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Consequences of wooded shrine rituals on vegetation conservation in West Africa: A case study from the Bwaba cultural area (West Burkina Faso)

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Abstract: Anthropological contributions that challenge several common perceptions on sacred sites are still poorly taken into account in conservation and ecological studies. This paper aims at filling this gap and providing a better framework for biological studies. Local concepts of natural sacred sites and their ritual administration were studied and the ritual practices relating to the vegetation of these sites were analyzed in the Bwaba cultural area in West Burkina Faso. Our research shows that these ritual practices are much more diverse and fluid than might have been supposed. Protection "by tradition" is thus rather different from what we call conservation. While vegetation does matter, its presence on sacred sites is not essential. In addition, under certain circumstances, sacred sites may be transferred or reproduced elsewhere. Attention is drawn to the inadequacy of "sacred woods" as a category, in an ecological as well as an anthropological sense. The idea that wooded shrines are "endogenous nature conservatories" is disproved.

Keywords: sacred sites; ritual practices; vegetation conservation; Bwaba of Burkina Faso

Introduction: the need for a new look at “sacred woods”

The special vegetal formations called “sacred groves”, “sacred woods” or “sacred forests” have raised much debate and hope these last few decades in the field of conservation. As Sheridan (2009) stated for Africa, they are from now on thought of as a category with which a certain number of properties are associated. They are often rather hastily attributed the status of relics of an original vegetation or that of “endogenous” conservatories of biodiversity. Thus considered the support for local systems of natural resource management, they are supposed to be capable of reducing anthropic pressure, of making better use of natural resources, indeed of reforestation. However, in West Africa, the picture that emerges little by little from the increasing number of studies in the human sciences (Hagberg 2001, 2006, Liberski-Bagnoud 2002; Dugast 2006, several papers in Juhé-Beaulaton 2010...) casts serious doubt on such ideas. Even though more and more studies on vegetation try to integrate social data (Byers et al. 2001; Campbell 2005; Kokou et al. 2006, 2008, Kokou 2010, Guyer et al. 2007...), some reappraisal appears to be necessary.

The ecologist who questions the real justification for sacred woods in West Africa and who attempts to gain an understanding of the logic of the societies who have put them in place would be confronted, it is true, by the profusion of their forms, the complexity of their anthropology and the absence of an overall classification. The first steps towards providing guidance in this maze were taken by the anthropologist Michel Cartry (1993) who picked out two distinct types, then analyzed them by opposition: the great forests of initiation, most of them criss-crossed with footpaths and some harboring constructions, as opposed to groves of more modest size and with fewer traces of human presence, which are connected with territorial rituals. Danouta Liberski-

Danoud (2002) explored in detail the religious, social and territorial significance of this kind of sacred groves in a society of eastern Burkina Faso. Another approach was explored by Stéphan Dugast (2005, 2009, 2010) and a few others (notably Marie Daugey 2010 and Klaus Hamberger 2010), by exposing the coherent relationships of sacred sites to one another in the systems of thought of some other societies of the same larger cultural area. If much remains to be done in anthropology to clarify the vast domain of sacred woods, ecologists and conservationists can no longer ignore that what they perceive as a mechanism of protection against “anthropic pressure” is the product of a historical, political and economic context, the foundation of which is religious. It is always difficult to try to converge social and biological approaches, but in the case of sacred woods, a closer examination of practices related to their ritual administration can offer the articulation required. In effect, some of these practices, which are the translation into acts of a way of thinking, have repercussions on vegetation. Up to now, these practices relating to vegetation have not been the object of detailed studies. In ecological approaches, they are in general tacitly considered to be static systems that have been put in place for all time. Their meaning is only touched on and as for their variations, they are generally neglected as they are attributed to a simple erosion of “tradition”. Indications of these practices and their fluidity are certainly provided by studies in the human sciences (e.g. Chouin 2002, Daugey 2010 or Dugast 2010), but as their main intention is symbolic, the relationship to ecological dynamics has been very little explored.

The objective of the present article is to draw up a preliminary outline of those aspects of ritual practices that apply to the vegetation of sacred woods in a West African society and to assess the consequences in terms of the dynamics and conservation of vegetation. An outline of the general principles and the logic that presides over the establishment of sacred sites is provided, the ideas developed by this society on the role of the vegetation in place on some of them and on the rules to be applied to them are examined and discussed. The reflections proposed here aim at providing a more accurate portrayal of these special places and thus to contribute to ecological issues the framework which they lack. In the wake of the anthropologist Liberski-Bagnoud (2002, 2010: 62), we will use the terms of “wooded shrines”, thus setting the “sacred woods” in the wider context of shrines.

Land, people and method

Vegetation, land tenure and environmental trends

Bondoukuy region (11°51'N, 3°45'W) belongs to the phytogeographical sector of the South–North Sudanian transition in western Burkina Faso. This burned savanna landscape is today deeply altered and contrasts cultivated land (fields and fallows) with natural vegetation (“bush”) in protected areas, mostly the government-run forests. Research programs conducted since 1990 in the Bondoukuy region, mostly on fallow land (Floret et al. 2001) and in protected areas (Devineau et al. 2009), have provided data on both vegetation and agricultural practices, while anthropological studies on the Bwaba have also been carried out in the neighboring locality of Houndé (Dugast 2002, 2006, 2009). However, the role played by sacred sites in the vegetation dynamics of ecosystems has remained poorly explored.

Bwaba society and culture

The Bwaba, who occupy an area covering western Burkina Faso and eastern Mali (map), form the core of the population in Bondoukuy region, but Dafing, Mose and sedentary and nomadic

groups of Fulani are also present. Bwaba religion, system of thought, arts and material culture have been explored in a number of studies in anthropology and agronomy (Capron 1957, 1962, 1973; Capron & Traoré 1986; Coquet 1994a and b; Serpantié 2003; Dugast 2002, 2006, 2009).

Bwaba society is characterized by a fundamental division between the farmers, considered to be “nobles” and their subordinates: the blacksmiths and the griots. An additional characteristic of their society is that elders of all social classes are highly respected and regarded with great reverence. Large villages, politically and economically autonomous without being subject to a centralized power at a higher level, have been constituted through complex processes. During the pre-colonial period, frequent conflicts among villages caused considerable territorial reshuffling. The defeated groups usually integrated those of the victors, but generally with a subordinate status (Lemoine 1998).

The Bwaba have always cultivated cereal crops and raised small ruminants, but nowadays they also produce cotton and raise cattle. Although Christianity and Islam are expanding, most economic and social activities are still bound up with traditional religion. The host of supernatural forces that are intimately involved in all aspects of daily life are honored, worshipped and consulted through numerous and diverse rituals generally involving shrines, divination and blood sacrifices.

Bwaba religion

The creator, an almighty superior god called *Dombeeni*, does not deal directly with humans, but communicates through several supernatural forces, among which is the paramount *Dombeeni* “messenger”, *Doo*, who also unites people throughout the whole cultural area. Bwaba thought strongly contrasts the village — a place for social activities — controlled by Ta (the Earth), and the bush — a place for production activities — controlled by *Nyinde* (the Bush, called *Nyile* in Bondoukuy region). *Nyinde* can provide people with what the bush can offer, chiefly agricultural production, but requires certain rules to be respected, such as the ritual installation of a shrine under the supervision of the Earth priest, compulsory for the cultivation of a new portion of land. In addition, several other supernatural forces interact with humans. Dugast (2002 p. 68, 2006 p. 414) listed a corpus of ritual names for the natural sacred sites that shelter them. The wood, called *Bani*¹, is considered to be the place from which all the members of the clan originate at birth, *Kani* is a hollow, a cave or an underground passage, *Bwe* is a hill and *Tini* a grassy hardpan.

Collecting data

Field investigation took place in February and September 2008, in July and November 2009 and in June and July 2010 in the Bwaba cultural area around Bondoukuy. The main objective was to explore the logic of local conceptions of wooded shrines. To do so, 50 male² elders, mostly custodians of sacred sites, were interviewed. According to their knowledge and willingness to respond, they were interviewed on one to six occasions, which resulted in a total of 80 interviews³. These specialists were free to decide whether or not other people could be present during the interview, they often were attended by a few relatives or ritual collaborators, who could both add to and confirm their responses. The interviews were as open and unstructured as possible; they rarely lasted less than one hour and never over three hours. They began with open questions on sacred sites and restrictions, followed by more detailed discussions on the subject of

¹ In the region studied by Capron (1926 p.147) woods are called *Banu* and groves *Lobwa*.

² In Bwaba society, ritual responsibilities are assumed only by males and residence is virilocal.

³ Not included: very short talks for contacts or for checking information.

vegetation treatment and social and religious representations, but all opportunities to discuss related religious, cultural, historical or political subjects were seized.

Whenever possible (more than 50 cases) the sites were visited in order to make a link between concepts and vegetation in real life. A list of woody species was established and some observations carried out to get a rapid, preliminary idea of their ecological stage, but ecological analysis is not included in the present study.

Results and discussion: sacred sites and vegetation

Wooded shrines as sacred sites

“Life” cycle of sacred sites

Origins

Informants usually first emphasized that the sacred sites were already in place before their birth and that it was not possible to establish new ones today. In their minds, the antiquity and durability of sacred sites seemed critical characteristics. However, when broaching more precise topics, their responses revealed that sacred sites could originate through two possible procedures that seemed to depend on the nature of the supernatural forces involved.

Human initiative seemed to be the rule for the few higher-level forces people spoke of as being “like *Dombeeni*”. Thus, sites consecrated to *Doo* were said to have been created on the collective decision of elders when the village was first settled. Similarly, the sacred sites consecrated to *Nyile* were said to have been set up by the first occupant of the area. Even before a village was settled, the first occupant arranged some stones to serve as an altar in the wild bush area to be cultivated. This man’s subsequent success in farming and in life was considered to be proof that *Nyile* had accepted to form an alliance with him. As the first Earth priest in charge of the area the man then granted permission to cultivate there to other family heads.

In contrast, the sites related to lower-level supernatural forces that are spoken of as being “like fetishes” or “like medicines”, were said to have “come by themselves”, because the force had decided to “stick to a person” or to “cohabit” with him or her. They usually revealed their presence by means of unusual events: a person found or “was shown” “something” in the bush or in a dream, or was struck by a series of illnesses or misfortunes. Once diviners had been consulted, the supernatural nature of the incidents would be confirmed and with the force thus identified, a shrine would be set up following the instructions of these specialists.

The shrine might be an object or a group of objects kept at home or a natural sacred site located either where the “thing” appeared or in a place chosen by the “owner”. This sacred place would then be the object of precise ritual prescriptions and would be honored by the “owner” if a man, or if a woman, by her father or husband. The establishment of shrines or sacred sites in this way rarely happens today. The acquisition of this type of cult was usually spoken of as a “gift” from the invisible, but some elders indicated that such a gift is to be expected since, for them, all villages *must* have these shrines or sites.

Creations of a sacred site on human initiative or after supernatural forces have revealed their presence are currently reported in West African ethnological literature (e. g. Chouin 2002 in South Ghana; Liberski-Bagnoud 2002, Père 2004 and Kaboré 2010 in three different societies of East Burkina Faso; Dugast 2006 in West Burkina Faso and in North Togo; Juhé-Beaulaton and Roussel 2002 in South Benin...).

Relocation, duplication and disappearance

As a result of the many displacements brought about by “wars”, sacred sites and objects have sometimes had to be abandoned, leaving entire groups with little or no spiritual protection. Whenever possible, people took their sacred objects (“fetishes”) with them in their flight, but natural sites were a more complicated issue. Sacrificing from a distance was often said to be possible but could prove less effective; therefore, when returning to a former residence could expose them to the risk of death, permission to move the site was usually sought from the supernatural force through divination and sacrifice. Elders would choose a new place for it, without being obliged to physically reproduce the original site: in particular it may be free of vegetation while the former was a grove or wood.

Similar transfers of sacred sites in the case of forced moves are practiced widely throughout the cultural area considered; they are described in minute detail by Kabore (2010) in his studies on Gurmantche society.

In addition, sacred sites may be replicated. A “main” *Nyile* site located in or near a village was thus currently reproduced in each of the bush areas exploited by the different farming groups, allowing them to sacrifice on the spot. The “offspring” sites did not necessarily have to reproduce the physical appearance of their “parent” sites.

Such replications of sacred sites are common among the Kasena, Tallensi and Dagari of Burkina and Ghana, as reported by Liberski-Bagnoud (2002 p. 169 sq.) and also among the Gan of Burkina (Père, 2004).

Disappearance

Cases of destruction of wooded shrines in Bwaba land were reported; they were often ascribed to conversions to “modern religions”, meaning Islam and Christianity, but also to the extinction of the family or social group responsible for the sites and related rituals. Elders explained in addition that the clearing of wooded shrines could be the action of “foreigners” “because they don’t know” or “because they don’t respect the tradition”. The latter are generally personified as “*Mose*”, farmers who migrate to escape the worsening climatic conditions in the densely populated region of northern and central Burkina Faso, or as “*Fulani*”, herders coming South from the Sahel.

Ritual management of vegetation

Basic rules

A list of some basic and rather unchanging general rules was said to apply to most wooded shrines in the Bwaba cultural area. By and large, it is prohibited everywhere to cultivate there, to cut down the trees, to collect any part of them, even dead wood, to burn the vegetation, to harm or kill any animal found there, or to take some earth or any stone from the place. On the other hand, picking herbaceous plants is generally allowed as is the circulation and grazing of livestock: free-ranging animals and tethered goats and sheep were indeed observed in wooded shrines and elders confirmed this as a regular practice.

Once such general rules were explained, informants rarely ventured to tell more about a precise site except if they were responsible for it. Additional information provided by the custodian of a given site indeed confirmed that prohibitions and prescriptions vary according to places, periods, and people.

Access

Some sacred sites were not shown but only mentioned; others could be seen only from outside, access to some others depended on the “answer” to one or several sacrifices and to the observance of a certain behavior, while many others could be freely explored. Access rights to a sacred site appeared to vary considerably, but the person in charge of the rituals seemed to always have free access. In most places access was open to anybody except during the performance of a rite. In others access was forbidden only to certain categories of people, such as foreigners to the village or to the family, uninitiated people, women, griots...

Burning

In certain sites the occurrence of burning was considered to be very serious and to prevent it fire breaks are set up around the wooded shrine, usually undertaken as a collective workparty once a year before the grasses dry out completely. Some elders told us that the grass thus cut around the grove would be burnt and that the resulting fire would be allowed to spread into the surrounding bush as a protection against further burning of the sacred site. In other sites, burning was forbidden only if it were set intentionally on the very spot and before a ritual was to be performed; in other words, a fire starting “by itself” was not considered to be a problem at all or the transgression considered as minor and easy to compensate. In addition, many sites were said to protect themselves against fire so protection by human intervention was unnecessary. The cutting of a firebreak is first of all a ritual act that contrasts with the burning of other — grassy — ritual areas. In both cases the ritual implies a collective commitment, but the cutting around the wood, which is hard work, involves only the clan members whereas the burning of the grassy site associates the whole village in a festive hunting party (Dugast 2006 p. 416). The burning of the grass cut for the firebreak in order to light a “preventive fire” suggests that the ritual thought could encompass another, intermediate, category between the compulsory ritual burning of the whole place and its careful protection (Dugast pers. com. March 2010).

Collecting plants and removing earth

In spite of a generally strict restriction on collecting any kind of tree material, it could be done in many places, usually with the express permission of elders. In certain sites it was allowed for particular purposes such as for medicines, provided that the species could not be found elsewhere and that the collection was performed by or intended for certain categories of people (initiates, members of the village or of the family...). Collecting fruit was generally allowed but in certain sites it was allowed only for certain human groups. In some cases consumption was possible only on the spot. As emphasized by Dugast (pers. com. March 2010), this echoes the ritual prescriptions of certain blood sacrifices, the meat of which may not be removed: all should be consumed on the spot and any remains, even if substantial, must be left there. Both practices seem to be connected with the same special ritual concept: the sacrifices offered are considered to belong to the site itself, just as the fruit it produces.

Despite a general restriction on the gathering of dead wood, elders said that this was regularly practiced on some sites. It may be allowed for ritual cooking or as a permanent privilege for certain social categories like griots or blacksmiths. In one unique case the privileged few were the women of the family, who could take the dead wood for their domestic cooking for two days during the course of a ritual.

Regarding the parts of living plants and trees the ban seemed more easily lifted for leaves than for bark and for bark than for roots. Restrictions on removing earth seemed the more universally and

strictly observed, since no exception was encountered. Other prescribed or prohibited activities were also recounted but they were not likely to have any ecological effect.

With many variations on the same basic theme, restrictions and prescriptions seem to be rather similar among other West African societies, but all do not place a ban on collection (Chouin 2002 p. 177)⁴.

How vegetation does matter

Clump and shadow, not species; plants as “children” of the site

“It is better to have trees”. As a leitmotiv, the Bwaba deplored the fact that the plant cover of shrines was poorer today than in the past because of drought, of accidental burning, of transgressions of ritual prohibitions by “foreigners”, or simply because “sometimes the trees grow old and naturally die”... To explain their wish to have trees on sacred sites they gave reasons ranging from pragmatic to supernatural. First, trees provide welcome shelter from the hot sun during the ceremonies that may take a long time. Second the presence of trees shows that the place is sacred and that the prohibitions are obeyed. In addition, the thickness of vegetation is believed to result to a certain extent from and to vouch for the “strength” or spiritual vigor of the site and the supernatural force that inhabits it. Lastly, the shade itself would help in the sacrificial process. In contrast, the species of the trees growing in the clumps or woods were considered to be unimportant, while the groves may be named after the most abundant of them.

Besides, the animals that take cover in sacred sites as well as the plants that grow there were said to be “the children of the site”. Animals were supposed to have entrusted themselves to the care of the site and plants were considered to have acquired their sacredness as an effect of the “strength” or power of the supernatural force worshipped there. Sometimes, one tree which was referred to by its species name was said to be “the one that matters” though it could have died long ago. However, further information made clear that the really important element was not the plant, but the small place, embodied or not as an altar, that is dedicated to the ritual procedures and that is called “the head” of the site. The “tree that matters” acquired its sacredness and special symbolic status because it had grown above this pivotal spot.

Vegetation absence or degradation

The Bwaba repeatedly pointed out that there is no required link between sacred sites and vegetation. The presence of vegetation is not included in the definition of most of the sacred sites, which need not have been wooded at their origin and may never have been. In addition the density of their vegetation usually fluctuates over time. Absence or regression of vegetation was deplored, but was not said to really lessen the “power” or “strength” of the sites. Similarly, invasion by exotic species like *Azadirachta indica* and the subsequent elimination of other plants is hardly a concern for the Bwaba, although plant ecologists would call it “degradation”... Compared to the “head”, vegetation was clearly of minor interest. Kani sacred sites, that are hollows or caves with or without vegetation⁵, are thought of as sometimes being able to move. A sudden and temporary shift of the hollow into the vicinity of human habitation, usually in a dream but sometimes in real life, was understood as being a demand from the supernatural.

⁴ “Firewood, medicinal plants and other non-timber products are regularly harvested in these groves by neighboring communities, even though access to these shared resources is often strictly regulated by a set of byelaws”.

⁵ At least when first found and recognized, since the cavity may subsequently disappear.

However, when the human group chosen by the force leaves, the latter would follow them and a cavity would be discovered in the new locality. In their reports of these events, Bwaba never mentioned the vegetation that may possibly have been associated, the “head”, the hollow, appeared to be the only crucial element.

Primacy of the invisible

Something quite different from mere vegetation stands

Indeed “wooded shrines” appear not to be an autonomous general category. Bwaba elders stated that in many ways vegetation does not matter in itself, but only as one of the possible signs indicating the presence of a supernatural force in a “site”. Dugast (2002, 2005) provided a list of natural features (dense vegetation stands, hills, caves or ponds) that may constitute such signs and that are considered equivalent in this field. However, in this system of thought, plants have a particular status: on the one hand they constitute one type of site (a grove or a wood), and on the other hand they are thought of as the “children” of sites. In addition the Bwaba use the same word “site” for the supernatural force, the site that physically embodies it, and the associated vegetation, which are three quite distinct definitions for a Westerner. Yet, when questioned about such overlaps, the Bwaba clearly distinguish among the three levels...

In an exploration of the properties of a particular type of sacred sites shared by the Kasena, Tallensi, and Dagari, Liberski-Bagnoud (2002 p. 167 and ff) notices a similar “fact of language and, therefore, of thought”. A place, a force, a vegetation stand and an altar are associated in a unique word and concept: they constitute a medium to communicate with the “world of origin”. Although the Bwaba do not share the same type of sacred site and ethnographic data certainly cannot be generalized to other societies as a whole, the key point revealed here clearly holds for West Africa and beyond: the essential purpose of sacred sites is to make the link with the invisible, not to conserve plant biodiversity.

Sacred sites as “active” places

Bwaba often spoke of a “site” as if it actively made its vegetation thicker or deliberately grew trees on an initially bare place. Although they recognized the natural processes to be the immediate cause of vegetation dynamics, for them the “strength” or the spiritual vitality and power of the supernatural force was also involved as the primary cause. Some sanctuaries were thus said to protect against fire “by themselves” through the conjunction of ecological factors such as humidity, poor herbaceous cover, rocky soil etc. In another sphere too, sites are supposed to be active: they deliver retribution in case of transgressions.

Moreover, according to the Bwaba, the “site demands” could be made known through divination⁶. Thus, in case of transgression, sacrifices made on the instructions of diviners may make amends or even prevent retribution. The already reported authorized transfers of sites after a forced migration partake of the same type of process. Similarly, exceptions to the usual ritual treatment of sites may be consented through divination, which appears to be a tool that makes it possible to shift or adjust the practices, a point that could be of interest to conservationists.

⁶ However what happens during a divination session is complex and is more akin to the revelation of a forgotten or ignored sacrificial debt than to communication of the wishes of the deities to humans (Liberski-Bagnoud, pers. com. 2010).

The vegetation of wooded shrines

A poor ecological category

The sacred sites visited in Bwaba area were mostly located inside the villages or near them. Their surfaces ranged from a few square meters to several acres, while their vegetation could be a unique tree, a clump of trees, a wooded or tree savanna, a forest, a grassy or very clear hardpan, a small uncultivated area in a field... In one case the site was even a rocky place devoid of vegetation. Regarding wooded shrines, the flora and structure of the vegetation ranged from almost natural to highly modified. While not totally unused, they unquestionably were less exploited than neighboring or similar secular sites, where the collection of plant material was visible. Most of the wooded shrines observed displayed very common ligneous species, but in some a few unusual species were found.

As already shown, what plant ecologists call “sacred woods” — a sacred site covered with woody vegetation — does not make much sense as a general category for the Bwaba who clearly refer to other criteria. Indeed, the wide variations in appearance and in practices observed also make them a poor category in an ecological or conservation sense. This category seems to be no more homogeneous in other societies: in a Kabye village (Togo) one wooded shrine is protected from fire, another ritually burned at the beginning of the dry season and the third burned even later (Daugey personal communication December 2006).

Degradation or ...change?

Changes in the ecological stage and treatment of wooded shrines are usually interpreted as being due to the degradation of natural or social environments. This may be true in many cases, but the data collected in Bwaba land have suggested in addition that changes in ritual practices might be one fundamental and “normal” attribute of sacred sites. As supported by broad ethnological evidence, while rarely emphasized in conservation literature, such changes seem the rule in other societies too. In fact, the capacity for change following its own logic indeed testifies to the dynamism of any living or working system. An example of this capacity is related to ritual burning among the Mose in Burkina Faso: under the pressure of altering environmental conditions and of government-sponsored awareness campaigns, a reshaping of practices was observed (Luning 2005). Whatever the depth of the anthropological significance of such changes, they may have profound consequences on vegetation.

Turn-over and protection of wooded shrines in the modern world

Today, in the Bwaba cultural area wooded shrines are still numerous, and in the landscape they are a noticeable element, the botanical assessment of which is in progress. However, unquestionably more are destroyed than are created. Are they therefore creations of the past inexorably doomed to extinction?

While it is undoubtedly not the most important aspect for them, the Bwaba show attachment to the plant cover their “grandfathers” passed down to them with the wooded shrines. Since the vegetation of sacred sites also signals their presence in a given area, it might assume more importance in the future, with the increasing number of “foreigners” in landscapes that are increasingly exploited. Anthropological studies stress that the durability of a sacred site depends primarily on the active supervision of its administrator (Dugast 2010, Liberski- Bagnoud et al. 2010...). The size and plant content of a wooded shrine is of paramount importance from a conservation perspective, but it is generally not linked to its ritual or social significance, a feature

shared by Ouatchi (Hamberger 2010) and Kasena, (Liberski-Bagnoud et al. 2010) societies. Therefore, the sites that people care the most for, might not be ecologically the most interesting. In addition growing needs in land and wood products and expanding “modern” religions are serious threats. However, local attitudes towards shrines and the associated vegetation may be as diverse as contexts. Among the Gurmantche who live in the vicinity of the large government-run Park “W, sacred sites still play a role in the conquest and preservation of the chieftaincy for competing lineages and for the maintenance of territorial control. From fear of the “theft” or of the diversion of the “strength” of such sites, some “owners” feel it advantageous to have their wooded shrines concealed in large bush areas such as government parks and reserves, and this in spite of the difficulties with the government administration (Kaboré 2010: 203 sq.). In the Vodun area of southern Benin and Togo, although ancient cults benefit from a recent and spontaneous re-evaluation, attention is mostly focused on constructed shrines, not on “traditional” wooded shrines. For the preservation of their vegetation this religious renewal may therefore be of less help than a present unrelated craze for ecotourism (Juhé-Beaulaton, 2010).

Biodiversity conservation actions: “blind” assistance

May conservation actions of the government or other stakeholders really help to preserve wooded shrines? In Bwaba villages, elders often expressed concern about the maintenance of wooded shrines and seemed ready to accept help from outside. In diverse countries and societies government officers or “projects” provide support for the preservation or reforestation of wooded shrines (e.g. Dugast 2010 for Bassar society and Lainé 2010 for Nawdba society). Usually, their lack of understanding of villagers’ objectives is great, but they may have some ecological results in the short term. However, this kind of “blind” help may also produce effects unwelcome for conservation. In Bobo Vore society (Burkina Faso), as the local most abundant tree species is sacred, it is prohibited to seed or plant it, and therefore reforestation is puzzlingly conducted with exotic species by a “project” (Alfieri 2010)...

Villagers are generally quite aware of the “blindness” of the help they receive from “modernity”. This is why they sometimes prefer freedom and self-government, as expressed in the words of a Bwaba elder in Bondoukuy. After having stated his wish for denser vegetation in a wooded shrine, when it was suggested that government foresters could help, he coldly answered: “We don’t need them; we know very well how to do that by ourselves”.

Conclusion

Biodiversity conservation approaches have often claimed the lasting nature of wooded shrines and their protection by “tradition”, but also the present risk of their elimination or degradation. Although they back up these ideas to a certain extent, our data reveal a more complex reality and some lesser known aspects.

Practices regarding vegetation cover proved to be more diverse and fluid than at first supposed. Wooded shrines really are protected, but only to a certain extent and only for a certain period of time (that may not or may indeed be very long). In fact, what is relevant for the societies that created them is their “apartness” from the secular world (Liberski-Bagnoud 2002). Their existence results from an agreement between a supernatural force and a person or human group. Therefore, it is the observance of prescriptions and prohibitions that is important, not the material result of them on biodiversity. In addition, species composition, an obsession with conservationists, seems to be of minor importance. These features indeed stem from the local concept of wooded shrines, not from a possible degradation of the ecological or social

environment. The significance of the variations observed in their appearance and in ritual practices is to be found mainly in the symbolic. Thus, although they are religious sanctuaries, wooded shrines are not necessarily biological sanctuaries in the sense of strictly protected areas sheltering exceptional species; many of them, located inside villages or in densely populated areas, are not. In all likelihood, this might be the case in other regions in West Africa also (Juhé-Beaulaton and Roussel 2002, Liberski-Bagnoud et al. 2010). When a sacred site is said to be strictly protected “by tradition”, scholars in ecology should be cautious because villagers’ ideas of protection may be very different from theirs. The notion that wooded shrines are an “endogenous” means for achieving biodiversity conservation must be firmly discarded: protection is definitely only a side-effect of this sort of “placing apart”. The idea expressed in a study on the Tallensi (Ghana) by Insoll (2007) that wooded shrines should be considered as both natural and constructed by humans may be pertinent for most of West Africa. The often supposed spatial fixedness of wooded shrines is another idea of high ecological concern that has also to be reconsidered. At least in the region studied and in some others also, sacred sites may be transferred, which is not surprising in societies which are generally highly mobile. However the frequency of such movements has to be assessed through detailed studies. Conservationists’ attempts to rid villagers of what they judge as “environmentally unfriendly practices” are implicitly based on the idea that ritual rules may change, which is correct. However, the only changes that are lasting and acceptable are those that conform to the internal logic of the system of thought of each society. The exploration of this symbolism is still in its early stages.

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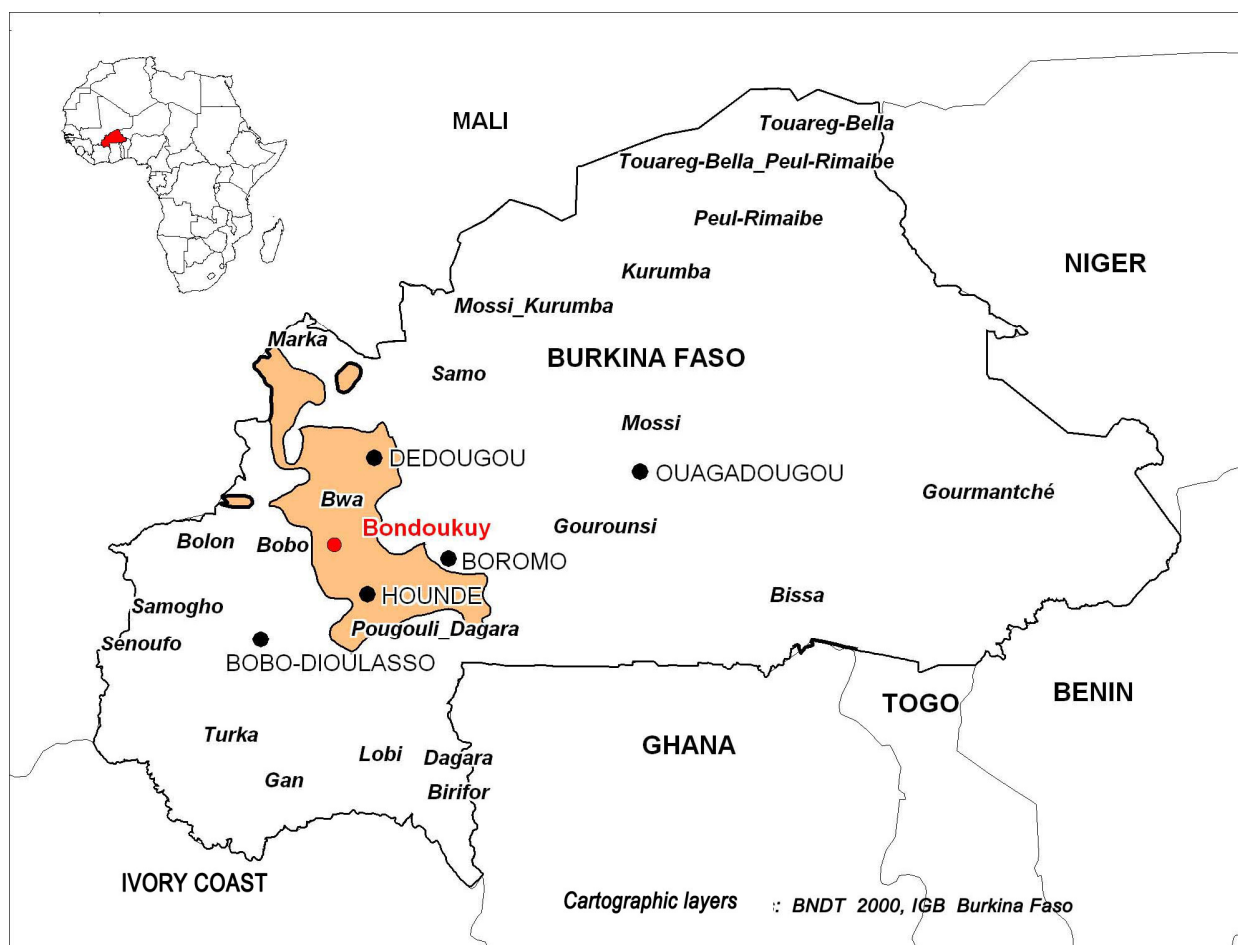
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Map. Location of the Bwaba cultural area in Burkina Faso