

"Water is God's": Commonality View and the Challenges of State Institutions in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

The search for responsible and accountable water management practices has generally overlooked belief systems, perception, reality and attitudes. Yet these all play a part in sustainable water management most especially in the Third World Countries. The aim of this paper is to see how such cultural and indigenous issues contend with the formal State initiatives for efficient water resources management in Akwa Ibom state, Nigeria. The study used key contending State water management principles, namely water rights, cost recovery and environmental sustainability and compared with local practice to see commonalities and differences. Meetings, interviews, observations and focus group discussions were used to collect the data. The ideal points for such data collection were the Cross River Basin Development Authority (CRBDA) projects which served as intersection points between formal, state-based institutions and the informal community-based practices. In the result, it was observed that the key water management principles adopted by the State could not fit well with the prevailing local practices and contexts. Expectedly, the needed cooperation from the locals for those projects was weak and lacking. A number of factors lent explanations and these bordered on the perception and attitudes to water by the locals and compounded by the hydrological characteristics of the study areas. For instance, the notion of linking water with the supernatural agency stultifies any formal efforts at cost recovery. This is likely going to be so in the nearest future given sufficient water supplies from the natural sources. Since the "scarcity value" has not been appreciated, it is likely that the locals will continue to perceive any formal water management initiatives as financially taxing rather than improving their overall conditions. Consistent with the above local impression, the study further observed that current state policies and programmes on water carry no elements intended for the improvements of the lives of people but meaningless projects, which is of meaningless impacts on the lives of the intended beneficiaries. A number of recommendations proffered include inclusive governance that takes on the views of the locals, incentive practices

and cost effective project targeting.

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Introduction

The way people perceive water shapes their attitudes to management. Based on this context, how do conventional water management paradigms fit into local practices? What are the roles and challenges of state institutions in guaranteeing efficient, accountable and equitable management of water resources? These and related questions will be answered by looking at how water rights, cost recovery and sustainability principles of the state compares favourably with local practices in the Cross River Basin (CRB), Nigeria. The study pays particular emphasis on areas of commonalities and differences as well as exploring how areas of differences could be resolved. Project units of the Cross River Basin Development Authority (CRBDA) in Akwa Ibom state are used for analysis.

Current State Water Management Instruments

The framework and basis for Akwa Ibom state involvement in water resources management come from various sources such as legal, legislative and administrative at national, state and local levels. Constitutionally, water resource is placed in the concurrent list of the 1999 constitution, involving all tiers of government and private sector. Prior to 1999, domestic water management had no position in the political decision making process. There were, however, selected but water related legislations at pre-independence, colonial (e.g., The Waterworks Act of 1915; the Minerals Act of 1917; and the Public Health Act of 1917) and post-colonial periods (e.g., the Oil in Navigable Waters Act, 1968; the Petroleum Act, 1969; Land use Act, 1978; the National Effluent Limitation Regulation 1991; Waste Management Regulation, 1991; the EIA decree, No.86 of 1992; the Water Resources decree, No.101 of 1993, among others). Water management practices during these periods were more disjointed in approach (responding to emergencies), with a number of vague and unrealistic assumptions (e.g. Land use Act of 1978). More so, implementation mechanisms were more stronger and realistic at pre-independent and colonial periods and very weak at post-colonial period. The very first attempt at coordinated water management in Nigeria came when the idea of using river basins as units of organising water management emerged in 1976. Although this idea has not recorded the anticipated success in Nigeria (Akpabio, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007a; Akpabio et.al 2005; Mitchell, 1994 and Salau, 1986, 1990), it, however, represents a significant realisation of the urgent need for a sound management of available water resources. Despite the above listed regulatory instruments for water resources management, Akpabio (2007b) observed that such regulatory instruments are mainly obtainable at the federal level and are not sufficient enough to resolve issues of control, ownership and management of water resources. Given these situations, how is water viewed and managed in general? The purpose of this paper is to present a common framework for the understanding of water resource management among the State and

Traditional institutions.

Water and Community in Nigeria: Perception, Relationship and Management

There is a marked dualism in the way water is managed between the urban areas and rural communities in Akwa Ibom state. While the formal rights system are applicable and enforceable in the urban areas, the rural communities, on the other hand, see water as a common property and managed within the framework of the commons. Generally, when a property is perceived as a common property, the following characteristics applies among the users, namely: Such a project is state project-in this case an opportunity to share in the 'national cake' syndrome; One can waste it, mismanage or misuse it with reckless abandon; Recovering cost of investments is absolutely impossible, which is linked to the 'national cake' syndrome; Everybody competes to use it with no sense of return or responsibility; Unwillingness to adhere to rules and regulations regarding use sometimes leading to vandalization; Community norms are not brought to bear in utilization and management compared to if it were perceived as a community-based property.

These characteristics are compounded by ecological, religious, customary, economic and institutional factors. Ecologically, there is water abundance making it impossible for the affected communities to realise its value (Akpabio, 2007a). There is also the attitude of seeing water as 'a gift from nature' which implies free use to members of the communities. This attitude is mostly re-enforced by the Biblical command of Genesis 1:28. Looking at the economic perspectives, it could be argued that the impracticability of achieving cost recovery among the people is related to the massive poverty that has

been the recurring nightmares of the rural populace in Nigeria (see Akpabio, 2003 and 2004).

Brief Insight into the Study Area

The study was conducted in Akwa Ibom state found between latitudes 40 30' N and 50 30' N and longitudes 70 30'E and 80 15'E (Fig 1). There are two sources of water supply in the state: the natural sources and the modern supply sources. The natural sources are still useful to about 80-90% of majority especially in the rural areas. Availability is a matter of direct collection of rainwater in containers and extraction from streams, ponds and hand-dug wells. The modern supply sources started with the British in days of empire. At best, the modern supply scheme is a public-sector affair, undertaken and maintained by government at public expense. At worst, modern supply source is individually owned e.g. a private borehole and a well owned by the wealthy individuals. Customary water rights in the rural areas are mostly embedded in the land tenure system. Although, the system of land ownership also influences water rights, Akpabio et.al (2005) however noted that in most communities there is a clear difference between land and water rights. This means one can have exclusive land rights but water bodies belong to the community (as in Nkwot community), where everybody has the right of access. This practice is reinforced by traditional recognition of water bodies as God given (*Mmon edi eke Abasi*). This implies that no single individual has exclusive right over water bodies - the context and basis for a collective management and control over available water bodies by communities concerned. Akwa Ibom state is well endowed with vast resources of both surface and groundwater as annual rainfall ranges between 2000mm and 3000mm, which occur mainly between March and October of every year (AKS, 1989). The study was conducted at the CRBDA projects, namely, Abak irrigation project and Itu drainage and irrigation projects. These two projects are selected since they form the intersection points between the CRBDA (as state agents) and the practicing farmers (as agents of local informal institutions). Village meetings, focus groups, interviews and researcher's past personal village experiences were important sources of field data. Issues that were given much attention during data collection include rights and access issues, cost recovery, equity and environmental sustainability, among others

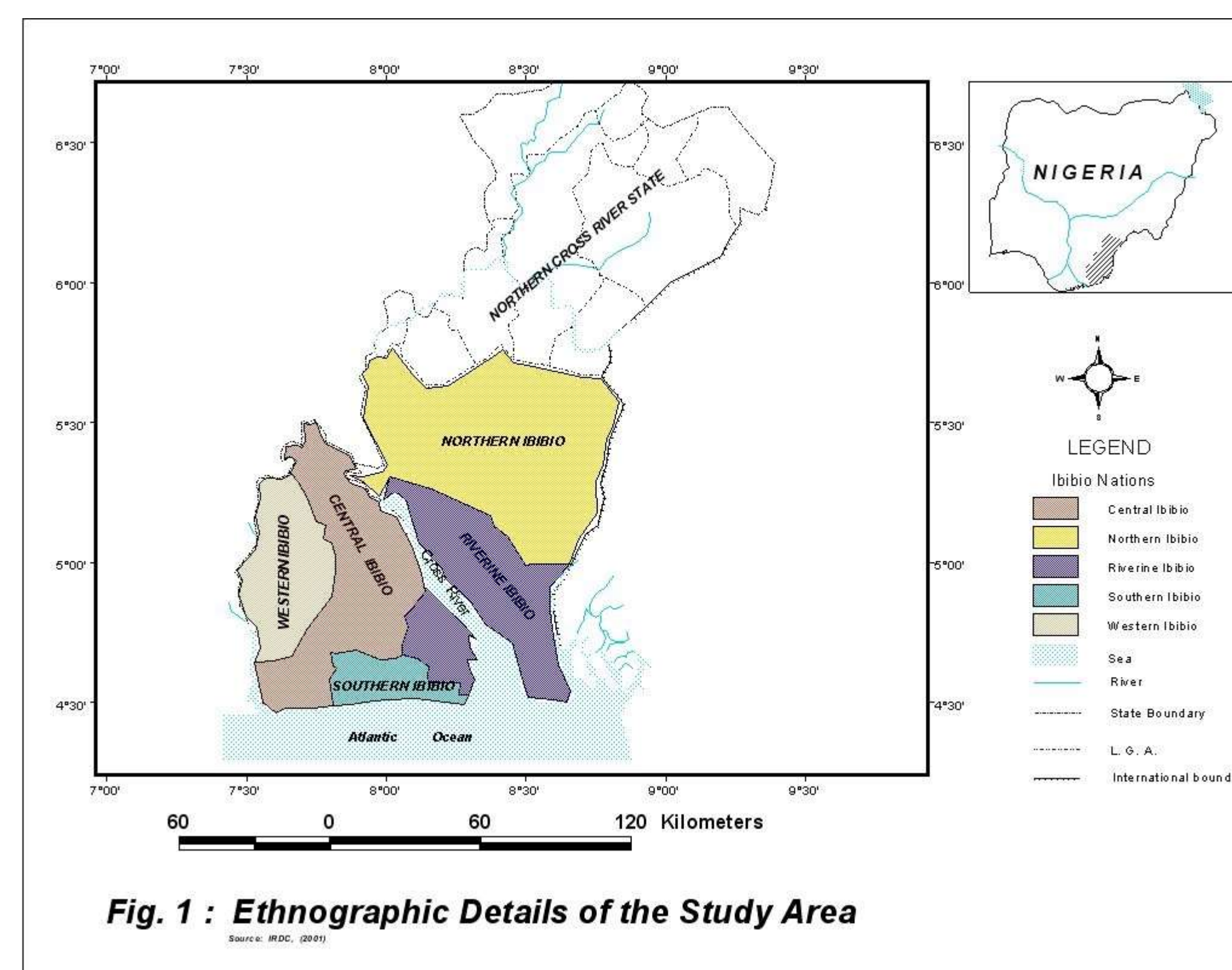


Fig. 1 : Ethnographic Details of the Study Area

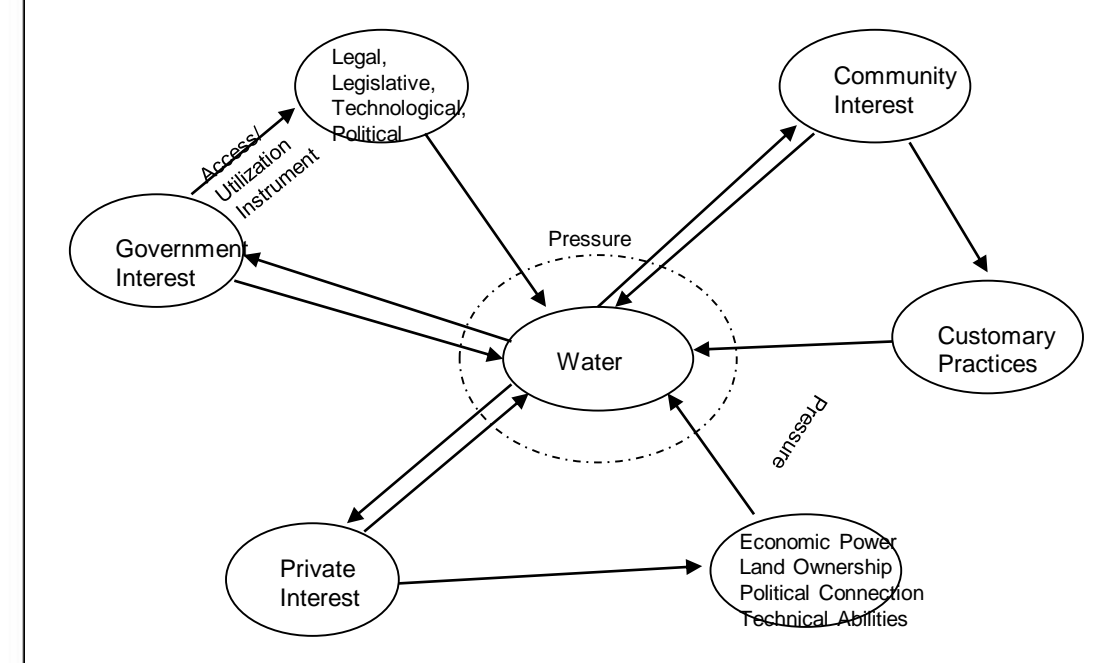


Fig 2 Tripartite Interest on Water use in Akwa Ibom State

The Challenges of State Institutions and Concluding Remarks

One of the distinguishing characteristics of indigenous system of natural resources management in Nigeria is the overlap of various authorities and rights system. For example the water resources management systems in Akwa Ibom state currently implies a dual right system derived from 1.) unrecognized or informal community based property right to water, and 2.) recognized or formal state right to water management. The informal community-based right exerts influential role in the daily management of water and related natural resources (Akpabio, 2006b). There is need for cooperative management. Consequently, State institutions should be in

constant dialogue with the community institutions when there is need for any water resources projects.

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Biographical Information

Emmanuel Akpabio, PhD, is a lecturer in the Department of Geography and Regional Planning, University of Uyo, Nigeria and a British Academy Visiting Fellow to Newcastle University, UK (1st May-31st August, 2008). His broad research field is on Environment and Natural Resources Planning in the Developing World. He has specific interest on governance and institutions for water resources management. He has participated in a number of scholarly activities on this theme, in the form of conferences and workshops, in countries of Africa, Asia and Europe. Emmanuel Akpabio is a member of many professional associations, including International Water Resources Association (IWRA). His current publications have appeared in the Environmentalist, Water Policy, International Journal of Water Resources Development and International Journal of Regulations and Governance.