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TREES, SOCIAL POWER, AND ECOSYSTEMS

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African Sacred Groves: Ecological Dynamics and Social Change. Edited by MICHAEL J. SHERIDAN and CELIA NYAMWERU. Oxford: James Currey; Athens OH: Ohio University Press; Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2008. Pp. x + 230. £45 (ISBN 978-1-84701-401-6 James Currey); £16.95 paperback (ISBN 978-1-84701-400-9 James Currey); R160, paperback (ISBN 978-1-86888-494-0 UNISA); \$59.95 (ISBN 10-0-8214-1788-6 Ohio University Press); \$26.95 paperback (ISBN 10-0-8214-1789-4 Ohio University Press).

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African Sacred Groves offers a diverse set of essays by ecological scientists, social scientists and forestry practitioners. In a well-executed introduction, co-editor Michael J. Sheridan delivers a critical discussion of 'relic theories' of sacred groves. Raising questions about relic interpretations will be the major intervention of the volume. You won't finish this book thinking that sacred groves and the people in them exist as remnants of an earlier landscape or tradition.

Two opening chapters describe the human ecology of these forests. Aiah Lebbie and Raymond Gureis build a case against relic theories with non-equilibrium ecological theory. Studying groves in Sierra Leone, they find notable diversity in small patches, but argue that disturbance rather than stasis is responsible. A chapter on the Kaya forests of the Mijikenda people of coastal Kenya assembles a broad array of evidence to reconstruct the history of forests and their human uses. The authors of the chapter, co-editor Celia Nyamweru and three others, chart a long (140,000-year) history of ecological change, including at least 2,000 years of human settlement. Contemporary fieldwork by two of the co-authors has produced histories of the ways people used different species in the forest and regulated use. They find evidence for a lot of environmental change and also for increasing human pressure.

The following chapters have fewer biological data. Contributors from the social sciences assail relic theories with an emphasis on the dynamism of human society and culture. While skepticism about relic theories draws the volume together, there is no common definition of 'sacred groves'. The term itself is questionable: 'sacred' is not appropriate because these are spaces of amoral power; 'grove' is misleading because the places may contain as little as a site which formerly held a single tree. Furthermore, the sorts of things that fall within the category of 'sacred forest' hold inconsistent promise for conservation.

The book's emphasis on dynamic processes reveals groves as spaces for the application of social power. This is repeatedly and convincingly demonstrated in the case studies. Eric Ross discusses baobab and kapok palaver trees in Senegal: 'Far from reflecting an idyllic state of democracy, such palaver trees were sites for ostentatious public displays of power and class privilege. They were places of power, marking social inequality and conferring political legitimacy by invoking the process of settlement foundation' (p. 139). In terms of biology and cultural

significance, the groves in Ethiopia are very different from Senegal's palaver trees, but the chapter by Tsehai Berhane-Selassie builds on the analysis offered by Ross. In Ethiopia, ritual use of sacred groves marked claims to resources and social status, but interventions by the revolutionary government undercut two types of grove specialists; artisan castes were displaced from groves during resettlements and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church lost authority and resources. Social power, rituals and groves have been redefined during these struggles.

Wood cutting also changes power dynamics. Alma Gottlieb explains that Beng of Côte d'Ivoire have historically accrued spiritual wealth from the groves, but, more recently, loggers have accrued economic wealth. Both sorts of wealth create power. According to the chapter by Ute Siebert, political and economic changes bring changes to the norms that protect groves. Young men in several villages in Northern Benin sought and received greater rights to cut lumber in groves associated with spirits. The spirits accepted compensation for increased logging; one grove even moved to an alternative location.

Gérard Chouin draws on theory of landscape and memory to search out the historic moments that led to the creation of groves in Ghana. Because the groves are historical creations, they are reinvented and even destroyed. In some cases, people built houses for spirits displaced by tree cutting. Chouin reaches a conclusion similar to others in the book: 'Sacred groves are created for social purposes and are typically used by local elites within the context of specific historical trajectories' (p. 193). Nadia Rabesahala Horning states the power equation bluntly: that the objects actually protected in sacred forests are 'local leaders' socio-economic interests' (p. 117).

We have come a long way from sacred groves as conserved glades of biodiversity. The contributors have led us past single urban trees of non-threatened species, through interchangeable and shrinking stands of forest, to walls marking a spot where trees used to stand. All chapters reinforce the message that the existence of politically and spiritually significant trees reflects social power and does not necessarily promote ecosystem protection.

It is interesting and understandable that the final two essays by forestry and development practitioners offer the strongest arguments that local and state regulations can protect ecosystems, if they are joined with economic incentives. The co-editors Celia Nyamweru and Sheridan also make a case for 'cautious optimism' in their look forward (p. 27), but their hope is less that ecosystems will be safe than that policy makers could devise a better model, one based on dynamic understandings of society, ecology and resources.

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MISSIONS AND COLONIAL RULE

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KEY WORDS: Accommodation to colonialism, Christianity, missions.

This volume is the outcome of a panel at the 48th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, held in Washington DC in 2005. It aims to re-examine the