

## 1 Introduction

Sacred groves are ubiquitous features of coastal Ghana. They are not surviving patches of a pristine tropical forest degraded by human activities, but were created and modelled by people. As such, they are both historical markers and archaeological indicators, for they often stand on past burial grounds and abandoned settlements. My objective in this article is to reflect on a set of preliminary ethnographic and historical evidence concerning the processes that led to the formation and conservation of sacred groves. In particular, I seek to provide an interpretative framework to examine such processes in the light of long-term regional socio-political dynamics.

Drawing on recent discussions about forested landscapes in West Africa (e.g. Fairhead and Leach 1996, 1998), and locating the Ghanaian evidence within West Africa more broadly, I hold that sacred groves are human artifacts and may be studied for their historical, symbolic and socio-political significance. In particular, this article argues that sacred groves were devices created to maintain social order by managing conflict and protecting society from a range of threats.

## 2 Sacred groves in history: formative processes and memory

In coastal Ghana, fieldwork conducted at Nsadwer, a village located about 4 miles west of Elmina, suggests that abandoned settlements and cemeteries are often covered by patches of forest of various sizes and ecologies (Chouin 1998). Regulated access to these places, through customary rules defined and enforced by chiefs and elders, also provides communities with non-timber forest products, especially pharmaceutical ones.

These patches of forest, referred to as 'sacred' or 'fetish' groves in social science literature, are recognised by local communities as dwelling places of spiritual beings, either *abosom* or *asamanfo*. Among the inhabitants of coastal Ghana, 'the Supreme Being, the deities, and the ancestors are spiritual entities' (Gyekye 1987: 69). *Onyankopon* or *Onyame*, the Supreme Being, is seen as withdrawn from the human world, so 'belief and ritual were focused instead on the *abosom* [the deities], who were conventionally understood as manifestations,

# Sacred Groves in History:

## *Pathways to the Social Shaping of Forest Landscapes in Coastal Ghana*

G rard Chouin

messengers, or 'children' of *Onyame*' (McCaskie 1990: 139). *Asamanfo* are departed spirits.

In forested West Africa there are recurrent spatial correlations between sacred groves and past settlements, and I give evidence for these later. However, this correlation is not ubiquitous, and as the article goes on to show, this requires reflection concerning the historical nature of sacred groves and their processes of formation.

## 2.1 Sacred groves and past settlements: some evidence from West Africa

Social scientists working in West Africa have sometimes recorded the association between old settlement sites and sacred groves. As early as 1923, for example, the British anthropologist Rattray identified a major archaeological site next to the sacred grove of Asantemanso. Located about 20 miles south of Kumasi, the place was presented by the Ashanti as the spot where 'the first human beings ... came forth from the ground' (Rattray 1923: 121). Recent excavations by Peter Shinnie and Brian Vivian have confirmed the importance of Asantemanso to the understanding of long-term human occupation in the forest area of Ghana. Several overlapping settlements have been discovered and dates provided by charcoal remains suggest that the site was founded circa 800 AD. (Shinnie 1988a; Shinnie and Vivian 1991).

In 1964, Davies first reported using patches of forest to identify settlement sites in Ghana: 'I have picked up from clumps of forest in orchard-bush village-sites which were probably abandoned in the XVIIIth century, in the Afram Plains, the Mo Plains, the Davi valley and near Kete Krachi' (Davies 1964: 29). Besides forest patches, he also mentioned other vegetal indicators of human settlements such as oil-palms, grassland in forest and baobabs.

Overall, a growing body of documented evidence, gathered throughout the forest zone of West Africa, shows a strong correlation between past settlement sites and the occurrence of groves. For example, in her remarkable historical study conducted in the 1970s among the Anyi-Ndenye in modern Côte d'Ivoire, Perrot remarked that:

...the old settlements are not cultivated. No one has the right to make a plantation or even to

hunt there. For some time, the old cemetery, and in particular the royal cemetery, continued to be used, in spite of the distance that separated it from the new village. These places, recolonised by the forest, are worth being seen... (Perrot 1982: 22, my translation).

Kõnvi Ande, one of the villages founded by the Ndenye during their migration, is a good example of the archaeological potential offered by such sites (Perrot 1982: 50, 54–6). In Benin, Juhé-Beaulaton noted the exact same process: 'An old settlement, abandoned for historical reasons, is respected because ancestors are buried there' (Juhé-Beaulaton 1999: 111, my translation). Togodo, first capital of the Allada kings; Savi, capital of the kingdom of Whydah conquered by Abomey in 1727, and many other abandoned historic settlements of Ghana's pre-colonial Slave Coast are still embodied in the landscape by such groves (Juhé-Beaulaton 1999: 109–12, Fairhead and Leach 1998: 105–06).

Much evidence attests that the spatial correlation between old settlement sites and/or cemeteries and the existence of sacred groves is no coincidence. Old settlements were frequently turned into burial grounds and gradually colonised by forest. The sacredness of the site, in this case, came from its association with the mortal remains of important ancestors and, consequently, its role as a territorial marker for leading lineages. We will return below to the close relationship between power, territoriality and sacred groves.

Such a correlation is not ubiquitous, however: not all sacred groves are associated with archaeological sites and conversely, not all archaeological sites are signaled by a sacred grove. This suggests that different historical processes might have led to the formation of similar anthropic environments.

## 2.2 Sacred groves between processes and 'Lieux de Mémoire'

While a complex chain of ecological processes can account for the formation of a forested landscape, its consecration as a spiritual device is a historical event that induces the conversion of the forest from a natural to a social entity: a sacred grove. In this process, members of a community identify a specific area in the landscape as a point of contact

between the invisible and the human worlds, and establish a ritualised alliance with spiritual entities that were dwelling there. This process, which can be seen to draw a patch of landscape away from the realm of natural history and marks its entrance into a realm of human history, cannot be described in ecological terms alone.

In her recent discussion of sacred groves in Bénin, Juhé-Beaulaton (1999: 107–14) adopted the distinction between ‘created groves’ (*bois créés*) and ‘pre-existing groves’ (*bois préexistants*). Such a typological distinction suggests the existence of different processes leading to the creation of a sacred grove but does not investigate the underlying complexity. In contrast, a survey of the Nsadwer sacred groves (Chouin 1998) suggested four categories:

- 1 Groves ‘discovered’ during the clearing of new agricultural lands (often in the case of a newly created or expanding settlement)
- 1 Groves used for ritual purposed by a particular group within the community
- 1 Groves associated with a specific trauma (a battle for example), which revealed the sacred character of the forest to the community
- 1 Groves used as burial grounds.

The four processes were not neatly bounded, however, and some of the Nsadwer forests could clearly have resulted from several processes in combination. Furthermore, while this categorisation provided a useful insight in the complexity of the phenomena at work, it suffered from failing properly to mirror local categories of thought. In southern Ghana, people differentiate between *asamanpow* – groves associated with burial places and seen as the habitat of departed spirits – and *abosompow* – groves seen as the habitat of ‘spiritual powers inhering in nature’ (McCaskie 1990: 135). Such a distinction fits the earlier observation that only a limited number of sacred groves are associated with archaeological remains and that these are generally related to burial grounds. A revised typology, then, would distinguish between: (1) sacred groves associated with burial grounds (and fortuitously with old settlements), and (2)

sacred groves associated with ‘nature spirits’, showing no archaeological remains other than those eventually produced by ritual practices. Further, it would be useful to distinguish between *process of creation* (why and how a particular sacred grove was established) and *process of usage* (how the forest was reinterpreted and used through time).

A central question in archaeology concerns the validity of a causal relationship between material or landscape features and past events: if very different historical processes, such as those listed above, are in effect producing the same phenomena, how can we infer the past from the latter? In the case of treating sacred groves as significant artifacts that can contribute to our understanding of the past, it is clear that we are far from meeting the criteria of a positivist history. However, I am less concerned with establishing micro-historical, causal explanations than with showing that an existing landscape has been crafted by a complex, multi-vocal and intertwined array of historical, ecological and socio-political factors. At the least, beyond the different processes that produced (processes of creation) and conserved (processes of usage) sacred groves, there is a common mechanism at work: the making of memory. I suggest that looking at sacred groves as *Lieux de Mémoire*, ‘places of memory’, would allow a series of dialogic correspondences between history, memory and material remains to be established.

The concept of *Lieux de Mémoire* has been the nexus of one of the most creative historical pursuits of the last two decades of the twentieth century, in France. First explored by Pierre Nora in the early 1980s, the *lieux* included not only geographical spaces but also a variety of mnemonic devices such as symbolic artifacts or even words or concepts. Thinking in terms of *lieux de mémoire* meant treating memory as representing a complex amalgam of strategies rather than as a simple mirror of the past (Nora 1984: viii). A distinction was made between the ‘recomposed memory’, which remains dynamic, and the ‘persistent memory’, which definitively belongs to the past. For Nora, the recomposed memory, a dynamic and living force constantly reinterpreting the past in the light of the present, is opposed to history, the intellectual reconstruction of the past. As Moniot

has noted recently, Nora's work is inspired by French historical specificities, creating difficulties in transposing the body of work around *lieux de mémoire* in entirety to any other setting (Moniot 1999: 13). Nevertheless, the variety of innovative concepts and ideas it contains could fruitfully inspire work on the tropics. The method, for example, of grounding historical accounts on petty objects, 'trifles of history', can assist in ascertaining the different realities existing at different scales (Moniot 1999: 17). Sacred groves can usefully be seen as such objects, dispersed but crucial evidence of the past. Conceptualising sacred groves as *lieux de mémoire* allows one to explore – beyond the diversity of formation processes – an overall process of memorisation that gives cultural meaning to natural phenomena.

In insisting on the dynamics of memory, the concept of *lieux de mémoire* also emphasises that the landscape should be interpreted both as a diachronic accumulation of memorial sediments extending deep into the past, and as a synchronic construction that reshapes a heritage into a present reality. This awareness is central to a better contextualisation of oral and archaeological material, as the following example illustrates. In July 1910, the chiefs of the Eguafó Traditional Area, on one side, and Louis Ferguson Gowans of the Royal Colonial Institute of London, on the other, signed an indenture that gave the latter the right to cut timber and conduct mining activities on a hill called 'Doopau'.<sup>1</sup> This document came as a surprise to me: in the 'Doopau', I easily recognised a wooded hill that I knew as one of the most sacred places in Eguafó. At the time, in 1995, I had not yet been allowed to enter this place which was associated with the mythical origins of the state. There was a striking contradiction between today's attitudes and what the documents revealed: while the indenture suggested that by the first decade of the twentieth century the hill had lost its ritual significance, my experience proved it was considered sacred in the 1990s. The concept of *lieux de mémoire* enables us to reflect upon this apparent contradiction. The indenture has to be placed in the context of the process of culture change occurring after the imposition of colonial rule. The sacred character of the place as I noticed it in the 1990s was probably more the resonance of a reaction to the cultural disintegration associated

with the colonial period, than the result of a harmonious and undisturbed spiritual continuity with a pre-colonial practice.

### 3 Sacred groves, social control and the ritual order

#### 3.1 The sacred in history

The concept of 'sacred' in anthropology is still dominated by Durkheim's definition in his *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912). Some of the characteristics of the sacred which he identified are relevant to our discussion of groves, such as the clear separation between the sphere of the profane – the realm of everyday practices – and the sphere of the sacred – the area that pertains to the invisible. The planting of *Dracaena arborea*, a boundary tree, on the edges of sacred groves, reinforces this separation, which is already often marked by the difference in vegetation between the groves and the surrounding fields (Juhé-Beaulaton 1994: 163; Polet 1983). The separation is further enforced by a series of rules that control access and behaviour. Indeed, as suggested by Durkheim, the positive interaction between the deities and the community is based on mutual respect, a virtual contract of alliance guaranteed by prohibitions and ritual observances.

Also worth considering is Durkheim's proposition that no object is intrinsically sacred but becomes so by virtue of human action. Pettazzoni echoed this observation in stating that: 'in fact, it is people who always create their ideal world. It is not the extra-human world that creates the human world' (Massenzio 1999: 20, my translation).<sup>2</sup> While Pettazzoni's work contains problematic functionalist and deterministic assumptions, his idea of the subordination of the sacred to the profane is useful in interpreting sacred groves. Indeed, the abandonment of a village, or the planting of a founding tree marking a new settlement, a battle or a disease, all mundane events, are the starting points in the process of grove formation.

While the creation of a sacred grove follows specific historical events, the rituals that embody their sacredness are usefully understood as *lieux de mémoire*. As time goes on, the grove erases history but recycles memory. Long after the precise chain

of events that gave birth to a sacred grove is forgotten, ritual activities are still carried on and form potential sources of history. Such an observation is partially derived from Perrot's argument that cults and rituals are *conservatoires* of the past (see, e.g. Perrot 1993).

Beyond the historical and memorial nature of the sacred, we also have to consider its social function. In his *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Rappaport wrote: '...it is in the nature of religion to fabricate the world, the True World upon which the truths of symbols and the convictions that they establish stand' (1999: 21). Indeed, the sacred is primarily related to the concept of truth. In that regard, the philosophical approach to rituals developed by Kwame Appiah (1992) is helpful. Discussing Horton's ideas about traditional religion, Appiah notes that 'traditional religious actions are reasonable attempts ... at prediction and control of the world' (Appiah 1992: 121). Thus, in this context, sacred groves have been created as an answer (or solution) to a question (or problem) about the meaning of events: Why did this happen? Why did that person die? They are the products of a strategy aiming at explaining the world. It follows that whichever social groups control the groves and their rituals, also have control over the production of truth and, ultimately, over power. This suggests that sacred groves are artifacts of societies where elite groups have struggled to concentrate 'the sacred' in particular places that they controlled.

### 3.2 Predicting and controlling: sacred groves, power and the ritual order

At this point in the discussion, it is necessary to return to the basic typology of sacred groves as characterised by their association, or not, with burial grounds. In Southern Ghana, sacred groves are often associated with ruined settlements that have been politically significant in the past. This is the case at Eguafo, where the Dumpo probably covers the ruins of Acomani (the 'Acomani Grande' of the Portuguese sources), the early capital of the Eguafo kingdom. At Efutu, the old capital of another early coastal kingdom, a prominent sacred grove significantly covers the remains of an old palace. At Asantemanso, the most sacred forest of Ashanti coincides with this site, which is the presumed cradle of the Ashanti nation. Many further examples

could be given, but the basic point is that the geography of sacred groves associated with archaeological sites closely matches the geography of precolonial power. By contrast, abandoned settlements presented today as the dwelling places of slaves, such as Abonquah, in the north-west of Eguafo, are not marked by the presence of sacred groves. The association of sacred groves with sources of power suggests that they might have been exclusively produced and used by dominant social groups to claim their rights to land but also, as suggested above, to predict and control the world.

Historical sources are available to help assess this hypothesis. Seventeenth and eighteenth century travel accounts on the coast of Guinea include material that allows a partial reconstitution of the social organisation of pre-colonial coastal societies. As far as sacred groves are concerned, however, detailed information is extremely scarce in these accounts. Most Europeans were not able to make direct observations and the information that they gathered through informants – in conditions not conducive to genuine dialogue about African religion – was very limited. Most of the references to sacred groves found in European writings are therefore mere products of the misinterpretation of scarce data in the light of cultural assumptions. Among a few exceptions is a short passage in Willhem Bosman's account, which suggests that, in the early eighteenth century Gold Coast, access to ritual practice in sacred groves was restricted to the leading class: 'Almost every village hath a small appropriated grove, where the governours and chief people frequently repair to make their offerings; either for the publick good, or for themselves' (Bosman (1705) 1967: 154).

Further, the first known mention of the practice of divination in sacred groves concerned the Slave Coast and is concealed in an anonymous French manuscript written after 1708.<sup>3</sup> A study by McCaskie (1990) centred on Nananom Mpow (literally 'the grove of the elders'), a sacred grove at Mankessim, the spiritual capital of the coastal Fanti, showed that very similar divinatory activities were taking place on the Gold Coast at the same period. Here, the grove was said to cover the burial sites of three historic leaders of the Fanti Borbor migration to the coast, probably in the second half of the fifteenth century. In this case, an ancestral cult

seems to have been promoted to the status of a public cult through the superimposition of an *obosom*, a pristine deity, on the same site. Nananom Mpow was therefore at the same time an *asamanpow* and an *obosompow*. Via the priest – the *akomfo* – ‘the *obosom* proposed solutions, offered advice, issued warning, and made predictions’ (McCaskie 1990: 139). Using the ‘indirect, ambiguous voice of analogy and parable’ (McCaskie 1990: 140) Nananom Mpow of Mankessim delivered oracles to individuals, to communities and also to the Mfantseman, the Fanti confederation, advocating for peace or war or judging adultery cases. The sacred grove of Mankessim thus provides a perfect illustration of the use of rituals by a highly influential clergy to predict and control the world. Clearly, not all sacred groves played such an influential role, but at a more modest scale and at a local level, their dense network served overall to manage conflict, secure social order and reproduce patterns of social domination.

Interestingly, the invisible world of the *obosom* (spirits inhering in nature) presents a striking symmetry with the human world. Sacred groves are sometimes talked about as villages of which the *obosom* are chiefs. These *obosom* themselves are said to have a retinue analogous to the retinue of a chief including, for example, a linguist. Once recognised, the dwelling places of the *obosom* are humanised, i.e. made humanly understandable, and removed from the state of nature to be integrated into a state of culture: *obosom* are also anthropomorphic and have a gender. By extension, they belong to extended families and have spouses: Nana Dompò of Eguafo, for example, a male *obosom*, is said to be married to the female *obosom* that dwells in the sacred grove associated with the neighbouring village of Abrem Agona. Such geography of the *obosom*’s fictive kinship is also an echo of the importance of kinship as a symbolic medium that speaks of a hierarchical regional and political order. This geography of fictive kinship may materialise, for example, the political, historical or symbolic hierarchy between settlements or lineages, possibly revealing fossilised strategies of spatial domination or patterns of preferred matrimonial alliance.

### 3.3 Sacred groves, ritual order and conflict management

Finally, sacred groves can be understood as devices used in managing conflictual situations. Whether taking the form of socio-political, military, economic and/or demographic crises, conflicts were not understood only as problematic threats to processes of community growth, but also as spiritual messages in need of interpretation. The process of discovering the spiritual meaning of conflicts often led to the creation of a sacred grove. It follows that each sacred grove is a place of memory where old crises still resonate.

An interesting example is a forest called PerEm Enntum, which literally means, ‘cannon was not able’ (J.E.K. Aggrey, pers. comm., 1998). This forest seems to be linked with an event that happened just before Nsadwer was founded in the 1870s by a group of people from the neighbouring coastal settlement of Komenda. The group took refuge in the thick woods that then stretched beyond the seashore. The high trees protected them from the gunshots: ‘No one was hurt during our hiding in the forest... Our safety was attributed to the powers of the inhabiting god of this forest which cannons could not harm.’<sup>4</sup> The creation of PerEm Enntum can be interpreted as an attempt to make sense of a historical event that threatened the survival of a founding group of settlers.

Other similar instances concern two forests presented as having a vital role to play for the survival of the community. They are Atwerpow and Egyinagyina Nkwanta. Atwer is a corruption of *yEtwer*, ‘we lean,’ and Atwerpow literally means ‘we lean on the forest’. The spirit of Atwerpow is thought to protect the village from diseases: ‘It is a god which has the power [to] prevent any disease or epidemic coming to our town. We all depend upon him. Our souls are dependent on him’ (J.E.K. Aggrey, pers. comm., 1998). The same power is attributed to Egyinagyina Nkwanta, which literally means someone who stands at the crossroad: ‘when an epidemic is being brought in from outside, when a sickness is about to break out, he stands at the junction or entrance and can therefore prevent any bad sickness from entering’.<sup>5</sup> The informant was not specific about the nature of the diseases that could be prevented by the spirits, nor could he tell under which circumstances these beneficial gods were

discovered. It is likely, however, that these forests were created in reaction to threatening epidemics: smallpox, the most recurrent and deadly pandemic on the Gold Coast in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the influenza pandemics of 1891–1893 and of 1918–1919. Still at Nsadwer, another grove, Nana Abodei, is believed to shelter a spirit ‘capable of giving us children’ (J.E.K. Aggrey, pers. comm., 1998) while another, Akromapow, is known for having ‘helped our ancient people in wars. Akroma can perform wonders to prevent any attackers from invading us here. Enemies will be unable to enter Nsadwer’.<sup>6</sup> Although there are no direct links between precise and documented historical events and the groves, such oral traditions provide us with a vivid memory of the spiritual and psychological reactions of rural communities such as Nsadwer in the last third of the nineteenth century, when confronted with endemic wars and deadly epidemics, conflictual situations that regularly threatened demographic dynamics and social order.

## 4 Conclusions

Regional patterns of sacred groves are to be read as palimpsests. On the one hand, they mirror traces of old settlement patterns and, by extension, trade routes; on the other hand, as artifacts produced by people, they provide a window onto pre-colonial socio-political practices and dynamics.

In this article, I have argued that sacred groves, as anthropic creations, are historical in nature. The main challenge for the archaeologist is to go

beyond their synchronic appearance and to conceptualise them as dynamic objects that were born at different periods of time and to consider that the historical messages they carry have been constantly reinterpreted and re-crafted in the light of new events, new ideas and changing values. Here, I have adopted an approach based on two intertwined concepts: process of creation and process of usage. The process of creation refers to the chain of events that explain the creation of a grove. Oral traditions are the main analytic tools used to explore such a process, but archaeological investigations should also be pursued if the sacred grove stands on a burial ground and/or a settlement. The process of usage refers to both the cognitive and practical dynamics that have changed the meaning and role of sacred groves through time. It is in this respect that sacred groves are usefully treated as *lieux de mémoire*.

Bridging the memorialisation process with the concept of sacredness, this article has argued that the control of the groves by ruling groups enabled them to monopolise the production of truth and sustain their domination. Further study of networks of sacred groves is needed to set up a long-term sequence of the emergence and dynamics of such processes. The spatial analysis of sacred groves on a regional basis, together with the analysis of oral and written sources, ecological patterns and the careful archaeological excavation of a limited number of sites might provide a better understanding of the history and culture of dwellers of Southern Ghana during the last millennium.

## Notes

1. Cape Coast Regional Archives, ADM 23/1/262, doc. 50, Letter of Kofi Atta and Ali to the Provincial Commissioner, Cape Coast Castle, 24/06/1921. For reasons unknown to me, the concession was never exploited.
2. By his death in 1959, Pettazzoni had become the principal opponent to Eliade’s theory of the sacred as an autonomous ontological reality coinciding with an extra-temporal, mythic discourse of origins (see Massenzio 1999: 20–1).
3. Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer (CAOM), Xiii/memoire/75/104, anonymous 1691 (sic), ‘Relation du royaume de Judas en Guinée, de son gouvernement, des moeurs de ses habitans, de leur religion, et du négoce qui sy fait’, p. 54.

4. Field interview of Ebusupanyin Kofi Atta dated 18/06/1994, at Nsadwer and surrounding forests. Transcription and translation by Mr Ernest Quayson, Elmina.
5. Field interview of Kyeame Kojo Nketsia, dated 04/06/1994, at Nsadwer and surrounding forests. Direct translation into English by Mr Thomas Montford, Elmina.
6. Field interview of Ebusupanyin Kofi Atta dated 18/06/1994, at Nsadwer and surrounding forests. Transcription and translation by Mr Ernest Quayson, Elmina.

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