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Introduction

Just outside the city of Savè in central Bénin, a footpath follows the base of one of the many large granite hills for which the area is known. Low bushes and stunted trees dot the hill slope, while farm fields stretch to the horizon on the other side of the path. The path meanders along the hill's contours before coming to a clearing, approximately 10 meters in diameter. In the center of the clearing stands a tree. The tree is tall, perhaps 30 meters in height. It dwarfs the stunted trees growing on the slope and the squat palm and fruit trees in the fields. The roots of the tree jut out at right angles from one another, buttressing the round trunk and branching canopy. As if the size of the tree and its prominent position in the center of a clearing were not enough to signify its strangeness, it wears clothes.

Wrapped around the tree is a large white cloth. The cloth is one meter wide and wraps about two-thirds of the way around the tree, while the remaining gap is bridged by more narrow strips of fabric tied in a knot. The overall effect suggests that the tree is wearing an apron. Above this cloth is another piece, this one a sash of light blue, less than half as wide as the lower cloth. Both pieces are faded and dirty from continual exposure to the elements, though in certain places there are distinct yellow and rust-colored stains. Nestled in the roots below are fragments of pottery, bits of animal bone, and shards of broken glass. Beside these material markers, there is no sign nor symbol, not even a nearby house or structure, which would suggest that this tree is a historical marker commemorating centuries of a changing cultural landscape.

In 2012, the Savè Hills Archaeological Research Project (SHARP) documented large, ritually important trees of five species in the Savè hills as part an archaeological reconnaissance survey (figure 1). Though clothed trees are the most conspicuous markers on the landscape, unclothed trees of the same species can serve a similar purpose. Some memorialize specific people and events, while others have more generalized connections to the past. That trees can be used as landscape markers is of little surprise. Their natural occurrence, large size, long life, and propensity for unusual growths and shapes make them well-suited for recognition. Their literal rootedness ensures that they remain within the geography they are used to identify. This discussion of trees identifies them with the cultural landscape of the Savè hills area—a landscape in which trees take on systematic and symbolically-charged meanings. In this paper, I describe the use of trees among the Shabe Yoruba to mark historical and archaeological sites. I also comment on how this use is contextualized within a cultural landscape, a term that has come to take on important meaning for conserving biological, cultural, and archaeological heritage. Finally, I end by considering how an increased understanding of sacred trees might contribute to heritage protection and promotion in the region.

Defining a Cultural Landscape

> [A]s far as the eye can reach to the eastward are three mountains of a conical form, all of which are of the same shape and height. I asked the caboceer[1] the name of these mountains, but he denied all knowledge of them, either by name or otherwise. I then asked several of my soldiers, from whom I received a similar reply. It seemed to me very singular, that a man should live during his whole life so near any remarkable spot

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> without knowing something of the place, or even its name. (Duncan 1847: 38)

This brief passage is the first written reference to the Savè hills and in it we are introduced to the defining feature of the landscape (plate 1). Indeed, the large granite domes of the Oke Shabe hill were for the neighboring Fon of nineteenth century Dahomey the only feature of the landscape. In truth, the Fon were well aware of the Shabe people living at the foot of those three conical domes, as the Dahomean king Gezo had led an invasion into the area only two or three years prior (Martí 1992a: 207). Perhaps Duncan's guides were reticent to elaborate about those hills that offered refuge to the Shabe peoples and allowed them to weather the Dahomean raids.

The Savè hills are named for the commune capital city of Savè, a name which is itself a Fon-language adaptation of the precolonial kingdom and ethnic autonym Shabe. The Shabe kingdom and people were and continue to be closely aligned politically, linguistically, and culturally with other Yoruba communities in Bénin and Nigeria. The overarching historical narrative of the Shabe kingdom puts a heavy emphasis on its origin from the Oyo Empire and, ultimately, Ile-Ife (Adediran 1994: 91; Martí 1992a). This connection is manifest most directly during the installation rites of the Shabe monarch, the Onishabe, who must be sanctioned at the Yoruba religious center of Ile-Ife. Aside from political narratives, communities in the area have many other connections with Yoruba communities in Nigeria. The Shabe language is a dialect of Yoruba (Parrinder 1947; Martí 1992a: 11). Many families have genealogical connections to communities on the other side of the Nigerian border with well-established social and economic relationships (Flynn 1997). Religious practices associated with Nigerian Yoruba peoples also have Shabe practitioners: the veneration of the supreme being Olorun, the first divine king Oduduwa, and the deities Shango, Ogun, Shakpana and Eshu; beliefs in the concepts of *ori* (destiny), *ashe* (spiritual power), and reincarnation; and the use of Ifa divination (Martí 1993).

Despite its name, the Savè hills landscape is relatively flat. The steep crests of the hills are quite spatially restricted, composed of granite domes in linear formations running along a northwest-southeast axis. The hills abruptly rise up just south of Savè, near the confluence of the Ouémé and Okpara Rivers, and run to the north of the town of Tchaourou. The landscape is intensively cultivated on a fallow system preceded by controlled burnings. Common crops include maize, African yams, cassava, peanuts, cowpeas, and garden vegetables, as well as wild and semi-wild tree crops such as shea and oil palm. The agricultural season is dictated by a climatic cycle typical of West Africa, with a rainy season extending from late March to November—punctuated by a brief respite in August—and a dry season from December to early March. Most agriculture is done by hand on small-scale farms, though some industrial farming exists, most notably the state sponsored SUCOBE sugarcane plantation adjacent to the Ouémé River. The population of the Savè hills has more than tripled over the past 60 years and, as a result, much of the local wildlife has been forced out due to pressure from hunting and habitat destruction. Antelope and other small ungulates are still found in area, but larger mammals such as elephants are completely gone. Hippopotamuses remain in the Ouémé River but their numbers have been severely reduced (Sayer & Green 1984).

The landscape of the Savè hills closely matches Sauer's (1925: 6) classic formulation of a cultural landscape: "The cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area the medium, the cultural landscape the result." Sauer's definition, however, describes only a single episode or mode of transformation. The Savè hills were occupied for centuries, and were transformed again and again, by different peoples and at different times. There is some evidence that the forest-savanna mosaic that characterizes the Savè hills is itself the result of long-term anthropogenic factors (Fairhead & Leach 1996; Hohn & Neumann 2012; but see Salzmann & Hoelzmann 2005). Indeed, it is more accurate to state that the landscape is in a continual state of transformation, with cultural practices shaping the landscape and the landscape recursively shaping cultural practices. By the time Shabe villages were established in the area, the primal environment as envisioned by Sauer was already long gone.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, the academic distinctions between natural and cultural elements of a landscape began to blur as a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between the two emerged (Fowler 2003: 17). The revised 1992 UNESCO World Heritage Convention was the first major international statute to recognize the recursive dynamic between humans and environments. The revised convention defined cultural landscapes according to three graded categories based on the intensity of anthropogenic influences: (1) defined and intentionally created landscapes; (2) organically evolved landscapes; and, (3) associative cultural landscapes (WHC 2008: 86). Despite differences in scale, each category emphasizes the associative value of the landscape to indigenous and world communities (Rössler 2003: 11). From this perspective, it is the distinct elements associated with human societies that constitute the value of a cultural landscape. The exact elements vary with any specific geography, and so cultural landscapes and their constituent

elements must be identified, evaluated, conserved, and interpreted on a case-by-case basis.

How can the Savè hills be envisioned as a cultural landscape? What might the elements of a Shabe cultural landscape be? Prominent geographic landmarks should be included, such as hills, caves, valleys, and rivers. The large granite domes that dominate the otherwise flat topography, the confluence of the Ouémé and Okpara Rivers, and the small patches of forest hidden amongst fields of maize and yams are part of the landscape. Modern settlements should also be included, as they most obviously provide the cultural side of the equation. The Shabe ethnic majority makes up most of the Savè hills population, but Baatombu, Fon, Mahi, and Akan ethnicities are also found in the network of urban centers, villages, and farmsteads. The nomadic Fulbe peoples are also part of the cultural mix of peoples and practices in the Savè hills. Historically they passed through on their seasonal cattle routes, but over the past 40 years they have started to settle in more permanent camps. More recently, immigrants from the Atacora region in the north of Bénin are also starting to settle in the area. The configuration of landscape and culture extends beyond present-day geography and ethnicity, however, and so must include a concern for cultural practices envisioned over a long time scale. Indeed, if the criteria for defining such a landscape is that it "creates monuments to the faceless ones, the people who lived and died unrecorded except unconsciously and collectively by the landscape modified by their labours" (Fowler 2001: 77), then we must include those traces of past life that are still preserved in the present, as well as how those traces are incorporated into the lives of modern communities settled on the landscape.

Archaeological sites are the most obvious traces of the lived past in the Savè hills. These sites are typically the remains of ancient settlements, defined by scatters of broken tools, pots, and animals bones. They are occasionally complemented by ruined architecture, such as building foundations, post holes, clay floors, and defensive walls. Less overt than artifacts and architecture are the botanical indicators of a sustained human presence. Large trees are commonly associated with archaeological sites. Often they appear along with artifacts and architecture, but occasionally large trees appear on their own without other material indicators of Fowler's "faceless ones."

The correlation of large trees with archaeological sites is not accidental. Trees are often planted when settlements are founded, and the trees are cared for throughout the occupation (Darling 2008; Ogundiran 2012: 235-236). By the time a settlement is abandoned, the tree is already established and continues to grow. Widespread and durable prohibitions against felling certain species of tree protect large specimens that would otherwise have been cut down for fuel and land clearance. The result is that the only large trees that remain on the landscape are those that were once associated with a village.

The value of these trees have not been overlooked by researchers and institutions interested in protecting natural and cultural heritage. However, the relationship between trees and landscape in Bénin has been discussed predominantly by conservationists concerned with environmental preservation (Juhé-Beaulaton & Roussel 2003; Sokpon & Agbo 1999). Sacred trees and groves are often the only primary forest growth in denuded landscapes that have been intensively exploited for fuel and agricultural land, as is the case in the Savè hills (Ceperley et al. 2010). Perhaps part of the reason that these trees are not more widely discussed is that they seem too commonplace to be linked to important aspects of cultural heritage. Trees may also seem too ephemeral to be linked to long term processes of landscape change. Perhaps it is simply that trees are regarded by researchers and NGOs as economic or ecological resources, not cultural objects. Whatever the reason, it is my aim to show that trees have a central role in both modern religious practice and historical and archaeological reconstructions of the Savè hills cultural landscape.

Clothed Sacred Trees

Trees are featured in many African religions, and indeed they are a common religious symbol in every part of the world in which they are found (Mbiti 1990: 51, 73, 92). Sacred trees are found in many communities in the Savè hills area of the Republic of Bénin. The sacred trees in the Savè hills tend to be large, mature trees, the kinds associated with archaeological sites throughout Africa (Darling 2008). There is a great amount of diversity in how trees are incorporated into religious practice (see Thompson 1993), but this study is primarily concerned with the practice of wrapping white cloth around the trunks of sacred trees. I argue that this practice is an important part of how Shabe people create and maintain a cultural landscape—a way of memorializing the past by caring for trees in the present.

Babatunde Agbaje-Williams' study (2005) of clothed sacred trees in Yoruba communities in Nigeria provides an excellent summary of why and how clothed sacred trees are created. One of the central conclusions of his research is that tying cloth around trees is closely associated with Ifa divination (Ibid: 158). An Ifa diviner, called a *babalawo*, provides the prescription for when and how to appropriately clothe trees and how to conduct related ritual practices,

such as offerings. Though the practice of tying cloth around the trunks of particularly large and impressive trees has been mentioned in passing (Martí 1993: 120), no detailed study of this religious practice has been previously carried out in the Savè hills area. Agbaje-Williams's study is a good point of departure for this discussion of clothed sacred trees as Ifa consultation is widespread in the Savè hills area among both ethnic Shabe and non-Shabe communities.

Agbaje-Williams was the first to identify sacred tree species related to Ifa religious practice and describe the reasons practitioners choose to clothe trees. His study investigated sacred tree use in twenty Nigerian Yoruba communities and found twenty-four tree species used for religious purposes, including eight that did not involve cloth wrapping (ibid: 180). Despite a great deal of variation in the specific meanings and practices among communities and species, Agbaje-Williams (ibid: 182) was able to characterize clothed sacred trees as serving three related functions: containment, territoriality, and historical consciousness.

Containment of spiritual energy is one reason that trees may be wrapped in cloth. Trees are often regarded as the dwelling places of powerful spirits (Bascom 1969). While spirits may inhabit a tree, there is no outward manifestation and so the tree must be identified through Ifa consultation. By wrapping the trunk of such a tree with cloth, the energy of the spirit is partially transferred to the cloth. The cloth thus acts to dissipate potentially harmful energies or to store beneficial energies. After wrapping a tree, energized cloth can be used in the creation of medicine or as a component in other religious practices (Agbaje-Williams 2005: 182).

Territoriality is another major function served by clothed sacred trees. Beyond the practical use of cloth to harness spiritual energy, clothed trees also signify the boundaries of a sacred geography. They reinforce a sacred/profane spatial binary, where only certain proscribed areas are appropriate for spiritual invocation (Agbaje-Williams 2005: 183). By siting these areas around communally held sacred trees, the chance for clandestine spiritual activities or witchcraft is lessened. Public activities can be regulated, or at least observed, throughout the community.

Historical consciousness is the third function of clothed trees. Historical consciousness refers to the function of trees as evidence for an historic event that figures prominently in notions of community identity (Agbaje-Williams 2005: 183). Typically, this event is the founding of the community in which the tree is located; due to their long lives, these trees are thought to have been planted and cared for by the community's founders. Many of the large trees that serve these roles are from species that thrive in village environments, but do not grow well in the surrounding savanna-forest mosaic. This selective pressure is most exerted during the initial growth of the tree. Once established in a village, the tree will continue to grow even if the village is abandoned.

Though Agbaje-Williams distills three distinct functions of clothed sacred trees, it is clear from the cases he references that all three are closely related and are often all "in effect." There are two associations that link all three functions Agbaje-Williams describes: human investment and depth of time. Trees are not inherently spiritually potent. They are ascribed this quality through human investment and involvement with human activities, such as divination or the founding of a town. In this way, trees take on attributes which are then magnified through ritual. Accordingly, particularly old trees are important because they are associated with past human activity. An old tree comes to stand in for the village that once stood with it. The tree is then easily incorporated into ritual practice focused on autochthony and ancestors through its mnemonic association (Schmidt 2006: 110). This association between tree and ancient village can also be evoked by secular notions of group identity and historical experience.

With Agbaje-Williams's functions in mind, I now turn to my research with SHARP on sacred trees in the Savè hills. SHARP documented nine clothed sacred trees in four Savè hills communities between July and August 2012. A historical reference was found to one additional clothed sacred tree in the Savè hills area—the *iroko* "that supports the world"—and details about the use of this tree were described by the current Onishabe, Oba Adetutu, in May 2013 (Martí 1992a: unnumbered plate; Martí 1993: 120). Of the sixteen species used in cloth wrapping identified by Agbaje-Williams, five of the most prevalent are also used in similar ways in the Savè hills: *akoko (Newbouldia laevis), babuwe* (kapok, called *araba*[2] by Agbaje-Williams, *Ceiba pentandra), iroko (Chlorophora excelsa), odan (Ficus vogelii),* and *ose/oshe* (baobab, *Adansonia digitata*). It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive inventory of sacred trees in the area, but rather a sampling of such trees encountered over the course of my archaeological fieldwork. Because of my research focus on archaeology and historic sites, each tree described below is closely associated with the historical consciousness function that Agbaje-Williams described. Indeed, few representations of the past are as visual and connected to the landscape as these trees. Clothed sacred trees are perhaps the most important element of the Savè hills cultural landscape.

Savè (Idadu)

Savè, locally called Idadu, is the seat of the administrative zone of Savè and the current capitol of the Shabe kingdom. In the courtyard of the Shabe palace is a large *oshe* tree, over 12 meters in diameter (plate 2). The tree is wrapped with a white cloth and regular offerings of water are made to it, although occasionally other offerings are made, including kola nut, palm wine or distilled liquor, and cash. Liquid offerings are sprinkled onto the trunk or poured directly onto the encircling cloth. Other materials may be placed at its base or tucked into crevices on the trunk. Amulets are sometimes nailed to the tree according to Ifa prescription, but they are removed after their effect has transpired, leaving only the nails behind. The tree, thought by palace occupants to be at least 300 years old, contains a powerful spirit that is responsible for the well-being of the entire town, though it is most closely linked to the royal lineage. The palace compound enclosing the tree was built after the destruction of the old palace in 1933, and was sited at its present location specifically to contain this tree. Prior to 1933, it is likely that the palace grounds occupied a larger portion of the Afin and Idi-iroko neighborhoods of Savè than it does today, and so this tree was probably associated with the palace in the past as well (Martí 1993: 51). The association with the Shabe palace and its suggested age of 300 years coincides with the beginning of the Baba-Guidai dynasty that overthrew the preceding Amushu dynasty around 1738 CE (Adediran 1994: 125). This sacred tree is thus closely associated with specific events of the past that legitimate claims to political authority in the present.

Near the palace in the Afin neighborhood is another clothed sacred tree, set in an open courtyard facing a main road through town (plate 3). This tree is an *oshe* and is wrapped in a fashion similar to the *oshe* on the palace grounds. This *oshe* is home to a powerful spirit, but unlike the previous example, it is a benefactor to the Amushu group, a lineage with competing claims to the monarchy. Despite its setting near a busy road, the rituals involving the tree are conducted in private and are not meant to support the health of the community as a whole. While the palace *oshe* can be characterized by Agbaje-Williams's territoriality function of marking a sacred space, the same is not true of this tree. It has a ritual function, certainly, but it is also a common space for day-to-day interactions among lineage members; what Agbaje-Williams describes as a profane space.

A third clothed tree is found in Savè in the Ainsen neighborhood (plate 4). This *iroko* tree is part of a larger ritual complex consisting of the clothed tree, several shrines, and *ogu tani*, an upright granite monolith set a short distance from the tree. The tree and associated shrines all commemorate the office of Olu Osi, an advisor to the Onishabe, said to descend from an autochthonous lineage predating the Baba-Guidai and Amushu dynasties (Martí 1992a: 237; Adediran 1994: 43). Various kinds of offerings are made at the shrines, though the primary offering is water, as at the palace *oshe*. Offerings are made when prescribed by Ifa, though they are also regularly made by the hunters' association to ensure successful hunts. The clothed *iroko* is not thought to be very old, perhaps only 100 years. However, it is growing on the spot where a previous *iroko* fell, and that sacred tree was associated with the founding of Savè by the Amushu lineage sometime in the seventeenth century CE. Similarly, the granite monolith is said to have been erected as a replacement following the death of another sacred tree as a replacement. The same spirits that inhabited the prior trees continue to live in their replacements. Even when individual trees die, they can be reincarnated to fulfill the same functions.

Perhaps the most important clothed tree in Savè is the eponymous tree associated with the Idi-iroko market and neighborhood: the *iroko* "that supports the world" (plate 5). This tree is not always clothed, but for special events associated with the Onishabe it is dressed and becomes the focus of royal installation rites. The tree that stands today is a replacement, planted only several decades ago. It replaced a much older tree that was destroyed in the 1970s by a government administrator who claimed the tree was infested with insects and posed a public nuisance (Martí 1993: 120). It is important to note that this destruction happened during the tenure of President Kérékou, who sponsored the widespread destruction of traditional religious institutions (Kahn 2011). That this tree was specifically targeted for destruction may signify its importance in religious and political practices. In the past, the tree was an important geographic marker—a place for divinatory revelations, royal proclamations, and market activity (Martí 1992a: 53). Today, a daily market continues to be held near the tree. Royal use of the *iroko* is returning after a hiatus following the previous tree's destruction. The current Onishabe, Oba Adetutu, has revived a coronation ceremony in which the *iroko* is the location for reciting royal historical narratives and donning the symbolic *ade* crown linking him to Ile-Ife. After donning the *ade* and asserting his status as Onishabe, he leads a procession to Oke Shabe and the archaeological site of Fiditi—a fortified village occupied by those seeking to escape Dahomean raids. Interestingly, Oba Adetutu has linked this celebration to the Pentecost, blending royal and Christian practices into a syncretic conceptualization of Shabe kingship.

Ouoghi

The theme of sacred tree reincarnation appears in other locations as well. A clothed *babuwe* tree in Ouoghi has a very similar story as the tree in Ainsen (plate 6). The current tree is not thought to be very old, but it is growing on the spot where the previous sacred tree fell when it was accidentally destroyed during the construction of the railroad in 1911. The chief of Ouoghi likened this new tree to the Yoruba idiom of *tunde* or reincarnation (literally "to come again"). *Tunde* is a common component in Yoruba naming, an example of Agbaje-Williams's assertion that the clothing of trees has the effect of personifying them. In this case, the personified spirit inhabiting the tree is a benefactor to the entire community, though the chief and his lineage are responsible for its care. The chief obtained this role because his ancestors founded the town initially and tended to the first sacred tree. The common offering made to the *babuwe* is water, though money and cowries are also offered.

Kaboua

Kaboua sits at the foot of Oke Agbodo, a large granite hill that encircles the town. On the outskirts of the main settlement there is a shrine house with three small clothed *akoko* (plate 7). A single wide cloth wraps around each, effectively bringing three separate trees into a single focus.[3] The trees and shrine are used for venerating the spirit of the hill. Unlike other clothed trees, no specific spirit resides in these three, nor do they memorialize an historical event. Indeed, the ritual specialist responsible for maintaining the trees and shrine admits that this is a recent installation created to provide Kaboua with a new conduit to the spirit realm. The demarcation of space is enhanced by a small cement semi-circle built around the trees. A plate at the foot of the trees receives offerings of water and cowries. Though the trees do not mark any specific history, they strongly reference the sacred hill which figures prominently in Kaboua founding narratives. The hill is also important to later histories, particularly the wars with Dahomey throughout the nineteenth century, when the hill was fortified with stone walls, the ruins of which still line the crests of Oke Agbodo.

Djabata

Outside the modern town of Djabata is the sacred site of Dikosha. This site is the location of a ruined village connected with pre-Shabe inhabitants. The site is some distance from the main town, yet is still considered an important part of the modern community as its presence supports Djabata's autochthonous claim as "first-comers" (sensu Kopytoff 1987) to the Savè hills area. A clothed *odan* is maintained at the site and serves as a focus for offerings and commemorative rituals (plate 8). A ceramic vessel serves as a receptacle for offerings to the tree. Because of its clothed tree, Dikosha is regarded as a community resource and prominently figures in conceptions of Djabata's history and sacred geography (Ceperley et al. 2010: 15).

Monka

All the examples discussed so far highlight the role of history in designating which trees should be wrapped in cloth. Cloth wrapping extracts spiritual power from the trees, but it can also preserve it. The cloth serves as a mnemonic to help residents recall the history of the tree and to reinforce its importance in the community.

While spiritual knowledge is crucial to establishing clothed sacred trees, it can also prescribe when to abandon them. As stated above, trees themselves are not inherently spiritually potent. Rather, they are vessels that can be inhabited by a spirit. If it is determined that the spirit is dangerous, absent, or no longer needed, the tree reverts back to its mundane status and can be treated as such. This is the case with an *oshe* in Monka (plate 9). The tree had, until recently, been clothed and received regular offerings. During the annual Oro festival in 2009, the local Ogboni society determined that the spirit in the tree posed a danger, and so it was cut down. It should be noted that the Ogboni society historically played a primary role in condemning and executing criminals (Morton-Williams 1960). Clothed trees are given the same judicial treatment as humans, extending the personification to their deaths.

Oke Shabe

The last tree I documented is the one with which I began this paper (plate 10). The tree is an *iroko*, a species not unusual for a cloth-wrapped tree. However, its placement and status in the community is quite unusual. Unlike other trees, it is far from any modern settlement. It is located in a clearing in a remote farm field that can only be reached by a small footpath winding around the hills outside of Savè. The tree is dressed with two bands of cloth and the remains of offerings litter the ground around it: glass bottle fragments, cowries, and animal bones. The tree is closely connected to the Eyin-Oke group, the eldest of all autochthonous lineages within the Shabe kingdom (Martí 1992b: 192). The Eyin-Oke maintain the sacred tree at the site of an ancestral village.

Countering the Eyin-Oke narrative, the Onishabe, Ola-Amushu, and other traditional authorities claim the area where the tree is growing to be empty of archaeological significance. From their point of view, there were no real villages prior to the founding of the Shabe kingdom and therefore no possible historical consciousness exists to be commemorated. While the Eyin-Oke tree might harness energies or demarcate spiritual boundaries, it is not a material connection to the past. The archaeological evidence tells a different story.

The fields surrounding the clothed tree are dense with potsherds, stone grinding basins, and stone hammers. These artifacts are the kinds of materials expected at former village sites; similar artifacts were recorded at many former village sites over the course of SHARP's survey. As I have discussed, certain species of trees, including the *iroko*, are associated with villages. The common use of clothed trees to memorialize ancient sites and the archaeological evidence of a past occupation indicate that this tree could indeed be marking the site of a former village. The village itself has been forgotten - at least by the primary heritage institutions in the Savè hills - but others continue to use the tree to link to a subaltern past.

Protecting a Cultural Landscape

The close relationship between sacred tree species and archaeological sites has important implications for cultural resource management, heritage protection, and heritage promotion in West Africa. The lack of basic research in many areas means that archaeological sites and materials are often not identified nor inventoried. These sites are effectively unknown in any systematic way to government agencies or other organizations charged with protecting cultural resources. The ability to quickly and efficiently identify archaeological sites based on tree presence could potentially increase their protection.

In some cases, archaeological sites are already being protected by local communities *because* of the presence of sacred trees. Sacred trees and groves are often situated on archaeological sites. Prohibitions on logging, farming, and other destructive activities protect the trees and effectively protect the underlying archaeological materials as well. This is the case with an archaeological site that I documented near Ouoghi. The site is recognized as a former village occupied by ancestors of the Amushu lineage. The archaeological deposits at the site are protected from farming and logging not because it is an important historical locale but because there is a large and ritually important *oshe* tree (plate 11), of course indicating a former village site.

Large trees are a vital part of the Savè hills cultural landscape. The trees are also important parts of the local biological heritage, unique in size and age in an intensively cultivated ecosystem (Ceperley et al. 2010). They are also important in the cultural heritage of local communities for the important role they play in religious practices and group identity. Finally, they are also an important part of the area's archaeological heritage. The trees are monuments to the lives of those who planted and cared for them and are closely connected to the other material remains of the past.

The promotion of heritage conservation is important for the long-term conservation of large trees, clothed and unclothed, in the Savè hills area. Though current ritual practices are often effective in protecting trees, changing views on religion and increasing pressure on economic resources are threatening this as a viable strategy on its own. Increasingly, ritual taboos on trees and groves are ignored in favor of the economic gains from logging and farming. Often these violations occur because non-Ifa practitioners do not feel compelled to abide by ritual prohibitions. The challenge of heritage conservation then is to articulate the value of these trees in new terms. By shifting the emphasis of conservation away from any particular religion toward a generalized conception of shared heritage, these impressive trees and their associated cultural traditions may be protected.

Identifying individual trees, associated practices, and nearby archaeological sites is the first step of heritage conservation. Though Savè hills area communities are often well-versed in the heritage and history of their own communities, their knowledge does not always extend to neighboring areas. There is little recognition that such a phenomenon is, in fact, widely distributed throughout the Savè hills and even elsewhere in Bénin and Nigeria. Calling attention to the commonalities of these large trees allows them to be valued as heritage apart from any specific local context, and thus valued by a larger population.

Identifying other clothed sacred trees and assessing potential threats to their conservation is an important goal toward understanding the Savè hills cultural landscape. However, this landscape is undoubtedly made up of many elements of which trees are just one. There may be other, less well-known elements that interested parties want to conserve. Conservation work on trees, as already initiated by environmentally oriented agencies and NGOs, can therefore productively articulate their programs in a broader cultural landscape framework—employing the specialized skills of anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, artists, and architects in collaboration with local community and religious leaders.

Movement toward this goal is already taking place. In 2012, SHARP partnered with the Department of History and Archaeology at the University of Abomey-Calavi, the Mayor of Savè, and a coalition of local heritage institutions including the Onishabe and Ola-Amushu to promote archaeological heritage in the Savè hills area. We organized a series of workshops with community leaders to identify archaeological sites in order to increase awareness of these important locations. These workshops culminated in a public archaeology day, wherein a market in Savè was transformed into the site of archaeological investigations. Market-sellers, buyers, and bystanders were invited to participate in documenting an archaeological site through satellite-assisted mapping, auger sampling, ceramic analysis, and sharing oral history.

The high level of interest in archaeology in the Savè hills has sparked increased efforts to coordinate the conservation of archaeological heritage with existing efforts to conserve biological and cultural heritage. Combining all three, guides who had been giving tours of the hills have started to incorporate large trees as landmarks to show tourists. Guides inform visitors of the biological implications of the trees and their ecological role as old-growth forest patches, as well as the cultural practices and archaeological sites associated with the trees. The itineraries of visitors to the Savè hills now include tours of the cultural landscape, not just the topography.

The Savè hills cultural landscape is beginning to receive institutional recognition as well. Prior to SHARP's 2012 research, plans to construct historic place markers in Savè were already underway. These markers follow the historic trade routes that ran from the coastal port of Ouidah to the southern terminal of the trans-Saharan trade route at Parakou. The Savè hills were chosen along this route to receive markers for their natural features and history of providing refuge. It is hoped that the completion of the markers will provide a framework for heritage tourism in Bénin. Identifying and articulating the cultural landscape of the Savè hills will enhance the tourist experience and potentially increase tourism in this often neglected area of Bénin.

A cultural landscape is defined by the recursive relationship between humans and environment. People and place are dually invoked to create a point at which the divide between nature and culture is most opaque. In the Savè hills, clothed sacred trees are emblematic of how the natural and cultural worlds are inherently intertwined. There are many reasons to value these large trees, even for those who themselves do not call the Savè hills home.

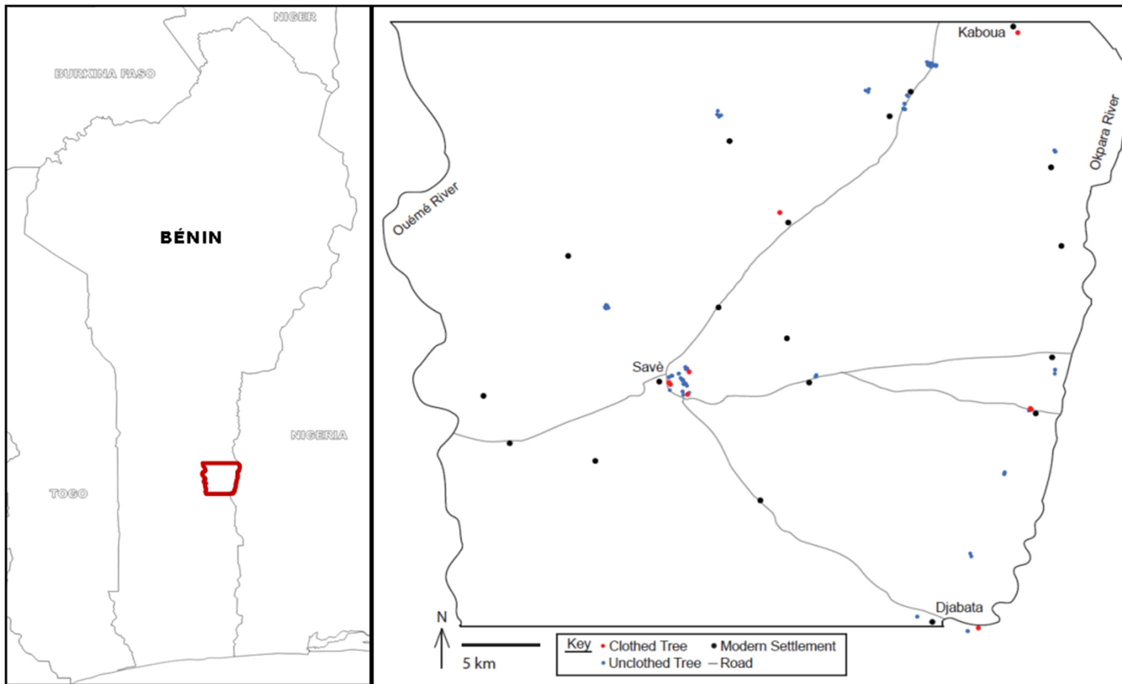

Figure 1. Map of Bénin with the SHARP study area in red (left) and distribution of clothed and unclothed sacred trees in the SHARP study area (right).

Plate 1. The Oke Shabe hills outside of Savè.

Plate 2. Clothed *ibabo/ose*, Shabe palace compound, Savè.

Plate 3. Clothed *ibabo/ose*, Afin neighborhood, Savè.

Plate 4. Clothed *iroko*, Idi-iroko neighborhood, Savè.

Plate 5. *Ogu tani* megalith and clothed *iroko*, Ainsen neighborhood, Savè.

Plate 6. Clothed *babuwe*, Ouoghi.

Plate 7. Three clothed *akoko*, Kaboua.

Plate 8. Clothed *odan*, Dikosha, Djabata.

Plate 9. Cut and felled *oshe*, Monka.

Plate 10. Clothed *iroko*, Oke Shabe.

Plate 11. Unclothed *oshe*, near Ouoghi.

Notes

1. Caboceer is a generic term widely employed by Europeans during the Atlantic trade to describe African officers, both civil and military. In this case, it is referring to a Dahomean military officer acting as a liaison to European merchants and travelers.

2. When asked what *araba* referred to, many Shabe speakers described it as a word for a sacred tree in general, regardless of species.

3. I count these three *akoko* as only one sacred tree in my analysis and summary, as they are in practice used as a single tree.

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