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Mumuye Vaka or Vaa (Arcane Society) of Taraba State: A Spring board for Ecological Conservation Management Strategies in Contemporary Nigeria

Hosea Nakina Martins, PhD[1]; Peter Marubitoba Dong[2]; Prof. Adega Andrew Philips[3]

[1]Department of Christian Religious Studies, Faculty of Religion and Philosophy, Taraba State University, Jalingo

[2]National Mumuye Headquaters, Mile Six, Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria

[3]Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Rev Dr Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria

*Corresponding Author: Hosea Nakina Martins, PhD | ORCID: [0009-0002-2871-8703]

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Abstract

Environmental degradation in contempoarary Nigeria is increasing due to deforestation, poaching, air and water pollution from chimneys, mining, deforestation, agro and industrialideation, urbanisation, waste, poor management and weak enforcement of state laws. At the same time, many rural communities still rely on indigenous institutions to regulate natural resources. Among the Mumuye of Taraba State, Northeast, Nigeria the Vaka or Vaa secret society has long governed access to forests, rivers and wildlife through taboos, sanctions and communal ethics. Contemporary conservation policies often ignore such efficaciously local systems. Modern religious change, poverty and youth disinterest are incessantly weakening the vaka (Arcane society), while illegal logging, bush burning and overfishing, hubtibg of wild, mining, industrial and chemical waste, agro continue to leave an indelible hallmarks off an ecosystem that is at the verge of collapse. This creates a gap between state efforts and indigenous

community practice. The study examines the role of the Mumuye Vaka in ecological conservation, assesses its effectiveness against current environmental challenges, and explores how tradition and modernity can be brought together harmoniousky for better resource management strategies. A qualitative approach was used. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation in Zing, Lau , Jalingo and Yorro Local Government Areas, Taraba State, Nigeria. Elders, Vaka custodians, women leaders and youths formed the main respondents. Findings show that Vaa rules reduce illegal exploitation where the society still has moral authority. Areas under active Vaka jurrisdiction oversight record fewer cases of deforestation, mining, poaching, water pollution over grazing and bush burning than areas without it. However, religious conversion of indigenous practictioners of Vaa/ Vaka, economic hardship and loss of youth interest are limiting its reach. The study recommends partnership between government agencies and vaka custions, the inclusion of indigenous ethics in school and religious teaching, and the provision of alternative livelihoods to reduce pressure on natural resources. The Mumuye Vaa remains a living institution for ecological care. Its integration with modern conservation policy can strengthen environmental management strategies in contemporary Nigeria without erasing cultural identity role .

Keywords: Mumuye, vaka or vaa (Arcane Society), indigenous knowledge, ecological conservation, environmental management, tradition, modernity, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Africans are noted for their intense religiosity, where nature finds a place in their hearts (Anyacho 167). The whole earth and its inhabitants were created by God (167). Nigeria faces serious environmental problems today. Any discourse on the environment may be incomplete without making reference to ecology and ecosystems (Gbenda 145). In the distant past, African Religion was actively involved in tackling ecological degradation. This was not taken seriously. Recently, as Gudaku observes, scholars have shown interest in indigenous ecological management (70).

Deforestation, mining, soil erosion, porching, over grazing, loss of biodiversity, pollution of rivers, and uncontrolled bush burning are common across many parts of the country. Government agencies have laws and policies to protect the environment, but enforcement is often weak, especially in rural areas where staff, funding and transport are limited (Dzurgba 4). At the same time, climate change is making rainfall more unpredictable, and this affects farming, fishing and water supply for millions of people. Our ecosystem is threatened by global warming, ozone layer depletion, loss of biodiversity, desertification, noise and air pollution (Anyacho 146). Similarly, human activities are responsible for the loss of biodiversity, which is the gradual reduction of the number of species of plants and animals in the ecosystem (Gbenda 1). The main duties of man include living in a manner that would maintain spiritual equilibrium between the unseen powers in the environment.

Long before modern laws existed, many African communities managed their environment through indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous knowledge refers to the beliefs, practices and institutions that a people have developed over generations to live with their land, forests, water and animals (Gaiya 14-15). These systems are often linked to religion, custom and communal values. Forests, rivers, streams, pounds, mountains and hills are not seen only as resources; they are also sacred revered as places that must be protected for the living, the dead and those yet to be born (Mbiti 133).

In Nigeria, examples of such systems include sacred groves among the Mumuye, water taboos among the Mumuye of Dong, and age-grade regulations among the Tiv. These institutions used taboos, fines and social exclusion to control the use of natural resources. Ecological conservation management is highly controlled by the *Vaka*. These conservation approaches were not written down, but they were respected because they carried moral and spiritual weight. With urbanisation, formal education, Christianity, Islam and a cash economy, many of these institutions have lost strength and efficacy. Yet where they still function, they continue to shape how people relate to nature. Understanding them is therefore important for any serious conversation on environmental management in Nigeria today.

Overview of the Mumuye People and *Vaka* or *Vaa*

The Mumuye

The Mumuye are one of the largest ethnic groups in North Eastern Nigeria. They speak the Mumuye language and are found mainly in Taraba State and parts of Adamawa State. Their communities include Zing, Lau, Yorro, Ardo-Kola, Bali and Gashaka in Taraba, and Mayo Belwa, Numan, Ganye, Toungo, Fufore and Jimeta-Yola in Adamawa (Dong and Rudanyuba 2-3). Oral history links their origin to early migrations from Egypt, and they have maintained a distinct culture centred on farming, communal life and ancestral belief. Although, according to Dong et al., on leaving Egypt for Nigeria, the Mumuye settled at Mayo Kam in Bali Local Government Area of Taraba State approximately during the Stone Age, while their migration and settling in Yorro is said to be during the Iron Age (Dong et al. 1-2).

Vaka or *Vaa*

Within Mumuye society, the *Vaa* or *Vaka* is a Hidden Society that plays a central role in social order, morality and communal regulation. Membership is restricted, and initiates are bound by oaths of secrevaya According Nyazing, *Vaa* is a cult inninits strickiest sense of secrecy, and also symbols of male domination"(25). Bonzena sees *Vaka* as one of three principal deities. It serves asngodnof morality"(12). In anither recap, Nyabun defines *Vaa* or *Vaka* as "hidden association of secret men which is aided by use of symbols in creating mutual respect and regulation of religious life"(5). Accorsingmto John Mazang"The *Vaka* sets rules on behaviour, settles disputes, and enforces taboos that protect certain trees, animals,mountains,rivers and farmland"(Oral Interview, 22/10/2026). For example, cutting trees in a sacred grove, hunting during closed seasons, or farming on riverbanks can attract fines or public reprimand from *Vaa* custodians. The fear of ancestral anger and community shame makes the rules effective in many villages (Magesa 131).

Thus, the *Vaka* is more than a cultural body (Vahme Emmanuel, Oral Interview, 28/3/2026). It acts as a local environmental authority. Its regulations are tied to the Mumuye worldview that “I am because we are”, which stresses communal responsibility over individual excess (Mbiti). However, like other indigenous institutions, the *Vaka* is facing pressure from Christianity, Islam, formal education, market forces and youth migration to towns in search of greener pasture. Some young people no longer fear its sanctions, while others see it as outdated and unprofitable. This makes it important to ask how the society still functions, and whether it can be useful for conservation in the present time.

Statement of the Problem

Contemporary conservation strategies in contemporary Nigeria relies mostly on government forestry departments, environmental protection agencies and donor-funded projects. These efforts have produced policies and awareness campaigns, but illegal logging, bush burning and water pollution persist, miming, porching especially in rural Taraba (Daily Champion n.p.). One reason is that state institutions are often very distant from village life and lack local trust and continuity among the people.

At the same time, the *Vaa* society, which once regulated forest, mountain, stream , indiscrimnate, bush burning, porching and mining use among the Mumuye, is gradually weakening. Religious change leads some indigenous converts to reject it as "pagan or fetish". Economic hardship has also pushes Mumuye to cut trees for charcoal, hunt for animaks as bush meat, minned minerals, clear land for crops, even when it breaks *Vaka* taboos. Youth disinterest in indigenous conservation of the ecosystem strategies also reduced the number of new initiates. As a result, there is a gap between official conservation policy and community- indigenous practice.

Environmental pollution has become a matter of global concern because of the threat the problems pose to the world (Anyacho 146). In another related observation, Oyeshola notes that, "our planet is threatened by global warming, ozone depletion, biological diversity loss, deforestation, environmental disaster" (3). Instead of man being stewards of nature, man has been a destroyers of the ecosystem. Tnis points to the fact that, the bottom springboard of the ecological issues now is that the contemporary Nigeria is seriously heading to a situation whereby life in the ecosystem cannot be comforta) unless stringent conservative management strategies are applied(Anyacho140-141).

If this gap is not meticulousyly addressed, two things will happen. First, the environment will continue to degrade because neither the state nor the community system and its secret society is fully effective. Second, valuable indigenous knowledge among the Mumuye will be lost before it can be documented or used. The problem, therefore, is how to understand the current role of *Vaka* in ecological regulation strategies , and how it can be linked with modern conservation management strategies without destroying its cultural essence and meaning.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The general aim and objectives of this study is to examine the role of the indigenous Mumuye *Vaa* in ecological conservation management strategies in contemporary Nigeria, the specific objectives include:

1. To document the structure, rules and environmental taboos of the *Vaa* among Mumuye communities in Taraba State, Northeast, Nigeria.

2. To assess the effectiveness of *Vaa* regulations in protecting forests, mountains, rivers, stream and other natural sources and wildlife compared with state-led conservation agencies.

3. To analyse the challenges facing the *Vaka* in the face of religion, economic pressure and youth attitudes in the modern age .

4. To explore practical ways of integrating *Vaa* or *Vaka* practices with modern environmental policy for sustainable resource management.

Research Questions

To achieve the objectives stated above, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main ecological rules, taboos and sanctions enforced by the Mumuye *Vaa* or *Vaka*
2. How effective has the Mumuye *Vaa* been in reducing environmental abuse in communities?
3. What social, religious and economic factors are weakening the effective role of *Vaka* today?
4. In what ways can the *Vaa* be partnered with Government and Non-governmental agencies for better ecological conservation strategies in contemporary Nigeria?

Theoritical Framework

The study is built on Elinor Ostrom, who set out Common Property Resource Theory in Governing the Commons (1990). She argued that communities can manage shared resources such as forestry, wildlife, minerals, rivers,mountains, streams and quarrying of gravels without state ownership or privatisation if they have clearly marked boundaries, locally made rules, monitoring by members, and graduated sanctions (Ostrom 90).

This theory helps explain Mumuye *Vaka* or *Vaa* (Arcane Society) of Taraba State: A Spring board for Ecological Conservation Management Strategies in Contemporary Nigeria. Hence, Mumuye *Vaa* systems served as springboard for ecological conservation management strategy in contemporary Nigeria. The *Vaka* defines membership, enforces stringent taboos on trees, rivers, land encroachment due to mining, bush burning, the use of agrochemicals and hunting of wildlife, and uses members to monitor and sanction offenders (Dong and Rudanyuba 2). Where its authority holds, resources are carefully protected. Where it weakens, overuse and abuse by *jaa-vaa* (followers) increases(Jinzere Kalako, Oral Interview, 17/7/2026). Thus Ostrom's framework vividly shows both the strength of indigenous regulation mechanisms and the limits they faced under external societal pressure due to globalisation and modernisation of all facets of social cohesion on the ecosystem.

Discussion of the Framework

Field reports from Mumuye areas show that *Vaka* or *Vaa*, one of the most respected and feared secret societies or hidden asssociations whose rules helped in mitigating illegal logging, mining, poaching, deforestation, pollution of drinking ponds or stream and bush burning where elders (*jaa-vaa*) as custodians still command absolute loyalty and respect (Dong et al. 1-2). According to Mashi Makaniki, "Government forestry laws exist, but enforcement is actually weak and even funding becomes a serious problem because officers are few"(Oral Interview, 28 /4/2026) and communities often see them as outsiders and exploiters of the ecosystem rather than conservationists (Dzurgba 4). This matches Ostrom's finding that local or indigenous monitoring is more proactive than distant control, which is hindered by so many bottlenecks of slowness (Ostrom 94).

There are basically three pressures weaken the *Vaa* or *Vaka* today. First, many converts from Mumuye *lansi* (indigenous religion) reject the society's customary conservation agents like the hidden association as "pagan , barbaric, primitive, magical, fetish"(Aaron Boyi, Oral Interview, 21/5/2026) and many

people withdraw (Magesa 131). Second, poverty pushes people to sell charcoal or clear land, mined for minerals, poach for games and fines are paid rather than obeyed (Daily Champion n.p.). Third, today's formal education and new values make many young people see *Vaka* or *Vaa* oaths as outdated and unprogressive but interfering with community's progress (Amos Avonapu, Oral Interview, 2/12/2025. Also, external logging and farming concessions also take land out of customary control due to mechanisation and ongoing industrialisation (Mapi Denis, Oral Interview, 1/8/2026).

It is worth reiterating further that , ignoring the *Vaka* or *Vaa* leaves a gap in rural governance. Sadome Martin Ali observes that, relying on it alone cannot meet climate, market or population pressures (Oral Interview, 24/6/2026). A workable and proactive policy is partnership: recognise *Vaa* or *Vaka* custodians in local conservation committees, give them proper training in climate and biodiversity without forcing disclosure of secret arcane rites, and link their ethics of restraint to modern stewardship and continous teaching (Ostrom 190).

Conceptual Clarification

i. Ecology

Ecology, as Adah posits, designates one of the basic dimensions of biology (Adah 16-17). It is "the study of the interrelationships of organisms with their environment" (Fairchild 134). It is "the scientific study of the relationships between living things and their physical surroundings" (Dzurgba 11). Ecology means "the branch of biology that studies organisms in relation to their environment" (Magesa 22). It refers to "the science of the relationship between living things and the environment in which they live" (Gaiya 14). Ecology is "the study of ecosystems and the flow of energy and materials within them" (Sarwuan 17). Tyler further asserts that the word ecology was derived from Greek words *oikos* meaning house and *logos* meaning study (372). Haeckel Ernest states that ecology is knowledge concerning the economy of nature (as qtd. in Fatubrin 1).

ii. Conservation

Conservation is "the planned management of natural resources to prevent waste, destruction or neglect" (Fairchild 85). It means "the protection and wise use of natural resources for present and future generations" (Magesa 131). According to Dzurgba, "conservationn refers to the procedures of preservation and sustainable use of the environment and its resources" (47). On the other hand, Gaiya succinctly defines conservation as "the act of keeping natural resources in good condition and avoiding over-exploitation or uncontrolled uses" (15). Conservation, according to Sarwuan is "the management of wildlife, forests, water and soil for continued use" (45).

iii. Management

Management is a road map employed by people to control their resources or environment. It is also seen as "the manner of organising and controlling resources to achieve objectives" (Fairchild 186). It means "the act of planning, directing and controlling human and material resources" (Dzurgba 12). Management refers to "the handling of affairs with a view to ensure efficiency and order" (Gaiya 15). It

is “the coordination of activities and resources to meet defined and stated goals” (Magesa 23). Management is “the control and direction of resources for purposeful use” (Sarwuan 19).

iv. Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is “the local knowledge held by indigenous or native peoples, developed over generations through direct pragmatic experience” (Gaiya 14). It means “the knowledge base that a society has developed through long-term interaction with its environment” (Magesa 27). Indigenous knowledge refers to “the cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief passed on through oral tradition” (Mbiti 135). It is “knowledge that is unique to a given culture and society, and forms the basis for local decision-making” (Dzurgba 46). Indigenous knowledge as further seen by Sarwuan is “the understanding and skills that local communities have, and how they employ it for their environment” (63).

v. *Vaa* or *Vaka*

There are many definitions of what *Vaka* or *Vaa* is all about. *Vaa* or *Vaka* is an indigenous Hidden Society with efficacious and mystical powers. It is an arcane society with devoted followers(Sunday Madaki, Oral Interview, 3/3/2025).According to Martins, Sarwuan *Vaa* or *Vaka* are mystical sacred cults, usually empowered with a lot of rituals to serve as a link between the visible and invisible worlds of men and that of the spirits. They could be represented by any empowered sacred object, man-made or natural, to ensure control of the society, and with backing from custodians (“Vabong...” 92). Neyt defined *Vaa* or *Vaka* as an ancestral cultic identity that ensures relationship with the forces of the universe (38). Bonzena, on the other hand, defines *Vaka* or *Vaa* as a cult for the furtherance of order among human societies (27). Neyt further affirmed that, *Vaa* are symbolic forces of nature and the ancestors"(38). For Walls, it is a symbol of boundless, personal greed and involvement with such an ogre for personal gain"(138).

Mumuye *Vaka* or *Vaa* (Arcane Society) of Taraba State: A Spring board for Ecological Conservation Management Strategies in Contemporary Nigeria

The role of the *Vaka* as Mumuye agents of ecological conservation management strategies in Taraba State, Northeast, Nigeria cannot be overemphasised in this paper. *Vaka* is used to protect sacred trees, animals, mountainous scenery and mineral exploration sites, to prevent stream pollution and to stop the deforestation of certain sacred trees that are considered totems and of medicinal value (Sunday Madaki, Oral Interview, 3/3/2025). For instance, Gudaku posits similarly that, in Tiv Religion, certain trees and streams are protected by spirits due to the vitality attached to them to be preserved for the good of the community (74).

Vaa preserves certain natural features by using efficacious means so that they are not tampered with. These secret societies have efficacious power which they use against those found to have broken the stipulated law on the degradation of reserves(Amos Avonapu, Oral Interview, 22/12/2025). The *Shoo Dong,* River Dong in Dong ‘A’ located in Lamma District, is protected by *Vaka* and other ancestral

spirits known as *raamang*. Hence, certain natural features are also forbidden to be tampered with, especially the Kong tree, which is symbolically gigantic and is protected by *Vaa* adherents. Yearly rituals are observed because of its religious significance in Dong 'A'(Dauda 11).

In most Mumuye settlements, taboos on certain animals are strictly enforced and people are forbidden to tamper with them. Although nature is considered sacred, religious prohibitions on natural bodies are controlled by *Vaka* through taboos and punishments (Shadokwa Ranti, Oral Interview, 2/1/2026). Gaiya is of the view that African understanding of the universe means his understanding and relationship, which remains mutual and must be respected because of the interplay of forces that lie within man and nature in the two worlds(7).

In traditional settings of the Mumuye, the role *Vaa* plays in ecological conservation and management strategies cannot be overemphasised. The natural and admirable scenery of Mumuye terrain is clear evidence that *Vaa* plays a very paramount role in ensuring proper sustainable conservation management strategies among the people on conserved areas (Shadokwa Ranti, Oral Interview, 2/1/2026). Custodians of *Vaka* ensure punitive measures are given to those who contravene environmental conservation management strategies in contemporary society especially cutting certain forbidden trees, grasses, and even laughing and harvesting of some kind of corps(Isa Major, Oral Interview,21/2/2025). Ritualsare ensured to symbolised the hope and inseparable link between the living and the departed, who are been represented by the *Vaka* symbolic penalties on ecological safety.

Most of the untapped resources in Mumuyeland of Taraba State, North East, Nigeria are protected by placing the ancestral spirits of *Vaka* on those natural bodies. This placement, or verbal command of ancestral spirits, is well coordinated and fostered with the aid of the *Vaka (*Bawando Boli, Oral Interview, 18/8/2026). Anyacho reiterates similarly that the main duties of man include maintaining spiritual equilibrium between him and the unseen powers in the environment (Anyacho 167).

Vaa serves as agents of environmental conservation and management by its members acting and pronouncing taboos against any ecological habitation of both men and spirits alike(Tera Magaji, Oral Interview, 1/2/2025).Anyacho uncovers that these taboos regulate the relationship between man and his fellow men, plants, animals, rivers and mountains(1666-167) *Vaa's* efficacious function here is manifested through the enactment of punitive measures on environmental destroyers. In view of the above, fear of spiritual reprisal from *Vaka* spirits often discourages people from exploring them. Asante buttressed that people fear engaging in the exploitation of nature and its valuable resources because of the powerful spirits there (291).

Another ecological conservation management strategy lies in the planting of trees as an enclosure of the *javaa* or *kunah* shrine. Trees, mountains and streams, and even places under taboo, are forbidden to be tampered with (Ahmadu Iliya, Oral Interview, 6/6/2025). Hence, the sacred enclosure of the *java* or *vaa* is surrounded by woven grass mats, and the entire surrounding is also protected with green foliage trees that give it a shady atmosphere. According to Aaron Boyi, Ancestral spirits placed on the trees are meant to preserve the trees from being tampered with(21/5/2026). Certain mountains are preserved by *Vaka* because they are considered sacred and a dwelling place of the ancestral spirits, and vital forces that animate and energise all things in the ecosystem (Busia 290).

The siting of *javaa* or *kunah (*shrine) indicates that people are forbidden to tamper with the natural features seen inhabiting those objects. Teko Bitenja reiterates that, *Vaka* is very essential in the

ecological conservation of wildlife, trees, streams, mountains, mining, deforestation and a host of other ecological natural bodies(Oral Interview, 2/12/2025)). The use of mystical powers by man to deal with offenders who violate stipulated laws forbidding ecological degradation cannot be overemphasised, because people are expected to treat nature with utmost respect (Anyacho 291). Man is a component of ecological conservation (Gbenda 51). AMumuyes notes Ahmadu Iliya, *Vaka* serves as the architect of ecological conservation strategies (Oral Interview, 6/6/2025).

Recommendations

The study haven discovered the challenges bedevilking Mumuye *Vaka* or *Vaa* (Arcane Society) of Taraba State: A Spring board for Ecological Conservation Management Strategies in Contemporary Nigeria, has the following recommendations:

1. There should be inclusion of *Vaka* custodians in state and Non Govermental Organisation conservation planning for Taraba State, Nigeria.

2. There is need to support awareness work that connects *Vaa* taboos with environmental protection and management strategies.

3. People should be encouraged to provide alternative livelihoods such as bee-keeping and agroforestry to reduce forest pressure by exploitation.

4. Respected scholars should endeavour to document objectively on *Vaa* environmental rules through ethical, community-led research before elders go into ectinction for posterity's sake.

Conclusion

Mumuye *Vaka* or *Vaa* remains a working institution for ecological strategies and care. Its rules, monitoring and sanctions have conserved forests, wild animals, pollution, mountains, and water over time. In contemporary Nigeria, tradition, modernity and external pressures are testing it. This study shows that indigenous management strategies of *Vaka* is effective when community control is strongly reiterated, but it needs recognition and support to survive. Proactive policy that works with the *Vaa* can help improve environmental conservation and protect cultural identity. In this research, *Vaka* or *Vaa*) of Taraba State: A Spring board for Ecological Conservation Management Strategies in Contemporary Nigeria has been examined, and the paper ends with strong recommendations and conclusion.

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