

Article

Setting up the first components of the person and its anchoring to the territory among the Seme of Burkina Faso: “services rendered by ecosystems”?

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Abstract

This article illustrates the need for studies on “cultural ecosystem services” to be based on ethnographic studies. It presents research conducted among a small, little-known population of savannah farmers, the Seme people of Burkina Faso (in West Africa). According to their concepts, sacred sites of hills and water bodies harbour genies. These genies play a major role in setting in place the essential components of the person during conception and birth and then they watch over the new human being until death. In addition, a flexible form of territorial and social anchoring of individuals and groups as well as the integration of outsiders, are achieved through this category of sites. These sites are related to two other broad categories of sacred sites which together make up a system, the first dedicated to male initiation and the others to agricultural activities. This relationship between Water Bodies and Hills and these other sites appears during a great collective ritual which is held every 40 years or so and which results in a major renewal of society. This is the last stage of male initiation during which the genies, who are initiated with the humans, shift to other categories of sites. These genies, which act as a sort of double, as guardians and censors of humans, thus they accompany or control biological and social reproduction and agricultural production activities.

Ad hoc conservation measures of sites located among the Seme which overlook the existence of this relationship among categories of sites are inadequate. They could be useless, or worse, could serve to endorse the destruction of other sites and thus of the entire system. As analogous concepts are found widely throughout West Africa, the lessons learned from these case studies have more than local value.

Keywords cultural ecosystem services; natural sacred sites; birth; genies; components of the person; societies of the savannah.

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