girl. It has also emphasized the value of maintaining virginity among young girls despite modernity.

Traditional form of architecture have been extensively used in the grove to construct the palaces, shrines, sculptures and structures in order to depict the Yoruba culture, envisioned spiritual setting and maintain the original concepts as handed over from generations to generations.

**North-West Nigeria**

**Nok Rural Landscape**

Nok landscape is located in Jaba Local Government Area of Kaduna State. The Nok old settlement landscape elements have been in existence for several centuries and several dominant features are still visible. Old Nok is estimated to have been settled as early as 1500BCE (Breunig & Ameje, 2006; Breunig, 2014; Breunig & Rupp, 2016). Several features make up the landscape, such as the Barn Caves (Gbyan) used as grain reserve during the period of war or famine, the old settlement with three security checkpoints and gates, erosion control measures within settlement, paved walkways, mainly built using stone works currently serving as a major tourist feature of the Nok Museum. Other features of interest scattered amongst the hills are the open court (Yer Shwurku) where community members take oaths before sacred stone pillars or male and female monoliths. The inner court is however only accessible to the initiated. There is also the rock shelter that serves as an upper court, or avenue for the commemoration of the dead, dispensing the testaments of deceased persons and pronouncing capital punishment. Several linked underground cave shelters (Thwun) as serve as welfare cave as well as a clinic providing general medical services with health recordings on stonewalls – it includes a maternity unit and recovery/ rest section. There is the tree of life which is an evergreen tree that has medicinal value and is believed to the capacity to foretell coming disaster or blessings to the land. Other features of significance are the water bodies with their sources within the Nok-Chori hills area.
Table 1: Landscape features of Nok rural Landscape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Landscape Features</th>
<th>Pictures</th>
<th>Description and remarks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nok Old Settlement Ruins</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>The old settlement of the Nok people of Jaba Local Government area showing the stone built ruins in the background and the sacred monolith at the foreground which is at the heart of the old settlement. A civilization estimated to have existed since about 1500BCE at the earliest and 900BCE as the latest estimates as shown by various archaeological researchers (Breunig &amp; Ameje, 2006; Breunig &amp; Rupp, 2016). The old settlement was considered a sacred place and accorded great reverence by local inhabitants. It was off limits to visitors until recently with the siting of a museum at the Nok foothills which made routine tourist visits to the old settlement ruins feasible. Sacred ceremonial events often take place at the old settlement using the original monolith thereby preserving the old settlement significance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Security Gates to Nok Old settlement</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>The gateway to the old Nok settlement serves as a consecrated component of the heritage site. Its past strategic place as a passage for ceremonial events has been replaced with its strategic relevance as a tourist gateway to the Nok civilization. Mainly made up of stone boulders at three different points, along the route to the settlement, which serve as watch points to forewarn the community in case of any security breach.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paved walkway to the Nok old settlement</td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>The stone kerbs are still visible on ascending and descending and ascend towards the old settlement. While the actual stone pavement has been mostly eroded a few paving stones are still visible despite the long period of relocation to lower plains and minimal maintenance. Is an attestation to the enduring legacy of the technical competence and skill available since several past millennials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nok welfare cave (outpatient section, medical record, maternity unit and resuscitation chamber)</td>
<td>Considering the utility value of the welfare cave and its adaptation of natural features for health management of the people in the past it is today still practically a learning. Three different colours are used to depict death (black), injury (red) and birth (white) at the welfare cave as seen on the rock outcrop table as part of record keeping.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barn Caves</td>
<td>This is a collection of granaries for the whole community under the care of the chief priest and elders of the various clans. Based on the convention of farming and storage at times of scarcity or famine, the barns were preserved through most of the history of the Nok people. Also provided for their nutritional needs at critical moment of intertribal wars.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rock Shelter (appeal court)</td>
<td>It is believed that the spirit of the dead reside here and can be consulted for goodwill messages that the dead will deliver before final passage to the ancestral world after burial rites have been completed. The sacred significance of the rock shelter has ensured its preservation for generations. Virgins are permitted to be present during such ceremonies by elders and initiates for the preparation of food and drinks during such occasions. The grain rock grinders and food preparations takes place within the rock shelter and the marks are still very visible.</td>
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### Monolith Shrine (open Court)
Community members treat this area with reverence as it is considered the abode of the spirit of the ancestors. It also served as adjudication and oath point for both male and female using the monoliths. These two monoliths are the last of the Nok people's traditional sacred worship focus until the arrival of colonial masters in late 1800 to early 1900.

The community performs general festivities and masquerades dances in this open court.

### Tree of life
Served as a sanctuary for the divine instruction at moment of disaster or emergency. Consultations are undertaken and interaction with ancestral spirit for sustenance and prosperity.

Its bark can be used as a cure for incurable diseases. It is an evergreen tree that does not shed its leaves.

### Water point (stream)
This stream and other water points within and around the old Nok settlement attest to its sacredness: they provide water and serve as sanctuary for flora and fauna habitat and are often associated with the specific role of protecting the community.

Within and around the hill settlements are several water points and stream that are still serving the current community.

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### Kandu Rural Landscape
Kandu old settlement is located in Danko-Wasagu Local government area of Kebbi State.

According to oral tradition, the Kandu Old settlement was first settled, over two hundred years ago, as a military fort to fend off attacks from the Othman Danfodio 19th century jihad. Old Kandu has preserved its identity, architectural features, traditional ceremonies and festivals. The main landscape features are the dominant dry stone fencing on the hilly settlement with round thatched compound homesteads including demarcated foregrounds as sacred family shrine base lineages and clans. Other critical features of the settlement are the terrace farmlands still in practice, burial ground and paved walkways. Traditional management practices to preserve of homeland of the Kandawa includes annual festivals during which major activities and ceremonies are reverently carried out within the old
settlement. The young suitors (*yan gulmo*) are required to re-thatch and renovate the buildings in their family compounds during or before major ceremonies and events.

Table 2: Rural Landscape Features of Kandu Old Settlement, Kebbi State, Nigeria

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<tr>
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<td>Kandu old settlement stone wall Fence at foreground with thatched roofs at the background</td>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>The routine repairs during burial rites, ceremonies and festivals have served as conservation strategies by ensuring consecration of the dry stone wall fence. These routine repairs during important events have virtually become a convention that each family look forward to participate periodically. Prior to major festivals and ceremonies homestead stone fences are refurbished thus serving to keep significant parts of the compound fence walls in good condition.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family compound during <em>Yanguimo</em> (young suitors) celebration at Old kandu.</td>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Compound settings during ceremonies where all family members are expected to be gathered from the various scattered settlements away from the old Kandu as respect for elders and appreciation of the ancestral blessings. During the <em>gulmo</em> celebration, friends and relations join the young suitors, in the open field with drums and dance, to show love through demonstrations of their capacity to cater for the betrothed girl.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decorated entrance to a Compound at old Kandu settlement.</td>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>During one of the ceremonies the compound is redecorated as shown at this compound entrance. The seating platforms at household entrances serve to receive visitors, including the chief priest visit on particular occasion to deliver message from ancestors or goodwill or in some instances for making declaration on an incident. The <em>yan gulmo</em> (young suitors) set for the days dance and celebration with their betrothed girls at the village square.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grave of compound head beside their family compound with fresh sacrifices of food and drinks.</td>
<td>The presence of the graves of family heads within the compound ensures the feeling of protection and presence of the ancestors amongst their people. The family members of the deceased often present sacrifices in pots and calabash for the gods. The continual interaction of the living and the dead and the feeling of being obligated to the departed ancestors ensure the conservation of the grave and even the family compound; even when most family members have moved from the settlement. The graves require constant maintenance.</td>
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| General burial ground for other members of the family within the family farmland down the hill at the plains. | The rest of the family members are buried within the terraced or low lying farm lands. As they farm the land annually the preservation and maintenance of the grave yard is sustained.

Burial sites are spread all around the farm land. Even those who have left the old settlement are brought back here to be buried. |
| Terraced farmland on the hilltop at old Kandu settlement | Terrace farmland on the hill top is a dominant feature of the old Kandu settlement. This feature of the settlement has been maintained for generations as they continually cultivate their surrounding farmlands.

Apart from the dominant thatched roof structures, the terrace farmlands are the most visible feature of the old Kandu settlement. |
| Boabab Tree as part of sacred sites within the Old Kandu Settlement. | Sacrifices and important consultations are often undertaken within the vicinity of the baobab tree and serves as an integral part of the people’s culture and thus considered as sacred.

The baobab tree is associated with several ancestral sacrifices and worship ceremonies all across Kandu land. |

**Summary of traditional landscape management in North-West Nigeria**

These two rural landscapes of Nok and Kandu have demonstrated capacity to endure and be preserved for generations despite political, religious and environmental adversities. The strength of their cultural ties have persevere despite the fact that most younger family
members have relocated to neighboring lands for farming purpose and ease of accessibility to modern amenities away from the old settlement. The detail overview of these rural landscape as well as their conservation strategies and methods are here further espoused. Most of the landscape features in the traditional settlements of north-west Nigeria have survived till date due to the continual practices and traditional ceremonies linked to their sacred significance that is attributed to them by the communities. The consideration of unique features and sites as sacred has been the most important management strategy of these two communities with respect to the identified features. Therefore, due to the sacredness of the features and sites certain methods have been cultivated from generation to generation towards ensuring their management techniques.

Until very recently in Nok Old settlement, the community rehabilitated the barn caves on an annual basis. The chief priest and initiates visit the cave shelters which were used as appeal courts and for dispensing of the deceased's will; the accompanying ceremony was undertaken in the presence of the widow(s) and the deceased's successors. The sacred attribute of the underground cave shelters (Thwun), along with the fact that they are hardly used as war shelters, guarantees their nearly pristine condition. The consecration makes it impossible for any individual to visit or desecrate a landscape feature/site without undertaking a procedural cleansing. Until recently, visitors were not allowed to visit the site. This has changed with the recent siting of the National Commission for Museum and Monuments (NCMM) office in Nok.

Kandu old settlement continues to be preserved mainly due to continued occupation and usage. The clan and family elders serve as a major anchor for the preservation of the landscape where they carry out terrace farming. The landscape also serves as a medium of ancestral worship and the community is custodian of the graves spread across the cultivated terraces. During burial and other ceremonies, the youth of each family jointly renovate and redecorate their family compounds according to their means. This technique of conserving family homesteads is considered a status symbol. Similarly, the young suitors (gulmo) ceremonies provides the opportunity for families to reunite at the old settlement. Above all each ceremonial activity is seasonal and time bound, with strict rules and procedures thereby making it difficult for individuals to willfully violate set community covenants thereby perpetuating the value systems necessary for heritage preservation.

Finally, the continuity of farming, harvest, bush burning and hunting as well as ceremonial duties continue to aid in preserving the cultural landscapes and associated values. The socio-cultural value worldview of these communities serve as an antidote against the ravage of cultural values in the region, from contemporary forces. Reinforcing and documenting these traditions would serve contribute to ensuring preservation and possible redevelopment to act as an avenue for reeducating global audience on their uniqueness and strategic significance within their rural environment.
Central Nigeria

Kofyar Hill Settlement

Kofyar Hill Settlement is located in Qua’an Pan Local Government Area of Plateau State. This cultural landscape is characterised by farm terraces, architecture, stone graves, dry stone walls and distinct animal pens. The extent of this culture is yet to be established as the area is still undergoing research, so far, evidence of this culture spans neighbouring local government areas (Kwapnoe 2018). The landscape is under threat from modernization which calls for concerted efforts to properly research and conserve this landscape with its rich indigenous techniques for posterity.

Farm terraces are present in every hill settlement in the Kofyar area and are a defining feature of their intensive agricultural system (Netting 1968). Terraces here are built with small stones held together with soil. They are usually built along the hill slopes and perpendicular to the flow of water, to prevent erosion caused by the high amount of rainfall. Terraces are built to protect crops and fertile top soil from run-offs. The use of terraces for farming on the hill settlements represents effective land use in areas where farmlands are scarce and cannot support the increasing populations and non-rocky areas are effectively managed to feed the hill populations (Kwapnoe 2012 & 2018).

Animal pens are located within the compound for management and security (see plate 3). They are circular structures with stone walls and thatch roofs. They have a diameter of between 2m to 10m, height of between 1m to 1.8m and thickness of 0.3m to 0.8m. They are used for keeping livestock such as sheep, goats, cattle, dogs, pigs and chicken. A hollowed rock is kept at the entrance of every pen to serve as a feeding trough for the animals.
Graves Most graves were demarcated by conical forms built of stones laid in mud mortar and with a grave marker on top. Oral sources indicate that this type of grave represent the male gender. Graves in the Kofyar area are located within compounds, sometimes at the entrance or behind living areas. Some of the graves belonging to patriarchs or village heads are usually renovated by youths as necessary.
Traditional architecture In addition to circular mud buildings common to African settlements, the Kofyar architecture also includes buildings with stone walls laid in mud mortar. They have small rectangular entrances made of larger stones and a window made of pottery shards, particularly from the neck and rim of ceramic pots (the remains of which can be seen in plate 7). Another type of building consists of a mixture of mud walls built over stone wall bases. It also has a pottery remain as the window. Compounds in this area are usually named after family patriarchs.
Dry Stone Walls The Kofyar landscape is also characterised by dry stone walls, usually located at the entrance of or around compounds.
Ritual Area Different types of ritual areas are found on this landscape. However, an outstanding one is located within a compound and it is called the King's court by the people in their native language (*Kop Long*). It consists of round huts; three graves with standing stones and a meeting place (see plate 9). It is said to be the ancestral home of the chief where meetings were held, judgments given and celebrations of large kills were made (D Dakwang, Pers. Comm. 2017).

The King’s court covers an area of about 15m from north to south and 8m from east to west. To the east of the court is a fig tree (*Ficus thonningii*). Also present in the area are stone seats which continue to be used today. The court also includes a butcher’s slab which consists of a pile of stones and a hollowed out stone slab where the heads of large animals killed in hunting expeditions were placed while the entire village celebrated the victory of brave hunters.
Sacred groves Sacred groves (or lighit in the native language) are identified by names just like abandoned settlements. These served as ritual areas and traditional courts where communal disputes were settled.

Based on the cultural materials identified, it can be said that these people lived in dispersed settlements defined by circular compounds distributed within an interval of between 50-200m, connected by foot paths and surrounded by farmlands or terraces. The use of stone in the erection of huts, footpaths, and farm terraces is a reflection of human adaption to the environment where environmental resources are used to create culture (Sutton 2010). The
inhabitants of the “Kofyar” area are aware of their landscape and this can be seen in their relationship with their immediate environment producing the above features among others. Their pattern of settlement is observed in both abandoned and extant settlements which show that there are possibilities of cultural continuity in this aspect. This continuity is also seen in the communal effort put into the maintenance of some of these cultural features like the farm terraces, animal pens, graves and houses (J. Datok 2017, Pers Comm). However, this culture is threatened by modernization like modern houses and vessels which are seen to be more durable which calls for its preservation from without (Kwapnoe 2018). This culture has been observed among other hill settlements in other parts of southern Jos Plateau which calls for a more extensive and advanced research.

CONCLUSION

In this presentation, the various heritage sites as sacred landscapes have been treated as the focus for a tradition of wisdom among the people in Nigeria. Cultural heritage as a sacred environment serves as a means of communicating information, and encoding value systems, therefore, according to Rapoport (2005) it must respond to culture and cultural identity. As an inheritance, a benefit of a long traditional dwelling of continuity, a collective treasure of local communities can also be described as a sacred cultural identity (Tomlinson, 2003). The presentation noted that these sacred identities may be generated for cultural survival, to withstand social, spiritual, territorial integrity. This feeling of integrity may lead local inhabitants to seek reference points for identity which in itself is sacred within their physical surroundings.

It has been considered necessary in order to understand the complexity of its communal and spirituality, to give an in depth account of the making of the communities within the heritage sites. Also an awareness of the roots and becoming of the Land as sacred is considered to reflect exceptionally well, the dynamic fluidity and evolutionary attitude to change in the cultural heritage and landscape productions of all the heritage sites. Traditional spirituality has been presented as the axis where all matters socially and historically is revolving around traditions. Hence in the corpus of spirituality the history and beliefs of its people is found in an intricate mace of myth and facts – which in turn details and explains the specific world-view of the inhabitants.
References