

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***The Book ‘Managing Agrodiversity the Traditional Way Lessons from West Africa in Sustainable Use of Biodiversity and Related Natural Resources’***

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#### **A Review by Professor George Hagan, Chairman, National Commission on Culture, Ghana**

This book, to quote the editors, “reflects nearly 10 years of multidisciplinary, participatory research in West Africa, particularly in Ghana, as part of the United Nations University project on ‘*People, Land Management and Environmental Change* (UNU/PLEC)’. It shows how farmers traditionally cultivate and conserve biodiversity while also using the land for food production. It highlights PLEC interventions for sustaining ‘agrodiversity’ for rural livelihoods, and provides lessons for teaching, policy and development planning, as it does for research methodology. Knowledge is the basis of human survival, security and development. One finds in even the most remote and isolated communities, rich indigenous bodies of knowledge.

In traditional societies nature is perceived as a cosmic whole: the earth is sacred and both living and non-living things are sacred. Few biological and social sciences take this philosophic basis of African cultures seriously enough to see its relevance in their research and intervention protocols. This, however, is the innovation and logic of the research approach adopted by the researchers and scholars whose papers appear in this book. And the publication of the lessons of the research should give new insights to policy makers and development agencies on the use of culture as an indigenous resource for sustainable development in Third World countries.

Traditional knowledge, technology, management practices, social institutions, values, world-view, religion and ritual, attitudes and patterns of behaviour have a role to play in Africa’s development. Indeed, these constitute the only basis for mobilizing Africa’s human and material resources for development. This, however, can have practical meaning only where policy makers are enlightened to see the need for the active involvement of local communities in the design both of programmes and activities for development. To affirm the importance of ‘CULTURE IN DEVELOPMENT’ we need to represent this in new development paradigms and conceptual tools, especially in the vital area of agricultural production. This is the most significant contribution that the UNU, with its PLEC project and the publication emanating from it, has made to the search for effective strategies for African and Third World development.

Besides a Preface, Foreword and Acknowledgements, the book has 21 Chapters presented in four parts compacted with an index into 266 elegantly printed pages. The Preface claims, “The PLEC research across the tropical world confirms that inherent in used biophysical environments

are...traditional practices that favour conservation of biodiversity through agrodiversity”. It bemoans that “this cultural heritage, which is fundamentally important for the ecological stability and genetic pool of plants and animals needed for food security, has come under threat mainly because policy and modern development planners and practitioners alike largely ignore it. A lack of emphasis on traditional knowledge in educational curricular associated with exotic values and the absence of relevant textbooks are contributory factors”.

It goes on to state that on the basis of case studies by multidisciplinary, participatory research work in West Africa (mainly Ghana), the book shows how, traditionally, farmers cultivate and conserve biodiversity as part of agriculture. It suggests that the PLEC approach points to “possibly cost-effective ways of recognizing, tapping, demonstrating, and upscaling conservation practices of exceptionally knowledgeable farmers”. For recognizing and addressing these factors, the book has to be recognized as one of the most significant contributions to the growing body of literature and knowledge on a subject that I, hesitatingly, but quite prophetically, introduced into the FUE African Studies course...both in the University of Ghana and in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.

The chapters are generous with the details of the number of factors on which traditional agrodiversity culture was based. I counted no less than 25, including human migrations, ethnic heterogeneity and taste,...religious values,...the economic value of crops, and, of course, management techniques. In this regard, the book is rich in ethnological material on management practices, some of which raise important questions.

The following is an example:

***Page 84: Yam domestication practices in northern Ghana***

Newly discovered yam seedlings in the forest are sometimes “bitter” in taste or tasteless. Fetish priests in northern Ghana commonly domesticate new yam types, brought into the community in shrines, even though individual farmers can cultivate yam brought from the forest on their own. New yam types are cultivated about four to seven years before being given a name, which is often descriptive in nature. Some of the shrines are located at Siiyare, Birikum, and Gambugu, all settlement in the Nanumba district of the northern region of Ghana. The essence of cultivation in the shrine is to receive blessing of the newly discovered yam types.

Interpreted functionally, this tradition seems to serve as a quarantine regime for the community to control the spread of dangerous crop species as well as observe and study the nature, mode of cultivation and management of newly discovered crops. The tradition needs to be further studied. The Editors state that effective resource management systems do not have to be invented only by modern science. They exist, and have been continuously developed by the world’s smallholder farmers. The challenge is to seek, preserve, and nurture them. The PLEC approach gives us a model schema of the steps and activities that may be employed to make interventions in programmes and activities that recognize indigenous people as collaborators and their traditional knowledge as a resource.

The book, to quote the Editors, “blends academic research and practitioner knowledge, and contains valuable information for policymakers and practitioners alike. It should also appeal to university students and teachers, including those in agriculture, social sciences, biological science and other fields relating to environmental and natural resources management and sustainable development”.