The Environmental and Social History of African Sacred Groves: A Tanzanian Case Study

Michael J. Sheridan

Abstract: Sacred groves figure prominently in efforts to create community-based conservation in Africa. Although they are often conceptualized in functionalist terms as relics of climax forest and peak cultural florescence, attention to the intersections of ecological and social dynamics offers a framework for understanding African sacred groves that avoids assumptions of steady states of habitat and culture. This article, based on a case study from the North Pare Mountains of northeastern Tanzania, demonstrates that the sacredness of these groves is embedded in social institutions, and that the deeply contested nature of these meanings produces African landscapes. It concludes that sacred groves, as examples of cultural and ecological co-evolution, require research based on hybrid social and natural scientific methods. The implication for conservation policy is that sacred groves are not simply local forms of conservation, and that their management demands cooperation among local, national, and global institutions.

Ever since James Frazer based *The Golden Bough* (1890), his monumental survey of religion and ritual, on the theme of holy trees, Westerners have glossed these areas as "sacred groves" and perceived them as icons of tradition and order in small-scale societies. Although Africanist scholars had long depicted sacred trees, groves, and forests as "ethnographic curiosities" (Castro 1990:277), recent work has recast them as resource management systems with the potential to conserve biodiversity and mitigate deforestation in Africa (Byers et al. 2001; Dudley et al. 2005). A 2005 symposium on the management of sacred sites called for administrators, scholars, and activists to work toward "safeguarding the cultural and biological diversity embod-

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ied in sacred natural sites and cultural landscapes" (UNESCO 2005), efforts that surely would contribute much to the diversification of conservation policy. Yet much of the conservation policy literature for Africa treats natural sacred sites as relics of ostensibly pristine ecosystems and unchanged traditional values (e.g., Decher 1997). Such ecological and cultural stasis will surely be scarce in Africa under conditions of global capitalism and climate change, and the assumption that sacred groves themselves are static entities may lead to inappropriate conservation policies and unexpected outcomes. The ecological implications of ritual may have the potential to enhance African land use, but the functionalist assumption that sacred groves exist primarily as indigenous forms of conservation (e.g., Chidhakwa 2003) is mistaken. This case study from Tanzania argues that far from being static relics, sacred groves are sites where ecological, social, political, and cultural dynamics intersect and disconnect over time. The process-based approach described here suggests that conservation policy for sacred groves should be oriented not simply toward empowering locals to protect and maintain these sites, but rather toward adaptive co-management by various institutions at local, national, and global levels.

Sacred groves exist throughout tropical Africa and typically serve as places for rituals of initiation and sacrifice. They usually consist of dense patches of forest in agrarian landscapes, and are particularly common in the long arc of forest–savanna transition zone from West Africa to southern Africa (see Sheridan 2008). The term *sacred* does not imply, however, that these sites are purely religious institutions, separate from politics, social organization, and land tenure—and effective conservation policy should not make such an assumption.[1] African sacred groves are "places of power" (Colson 1997), and as such they are critical sites in the ideological and material struggles that generate political legitimacy, ethnic and gender identities, and access to resources. They are central to the process of social change, not peripheral remnants of social and ecological continuity. This article assesses the ecological status of sacred groves in an East African mountain block, describes their social history, and suggests strategies for their conservation in Tanzania and throughout Africa.

African Sacred Groves and Conservation

Postcolonial conservationists began to focus on sacred groves only recently. In the 1990s the failures of state-led conservation efforts in Africa led them to create less centralized, community-based institutions for natural resource management (Adams & Hulme 2001). Arguing that the taboos protecting sacred groves constitute indigenous conservation systems (Colding & Folke 2001), they searched for ways to incorporate these practices into formal conservation policy (e.g., Dorm-Adzobu et al. 1991; Gerdén & Mtallo 1990; Robertson & Luke 1993).[2] Various international NGOs sponsored community-based projects in African sacred groves (Anane 1997; Nyamweru 1996; Schaaf

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1998; UNDP 2004), while scholars insisted that further attention to sacred groves was essential for building effective conservation and development (e.g., Lebbie & Freudenberger 1996, Madeweya et al. 2004). The threatened status of African sacred groves has been recognized since the continent's colonial days, and recognition of this threat forms part of the standard argument in favor of their conservation.[3] As Chevalier (1933:37) phrased it, "since our contact the primitive has abandoned his creed, and the sacred groves are disappearing." Indeed the trees in these groves—and the social institutions built upon them—face serious threats from local demand for fuelwood and global demand for tropical hardwoods. In many areas, axes and chainsaws have replaced sacrifices and initiation ceremonies. The standard argument therefore asserts that because the groves are relics of primeval forests and the property of kin and/or ethnic groups whose "traditional" spiritual values made them conserved areas, the appropriate policy is to empower and validate traditional institutions, practices, and beliefs.

Although persuasive, this argument is flawed, particularly in its assumption that African sacred groves are remnants of an ecological and cultural climax. Recent scholarship has questioned the "naturalness" of tropical forests around the world (Willis et al. 2004). Archaeologists have shown, for example, that the largest contiguous tract of "virgin" rainforest in the southern Amazon had been a thoroughly transformed "cultural parkland" before European contact (Heckenberger et al. 2003), and many of the "forest islands" in West Africa's savanna–forest transition zone are anthropogenic as well (Fairhead & Leach 1996). Indeed, this analytical shift from a focus on static entities to an emphasis on historical processes in tropical ecology has parallels in Africanist history, anthropology, and conservation policy. Current African religious practices, even those declared "traditional," are now understood not in terms of precolonial patterns but rather as recombinations, reinventions, and reconfigurations of belief systems (Ranger 1988). The notion that "tribes" and ethnic groups are basic units of African societies has been replaced by attention to the construction of identities in various historical contexts (e.g., Bravman 1998). Finally, scholars have started to show how community-based conservation often leads to institutional ambiguity rather than effective management (Larson & Ribot 2005). These intellectual currents suggest that the focus is shifting from fixed units and closed systems to dynamic and historically contingent complexities. Clearly, the assumption that sacred sites represent an unproblematic precolonial-era balance of nature and culture is inadequate for building effective conservation policy today.

Interdisciplinary efforts to understand the dynamic nature of African sacred groves are just beginning (see Elliott & Campbell 2002). Some groves may be relics of larger forests, but a more dynamic view of ecology and its linkages with social organization, politics, and symbolism shows that many are the historically contingent products of vegetation change and shifting social values and functions. Many, in fact, have been found atop old

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settlement sites, despite the current caretakers' insistence that the trees are relics of primeval forest (Chouin 2002; Fairhead & Leach 1997:12; Guillot 1980; Lebbie & Guries 2008; Nyamweru et al. 2008), and many acquired spiritual value only within the context of—and possibly in reaction to—the transformations of colonial rule (Baum 1999; Campbell 2004:227, Greene 2002). African sacred groves are community institutions in which power and authority are local in space and temporally tied to the life-cycle of kin groups. They often represent legitimate resource ownership and political influence, which accounts for much of their persistence compared to other forest areas throughout the postcolonial era in Africa. Yet it is often the groves' poor fit with the secular and religious institutions of the contemporary nation-state that threatens their destruction. The sacredness of African groves, then, is not embedded in their trees and plants, but rather in the diverse social institutions that sacred groves manifest in particular African landscapes. An analytical focus on intersecting ecological, social, and historical dynamics therefore offers a framework for understanding African sacred groves that avoids assumptions of steady states of both habitat and culture.

The Dynamics of Sacred Groves

Sacred groves typically serve as historical markers and sites for initiation, burial, and sacrifice in horticultural and agricultural societies.[4] Igor Kopytoff's model of the "internal African frontier" (1988) can help us make sense of the remarkable similarities and continuities among sacred groves across tropical Africa. Kopytoff argues that although land was the scarce factor of production in Eurasian societies, in sparsely populated Africa labor was scarce. African societies therefore developed ways to organize rights in people, rather than in land, along moving frontiers of population growth. Kopytoff suggests the following growth cycle for precolonial African societies. First, some members of a mature "core" society moved to its periphery due to internal pressures or external opportunities. These people built a new society by recombining or innovating upon the institutions, practices, and symbols of the core society. The new society grew and devised ways to attract and incorporate new settlers into the community. As the population grew, elites emerged and shifted social organization from a focus on kin groups to the more organic solidarity of rulers and subjects. Some people left the new core society, and the process began again.

According to Kopytoff, this model explains the wide geographic spread of African cultural characteristics such as kinship, age, and gender hierarchies, sacrifice, initiation, and the political primacy of "first-comer" groups over subsequent immigrants. Sacred groves were a key mechanism for reconstituting societies on these frontiers. Sacred trees and groves marked new settlements, provided sites for the ritual practices that organized society, and served as icons of political legitimacy, prosperity, and health. If

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African societies were, as Kopytoff says, in "ceaseless flux" (1988:7) before European colonization, the multiple significances of sacred grove institutions (in ecological, sociopolitical, and moral domains) provided much of that flexibility. This explains the presence of sacred groves across Africa in societies with quite different degrees of political centralization.

These continuities are based in the usefulness of sacred groves as homes for various institutions, not any essential traditionalism in African societies. The institutions embedded in the groves relate to critical factors of production such as access to land and control of labor, so the social context of sacred groves can have direct effects on their ecology. In many parts of Africa, sacred groves represent the moral authority of male ancestors, and are therefore material expressions of the social organization of society by gender and kinship (Fortes 1945:101; Netting 1969:1044). Sacred groves reflect idealized models of social order, and the ongoing struggle to create order makes them sites of cooperation and conflict instead of centers of static tradition. The political aspects of sacred groves are particularly cogent in frontier societies, especially those characterized by a division of rights and labor between autochthonous first settlers and later immigrants. As markers of social differences that often relate to key institutions, sacred groves, as well as other sacred sites in Africa, function as political arenas in different historical contexts (Ellis & ter Haar 2004; Ranger 1999).

Sacred Groves in the North Pare Mountains

The Pare range is part of the Eastern Arc Mountains, an archipelago of highlands that stretches from southeastern Kenya to southern Tanzania. These mountains are considered to be a biodiversity "hotspot" because of their relatively high proportion of endemic species (Myers et al. 2000). North Pare is an enormous tilted block with a ridgeline that looms high above the savanna (see map 1). Most of the area's population lives on this mountain block. Its eastern side receives more than twice the rainfall of the western side because the mountains force the warm, moist air of the trade winds to rise, cool, and condense into rain. Reliable rainfall fostered the growth of forests with an eighty- to one-hundred-foot closed canopy in the North Pare highlands.

Indigenous trees can still be found in the forest reserves on the highest peaks and in the hundreds of sacred groves that lie scattered throughout the densely settled zone between four thousand and fifty-three hundred feet above sea level. Although North Pare was once sparsely inhabited by foragers, significant environmental transformation began when farmers settled in the area between 250 and 790 CE. North Pare became an important node of the precolonial regional exchange network because its minerals gave it a comparative advantage over the volcanic areas to the north and west (Kimambo 1995). The clay and magnetite found in Pare are far superior to those found on the geologically young slopes of Kilimanjaro, so North

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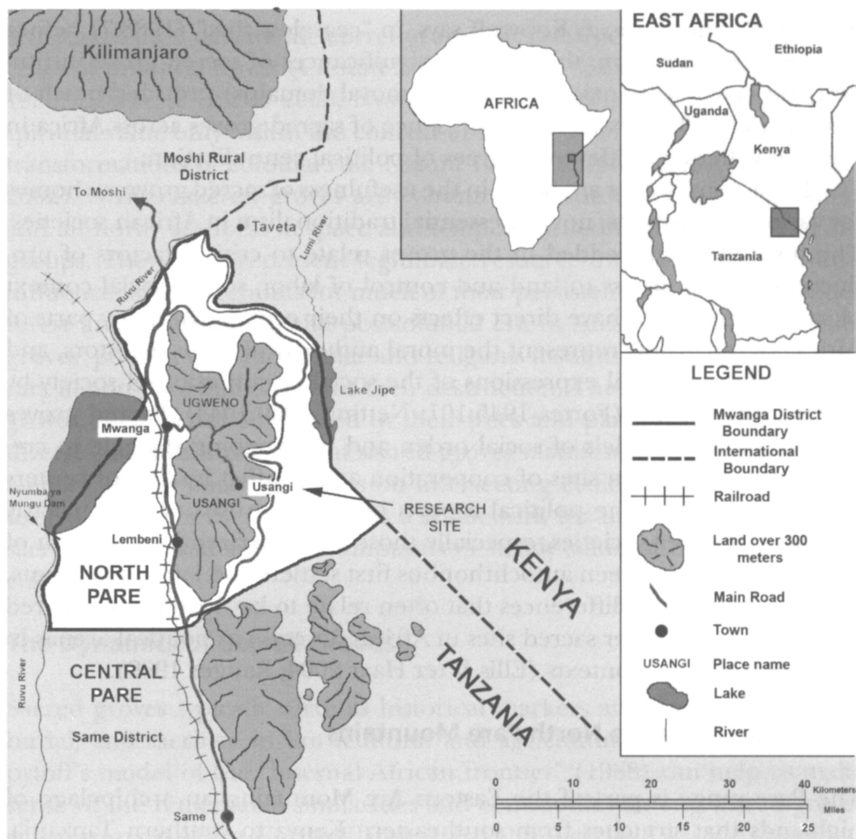

Map 1: The North Pare Mountains of Mwanga District, Tanzania

Pare has long been the region's leading producer of pots and iron. Precolonial agriculture and fuelwood consumption for these industries clearly transformed the vegetation cover of these mountains, but ascertaining the degree and timing of these changes requires further archaeological and paleoecological research. Based on the general pattern of forest patches in the Eastern Arc mountains, however, biogeographers estimate that up to 76 percent of North Pare's preagricultural forest cover is now gone (Newmark 2002:25).

According to oral histories, the major settlement was in Ugweno, at the northern end of North Pare. By collecting tribute in exchange for iron products, the ironworking Washana clan came to dominate the North Pare political economy by the thirteenth century (Kimambo 1969). Many Washana were killed in a late fifteenth-century coup by members of the subordinate Wasuya clan, who ambushed them outside of a sacred grove. As immigrants arrived in North Pare over the following centuries, men were

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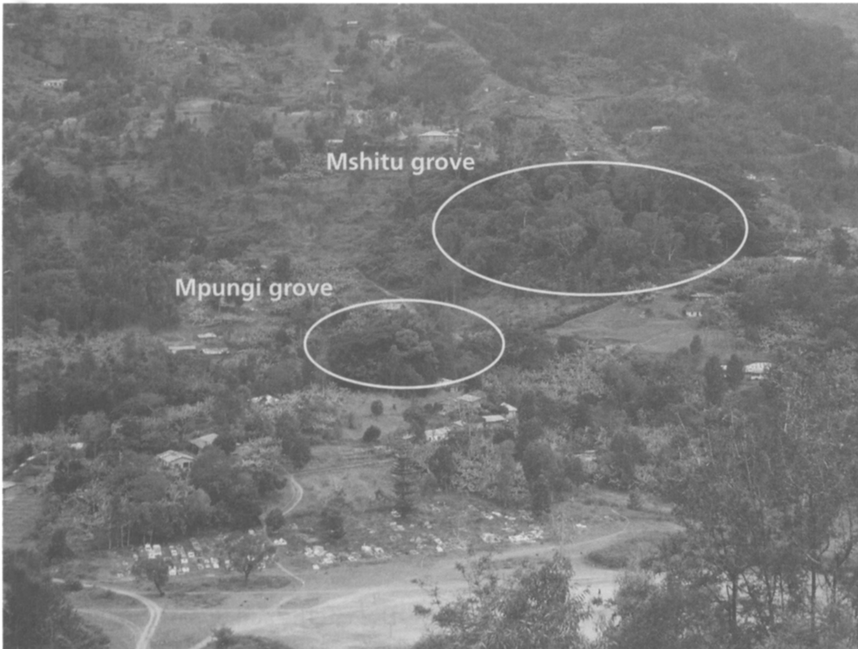

Photo 1: Two sacred groves in Usangi: The Mshitu wa Sereni (large oval) and the Mpungi wa Semvua (smaller oval).

assimilated into the Wasuya political system through initiation ceremonies held in sacred groves throughout the highlands. When the Wasangi clan arrived from Kenya in the seventeenth century, they adopted the Wasuya institutions and negotiated a partial autonomy from the Wasuya polity to form North Pare's southern settlement of Usangi. Sacred groves, and the political legitimacy they confer, have been both the glue and the solvent of politics in North Pare ever since.

Sacred groves stand out both visually and culturally in the North Pare landscape as concentrations of both vegetation and meaning among its fields, houses, markets, roads, and schools (see photo 1). According to the fundamental management rules, groves must be composed of only indigenous species and no vegetation may be cut.[5] There are two kinds of sacred groves in Pare; a *mpungi* is a small shrine of trees, usually an acre or less in size, whereas a *mshitu* is a forest ranging from three to ten acres. Each mpungi contains the skulls of a particular lineage's ancestors, and there the living ask the dead for their blessings (see photo 2). Young men are initiated into manhood in the mshitu forests, which are more powerful than the mpungi shrines—as well as far fewer in number—because they represent the ancestors of a ruling clan rather than an isolated lineage.[6] The sanctions for violating a mshitu are therefore far more severe than those for a mpungi, and cursing someone by performing a sacrifice in a mshitu is commonly

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Photo 2: Skulls on potsherds in a sacred grove, Usangi. The author did not enter this grove; it had been cut open by a road-building project. The ancestors had not yet announced their desire to relocate at the time of the photo.

considered to be attempted murder. As one mshitu caretaker expressed its power to me, "if you go in without permission, I'll go give some beer and say my two words and you won't last two days!" (interview, Sept. 10, 1997). More typically, however, elderly men sacrifice beer and meat to their ancestors to "cool" their anger and to forestall the disease, bad luck, drought, famine, and paranormal events that angry spirits are likely to send. The essential characteristic of a mshitu is its secrecy rather than its vegetation status, and it is for this reason that the idiom for "keeping secrets" and oath-taking in North Pare is *kula mshitu*—"eating a sacred forest."[7]

Each grove has a designated caretaker, typically the most senior male of a lineage or clan. These men are responsible for conducting sacrifices, organizing initiation rituals, and monitoring the integrity of their groves. Many of these elders also hold a variety of other local leadership roles. For example, Hamisi Saidi of Chomvu village tends the Kwa Mbendi mpungi, allocates water from the irrigation furrow next to his grove, and serves on the village Land Use Planning Committee. This does not mean, however, that sacred grove caretakers form a coherent publicly recognized group today. Their role depends on context, and people throughout North Pare invariably reckon who the caretaker should be for a given grove based on the logic of patrilineal kinship and the sort of action deemed necessary. Religious doctrine also shapes how these elders perform their caretaker duties. In my experience in North Pare, Lutheran Christians tend to neglect (or even destroy) their sacred groves, while Roman Catholics and Muslims

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maintain them. Actual ritual practice depends on the scale of the issues involved; as many caretakers expressed it, "Muslims go to the groves when they have a problem, and Christians go when they have a very big problem" (interviews, January–June 1998 and July 2004).

The Environmental History of Sacred Groves in North Pare

According to the local authorities, North Pare suffers massive deforestation driven by human population growth (*Guardian* 1997). This view is incorrect. North Pare's population grew rapidly over the twentieth century, and its farmers increased tree cover by planting exotic trees such as coffee and eucalyptus. The result is that the densities of both people and trees are now much higher than they were one hundred years ago (Gillson et al. 2003). Evidence for precolonial deforestation comes from the accounts of nineteenth-century travelers. One German explorer reported forests only in the nearly uninhabited northwestern quarter of North Pare and on the outer flanks of the massif. "Elsewhere," he wrote, "everything has been burned down for clearings, or, as on the higher zones of the mountains, the slopes are covered with low bushes, grass, or ferns" (Meyer 1891:223). A missionary related that "there [were] few forests, and most of the hills and mountains are bare" in the area (Althaus 1894:451). Finally, a geographer described the North Pare highlands as an agricultural mosaic: "The actual inhabited and cultivated area, which was originally well forested, and which still stands in scattered thick groups of trees, has long been developed [for agriculture]" (Baumann 1891:200). These "groups of trees" are clearly the hundreds of sacred groves that punctuate the Pare landscape today, and which now make up 8 percent of the land area of Mwanga District and 68 percent of its total forested area (Semgalawe 1996). Most of these (77%) lie in the densely settled zone between four thousand and forty-six hundred feet above sea level (Ylhäisi 2004:117).

In my interviews in Usangi in 1997 and 2004, officials of the Tanzania Forestry Action Plan (a forestry program sponsored by the German government through the GTZ agency) often identified the sacred groves as remnants of North Pare's original forest.[8] Indeed, the existence of patches of indigenous trees helped to justify the program. The project (active from 1991 to 2003) was based on the assumption that the "mountains used to be an area favourable to agriculture with large tracts of land under forest," but that recent population pressure had meant that "traditional environmental protection measures and farming practises could not ensure the sustainability of the natural resources" (GTZ 2003). This scenario compressed hundreds of years of landscape transformation into a crisis narrative demanding immediate action (Leach & Mearns 1996). The idea that North Pare's sacred groves were unchanged relics of a pristine forest appealed to both the development planners and the groves' caretakers, who still insist that their ancestors "carved" these groves from the larger forest as the

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Table 1: Species Composition of the Sacred Groves of North Pare

Species designation	Vernacular name (in Chasu)	Fruit-bearing?
Unknown	Iramboni	Unknown
Albizia gummifera versicolor	Mtanga	No
Albizia shimperana	Nyasutu	No
Bridelia micrantha	Mwira	Yes
Combretum schumanii	Muhama	Yes
Cordia abyssinica	Mringaringa	Yes
Croton macrostachyus	Mfirifiri	Yes, but poisonous to humans
Croton megalocarpus	Muhande	Yes
Diospyro mespiliformis	Mdulu	Yes
Dracaena usambarensis (shrub)	Ithae	Yes
Ficus sycamorus	Mkuu	Yes
Ficus thonningii	Mvumo	Yes
Maerua triphylla	Mluhindi	Unknown
Manilkara mochisia	Ihuu	Yes
Manilkara zanzibarensis	Mgambo	Unknown
Sonchus taraxasifolia	Msanga	Unknown
Syzigium guineense	Mlama wa Chasu	Yes

Note: The species list is from Mzee Iddi Mkenga of Usangi. Species identification by Haruni Mbilinyi. Data on fruit edibility from Hines and Eckman (1993).

founding acts of settlement. Such statements about "carving" cannot be taken at face value, however. The identification of the groves as primeval forest may suit the goals of the different social actors attempting to restore a static harmony of culture and ecology, which they call (according to their preferred point of view) either "tradition" or "sustainability." But these groves owe their existence to tenurial legitimacy and political authority, and their creation narratives are tales about social relationships rather than ecological descriptions.

It is likely that the mpungi exist today primarily because of the rapid segmentation of kin groups in precolonial Pare (Kimambo & Omari 1972), and also because of unintended ecological consequences. After arriving in the area, male elders established a sacrificial spot under a tree near their new homes, which legitimized the immigrants' rights to land and their place in society. As the families grew and created new homesteads and farms, they were prone to segmentation. The sacrificial areas therefore became places that maintained lineage unity through collective rituals. This social process interacted with the dynamics of banana-based long-fallow agriculture (see Sheridan 2002) to produce sacred groves as coevolved features of the

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North Pare landscape. Many groves cover rocky outcrops or springs, and as farmers transformed the North Pare landscape with ax and fire, the groves grew from shrubs and trees left on nonarable areas. With a prohibition on cutting vegetation within a ritualized area, the margins of each sacred grove grew into thick walls of greenery rather quickly because of the availability of sunlight from multiple directions. Many of the trees commonly found in the sacred groves are fruit-bearing (see table 1), so it is likely that many germinated from seeds carried there by birds and primates that still use them today as refuges and migration corridors. The result, as Baumann saw in 1890, is "scattered thick groups of trees" in a landscape of farms and pasture.

That these groves have, for the most part, persisted through a period of rapid population growth is testament to their importance in North Pare society. The people of North Pare are quite aware of the many ecosystem services that their mpungi and mshitu provide, and often point out the groves' ecological functions when discussing soil and water conservation projects.[9] It is likely, however, that the groves contribute less to faunal biodiversity than they did a century ago. Vertebrate animals such as eagles and duikers figure prominently in North Pare oral histories, yet they are increasingly rare today. The predators and large herbivores were hunted out long ago, and the smaller species are fewer in number because the pasture and fallowed fields that once lay adjacent to the sacred groves have recently become intensively cropped fields. In 1982 only 18 percent of the groves in North Pare were completely encircled by farms and houses, but 69 percent were circumscribed by 1997 (Ylhäisi 2004:119). As is the case for other African forests, therefore, linking social history and ecology offers more insight than assuming that sacred groves are shards of a lost "balance of nature" (and culture).

The Political History of Sacred Groves in North Pare

The sacred groves of North Pare are fine examples of ritual-ecological institutions on Africa's internal frontier, and North Pare's sacred groves have been inseparable from the area's political dynamics for at least five hundred years. While there was no central authority over sacrifices in the mpungi shrines, the mshitu forests served as basic political institutions throughout the region. By establishing a special council of elders to supervise the content and practice of initiation, the chiefs of Ugweno directly controlled the means for youths to marry, bear children, achieve respect, and eventually have their skulls installed in the clan or lineage shrine. In the sixteenth century the Wasuya chiefs of Ugweno lengthened the ceremony into a six-month period of intensive political, military, and cultural training backed by a series of oaths and ordeals (Kimambo 1969:52). Clan histories assert that the mshitu forests were the primary means of social control and community-building because initiation ceremonies made immigrants socially

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legitimate. Usangi became an exception when the Wasangi clan secured the right to oversee their own initiation ceremonies, as long as they sent regular tribute to Ugweno. This was significant because the combination of ritual and political authority made the Wasangi the only clan in North Pare with the same sort of legitimacy as the Wasuya chiefs of Ugweno. Usangi broke away from Ugweno in the mid-eighteenth century with the help of mercenaries from the Mbaga chiefdom of South Pare.

The sacred groves of North Pare are central social institutions that link diverse cultural domains such as land tenure, moral order, and political legitimacy. Even today, each mpungi serves as a prominent reminder of the legitimate land tenure of a patrilineage; the presence of skulls, for example, demonstrates how long a patrilineage has occupied its land. Another pragmatic function of the mpungi shrines is the maintenance of moral order. Parents regularly admonish their children to behave because their ancestors are watching them, and victims of injustice can seek revenge by sacrificing to the skulls. Many residents of Usangi say that sacrificing in a mpungi gives faster and more equitable justice than the local court does. For example, when someone stole a contact switch from a milling machine in January 1998, the miller led a goat down the main road through Usangi, loudly declaring that he was going to sacrifice in a mpungi the next day. The women in the marketplace began to shout, "Eee, this man is going to kill someone!" and the thief returned the part before nightfall (interview with the miller, Jan. 8, 1998).

While the smaller mpungi shrines mediate relationships with ancestors, the larger mshitu forests represent political and ecological relationships. The political functions of the mshitu made them critical resources for the ruling clans of the precolonial chiefdoms of North Pare, and not only because the initiation ceremonies formalized the chiefs' social control. In Usangi the legitimacy of the ruling Wasangi clan became increasingly precarious after they allowed their Wambaga allies from South Pare to settle on their border with Ugweno in the eighteenth century. One condition of the alliance was that the Wambaga had to return to their own mshitu forests in South Pare rather than participating in the Wasangi-dominated rituals in Usangi, but they could practice rainmaking and accept farmers' tribute for this service. The Wasangi also claimed that their sacrifices brought rain; as one irrigation manager put it, "the old men went into the mshitu, and as soon as they came out it would begin to drizzle" (interview, Oct. 28, 1997). The Wasangi failed to contain the power of their allies because rainmaking and tribute collection gave the Wambaga their own claim to political legitimacy (see Håkansson 1998). By the middle of the nineteenth century the Wambaga had formed a chiefdom that rivaled that of the Wasangi, and they were quickly outpacing the latter in wealth and influence. The Wambaga chief Kengia created new marketplaces to supply provisions, ivory, and slaves to caravans from the coast (von der Decken & Kersten 1978:18). The guns, cloth, and wire that he received gave him a distinct advantage over

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his Wasangi rivals, and interchiefdom relations became increasingly fractious. Violence broke out during an initiation ceremony when the Wasangi assumed that Kengia's son was going to force his way into the mshitu forest at Mbale. A period of intense internecine warfare, lawlessness, and famine (now known as *Kibonda* throughout Pare) began in the early 1870s, culminating in 1891–92 with German intervention and the deaths of most of the Wambaga ruling family.[10]

Colonial and Postcolonial Political Ecology

The politics of sacred groves in North Pare did not fade with the imposition of colonial rule; rather, their new roles reflected other processes of cultural and social change.[11] Specifically, the history of Usangi's mshitu forests dovetailed with the rivalry between the Wambaga and Wasangi clans throughout the British colonial era. Horrified by exaggerated accounts of North Pare initiation rituals, the British prohibited the ceremonies throughout the Pare range in 1923 (Tanzania National Archives [hereafter TNA] 1733/23). Kin groups continued to sacrifice in their mpungi, and the Wasangi clan defended their mshitu as sacred areas, but this ban and the spread of Christianity and Islam undermined the political salience of the groves from 1923 to 1948. For most of this period the chief of Usangi Division was Sabuni Naguvu of the Wambaga clan. Since the establishment of indirect rule in 1926 had reduced the number of chiefs in Usangi Division from nine to three, the Wasangi clan was formally shut out of local government (TNA microfilm 11). The Wasangi had long been campaigning for recognition as the legitimate ruling clan of Usangi and they were outraged when the colonial administration allowed William Sabuni to succeed his father in 1948. As a result they began to vigorously assert their control of the mshitu forests, the defining political symbol for the Wasangi, in repeated displays of what Spivak (1987:205) has called strategic essentialism—the vigorous assertion of a particular interpretation of tradition and authenticity (see also Spear 2003).

In 1951 William Sabuni convicted two Wasangi elders of supervising an illegal initiation and charged them the maximum fine of Tsh 200/= (£10) and six months of hard labor. Although the district commissioner waived the labor, the Wasangi were sufficiently incensed (and sophisticated) to appeal to an international authority, submitting a petition to the United Nations Trusteeship Council for a review of Sabuni's legitimacy. The major complaint in the petition was that the chief had "the intention of disallowing and killing this [initiation ceremony] as it is closely tied and associated with ruling affairs" (TNA 19/11/2B/196; U.N. Trusteeship Council 1955). Before the U.N. had addressed the petition the colonial administration responded to the situation in 1952 by allowing the initiation ceremonies to take place in North Pare, but only under the direct supervision of the Wambuga chief (or his representative) (TNA 19/12/2A/II/233), who was

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to stand at the entrance to the mshitu forest and collect a fee from each initiate as he entered. This was a British attempt to foster the "tribal unity" that indirect rule demanded, but such direct control of a Wasangi ritual by a Wambaga chief was antithetical to the eighteenth-century political agreement between these two clans. While waiting for the United Nations to act, the Wasangi elders supervised illegal initiations, were often arrested, and repeatedly paid the maximum fine of Tsh 200/=. When the petition failed in 1955, the Wasangi leaders responded by recasting their campaign for control of the mshitu forests as an environmental issue.

The forests had long carried an indigenous political and ecological symbolism as bringers of rain, but colonial development programs contributed yet another layer of meaning. In the early 1950s Usangi was the focal point of the Pare Mass Literacy Scheme, which taught adults to read and write using soil and water conservation literature (Mason 1952; *Fundamentals of Adult Education* 1955–56a, 1955-56b). Specifically, district administrators wanted to protect water sources, ban livestock from steep slopes and hilltops, and mandate tree planting (TNA 517/A3/13/1). Adopting this rhetoric for their political campaign, the Wasangi accused Chief Sabuni's assistant, Sefu Mbwana, of grazing livestock and burning trees in the Mshitu wa Mbale forest. In 1931 Chief Sabuni had given Mbwana, then his personal bodyguard, permission to establish a cassava farm on the area of the forest that had been damaged by Lutheran missionaries.[12] Mbwana planted *Eucalyptus globulus* and *Grevillia robusta* seedlings in 1937 after the district commissioner had ordered all Native Authority staff to plant trees on the bare summits of North Pare. But from 1937 to 1956 Mbwana repeatedly cut and burned his trees to make charcoal on the spot and allowed the stumps to coppice (Mbwana n.d.). In July 1956 the Wasangi, by then organized into a political party called the Wasangi Union, wrote to the Pare Council formally accusing Mbwana of destroying a sacred grove (TNA 517/A2/2/58). The Council ordered Mbwana to stop cutting trees, and the Wasangi brought powerful allies to survey the damage to their grove. Three chiefs from South Pare visited Usangi and sent a sympathetic report to the Pare Council stressing that the area "is of great value, and must be preserved as it was by our fathers, because it gives water, shade, and clean air, and it preserves the hilltop of Mbale" (TNA 517/A2/2/88).[13] The Wasangi won the legal skirmish, and in 1960 they installed Sangiwa Mtengeti II as chief of Usangi and revived initiation ceremonies in all five of Usangi's mshitu forests. These initiations are still held every year in September and usually involve about thirty initiates in a secret six-day training program.

After the transformation of local government from chiefdoms to a local administrative structure under direct government control, the mshitu forests became much less politically relevant. Throughout Usangi people still refer to the mshitu as part of the ongoing discussion about who would be the chief of Usangi today if Nyerere had not changed the structure of local government (see Sheridan 2004), and both the mshitu and mpungi

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groves have maintained their importance as areas for initiation and sacrifice. However, after independence they no longer benefited from political protection, and many informants reported that in the early 1960s farmers were quick to deduce that colonial era conservation laws no longer applied. Water sources, swamps, riverbanks, and sacred groves were invaded and cultivated throughout North Pare. Many groves, such as the Mshitu wa Kena, lost up to half of their area to encroachment by farmers hungry for their rich soil. Some mpungi were completely destroyed.

Much of this decline in the value of the groves was based on (and justified by) religious differences. By the 1960s most people in Usangi identified themselves as either Christian or Muslim, and attitudes toward the sacred groves followed this cultural and generational divide. In general, most of the men who now value sacred groves are Muslims. Most of the groves that have been cut or destroyed were those managed by Christians, and farmers, in fact, often defend grove encroachment as a demonstration of Christian fervor. At public meetings in Usangi I often heard many Christians and young men say that the sacred forests were "absurdities," and that their elderly caretakers should "go with the times." The old men's ironic rejoinder was usually some version of the question, "if we go with the times, where will that take us?"

Thus the caretakers' struggle to maintain their groves has become increasingly difficult since independence. Although the local government regulations explicitly protect the sacred groves, the legal procedure to stop someone from cutting a grove is cumbersome, time-consuming, and expensive. The process became particularly difficult in the 1970s, when the Tanzanian government urged farmers to maximize production. Under such circumstances, the caretakers say, "the farmer could not be wrong," and the offenders just had to insist that they had been following the government policy that "politics is agriculture" (TANU 1972). The caretakers' defense of the groves became even more precarious in the late 1980s, when the Tanzanian government began to liberalize its economy under pressure from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The value of the shilling plummeted, and the fines that offenders paid in court did not keep up with inflation. In the 1980s and 1990s, those found guilty of cutting a tree in a sacred grove paid a fine of Tsh 1000/=. This was a heavy penalty (about US$100) when the district's Protected Areas By-Laws were passed in 1984, but today it is worth only about US$0.75. And given the fact that the plaintiff must supply the court with paper, pens, and the occasional bribe, sacred grove caretakers find legal proceedings expensive, while offenders find them cheap compared to the profits to be gained from a good-sized log. If the judgment goes against the plaintiff, a caretaker often must reimburse the defendant's legal costs, so caretakers must carefully evaluate the chances of winning and the costs of losing.

The latest development for Usangi's sacred groves involved the German-funded Tanzania Forestry Action Plan–North Pare (TFAP), which

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from 1992 until 2003 promoted terracing, agroforestry, and the use of fuel-efficient stoves through village-based land use planning committees. TFAP administrators soon realized that the project should involve the area's major examples of indigenous environmental conservation, the sacred groves. Tanzania's forestry policy was also calling for their protection (United Republic of Tanzania 1997:11).[14] After a series of discussions with sacred grove caretakers, German and local TFAP administrators organized a meeting of more than two hundred elderly men from all over North Pare in May 1996 to discuss the ecological and cultural values of the groves. Participants agreed to conserve the groves because they house the skulls of the ancestors, bring rain, and protect the aquifers of many springs and water sources. The meeting participants decided that the best ways to protect the mpungi and mshitu were by formalizing the customary fines for violating a sacred grove, marking their borders with *Dracaena* plants, and "strengthening" them by planting indigenous trees (Semvua 1996; TFAP 1997). Although the customary fines still have no legal basis as district by-laws (which require ratification by the central government, a notoriously slow process), this meeting and the dissemination of the schedule of fines have given caretakers a powerful tool to punish violators. As the grove caretakers themselves are quick to point out, however, the fines may not withstand close legal scrutiny.

On the whole, this amalgam of rational bureaucratic process and ritualized forest management has been successful. Sacred grove caretakers told me in 2004 that the formalization of sanctions had strengthened their management capacity and prevented grove encroachment. A 2003 ecological assessment of the sacred groves in Ugweno (the northern half of the North Pare massif) suggested that the new rules and adequate rainfall had hastened their ecological recovery since the mid-1990s (Ylhäisi 2004:121). As is often the case, however, this new institutional dynamic has had some unexpected consequences, caused in this instance by the tenurial implications of tree planting and, in response, the custodial behavior of some local caretakers. As in many parts of Africa, the act of planting trees in Pare creates long-term use-rights, yet kin groups claim ownership (Fortmann 1988). The land tenure system of North Pare features seasonal land loans, landholding patrilineages, and the omnipresent potential for the state to assert its ultimate ownership of land. Farmers who borrow land, and particularly female farmers, are enjoined from planting trees because this can create use-rights that last decades. Although they sought to "strengthen" the groves, TFAP and the local government did not recognize that these tenurial muddles apply to sacred groves.

There is no source for indigenous tree seedlings in North Pare, so TFAP provided ficus cuttings—which propagate vegetatively—for the groves' caretakers to plant under the supervision of the Divisional Forestry Officer and TFAP extensionists in 1998. Most of these cuttings failed to take root and dried up, however, and many of those that did sprout roots were

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found later with dry roots in the air and their leaves underground. TFAP administrators thought that encroaching farmers were preventing the cuttings from flourishing by inverting them. But when I asked the caretakers about this issue, they explained that they had sabotaged the project themselves. Sacred grove caretakers are keenly aware of Tanzanian land tenure ambiguities, which they usually summarize as "I own what I have planted, but the land belongs to the government." They point to their government's authoritarian style, the nationalization of private property after the 1967 Arusha Declaration, and the many examples of uncompensated land seizures. They also apply the logic of the tree tenure system to their own situation when they evaluate their rights to manage sacred groves. When TFAP asked them to plant trees, the caretakers complied, but reasoned (correctly) that forest administration would revert to government officials after the German project left. TFAP's use-rights to those ficus saplings would therefore pass to the local government, which meant that each "strengthened" sacred grove would be encircled by government ownership. It was not too difficult to imagine a future government order declaring the sacred groves to be Forest Reserves, and no longer kin group property.

The key issue is that the sacred groves of North Pare connote social order and morality—and the TFAP intervention upset the logic and meaning of local control. As one elder said, "Why does TFAP need to know the number of trees and the size of a mpungi? Are they going to sue somebody if it changes? The elders think they want to take them from us.... We don't have development now, we only have fear and doubt" (interview with Land Use Planning Committee member, Feb. 3, 1998). The bureaucratic imperative to rationalize sacred grove management foundered, therefore, in a tenurial morass that the administrators did not understand or anticipate. Efforts to reinforce existing management patterns, however, were more welcomed and successful.

Conclusions

This account has shown how the ecological status of African sacred groves is linked not only to their spiritual significance, but also to politics, economics, and legal processes. As is often the case in sub-Saharan Africa, land tenure in Pare is a negotiated social process rather than a structure of rules and rights. Because various social relationships of land use, kinship, political authority, and metaphysics intersect in African sacred groves, the trees have been particularly vulnerable to the institutional changes introduced by colonial and postcolonial states. The sacred groves of North Pare were once a means to institutionalize kin group rituals and mechanisms for social control in polities that were expanding by assimilating immigrants. The groves were symbols of legitimate land tenure, political authority, and moral order. The social and cultural transformations of colonial rule and independence did not replace these functions of the groves; rather, they added new layers

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of meaning. The groves' latest layer of meaning is their value as examples of indigenous conservation, in the pursuit of which their caretakers have been able to negotiate complex relationships with the local government and an internationally funded development agency. Insofar as all of these layers of meaning contribute to decisions to cut or preserve trees, social history and political ecology have quite tangible effects on the ecological dynamics of culturally significant vegetation patches.

The complexities of local history and politics surrounding the sacred groves should make us cautious, but moderately optimistic, about their long-term survival in North Pare and other parts of Africa. As governments and conservation agencies struggle to create community-based conservation that protects biodiversity and promotes sustainable livelihoods, sacred groves are, in many ways, ideal for such efforts. It must be remembered, however, that the cultural values and institutions that maintain sacred groves are perhaps analogous to, but not really the equivalent of, the scientific concept of an ecosystem (Berkes et al. 1998). What's more, any link between sacred groves and conservation that implies either an ecological or social equilibrium is probably misguided, since much of the data on sacred grove ecology, social organization, and meaning in Africa show dynamism and transformation rather than stasis. Tropical forest patches often exist in states of ecological flux, African communities are not characterized by uniform values and organization, and the meanings of sacred groves are often multiple, overlapping, and ambiguous.

Efforts to decentralize and democratize resource management in Africa are often fraught with contradictions such as these (Manor 2005). Bureaucratic demands for communities with marked boundaries and permanent membership can foster divisive politics in which once-flexible social networks harden into blocs of "stakeholders" and "outsiders" (Geschiere 2004). As this case study of North Pare shows, the political and historical dynamics of African sacred groves can make their incorporation into conservation policy problematic at best. The complex and overlapping ecological, sociopolitical, and moral aspects of sacred groves are not reducible to bureaucratic planning, and rationalizing these sites in order to enhance biodiversity can threaten the very local land management institutions that conservationists want to support.[15] Sacredness, as Roy Rappaport (1999) emphasized, is usually unquestionable, dangerous, and secret. This does not make for a good fit with the transparency, accountability, and empiricism that most conservation bureaucracies require. The potential for the co-management of African sacred groves is now emerging as a result of policy reforms that are decentralizing land and tree tenure to local authorities (Alden Wily 2008), but few conservation institutions have engaged African sacred sites on their own terms. This would require administrators to investigate and document the complex (and often disputed) history, meanings, and legal status of African sacred groves. What is needed are policies based on both social and natural science, a hybrid sort of conservation in which

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sacred grove caretakers would need to be empowered as equal stakeholders alongside ecologists and bureaucrats.[16] Finally, it would be necessary for conservation practitioners to accept (and perhaps embrace?) a processual approach that includes negotiated social dynamics and shifting meanings rather than steady states of ecology and society.

Tanzanian government agencies and NGOs could, for example, create such a hybridized co-management system in North Pare by agreeing to caretakers' requests that outsiders offer sacrifices (e.g., of beer or meat) in sacred groves when introducing new management procedures and goals. Development agencies could help kin groups undertake the costly process of having their groves surveyed in order to get title deeds. Tree nurseries could stock indigenous species, and the status of *Dracaena* as a boundary marker could be formalized in the area's by-laws. Outside agencies could facilitate a forum for the area's religious leaders to discuss how religion relates to environmental protection. Such discourses and practices would have the potential of redefining conservation in North Pare, where most farmers now say that the Kiswahili term *hifadhi* (conservation) really means government ownership and mismanagement.[17]

The particular local history of ecology, society, and culture means that there is unlikely to be a single blueprint for managing sacred groves in Africa. The vital issue facing scholars, conservationists, and sacred grove caretakers is not how conservation policy can absorb the beneficial ecological and social functions of sacred groves in Africa; rather, the challenge is to allow the diversity and dynamics of African sacred groves to transform the nature of conservation.

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Notes

1. Better terms, which would accentuate the wide social and ecological variability of these sites, might be "culturally significant trees" or perhaps "ethnoforests." The term *sacred grove* does, however, dominate the literature, so here I follow this commonplace usage.
2. The kaya forests of coastal Kenya are particularly well-documented sacred groves. See, for example, Nyamweru and Kimaru (2008), Parkin (1991), Spear (1978), and Willis (1996).
3. For elements of this narrative, see Anoliefo et al. (2003), Bagine (1998), Chidhakwa (2003), Mwihomeke et al. (1998), Okeke (1999), Sibanda (1997), Tchamie (2000), Warren and Pinkston (1998), and Ylhäisi (2000).
4. Many authors emphasize that sacred groves correspond with horticultural modes of production worldwide; see, for example, Gadgil and Guha (1992:38), Gokhale et al. (1998:366), Hughes (1994:170).
5. The rule against cutting trees in a sacred grove is usually interpreted quite strictly by its caretaker. Even if a fallen tree hits a house, the homeowner cannot cut the tree without the caretaker's permission and the necessary sacrifices.
6. This article does not describe initiation rituals because their content has no direct bearing on the political ecology of North Pare. The ceremonies consisted of a series of physical hardships and lessons about law, politics, and sexuality (Lebulu 1979).
7. Oath-taking in Pare typically involves ingesting an herbal concoction that will, in theory, cause one's stomach to burst if the oath is violated.
8. GTZ is the Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, or the Agency for Technical Cooperation. It is a private company owned by the German government.
9. Much of this discourse emphasizes that the ancestors had deep ecological wisdom when they established the groves, and that current conservation efforts should reinforce rather than replace indigenous methods. In the conservation meetings I attended in 1997–98, these subtle critiques were consistently ignored by development planners.
10. This was part of a widespread regional process of ecological, economic, and political disruption throughout East Africa (Kjekshus 1977).
11. For a review of the colonial political economy of Pare, see Kimambo (1991).
12. Labor and taxation policies were major agents of change in the German colo-

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nial period (ca. 1885–1917), but in the North Pare highlands missionaries were more influential. Hans Fuchs established a Leipzig Lutheran Mission station in July 1900 and developed a reputation for cutting down sacred groves during his long career in North Pare (1900–34). Because North Pare was largely deforested by the early twentieth century, he built churches and houses with local sacred logs and secular timber from Usambara and Kilimanjaro (Fuchs 1901:38).

13. The original handwritten copy of this report (TNA 517/A2/2/73) includes a sketch map of the forest, with streams marked in blue. A note in Kiswahili at the bottom of the map says that "the damage caused first by the missionaries and then by people of Usangi has dried up these four streams. Now all people must care for this Mshitu so that they will always get rain clouds and clean air from it."
14. The policy calls for village governments to be responsible for forests not already under central government control as Forest Reserves. The policy states that "existing traditional forests with established indigenous management systems will be protected from any disturbance and new traditional forests will be encouraged to be established."
15. For examples of calls to rationalize African sacred groves, see Dorm-Adzobu et al. (1991), Mgumia and Oba (2003), and Okafar and Ladipo (1995).
16. The call for hybrid scientific research can be found in Batterbury, Forsyth, and Thomson (1997).
17. Undoubtedly such efforts would also foster new complexities in regard to neo-traditionalism (Spear 2003) and the simplification of belief systems (Ranger 1999). For examples of efforts to create ostensibly "traditional" organizations for planting trees and maintaining forest cover in Africa by reference to notions of "sacredness," see Baker (1931) and Daneel (2001). These case studies (from colonial Kenya and independent Zimbabwe, respectively) showed how difficult it is for outsider conservationists to synthesize disparate value systems and principles of social organization. Both efforts created supposedly "traditional" secret brotherhoods of men, and both had short-term success and long-term failure because of symbolic and organizational contradictions.

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