



# May vodun sacred spaces be considered as a natural patrimony ?

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## PART I : SACRED SPACES IN RITUAL PRACTICES

### May *Vodun* Sacred Spaces be Considered as a Natural Patrimony ?

Dominique Juhé-Beaulaton and Bernard Roussel<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

For the last ten years, both in the north and the south, the notion of patrimony applied to natural objects has been used more and more to justify targets of nature protection and management (Humbert & Lefeuvre 1992; Cormier-Salem & Roussel 2000). The setting of biodiversity conservation policies is frequently required to take into consideration, and even to define, natural patrimonies.<sup>2</sup>

In the *Aja-Tado* cultural area<sup>3</sup> (south of Benin and Togo), access to and management of some special spaces and natural objects – trees and forests, springs and water places, etc. – are strictly controlled by the religious rules of the *vodun*<sup>4</sup> cult. These sacred sites, more precisely forests and woodlands, and their biodiversity have been noticed both by scientists and managers specializing in questions of conservation (Mama 1985; Sokpon et al. 1998; Zoundjihekpon & Dossou-Glehouenou 1999). “[Sacred groves] are a proof of the capacities of traditional societies to protect biodiversity,”<sup>5</sup> as was stated by Kokou (1998 : 1). Others stress the “millennial” management of sacred forests drawing upon “values close to sustainable development values”<sup>6</sup> (Ofoumon 1997) and regard it as a “vital patrimony” for the surrounding human communities (Ofoumon 1997; Agbo & Sokpon 1998).

Our two-fold approach, ethnobiological and historical, allows us to describe the evolution of cultural representations, management and practices, and to discuss the previous points of view, most especially the last one. Without taking issue with this polysemic notion of natural patrimony (Ecole Nationale du Patrimoine, hereafter E.N.P. 1995), we will analyze first the link between sacred sites and local biodiversity. The description of its management will give us some information about the relevance of sacrality in terms of conservation and sustainable uses. Then, we will try to derive from the cases investigated the three main properties usually associated with patrimonial matters (Babelon & Chastel 1994; Bady in E.N.P. 1995 : 12) : Are sacred sites inherited ? Are they passed on to future generations ? Are they taking part in

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<sup>2</sup> This approach is strongly promoted by the Convention on Biological Diversity (<http://www.biodiv.org/convention/articles.asp>). Article 8j, for instance, recommends “to maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities [...] relevant for the conservation of biological diversity” which appears as patrimony for those communities rather than a heritage of mankind. (Glowka et al. 1996).

<sup>3</sup> *Tado* is a town, actually Togolese, which was a historical center for the spread of the *Aja* people. All the groups concerned have common cultural particularities, such as language and religious practices related to their common geographical origin : *Oyo*, a *yoruba* city, located in Nigeria.

<sup>4</sup> *Vodun* or *vodu* according to linguistic contexts : *Fon* for the first one; *Ewe-Gen* for the second.

<sup>5</sup> “[Les îlots forestiers sacrés] sont une démonstration de la capacité des sociétés traditionnelles à conserver la biodiversité.”

<sup>6</sup> “valeurs très proches de celles du développement durable.”

the reproduction of some cultural practices, the handing down of memories and of a joint identity ?

### Various Spaces and Natural Objects under the Control of Religion

Throughout the whole *vodun* countryside, all the territorial components are distinguished and managed by sacred rules that have a great effect upon all the uses of it, individual as well as collective. However, in certain places, religious practices take precedence over all others, in particular over uses for agriculture and forestry. They are, indeed, considered as places of communication with the divine, with the Beyond.

Sacred places can be natural sites, such as springs, ponds, rocks and termitaries. They can also be constructed, such as in the case of sanctuaries, altars and representations of protective gods, like, for instance, the great anthropomorphic *legba*, built near crossroads, market places and alongside roads. The various elements of biodiversity (trees and grasses, bushes, groves and forests, etc.), whether spontaneous or not, are to differing degrees deeply connected with them.

All these places have in common the role of being used as theatres for religious rites. Generally speaking, all the ceremonies connected to the cults of the ancestors (*togbe*, or *toxwo*)<sup>7</sup> and to the *vodun*,<sup>8</sup> take place there, in particular, initiations, prayers and offerings. The foods of the gods, *vodun nan dudu*, are presented before altars. *Vosa*, expiatory offerings, are set down at the feet of *legba*.

Sacred areas also have very important functions in *vodun*-related therapies : plants named *ama*, liturgical and medicinal, are often collected there; sick persons spend some time there in order to receive treatments (Roussel 1994). Special obsequies, for very young children or unexpected decease, are performed there. Ordeals and meetings of some occult associations, such as *Zangbeto*, *Kuvito* or *Oro*, very important for maintaining order, justice and social cohesion, are organized in sacred groves and forests. In addition, traditional dignitaries, for instance the kings of Allada and Abomey,<sup>9</sup> are crowned in *Togudo* and *Agbobozun* forests (Juhé-Beaulaton 1999).

The functions fulfilled by the sacred places are always accompanied by peculiarities in their management. First of all, admission is regulated. Though some sites are open to all, such as village *legba* (*tolegba*) or crossroads *legba* (*dulegba*), others are reserved for more restricted circles (secret societies for instance), and even to individuals as houses *legba* (*Xwelegba*). Most cult places are under the responsibility of a lineage, or a part of a lineage, but ceremonies organized there can bring together larger communities : *kpesoso* ("taking off the sacred stone") is enacted in the forty-one *Genvodu* forests of Glidji for the whole *gen* community. Annual celebration of the sacred *Xetin* (*Fagara zanthoxyloides* Lam. Cf. Fig. 1, p. 55) in *Aklaku* joins together *Tugban*, a *gen* clan native to Ghana, and *Kota-Fon*, who came

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<sup>7</sup> Usually, these ceremonies bring together all the members of a lineage, both those who are still living in the village as well as those who have gone away to cities or foreign countries. They are good opportunities to enhance a family's cohesion and solidarity.

<sup>8</sup> Groves and forests are commonly called by the names of their celebrated gods : *Gbé zun*, *Dan Zun*, etc.

<sup>9</sup> People met by Europeans on their arrival had been there since the 16th century. Internal migrations occurred until the end of the last century. *Aja* from *Tado* are divided into various groups actually located in the South of Benin and Togo. Among others are the *Ewe*, *Watchi*, *Ayizo*, *Xweda*, *Fon* and *Gun*. Relatives of those who migrated report the emergence of various kingdoms, such as *Ouidah* by a *Xweda* king, and, since 1600, *Allada* birthplace of the *Gun* dynasty from Porto Novo and the *Fon* dynasty from Abomey.

from Benin (Juhé-Beaulaton 1999).<sup>10</sup>

Usually, only the priests and the initiates, barefoot, dressed in a white skirt or in priestly clothes, are allowed to enter cult sites.<sup>11</sup> Every site is placed under the responsibility of members of the religious hierarchy, *vodunon* (priest, literally “voodoo-mother”) assisted by *vodunsi* (adept, “voodoo-wife”). Sometimes some dignitaries are in charge of several sacred sites. So, at *Lotodenu*, near Ouidah, all the cult sites of the lineage *Adikpeto* are maintained by an important woman designated by the divination of the *Fa*,<sup>12</sup> the *kpodo*, who surrounds herself with assistants, *hundeva*.

Persons responsible for sites insure the maintenance of sanctuaries and altars. They take care of the cleaning of paths, clearing of the sacred forests, and the organization of entrances. They establish different plantations and fire-protection zones.<sup>13</sup> But they are also in charge of maintaining respect for the moral principles and different prohibitions (*sin*) that govern access to the sacred sites, so as to avoid any desecration. Certain places are forbidden to menstruating women; others can not be visited without preliminary ritual purification. In the sacred forests, lighting fires and hunting are generally prohibited. Cutting wood, and collecting dead wood, food crops and medicinal plants are strictly regulated, and their produce is shared among the priests and the persons who take charge of the site. Farming is generally forbidden, but nowadays borders are often cultivated, and one finds also plantations of oil palm, teak or coconut palm, the produce of which is reserved for the priests of the forest.

The persons responsible for cult sites are also charged with chastising the profaners of sacred sites. The fatal consequences of disregarding that which is forbidden can bear down on the whole community (bad harvests, epidemics, drought and thick clouds of mosquitoes, etc.) as well as individuals (accidents, disease and ruin). The culprits have to carry out special rites at the desecrated places, often very long and expensive, involving the sacrifice of animals, offerings to the priests, etc.

The main characteristics of the sacred sites presented above evoke those attributed generally to patrimonies. We have emphasized that many *vodun* sites are under the collective control of certain social groups whose cohesion and identity depend primarily on ceremonies held in these places. We find here one of the major characteristics recognized in patrimonies : “a collective mark translating a privileged interest”<sup>14</sup> (Bady in E.N.P. 1995). For the populations concerned, *vodun* sacred sites represent places of religious communion, transmission of collective memory and recognition of a certain identity. The guarantors for these places insure the transmission of oral traditions from generation to generation by means of religious ceremonies.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This tree was planted as a symbol of the alliance between the *Tugban* and *Kota-Fon* against the *Watchi*. Nowadays it always serves as an important symbol in political conflicts that occur between *Tugban* and *Kota-Fon*.

<sup>11</sup> The degree to which this rule is respected today varies from site to site : so, for instance, tourist visits to the forest of Ouidah are regularly organised.

<sup>12</sup> An intermediate divinity between the gods and the people, interrogated frequently by priests – soothsayers called *bokonon*.

<sup>13</sup> Kokou (1998) insists particularly on the role of the forested, often sacred, patches near villages that provide shelter against violent winds and slow down bush fires.

<sup>14</sup> “Une marque collective traduisant un intérêt privilégié

<sup>15</sup> So, offerings to the ancestors are an occasion to recite genealogical successions since the foundation of a dynasty or a lineage.

Rules of access and management of resources there, as we have noted, aim to maintain the sacred space in a condition so that it remains functional at the spiritual level. This means that divinities do not depart, and that cults and all the other activities can take place appropriately. But, as assumed by some of the authors previously quoted, can these rules be a particularly relevant way of preserving the local biodiversity for all the places considered here ? This question needs to be treated with care.

### Sacred Sites and Biodiversity

*Vodun* sacred sites are strictly linked to natural elements : the sanctuaries of *Mami wata vodun* are often situated on sandy beaches by the sea, while those of *Dansu*, the three-faced god, are generally at the edge of rivers and areas of stagnant water. *Dan*'s altars and those dedicated to *Aziza*, the "boss" of the liturgical plants, are old termitaries, while the sanctuaries of *Aniygbanto*, mistress of the ground, are rocky places or big rocks. But it does not mean that all these places are systematically considered sacred. For that to be the case, it is necessary that something unusual or surprising happen there. Then, after interpretation by the *Fa*, as we have previously described, the place will be liable to be considered as divine. Yet not every termitary becomes an altar. For instance, when they grow at the feet of a *logoti*, *Milicia excelsa* (Welw.) C.C. Berg., or of a *logoazanti* (*Antiaris africana* Engl.), or if they are inhabited by a snake, they are often secularized.

The connection most frequently mentioned by the adepts themselves is the one that exists between sacred sites and the plant world. Plants, particularly trees (*ati*), as well as plant communities, occupy an essential place in the *vodun* religion,<sup>16</sup> and are indispensable to the fulfillment of almost all the rites. A certain number of plant species or varieties are associated with each divinity. Knowledge and use of these liturgical plants, called *ama*, are the privilege of the priests, and are a jealously guarded secret : to know all the liturgical plants of a god and the ways of using them is to be able "to make the god work".

The spontaneous appearance of a liturgical plant, as well as its deliberate planting (followed by a divination and by offerings to ask for the agreement of the gods) can be at the origin of the sacralization of a place. In the *vodun* area, as elsewhere in Africa and other parts of the world (Michaloud and Dury 1998), the appearance of trees of the botanical families Moraceae (*Antiaris*, *Milicia*, *Ficus*) and Bombacaceae (*Adansonia*, *Ceiba*, *Bombax*)<sup>17</sup> is generally interpreted as a divine demonstration. But much more than its botanical identity, the peculiarities of the individual history of the tree can be at the origin of its sacred character. In *Seje Denu*, the tree planted on the remains of an enemy of *Alisu*, founder of the village, is a

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<sup>16</sup> <sup>16</sup> One of the tales associated with the signs (*kpoli*) of the *Fa* gives a mythical foundation to this peculiarity. At the origin of the world, the Sky (or, in certain versions, *Hevieso*, the god of thunder) and the Earth (or, often *Anyigbanto*, *Sakpata*'s feminine principle, smallpox divinity) were husband and wife, as close to each other "as a gourd to its lid." From their courtship, children were born : the first were plants; then animals and people came. Their beautiful original harmony was soon broken by the behavior of these last ones, so quarrelsome and noisy. The Sky, tired with their escapades, blamed the Earth for it, and on the deceitful advice of *Dan*, the python rainbow, left his wife. The maternal Earth, being afraid for her offspring, invented the first prayers, made the first offerings and begged the sky not to abandon her children. Sky was touched, and so as not to treat inequitably the wisest of them, plants, sent the first rain, thus creating the cycle of the seasons, from which the people and the animals also knew how to benefit. Grasses and trees thus appear as the favored children of the gods, intermediaries privileged among the Beyond and the world (Roussel, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> <sup>17</sup> False iroko, iroko and fig tree; baobab, cotton tree and kapok. The reasons given by our advisers are very different : size, form and exceptional longevity, presence of milk, enigmatic characteristics of reproduction, etc.

*gutin* (*Erythrina senegalensis* D.C.). In Allada, a cotton tree, *hunti* (*Ceiba pentandra* (Linn.) Gaertn.) was planted by *Ajahuto* in order “to bury his anger” : this tree named *Adanhunsa* (*adan* : anger) is a place of offering.

When a liturgical plant is not native to a cult site, it has probably been grown there by the leaders of cults and their assistants (sometimes specialized as *Kpodo* and *hundeva* of *Adikpeto* evoked above). So, *Kpatin*, *Newbouldia laevis* (P. Beauv) Seemann ex Bureau, which is certainly the most used *ama*, is always planted abundantly in places like convents, altars, the environs of *legba*, and hedges of the houses of adepts. The sanctuaries of divinities close to *Hevieso* (the god of thunder) and sites dedicated to the ancestors are easily recognizable by the presence of *anyatin*, *Dracaena arborea* Link. The installation of an altar to *Tro*, the most widespread *Goro vodun* (voodoo of *Cola*) requires the presence of a *goroti*, *Cola nitida* (Wind.) Schott. & Endl. Certain expiatory offerings (*vosa*) called *adra.dide* (“misfortune.take-away”) require the planting of a small *Ficus polita* Vahl near the *legba* of the village.

We understand why spaces dedicated to *vodun* are often woody. The area is a savannah zone (the Dahomey Gap), where the vegetation is naturally forested when slash and burn practices are interrupted, which is the case for the sacred sites.<sup>18</sup> In *vodun* ceremonies, places covered by trees are generally considered and used as places *fafa* or *fifa*, i.e., cooling, healthy, holy and peaceful.<sup>19</sup> In the forests are found a large number of liturgical and medicinal plants (*ama*).<sup>20</sup> During migrations, movements were directed by the search for forests to settle *vodun*, and even today most human habitations are situated not far from groves, the remains of former forests, or recent and complete creations (Juhé-Beaulaton & Roussel, 1997).

Religious practices mark landscapes so strongly that numerous observers have drawn attention to the plant constituents of their sites.<sup>21</sup> Already in 1933, Chevalier qualified the sacred groves as “sanctuaries of nature”<sup>22</sup> and became alarmed by the acceleration of the spread of clearings : “regrettably, due to our contact, the primitive gives up his faiths, the sacred woods disappear”.<sup>23</sup> In 1937, Aubréville went further : “all the curious holy groves of the Dahomey, in the shade of which mysterious fetishists ceremonies happened formerly, are not respected any more”.<sup>24</sup> We have already mentioned above the works that research scholars – scientists, in particular ecologists or botanists – have dedicated to them, during the 1980s. More than fifty years later, these authors express the same fears as their predecessors,

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Souza de et al. 1984; Guelly et al. 1993.

<sup>19</sup> On the therapeutic routes, the patients stay alternately in warm places (*zozo*) and in cold places (*fafa* or *fifa*). Medicines, of both plants, are administered to them, alternatively *zozo* and *fafa*. The ultimate purpose of care for the patient is to reach the state of the characteristic “coolness” of good health. In this context, forests are universally *fafa*, but some, totally or partially, can be *zozo*, notably the places where those who suffered “bad” deaths (very young children, pregnant women, etc.) are buried.

<sup>20</sup> For the *vodun* priests even, the reputation of some forests, like that of the *Avokanzun* forest, near Abomey, is based on the fact that they would be the only places where grow certain particularly renowned liturgical plants.

<sup>21</sup> We shall not discuss animal diversity here. The sacred sites also shelter numerous animals, but few works have yet been dedicated to them. Nevertheless, relationships between *vodun* sacred sites, birds, insects and especially reptiles certainly should be very fascinating to investigate.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Chevalier 1933 : 37.

<sup>23</sup> “Malheureusement, à notre contact, le primitif renonce à ses croyances, les bois sacrés disparaissent.”

<sup>24</sup> “Tous les curieux bois fétiches du Dahomey, à l’ombre desquels se passèrent autrefois de mystérieux cérémonies fétichistes, ne sont plus respectés.”

and always insist on the contribution of sacred groves to the protection and the sustainable management of biodiversity.<sup>25</sup>

However, we must express some reservations. Among the fifty-three groves inventoried by Kokou (1998) in South Togo, it is very important to note that if the biggest wealth of flora can be found at those that are sacred, such is not the case for the biggest specific biodiversity.<sup>26</sup> These sacred woods are generally of reduced surface area (often of the order of a hectare, rarely greater than ten hectares), facilitating exchanges of species with the surrounding vegetation and so increasing the wealth of flora. The human practice of adding some specimens, belonging in particular to exotic species, has the same consequences<sup>27</sup> But this “border effect” and human practices, by artificially increasing the number of specimens of certain species, generally the most ordinary and the exotic ones, disrupts the balance of the frequency of species and causes the biodiversity index to fall.

Regarding the plant communities, the conservative role of the sacred sites must also be asserted with a certain caution. There are certainly very ancient copses and holy forests. But it does not seem realistic, in view of their often reduced size and the nature of the human practices for which they were always the theatre (clearings, plantations), to consider them as almost intact relics of an original forested coverage or an hypothetical “primary” vegetation. Many are now little more than a kind of woody savannah or old fallow (with the presence, for example, of the baobab-tree). Their stratification is often simple : some big trees (very often Moraceae or Bombacaceae) appear on a single, thick ligneous stratum. It is important to notice that certain plant communities of the region are not represented among the sacred sites : for example, mangrove swamps, forest galleries, swampy meadows, and, especially, grassy savannahs. The latter are considered as “warm” places, where fires can pass through, and thus as unhealthy, and as such they cannot shelter cult sites. These choices, closely related to cultural representations, do not take into consideration the requirements of the biology of conservation and “scientific” protection. The choices of the plant species are made in the same way : we have already indicated the peculiar attraction of *vodun* adepts for *Ceiba*, *Bombax*, *Ficus* and *Adansonia*. To this list we could add *Newbouldia laevis*, *Spondias monbin* L. (*kpatinaklikon*), *Dracaena arborea* or *Fagara*, some of the dominant species at the sacred sites.

Finally, through the observation of sites and relevant practices, we are compelled to wonder about the well-defined and powerful character of the link that unites sacred places and plants. We have already said that the sacred character of a site could have had its origin in the spontaneous appearance of a plant. But the sacred character of this site can, in fact, remain after the death and total disappearance of the plant : “a living tree, it is voodoo; a dead tree, it is voodoo” is a common assertion.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the sacredness of a site does not extend necessarily to all the plants that it contains, but these benefit from a certain protection, one

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<sup>25</sup> It is noteworthy that until now isolated sacred trees, scattered in fields, along roads and in gardens, did not attract the attention of researchers. Nevertheless, they are also an important protected part of biodiversity.

<sup>26</sup> Specific wealth is calculated by dividing the number of species found in each grove by the area of its surface. Biodiversity is estimated by an index also taking into account the frequency of species found (Kokou 1998 : 37).

<sup>27</sup> Such as coconut palm, different *Cassia*, the neem (*Azadirachta indica* A. Juss.), cf. Juhé-Beaulaton & Roussel 1997 or Kokou 1998.

<sup>28</sup> *Atin gbè vodun, atin kuku vodun*, (comments recorded at *Lotodenu* in December 1996). To Wankon, *Fagara* planted by *Gede* is only a dead trunk. In the small yards of the cities some leaves that one re-news when they turn to dust replace sacred trees.



that they would not have somewhere else. We know only one plant of which all the specimens are protected, whatever place they grow in, a particular variety of oil palm, considered to be the realization on earth of the god *Fa*.<sup>29</sup> Other plants often benefit from only a very haphazard protection, reserved for some particular individuals distinguished by their form, history, ecology, etc.

But if divinities can dwell in certain trees, they can also leave them. This desertion can be spontaneous, or, in cases of necessity,<sup>30</sup> decided by people who transfer the divinity to another plant somewhere else. One can then make boards with the abandoned tree. In Benin, as in Togo, the clearing of the big sacred *iroko* (*Milicia excelsa*), a rare timber with high commercial value, has become very common. It is enough for the forester to appease the *vodun* by propitiatory offerings, in case the selected tree is the place of residence of a *vodun* or a “ghost” (*ye nyan nyan*). This presence of the latter can even be an excuse for a clearing. Economic interests override the permanency of the place, and only a memory of it remains (but for how long ?).

However, the picture of the current situation must be moderated further, because sacred trees and forests seem to be protected not only by the influence of *vodun* cults, but also by the actions of institutions in favor of environmental protection and the development of a durable management of resources. More recently, researchers of the University of Benin completed a “national inventory” of these holy groves, which they consider as “a vital patrimony” (Agbo & Sokpon 1998). A seminar on *vodun* religion and the protection of the environment organized in 1995 by German researchers in association with religious dignitaries explored relations among the various actors. According to *Daagbo Hunon*’s speech, one of the main *vodun* dignitaries, only restoration of “interdicts ensuring protection of the sacred forests” and of the “power of the masters of the lands” would put “definitively the country on the proper path to progress and the flourishing of democracy”.<sup>31</sup>

In general, the rules of access to the biodiversity on the sacred sites can thus not be considered as a simple way of management of a natural patrimony. However, is not what the *vodun* religion tries to pass on from generation to generation sets of practices and religious knowledge rather than places or natural objects ? An historic approach can answer this to various degrees.

## Origin, Inheritance and Transmission of the Sacred Sites

To reconstitute the history of the sacred sites and enquire about their origins one must go back to the *vodun* pantheon. The great variety of the gods, more than six hundred, as we are told, are as much connected to the history of individuals as to that of societies. Any extraordinary event will be interpreted as a likely demonstration of a divinity or a supernatural force, and will be subjected to a divination by the *Fa* that will confirm or counter it. “It is the *vodun* that chooses his house”, as is usually asserted. A snake dwelling in a termity, night birds settling in rocky crevasses, strange night-lights in the fronds of trees are just some of the many signs to be interpreted and which can provide sites for rites of sacralization. The soothsayers of the *Fa* also interrogate the divinities about appointing those responsible for the cults who will

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<sup>29</sup> This variety, called *afandeti*, was named by the French botanist A. Chevalier : *Elaeis guineensis* var. *Idolatrix*. It is a genetic mutation that appears at a very weak rate in palm plantations. Nobody is allowed to cut it down and to use its fruits for making oil, and their ritual use is reserved for soothsayers, *bokono*. See Fig. 2, p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, the construction of a road, a hotel, or a school.

<sup>31</sup> Conversation published in “La Gazette du Golfe”, in March 1995, quoted in Banégas (1998 : 493).

build altars, dedicate them and equip the sites.<sup>32</sup> The rites of sacralization are complex and vary according to the divinities concerned, but are adapted also to the context of the proposed site. For example, it is always necessary to sacrifice a ram when dedicating sites to *Hevieso*, the god of thunder, but other sacrifices may be necessary if the altar to be dedicated is near a sanctuary of *Dan*, the python god. The installation of the *vodun Tro* is carried out in several stages and most advanced ones demand an ox to be knifed at the base of the cola tree (*Cola nitida* (Vent.) Schott. & Endl.), which symbolizes divinity.

Historical sources contain numerous examples of sacralization reflecting the capacities for adaptation, spreading and syncretism of these societies. They teach us that the creation of sacred places is continuous through time and that it can have different bases.

Sacralization is often bound to the transformation of a person into *vodun*. Not far from Abomey, *Wankon* and *Kotokpa*'s sites, dedicated to the *vodun* Gede, give examples of this kind :

The *vodun Gede* is a man *ayonu* whom the king of the Dahomey brought from the war against *Ayonu*. One day, the king decided to behead him, but he managed to escape from Abomey. The warriors pursued him until *Wankon*, where he stopped the first time; from there he went to *Akpa*, where the *vodun Dan* obliged him to divert from his path and he had to take the way which leads to *Xanlanxonu*; he began to turn into a stone, marking his passage. He stopped at *Kotokpa*, where he planted a *xetin*, and turned into a big stone. The *xetin* has become a big tree today. *Gede* became *vodun* after his meeting with *Dan*. The king, *Agasu*, and others planted a *xetin* that did not grow, but *Gede* planted it and it grew. The king, in the presence of the transformed *Gede*, convoked all the inhabitants of *Wankon* and informed them that this place would henceforth be a house of *vodun*; from this day he nominated a person responsible for the *vodun*, called *Gedenon*. The place where he stopped before arriving at *Kotokpa* is called *Wankon*; on this spot there is a big stone and the place is sacred; the *vodun* is worshipped there in the forest. For the sacred place boundaries were set by the *Gedenon*, whom the king placed there in charge of the *vodun*, and one is not allowed to cultivate anything there; no one is allowed to enter there, and it has become a forest (Comments collected to Lissezun : 08/92).<sup>33</sup>

In this example, we can see that a political authority, which, in particular, appointed those responsible for sites, orchestrated the process of sacralization. We know numerous other examples of this type. For instance, Iroko (1994) reports deification by *Hève*'s *Xla* of two

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<sup>32</sup> *Enyi vodun kuè, edo hunkpa* : we make the house of the voodoo, then we plant the hedge.

<sup>33</sup> “Le *vodun Gede* est un homme *ayonu* que le roi du Dahomey a ramené de la guerre contre les *Ayo-nu*. Un jour, le roi décida de le décapiter, mais il réussit à s’enfuir d’Abomey. Les guerriers le poursuivirent jusqu’à *Wankon* où il s’arrêta une première fois; de là il alla à *Akpa*, où le *vodun Dan* l’obligea à dévier sa route et il dut prendre la voie qui mène à *Xanlanxonu*; il commença à se transformer en pierres, marquant son passage. Il s’arrêta à *Kotokpa* où il planta un *xetin* et se transforma en grosse pierre. Le *xetin* est devenu un gros arbre aujourd’hui. *Gede* est devenu *vodun* après sa rencontre avec *Dan*. Le roi, *Agasu* et d’autres ont planté le *xetin* qui n’a pas poussé, mais *Gede* l’a planté et il a poussé. Le roi, devant la transformation de *Gede*, convoqua tout les habitants de *Wankon* et les informa que cette place serait désormais une maison de *vodun*; dès ce jour, il nomma un responsable du *vodun* appelé *Gedenon*. Le lieu où il s’est arrêté avant d’arriver à *Kotokpa* s’appelle *Wankon*; il y a une grosse pierre et cet endroit est sacré; le *vodun* est adoré là dans la forêt. La place sacrée a été délimitée par le *Gede-non* que le roi a mis là pour s’occuper du *vodun* et on ne doit pas cultiver; personne ne doit y pénétrer et c’est devenu une forêt” (propos recueillis à Lissezun : 08/92).

warriors of the king of Abomey Agaja fallen in ambush, *Gahu* and *Kposu*.<sup>34</sup> Near *Ayakpa*, a *legba* settled in the 18th century by the same king is now surrounded by a grove (*Agajalegbazun*). The royal gods were implanted on territories recently conquered, thus participating in the political control of the territory. The same types of strategies also led the conquering sovereigns to adopt the divinities of their opponents : Dahomeans thus integrated *Dan*, the tutelary god-python of *Xweda* (cf. picture 3, p. 55). First, they destroyed his main temple in *Savi*<sup>35</sup> after their victory over *Xweda* in 1727, then they resettled it at new cult sites. This type of attitude is common, and the history of relations between kingdoms of the area *Aja-Tado* was marked more often by the creation of new sacred sites than by their destruction. So, some sacred woods have as their origin the transformation of “historic places”. At *Togudo*, historic capital of the kings of Allada, we can observe several that bear names signifying a relationship with their history. *Ayizanzun* is a forest that bears the name of the *vodun* defender of the house of the king *Kokpon* (4th son of *Ajahuto*, founder of the dynasty, according to Cornevin) abandoned after the conquest of *Allada*'s realm by Dahomeans in 1724. The forest of *Axosezun* was formerly, according to our advisers, the yard of the royal palace : today, one “feeds” those that are buried there, such as royal wives who lost their children, those that had no children, and dead very young children. Despite having been abandoned, these places were still respected. They were not cleared, but covered with trees. Today, they provide evidence of a major event in the history of this kingdom – dynastic change following the defeat of 1724. The inhabitants of *Togudo* never miss the chance to retell this story to guests who pass the forest.

In the north of Ouidah, we find a similar situation. After the conquest of Ouidah's kingdom in 1727 by Dahomean warriors, the capital *Savi* lost its political importance and the royal palace was abandoned. Today, one can see on the ancient site of the palace a grove where religious ceremonies still take place. Burton, an English traveler in the 1860's, observed the vestiges of the palace of *Hunfon*, last king of *Xweda*, noticing the presence of big trees there, a site that is still respected now.

The sites cited above are certainly suffused with history and are symbols of lost political independence. But they are also respected because a cult for the ancestors is still performed there. Indeed, traditionally, the deceased were buried in their houses, which were then abandoned.<sup>36</sup> In 1724, the Chevalier des Marchais, staying at *Savi*, in the Ouidah realm, had already observed funeral rites particularly well, distinguishing those performed for the king from those for dignitaries and ordinary people :

The custom of the country is to completely destroy the palace on the day when one buries the deceased king; three months are necessary to build another one in another district of the city for the new king. [...] One destroys all the palace [...] except the surrounding wall, and one burns all the combustible buildings. [After a death] among the dignitaries and the common people they are not obliged to destroy their houses, and they are not obliged to sacrifice any of their domestics or women, as is done for the king. The big men [each] bury their father in a gallery, and above the place where he reposes they make several fetiches or puppets out of mud [...] what they observe after the death of their father is not to

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<sup>34</sup> In this case, the invaded have deified the invaders.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ellis 1890 : 54.

<sup>36</sup> This practice still exists, notably in the countryside, in spite of cemeteries conceived on the Christian model being the norm

live in the house where he died [...] they are obliged to live somewhere else.<sup>37</sup>

So, numerous sacred places are former dwellings-houses. They are indicated on the landscape by groups of trees, and the inhabitants continue to celebrate ceremonies in honor of the ancestors who are buried there.

Among the social dynamics involved in the creation of sacred sites, it is necessary to mention population migrations.<sup>38</sup> Such migrants take with them and re-establish their tutelary divinities, and by this act participate in the foundation of new territories and in the reproduction of the identity of the group. So, runaway *Bè* from *Notse* in Togo found refuge in the forests of *Agbodrafo* (Togoville) and *Bé* (Lomé) where they installed their *vodu*, *Nyigblen*, deified ancestral founder of the kingship of Tado.<sup>39</sup> The inauguration of those responsible for the cult of *Nyigblen* starts in *Agbodrafo* and ends in *Bè*, described by some written sources as the religious capital of *Ewe* (Zöller 1990). *Gen* came from Accra and settled their forty-one *genvodu* in the *Glidji* forest called *Gen yehueve* (forest of *Guen* voodooos). In the same way, the creation of new villages is always accompanied by the installation of the material representation of the ancestral founder of the lineage (who can be mythical). A part is taken from the original representation with the aim of setting it up on the site of the new settlement.<sup>40</sup> In the *Fon* area (Benin), ancestral founders of lineages are considered as particular *vodun* named *Toxwyo*. They are generally manifested in a tree, usually a *lokotin*, *Milicia excelsa* (Welw.) C.C. Berg. Sometimes planted, but often voluntary, they have individual names. *Toxwyo* follow the people in their movements and are at the basis of the foundation of new cult sites.<sup>41</sup>

If the study of written and oral sources shows the durability of certain sites, it also allows us to see that other places have a more complex history, providing a long list of sacralizations and desacralizations possibly accompanied by relocations. And so history shows us that their transmission from generation to generation has not always been effectuated.

The spread of Christianity in this region is one of the major factors in the destabilization of *vodun* cults, and has resulted in the disappearance or movement of sacred sites. The first Christian missionaries arrived during second half of the 19th century, and, from their arrival, they often chose the location of their establishments according to the sites of *vodun* cults.

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<sup>37</sup> Translated by the author of this paper from des Marchais 1724 : “La coutume du pays étant de culbuter le palais de fond en comble le jour qu’on enterre le déffunt roy on employe les trois mois à en construire un autre dans un autre quartier de la ville pour le nouveau roy. [...] On culbute le palais [...] à la réserve de l’enceinte et on brusle tous les batimens combustibles. (p. 94)

[Après un décès] chez les grands et parmy le commun du peuple ils ne sont point obligéz de culbuter leurs maisons ny qu’ils ne peuvent sacrifier aucun de leurs domestiques ou femmes, comme on fait pour le roy. Les grands font enterrer leur père dans une gallerie et dessus l’endroit ou il repose ils font [...] plusieurs fétiches ou figures de marmots de terre [...] ce qu’ils observent à la mort de leur père est de ne point habiter la maison où il est mort [...] ils sont obligés de loger ailleurs.” (p. 95)

<sup>38</sup> Political dissension and the search for fertile land are the most frequently evoked reasons to justify these migrations.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Gayibor 1985, Vol. 1 : 229.

<sup>40</sup> A map of these movements of cult sites would allow one to redraw the history of these migrations and maybe to establish a hierarchy of these sites.

<sup>41</sup> If one can date the moment of the installation of a group, one can deduce from it the date of the sacralisation of the site where the tutelary divinities of the new community are deposited.

Hence, in 1860, the mission of Porto Novo was built partially on the forest devoted to the divinity *Shango*, in spite of the opposition of *vodun* religious authorities. Father Baudin, twenty years after the installation of the mission, writes :

In Porto Novo, near the mission, is a famous place by one of the descendents of Chango. There was for many years a temple there and a school of fetish priests. For some time, the temple has been deserted, the only one fetish priest takes care of it; the school was moved somewhere else, disturbed by our proximity (Baudin, 1884 : 26).<sup>42</sup>

Thus we can see why the cult site was moved. The decision to place Ouidah's basilica in front of Dan's temple is a similar example. Certain Christian priests celebrated mass in holy forests to demonstrate the superior power of their unique god.<sup>43</sup> The missionaries also took charge of school education, cutting off the future intellectual elite from its original culture.

After the colonial conquest, at the end of the 19th century, administrative policies also contributed to the disintegration of the social and religious structure. For example, agricultural experimental stations were set up at Niaouli, where there was a sacred forest connected with a spring, and in Porto Novo the forest of *vodun Shango* was transformed into a colonial garden and integrated into the capital of the new colony. The development of colonial culture was mainly responsible for the increase in clearings at the borders of forested zones. Actions of this type were associated with evangelization campaigns, widely supported by the colonial authorities, which contributed greatly to the destabilization of the *vodun* cult chiefs, changing relations between the people and their divinities, and resulting in the desacralization and destruction of numerous sites.<sup>44</sup>

Since Independence in 1960, *vodun* cult sites have continued to suffer attack from the new political authorities. From 1975 until 1980, the government of the marxist-leninist People's Republic of Benin have fought against the "obscurantism" of religions called "traditional or animistic", provoking the destruction of numerous sites. Religious dignitaries were forced to cease their practices. But in 1976, a severe drought occurred. This was interpreted by public opinion as a sign of the anger of the divinities, something that worried the government and encouraged it to undergo a change of attitude.<sup>45</sup> Since then, it has adopted a policy of compromise with traditional authorities without formally recognizing them. Tension between the political and religious authorities *has gradually* decreased during the 1980's, and, especially since the recent decline of the economic situation, the population has showed a renewed interest in *vodun cults*. As a result, it is possible to observe the re-creation of certain sacred sites : the forest dedicated to the *vodun Oro* near *Sedjè Denu* cultivated during the 1970's was re-established in 1986 not far from the original site. At *Lissèzun*, the villagers decided to reorganize the cult site of the *vodun Yahèsè* because, "under the former government, it was forbidden to practice traditional religion and the sacred cotton tree had been cut down." During our visit, in 1991, we noticed that the place had just been cleaned and

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<sup>42</sup> Translated by the author of this paper from Baudin 1884 : 26 : "A Porto Novo, près de la mission, se trouve un lieu célèbre par une de ses descentes de Chango. Il y avait là pendant de longues années un temple et un collège de féticheurs et féticheuses. De-puis quelque temps, le temple est désert, un seul féticheur en prend soin; le collège a été trans-porté ailleurs, gêné par notre voisinage."

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the papers of the abbot Borghéro, quoted by Desribes (1877 : 221) and Laffite (1881). This aspect of the spread of the Christianity in Africa has not yet been studied.

<sup>44</sup> Very early, botanists such as Chevalier (1933) and Aubréville (1937) became alarmed at the acceleration of the growth of clearings and alerted the colonial authorities.

<sup>45</sup> E. K. Tall (1995 : 198) writes that Kerekou, President of the People's Republic of Benin, even appealed for the intervention of one of the most important religious dignitaries of Benin, *Daagbo Hunon*, "supreme leader of *vodun* to Ouidah".

a *Dracaena* had just been planted there.

The “democratic flowering” that followed a national conference in 1990 also allowed the religious authorities to rediscover their importance on the political and social scene. The organization of the “festival of *vodun* arts and cultures” in February 1993 at Ouidah was the result of the policy of the revalorization of national cultures by the Benin government.<sup>46</sup> This event enabled the development and tourist exploitation of certain religious sites at the city, such as the forest of *Kpasè*. Indeed, arrangement of this site began during the festival, and continued after with the construction of a monumental gate and an enclosing wall built around two sacred trees. Paying tourists’ visits are organized for the benefit of the lineage *Adjovi*, holder of *Kpasè*’s “seat”. This sacred forest is now a kind of “living *vodun* museum” with an exhibition of sculptures of the main divinities of the *vodun* pantheon created by contemporary artists. Some ceremonies are open to a wider public, by invitation of those responsible for the forest, with “modernized” rites inspired by Christianity.

At present, divinities of relatively recent import tend to be popularized, and some of them have even become very fashionable. *Mami Wata*’s siren cults, associated with journeys and business, are found now along the coast of Guinea. In towns, the cult of *Atingali*, a cynomorphic divinity inspired, we are told, by the Ashanti pantheon, is rapidly expanding. It assures effective protection against wizards (*azeto*), particularly active due to the rivalries stirred up by modern life. For the same reason, *Tro*, ancient deity of the *Ewe people*, is experiencing a rebirth in the south of Benin, while street children put themselves under the protection of the violent *Koku Vodun*, whose followers undergo ritual slashing with knives. These “new” gods have sometimes only a few priests, a handful of adepts and one or two sanctuaries. Their installation can involve financial negotiations and often corresponds to strategies of ascent and social recognition, more individual than collective. Though ancestral cults are still under the responsibility of a lineage or segments of a lineage, ceremonies and sites for “new” *vodun* tend not to be any more, being an individual or corporate matter connected to urban development. Tall’s studies (1995) show the process of individualization of these “new cults”, to which divinities such as *Dan* or *Gun* are associated, rather than those of the cults of “older divinities”, such as *Sakpata* or *Hevieso*. Their transmission to future generations thus remains very hypothetical.

## Conclusion

The analysis of past and current practices concerning *vodun* sacred sites shows clearly that the biodiversity inherent in them cannot completely and always be considered as a natural patrimony. Very often the elements concerned are neither inherited nor passed on, and their management is not static. For example, though these sacred spaces are often wooded, one cannot assert that the composition and structure of the tree cover faithfully represents that of the original forest. On the contrary, our study shows that borrowings, movements, and fashions connected to the social dynamics and economic and political situation effect the religious management of sites, depending on the history of the people concerned. Numerous cult sites have been destroyed, moved, or re-organized, and the corresponding biological diversity was widely affected by these changes.

However, some nuances can be extracted. Disparities are strong between urban and rural surroundings. In the latter, ancestral cults are always long-lived and still ensure the perpetuation of the places of conservation of the groups’ memory. In cities and their suburbs,

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<sup>46</sup> See the thesis of R. Banégas (1998) on the democratic transition and reinvention of tradition in Benin.

the evolution is more radical, marked by an increasing individualism and a high level of state interventionism. As a result, the pressures of modern society have brought about attempts to limit the duration of the period required for the schooling of young adepts. Under these conditions, the transmission of *vodun* knowledge becomes problematic. One can only wonder whether the conservation of religious practices and the places where they are performed, i.e., a certain kind of patrimonialization, is not going to take place by means of their “folklorization”, with a twofold purpose of tourist development and the construction of a national culture. The gap that seems to be becoming more and more defined between city and countryside will make the analysis of the interrelationship between them indispensable.

Finally, let us remember that in the last dozen years or so, in both Benin and Togo, naturalists, agronomists and forestry scientists have brought to the attention of the public and the political decision-makers ecological, botanical and even zoological issues concerning the forests and sacred copses. They have thus made them inseparable from the implementation of environmental policies. Their work has greatly contributed to making them part of a national patrimony, natural and cultural at the same time.

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**Figure 1** (*D. Juhé-Beaulaton*) :  
The sacred *Xetin* of Aklaku (Togo)



**Figure 2** (*D. Juhé-Beaulaton*) :  
*Afandeti* (*Elaeis guineensis* var. *Idolatraca*  
A. Chev.) is a genetic mutation that appears in palm  
plantations. Its uses are strictly reserved to *bokonon*.



**Figure 3** (*Echo des Missions Africaines, Bulletin n°4, 1902, p. 101*) :  
Temple of Snakes at Ouidah.



**Figure 4** (B. Roussel) :  
Legba protecting the entrance of a sacred grove near Ouidah '(South of Benin)



