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The Bendi Man and His Environment since C.1800 A.D

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Abstract

Bendi history lends credence to the assertion that there is a dialectical relationship between history and geography. While this paper does not submit wholly to the theory of environmental determinism, it avers that the environment impacted remarkably on the course of Bendi history, especially in the pre-colonial period when the people were scientifically and technologically underdeveloped. Because the people depended on the environment for their sustenance and general wellbeing, they regarded the despoliation of the environment as an existential threat, which must be avoided. As a result, they formulated a number of policies and principles which ensured that the people related with the environment harmoniously. Over the years, the Bendi man has jettisoned his forebears' principles of securing and maintaining environmental harmony and has become the major agent of destruction of his own environment. Whether it is deforestation, bush burning, flooding, erosion, pollution, loss of biodiversity, poor garbage management, loss of soil fertility or any other environmental hazard, human beings are directly or indirectly responsible for them. The abuse of the environment has rendered the Bendi people vulnerable to various kinds of diseases like Cerebrospinal Meningitis, Cholera, Hepatitis A, Hepatitis E and Typhoid fever, all of which have been on the increase in recent years. With a critical use of primary and secondary sources, this paper examines and analyzes the interplay between the Bendi man and his environment over a long period of time. Recommendations are made on how to improve the environment, maintain ecological balance, and fulfill the divine instruction given to man to tend, dress and preserve the environment for his own preservation.

Keywords: Agriculture, Bendi, Ecology, Environment, History, Sustainable.

Introduction

Bendi is an expansive term that refers to the people, the land, and the language; it covers an area of about 148square kilometers (148km²) in what is today known as Northern Cross River State of Nigeria. Geographically, Bendi lies between the laps of valleys, down the walls of a symmetrical range of hills in the vicinity of Nigeria's famous tourist centre, the Obudu Mountain Resort. By the current political delineations in Nigeria, Bendi is a nation of two political wards in Obanliku Local Government Area of Cross River State. It is bordered on the north and east by Bisu and Basang communities, both in Obanliku Local Government Area; on the south by Bateriko and Beebo in Boki Local Government Area; and on the west by Kubong-Bette, Kutiang I and II, Begiaba and Ukwel-Obudu, all in Obudu Local Government Area.

When the Bendi man first arrived in his present locale over two centuries ago, he was basically a subsistence farmer, committed to the cultivation and production of food crops that were essential for his survival and wellbeing. Over time, he transmogrified from being a subsistence farmer using crude implements to a quasi-commercial farmer,

desperate to subdue and control his environment for personal gains. Apart from his economic pursuits, there have been noticeable changes in his way of life which have increasingly become injurious to his environment. Gradually but steadily, he has replaced his mud-plastered and palm-thatched houses with mansions of complex architectural designs which required a great deal of wood and sand/gravel procured from his immediate environment. The observed outcomes of the relationship between the Bendi man and his physical environment are at variance with the recent report by Michael Adie that the Bette-Bendi people "have not exercised enough control over our environment but rather allowed the environment to influence us."¹ A more critical assessment of the consequences of the interaction between the Bendi man and his environment is bound to lead to the conclusion that the Bendi man's influence on his environment is more pervasive than has been realized by some authors and commentators.

This paper examines the relationship between the Bendi man and his environment. It pays attention to the historical trajectory of the Bendi environment by identifying the Bendi man's anthropogenic activities,

including, but not limited to, damaging agricultural practices, wanton deforestation, uncontrolled bush burning, use of industrial chemicals (fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides and piscicides) and open cattle grazing. These activities have adversely impacted on the fertility of the soil, availability of soil water and the contamination of water for domestic use, poor crop yield, health challenges, low income, etc. The cycles of such climatic conditions like temperature, rainfall, sunshine and wind have changed significantly, giving rise to incidences of late start and early stop of the rain, flooding, drought, late planting of crops and poor yield. All these adverse conditions are the outcomes of a long period of sustained interference with the health of the environment by the Bendi man, and the response of the environment to continuous harmful interferences. Available evidence indicates that the environment played a significant role in the movement of the ancestors of the Bendi from the Central African region where they are believed to have originated from to their present locale in the upper Cross River region, which they first occupied around the late 1700s and early 1800s.ⁱⁱ

Though the migration of the Bendi from their previous places of settlement has been

attributed to a coalition of push and pull factors, there is agreement that environmental factors were pivotal to their recurrent migration and continuous search for a cozy and comfortable abode. The movement out of the Congo basin to the Cameroon Mountains has been attributed to unpleasant developments in the environment.ⁱⁱⁱ After settling in the Cameroon area for several decades, the Bendi were again compelled to move out of the area as a result of some natural disasters (earthquakes or volcanic eruptions), which recurred frequently and resulted in the destruction of lives, property and farmlands.^{iv} At the Utanga/Becheve and Beebi-Sankwala areas, the infertility of the soil, which led to famine, was a push factor for further migration.^v The story was the same in several other places where they had lived before getting to their present locale. The present homeland of the Bendi was not void by the time their ancestors arrived in the area. It was occupied by the Bette group of villages, who the Bendi had to dislodge in order to take possession of the area.^{vi}

The new environment was homey, welcoming and hospitable to the Bendi people and as a result, there was no compelling reason for further migration,

especially when it had become difficult to find unoccupied territories. Throughout the pre-colonial and early colonial period, the people formulated and obeyed a number of laws to ensure that they related harmoniously with the new environment, which was their source of food, clothing, building materials, income, medicine and worship. In fact, the food they ate, the water they drank and the fresh air they breathed all came from the natural environment. Without exception, the materials they used in building their houses were gotten from the forest which was also the storehouse of the roots, barks, leaves and seeds of trees used by herbalists (native doctors) for the treatment of the sick.

The practice of caring for the environment began to be undermined after colonialism was firmly established, giving people the opportunity to pursue selfish desires at the expense of the collective interests of their communities. The real consequences of the destruction of the ecosystem became glaring in the post-independence people, especially from the early 1970s when it became increasingly difficult for the environment to support the people in the way it had done in the pre-colonial era.^{vii} Ever since then, the Bendi environment has continued to be degraded without any deliberate attempt to

rehabilitate it. The behavior and actions of the vast majority of the locals suggest that they may not fully aware of the existential threats occasioned by their reckless abuse of the natural environment.

At the global level, there is great concern about environmental degradation and much is being done to save the environment for the present and future generations. The first major international action that made the environment a topical discourse was spearheaded by the United Nations in June, 1972 when it convoked a conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm, Sweden. The Stockholm Declaration, which was adopted by the governments of the Scandinavian countries at whose instance the conference was held, placed environmental issues at the forefront of international concerns and marked the start of a dialogue between industrialized and developing countries on the connection between economic growth, the pollution of the air, water, and oceans and the well-being of people around the world. In June 1992, the United Nations convened a similar conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil tagged the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. The first conference gave birth to the United Nations

Environmental Program (UNEP), while the second culminated in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which states that the only way to have long term economic progress is to link it with environmental protection. Despite the commendable efforts of the United Nations and several other organizations and governments, many of which have created ministries and departments of environment, several communities, including the Bendi still carry on as if they are insulated from the grave effects of climate change and environmental degradation.

Despite the ecological problems that have become great threats to life and property in Bendi, one cannot point to any local initiative or effort made by the people to revamp the environment and make it sustainable for future generations. *The situation is compounded by the fact that the Cross River State government which should be a moderator in the exploitation of forest resources and gamekeeper in the protection of the environment has since 2016 metamorphosed itself into a reckless poacher and heartless destroyer of the forest resources of the state as we see in the official butchering and plundering of the remaining rainforests of the state for pecuniary gain.*

This state of affairs has made it imperative for communities to take local actions that are capable of saving them from an avoidable accident. Thus, this paper makes recommendations that involve the use of local adaptive mechanisms to improve the environment, maintain ecological balance, and thus fulfill the divine instruction given to man to tend, dress and preserve the environment for his own good and benefit. It has become important to draw the attention of the Bendi man to the rhetorical question posed by Pope Benedict XVI, to wit: “How can we separate, or even set at odds, the protection of the environment and the protection of human life, including the life of the unborn?”^{viii} Pope Benedict XVI’s position reflects divine mandate from God who created the environment and put man in it with specific instruction to tend it. Any harm to the environment by man is injurious to man himself and constitute an offence to God.

Causes and Consequences of Environmental Degradation in Bendi

The Bendi environment has been going through gradual changes over the years. The pioneer compilers of the colonial records on the area who testified to pleasant climatic and

weather conditions characterized by good and adequate rainfall, woodlands and fertile soil would definitely be dumbfounded if they return to the area today to see what the Bendi environment has become in less than a century. Writing in the early 1930s, the Acting Divisional Officer of Obudu Division^{ix}, AFR Stoddart, attested to the fact that “the climate is pleasant and kept reasonably cool by an almost continual breeze.”^x Subsequent reports by other colonial officials validate Stoddart’s testament. The various reports attest to the fact that the pre-colonial and early colonial ecological system of Bendi robustly supported the production of food crops and the rearing of animals, which made agriculture the mainstay of the people’s economy. The combination of low-level technology, low energy needs and limited demand for timber in the pre-colonial time meant that the environment was not much threatened. Several policies were also protective of the environment. For instance, hunting was uncompromisingly forbidden in reserved forests (locally called “*shindior*” or “*uteem*”). Anyone who pursued an animal into an *uteem* was severely punished.^{xi} It was forbidden to continue to chase an animal once it escaped into an *uteem*, irrespective of the

fact that it was initially attacked outside the reserved area, hence, the expression “*Atie fe uteem*” (the game you have successfully given a lethal shot has entered *uteem*, from which no one followed the wounded game to retrieve it for meat).^{xii} This expression has thus been an idiom in the Bendi language suggesting victory that yields the victor no benefit.

The deterioration of the environment was set in motion in the colonial era by the Bendi man’s extensive and intensive interference with the vegetation, as well as by wind and “running” water which man had empowered to destroy him. Before long, he came face to face with the repercussions of his careless and destructive action. At various times, flooding and wild wind have occurred in the area causing the destruction of property worth millions of naira. There are instances when people have been rendered homeless by either a devastating flood or wild wind. In some cases, a wild wind will completely blow off roofs of houses. There are also cases where the whole buildings are completely demolished, rendering their occupants homeless. Forests, which were the people’s pharmacies, a source of meat and an ecological shield, have been razed either by the chain saw or by the axe or by the seasonal

burning for crops to be planted. Commenting on the situation, Joseph Ushie avers that "...In Bendi, ... for example, it is known that in the early days of the people's settling in the area, they never died from snake bites, a situation that has yielded the euphemism, '[a] grass has stood in the way of my leg', as a proxy for 'I have been bitten by a snake.'"^{xiii} Writing further, Ushie regrets that "Today, the Bendi die from snake bites just like other humans. The most likely reason for the earlier settlers' immunity to snake bites is possibly the existence in the area, then, of a leaf or tree which served as an antidote to snake poison."^{xiv} The remaining part of this section discusses some specific factors that have contributed to environmental mutation in Bendi.

Intensive/Extensive Cultivation

Although every Bendi person became a farmer once they assumed permanent residency lifestyle in their current locale, the effect of their agrarian activities on the environment was unnoticeable for a long time. This was as a result of low technology and the use of wooden tools and implements in farming. The use of crude wooden implements did not give the Bendi man the capacity to degrade the environment the way

he will later do with iron tools. The increasing use of iron tools enabled the people to work faster and better. More land was brought under cultivation and this increased agricultural production. The coming of Awka blacksmiths from Igboland to Obudu in the colonial period and the establishment of iron smelting sites in the area made it easier for the people to bring a large portion of land under cultivation with visible impacts on the environment. Awka blacksmiths in Obudu produced tools and weapons such as knives, hoes, cutlasses, diggers, spears, hunting bells, iron arrow tips, guns, carving knives and axes all of which led to higher productivity in crafts, farming, fishing and hunting. The availability and use of better farming implements was also enhanced by the importation of some farming tools, the most prominent being metal hoe blades from Europe into Nigeria. Despite the claim that important tools were of a better quality, Percy Amaury Talbot wrote that in the northern part of Ogoja and Cameroon Province, Awka blacksmiths performed favourably well and sometimes produced items of superior qualities from local iron than those that were imported from Europe, which broke easily.^{xv}

The availability of locally made, and imported iron implements made it possible for the people to degrade the environment with relative ease, paving way for extensive cultivation. This was given fillip by the presence of stranger elements (made up of the British and local immigrants from other African countries and Nigerian ethnic groups) who depended on the local population for provisions. The implication of this development is that farming was no longer only done for subsistence; many farmers were producing for sale to those who depended on the local market for the things they needed for survival. A recent study by Isaac Ishamali indicates that the Bette-Bendi people were prodigious farmers and they were among the chief suppliers of yams to the people of the lower Cross River region of Nigeria.^{xvi} In order to meet up with increasing demand, a great proportion of Bendi farmers expanded their farms with the use of paid labour. There were many problems with extensive cultivation but one was most prominent. The length of time that a piece of land can lay fallow in order to regenerate itself was shortened because of increase in population and the concomitant rise in the demand for land for several non-agricultural purposes. The depletion of soil fertility as a

result of continuous use of the same piece of land compelled farmers to acquire and use inorganic chemicals as fertilizers, which have their own adverse effects on the soil and environment. Commenting on this development, Ushie avers that the activities of the Bendi man have rushed the soil into an early menopause.^{xvii} He further pursues this view trenchantly,

Hunger has thus strangely entered this land [Bendi] as yet another strange guest of an area which once could boast of its invincibility against hunger. Perhaps the most affected is the yam, which, as king of the crops, requires a delicious, well balanced and timely served meal from the soil if it is to return the right dividends for the farmers' labour. And its dwindling fortunes replicate in the decay of enthusiasm for the once solemn and almighty New Yam Festival to which everyone once looked.

The story is the same for other crops including cassava which the Bendi people treated with contempt when it was first introduced to the area. At its introduction during the early days of colonial rule, the Bendi people openly told the Europeans that cassava was a "woman crop", far below the dignity of man to cultivate.^{xviii} The soil has so

degenerated to a level that has made it difficult for the Bendi Man to even produce this so-called “woman crop” in the quantity that is required to feed him and his family. The Bendi man now buys food from his neighbours, including those who once looked up to him for food.

Chemical Fertilizers

In addition to extensive cultivation, chemical fertilizers were introduced to the Bendi farmer in the 1970s.^{xix} The use of chemical fertilizers has debilitating consequences on the environment. Until the introduction of chemical fertilizers, farmers in Bendi made use of leaves of trees, dung of domestic animals like goats, sheep, chicken, and ashes to regenerate their farms. The expansion in the sizes of farmlands cultivated by individual farmers and the shortening of fallow period increasingly made it impossible for farmers to depend on organic manure for the purpose of replenishing lost nutrients in the soil. They have to necessarily make use of inorganic fertilizers. The number of people using chemical fertilizers in the area has been on the increase since the 1970s. Fertilizers, insecticides and herbicides have all become common items that politicians and public office holders give to the electorates in order

to improve their chances of winning elections in the area. There are claims that chemical fertilizers have bad effects on the soil texture as they loosen the soil and expose it to erosion by water and wind.

The use of herbicides has also been on the increase. The unwillingness of Bendi youths to engage in manual jobs and the paucity of funds to hire labourers from neighbouring Tiv communities where they are readily available have made farmers to depend on the use of herbicides. Many youths prefer to idle about these days, rather than get involved in farming. Some either get involved in commercial motorcycling to make quick money or identify themselves as politicians who use blackmail and thuggery to eke a living. The consequence of this development is that the Bendi people, like their Bette brothers, now rely on the Tiv of Benue State for food supply for even items like yams, fermented cassava (*akpu*), maize, vegetables, cocoyams, tomatoes, etc. The Bendi also look to the Tiv for items such as fruits including mangoes, pawpaw and oranges. This absolute reliance exists in spite of the fact that the Tiv have been endemic enemies of the Obudu people. A scholar of Obudu extraction recently stated that the complete dependence of the people of Obudu for supplies from their

“arch enemies” (Tiv) has compromised the wellbeing of the people.^{xx} We have stated elsewhere that If anybody had told the forefathers of the Bendi or the European compilers of the colonial reports on Bendi (who eulogized them in the literature as producing more than they need for sustenance) that a time would come when the Bendi shall go to some of their neighbours to buy *garri* and *akpu*, they would have preferred to be skinned alive than to believe such a near-impossible prophesy.^{xxi} What is important to our analysis is the fact that the inorganic chemicals used in the farms have not been able to guarantee food security; yet, they pollute streams and rivulets when washed by heavy rains. This has exposed the people to water-borne diseases and increased death rate. The Bendi people have become vulnerable to diseases like cerebrospinal meningitis, cholera, hepatitis A, hepatitis E and typhoid fever, all of which were unknown to the people a few decades ago. Cerebrospinal meningitis first occurred in the area in 1995 and resurfaced in the early 2000s. It claimed over 300 lives.^{xxii} The number of persons dying from hepatitis in Bendi has also reached unimaginable proportion.

Tree Felling

Deforestation occasioned by the need to construct houses and furniture, farming and fuel, is a worldwide phenomenon.^{xxiii} The destruction of the natural and planted vegetations through various human activities is an age-long practice among communities in Bendi. The devastation has tended to increase due to the ever-increasing demand for cultivable and construction land (this refers to land used for agricultural activities, construction of roads, houses, etc.), domestic use of wood as well as the external demand for wood. House constructions affect vegetation in two ways: first, trees on the site are destroyed to create space for the building; second, timber is needed as part of roofing materials. The use of trees for firewood is a common practice in the area. The implication of all this for the environment is that the positive impact of the forest in the circulation of valuable gases such as nitrogen, oxygen and carbon dioxide; in control of heat; in protecting the soil, and in regulating the flow of water and wind is greatly hampered. Deforestation diminishes the ability of trees to improve air quality by intercepting and trapping dust and other pollutants from the atmosphere, reduce air and water pollution, protect man from harmful ultraviolet

radiation from the sun, provide food and shelter for wildlife, minimize erosion and maintain healthy soil, increase rainfall, and absorbs sunlight as energy. Researchers have concluded that sustained deforestation and the use of fossil fuels have adversely disrupted the carbon cycle and have brought about traumatizing repercussions on the people as well as their environment. This is due largely to disproportionately slower rate to naturally balance the process of restoring the carbon cycle to the higher rates at which human activities have added CO₂ to the atmosphere.^{xxiv} It is also important to mention that the felling of trees, especially along the banks of rivers and streams has destroyed the watersheds of such water bodies. Michael Adie has observed that:

Beginning in the early 1970s, the watersheds of these rivers have been gradually destroyed by people cultivating rice, leading to the drying up of the rivers in the dry season. They have also shrunk in size because of the destruction of the eco-system, the bamboos and thatch palm trees (*Kukeh*) that conserved water. The result is undue pressure on available boreholes and surface wells during the dry season as attention is shifted from the streams (*Beegbe*) to the boreholes.^{xxv}

Ushie lends credence to the above view when he avers that “Streams and rivers on which the people had depended for drinking, bathing and for the pleasure of swimming have either dried up completely or have been reduced to appearing only during the rainy seasons, when floods strengthen them, and disappearing with the onset of the dry season.”^{xxvi}

Population Growth

The Bendi population has greatly increased in recent years. The population of Bendi which was estimated to be 2,876^{xxvii} in 1932 with an average density of 135 persons to a square mile^{xxviii} rose to 3,560 in the 1963 census.^{xxix} This means that only 684 persons were added to the population in a period of 34 years. The last estimate of Bendi population was given in 1996 to be 45,625 people.^{xxx} This geometric increase in population within a fixed geographical space has impacted on the environment in a variety of ways: increase in the extraction of resources from the environment and the generation of waste products. Perhaps it is needless to argue that more people put more pressure on the environment as they use more resources and create more waste. Experience has shown that as population increases, the

health of the environment decreases. This is part of the reason the Bendi people have become hungrier and sicker than they used to be. Population growth has also rendered some people landless in their ancestral homeland. Today, we have Bendi men who have no land and they have to depend on the goodwill of others to have land for farming and for the building of living houses.

Action Plan

Establishment of reserve areas: The people of Bendi should as a matter of urgency resuscitate their forebear's practice of establishing forest reserve areas (*shindior/uteem*) and sacred groves. Many of the animal and plant species that were preserved in these restricted areas are already extinct and completely unknown to the present generation of Bendi people. We read in one of Ushie's seminal article that, "not many speakers of the Bette-Bendi language today would know what *utsukpekpe* (a hand-woven tray, the equivalent of the modern *whudiya*), *bitanakpe* (a rare species of beans) or even *whundi* (about the oldest staple known as *amala* in Yoruba) meant."^{xxx} He states further that trees like *undua*, *uleku* or even *shikwuang* are no longer common. Animals like *shikplidem* or *shingi'ashi*, *ugbai*

(zebra), *biluu*, *shinyinyia*, *shifue le benzue* have lapsed into oblivion. Yet, many of these animals and trees are the foundation for many proverbs, wise sayings, folktales and myths in the Bendi language. The absence of these objects in the real world of the Bendi people signals the disappearance of the word from the vocabulary and hence, a possible decline in the depth, grandeur and profundity of the language.^{xxxii} Once the reserved areas and sacred groves are established, there should be a taskforce to ensure strict adherence from the people.

Tree Planting: The worrisome destruction of the Bendi environment should be of concern to all those who know the advantages of a clean, green and serene environment. One of the simplest things to do is to discourage indiscriminate tree cutting, and encourage tree planting. No one can doubt the fact that humans, animals and the environment depend on trees for survival. Therefore, as deforestation continues, the people must endeavor to put back what they take from the environment. This view chimes with the view of Rattan, who avers that for sustainable management of the environment to be successful, people must necessarily "replace what is removed."^{xxxiii} Lal furthers this view by explaining that the demands placed on the

environment can be met without reducing its capacity to allow people to live well now and in the future. We had seen Bendi communities doing this in time past by planting trees as one way of maintaining ecological balance. The National Association of Begiagba Youths (NABY) had planted trees along the road from the community's northern boundaries with Kakwalaka to the boundary with her southern neighbour, Omale community. Unfortunately, none of those trees which had served as wind breakers and provided shelter to pedestrians is still standing. Though their economic benefits were not in doubt, those who cut them down for selfish purposes did not plant new trees to replace them. In the same vein, many church and school compounds in Bendi were adorned with mango, orange, guava, palm, neem (*dogoyaro*) and gmelina trees. This is no longer the case because many school premises now stand nude. The situation is so bad that many pupils leave the primary school without seeing and knowing these trees that used to be common features of their immediate environment. Ushie remarks regrettably that this situation has taken a toll even on the language and culture of the people in both obvious and subterranean ways. He laments how the

despoilation of the environment "has enhanced the speed at which the language is decaying as many of the erstwhile referents of words in the fauna and flora are now extinct, and hence, leaving the words as weightless empty shells which any light wind can blow away from the vocabulary."^{xxxiv}

The planting of trees will contribute to the reforestation and restoration of lost forests, repairing of the damaged ecosystem and mitigating climate change. In the immediate past, it was a criminal offence to cut down a tree without approval by the Cross River State Forestry Commission but because the government itself has become the most notorious culprit in the felling of trees to generate revenue, the anti-deforestation law only exists on paper now with corrupt anti-deforestation agents giving cover to people whose business is the indiscriminate cutting down of trees and the selling of wood. When the forests are depleted for timber and farming, the natural vegetation is lost and the environment is exposed to heat waves.

Planting of bamboo to prevent the river from overflowing its bank and also retaining it throughout the dry season should be taken especially seriously. There are a number of streams that have changed their flow regimes

from perennial to seasonal flows as a result of climate change. This has seriously affected the availability of clean water for domestic use. People are compelled to spend hours in dry boreholes to get water. In communities where boreholes are not available, people have to trek long distances in search of drinkable water. This is mostly so during the dry season. No sacrifice can be too much in getting water, which improves personal hygiene and enhances life expectancy.

The harvest of such resources as river sand and gravel, fishing technique (to check any epidemic resulting from the use of chemicals to fish), bush burning and logging should be regulated. People who violate stipulated procedures and rules should be punished to serve as deterrents to others. Volunteers can constitute themselves into friends of the environment to serve this important purpose.

Provision of Extension Services: The government should, as a matter of urgency, employ and deploy extension officers to the rural areas with the aim of educating and enlightening the rural populace on how to mitigate and adapt to climate change, which has become an issue of global concern. Extension services are critical for the sharing of new knowledge with farmers for the

benefit of agricultural productivity, increasing food security and environmental sustainability.

Prohibition of Bush Burning: Bush burning is still a common practice among farmers in Bendi. Though bush burning has some economic advantages, its disadvantages are overwhelming. Being a hazardous practice, bush burning is a major source of air pollution with emissions like carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen and sulphur oxides. These oxides inflict respiratory disorders that the proceeds of the initial action cannot control. Bush burning destroys both the flora and fauna components of the ecosystem. The destruction of farmlands and plantations by ravaging fires has become a regular occurrence in the area. In sum, uncontrolled fire destroys the environment, reduces soil fertility, and destroys crops and animals. All these unhealthy interaction with the natural biosphere culminates in poor yield, which causes hunger, poverty and communal conflict. In order to check bush burning and reduce it to the barest minimum, the colonial regime criminalized bush burning and culprits of fire disaster were severely punished. Bush burning cannot continue to be left unchecked in the present period.

Conclusion

Intensive/extensive agricultural practices, tree cutting, bush burning, chemical use, pollution and other anthropogenic activities have over the years degraded the Bendi environment through outright destruction of the soil, forest and natural habitat. These unhealthy activities have adversely impacted on the fertility of the soil and the vegetation of the area, availability of soil water and the contamination of water for domestic use, poor crop yield, health challenges, and low income. It has become imperative for the Bendi people to take urgent actions to mitigate the impact of negative

environmental change. There is urgent need for concerted efforts from traditional and religious leaders, age grades, community leaders and other stakeholders in the community to discourage people from destroying the environment. It is not out of place for the Bendi community to constitute a taskforce with the mandate to regulate the harvesting of water sand and gravel, logging, fishing and bush burning. Emphasis should be placed on Pope Benedict XVI's admonition that: "The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa..."^{xv}

ⁱ Michael Adie Ugiobe. *Groundwork of Obudu History (1600 – 1959) Reconstructed Through the Lenses of Bette-Bendi Groups* (Calabar: University of Calabar Press, 2015), p.117.

ⁱⁱ Godwin Unimundebeshi Agim, "The Pre-colonial History of Bendi and Impact of Colonial Rule up to 1936". B.A Project submitted to the Department of History, University of Calabar, June 1980, p. 16.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Elder Augustine Aniashi, 80+, Retired Civil Servant and Community Leader, Bendigie Village, 17 February 2001.

^{iv} David Imbua L., "Bendi and Her Neighbours, 1900 – 1991." BA Project Submitted to the Department of History and International Studies, University of Calabar, 2002, p.21.

^v Interview with Elder Mark Ashipu, 75+, Community Leader, Ketting Village, 12 February 2001.

^{vi} A. F. R. Stoddart, *Intelligence Report on Bette – Bendi Clan*, National Archives Enugu, 1932, p.18. See also Adie, *Groundwork of Obudu History*, p.186.

^{vii} Adie, *Groundwork of Obudu History*, pp.8 & 197.

^{viii} Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to the Diplomatic Corps", January 11, 2010. Cited in John Cole and Frank Incropera, *A Catholic Perspective on Climate Change*. Available online at https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/ex1626_catholic_perspective_on_climate_change_document_a2.pdf. Accessed May 11, 2023.

^{ix} Bendi was an integral part of Obudu Division.

^x Stoddart, *Intelligence Report on Bette – Bendi Clan*, p.6.

^{xi} Interview with Professor Joseph Akawu Ushie, 66+, Dean of Arts, University of Uyo, 28 May, 2023.

^{xii} Joseph A. Ushie, "Land, Language and African Literature in a Climate of Decay", *Journal of the Annual International Conference on African Literature and the English Language*, Volume IX (May 2014), p. 40.

^{xiii} Ibid, p. 37.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Percy Amaury Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria; A Sketch of their History, Ethnology and Languages, with an Abstract of the 1921 Census* (London: F. Cass, 1969), p. 79.

^{xvi} Isaac Ishamali, "The Nigerian Economy in the Pre-colonial Period", in David Imbua, Joseph Ajor, Elvis

Okorn and Zara Kwaghe, eds., *Nigerian History from the Earliest Times to the Twentieth century* (Makurdi: Aboki Publishers, 2024), p.35.

^{xvii} Ushie, “Land, Language and African Literature”, p. 38.

^{xviii} Interview with Madam Lydia Ashiebi, 100+, Begiagba Village, 15 February 2001

^{xix} Interview with Professor Joseph Ushie.

^{xx} Adie, *Groundwork of Obudu History*, p.12.

^{xxi} Joseph Ushie and David Imbua, *Essays on the History, Language and Culture of Bendi* (Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2011), p.272.

^{xxii} Ushie, “Land, Language and African Literature in a Climate of Decay”, p.37.

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