



## LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION: A CASE OF OLUTACHONI OF WESTERN KENYA

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### Abstract:

Environmental preservation is an urgent and salient subject in the current world since population pressure has directly impacted negatively on the natural environment. Notwithstanding this, environmental conservation efforts cannot be left to governments and other large organizations alone. The actual inhabitants of the various sections of the landmass need to be directly involved. Getting them involved will variously draw on economic and environmental reasons as well as on their cultural practices. This article examines the role of the language and culture of the Tachoni people of Western Kenya in preserving the environment that they inhabit. The data that is discussed was obtained through face to face interviews and observation of the physical environment. Those interviewed were sampled purposively on the strength of their knowledge of the language and culture of the Tachoni and how the two related to environmental conservation. Findings showed great dependence of the Tachoni on the environment and some conscious efforts to preserve it. In spite of the conservation efforts noted, it was also evident that the community faced an uphill task in maintaining the environment they needed so much to keep alive their cultural practices.

**Keywords:** Tachoni, culture, Olutachoni, language, environment, conservation

### 1. Introduction

The Tachoni are one of the subgroups of the larger Luhya people who inhabit the former Western Province of Kenya (Osogo, 1965). Administratively, they are spread in three counties namely Bungoma, Kakamega and Trans Nzoia. They are mainly concentrated around Webuye, Ndivisi, Tongaren, Lugari and Matete. The Tachoni are socially organized along clans totaling eighteen.

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Among these clans we have the Abakobolo, Abamuongo, Abacharia, Abaabichwa, Abasang'alo, Abangachi, Abasamo and others. Traditionally, they are agriculturalists as well as livestock farmers. They have a great affinity for wetlands and will always prefer staying around wetlands. Their language is known as *Olutachoni* (Lwangale, 2016) and it is one of the Bantu languages of Western part of Kenya. Olutachoni forms one of the many Luhya dialects. Tachoni cultural practices are closely associated with nature and it is common to find a Tachoni referring to nature with such fondness as if it were a fellow human being. For example, they may refer to themselves as *abana be likhanga* (children of the guinea fowl). The guinea fowl is one of their totems. Traditional Tachoni burial rites as well as initiation rites are all fraught with aspects of nature. It is as if without the natural environment, the Tachoni would literally feel strangers in this world. Against this background, we sought to find out how the community is surviving in this world where widespread degradation of the physical environment is the practice. Specifically, we sought to find out how their language and culture relate to and contribute to environmental conservation.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of culture has been mainly used by anthropologists to refer to customs, laws, practices and characteristics of a people. It, therefore, encompasses the whole way of life of a group of people. Anderson and Gale (1992) see culture as a mix of symbols, beliefs, languages and practices that people create. To Anderson and Gale (*ibid*) culture is not a fixed thing or entity governing humans. It changes with and over time. In this definition language is a subset of culture. Language is used to express culture yet at the same time it is an aspect of the culture that it expresses. Language carries a people's worldview, the knowledge they possess, their practices, their aspirations and many other aspects of human life. The word 'environment' is used here in its most basic sense to refer to the physical (geographical) space that people inhabit, and it includes all the natural resources therein. These natural resources encompass wetlands, trees, forests, grass, soil, animals (whether domestic or wild) and so on. Human beings depend on these resources for their survival. Consequently, oftentimes they realize they have to live in harmony with this natural environment. There is a lot of vocabulary in the languages of people that shows their relationship with the environment that sustains them. Some of this vocabulary is meant to impress on the minds of members of given communities the need to relate positively with the environment and so preserve it for posterity. This silent yet salient purpose of language was the thrust of the current survey.

Earlier on, environmental conservation studies and efforts failed to take cognizance of the role culture played in environmental preservation (McNeely & Pitt, 1985). In recent years, a number of studies have been devoted to environment-culture relations. Waylen, Fischer, McGowan, Thirgood & Milner-gulland (2010) argue that since the 1980s conservation efforts have tried to incorporate the interests and views of local people having in mind that local cultural context has considerable influence on conservation outcomes. This trend of thinking is important since most communities live in rural areas and depend solely on the environment for their survival. In such case then it is worthwhile to investigate how such communities not only exploit their natural environment but also the efforts they make in conserving it. This report thus

documents findings from a short study carried out among the Tachoni of Western Kenya whose aim was to find out the relationship between Olutachoni (the language spoken by the Tachoni) and environmental conservation.

For a clearer understanding of culture-environment relations, Rapoport (n.d.) proposes a set of three questions that one carrying out environment-behaviour study needs to consider.

These questions are as follows:

- 1) What are the characteristics of people, as members of the species, as individuals and as members of various groups ranging from families to societies that shape the environment and, in design, should shape the environment so that it is congruent with these characteristics and supportive of them?
- 2) In what ways do which attributes of environments affect what groups of people in which ways, under what sets of circumstances, why and how?
- 3) Given this two-way interaction of people and environments, they must be linked in some ways: What are the mechanisms that link them?

We find these questions relevant since communities adapt to the environment through various characteristics and practices. The term characteristics takes in a wide variety of what the group of people does (what practices identify them). Such practices may relate to the biological needs of a people or even their spiritual and emotional needs. The same communities discover that for them to maintain their practices, they need the environment and this drives them to endeavour to conserve it. Yet different groups of people will be affected by aspects of the environment in different ways. This leads to a differential emphasis on aspects of the environment. The skewed way of attachment to the natural environment stems from those mechanisms that link the people to the environment.

### **3. Methodology**

The data analysed herein was obtained from intensive interviews carried out among local Tachoni people who in most cases depend on the environment for most of their provisions in life. Four elderly (over 60 years of age) male members of the Tachoni community were subjected to face to face interviews on aspects of their culture and how the practice of the same contributed to environmental preservation. Also interviewed were two slightly younger (50 years and below) members of the same community. In addition, we observed the natural environment in question to countercheck what was mentioned verbally through the interviews whether the same obtained on the ground. The sample of those interviewed and places visited for observation were arrived at purposively and spread across different locations to ascertain whether the Tachoni practices remained the same or similar in different locations. Information that was generated was then subjected to in-depth content analysis in order to make judgments and reliable conclusions.

### **4. Olutachoni and Environmental Conservation**

In *Olutachoni*, one finds vocabulary used to refer to the cultural practices of these people. These lexical items encapsulate both the relevant cultural practices as well the attendant taboos. On the surface, the taboos may pass just as cultural practices but looked at keenly, they serve other

purposes such as ensuring that the Tachoni live in harmony with their geographical environment. It is against this background that this short survey set out to establish the relationship between Olutachoni, as a cultural artifact, and environmental conservation.

#### **4.1 *Omutoto* (a type of fig tree): its origin**

To the Tachoni, *Omutoto* is a sacred tree. When fully grown, *Omutoto* is a huge, leafy and succulent tree that survives all seasons whether dry or wet. According to tradition, when the Tachoni were migrating from Misri (probably the present-day Sudan), they came across a huge river. While crossing this river, their leaders asked the people to pick something from the river or nearby to serve as a reminder of their sojourn. From the riverbed, the men picked three smooth stones while women picked *isimbi/likongolo* (cowrie shell). The three stones were symbolic of the male reproductive organ as well as the family – man, woman, child. Similarly, the cowrie shell symbolised the female reproductive organ. Upon crossing the river, the Tachoni also picked a stick that ‘froths with milk’ which was later named *omutoto*. It is this stick that is important for our current discussion. They moved on with these ‘treasures’ picked from the river and nearby. They were later to become important artifacts of their culture and the stick (later planted and grew into a huge tree) was elevated to sacred status. The Tachoni would later pray under it so that their offsprings would survive. The ‘stick’ that was picked would later be planted by successive generations since it was a sacred tree. First born children of each family were the ones entitled to plant this sacred tree. This practice continues to date and it is taboo to cut down this tree (*omutoto*/a type of fig tree).

##### **4.1.1 *Omutoto* and Environmental Conservation**

*Omutoto* is planted from cuttings made out of branches from the main tree. The piece that is cut from the branch is planted during the dry spell and accompanied with a ceremony. This is because it is no ordinary tree but a sacred one meant to serve as protection to the lineage of those who plant it. The male who plants it can pray under it for the survival of his offspring. Culturally, *omutoto* is never harvested for whatever use or simply destroyed. It is left to survive forever and can only be destroyed by natural forces. It is believed that whoever cuts it or destroys it gets automatically cursed. The curse is transgenerational going on to affect his offsprings and their offsprings. It is this cultural belief that has led to so many *emitoto* (plural form) in places inhabited by the Tachoni to survive for many generations. Any Tachoni traversing lands inhabited by the Tachoni can easily identify this tree. Even where the Tachoni have migrated, the presence of *emitoto* is a sign that they once populated such an area. So, in places like Lugari, Bungoma North, Bungoma East and parts of Western Trans Nzoia one finds many *emitoto* surviving to date. As such as long as the cultural practice of the Tachoni of holding the *omutoto* as a sacred tree continues to survive, we shall continue witnessing the presence and survival of *omutoto*.

##### **4.1.2 *Esitabicha* and other Initiation Rites as Features of Environmental Conservation**

*Esitabicha* is a terminology used to refer to a place where the Tachoni carry out their final circumcision rites fondly referred to as *okhulich*a (an equivalent of baptism in Christianity). Such a place must have certain physical features for it to be used for this purpose. It must have a wetland (both a running river/stream and a swamp – both of which should be permanent).

Besides, it must have a palm tree (*likhendu*) and a flat rock (*olwanda*). The three physical features are mandatory since they are used for *okhubita* (baptizing) the fresh initiates into the traditions and customs of the Tachoni. In effect, any mention of the terminology *esitabicha* evokes among the Tachoni memories of a wetland with rocks, a swamp and palm trees (*amakhendu*).

#### 4.1.2.1 The Physical Features of *Esitabicha* and Environmental Conservation

*Esitabicha* (the plural form is *ebitabicha*) is another sacred place for the Tachoni. During the particular ceremony, only Tachoni males who have undergone the rite of *okhulichwa* are allowed to access the place. As a practice, traditional circumcision of males is still a strong cultural practice among the Tachoni. It is done in two phases. The first phase is the actual circumcision that is done at the home of the particular initiate. After this, the initiates undergo healing and a bit of seclusion. For the initiates to come out of seclusion and join the outside world as mature members of the Tachoni community, they have to undergo *okhulichwa* which is carried out mainly at *esitabicha*. As long as this practice holds then, it means *ebitabicha* have to continue being there. It is in this light that the Tachoni elders have now undertaken the process of marking out and preserving the *ebitabicha* that they have been using and identifying and marking out possible new *ebitabicha*. As already mentioned, for a place to be marked out as *esitabicha*, it must have a permanent wetland (a river or rivulet), a swamp, palm trees and a flat rock. Among the Tachoni of Bungoma, these sites are being marked out and fenced off for posterity. The place must have all the mentioned features to be preserved through fencing so that it is not open to wanton destruction. Funds for the fencing are usually sought from well-wishers such as local members of parliament. In this way, sections of the natural environment are conserved albeit because of a cultural practice.

*Okhulichwa* is only a final rite of circumcision among the Tachoni. The first rite involves the actual 'cutting' of the initiates. This initial rite also depends on features of the environment to be complete. The Tachoni did not have any advanced form of anesthesia for the initiates that would lessen the pain while the initiate was undergoing circumcision. The traditional knowledge of anesthesia involved use of cold water and cold mud. As such the candidate is escorted to a wetland (loosely referred to as *emuchela/esilongo*, the river) early morning where he is dipped in cold water and smeared with cold mud from the same wetland. This serves the anesthetic function since the actual circumcision ritual has to be completed before the sun warms the day. In effect the Tachoni need these wetlands as long as this traditional approach to initiation is still maintained. Most community members still prefer this traditional way of accomplishing this rite of passage to the modern one where a young man is circumcised at a health facility. The emotional attachment to the traditional rite means that the Tachoni have to endeavour to maintain wetlands which they can continually use for initiating their young males.

#### 4.1.3 The Tachoni Totem and Environmental Conservation

The Abachikha clan of the Tachoni (comprising the Abakobolo, Abamuongo, Abacharia) have the following totem:

<i>Wa nekoye</i>	(men of papyrus reeds)
<i>Wa namnaba</i>	(those who make fishing baskets)
<i>Wa makwena</i>	(men who are friends of crocodiles)

*Wa welalo**Wa khasolokho**We maabo* (the courageous ones)*We nachilinda* (those who protect themselves against enemies)

A close scrutiny of this totem reveals the close relationship that the Tachoni had with their environment (in this case, wetlands). Apart from farming, keeping livestock and hunting, the Tachoni also practiced fishing as a source of food. The above totem is thus full of association with fishing (papyrus reeds, baskets for fishing made from papyrus reeds, and crocodiles) are all associated with water and therefore fishing. This is not just a verbal totem but is also used to show the young generation the benefits of wetlands and animals found in such wetlands. Elderly members of the community have respect for wetlands and endeavour to preserve them. The young generation is thus encouraged to do the same. It is believed that crocodiles cannot harm the Tachoni and as such they are encouraged not to harm crocodiles. Similarly, the Tachoni are not supposed to interfere with wetlands used for fishing.

Among *Abasamo* and *Abamuongo* clans of the Tachoni, it is forbidden to eat meat of the guinea fowl (*likhanga*). This is because these two clans believe *likhanga* is their sacred bird. This is why it is a taboo to eat it or harm it. The *Abasamo* also hold it as a taboo to eat meat from a grey cow or even drink its milk. Due to these cultural restrictions, these animals are preserved.

#### 4.1.4 *Esinawela* and other Tachoni Burial Rites and Environmental Conservation

The traditional burial of an elderly Tachoni man cannot go on without the presence of many freshly acquired items from the environment. These items include a skin from a freshly slaughtered bull, live domestic animals, grass, posts and a branch from a specific tree. Because of this social need for these items, the Tachoni make an effort to maintain their environment from where they get them. For instance, an elderly Tachoni man will always have a herd of domestic animals in his homestead especially if he has chosen that when he expires he should be buried under traditional rites. Similarly, he needs to have long grass and trees that can be used for preparing his grave. As a practice such a man is never laid to rest in a coffin. Rather, a bull taken from his herd is slaughtered then the body of the deceased is wrapped in the fresh skin of the slaughtered bull. The herd of animals he possesses plus those of his neighbors are normally engaged in a traditional dance called *esinawela* (a mock fight), performed a day after his burial. It follows naturally then that members of the Tachoni group of people, keen to maintain their traditional practices, will always maintain positive relations with the physical environment so as to satisfy these cultural practices. As such funerary terminologies such as *esinawela* evoke not only messages of loss but also what the environment should contribute to the funerary rites.

#### 4.5 Tachoni Songs and the Environment

Songs are also used to promote rearing and preservation of animals as seen in the following song in praise of reared cattle:

(Chorus)                      *Ee ing'ombe*  
*Mama ing'ombe*

*Ing'ombe**Mama ing'ombe*

1. *Okhusoma, ing'ombe*
2. *Yikhwe, ing'ombe*
3. *Obulwale, ing'ombe*
4. *Eloni, ing'ombe*
5. *Okhulima, ing'ombe*
6. *Amabele, ing'ombe*

The above song enumerates the various economic benefits emanating from cattle. Cattle can be used to pay fees for children who are schooling, settle dowry, pay hospital bills, clear loans, carry out agricultural activities, provide people with milk and many other benefits. What is apparent in this song is that the Tachoni are encouraged to rear animals for their economic benefits. They serve as traditional banks for the Tachoni so that in case of any need all that one needs to do is sell a cow and settle the need that would have arisen. In this way domestic animals are preserved.

Traditionally, the environment provided everything including medicines. Medicines were extracted from parts of trees such as barks, roots, leaves, fruits and others. Elsewhere vegetation could be mystically associated with healing. Such an association can be seen in the following song:

*Ofurarai...**Wela khumusala omurembe,**Omwoyo nokwenyile...**Wela khumusala omurembe**(Euphorbia...*

Please heal me of mumps,

If it pleases you...

Please heal me of mumps)

The person suffering from mumps sings this song while running around the euphorbia (the type that has thick leaves and just one stem) tree. It is believed that with that, the mumps would get cleared.

## 5. Challenges to the Tachoni Environmental Conservation Efforts

As a result of the fast-changing world, no aspect of human existence is left unaffected. Durning (1992) identifies the following as the main reasons jeopardizing indigenous peoples and their positive relationship with the environment: vanishing of cultures of indigenous peoples, plagues and violence, the work of Christian missionaries, entrepreneurs and their indiscriminate extraction of natural resources, means of national development and the action of the landless and peasants. Some of these reasons hold true in the case of the Tachoni. The main challenge to the Tachoni culture and language stems from population pressure. This has led to high demand for

resources, the most important being land which gives rise to the other gifts of nature. As such the landless and peasants encroach even on sections of land that are sacred and used by the community to accomplish their rites. Apart from population pressure, Christian missionaries have continuously changed the culture of the Tachoni. Wa Thiong'o (1981a, 1981b, 1983) holds the view that the Whites, both colonialists and missionaries, decimated African indigenous cultures. Their teachings frowned upon most aspects of ways of life of Africans including the Tachoni and equate them to darkness and lack of belief in God. By and by many Tachoni people have abandoned many aspects of their culture and with that have forgotten the traditional ways of relating to the environment and conserving it. Yet one cannot blame the church alone for the vanishing of the Tachoni cultural practices. Okello, Mukundi, Watako & Adimo (2016) contend that in Africa many people, especially the young generation, have abandoned their cultures in favour of Western culture. Many Tachoni people have similarly abandoned their culture in favour of the universal (Western) culture brought about mainly by Western education and culture. With this, they have lost the traditional ecological knowledge and habits that were used traditionally to support the health of the environment. A further aspect of the modern capitalistic culture that endangers the health of the environment is the materialistic attitude that permeates all and sundry. The current generation is in a hurry to acquire anything and everything for selfish ends. Everyone wants to amass material wealth whether for good reasons or simply for selfish ends. This has left the environment quite vulnerable as it is exposed to people who forever have insatiable appetite for material wealth gotten from the environment. These stand out as the most notable challenges to the traditional ways of conserving the environment among the Tachoni.

## 6. Conclusion

As Jepson & Canney (2003) argue, views of local communities in environmental conservation efforts are important for the health and survival of the environment. The practice of relying on only scientific and environmental reasons may not resonate well with local communities since such approaches look at only the economic and environmental benefits of conservation. However, communities-led efforts are more eclectic and take on board all the other social reasons that drive local communities to see the need for conserving their environment. In the long run, using community-led approaches is more formidable and arguably more sustainable. This is because such an approach tickles the communities' social, cultural, emotional and spiritual reasons that are deep-seated, for conserving the environment. What is evident from this survey is that the Tachoni exhibit many traditional forms of environmental conservation. The conservation knowledge they possess emanates from the interaction of the people and their environment. For the Tachoni, the environment serves their cultural needs as well as other economic needs. This knowledge of the interdependence between man and environment naturally makes the Tachoni come up with lexicon that describes the close relationship. The language of the Tachoni thus embraces not only their cultural practices but also their environmental concerns.

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