

## **Local Practices in Sacred Groves Management in Togo: A Comparative Study in *Nawda, Ifè, and Ouatchi* Lands**

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### **Abstract**

Local populations have ensured the sustainable management of forest resources by sanctifying areas of woodland. Despite the reduction of these sacred groves by multiple threats, including those caused by humans, they

persist and demonstrate the community's desire for preservation. This paper focuses on increasing the comprehension of the management of local sacred groves within the *Nawda*, *Ifè*, and *Ouatchi* regions in Togo. Qualitative ethnographic analysis was employed to describe how the management practices are carried out and also to examine their underlying socio-cultural concepts. The findings of the study indicate that customary religious, family, and political authorities manage sacred groves. Management practices involve conducting ritual ceremonies and establishing rules and regulations. The socio-cultural representations that shape these management practices facilitate the definition of sacred groves as sites of shared memory, confer upon them the status of dwelling places of protective divine beings/ancestors, and identify them as sources of prosperity and abundance.

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**Keywords:** Sacred groves, Local management practices, Ritual ceremonies, Prohibitions, Socio-cultural representations

## Introduction

It is now recognized that modern nature protection policies, based on scientific knowledge, have shown their limitations in failing to ensure the sustainable conservation of ecosystems. This failure has led to a growing interest in local naturalist knowledge and related practices (Cormier-Salem & Roussel, 2014; Ibo, 2005). This knowledge, developed by local communities based on their relationship with the environment and their experience of living things (Dumez et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2017), has long been ignored and scorned by the world of science and, more generally, by the world of development. However, since the 1990s, the Convention on Biological Diversity has recognized the importance of the knowledge, innovations, and practices of local and indigenous communities for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. As a result, more and more scientists, including naturalists, ecologists and agronomists, are looking to these communities as a source of new and accurate information about environments and biodiversity, while developers and planners are seeking effective solutions in terms of prudent management and sustainable use of resources (Cormier-Salem & Roussel, 2014). In this way, knowledge relating to the culture of people, which has long been sidelined and regarded as negative (Wala et al., 2003), is now being called upon to supplement or compensate for the shortcomings of so-called scientific knowledge.

Among the local methods of environmental management and biodiversity conservation rooted in local naturalist knowledge are the sacred groves recognized by the Convention on Biological Diversity as veritable sanctuaries of plant and animal biodiversity (Ibo, 2005). Sacred groves are often located close to villages and usually cover relatively small areas (Juhé-

Beaulaton, 2013). Their creation, sacralization, and elevation to the status of an institution feared and respected by local communities have helped to protect many plant and animal species from exploitation (Savadogo et al., 2011). In this work, sacred groves are defined as:

“small patches or islands of remaining original habitat or forests of various dimensions partially or fully protected by local religious and/or cultural actors. They are maintained through complex traditional institutions that sometimes do not require governmental involvement” (Nganso et al., 2012, p.1)

In Togo, the sustainable management of natural resources has long been the responsibility of the local populations, thanks to their know-how, which includes the sacredness of the forests (Wala et al., 2003). Throughout the different cultural areas of Togo, there is a diversity of sacred groves. They have a strong link with religion and the taboos that form the cornerstone of natural resource management in Africa (Sibanda, 1999). They contribute to the well-being of the local population through their various functions. These include religious, socio-cultural, and nutritional functions. Not only do sacred groves shelter deities and the spirits of ancestors, and serve as sites for certain rites and initiations, they also constitute a reserve of food and medicinal plants, and sometimes contain springs where local people come to get water (Kokou et al., 2005).

Furthermore, in the face of the reduction in their surface area caused by multiple threats, the sacred groves are resisting complete disappearance, bearing witness to a desire for preservation on the part of the local populations, and it is this desire that continues to halt their complete disappearance (Kokou et al., 2005). This desire demonstrates a real attachment to these groves and their importance in the eyes of these populations, as can be seen in the villages bordering the sacred groves in the *Ouatchi*, *Ifè*, and *Nawda* areas.

The system of sacred grove management instituted by local communities has proved effective, even if it has its limitations. Through well-defined practices, it has been able for generations to prevent these areas from disappearing. Proof of this is the longevity of these forest islands, which have survived the passage of time, some dating as far back as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, such as the *Akissa* sacred grove in south-east of Togo (GIZ, 2016). Given these facts, it is legitimate to ask the following question: what are the socio-cultural management practices of sacred groves in Togo?

The management of these forest fragments is based on local beliefs that carry with them a whole system of representations that it is becoming necessary to take interest in. Thus, this is because they are disappearing as the sacred groves shrink. Given that these representations are strongly linked to the very existence of sacred natural sites, it is important to know and

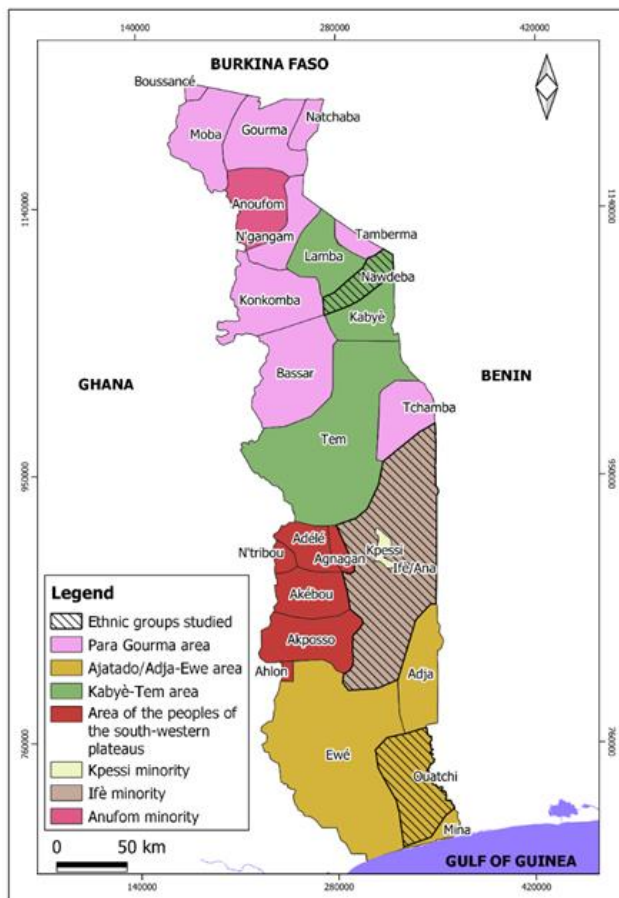
understand them. Hence the question, what are the representations that come into play in the management of sacred groves?

To provide answers to the questions raised above, the general aim of this article is to contribute to a better understanding of local sacred grove management practices in the *Ouatchi*, *Ifè*, and *Nawda* areas in Togo. Specifically, the aim is to (i) analyze local sacred groves management practices in the above areas and (ii) study the socio-cultural representations on which these practices are based.

## Methodology

### Study Area

The study was conducted in three cultural areas of Togo. These are the *Ajatado* or *Adja-Ewe*, the *Kabyè-Tem*, and the *Ifè* area. Specifically, the ethnic groups concerned are the *Ouatchi* sub-group (*Adja-Ewe* area), the *Nawdeba* (*Kabyè-Tem* area), and the *Ifè* (*Ifè* area) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Location of ethnic groups and cultural areas in the study (adapted from Gayibor (1997))

This paper focuses on three sacred groves found on the territories of the three aforementioned ethnic groups. These are:

- The *Godjè-godjin* sacred grove (53 ha) located in the prefecture of *Yoto* (Figure 2), precisely in the cantons of *Gboto* and *Essè Godjin*<sup>1</sup> in *Ouatchi* area in south-east Togo (Kossi-Titrikou et al., 2021);
- The sacred *Igbolakou* grove of *Okpodjivè* (10 ha) in the *Ogou* prefecture (Figure 2), canton of *Datcha*, *Ifè* area in south-central Togo;
- The *Niamtouragou* sacred grove (7 ha) in the prefecture of *Doufelgou* (Figure 2), canton of *Niamtougou*, *Nawda* area in north-east Togo.

The choice of these ethnic groups and sacred groves was motivated by the need to compare local management methods for sacred groves in ethnic groups belonging to different cultural areas. In addition, the ethnic groups selected are among those with the largest number of sacred groves in proportion to the surface area of their territory (Hounkpati, 2020).

The research was carried out in the following *Ouatchi* localities: *Godjinmé*, *Gboto-zeve*, *Gboto-Kossidamé*, *Gboto-Zogbe*, *Témanou-Copé*, and *Domeze-Copé*. These villages were chosen not only because they border the *Godjè-godjin* sacred grove, but also because they all claim it as their own. In the *Ifè* area, only the village of *Okpodjivè* was included in the data collection because it contains the sacred grove chosen for the study. Among the *Nawdeba*, the town of *Niamtougou* was chosen for an investigation into the *Niamtouragou* sacred grove.

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<sup>1</sup> It is home to the Krobo ethnic minority, now assimilated into the Ewé (*Ouatchi*) groups (Kossi-Titrikou et al., 2021).

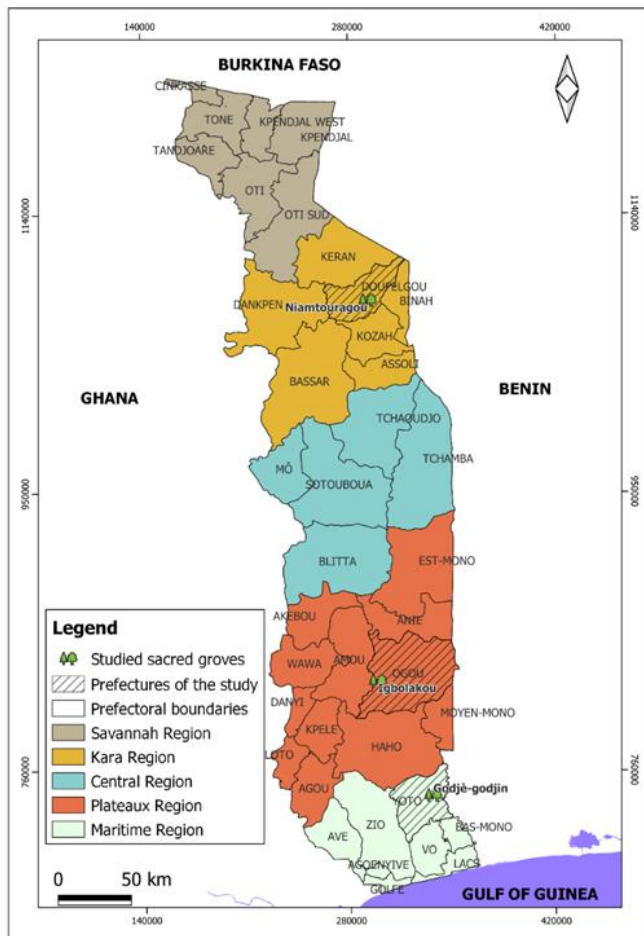


Figure 2. Administrative location of the sacred groves in the study

## ***Methodological Approach***

### ***Nature of the Research***

For this research, a qualitative approach was adopted to identify sacred grove management measures in the three study areas. The aim is to identify these practices and representations and to analyze them to understand how the local authorities, who are the guarantors of these practices, achieve their conservation objectives. In addition, this paper focuses on using a comparative approach to analyze the points of convergence and divergence in sacred grove management practices in Togo.

### ***Data Collection***

#### **➤ Literature Search**

It focused on themes relating to the management of sacred groves, in particular the importance of sacred groves, socio-cultural management norms

and practices, and the socio-cultural representations involved in this management. To this end, several types of documents dealing with sacred groves were consulted, including scientific works, journal articles, study reports, dissertations, etc. from both the social sciences and the environmental sciences.

### ➤ **Ethnographic Surveys**

The initial field researches were carried out between August and November 2020. Subsequently, additional surveys were carried out during short visits between February and March 2023 to update and supplement the data previously collected. In the three research areas, a total of 110 people<sup>2</sup> were interviewed within the target populations, i.e., the communities living around the sacred groves. Informants were selected from the target population according to the principle of internal diversification (Pires, 1997). In addition, resource people were interviewed, including village and canton chiefs, *Vodou* priests and priestesses, people in charge of places of worship and custodians of sacred objects, forestry officials, and families with rights to the sacred groves. Several techniques were used to collect the data. These are direct observation, group and individual interviews.

Observation was carried out from the inside, allowing us to immerse ourselves in the life of the communities studied and to gain gradual access to local sacred grove management practices. The observation was based on a grid that included observation situations such as the activities carried out around the sacred groves, the types of people frequent in the forest, and the times of day when people could access it.

Two types of interviews were conducted during the research. Firstly, group interviews were organized with local people, each time bringing together 7 to 10 people with whom discussions were held on the purpose and importance of sacred groves, management measures, and representations linked to the sacred places. The subjects discussed in the groups were later discussed in greater depth with the informants and resource people.

Group and individual interviews were conducted using a discussion outline and interview guide drawn up beforehand. At the end of data collection, 26 individual interviews and 2 group interviews were carried out for the *Godjè-godjin* sacred grove, 19 individual interviews and 1 group interview for the *Okpodjivè* sacred grove, and 17 individual interviews and 2 group interviews for the *Niamtouragou* sacred grove.

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<sup>2</sup> 62 people were interviewed individually and 48 in groups.



### *Data Processing and Analysis*

The data from the observations was combined with the transcribed interview data to form a corpus for analysis. This corpus was processed using Nvivo 12 Plus software, which enabled a content analysis to be carried out using a pre-designed grid. The themes identified are set out in Table 1 below:

**Table 1. Themes for analysis**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Dimensions</b>
Governance of sacred groves	Management of sacred groves Sacred groves management authorities
Socio-cultural management practices in sacred groves	Endogenous conservation measures for sacred groves Religious beliefs and practices associated with sacred groves
Socio-cultural representations (SR) of groves	SR linked to the collective history of populations SR linked to the community identity of societies SR linked to the divinities SR linked to ecosystem provisioning and regulating services

## **Results**

### ***Sacred Groves Management Practices of the Ouatchi, Ifè, and Nawdeba Peoples***

The sacred groves studied in this work are woodlands dedicated to divinities and ancestors. Their management is based on a diversity of practices rooted in a religious universe and a style of thought specific to each ethnic group. These practices include ritual ceremonies and prohibitions decreed and controlled by the bodies responsible for managing the sacred groves.

#### *Entities in Charge of Sacred Grove Governance*

The governance of sacred groves in the *Ouatchi*, *Ifè*, and *Nawda* areas is characterized by a system at the center of which are the political authority, the religious authority, and the clans that hold decision-making power at the customary level. The political authority is represented by the village chief, while the religious authority is symbolized by one or more traditional priests responsible for managing the sacred groves. The holding clans are the descendants of the mythical ancestor who founded the village or was the first to occupy the grove. Among the *Ifè* and the *Nawdeba*, the groves belong to the community, but decision-making power rests with specific clans. Sometimes, the three types of authority mentioned above are represented by the same people. This is the case in *Okpodjivè*, where the sacred grove is under the authority of the village chief and priests, all of whom come from the clan that holds the rights to the grove. In addition to having a similar system of governance based on customary and religious norms, the *Godjè-godjin* sacred grove has a management committee and a supervisory board made up of the Prefect, the canton chiefs, the village chiefs, and the forestry administration.



This grove is therefore unique in that it is managed on a mixed basis, with governance involving diverse stakeholders. In 2017, it received funding to draw up a management plan and a local convention that sets out the laws and management measures.

### *Ritual Ceremonies*

Sacred groves share objectives common to all three study areas. They are at the same time a sanctuary for the deities, a shelter for the spirits of the ancestors, and a site for ritual ceremonies. *Godjè-godjin* is a sacred grove that shelters the spirits of the ancestors and the three main deities: *Bagbo*, *Godjè*, and *Tchawè*. The sacred *Igbolakou* grove is home to the spirits of the ancestors and a sanctuary called *Akpolori*, which houses the eponymous deity as well as other deities like *Tchankpana* and *Heviesso*. The sacred *Niamtouragou* grove is a sanctuary for the spirits of deified ancestors and a place for initiation rites. Its periphery also serves as a cemetery for those who have been initiated there.

Several ritual ceremonies are organized in the villages surrounding the *Godjè-godjin* sacred grove (*Gboto-Zogbé*, *Domézécopé*, *Essè-Godjin*). These ceremonies include *Peta tɔtrɔ*, which is a priority for both the *Ouatchi*, owners of the *Godjè* and *Tchawè* deities, and the *Krobo*, owners of *Bagbo*. It takes place inside the sacred forest and its frequency varies according to the deities. For *Godjè* and *Tchawè*, the ceremony is held between March and May every three years, whereas for *Bagbo*, it is held annually. These are rites during which propitiatory sacrifices are made to the deities residing in the forest to implore their blessing for the well-being of the community and abundant harvests. The sacrifices consist of the immolation of goats and chickens, the meat of which is eaten in the sacred forest. These ritual ceremonies are part of a series of traditional festivals that bring together most of the villagers, especially those who identify with this cult.

Among the *Ifè* of *Okpodjivè*, the sacred *Igbolakou* grove is also the focus of annual ritual ceremonies known as *Odjououlou*, which means "the eye of the village". This rite takes place at the beginning of January and commemorates the history of the creation of the village. The ancestor who founded the village had to obtain permission from the spirits of the grove before setting up camp. To do so, he had to make offerings to them and sacrifice a person who would bring them the gifts. The ancestor's uterine nephew was chosen, but he survived the ordeal and emerged unharmed from the grove. To commemorate this event and thank the spirits for sparing the 'hero's' life, the *Odjououlou* ceremony is held every year. The rituals consist of sacrificing a billy goat or ox, and drinking offerings. They take place in the evening inside the sacred grove. The meat of the sacrificed animals is eaten on the spot, and is strictly forbidden to be brought back to the village. The purpose

of these ceremonies is also to seek the favor of the ancestors for regular rainfall and good harvests.

In *Niamtougou*, the sacred grove plays a central role in the belief system and the regulation of social life. It is the sanctuary of the ancestors, who are consulted there by the *Santba* initiates in charge of making the libations and sacrifices needed to ward off the bad luck that befalls the community. The sacred grove contains relics of dwellings and objects which, in the belief system, constitute the place where the mythical ancestor lived. As such, it has an identity function for the communities. The *Santba* authorized to conduct ritual ceremonies in the sacred grove which are initiated during the *Santberm*. This is an initiation rite organized every 5 years, the aim of which is to train a caste of initiates responsible for intervening with the ancestors to resolve the community's problems, whether economic, social or health-related. The rite consists of a series of initiation rituals followed by the initiates. These rituals take place over several days in the village with the humans and then in the sacred grove in the company of the spirits of the ancestors, where a large part of the esoteric knowledge is passed on to the initiates. It is important to specify that initiates are of both sexes. However, women authorized to become initiates must be over 45, as they are mature and menopausal at this age.

#### *Definition of Rules and Prohibitions*

To regulate access to and the collection of resources from sacred groves, each society defines norms and prohibitions and ensures that they are applied. In the villages bordering the sacred grove of *Godjè-godjin*, wood cutting, hunting, and fishing are forbidden. It is also forbidden to approach the convents in the grove wearing clothes and shoes. Failure to comply with these prohibitions exposes the offender to fines proportionate to the type and seriousness of the offence. Offenders are also liable to the wrath of the divinities, which manifests itself in a series of misfortunes that can even lead to death. The fear aroused by the deities present in the sacred grove is also a factor in compliance with the rules and prohibitions. Women are forbidden access to the grove if they are considered impure. This impurity is linked to menstruation and sexual acts.

In *Okpodjivè*, the prohibitions concerning the sacred grove are similar to those mentioned for *Godjè-godjin*. In addition, it is not permitted to walk around the sacred grove. Cutting wood, hunting, and shooting with firearms are strictly forbidden. Similarly, the gathering of dead wood is not permitted, as it is used as fuel for cooking sacrificial food during annual rituals in the grove. Here, women are doubly forbidden. They may only enter the grove during ritual ceremonies and must stay away from the *Akpolori* sanctuary when they are impure. If the rules and prohibitions are broken, a fine is set according to the offence committed. The fine is often set after consultation

with the divinities, who tell the diviner-priest what is needed to ensure that the harm caused is made good. Most of the time, this involves liquor, beer, palm oil and animals, intended to appease the gods. According to the traditional priest who guards the sacred grove, any undiscovered violation is signaled by the deities through special signs. These signs are interpreted by the diviner, who concludes that the violation has occurred and identifies the culprit.

The rules and prohibitions governing the management of sacred groves are not very different among the *Nawdeba* either. Here, they are mainly linked to the times of access to the sacred grove, the person entering it, and the activity they intend to carry out there. For example, it is forbidden to enter the sacred grove in the early evening (from 4 pm) and at night. This prohibition is justified by the fact that these hours correspond to the times of activity of the spirits that reside there. Consequently, going into the sacred grove at these times is synonymous with disturbing the peace of the ancestors. Women are forbidden access except during ritual ceremonies, as is the case with the *Ifè* of *Okpodjivè*. The same prohibition applies to children, and more strictly to outsiders. Collecting firewood and hunting are also forbidden activities in the sacred grove, but an exemption is granted for collecting medicinal plants. As one informant put it: "*Certain activities in the groves are accepted with the authorization of the customary leaders. It is permitted to collect medicinal plants, but only with the authorization of the customary chief*" (Extract from an interview in Niamtougou, September 2020).

The system of rules and prohibitions presented here have always been part of the history of sacred groves. These rules and prohibitions have deep religious roots and have been respected throughout the ages. However, these days, there is a laxity in respecting the rules of conduct laid down for the management of sacred groves. In the case of the three sacred groves studied, this relaxation is effective. It can be explained by a social and religious dynamic that manifests itself in the abandonment of local beliefs in favor of new forms of religiosity.

### ***Socio-cultural Representations at Stake in the Traditional Management of Sacred Groves***

#### ***Sacred Grove as a Place of Collective Memory***

In all the communities we visited, the sacred groves represent a place of collective memory. They are an integral part of the history of the peoples, with a special place in the founding myths. An analysis of the legends relating to the creation of the *Ouatchi* villages bordering the sacred grove (*Gboto-zeve*, *Gboto-Kossidamé*, *Gboto-Zogbe*, *Témanou-Copé*, *Domezze-Copé*) reveals a common thread. These stories feature a founding ancestor who came from Kouvé, a village around ten kilometers away, to settle in the *Godjè-godjin* grove with his family. The place where he settled is the original site from

which the various villages were created. In the same vein, the *Krobo* attribute the discovery of the *Godjè-godjin* grove to their ancestors, who settled there at the end of their exodus from Ghana.

The same is true of the *Ifè* of *Okpodjivè* and the *Nawdeba* of *Niamtougou*. The former attribute the discovery of today's *Okpodjivè* grove to the founding ancestor who came from the village of *Ariafe* near the Benin border. He set up camp next to the grove after agreeing to sacrifice his uterine nephew to the local spirits. It was this camp that became the village of *Okpodjivè*. For the *Nawdeba* of *Niamtougou*, the sacred *Niamtouragou* grove is the mythical site where the founding ancestor of the locality and his family appeared and lived. It cannot be dissociated from the origins of the people of *Niamtougou*.

These accounts demonstrate the attachment of the local people to their sacred grove, the disappearance of which would mean the loss of a part of their history. The value of these groves in terms of identity is clear. This is why the chief of the village of *Godjinmé* says: "*The sacred grove is our life, it's a symbol of our cultural identity*" (interview extract, February 2023).

#### *Sacred Grove as the Home of Protective Deities/Ancestors*

In the three ethnic groups studied, the grove in general is conceived as a space separate from that of humans and inhabited by divinities and protective ancestors. A closer look at the sacred groves reveals that their sacred nature is explained by the presence of sanctuaries dedicated either to the *Vodu* deities in the *Ouatchi* and *Ifè* areas, or to the ancestors among the *Nawdeba*. For example, as already mentioned, the *Igbolakou* and *Godjè-godjin* groves are home to convents dedicated to deities such as *Akpolori*, *Tchankpana*, and *Hebiesso* for the former, and *Bagbo*, *Godjè*, and *Tchawè* for the latter. In *Nawda* area, as far as the *Niamtouragou* grove is concerned, the deified ancestors are the "occupants" and form an integral part of society, given the central role they play.

The conception of the grove as a world of spirits, and also as the home of deities and ancestors, inspires fear and respect within the community. Moreover, the groves, because they provide shelter for these entities, are also thought of as a source of mystical power. Thus, the power to ward off bad luck or to deal with misfortune that strikes the community is said to be consubstantial with the grove and the entities that inhabit it. With this in mind, the customary leader of the *Niamtouragou* grove explains:

*"In this sacred grove lies all the strength of the people and the canton of Niamtougou. It is the source of our creation. Our life is here. It is from this grove that our elders derive their power. This is where the first man of our community was born"* (Extract from an interview in *Niamtougou*, September 2020).

An analysis of this verbatim allows us link the socio-cultural representation presented here and that set out above. Like sacred groves, deities and ancestors are also an integral part of community history. As a result, these entities cannot be dissociated from either the sacred groves or the history of the Ouacthi and *Krobo* communities of the villages bordering *Godjè-godjin*, the *Ifè* of *Okpodjivè*, and the *Nawdeba* of Niamtougou. As a result, the divinities and ancestors share the same identity value with the sacred groves they “inhabit”.

### *Sacred Grove as a Source of Well-Being and Wealth*

Sacred groves are also seen as a source of well-being and wealth. The well-being and wealth in question here are linked above all to the ecosystem services of provisioning and regulation they provide. Whether in the *Ouatchi*, *Ifè* or *Nawda* areas, the populations we met indicated the existence in their sacred groves of plants whose organs are used as food and medicine. Although hunting and logging are prohibited, the harvesting of plants is regulated in all three communities. The plants include *Khaya senegalensis* used to treat malaria and fever, *Triplochiton scleroxylon* used to treat eye ailments, *Dialium guineense* used to cure infections and whose fruit is edible, and *Ceiba pentandra* used as food. In addition to medicinal and food plants, sacred groves may also contain watering places used by local people. In the *Godjè-godjin* grove, for example, there is a water source that local people use in times of drought.

In terms of regulating services, local people link the coolness of the microclimate and the regularity of rainfall to the presence of the sacred groves. They therefore recognize their positive impact on agricultural activities in particular.

As well as being a source of well-being in terms of the ecosystem services they provide, sacred groves are also a cultural asset, attracting development projects that help to improve living conditions for local people. For example, the *Godjè-godjin* grove is the one that has attracted the most funding, notably through the Mono Delta Transboundary Biosphere Reserve project and the West African Coastal Area Management Programme (WACA). A local authority from the village of *Témanoucopé* said: "*The grove is a treasure for us. Thanks to it, the WACA project has donated 27 million CFA francs to build solar panels in the villages bordering the grove [...] The grove is therefore a great source of wealth and an asset for us local people*" (Interview extract, February 2023).

## **Discussion**

Sacred groves are cultural and religious institutions in many African societies. They belong to a category of sites or spaces that are genuinely

sacred. This sacred nature is based above all on a symbolic organization of man's relationship with the world (Dugast quoted in Ballarin & Blanchy, 2016). There are several types of groves, including cemetery groves, groves of gods or genies, groves of secret societies and groves of ancestors, and venerated animals (Kokou & Sokpon, 2006; Savadogo et al., 2011). This paper focuses on the groves of divinities/ancestors in the *Ouatchi*, *Ifè*, and *Nawda* areas to analyze the management practices and representations that underpin them. The results indicate that, in terms of governance, sacred groves are managed by local management entities with customary, and politico-religious authority. These management entities are made up of a category of people that Savadogo et al. (2011) and Dounias (2015) have also identified as customary authorities, guardians of divinities, notables, and other resource persons made up of older people.

In terms of management, the study showed the adoption of practices involving the use of sacred groves as sites for ritual ceremonies on the one hand, and the establishment of rules and prohibitions on the other. Similar practices to those highlighted in this work have been revealed by several authors. Ballarin and Blanchy (2016) describe sacred groves as settings for male initiation rituals and cyclical rituals that regulate the community. This is the case for the *Nawda* people in Togo. In this area, each village has a sacred grove (Wala et al., 2003) which plays a major role in the *Kowt* and *Santberm* initiation rites studied by (Sama, 2020). In the neighbouring *Kabye* area, the sacred groves, despite their relatively small size, are essential for ritual ceremonies. They are points of intersection between natural forces and the land places where the divine powers called “*Egolmyè*” manifest themselves (Daugey, 2016).

As far as prohibitions are concerned, Cormier-Salem and Roussel (2014) note a system of prohibitions in which hunting is generally prohibited, while other less aggressive activities such as collecting dead wood and gathering food and medicinal plants are strictly controlled. According to Hounghin (2005), the sacralization of groves is an endogenous technique for conserving natural resources and protecting nature by turning them into botanical and ecological gardens, where the removal of plant species for medicinal and ritual purposes and the collection of dead wood is subject to authorization. Everyone is required to respect community prohibitions linked to sacred groves. Violation of these prohibitions carries penalties that vary according to the seriousness of the offence. In the same vein, Savadogo et al. (2010, 2011) describe an endogenous management system for the natural resources of the sacred groves of the Mossi people of Burkina Faso, based on customary principles, rules and laws: no cutting of wood, no fires, no hunting, and no use of the grove outside days of worship. However, people's compliance with these principles and rules is declining, as this study has



shown. This result is in line with the observations made in Togo by Kokou et al. (2005) for the sacred groves of the *Ouatchi* area in the maritime region, Takou et al. (2010) for the sacred groves of the *Ogou* prefecture (Plateaux region), and Lynch et al. (2018) in the sacred groves of Kaboli (Tchamba Prefecture, Central Region). In addition to the abandonment of local beliefs, these authors blame the ever-increasing demand for arable land, urbanization, and population growth for the risk of disappearance facing sacred groves.

Sacred grove management practices involve several socio-cultural representations. The role of these representations is to legitimize the actions taken (Jodelet, 2003) as part of the customary governance of sacred groves. Three main representations emerged from this study. These identified the sacred grove as a place of collective memory, a home for protective deities/ancestors, and a source of well-being and wealth. An analysis of the literature on sacred groves reveals socio-cultural representations that converge in the same direction. Firstly, groves are conceived as the lair of spirits and the support of collective mythical representations (Bertrand, 1992). Secondly, for many African ethnic groups, they are the domain of the founding ancestors (Pellissier, 1980) and the founding sites of human settlements, which generally house the protective divinities of the villages and also serve as cemeteries (Juhé-Beaulaton, 2013). As a result, they constitute an important place for the identity of local populations (Ibo, 1998). They are places of communion, transmission of collective memory and recognition (Juhé-Beaulaton & Roussel, 2002). In the same vein, Badiane and Coly (2009) attribute to the sacred grove, the function of ensuring the continuity of rites and contributing to social stability as a place for the transmission of knowledge, as in the case of *Santberm* among the *Nawdeba*. Finally, sacred groves are seen as a shared cultural and natural heritage. In the eyes of not only the population in general, but also of the followers of the *Vodu* cult, they constitute a food reservoir, medicinal and liturgical plants (Hamberger, 2006; Kokou et al., 2005).

In view of the main findings, this paper is a contribution to a better understanding of the cultural mechanisms put in place by local people for the management of sacred groves, and also a demonstration of their interest in safeguarding them. Today, in the context of the fight against climate change and the preservation of biodiversity, it is essential to consider sacred groves and the mechanisms governing their management. This is why traditional practices have been taken into account in Togo's national biodiversity strategy and action plan (SPANB 2011-2020) through national biodiversity target no. 18<sup>3</sup>, as well as the restoration of sacred groves in Togo's National Reforestation Programme 2017-2030.

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<sup>3</sup> Objective 18. Increase national expertise by 2020, including consideration of traditional practices



## Conclusion

Sacred groves in *Ouatchi*, *Ifè*, and *Nawda* areas are managed by customary religious, family or political authorities according to local practices rooted in local belief systems. These practices consist of ritual ceremonies in which the sacred groves serve essentially as sites. In the sacred grove of *Godjè-godjin*, ritual ceremonies are dedicated to the protective deities *Bagbo*, *Godjè* and *Tchawè* to implore their protection and blessing. To commemorate their shared history, the *Ifè* of *Okpodjivè* hold an annual *Odjououlou* rite in the sacred grove of *Igbolakou*. Among the *Nawdeba* of Niamtougou, the *Santberm* initiation rite, and the many occasional prayers to the ancestors give the *Niamtouragou* grove a predominant place. In all three communities, similar rules and prohibitions have been established to regulate access to and collection of resources within the sacred groves. It is forbidden to collect natural resources unless special authorization is granted. Customary management of sacred groves is part of a vision of the world in which socio-cultural representations are developed to guide management practices. These representations have been identified and there are three types: those that enable sacred groves to be defined as a place of collective memory, those that attribute to them the status of abode of protective divinities/ancestors, and those that identify them as a source of well-being and wealth. The first type of representation refers to the identity dimension of sacred groves, which are at the heart of the history of the creation of the villages that host them. The second type of representation makes the link with the sanctuarization of sacred groves, which house the convents of divinities and ancestors. The last type of representation is based above all on the ecosystem services of supply and regulation that the sacred groves provide to the populations.

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**Declaration for Human Participants:** This study has been approved by University of Lome, Togo, and the principles of the Helsinki Declaration were followed.

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