

Shrines and Groves

David Millar, Richard Aniah and Peter Atoyure



Photo: Bertus Haverkort

Concerns for environmental degradation are more real now than ever before. The loss of biodiversity and natural resources is occurring at an alarming rate in Ghana. Some perceive this loss from a biological perspective. Others put more emphasis on economic, political or legal aspects. These partial perceptions lead to limited responses and interventions. This article presents the biological and cultural aspects of natural resource management among the Gowrie-Kunkwa community in the Boosi chiefdom, Northern Ghana.

In Northern Ghana the worship of the ancestors is central in the worldview of the rural people, especially in the use of common property. Since 1997 CECIK has been part of development efforts in the Gowrie-Kunkwa area. We gradually recognised the vital role of the worldview of the people in community initiative and responses.

In relation to agriculture, people distinguish between crops and animals that are used for rituals, for consumption and for commercial purposes. Commercial crops are frequently introduced from outside and lack a relationship with the ancestors. Rituals are associated with food crops and ritual crops, but to a far less extent to commercial crops.

In the worldview of the people the traditional crops were received from the ancestors. The spirits of the ancestors are the owners of human kind and responsible for their well being. A decision to adopt a new crop or a new variety, therefore, can not be taken without asking the advice of the ancestors. Spirit mediums play an important role in this process. The spiritual world is integrated in nature, because the spirits reside there. Working with natural

resources and agriculture implies working with traditional leaders and institutions because they are the ones that can mediate with the spiritual world.

Shrines and groves

A shrine is a sacred place of worship. A grove is a forest patch; some are the remnants of the original forests. A grove may or may not be worshipped, but it is perceived sacred by the people. Some groves are also shrines. Usually groves are part of nature, but shrines can be any item of worship; sometimes within the house. Shrines and groves vary in their physical and biological appearance. They can include a cluster of trees and shrubs, water bodies, a range of rocks, a river with a valley or a few stones gathered in a heap. Shrines and groves can be located in low lands, flat lands, highlands, near homes or far in the fields. They may be near water bodies or be a part of a water body.

The location of a shrine or grove is related to a historical site. It may indicate the location of settlement of the first ancestor of the village or his burial place. It can also be a site identified by a sooth-

sayer or a location commemorating an important occurrence of mythical or spiritual nature.

The existence of shrines and groves despite numerous battles and ongoing degradation, calls for special attention. In the Boosi Chiefdom one can find most of the land barren, depleted of permanent vegetation. Yet various small clusters of bushes, trees and grasses are prominently there. Almost invariably these are shrines or groves. To survive the test of time some degree of protection must have regulated these isolated clusters.

A study

CECIK has conducted a study to look at natural resource management of the shrines and groves. The following questions were addressed: what are the historical changes of shrines and groves in the Gowrie-Kunkwa area? What structures guarantee the survival of shrines and groves and how do the regulatory mechanisms operate? How are the shrines and groves perceived by individuals and by communities? What is their role in bio-cultural diversity maintenance; can they

be regenerated and how? How can they be a part of development intervention?

A total of 20 shrines and groves were encountered in an area of about four square kilometres. Four of the shrines were on highlands, nine in valleys or lowlands, two on flatlands and five near rivers or other water bodies. The largest shrine occupied an area of about four acres. It consisted of a chain of rocky mountains. The smallest shrine of half an acre was found in a valley. The average size of the shrines was around two acres. Four of the shrines were submerged by the Vea Lake, an artificial lake for irrigation purposes. Yet the original locations are still worshipped and the lake is divided into four points for sacrifices.

Methodology

In a study like this, one has to prepare oneself to be an active and respectful part of what one encounters. The researchers' attitude is easily read by the rural people and determines the quality of the responses. The people are aware that their traditional lifestyle is often perceived negatively by outsiders. They are inclined to react with some suspicion to questions about their worldview. To give the opportunity to process their acceptance or rejection, the people were informed of the study long in advance. Moreover, the elders consulted their ancestors about the project through a soothsayer.

It is our experience that one can rely on key informant interviews in order to connect with people's spirituality. So we started talking with the chiefs, the *Tendanas* or earthpriests, the spirit mediums, elders and opinion leaders in the communities. On a few occasions we started with one person and a group was formed spontaneously. We wanted to deal directly in the local language and were lucky to find a key facilitator from a Tindamba family, the family of the Earth God. We tried to make the interviews a fluid discourse with few interjections.

Funerals, markets and festivals were good opportunities to have more in-depth dialogues. We also used participatory observation during the visits to the shrines and groves. We wanted to see what was there and feel the sacred aura of these places. The 'snowball method' of investigation was used in which the next key informant could elaborate on issues mentioned by the previous key informant. Specific case studies were undertaken to reinforce some of the findings.

Vital link

The spirits inhabiting the shrines and groves are important to the people; not the shrines and groves themselves. These are perceived as the residing places of the ancestral spirits that protect the community. When sacrifices are performed correctly and by the right people, the spirits

will go on protecting the community. In this way the ancestral spirits serve as a vital communication link between the people and their creator.

The living see themselves as the children of the shrines and groves, that are supposed to guide and guard the people. The shrines and groves are 'the eyes for the unseeing, ears for the inaudible and defenders of the defenceless'. They are to drive away all evil spirits and ensure that deceased family members reach their Creator. The shrines and groves, therefore, maintain a vital link between the living, the dead and the yet unborn.

The physical role of the shrines and groves is to provide rain, fertility and health. They propel livestock development, reduce deaths and increase births. They ensure peaceful co-existence between mankind, vegetation and other parts of nature like stones, mountains and rivers. Children can go to eat fruits or play in the trees and they will never get injured.

Socially, shrines and groves are significant for the fact that they provide a common place of worship, where the community meets to perform various sacrifices and resolve conflicts. The sacred tree that symbolises the soul of the ancestral spirit must receive a special treatment. This tree, that is said to have germinated out of the grave of the ancestor, is either the father or mother of the shrine.

Restricted area

Traditional rules have to be followed for all shrines and groves. Re-planting is not done but natural regeneration is stimulated, like for example the introduction of new plant species by birds. Appeasing the spirits is an important component in the conservation effort as well as proclaiming the shrine or grove as a restricted area. Offenders face strong punishments.

The traditional rules are quite strict. Hunting, fishing and cutting wood is only permitted on special days indicated by the *Tendana*. The community is not supposed to harvest the vegetation there for private use. Wild life in the shrine or grove is considered sacred and should not be killed without the consent of the *Tendana*. Trees should not

be cut for musical instruments. Dead wood should be picked before live wood can be cut.

Communal de-silting is carried out once a year in groves with water bodies and only then fishing is allowed. The first couple of catches with big fish and numerous flora and fauna are kept aside and put back into the pond when de-silting is completed. This perpetuates life in the ponds.

The chief, *Tendana* and the elders all play their role in enforcing these unwritten rules, which are understood by all. Moreover myths and legends exist in the communities about what can happen to members who abuse the shrines and groves. Punishment by the spirits may affect an individual's family or clan and can include floods, drought or disease. The punishment by the spirits may be immediate or delayed, direct or indirect. This aspect has been a major reason of the survival of groves and shrines.

Traditional rules

The *Tendana* explains: "With the coming of Christianity and modernity, the position of the shrines and groves has been undermined. The traditional rules for the use of shrines and groves are weakening. We have lost some of the trees, but the spirits of the good trees still remain there. Most of the wild animals have also escaped but their spirits are also still in those shrines and groves. Above all, the spirits of our



The son of the *Tendana* is the caretaker of the sacred grove in Gowrie and performs rituals

Photo: Bertus Haverkort



CECIK staff dialoge with the elders of the Bongo community.

ancestors have remained intact. People that claim to be Christians go in to fish, kill wild animals, pick dry wood or cut trees. Only the elderly keep to the tradition. However, when the young encounter problems in their newly chosen way of life, they run back to us to 'look into things' for them".

One of the elders: "We lament it that a majority of our youth today has become the victim of these unfortunate ideas. Despite this we foresee the return of our youth to their roots at a more advanced age. They need to be sufficiently informed about important aspects of our culture."

Who decides?

There are private and communally owned shrines and groves. The head of the household controls the private ones. The Tendana is the person responsible of the communally owned shrines and groves. Although the decision process includes consultation with soothsayers, elders, the chief and key clan members, the most important influence comes from the Gods. After sacrifice they can give spiritual clearance.

Women are not to take part of the decision making process because their original homes are somewhere else. Even back there they have no say in the decisions, but they are required to comply and help enforce the rules. They prepare the materials for sacrifices, like fetching water and firewood, grinding flour, brewing *pito*, the local beer, preparing meals and cooking the meat after the sacrifice. Only when they die they become a very important component of the people's spirituality: then they are worshipped as 'mothers' and 'grand mothers'.

Children learn informally how to relate to shrines and groves through riddles, songs, legends, myths, proverbs and direct instructions. This way they are called upon to be responsible for the management. They may be involved in the sacrifice, help to produce the music or take part in the dancing ceremonies - as part of

their tutelage.

Any member of the community can make special requests to the *Tingani*, the Earth God, through the Tendana. Community members living outside the village are expected to come home during ceremonies and to contribute towards sacrifices. They often request the Tendana to perform special sacrifices for them.

The community and outsiders

The rural people in Northern Ghana perceive a disregard for their cultural heritage in the relation with outsiders.

They blame this on a lack of understanding of their worldview and negative influences of formal religion and modernisation. Local development staff looks at shrines and groves with suspicion. They acknowledge the shrines and groves to be an important feature of the community, but at the same time see them as a hindrance for 'real development'. For them the shrines and groves are unsustainable, because "only old people are interested in them".

Many foreigners working in these areas, however, see that shrines and groves have potential for sustained action, although they have no idea how this could be done. They find them to be fascinating pieces of the people's culture. They are impressed how shrines and groves have survived over time in spite of the 'wars' waged against them by Christianity, Islam and modernisation.

Development potential

In our project we were surprised that the communities reacted very positive when discussing the idea of working on the shrines and groves. The communities are

very tolerant with someone from outside of the community who is interested in assisting them to develop this heritage. They take the development worker serious if they feel that the purpose is not to ridicule them, nor to change their worldview or anger their ancestors. Community members indicate that they can determine the degree of seriousness of outsiders. They also argue that shrines and groves can be developed when the right process is followed. This includes allowing the people to do it their own way, with minimal input from the outsider, and abiding the traditional rules.

As an elder explains: "We should make sure that new trees speak the same language as the indigenous ones. They will have a problem of communication if they are from different parts of the world. When this is done, we, through the Tendana and with the help and guidance of the ancestral spirits, will ensure that they survive and we will control their uses as we have done with those already there".

The community leaders in Gowrie-Kunkwa think the development of shrines and groves should start in partnership with outside organisations. They indicate that it will be difficult for them to start it alone. There are already some ideas, like planting trees and de-silting water bodies in the shrines and groves. Other possibilities mentioned by the communities are re-activating the water bodies that have dried up and re-stocking them with fish.

CECIK intends to give priority to rehabilitation and development of shrines and groves. In close co-operation with the elders and earth priest the methods for this will be developed, priorities set and resources mobilised. Shortly after the study, some of the communities indicated they were ready to do something this year with mud walls as protection for grove rehabilitation. We will keep the readers of the Compas Newsletter informed about the results in due course.



Sacrificing millet and a chicken by the Tendana, or Earth priest