The role of earth shrines in the socio-symbolic construction of the Dogon territory: towards a philosophy of containment

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This paper deals with the role of earth shrines in generating and maintaining social order and cohesion in a Dogon village on the Bandiagara escarpment (Mali, West Africa), in a context of scarcity. Earth shrines are erected at significant points in the landscape and in remote times symbolised the foundation of the territory. They form part of the ritual control of space by reinforcing, through sacrificial practice, a symbolic boundary that encloses and protects the village space. Through their yearly reactivation, this practice firstly enables the Dogon to strengthen their relationship with their god, their ancestors and the spirits that own the place and, secondly, it aims to renew social relationships and maintain the cohesion and continuity of the society whilst simultaneously conveying a sense of well-being. This paper examines the materiality, efficacy and activation principles of Dogon earth shrines that operate through the intervention of complementary living substances: millet and blood. These earth shrines function on an ontological principle of containment by which people protect themselves, act and dwell in the world. That is to say, they endow active principles and play a part in forming a local cosmology in a harsh and changing world.

Keywords: shrines; containment; sacrifice; well-being

Introduction. The notion and anthropological approach to shrines

Earth shrines are a widespread phenomenon in Africa (Dawson 2009). They appear in the form of an artefact or a natural feature of the landscape, such as a significant tree, a rock or a watercourse. They are prominent sacred elements in African ritual life (Prussin 1982). These objects of power (McNaughton 1988; de Surgy 2000) are generally located outside a village and are cared for by ritual specialists. They are often intentionally camouflaged to blend in with the surrounding landscape as a means of preventing people from approaching them. While a shrine can constitute a landmark for a community and convey a sense of autochthony (Lentz 2009) and therefore rootedness, they also act as a means of organising, controlling and thus protecting the people against the circulation of malevolent entities. In fact, Mather (2003) suggests that shrines are evidence of the domestication of the landscape and
the mastering of the spiritual forces that dwell in the place they own. According to Insoll’s definition (Insoll 2007, 140, referring to Courtright 1987, 299), shrines are considered both as material fixed elements and dynamic or active containers or receptacles that accumulate power and meaning in their materiality during seasonal sacrificial practices. A considerable amount of literature, mainly produced between the late 1960s and the mid 1990s, was dedicated to the nature, role or function of shrines, known in some places as ‘fetiches’, as well as to the sacrificial practices (de Surgy 1993). From the mid 1990s, new academic research interests into land shrines appear to have developed. They particularly concern the role of shrines in the religious construction of the landscape (Vincent, Dory and Verdier 1995), the materialisation of political unity and identities (Kuba 2000; Antongini and Spini 1997, 755–6; Dawson 2009; Insoll 2007) and similarly their role in the legitimisation of genealogies (Liberski-Bagnoud 2002).

This paper provides some aspects of the ethnographic framework of the role of Ama land shrines in the context of the symbolic construction of the Dogon territory and considers theories dealing with the mechanisms of sacrifice that highlight the role and efficacy of substances in building the Dogon socio-symbolic landscape. These Ama shrines are built on significant points in the landscape, around the village space and the fields and in the village. They form a symbolic or magical protection against invaders, evil spirits, the vengeful spirits of the dead, witchcraft, diseases and epidemics. Ama shrines are re-empowered and thus reactivated (Blier 1987) through a blood sacrifice followed by libations of cereal-based substances in order to restore and increase the efficacy of the symbolic protective boundaries of the territory. It is suggested here that by enclosing the village space, earth shrines create a sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991) and thus express a philosophy of containment (Warnier 2007). To a broader extent, a philosophy of containment designates the way people engage with, dwell in and organise the world around themselves through their daily embodied experiences of the materiality of the landscape. This is, as Ingold (2000) suggests, a ‘dwelling perspective’ that the author defines as a perpetual ontological engagement with the environment through practical activities and ritual. In this paper, the author proposes that this principle of containment informs about a local cosmology that is ‘in-the-making’ (Barth 1990). This is defined as a gathering of relational, relative and changeable world-views of people’s relationships with the invisible/spiritual world, as well as with nature and society (Douny 2009). Furthermore, this Dogon cosmology ‘in-the-making’ is described as a stabilising or fixing, and thus an ordering, of the Dogon world, to which meaning is attributed through the people’s continuous and thus cyclic shared social and ritual experience. In particular, a yearly communal celebration that includes sacrifices on the shrines helps to psychologically prepare the villagers for beginning a new agricultural cycle anticipated by the start of the rainy season.

Particular focus is placed here on regeneration and the communion of nature and society through various sacrifices and libations aimed at their purification. These practices consist of reinstating their order; for instance, ensuring social well being with networks of support between families and unity and cohesion of the village’s community, in tandem with the fertility of the soil and humans. These dimensions are discussed in a brief account of the identification and function of Dogon earth shrines that provides an overview of the mechanism of sacrifice. The implicit elements are discussed by focusing on the substances involved in the whole process.
Following an earlier thesis on sacrifice in West Africa and more particularly in the Mande-speaking world (Colleyn 2004; Jonckers 1995; van Beek 1992), it is proposed that the efficacy (Hardin and Arnoldi 1996) of the ritual lies in the materiality of the earth, blood and millet, as well as in the speech that is pronounced throughout the sacrifice. These ritual components are considered to be living substances that play an active role in transferring the nyama or vital energy of sacrificed animal bodies to a shrine in order to reactivate the latent power of the object. Hence, the role of substances is explored through aspects of ritual action and, in particular, of the purification process, which stand at the core of a Dogon cosmology of scarcity. It can already be underlined here that due to climate change, increasing desertification and over-exploitation of timber resources, the Dogon people have to overcome a critical lack of rain and dramatic food shortages (de Bruijn, van Dijk, Kaag, and van Til 2005).

The Dogon system of thought and their concept of illness

In the Bandiagara escarpment of the Dogon region in Mali, earth shrines are represented by standing stones or earth cones that serve an individual, a family, a clan, a particular age group or an entire village. They are called Ama (Figure 1), a term that refers to the name of the Dogon people’s god. The ritual care of Ama shrines is ruled by a system of thought that transcends Dogon spiritual life and is known locally as Omolo Bulone. This is identified in the West as ‘animism’, a concept we shall define here as a relational ontology (Descola 1986; Ingold 2006). In other words, an animistic relational ontology, as proposed by Ingold, consists of ‘inhabiting’ a changing world (Ingold 2006, 14), a world of relations and relations.
to the worlds within which ‘[…] beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence’ (Ingold 2006, 10). From the same point of view, animism can be seen as a ‘theory of social relationships’ (Colleyn 2004, 62), while ritual practice fundamentally serves to ‘reify’ social relationships and strengthen social coalitions, thus maintaining the cohesion of society.

Although Dogon communities are increasingly converting to Islam, Catholicism or Protestantism, Omolo Bulone is still very much present in rural areas. Omolo refers to ‘a shrine’ and the term Bulone means ‘to revive’ or ‘to regenerate’ (Calame-Griaule 1968, 49–50). To a broader extent, as the author gathered from her informants, Omolo Bulone conveys the idea of reinitiating the order of things through ritual practice, for instance when a rule has been broken or a prohibition transgressed. Furthermore, Omolo Bulone concerns the fertility of soils through rain, the fertility of people and the fertility of social relationships. Finally, it corresponds to a principle of communion that is one of the unity, order and cohesion of the society (Jacobson-Widding and van Beek 1990, 33). Defined as such, the Dogon system of thought places strong emphasis on the vitality of the materiality of things and beings. As is found elsewhere in West Africa, Dogon people believe that every living/existing feature of their world is animated by a powerful vital energy that they call nyama and which flows with blood in all individuals and is partly transmitted by the mother, partly by the father. It increases as a child grows up and can also decrease due, for instance, to illness or accident. Nyama ensures an individual’s equilibrium and wellness. As described by a traditional doctor, nyama is also perceived as a dangerous energy that can harm people (the uninitiated, women, etc) when the rules regarding the agency of a shrine are not respected. For instance, approaching a shrine can lead to starvation and death. Similarly, it was reported that a young Dogon died shortly after breaking into the perimeter of a village shrine and plundering the site. The loss of nyama in human beings is considered to be a form of illness (jimu) and a state of impurity (puru) that leads to madness and death, if speedy action is not taken to remedy it. Five causes of illness, and thus loss of nyama, are generally identified. These are the breaking of a society prohibition, a physical aggression or an injury caused by a human or supernatural entity, poisoning through witchcraft, talking loudly against someone and, to a higher degree, violent verbal conflicts involving insults. Speech is indeed considered as a particularly powerful and ambivalent substance that can solve a problem but can also initiate vehement conflicts between people. Lastly, impurity can be caught by contact with impure substances such as menstrual blood. The origin of illness is attributed to specific vengeful spirits, a god, ancestors and a pantheon of bush spirits called olubem that coexist with human beings. They move through the air, but also live in the water. The full range of material things of which the human and natural realms are composed constitutes a potential host for these supernatural entities – such as, for example, the djimu or djinagu that live in the trees. Yeban (Griaule 1994, 153) are chthonic spirits associated with rocks and dunes. They help humans to do good or evil. As reported by van Beek, jinu spirits are particularly dangerous, as they attack people and seek out body parts or newborn babies. In summary, illness consists of a loss of vitality that is perceived by the Dogon people as a loss of both spiritual and physical strength or power that decreases when the nyama is affected by impurity attributed to the spiritual world.
Protective boundaries as a principle of containment

Earth shrines and the division of space

The originality of the Dogon landscape stems from the particular aesthetics of the Bandiagara cliffs. These mark a transition between the rocky plateau of Bandiagara and the sandy Seno Gondo plain, which faces the escarpment. Dogon village territories located in that area are bounded by dunes that create a visible boundary with the Seno Gondo plain or ‘wild’ bush area. On the eastern and western sides of the built-up area, situated on the escarpment scree, the field limits are shown by a furrow in the soil. They border with the fields of the neighbouring villages, thus creating a political boundary. As proposed by Petit, the village territory, as in many other areas of the Dogon land, can be conceptualised: ‘[...] by considering the village as a central point that stands in the middle of a series of concentric circles. As we leave the central point of the settlement, we leave the civilised world [...] to penetrate into an increasingly unknown and distant, dangerous world’ (Petit 1998, 39). Three shrines,¹¹ called Muno and the Lebe, that blend into the surrounding environment of dunes and scree, distinguish the natural and ‘dangerous’ space, an ambivalent area of the bush, as both ‘wisdom and knowledge’ and ‘life and death’ (van Beek 1992, 64), from the ‘safe’ cultural space of the village and its surroundings or exterior, where most social and domestic activities take place. They demarcate the territory, thus creating the inside and the outside of the village.

The ‘domesticated bush’, where all the fields and orchards are found, extends from the foot of the scree to the dune. This area is referred to as the ‘outside’ of the village and is called ana kerugue, meaning ‘on the side of’. The ‘inside’ of the territory is then designated as the village or place of residence called ana koro (also ana bere). Koro translates as ‘to surround with’ (Douny 2007). As described by the villagers, the territory is governed by deities such as the ancestors who founded the place and the spirits who give it life. Dogon territory appears to be a social and symbolic construct that is dwelt in, divided by and ruled through a system of prohibitions. In fact, as underlined by Liberski-Bagnoud (2002), African landscapes are not just places of ritual, but are truly defined through complex relationships between the soil and the society. In other words, the landscape is structured by a society’s prohibition rules, lineage system, genealogies, moral values and ethics, etc. The very act of founding a territory also founds the unity of a people and therefore its cohesion.

Lebe and Muno as pegu shrines: fixing and appropriating the place

The Lebe and Muno shrines are commonly referred to as ‘timeless’ elements that played a central role in the foundation of Dogon villages. They are what the villagers call a pegue or pegu, meaning an act of fixing and maintaining the continuity of the ‘things’ of life and, by extension, of the society. Hence, these pegu shrines reaffirm the idea of a shared common ancestry that works towards the perpetuation of the village’s unity. The term pegu also relates to a particular process of constituting the shrine material’s content or hoard (Douny 2009) located inside it and underground. The power of the earth shrine relates to the specific components that make up its form and content, a power that is magnified through sacrificial practices. For instance, the mud is taken from a particular pond where the nommo, the water spirit, lives. This type of earth known as logo, which possesses all the appropriate chemical qualities, such as hardness and resistance to harsh weather conditions, is considered
to be a ‘living’ substance that symbolises fertility. As recalled by a group of elders, the foundation of a *pegu* from time immemorial involved the sacrifice of a person standing in a hole in the ground and in whose skull a metallic hook was ‘planted’ (Bouju 1995, 355). Once fully enshrined in a thick conical-shaped mud envelope, the hook acted as a link between the victim and the shrine as a means of empowering it by conducting the victim’s *nyama* to it.

Initially the *Lebe*, the first *pegu* established by the ancestors on founding the village space and legitimising its existence, creates a dividing line between the village of the living and the escarpment on which the dead are buried. It is revealed as an act of appropriation of space, which creates particular senses of autochthony (Lentz 2009). It therefore acts as a symbol of identity for people who share the same ancestry back to the remote times when the Dogon migrated from the Mande. In a similar way, the *Lebe* brings Catholics, Muslims, Protestants and animists into a single unity, objectifying as such a principle of communion (Jacobson-Widding and van Beek 1990) that allows the political and social stability and continuity or cohesion of the village to be maintained. In relation to the foundational scheme of the village, the *lebe* earth shrine does not only objectify in its materiality a cyclical ritual temporality occurring at the turn of the rainy season, but also symbolises ancestor worship. Thus, it reminds the villagers of their history and identity, recalls the genealogies of the families whose ancestors founded the village and thus their origin. As recounted by the elders of a village and subsequently confirmed in ethnographic literature, the first *Lebe* was an altar (portable device) brought from the Mande and made from the soil of the tomb of the ancestor from whom the Dogon clans are descended (Dieterlen 1941). Hence, once Dogon migrants had divided and relocated in separate areas of the present-day Dogon region, the *Lebe* altar was divided between the various groups. The fragments of this altar were subsequently integrated into individual foundational *Lebe*, thus becoming an earth shrine legitimising the settling of a group in a particular space.

Secondly, the *Ginu Muno* stands as a protective device that covers all the *ana koro* or inhabited areas. The term *Muno* signifies the action of ‘wrapping’ as forming a kind of protective shield. A similar concept is described by Kuba when referring to Dagara-Wiile’s concept of *tengan* meaning ‘the crust or skin of the earth’ a term that: ‘refers to the territory under the protection of a particular earth shrine’ (Kuba 2000, 417). The two first *Oru Muno* are set in the domesticated bush, outside the village. One of them is situated on the eastern side of the outside of the village. It is buried in the scree where it is hidden among the rocks. The other *Muno* earth shrine is set in a similar fashion on the western side of the bush in the dune. The two *Oro Muno* perform the function of insulating the village from anything coming from the wild bush that could compromise the village’s stability, such as epidemics brought in by bad winds or bush spirits. As previously stated, these ambivalent forces that can do either good or evil also generate conflicts between the villagers by seizing them and pushing them to act negatively or, as they say, ‘mixing up our souls’.

In a similar way to the *Lebe* shrine, the two *Oro Muno* or bush shrines do not only objectify a concept of space, but also materialise a conjuncture of temporalities, which are both ritual and seasonal, by relating to the agrarian cycle occurring with the renewal of nature. Furthermore, these two shrines recall the history of boundaries through the multiple threats against which the Dogon protect themselves; these range from epidemics, wars and famines to slave raids and
colonialism. In this way, these two bush shrines constitute an initial barrier that stops threats entering by containing them (Bouju 1995, 363). However, the enclosure they form remains porous; a *jinu* or diseases still manage to penetrate the boundary as long as their power remains stronger than the power of the symbolic protection provided by the shrines. As proposed by Bouju, Dogon earth shrines are seen as doors through which ‘evil’ entities enter the living space (through the eastern shrine, sunrise) and are later expelled from it through the other shrine (in the west, the pole of danger, sunset). This leads to Bouju’s argument about a linear circulation of ‘evil’ beings, a scheme that he defines as an inverted modality of space and time. According to de Surgy’s (1993) proposals regarding voodoo shrines, their primarily immaterial reality belongs to the invisible order, located in another space-time. Hence, earth shrine space-time does not possess the same properties as that of everyday human life (Hubert and Mauss 1899).

The reactivation of boundaries through sacrificial practice: an overview of the mechanism of the sacrifice

As the rainy season approaches, nature regenerates, indicating the start of the new agrarian cycle. This period appears as transitional when the hopes and prayers for abundant rains and a successful agricultural cycle are manifested through various ritual and festive events framed within the *Bulo* (April/May), which is a time of collective celebration. It is particularly marked by a series of sacrificial practices seen as obligatory cyclic rites that are carried out by the elders who have been in charge of them for generations. Those ritual practices operated on particular shrines in a specific order enable, on the one hand, the initiation of young people into the community’s ritual practices through access to particular knowledge and, on the other, they also allow the reordering of society, notably to reinstall a solid network of mutual aid between villagers, particularly in terms of agricultural work.

The cult of the *Binu*, which concerns the purification of the land, its fertility, rain-making and, therefore, the renewal of the natural environment, also occurs at this time. It can be underlined that the *Binu* cult is associated with that of the *Lebe* shrine, which guarantees good health, the multiplication of families and the fecundity of the earth and of women, as well as ensuring the longevity of the elders. A delegation organised by the elders and involving a different age group of young men is organised each year in the form of a pilgrimage to the sites of the *Muno*, where the young men observe the sacrifice. Repairs to the shrine are carried out by its keepers, who re-plaster the artefact by adding a layer of earth collected from the ponds, a powerful material associated with fecundity. In order to purify the object and symbolically purify the land, an act known as *dyala* is undertaken. This consists of rubbing the shrine’s new skin with the moist leaves or, more frequently, the bark from the cailcedrat tree or *Khaya Senegalensis* called *pelu* (Dieterlen 1952). This is followed by the sacrifice of a chicken. The ancestors who are proposed by Mbiti (1970, 100) to be ‘timeless’ intermediaries with God, are convened by the elder in charge of the ritual or the ritual manager to come and rest on the shrine. In this way, the earthen artefact acts as a meeting point, mediation site or, in other words, a receptacle where communication between humans and the supernatural world is made possible. Ancestors, together with spirits, are responsible for the way things are in the society; they also advise and help people in particular enterprises such as...
divination, healing and protecting people during a war or against witchcraft. Therefore, people act through them.

Thirdly, the assistant to the elder who manages the ritual proceeds to carry out the libation of millet on the shrine. The cereal is a liquid porridge of *yu mogulu* (meaning clear/washed millet) that is only made from the flour of the grain. This substance, called *pumu*, is regarded as a rich, active or living element. It is poured out on the shrine as a means of ‘fortifying’ plants (the regeneration of nature) and this is followed by a long prayer\(^{13}\) (Dieterlen 1976). Thus, the aim of the libation is to revitalise the fields and nature, as well as the people. Millet is also seen as a sign of prosperity. The libation is followed by a blood sacrifice that consists of cutting the carotid artery of the victim. As described by Griaule (1940), this technical act consists of releasing the *nyama*, the independent life force of the victim channelled by its blood, in order to feed the shrine-container. Hence, the dynamics of the sacrifice as proposed by Griaule constitute a circuit through which the *nyama* is channelled, transferred or transmitted to the shrine. The life force leaves its support (the body) at the moment of death and thus liberates the *nyama* energy, which is the main ingredient causing the efficacy of the whole sacrificial process. The animal victims generally belong to the family of the ritual manager and are sometimes fed with particular substances or medicines\(^{14}\) in order to strengthen their *nyama*. The composition of the latter remains a secret and is only known to the men involved in the sacrificial process.\(^{15}\) It can be underlined that the same knife that is part of the shrine paraphernalia is used over time to sacrifice animals. It renders a permanency to the function of the practice and the meaning attached to it as a tradition transmitted from one generation to the next that creates continuity between the world of the ancestors and the people of today. It is said that the knife belonged to the ancestors who founded the village.

In the last stage of the ritual, the flesh of the victims is seasoned and then consumed as a ritual meal over several days by the men in charge of the sacrifice. As they are eating this ‘sacred’ meat, their bodies assimilate the vital energy or *nyama* of the animal that had been raised within the household and fed beforehand with medicines (secret components) as a means of strengthening its *nyama*. When the consumption of meat has come to an end, the men are forbidden to travel to avoid them defecating outside the village and thus scattering the benefits of the *nyama* that still remains in their excrement. The feast is also accompanied by the consumption of millet or sorghum beer that is shared with the men of the village. Dogon families are asked to contribute to the brewing of the beverage by offering a large calabash of millet. The young girls of the village are called on to bring fresh, clean water to the site of the shrine where beer is brewed.

It can be underlined that knowledge of the sacrificial practice, including the procedure and the speech, is re-invented over time, as in certain contexts, knowledge is never completely transmitted, for political reasons or simply due to the lack of interest among younger people in taking over the ritual due to religious conversion. Furthermore, as underlined by Jonckers (2000, 102), the sacrifice does not only entail utilitarian or symbolic functions and reflect social relationships, but also materialises a socio-economic reality in the production/consumption of material goods. While the communal sacrifice dedicated to the village shrines involves a restricted group of elders, another range of sacrifices takes place during the same period on an individual level. These are organised by the heads of families in their own
compounds. In terms of the villagers’ investment, on a communal level each family offers a large calabash of millet pearls to the ritual manager. This is used to brew the beer for the event, which is consumed over several days by the men of the village. On an individual level, a large quantity of food prepared by each family is offered to relatives and friends who come to visit. The head of a family has to make sure that all visitors are well received with plenty of food and millet beer, as this makes the reputation of the family. Hence, a substantial number of domestic animals are slaughtered and hundreds of kilos of millet are used in the production of beer and food for ritual consumption, as well as for families and guests during the annual celebration that is spread over ten days. For many villagers, this feast leads to a significant consumption of food resources in an atmosphere of effervescence and illusory abundance that often jeopardises the meagre resources of Dogon families. Many people get into debt and the scarcity that characterises daily Dogon life, including the hunger gap of the following agricultural period, is denied. However, although this situation could be interpreted as squandering, it is perceived as necessary by Dogon villagers. In fact, the overconsumption of food and its offering constitute a necessity to notably perpetuate the ritual in order to maintain the ordered cohesion of the society in a modern, unstable and changing world.

Purifying and reinitiating the order of society

As we have seen, sacrifice as an embodied practice plays a central role in the purification and reorganisation of society, as well as in psychologically preparing the villagers to enter a new agricultural cycle. In the case given above, the reordering of society takes place through the yearly reactivation of the earth shrines that map out the land and reinitiate the symbolic protective and permeable boundaries that create a conceptualised space division, distinguishing, but at the same time combining, the same cosmological scheme of nature and culture (Descola 1994).

According to Griaule (1940, 129), Ama shrines stand as successive points of convergence between, on the one hand, the deity and the victims, and on the other, between the deity and the sacrificer. This takes place through the transfer of living substances, such as blood and millet, the vital energy of which is appropriated, channelled and stored in the earth shrines as a means of reactivating them (Colleyn 2004, 68). The discharge of blood illi edu occurring at death releases the victim’s nyama, which is used to overcome the shrine’s loss of vitality caused by malevolent entities entering or living within the territory and causing quarrels, fights, accidents, disease or epidemics. Hence, sacrifice enables healing and an overall re-establishment of social order, as the shrine is first being purified and then having its power regenerated.

The efficacy of the ritual lies in the periodicity and thus the seasonal repetition of sacrifices through which nyama accumulates in the artefact and keeps its power up to a certain level. Although a shrine’s power is omnipresent and in fact feared, its power tends to diminish when the artefact is deprived of blood. Blood, as well as millet and earth, are mixed with specific organic components that reinforce the materiality of the object. While these substances are being transferred, another substance, speech in the form of prayers, is expressed at each step of the ritual. As such, the elder makes requests to the spirits of the land, the ancestors and then to Ama, the god of fertility, harmony and protection, of forgiveness for the breaking of prohibitions, of rain, of
female fecundity and finally of ensuring the peace and happiness of the villagers, all of which combine to bring about the general well-being of Dogon society. The practice acts as the perpetuation of a ‘contract’ between the villagers and the coexisting invisible world that was set up when the village was founded. It also enables the strengthening of relationships of solidarity and the reaffirmation of a common origin and a sense of unity among the villagers, most of who have converted to Christianity, Protestantism and Islam.

Conclusion: earth shrines, ontological security and well-being

In Dogon society, as in many West African Mande speaking societies, sacrificial practices reveal principles of fertility and communion between the individual, society and nature. Omolo Bulone, or the animistic system of thought, designates an active cosmological principle of dealing and interacting with the world through spiritual beings and ritual practice. It is therefore constitutive of what it is to be the Dogon people existing and living in the world. In other words, by focusing on the efficacy, materiality and immateriality of land shrines, this paper has provided an account of an ontological principle of containment, through which the Dogon people act and therefore dwell in the world. The proposed philosophy of containment encompasses particular concepts of space and time seen as a continuum. While time is defined as cyclical, space appears as an expansion. Hence, Dogon land shrines play a part in establishing a local cosmology ‘in-the-making’ that is expressed as a form of well-being and reveals the Dogon principles of ordering of the world, the Dogon relationship with the spiritual world and therefore their relationship with nature in a particularly poor environment.

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Notes on contributor

Laurence Douny is a Leverhulme Postdoctoral Research Fellow at UCL Anthropology. She has been working in the Dogon region of Mali since 2001 looking at the symbolic construction of the landscape and domestic material culture.

Notes

1. This paper is the result of ongoing research on Dogon shrines. The main body of the research was conducted between 2003 and 2004 and in 2005 at various places in the Dogon region and predominantly in the Bandiagara escarpment region. It was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.
2. Dogon villages have innumerable shrines. First, there are the village shrines (e.g. earth shrines) that serve the entire village community. They can be cones made of earth and of different heights, a standing stone, a tree surrounded by a fence or a bush, a rock of a particular shape, and so on. They are set in a significant part of the landscape, for example, in a place that is associated with a spirit or ancestor or the history of the foundation of the village. Secondly, individual or family shrines strictly concern personal and family matters. These can be fixed or portable artefacts (altars) and they can come in various forms including cones (as described) or small pieces of pottery. These shrines are located in compounds or the ginma, which is the extended family house.

3. For example, the spirit of a woman who died during pregnancy is said to come back to kill newborn babies.

4. Dogon cosmogony as a system of representations or archetypes of the Dogon creation myth, as described by Griaule’s team, is not considered here due to doubts about the veracity of these theories (van Beek 1991).

5. The author is aware of ongoing debates about Dogon Mande origin and ethnicity (e.g. van Beek 1991; Martinelli 1995; Bouju 1995). The data were collected and therefore cross-checked in multiple parts of the actual Dogon region where people claim their origin to be Mande. This aspect will be further developed in a forthcoming monograph.

6. Although the existence of the concept of nyama was refuted in specialised literature on the Dogon (e.g. van Beek 1991), the author of this paper came across this term in the Dogon villages where she undertook her research. The term nyama is in general use, notably among the Dogon elders in charge of rituals, traditional doctors and blacksmiths. The term nyama is also translated in the Dogon languages as follows: nômmo in Tengu so and three terms are used in Toro so: nyama, nômmo and teere. The information provided by the author’s informants and repeated in this paper correlates with that found in the ethnographic literature the author has chosen to use in this paper.

7. All terms in this paper are expressed in the Toro so language.

8. The belief system includes four cults: Wagem, Lebe, Masks and Binu.

9. The people and places are all anonymous for ethical reasons.

10. Translation by Laurence Douny.

11. There are three Muno shrines and one Lebe shrine in the village where the research took place.

12. The author of the paper is aware of the large amount of existing literature on sacrifice, as well as the different schools (e.g. Colleyn 2004; Jonckers 1995; de Heusch 1985). Due to the lack of space, the mechanism as observed in the field is described and analysed by reference to a corpus of theories referring to the Mande area of West Africa.

13. The content of the prayers was not revealed to the author and could not be recorded.

14. The composition of the substance is produced by the guarantor of the sacrificial practice on a particular shrine. For example, animals to be sacrificed are never bought in a market, as it would not be possible to ensure the ‘quality’, that is the strength of the animal, and on the whole they would not know how the animal had been fed.

15. The composition was not revealed to the author.

16. As opposed to illi dyodya that refers to impure blood lacking nyama.

References


