

Traditional Leadership, Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Conservation in Ghana: A Content Analysis

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Abstract

The involvement of traditional leaders in environmental conservation is a critical factor contributing to the success of countries with abundant biodiversity conservation. Unfortunately, many biodiversity policies in developing countries, including Ghana, overlook the perspectives of traditional leaders, limiting the effectiveness of conservation initiatives. Content analysis was employed as the primary qualitative research method to examine the relationship between traditional leadership, indigenous knowledge, and environmental conservation in Ghana. This was achieved through a systematic review of existing journal articles, where recurring themes, patterns, and concepts related to the topic were identified and analyzed to draw insights into their interconnectedness and practical implications. The study reveals that traditional leaders, such as chiefs, clan heads and traditional priests, serve as custodians and agents of indigenous knowledge, playing a key role in the enforcement of natural resource management practices in indigenous societies like Ghana. However, the study identifies several contemporary challenges that hinder the effective role of traditional leadership in environmental stewardship. These include a lack of legal authority and recognition, community non-compliance and resistance, conflicts between traditional and governmental policies, over-reliance on Western approaches to environmental issues, tensions between Christianity and indigenous religion, and the constitutional rights of Ghanaian citizens. To address these challenges, the study proposes key strategies such as legal recognition and policy integration, capacity building and resource allocation, revitalization of indigenous knowledge systems, and increased community participation and stakeholder engagement in Ghana's environmental governance.

Keywords

Traditional Leadership, Indigenous Knowledge, Environmental

1. Introduction

Traditional leaders play a significant role in the social, political and economic lives of citizens throughout African countries. They are defined as local elites who derive legitimacy from custom, tradition and spirituality. Traditional leaders are custodians of ancestral lands and possess indigenous ecological knowledge for the protection and conservation of environmental resources.

In African societies such as Ghana, chieftaincy is the main institution responsible for supervising the use and enforcement of indigenous knowledge of nature conservation, as chiefs are the overall custodians of lands in local communities. These traditional leaders are the fulcrum around which indigenous knowledge systems revolve. Through ceremonies, stories, taboos, and totems, traditional leaders regulate natural resources. This underscores the fact that traditional leadership and indigenous knowledge have played a crucial role in environmental conservation across African societies for centuries (Aniah, Aasoglenang, & Bonye, 2014; Bardy et al., 2022). Osei (2023a) also argues that in Ghana, traditional leaders such as chiefs, queen mothers and elders have historically acted as custodians of natural resources, ensuring that forests, rivers and wildlife are preserved through customary laws and practices.

Given that one of the aims of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to protect the planet, conserve natural resources and promote the sustainable use of ecosystems by 2030 (United Nations, 2015), the role of traditional leadership in achieving these goals cannot be underestimated, because they possess valuable indigenous knowledge, which can contribute significantly in promoting environmental sustainability and ensuring the effective implementation of the SDGs at the community level.

In some communities in Ghana, studies have shown that traditional leadership possess sophisticated indigenous knowledge for the conservation of the environment. This indigenous knowledge serves as a valuable tool for managing and protecting natural resources in a sustainable manner. Among the Akwamu people in Ghana, environmental conservation is deeply rooted in ecocentric ethics—the belief that nature has inherent value and should be respected and preserved. Their strong attachment to the Volta River reflects this worldview, where the natural world is seen as sacred and deserving of care, not only for human benefit, but because of its spiritual significance (Osei, 2023a).

Research also reveals that the indigenous knowledge systems of local people, embedded in their culture, are effective tools for conserving natural resources. This is evident in the study by Wilder, O'Meara, Monti, & Nabhan (2016), which argues that culturally significant species of flora and fauna, as well as their habitats, have been conserved using indigenous knowledge systems because these spe-

cies are culturally intertwined with the customs and beliefs of the people.

Despite the significant role of traditional leadership in environmental management in Ghana, Antwi (2020) argues that the implementation of indigenous Knowledge system has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. While research on environmental conservation has often focused on scientific and policy-based approaches, the rich ecological wisdom embedded in African Traditional Religion and indigenous practices remains underexplored in academic discourse, leading to a gap in understanding the full potential of traditional leadership in sustainable development. Addressing this gap through a more comprehensive scholarly investigation would not only deepen our understanding of indigenous environmental management strategies, but also enhance global efforts toward environmental sustainability and the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In this study, content analysis was employed to investigate the relationship between traditional leadership, indigenous knowledge, and environmental conservation in Ghana through a review of existing journal articles on the topic. Content analysis is a qualitative research method that systematically analyzes and interprets content from various sources, such as journal articles, reports, and documents. Krippendorff (2004) highlights that content analysis is a valuable tool for identifying and analyzing specific words, themes, or concepts within qualitative data, thereby uncovering insights that might not be immediately apparent. By using content analysis, this study explores the role of traditional leaders in environmental management, assesses the challenges they encounter, and identifies strategies to enhance their involvement in contemporary environmental governance in Ghana.

Due to the content analysis approach used in this study, it was not limited to specific regions or ethnic groups in Ghana. Instead, it encompassed all parts of the country where existing journal articles, reports, and documents identified relevant connections between traditional leadership and environmental conservation.

2. Traditional Leadership: Who Are They?

When discussing indigenous knowledge systems in natural resource management, it is important to highlight key traditional leaders who play a central role in enforcing natural resource management practices in indigenous societies. These leaders, who serve as custodians and agents of indigenous knowledge, include chiefs, clan heads, opinion leaders and Traditional priests.

2.1. Chiefs

Chieftaincy has been important in state governance since the colonial period when chiefs were incorporated into local administration, given powers over land administration and allowed to create local byelaws. The importance of chiefs is articulated within the 1992 Constitution, which recognizes chiefs as the legal custodians of land and natural resources, with rights to transact and gain specified

shares of royalties from market sales of these resources (Amanor, 2022). Mohammed-Katerere (2001) argues that before the colonial era, each tribe in Ghana had a traditional chief who was the central figure responsible for community organization and natural resource management. The lands were vested in the chiefs before our colonial masters came into our country. They were regarded as the highest figures in the community and held various positions which they did not exercise as an individual, but in collaboration with their elders. The functions of these traditional leaders, particularly the chiefs encompass regulating access to land, holding land in trust on behalf of the people as well as mediating disputes over land, thefts of crops, and misconduct. Furthermore, sacrifices as well as mobilizing people to participate in community activities are spearheaded by indigenous institutions. Chiefs, for instance, assume key leadership roles in the traditional authority structure in the management of natural resources in their communities. Involvement of chiefs is needed for effective and efficient management of Ghana's lands and natural resources. Another role of the chief is to support the government's quest to manage the exploitation of the country's natural resources.

From the above perspective, the chief is described as someone who has jurisdictions, and all the resources within that jurisdiction are under his control. This shows that traditionally, chiefs are not only stewards of people and properties in Ghanaian indigenous societies, but they are stewards of cultural beliefs and practices, including natural resources in trust of the gods, ancestors and posterity.

2.2. Clan Heads

Clan heads play a crucial role in managing the environment through various traditional practices and leadership responsibilities. One significant way they contribute to environmental management is by enforcing taboos and norms. Clan heads ensure that taboos against harming totemic plants and animals are strictly followed. Since totems are considered sacred and connected to the identity of clans, protecting them helps in conserving biodiversity and maintaining the natural balance of ecosystems. A study by Abayie-Boaten (1998) highlights that in many Ghanaian communities, taboos related to sacred groves and totemic animals serve as effective measures for preserving biodiversity and maintaining ecological balance. Similarly, Awuah-Nyamekye (2014) notes that traditional norms and taboos in Ghana have been used to protect sacred rivers and forest reserves, ensuring that natural resources are preserved for future generations.

According to Nukunya (2003), clans are often linked to certain plants and animals, which serve as their totems. According to Adu-Gyamfi (2011), totems are used by different group of people for different reasons including the conservation of natural resources. For this reason, Alun (2005) contends that people who believe themselves to be of one blood, descendants of common ancestors, and are bound together by common obligations to each other by common faith revere that totem. Alun further posits that totemic animals and plants serve as symbols of identity for clans, and it is considered a taboo to harm them or engage in certain relationships within the clan. Alun further explains that totemic objects are be-

lieved to be ancestrally related to an ethnic group, clan, or family as a tutelary spirit which they attach deep feelings to.

Ntiamoa-Baidu (1991) argues that totems associated with clans play significant roles in the conservation and management of natural resources. In her work, 'traditional and indigenous methods of conserving biodiversity', she identifies totems as the key indigenous methods for conserving biodiversity. She indicates that totems represent traditional institutions where religiously governed norms define human behaviour.

Clan heads also play a key role in educating the community about the importance of totems and the need to protect them. They pass down traditional knowledge and values to younger generations, ensuring that environmental conservation practices rooted in indigenous beliefs and customs are sustained. Awuah-Nyamekye & Sarfo-Mensah (2011) emphasize that traditional leaders (clan heads) in Ghana use oral traditions, such as proverbs and storytelling, to teach younger generations about the sacredness of the environment and the importance of preserving it. This education helps to instill a deep respect for nature and the environment within the community.

In addition to regulating resource use, clan heads provide spiritual leadership through rituals and ceremonies linked to totems. These religious and cultural practices reinforce the sacred connection between the community and nature, encouraging sustainable behavior and respect for the environment. The spiritual guidance offered by clan heads strengthens the moral and cultural obligation to protect natural resources. Ankomah et al. (2018) assert that rituals performed at sacred groves and ancestral shrines in Ghana not only promote spiritual renewal, but also reinforce the protection of biodiversity and natural ecosystems.

2.3. Traditional Priests/Priestesses

Traditional priests play significant roles in the conservation and management of natural resources. In Ghana, traditional priests and priestesses are regarded as special individuals within communities who are believed to be chosen and possessed by deities associated with natural resources. Their roles include working closely with traditional leaders to manage the political, cultural, and social aspects of the community. As part of the core political structure and leadership of indigenous communities, traditional priests and priestesses hold significant influence in decision-making processes. In times of tragedy or uncertainty, both the people and the chiefs seek guidance from priests and priestesses, who consult the deities on their behalf to provide answers and direction (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2014).

Traditional priests and priestesses ensure that taboos governing natural resources are strictly followed. For instance, menstruation is considered a taboo for the Tano River, and no woman who is menstruating is allowed to go near the Tano shrine. Additionally, since the Tano River is believed to be guarded by baboons, eating, killing, or harming them is regarded as an unforgivable offense and could result in death or severe punishment for the individual or their community. Similar rules apply to other wildlife living in or near the Tano River, such as croco-

diles, mudfish, and antelopes (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2014). These taboos serve as effective measures for conserving biodiversity and protecting sacred species from exploitation and harm.

Apart from their political and cultural roles, traditional priests and priestesses also serve as rainmakers, who invoke the assistance of deities associated with weather and fertility to ensure an adequate and timely supply of rain. In Akan culture, the term “rainmaker” refers to an individual believed to have the ability to influence or control the weather, particularly rainfall. These individuals act as intermediaries between the community and the spiritual forces governing natural phenomena, including rainfall. Rainmakers perform ceremonies intended to appease or invoke the deities associated with rain, ensuring favorable weather conditions for agriculture and other essential aspects of life. Their ability to secure rainfall directly impacts food security and the health of the environment, making their role crucial for the sustainability of the community (Ankomah, Ofori, & Amoah, 2018).

Mbiti (1990) observes that rainmakers are regarded as figures of high status in almost all African societies. They are described by various names that translate to “the shepherds of heaven”, implying that they guide society in maintaining harmony with nature. The underlying belief is that rainmakers shepherd society into a balanced relationship with the environment, acting as a moral compass to determine whether a society is in harmony with nature. They provide the ecological ethics that guide society’s interactions with the environment, ensuring that the community receives the blessings of the land. According to Mbiti, rainmakers possess deep knowledge of weather patterns and environmental behavior. They acquire this knowledge by studying the habits of trees, insects and animals, as well as through careful observation of environmental changes. Their wisdom enables them to offer guidance on how the land should be treated and to prescribe the necessary remedies to heal the environment when it has been damaged by misuse.

In Ghanaian traditional society, the management of natural resources is closely linked to the role of rainmakers. Their spiritual ability to control rainfall can have both positive and negative impacts on the availability of natural resources. For example, an impending calamity, such as the failure of a specific crop during a particular season, could be foreseen by a rainmaker. Such a failure may be interpreted as the wrath of the gods for a specific offense, which could be averted through sacrifices and rituals to appease the gods (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2014). This underscores the important link between spiritual practices and environmental management, highlighting the role of traditional priests and priestesses in maintaining ecological balance and ensuring the sustainability of natural resources.

3. Challenges Facing Traditional Leaders in Contemporary Environmental Governance in Ghana

Traditional leaders in Ghana have historically played a central role in managing natural resources and enforcing environmental stewardship within their commu-

nities. However, contemporary challenges have significantly impeded their effectiveness. This section examines the multifaceted obstacles confronting traditional leaders in environmental governance in Ghana.

3.1. Lack of Legal Authority and Recognition

In Ghana, traditional leaders, commonly referred to as chiefs, have historically played a pivotal role in the stewardship of natural resources and the enforcement of environmental norms within their communities (Ubink, 2007). Operating under customary frameworks, these leaders have been instrumental in managing communal lands, adjudicating disputes, and preserving ecological balance through indigenous knowledge systems (Amoah, 2019). However, the advent of statutory laws and modern governance structures has often marginalized these customary practices, leading to a diminished role of traditional authorities in environmental governance (Appiah-Opoku, 2007). This legal disconnect hampers the effective integration of indigenous knowledge into formal environmental policies and undermines the enforcement of environmental regulations at the local level (Abdulai & Yakubu, 2014).

The introduction of colonial rule and subsequent statutory laws in Ghana redefined the power dynamics between traditional authorities and the state. During the colonial era, indirect rule utilized chiefs as intermediaries, yet this system simultaneously eroded their autonomous power by subordinating them to colonial administrators. According to Busia (1951), colonial authorities introduced systems of indirect rule that maintained the façade of traditional leadership while consolidating real political and administrative power within colonial structures. Chiefs were expected to implement colonial directives rather than act independently in the interest of their communities. This weakened the traditional governance framework and established the foundation for legal and political marginalization.

Post-independence efforts to establish a centralized governance system further marginalized traditional leaders, often excluding them from formal decision-making processes related to land and environmental management. Kessey (2006) posits that the establishment of modern local government structures, such as town councils and district assemblies, systematically reduced the political, administrative and financial influence of traditional authorities. This centralization of authority disrupted long-standing customary governance structures and limited the involvement of traditional leaders in environmental management. Chiefs, who once held significant influence over land and resource allocation were rendered powerless as statutory institutions took over these responsibilities. These changes not only diminished the role of chiefs, but also disrupted the integration of customary practices in local governance.

The impact of this shift became more evident in environmental governance. Traditional leaders had long used indigenous knowledge and customary laws to regulate the use of natural resources and maintain ecological balance. However,

the introduction of statutory environmental laws sidelined these practices, often imposing Western-style regulations that did not align with local realities. Appiah-Opoku (2007) argues that the imposition of statutory environmental laws without considering indigenous knowledge systems creates tension and weakens enforcement, as local communities are less inclined to comply with regulations perceived as foreign and disconnected from their cultural values. This historical context underscores the legal and political factors contributing to the diminished role of traditional leaders in environmental governance.

The current legal framework in Ghana often fails to recognize the authority of traditional leaders in environmental governance. While customary law is acknowledged, it lacks the formal legal backing necessary for enforcement within the statutory system. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana recognizes the institution of chieftaincy, but does not provide explicit authority for traditional leaders to enforce environmental regulations. Article 270 of the Constitution guarantees the institution of chieftaincy and the role of traditional councils, but environmental governance remains under the jurisdiction of statutory bodies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) (Republic of Ghana, 1992). This creates a dual legal system where customary practices are subordinate to statutory laws, leading to conflicts and inefficiencies in environmental management. Tenkorang (2021) observes that in the Asutifi North District in Ghana, traditional authorities, despite their deep-rooted influence, are often relegated to roles of mere consultation without substantive decision-making power in environmental matters. Chiefs may provide advice and feedback, but final decisions are made by statutory authorities, thereby reducing the legitimacy and acceptance of these decisions at the community level. This exclusion not only undermines the effectiveness of environmental governance, but also disregards the valuable indigenous knowledge that these leaders possess.

Furthermore, lack of legal authority limits the ability of traditional leaders to enforce local environmental norms. For example, traditional leaders have historically imposed fines and sanctions for illegal logging, overfishing and other environmental offenses. However, statutory laws now require that such enforcement be conducted by government agencies, thereby stripping traditional leaders of their enforcement powers. Abdulai & Yakubu (2014) note that this has created a gap in enforcement, as government agencies are often under-resourced and lack the local presence necessary to monitor and enforce regulations effectively.

3.2. Community Non-Compliance and Resistance

In Ghana, traditional environmental practices and taboos have historically played a crucial role in preserving natural resources and maintaining ecological balance (Appiah-Opoku, 2007). However, modernization and external economic interests have led to increasing non-compliance and resistance among community members toward these indigenous practices (Sarfo-Mensah & Oduro, 2010). This shift

has resulted in significant environmental degradation and the erosion of cultural heritage. One prominent example is the rise of illegal small-scale gold mining, known as “galamsey”. Driven by poverty and unemployment, individuals and groups have engaged in mining activities that violate traditional prohibitions against exploiting sacred lands and water bodies (Hilson, 2017). In Akwamu traditional society in Ghana, for instance, Osei (2023b) posits that taboos have long existed in fishing communities to regulate fishermen and conserve the Volta River from overexploitation. Some of these taboos include the prohibition of illegal fishing methods and a ban on fishing on Sundays, which are considered sacred days for the Volta River. However, many fishermen disregard these traditional customs in pursuit of personal gain. This non-compliance has led to severe environmental degradation, including deforestation, soil erosion, and water pollution (Bansah et al., 2018). Despite the cultural significance of these taboos, the enticement of economic gain has led many to disregard them, causing long-term harm to their communities and ecosystems (Ofosu et al., 2020).

The erosion of traditional beliefs is also evident in the context of water resource management. Historically, Ghanaian communities employed taboos and totems to protect rivers and other water bodies (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2014). However, studies have shown that the advent of modern education and religious influences has led to a decline in the observance of these traditional practices (Boafo et al., 2016). Many community members now view these taboos as outdated, resulting in activities that degrade water resources and compromise their sustainability (Yeboah-Assiamah et al., 2017). Moreover, the weakening of traditional authority structures has further exacerbated non-compliance. Traditional leaders, once the custodians of environmental taboos, have seen their influence wane due to the imposition of centralized governance systems and modern legal frameworks (Mensah, 2019). This shift has diminished the effectiveness of customary laws and the community’s adherence to them, leading to increased exploitation of natural resources without regard for traditional conservation methods (Asante & Sasu, 2021).

3.3. Conflict Between Traditional and Governmental Policies

Government environmental policies sometimes conflict with indigenous practices, creating tension and undermining traditional authority. In Ghana, this discord between traditional authorities and governmental policies presents a significant challenge in environmental management. Traditional leaders, as custodians of local customs and lands have historically employed indigenous practices to conserve natural resources. For instance, communities in Ghana have utilized taboos and cultural beliefs to protect water bodies and sacred groves, demonstrating the efficacy of traditional conservation methods (Ghana News Agency, 2022). However, the imposition of modern governmental policies often sidelines these traditional practices, thereby leading to conflicts and undermining environmental governance. For instance, in Ghana, although respect for cultural practices in for-

est operations is enshrined in the Timber Resources Management Act (Act 547), these practices are often violated. This is largely because the accompanying regulation which is intended to streamline activities in public forests, is silent on sanctions for individuals who breach sociocultural beliefs. Similarly, the Forestry Commission of Ghana often appears unconcerned when timber contractors operate in public forests on taboo days. Such actions constitute an infringement on the traditions of the communities in which these forests are located, reflecting a significant disregard for cultural values (Asante et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the extraction of natural resources creates land use conflicts, economic upheaval, and environmental harm. Environmental governance is a system designed to allocate decision-making authority over environmental resources among various social actors to address environmental dilemmas. However, its effectiveness depends on the active participation of multiple stakeholders, including the state, communities, businesses and non-governmental organizations. Despite this, Tenkorang (2021) observes that while traditional authorities possess valuable local knowledge, they are frequently excluded from higher-level decision-making processes in environmental governance. As a result, this exclusion leads to community grievances and hampers effective environmental oversight.

Moreover, the proliferation of illegal small-scale gold mining, known as “galamsey”, further exemplifies the tension between state regulations and traditional practices. Despite governmental crackdowns, “galamsey” persists, causing severe environmental degradation, including polluted rivers and deforestation. Unfortunately, the government’s reliance on security forces to address these issues often overlooks the potential role of traditional leaders in mediating and resolving such conflicts (Reuters, 2024). Consequently, this approach has not been entirely effective in curbing the environmental destruction caused by illegal mining.

Additionally, land tenure issues further complicate the relationship between traditional authorities and the government. Traditional leaders maintain significant control over land allocation and often perceive governmental interventions as threats to their authority. As a result, this dynamic creates resistance to land reforms and complicates efforts to implement cohesive environmental policies. Notably, in Ghana, approximately 80% of land is under customary tenure, managed by traditional authorities. Therefore, governmental interventions that overlook this reality have led to persistent tensions between the state and traditional authorities. For instance, the government’s attempts to implement land reforms without adequately involving traditional leaders have been met with resistance, as chiefs perceive such actions as threats to their authority and the socio-cultural fabric of their communities (Selorm, 2020).

3.4. Over-Reliance on Western Style of Addressing Environmental Issues

Evidence available shows that, right from independence, successive governments in Ghana have been aware of the potential roles of indigenous knowledge in man-

aging environmental issues, but have failed to give indigenous knowledge serious consideration in their policies (Ministry of Environment and Science, Accra, Ghana, 2002). Basically, the non-recognition of indigenous knowledge in government policies is linked to Ghana's adoption of the Western perspective of developmental issues, which compels the government to place economic growth high on its developmental agenda at the expense of preserving natural resources, leading to the marginalization of indigenous knowledge of conservation in environmental policies (Kalu, 2001). It is evident that this Western style of development is in conflict with indigenous knowledge of conservation among the Akan people of Ghana. While the scientific approach seeks to exploit natural resources for economic development now, indigenous knowledge, on the other hand, seeks to preserve them for future generations through measures such as the institution of taboos, sacred groves, and the belief in totemic animals, among others. It may be against this backdrop that policymakers in Ghana today exclude indigenous knowledge in environmental policies, as it appears not to champion the cause of the government's developmental agenda and therefore is seen as counterproductive (Kalu, 2001).

A study postulates that the Western view of nature is through the lens of science, which empowers humans to master and utilize nature for their own betterment because decisions based on scientific knowledge often command acceptance based on evidence rather than indigenous knowledge and beliefs (Ali, 2003). However, Appiah-Opoku (2007) contends that indigenous knowledge of conservation may not be inferior to modern and scientific methods, as some people claim. He explains that while indigenous knowledge and beliefs are transmitted through oral tradition, they are verified, validated, and revised daily and seasonally within a specific geographic context and environment. This contrasts with Western science, which thrives on a set of assumptions on which knowledge generation is tested for validity. Appiah-Opoku (2007) further proposes that despite the variations between Western science and indigenous religio-cultural beliefs, both can complement each other for the conservation of natural resources.

Although indigenous knowledge of conservation is not officially acknowledged in Ghana's environmental conservation policy presently, some Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and researchers are recognizing the significance of various traditional religious beliefs and culture-based knowledge schemes in dealing with the alarming environmental crises (Fekete et al, 2010). Also, the value of indigenous knowledge and beliefs for the protection of biodiversity and the attainment of sustainable development goals is gradually being acknowledged globally. For instance, Article 8 of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity advises humans to respect, preserve, and maintain knowledge, innovations, and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

3.5. The Encounter between Christianity and Indigenous Religion

The encounter between Christianity and Indigenous Religion has significantly influenced environmental management by traditional chiefs in Ghana. Before the

advent of Christianity, indigenous religions played a crucial role in environmental conservation through sacred groves, taboos and totemic beliefs that regulated the use of natural resources. However, the introduction of Christianity challenged these traditional systems, often labeling them as superstitious. It will be recalled that until the advent of colonization and Christianity, the system of government known and practised in Ghana was chieftaincy. It is a system of governance or political arrangement under which the leader is known as a chief. The system of government was described as theocratic in which chiefs' rule in the name of God or a god (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2009). In the Akan society, one of the key responsibilities of a chief is to ensure that anything that ensures life becomes everyone's religious duty of which protection of water bodies is no exception. This explains why the chiefs and elders of the Akan do not take kindly to any action that tends to destroy water bodies. It is important to note that things took a different dimension when the colonial masters gained ground in the affairs of Ghanaians, where all legislations passed by the colonial administrators were influenced by Christian principles which granted limited powers to the chiefs to preside over cases. The reduction of the powers of the chiefs affected indigenous religion, since the chiefs were the embodiment or the custodians of the indigenous religion. Sadly, the encounter between Christianity and the indigenous religion gradually replaced the traditional system of government which weakened the authority of the chief. The direct consequence of this was that taboos, totems, the institution of sacred groves and others, which thrived on traditional religion for nature conservation were undermined (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2009).

In recent times, it is observed that the use of the gods as police to protect our natural environment, as it used to be in the past is not working because many of the youth who have received western education and are mostly Christians disregard the power of the gods and the ancestors with impunity. It is against this background that Awuah-Nyamekye (2009) contends that traditional religion, which forms the basis of traditional society, has been shaken to its very foundation, and as a result, the sacred groves and water bodies which hitherto could not be entered by ordinary people on sacred days are now being frowned upon without fear. Around the coastal areas in Ghana, Ntiamoah-Baidu (1991) has noted that traditional beliefs and taboos for the conservation of coastal lagoons are no longer respected. She indicated for instance that fishing activities continue in Sakumono lagoon daily, and despite the prohibitions of sacred days and closed seasons, drawnets of varying mesh sizes are used regularly which do not conform to the rules stipulated by the traditional authorities.

3.6. The Constitutional Right of Ghanaian Citizenry

Indigenous knowledge has long played a vital role in shaping the cultural and environmental landscape of Ghana. However, the erosion of indigenous knowledge is influenced by various factors, including constitutional provisions that both protect and challenge traditional practices. A key factor in this constitutional conflict is the recognition of the fundamental rights of Ghanaian citizens. Chapter 5, Ar-

Article 26 (1) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana states that: “Every person is entitled to enjoy, practise, profess, maintain and promote any culture, language, tradition or religion subject to the provisions of this constitution.” This article aligns with the United Nations’ “Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief”. Article 1(1) of the Declaration states that:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually, or in community with others, or in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1981).

While these provisions seek to protect religious freedom, another section of the constitution complicates the matter. Chapter 22 of the 1992 Constitution grants legal authority to chiefs to enforce traditional laws. This, however, can sometimes infringe upon individuals’ fundamental rights to freedom of worship as guaranteed by Article 26(1) of the Constitution. Additionally, Chapter 26(2) of the 1992 constitution prohibits all customary practices that dehumanize or harm the physical and mental well-being of individuals. The interplay between these constitutional mandates creates a conflict between Christians and Traditionalists, as the enforcement of customary laws can sometimes be at odds with the personal religious freedoms guaranteed under Article 26(1) of the constitution.

This constitutional contradiction has practical consequences in Ghanaian society. Many argue that the tension between these legal provisions has hindered the effective implementation of customary laws. In some cases, this conflict has led to direct confrontations between Christian communities and traditional leaders. One notable example is the periodic clashes between charismatic or Pentecostal churches and Ga Traditional leaders over the imposition of a ban on drumming and noise-making. This annual ritual, enforced by Ga authorities to honor their traditional customs, is often resisted by some Christian groups who view it as an infringement on their religious freedom (Dickson, 2003).

One would then argue that although, the constitutional provisions in Ghana seek to protect both individual freedoms and the authority of traditional leaders, the tensions between religious freedom and the enforcement of customary laws present a significant challenge to harmonious coexistence. To address the conflicts between state laws and customary laws, particularly in areas with strong religious and cultural beliefs, Konadu et al. (2022) advocate for legal frameworks that promote dialogue and mutual respect among diverse religious groups to maintain social harmony.

4. Strengthening the Role of Traditional Leaders in Contemporary Environmental Governance in Ghana

Traditional leaders in Ghana have historically played a crucial role in the govern-

ance of natural resources and environmental stewardship. Their influence extends to the enforcement of customary laws, conservation practices and the sustainable use of natural resources. However, contemporary environmental governance in Ghana is increasingly shaped by formal state institutions and other external factors, often sidelining the contributions of traditional authorities (Tenkorang, 2021). According to him, strengthening the role of traditional leaders in contemporary environmental governance can enhance conservation efforts, promote sustainable development, and bridge the gap between indigenous knowledge and modern environmental policies. This section explores strategies to reinforce the involvement of traditional leaders in Ghana's environmental governance.

4.1. Legal Recognition and Policy Integration

According to Blankson (2021), traditional ecological institutions, such as chieftaincy, priesthood and clan systems have been instrumental in regulating land use and conserving biodiversity within their communities. These institutions enforce customary laws and practices that have historically ensured the sustainable use of natural resources. He argues that integrating these indigenous regulatory systems with modern statutory laws can lead to more effective environmental governance. Blankson emphasises that by formalizing the roles of traditional leaders through legal frameworks, their authority and influence can be preserved and effectively utilized within contemporary governance structures.

The 2012 Forest and Wildlife Policy of Ghana acknowledges the importance of incorporating indigenous knowledge into environmental management. It advocates for the documentation and respect of local communities' religious beliefs, customs and values that enhance resource management. Strategic directions within the policy call for reviewing legislation to recognise the rights of local people and their belief systems which have historically contributed to the management of sacred sites. As noted by Adom & Boamah (2020), this policy underscores the necessity of integrating traditional practices into formal governance to promote conservation and sustainability.

A systematic review by Agyei et al. (2019) specifies that customary authorities often hold de facto control over environmental resources, despite formal state ownership. In Ghana, for instance, while the state has de jure authority over forest management, customary authorities frequently exercise actual control. This reality suggests that legal recognition of these traditional roles can bridge the gap between statutory provisions and on-the-ground practices, leading to more effective environmental governance.

4.2. Capacity Building and Resource Allocation

Incorporating traditional leaders into formal environmental governance structures through capacity building and resource allocation not only bridges the gap between indigenous knowledge and modern practices, but also promotes community ownership of environmental initiatives. A notable example of this approach

occurred on 25 July 2024, when a collaborative effort led by the United Nations University Institute for Natural Resources in Africa (UNU-INRA, 2024) and its development partners organized training workshops for Community Resource Management Areas (CREMA) leaders in the Okyeman area in the Akyem Abuakwa Traditional Area in the Eastern Region of Ghana. These workshops were designed to revitalize existing community resource management groups and to establish governance structures at the landscape level. Through such interventions, traditional leaders are empowered with the necessary tools and frameworks to play an active role in environmental stewardship.

Building on this momentum, other organizations have also prioritized capacity building as a strategic entry point. One such example is the TAMA Foundation Universal, which has rolled out series of targeted programmes involving traditional leaders, community members and local authorities. These initiatives aim to instill sustainable environmental practices, foster effective resource management and ensure fair benefit-sharing. By equipping traditional leaders with contemporary environmental management techniques, such programmes significantly enhance their ability to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes concerning natural resources (TAMA Foundation Universal, 2023).

In addition to capacity building, the provision of adequate financial and logistical resources remains fundamental to enabling traditional authorities to execute their roles effectively. Recognizing this, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of Ghana has embarked on several projects that intentionally integrate traditional leadership into the broader environmental governance framework (EPA Ghana, 2022). By channeling resources to support their involvement, the EPA contributes to a collaborative and inclusive system of environmental management.

Complementing these efforts is the strategic direction provided by Ghana's National Environmental Policy. The policy explicitly acknowledges the influential role of traditional leaders and promotes their inclusion in environmental education and public awareness campaigns. By doing so, it seeks to harness their community authority to foster a widespread culture of environmental responsibility and proactive conservation practices (Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation, 2014).

4.3. Revitalization of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Revitalizing Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) is not merely about preserving cultural heritage it is a strategic approach to empowering traditional leaders in environmental governance in Ghana. As environmental challenges intensify due to climate change, deforestation and unsustainable practices, integrating traditional governance structures rooted in indigenous wisdom becomes increasingly critical.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems embody the accumulated wisdom, beliefs and practices developed by indigenous communities over generations, particularly in

managing natural resources sustainably. According to Agrawal (2021), such knowledge is localized, adaptive and rooted in the daily lives and experiences of indigenous peoples. In Ghana, these systems are deeply embedded in the cultural institutions and leadership structures of traditional authorities, positioning chiefs and elders as vital stakeholders in environmental governance.

Historically, traditional leaders served as custodians of the environment, including forests, rivers and sacred groves. They enforced taboos, regulated hunting and farming seasons and protected ecologically sensitive areas through customary laws. Boamah (2023) argues that these practices contributed significantly to biodiversity conservation long before the advent of modern environmental science. However, modernization and the erosion of indigenous values have weakened the influence of such systems. Boamah is of the view that revitalizing Indigenous Knowledge Systems can restore the authority of traditional leaders and provide them with culturally resonant frameworks for managing natural resources effectively.

Furthermore, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) can complement scientific approaches by offering localized and context-specific solutions to ecological challenges. For example, cultural practices like traditional festivals are often used to enforce temporary ban on farming or fishing, helping ecosystems to recover. The banning of fishing during spawning seasons is one such traditional mechanism that aligns with modern conservation efforts. Such practices, as highlighted by Owusu (2022a) can be strategically incorporated into national environmental policies to bridge the gap between formal governance structures and community-based resource management.

Recent policy discussions also reflect a growing recognition of the value traditional leaders bring to environmental governance. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has acknowledged the contribution of chiefs in implementing community-based natural resource initiatives, demonstrating the potential of collaborative governance (Mensah & Ababio, 2024). Moreover, Tandoh-Offin (2023) argues for the integration of IKS into educational curricula and public awareness programme which can foster broader societal support and ensure the sustainability of indigenous practices.

4.4. Community Participation and Stakeholder Engagement

Community participation and stakeholder engagement represent powerful strategies to reinforce the involvement of traditional leaders in Ghana's environmental governance. Their effective inclusion in environmental policy formulation and implementation is crucial for sustainable development and ecological conservation. One of the key strengths of community participation lies in its ability to foster inclusive decision-making. When local communities are involved, particularly through their traditional leaders, environmental policies are more likely to reflect indigenous values, cultural norms and localized knowledge systems. As Mensah & Ababio (2024) observe, traditional leaders possess significant legitimacy within

their communities. This enables them to mobilize collective action, enforce customary environmental laws and mediate land and resource conflicts. Their role in guiding environmental practices is therefore, not merely cultural but also strategic for promoting sustainable resource governance.

Building on this, [Boamah \(2023\)](#) provides practical evidence from community-based forest management projects, where traditional leaders have successfully taken the lead in monitoring deforestation and promoting environmental ethics. He highlights that in many rural areas of Ghana, chiefs are trusted more than governmental institutions. This level of trust facilitates stronger community ownership of conservation initiatives and bridges the divide between formal governance systems and traditional structures.

Equally important is the communicative role that traditional leaders play in environmental governance. Through culturally appropriate platforms such as durbars, festivals and town hall meetings, chiefs disseminate vital environmental messages. These platforms serve not only as educational tools, but also as effective means of encouraging community compliance with environmental regulations. According to [Tandoh-Offin \(2023\)](#), such grassroots communication strategies tend to be more impactful than formal top-down campaigns, especially in rural settings where literacy rates may be low and external influence is limited.

Moreover, Ghana's environmental governance framework is evolving to be more inclusive of traditional authorities. For example, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan explicitly advocates for the integration of indigenous leadership in biodiversity conservation. This policy shift reflects a growing recognition of the value that traditional leaders bring to participatory governance. [Owusu \(2022b\)](#) underscores this development, noting that it represents a broader effort to involve diverse voices in environmental decision-making processes. In response to these policy directions, [Agyei & Agyeman \(2023\)](#) observe that state institutions are initiating collaborations with traditional councils to enhance environmental outcomes. They explain that both the Environmental Protection Agency and the Forestry Commission have rolled out programmes that engage chiefs in the planning and execution of local environmental projects. Such partnerships not only strengthen stakeholder engagement, but also ensure that conservation strategies are culturally relevant and widely accepted by local communities.

5. Conclusion

The main thrust of this article is to explore the relationship between traditional leadership, indigenous knowledge and environmental conservation in Ghana. This is carried out by reviewing research documents, such as journal articles related to the phenomena under study for analysis and interpretation. The article reveals that traditional leaders are the primary custodians, transmitters and enforcers of indigenous knowledge in promoting environmental stewardship within their communities. The article argues that, although traditional leadership faces

multifaceted challenges, including over-reliance on Western culture, constitutional rights and governmental policies, scholars in Ghana who have contributed to the study of indigenous knowledge and environmental conservation practice have advocated for legal recognition and policy integration, capacity building, resource allocation and the revitalization of indigenous knowledge systems as key strategies to reinforce the involvement of traditional leaders in Ghana's environmental governance.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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