
Book Reviews

Michael J. Sheridan and Celia Nyamweru (eds.), *African Sacred Groves: Ecological Dynamics and Social Changes* (Oxford: James Currey, 2008), x + 230 pp., £45.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-84701-401-6. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v5i1.101.

The rear cover of a book always shows glowing pre-reviews, and the one by Melissa Leach is no exception, as she praises this volume as an original contribution to the often misused notion of sacred groves. In this case the praise is well deserved. The editors not only have collected a group of able researchers and writers on the topic but they have also managed to make the edited volume into a real book, with an internal structure and a clear theme—almost a monograph. Sacred forests are an old fascination, even if they now seem to have shrunk somewhat in size to sacred groves, but anyway they indeed deserve a thorough theoretical and practical study; so the book is as timely as it is insightful. At least one old ghost, that of James Frazer, is laid to rest with this book. In his *Golden Bough*, Frazer started and ended with a priestly figure prowling inside a sacred grove, though in his case the detour between start and finish was very long indeed. Now the relation between sacred groves and sacred kingship is no longer tenable as, first, sacred groves appear to be a very mixed category and, second, their role in ritual is highly ambivalent.

The main debate is between conservation and—to use an old term—the social function of the groves or forests. As Sheridan points out in his theoretical chapter ‘Dynamics of Sacred Groves’, for some time already conservationists have held high expectations of the contribution sacred groves could make to the conservation of biodiversity. In a continent that depletes its forest reserves as quickly as does Africa, these patches of forest stand out as havens for threatened species, plant as well as animal. The happy surprise that Africans do, after all, conserve nature, easily led to notions of ‘pristine forest’, ‘untouched nature’, and even ‘native wisdom’. That, Sheridan notes, fits in nicely with the present-day fascination of development agencies with Community Based Natural Resource Management, and also provides an ideological basis for the devolvement of resource management among the lower echelons of society, the ‘communities’. This is what Sheridan calls the ‘Relic Theory’, i.e., relics of the ecological past, and this is what the book sets out to challenge. And a severe challenge it is. Of course, some of the groundwork has already been done, for example, in the groundbreaking book by Leach and Mearns (1996), which showed that the relationship between African farmers or pastoralists and vegetation was much more complex than the simple ecological depletion model predicted. The authors in this volume try to move forward from there and incorporate the sacred groves problematic inside the general debates on resource use and land rights; the end of the volume, using a more legal approach, is especially successful in this regard. But

also some case studies, such as one on Ethiopia, show how sacred groves themselves become markers of ownership in land tenure disputes.

The main thread in the book is the recognition that sacred groves are not remnants, relics, or residues of primal forest, or the hallowed remains of what once covered most of Africa. Instead, the resounding consensus in the book is that the groves are generated or regenerated in a continuous and intense interaction between biotope and people, between nature and culture. In the past many of these groves were not even forests at all, but old abandoned settlements where the forest took over, accruing sacredness not because of the forest's attributes but because of the human history of the place. Some of them are shrunken forests, preserved because the old forest circle around the villages was a defensive strategy against slave raiders, or later against colonial officers looking for taxes or army recruits. Ecologically, it is the resilience of vegetation and fauna that is striking, since in many cases the groves are of relatively young origin, such as groves around a village burial site, or around a saintly repose. Culturally, the diversity of both origin and use is much larger than expected. The classic picture of a sacred grove, at least from West Africa, is as a place for initiation (read *poro* and *sande*), and is used only for that purpose. Reality is always more complex, and these forest patches appear to be used for various purposes, including subsistence: gathering honey, building poles, procuring medicine, as well as for the occasional hunting of bush meat to supplement the daily diet. Also, internally they are sometimes zoned and diverse.

Whatever the main socio-cultural use, conservation of biodiversity as such is never the aim; the main goal, throughout the many interesting cases in the book, is one of self-definition, a statement of social and cultural identity, a means to structure one's own society, and, above all, to provide a repository of history, a *lieu de mémoire*. It is a link between the world of people and those of spirits (as in the Beng case), a place of rendering justice (as with the palaver trees of Senegal), and a way in which lower status groups carve out their own niche in society (as in Ethiopia).

There are, however, some critical oversights as well. The first is the absence of the commons debate in the theoretical introduction. After all, these groves could well be used to highlight the difference between commons and common access property, and as such seem to be highly relevant for this debate, which continues after the 'tragedy of the commons'. Some of the contributions do address the debate to some extent, though. The second is the absence of the work of Tim Ingold (e.g. 2000), especially his treatment of the notion of 'dwelling' as a mutual constitution of environment and culture; this feeds well into the consideration of groves and could have been used as an additional theoretical angle. Another opportunity for interdisciplinary debate would have been the notion of the sacred. The cooperation between ecologists and anthropologists—with an occasional political scientist thrown in—highlights the cultural ecology, but leaves the notion of sacredness in the shade. Yet, for the African construction of the sacred—sacred objects as well as sacred spots—these groves are highly relevant. Recent debates on this seemingly well-worn notion of the sacred, such as between Jonathan Z. Smith and Ronald Grimes, center on the notion of place and the inherent qualities of the natural environment for sacred acts.

But my comments also aim to illustrate that the book has kindled a debate it has not yet finished, meaning the issue and the approach are productive. One question that the book generated for me is the regional issue: Why are sacred groves important in the Western coastal zone and Eastern Africa and not in the rest of Africa, like the

savannah or the Sahel? Why are trees 'good to think with' in these areas, and what other venues into sacredness are dominant in other regions? New questions are a good sign, however, and the book is a valuable addition to our knowledge of an intense form of interaction between culture and nature in Africa.

References

Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge).

Leach, Melissa, and Robin Mearns. 1996. *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (London: Curry & Heinemann).

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