

## 1 Introduction

Landscapes and their constituent components present a dynamic set of relationships between plants, animals, climate and other influences, within which humans are but one factor. Both remote forest tracts and forest near human settlements can be seen as part of a social landscape, modified by human activities (Olson 1997). A people's image of a forest with which they interact is socially constructed from factors including both its useful products and spiritual forces perceived to inhabit it (Fairhead and Leach 1997; Seeland 1997; Wessing 1999). Such perceptions, which are not necessarily the same for all people (Wessing 1994), nevertheless inform local people's interactions with their natural environment and the shaping of their landscapes, especially in traditional societies (Osemeobo 1994; Trefon 1994). Furthermore these perceptions frequently impose, on individual members of such societies, fear and reverence for traditional leaders and the gerontocracy, based on belief in a connection between these authorities and the spirits linked to their in-depth knowledge of the landscape (Osemeobo 1994). Therefore, in settings such as the Ghanaian villages of Bofie and Dotobaa on which this article focuses, changes in local perceptions may help in explaining both transformations of landscape, and changes in – in this case erosion of – the authority of traditional leaders.

## 2 *Tumi* in the landscape of Bofie and Dotobaa

Bofie and Dotobaa are located in the forest-savanna transition of the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana, within Wenchi and Nkoranza districts respectively (Figure 1). The rich traditions and history of Bofie are as part of the Banda traditional area (Owusu 1976; Boachie-Ansah 1986). Dotobaa is linked with the once powerful Nkoranza Empire (Arhin 1979). Both communities may be associated with the rich ancient traditions of central Ghana, which Stahl (1993) describes in her discourse on the archaeology of central Ghana ('Kintampo Complex'): 'a people with a heritage rich in ceramics, ornaments, trade and agricultural intensification'. Local oral accounts emphasise a dynamic ecological history in which forests have played a significant role in shaping local social, cultural and economic conditions (Sarfo-Mensah 2001). In this discussion, I will give a brief account

# Is 'Tumi' in the Sacred Grove Really Gone?

## *Local Interpretations of Changes in the Landscape of the Forest-Savanna Transition in Ghana*

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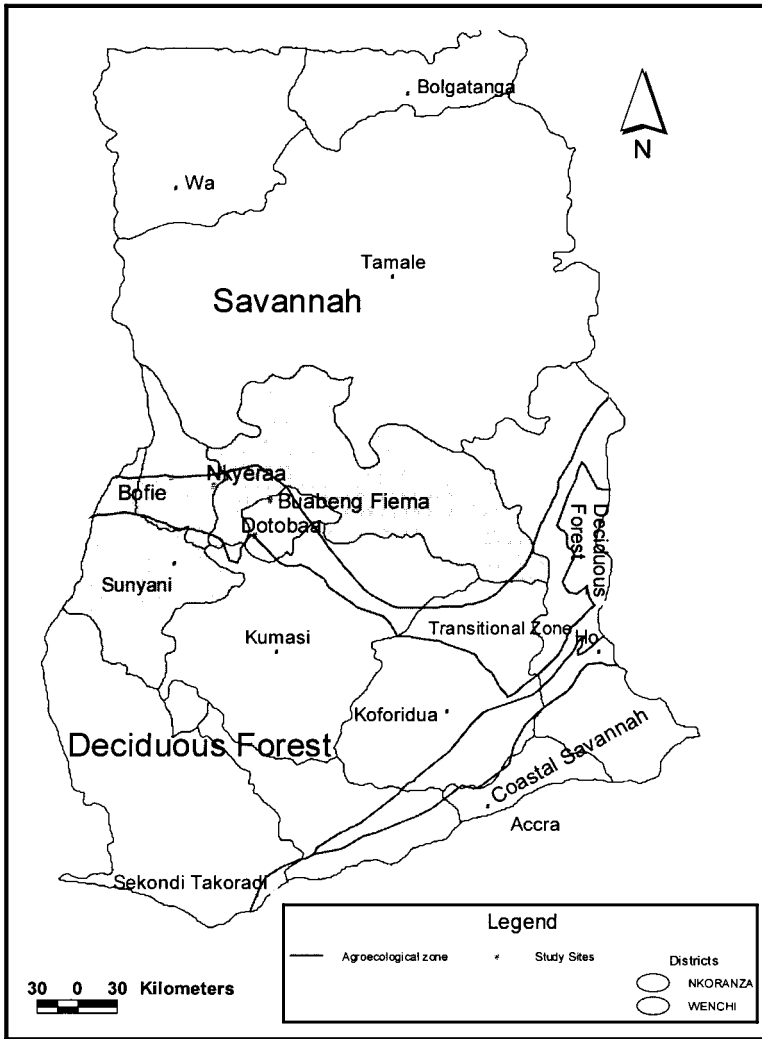


Figure 1: The Agroecological zones of Ghana and the locations of Bofie and Dotobaa

of local beliefs and perceptions around natural resources, focusing especially on the notion of *tumi* and the complex relationships this has fostered between the forest landscape and society in Bofie and Dotobaa.

Amongst the people of Bofie and Dotobaa, the spirituality of natural resources, such as soils, trees, forests, rivers, rocks and animals is attributed to their 'supernatural powers' or *tumi*. As an inherent spiritual power, *tumi* is suffused in natural resources by *Onyame*, the Supreme Creator Deity (McLeod 1981; McCaskie 1995). It is also part of

the wider local cosmology that *Onyame* created the universe and impregnated it with his power, which can be accessed by those who have knowledge of it (Akyeampong and Obeng 1995).

In local cosmology, *tumi* (also called *ndele* in the Nafana language of Bofie) in the natural environment imputes spirit or *sunsum* (*gyanga* in Nafana) to natural resources. *Tumi* is also associated with belief in a 'life force' or *sasa*, which trees and animals possess. *Sasa* is considered as the equivalent of *hra* (soul) (Rattray 1923; Frazer 1926; McLeod 1981; McCaskie 1995; Chamlee-Wright 1997).

There are two categories of *sasa*: resources which are believed to be vindictive are considered to be replete with *sasa eduru*, while others – considered comparatively harmless and negligible with no power for evil – have *sasa ehare* (McCaskie 1995).

The belief that certain other supernatural beings and spirits in the landscape have the capacity to imbue natural resources with *tumi* is central to local mythical representations of the natural environment. Local folklore emphasises the existence of dwarfs (*mootia*, also known as *jina* in Nafana) and *sasabonsam* (a hairy monster which lived on tall and large trees) in the landscape, especially in forest (McLeod 1981; McCaskie 1995; Abbiw 1990; Falconer 1992). Forests, rivers and rocky areas, which are associated with these creatures, are imbued with *tumi*. Such areas are hardly entered by ordinary people, except by certain hunters and other people considered to have *tumi*. According to elderly informants in Bofie and Dotobaa, *sasabonsam* may no longer exist, because forest and tall trees have been cleared for farming and settlement. However, it is believed that *mootia* are still present in the landscape, associated with forest patches as well as remote savanna and rocky areas.

Local people's understanding that other beings in the landscape possess their own spiritual principles has engendered relations of protection, seduction, hostility, alliance and exchange of services (Descola 1992). Until the advent of Christianity and Islam, local people's interaction with the natural environment, social interactions, political structure and authority – as well as social cohesion and control – were underlined by the belief in *tumi*.

### 3 *Tumi* and gerontocracy

I wish *mootia* and *sasabonsam* still existed in most parts of the landscape to put fear into the youth so that they would respect and fear the elders. It is unfortunate that most of these spirits have receded from our environment. (Nana Kwame Asamoah pers. comm.)

This apparent reminiscence of the past predominance of spiritual beings emphasises the connection between traditional leaders and spirits in the landscape (Osemeobo 1994). It confirms the local belief that *tumi* could be accessed from the

natural environment, as a basis for the reverence and awesome recognition (*suro*) of chiefs and elders. In West Africa, this belief enhanced the power of chieftaincy as an institution and enabled traditional leaders to ensure local people's ethical use and sustainable management of natural resources (Lebbie and Freudenberger 1996; Warren and Pinkington 1997). The deep knowledge claimed by local chiefs, elders and spiritual leaders of the spiritual and mythical dimensions of the environment projected them as having special relationships with animate, inanimate and spiritual beings in the landscape. Traditional leaders were perceived by other community members as capable of manipulating the *tumi* of such beings to punish social deviants. This underscores the observation that humans and non-humans may develop relationships based on mutual reciprocity, need and care for the existential and reproductive needs of each other (Descola 1992; Mauzé 1998). Thus, local chiefs and elders derived *tumi* from the landscape; this enhanced respect and fear for them, which they in turn used to protect nature and to ensure social harmony.

Although in the societies of Bofie and Dotobaa, *tumi* is particularly associated with male elders, this does not imply that other members of society, such as women and juniors, cannot access it. Rather, women and juniors may also be spiritually powerful, for example in the domains of traditional priesthood (*akomfo*) and witchcraft (*bayie*), which are also associated with *tumi*. Thus *tumi* is not restricted to any particular group.

### 4 *Tumi*, sacred groves, and landscape shaping in Bofie and Dotobaa

In Bofie and Dotobaa, *nsamanpow* (burial grounds), *mpaninpow* (ancestral burial grounds), *amanfooso* (abandoned settlements or places where ancestors were believed to have settled) are believed to contain *sunsum* (spirits) of the ancestors or the dead. Similarly, *abosompow* (designated areas of local gods) contain their spirits. These sites have been referred to as 'sacred groves' (Rattray 1923; Dorm Azorbu *et al.* 1991; Ntiamao-Baidu 1995). Local key words used to describe these areas include *ehohu* ('frightening'), *ehoyedinn* ('quiet and serene'), *ehoyesum* ('it is a dark place'), *empe efi* ('such areas should not be profaned'), and

*mipahumu biara nkoho* ('those without *tumi* or unauthorised, go there at their own peril'). Such sites are used for *mmusuyi* (rituals), *apaye* (prayers and libation pouring), initiations and other religious purposes. In this context, it is no surprise that such areas, usually forest surrounding the village or abutting it, are qualified with the word 'sacred' (Rattray 1923: 122).

#### 4.1 Asuonyima sacred grove and spiritual pond of Dotobaa

The grove was part of a vast forest, which was several hundreds of hectares, but has been reduced in size over the years to about eight hectares within the close proximity of the sacred pond (Nana Dotobaahene pers. comm.). Ancestors of the village are believed to have entered into a spiritual pact with Asuonyima for protection, after oracles revealed that the pond was *asubosom* (river deity). According to the local chief, their ancestors marvelled at the perennial nature of the pond during extreme drought when all big rivers in the area dried up. He emphasised that the oracle also revealed to their ancestors that the *sunsum* (spirit) of the pond did not like people to live close by because of *efi*, so they moved to their present settlement. According to the chief, *efi* is all forms of waste and filth associated with human habitation including those with spiritual connotation such as menstruating women and adulterous people. The pact enjoined local people to comply with the demand that the pond and its environs be avoided (except village elders and traditional priests), especially for farming, but established that for the regular performance of rituals and conciliation, protection and prosperity would be provided by the deity. For example, local folklore indicates that, in the past, gold could be collected from the pond on special occasions. Asuonyima, literally 'the water that gives', derives from this. Although this will not be discussed here, it is worth noting that gold is believed to be a source of *tumi* and associated with several gods in southern Ghana (McLeod 1981).

Local memories also indicate that, in the past, the sacred pond and its environs was vast, dense and dark forest, which was inhabited by *mmoatia*, elephants, lions and other wild animals that made it a fearful place to enter. It was only village elders

who went into the forest to offer prayers and offering to Asuonyima. The fear for the place in the past is captured in the words of an elderly informant that:

The forest was feared and revered by all in the past. Nobody farmed, collected firewood or hunted in it. Those who did were often made to lose their direction by *mmoatia* and roamed in the forest for hours until Asuonyima set them free after he was satisfied that a lesson has been learnt (Nana Owusu pers. comm.).

Sundays, which are *dabene* (taboo days) for Asuonyima (the deity roams the land), were particularly revered. The fetching of water from the pond or streams in the forest and farming in adjacent lands were forbidden. Those who disregarded these restrictions could suffer various forms of retributions from Asuonyima and the *mmoatia*. In 1987, a logger who clandestinely went to log in the sacred grove on a Sunday was brutally 'assaulted' by bees and chased out of the forest. Surprisingly, he could not find his axe, which he had left close by. Fearing further retribution of the spirits, he reported the episode to the village chief and elders who conciliated Asuonyima. Commenting on the incident, an informant indicated:

But now these powers have waned even though people still fear and revere Asuonyima. Disbelief by the people has eroded the *tumi* in the forest and subsequently the *tumi* of Asuonyima has been affected (Nana Owusu pers. comm.).

The degradation of the sacred grove, although believed to have been started by bush fires, has accelerated, due to opportunistic farming. According to informants, bush fires have caused the forest to lose its canopy and darkness (*esum*), which in the local cosmology engenders *suro* (fear/reverence) and enhances the spirituality of forest (McLeod 1981; Abbiw 1990). Thus, increased human activities in the forest were facilitated, resulting in a vicious cycle of bush fires and the further expansion of farming and other human activities. Much of the forest has been cleared, except for a small patch containing the shrine (*asoneyeso*) of Asuonyima and the sacred pond.

#### 4.2 Bofie sacred grove (Ghonno) and Jinatra

Bofie sacred grove is estimated by local people to be 1.0 km<sup>2</sup>. It is considered as the abode of both ancestral spirits and *abosom* (local deities or gods). Local oral history indicates that the area was previously an ancestral settlement, *amanfooso*. Local people hold the view that because their ancestors were buried there, their spirits still live in the forest, and the area must not be disturbed. The grove, or *Ghonno tra*, as it is known locally, is also the abode of Kramo (rain god) and Chin, a river deity. Annual rituals are still performed by village elders to Kramo and Chin for rain and protection, respectively.

According to the chief of the village, the original settlement (*amanfooso*) which forms the sacred grove was abandoned by their ancestors for the present settlement about 100 years ago. One of the reasons for their ancestral departure was related to the frequent flooding of the River Chin, which was then very close to the settlement. Another narrative is that an adjoining forest to the settlement, known locally as *Jina tra* (or dwarf-land) was inhabited by dwarfs, spiritually powerful beings, which were considered by the elders as too risky to live close to. They also believed that a two-headed python, which was a spiritual collaborator of the dwarfs, inhabited the forest. Local stories indicate that the python was believed to be able to metamorphose into a human giant whose form was so frightening that not even hunters could enter that forest. It is believed that these beings abhorred noise and farming close to them, so the ancestors decided to leave the place. Evidence of past habitation of *Ghonno* includes cooking pots and other household items. Also, remnants of some buildings can be found in the site.

Farming in the *Ghonno tra* was stopped about 40 years ago. One school of thought attributes cessation of farming in the area to the increase in the population of livestock in the community. It was explained that everybody (or at least a relation) has some livestock (especially sheep, goats and cattle). Due to the increasing population of the animals, which are mainly grazed in the area, it became impossible to crop there. The village chief and elders insisted that they caused farming to be stopped in the area, because of the reverence for

the ancestral spirits and Kramo that dwell in the area. Farming was also stopped to protect river Chin and other spirits that were believed to inhabit the area. The elders intimated that even when they were farming in the area, certain pockets were not cropped; the area around Kramo, the corridor along the River Chin, and the vicinity adjoining the burial grounds of their ancestors, *nsamanpow*, were not used for farming. Grazing was permitted in the area during the dry season. In Ghana, these practices, especially river corridor management, were used to protect vital water sources (Ntiamao-Baidu 1995; Abayie Boateng 1998; Appiah-Opoku and Hyma 1999).

Thus, local people attributed the regeneration of the forest to both anthropogenic and biophysical factors. It was mentioned that, when the area was abandoned as human habitation, the greater part of it was *esere* (grassland) and *mpe* (a transition between *esere* and secondary forest re-growth). There is also the conception that the pile of refuse (human waste) from past human habitation has facilitated regeneration of forest in the area. Wind dispersal of several tree species has also contributed to this. Orchards of mangoes in the grove were described as signs of past interaction with the forest indicating areas where they sat and ate fruits. Although there is little pressure on the community lands – by contrast to Dotobaa – to compel the local people to use the sacred grove, there are some who feel nostalgic about the fact that it was in the area that they cropped staples such as cocoyam and plantain, which do not do well on other community lands. This may in future threaten the sacred grove. For example, a Moslem has clandestinely maintained a farm for these crops in the grove for about two farming seasons. The chief and elders, who only found out recently, have asked him to stop farming in the area.

Local elders indicated that, until recently, when Islam and Christianity have changed the beliefs of most people in the community, the *jina tra* was also not farmed because of fear of retribution from the dwarfs and other spirits that were believed to inhabit the area. The village chief intimated that the spirits would allow prospective farmers to prepare the land, but the farmer would either fall sick or some misfortune would befall him or her. This would prevent the person concerned from

continuing to farm. Therefore, at best one could plant crops but would not live to harvest them. The chief indicated that the elders would love to have these spirits in the area, to put fear into youths, so that they would have respect and fear (*suro*) for what the elders tell them. He said, 'But it is unfortunate that these spirits do not exist in the area any longer'. He explained that the advent of Christianity and Islam had driven away the dwarfs and the spirits. Some indigenous people also came to believe that the spirits did not like, e.g. the lights of hunters, which were continuously used in the area. Generally, the local people believe that the dwarfs have vacated the area.

## 5 Is *tumi* in the sacred grove really gone?

These local oral narratives suggest that, in the past, *tumi* provided a powerful medium, which enhanced the authority, respect and fear of the local gerontocracy. Belief in *tumi* was manipulated to shape the landscape. *Tumi* of the spirits and gods that existed in the landscape, particularly in the forest and designated areas, such as sacred groves, as noted in other parts of Africa (Castro 1990; Lebbie and Freudenberger 1996), made it risky to exploit resources in these areas. The gods and other supernatural beings in the forests were considered vindictive and abhorred the presence of ordinary men, except those who have established relationships with them, including the local chiefs and elders. This may suggest an implicit exclusion, perhaps, comparable to the modern protected area management regimes. Therefore, it may be implied that the local belief in *tumi* served the agenda of local chiefs and elders. As noted above, local elders indicated that they wished that the spirits in the landscape were predominant as it was in the past so that the young would respect and fear the elderly and stop the degradation of natural resources, including the sacred groves. Lebbie and Freudenberger (1996) have noted similar relationship between fear of the mythical and spiritual forces in sacred groves and respect for the elderly in Moyombo district of the Sierra Leone. They warned about the disappearance of some traditional animist beliefs, which are necessary for the survival of sacred forests. Similar observations have been made by Castro (1990) about the destruction of sacred forests on the slopes of Mount Kenya.

Thus, belief in *tumi* suffused in the natural environment by *Onyame* may be conceived as central to the survival of the sacred groves and the shaping of the landscapes in Dotobaa and Bofie. But oral history in the communities suggests that the powerful forces in the forest are gone or have receded. But is the *tumi* or spiritual force in the forest really gone? An opinion survey conducted by the author in Bofie and Dotobaa and in two other communities that also have sacred groves (Nchiraa and Buabeng Fiema), suggested that most local people still believe in the existence of *tumi* in the landscape. However, local perceptions and attitudes towards *tumi* are changing. For example, some Christian informants considered the exploitation of sacred groves for farming, which have led to their decimation, as a 'victory' over the evil spirits that reside in the groves.

Local narratives as noted elsewhere (Ntiamao-Baidu 1995; Wessing 1999), suggest that Christianity and Islam are to blame for the changes in the local cosmological landscape. But it will be simplistic to attribute this change to only Christianity and Islam. The situation is more complex than that, because most converts of the Christian and Islam faith in the communities, as elsewhere in Ghana (Chamlee-Wright 1997), are syncretic. Also, the traditional practices did not ensure stringent order and some of their intrinsic values were inimical to society (Leff 1985). Most traditional practices are also dynamic (Ghai 1994). Thus, Christianity and Islam might have only facilitated a rapid change in the perceptions of the spiritual and mythical representations in the landscape, and the erosion of the authority of local traditional leaders and gerontocracy. It was observed in the settlements that whilst changes in ecological, demographic and economic conditions have driven the need to over-exploit natural resources including sacred groves, changes in religious beliefs have been used to justify such actions.

The threat to the sacred groves of Dotobaa and Bofie and other parts of the transitional zone may lie in this complex interaction. The area is experiencing tremendous influx of migrants from other parts of Ghana, especially from the north (Amanor 1994). There are few livelihood opportunities that are less dependent on the land, forest and tree resources. There have been

tremendous changes in the farming systems in the area with increasing tendency towards modernisation and commercialisation (Sarris and Shams 1991) resulting in excessive population-related land pressures. Thus, with this potent opposite force of 'need to survive', Christianity and Islam, as noted above, might have facilitated the inherent desire to get over the fear of the *tumi*. And as noted by Wessing (1999) amongst the Sundanese of Indonesia:

Modern enterprise and tremendous growth of population leading to an enormous demand for land have proven stronger than fear of spirits...

## 6 Conclusion

The belief in *tumi*, the inherent spiritual potency and power, which is suffused in natural resources

by *Onyame* (God) (McLeod 1981), still underlies local construction of the forest landscape in Bofie and Dotobaa. Sacred groves are derivatives of these representations. However, local beliefs in traditional representations of the natural environment are changing, and the awesome reverence and fear (*suro*) for *tumi*, which enhanced the sustainable use and management of natural resources, including sacred groves, is eroding. The fear and respect of traditional chiefs and elders is also diminishing. The survival of sacred groves and the general protection of the landscape in the transitional zone and other parts of Ghana and the sub-region of West Africa must be approached more holistically. Policy-makers must reappraise rural development strategies and adopt approaches that emphasise environmental education, and the creation of more livelihood opportunities, which are less dependent on tree and forest resources.

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