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## **Sogidi Sacred Grove and the Construction of the Collective Identity of Awe People, Southwest Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Groves are imbued with meanings that define how members of a local community relate with landscape and construct reality that defines their collective identity. This article examines Sogidi sacred grove in the context of the construction of the collective identity of Awe people, southwest Nigeria. Techniques of data collection were **participant observation, key informants interviews and focus group discussion**. The article establishes that Sogidi sacred grove, Awe, imbued with immense religious-cultural values, constitutes the centre of the 'being' of Awe people. The grove is perceived as the goddess of fertility and its water, "water of life", signifies the past, the present, and because of the people's belief in her healing powers and ability to give children, she also represents the survival, future and the continuity of the Awe people. Allegiance to common beliefs and values associated with Sogidi contributes in building group solidarity among community members, and defining the people's collective identity. Many community activities are conducted at Sogidi site, indicating a sense of communality Sogidi grove invokes in the people. Most of the indigenes maintain that Sogidi grove is a gift of the Supreme Being to the town due to the supernatural powers they associate with the site, and its economic significance.

**Key words:** **Sogidi, sacred grove, cultural life and meanings, collective identity, Awe people of Southwest Nigeria**

## **Introduction**

Landscapes are imbued with meanings that reflect humans' interaction with the environment. Meanings ascribed to space, often times, define a people's identity. Human groups in their interactions with the environment shape and set boundaries on environment, determining that which is 'sacred' or 'profane' (cf. Durkheim, 1915). It is a fact that environment plays critical role in shaping the culture and identity of humans, just as humans impact on environment (see Ogundele, 2014). Identity construction is dynamic, multi-layered, and in modern times, has become problematic, generating various meanings in diverse contexts (Kelner, 1997). At the level of the individual, scholars like Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934), among others, have reasoned that identity is constructed through the processes of interactions between the self and significant others. An individual in the process of social interaction with others incorporates the attitudes which they hold about oneself. This is what Charles Horton Cooley in his book *Human Nature and the Social Order* terms "the looking glass self", which is our reflection on how we believe we appear to other people. Looking glass self is subjective, as it is based on what the individual thinks is other people's perception of him or her. The individual responds in such a way as to gain the approval and acceptance of others. Overtime, the personal self is built. In response to the position of symbolic interactionist, Susan Harter rightly maintains that scholars like Baldwin, Cooley and Mead aver that "the self was primarily a social construction crafted through linguistic exchanges with others" (Harter, 2012: 81). Human actions are imbued with meanings, which are decoded in the process of social interaction. Interestingly, there have also been contentions on the possibility of the individual developing false self in the processes of gaining approval of others through social interaction so that throughout one's life span, an individual may suppress the authentic self. This position was exacerbated by the position of scholars like Sigmund Freud who wrote about the unconscious self that may even be hidden from the individual. If this position holds true, many humans may throughout life time live self-deceptive life while the core self is hidden from public scrutiny. In fact the Sociologist, Goffman in the book, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959) has argued that adults engage in series of 'face works' in order to present themselves likable, of good moral,

respectable, and so on. With these ‘put ons’, which are actually false behaviour, many humans navigate their social environment.

At the collective level, identity remains multifaceted and complex, and in the twenty first century, globalisation and intercultural encounters have further deepened the complexity of identity. G.A. Yep (2002) defines identity as “a person’s conception of self within a particular social, geographical, cultural, and political context. ... Identity gives the individual a sense of selfhood and personhood” (Yep, 2002: 61). Individuals in a group identify themselves as collective, stressing “who we are” rather than “who I am” (cf. Harter, 2012). Socio-cultural and indeed, physical contexts determine human behaviour and the meanings they make of their interactions with others and landscape. In the formation of collective identity, what happens is what Iain Robertson and Tim Hall call the “deployment of the past in the service of the present” (Robertson and Hall, 2007: 22). For instance, the conservation of natural resources, part of landscape, has been an integral part of diverse cultures and peoples of the world. Often times, groves, part of the landscape, constitute natural resources and markers of cultural identity of members of the local community. These forests with rich biodiversity have history and have been protected by the local people for centuries for their cultural and religious relevance (God bole, *et al.*, 2004). Instruments of protection of these groves vary from taboos to supernatural means such as deities, which are believed to inhabit these sites, and protect the villagers from different calamities. Every sacred grove, God bole *et al.* (1998) contend, carries its own narratives, which form the integral part of the grove; an inextricable link between present society and past in terms of biodiversity, culture, and ethnic heritage. Similarly, Wilde and McLeod (2008) hint that based on the traditional beliefs of peoples across cultures and societies, indigenous communities have given a special status to natural sites such as rivers, lakes, caves, forest groves, mountains, or entire highlands, many of which have been set aside as sacred places. Some of these sacred sites are assumed to be the dwelling place of deities, ancestral spirits, and hence places where these forces can be consulted. Others are viewed as sources of healing water and medicinal plants or even associated with special events, saints or leaders (Wild and McLeod, 2008).

Individuals, Ojebode (2012) reasons, may experience a sacred place in different ways. For some, it is such as a site of fascination and

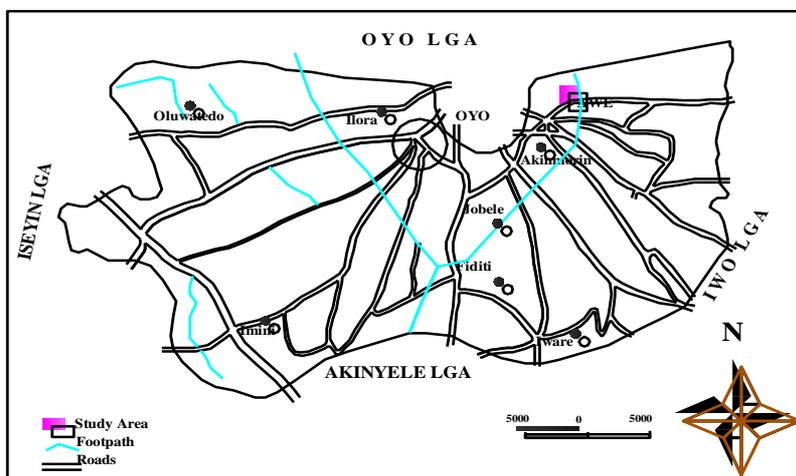
attraction while for others, it signifies connectedness, danger, healing, ritual, identity, revelation and or transformation. Sacred places are tremendously diverse, not only among cultures, religions, and regions, but also within one of these categories. Sacred groves are viewed by members of local community as the abode of deities, nature spirit and ancestors, burial land, or associated with the spiritual leaders (Wild and McLeod, 2008), often known as fetish groves (Dorm-Adzobu *et al.*, 1991). These are remarkable places, which link nature and culture, often determine local, regional and or national cultural identity (Schaaf, 2007). About a century ago, there were many sacred groves in villages and towns in every part of Africa. In Nigeria in particular, most of these groves have in recent decades been abandoned or have been reduced to quite small areas as a result of encroachment for hunting, farming, road constructions and other developmental purposes. In southwest Nigeria, the dense forest of the Osun Sacred Grove, Osogbo, is one of the last remnants of such forests in southern Nigeria. Regarded as the abode of the goddess of fertility, Osun, one of the gods of the Yoruba people, the landscape of the grove is littered with shrines, sculptures and other art works in honour of Osun and other deities. This grove has become a symbol of identity for all Yoruba people, testifying to the once widespread practice of establishing sacred groves outside all settlements (see UNESCO World Heritage Centre 1992 - 2013). In recent decades, the grove has become an avenue for tourism promotion in Osun State, Nigeria.

Sacred groves play major roles in the lives of members of the local communities where they are located, providing shelter to thousands of species of plants and animals. The groves are believed to possess powers to heal the body and spirit, and naturally become the reservoirs of biodiversity, refuge for endemic and endangered plant and animal species, storehouses of medicinal plants valuable to village communities as well as modern pharmacopoeia. They also contain relatives of crop species that can help to improve cultivated varieties, help in keeping the water cycle in local areas, improve soil stability, prevent top-soil erosion and provide irrigation for agriculture in drier climates, among other roles (Khan *et al.*, 2008). Apart from Osun Osogbo and other traditional religious sites in Nigeria, there are some of the remnants of sacred groves in Nigeria that have not received much ethnographic attention, and their place in the construction of the collective identity of members of the communities hosting these sites

remain understudied. This article therefore examines Sogidi sacred grove, Awe town, southwest Nigeria, with the aim of exploring the place of the grove in the construction of the collective identity of Awe people. The article therefore attempts to answer the following questions: What is the nature of Sogidi sacred grove? What cultural values are associated with Sogidi grove, and to what extent does Sogidi grove contribute in the construction of the collective identity of Awe people?

### **Study Location and Methods**

This study was carried out in Awe, a town in Afijio Local Government Area of Oyo State, southwest Nigeria (see Figure 1 below), which constitutes the northern part of the Afijio Local Government Area (Lawrence and Titilola, 1998:36). Awe shares border with Oyo town in the western part, in the eastern and southern part are Ejigbo and Iwo towns, both in Osun State Nigeria respectively, and Ogbomosho to the north. As at 1998, Lawrence and Titilola (1998) report that Awe had a population of about 60, 000 people.



**Figure 1: Map of Afijio Local Government Area showing Awe (the study area)**

**Source: Town Planning Department, Afijio Local Government Area**

The major occupation of Awe people is farming and hunting, while local industries producing such products as soap, pottery, garri, cocoa among others have also sprang up. The production of soap is dominated by women. Awe is a community with rich natural resources

such as rivers surrounding the town, arable land suitable for the growth of economic trees such as cocoa, coffee, timber, palm tree, rubber among others. Large poultry and livestock farms owned by a business man, Sir Anthony Amoje of Amo Group of Companies, attract patronage from people from different towns. Other companies in the town include Bond Chemicals (a pharmaceutical company), some hotels such as Adesakin Hotels, Retokin Hotels, and Motel de Klob. These hotels promote hospitality industry, and influx of visitors to Awe. Awe hometown association (HTA), Egbe Ibile Omo Awe, has played critical role in the development of Awe town. The association built the first secondary school in the community, Awe High School, in 1954, followed by many other infrastructural facilities in the community. Awe is ruled by traditional leadership with the *bale* as the head of the hierarchically organised leadership structure. There are several quarters that make up Awe town, with many homesteads scattering all over the community, and associated with different lineages groups.

This study adopted ethnographic approach, which gave the informants' voices 'visibility' in the research process. John D. Brewer in *Ethnography*(2000) has classified ethnography into two forms, ethnography as approach (Big ethnography) and ethnography-as-fieldwork (Little ethnography). These two have been adopted in this study. Ethnography-as-fieldwork as Brewer (2000) observes involves:

The study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally (Brewer, 2000: 11).

It involves the study of "real-life situations". The researchers engaged in ethnographic research, participates in the day-to-day activities of the people and document what is observed and the people's explanations of what they do. It involves probing to unveil meanings behind human actions, with a view to making sense and connecting the logics from the insider's perspective. This is achieved through the researcher's ability to "document and interpret their distinctive way of life, and the beliefs and values integral to it" (Atkinson *et al.*, 2007: 1). Oral tradition as included in the work offers an opportunity for a society

characterized by orality to have their testimony of their history incorporated into ethnographic work.

Specific methods of data collection were participant observation, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and unstructured Interviews. A total of fifty research participants were involved in the research and these include 10 chiefs, including the traditional ruler; 10 women leaders, 10 men, 10 youths and 10 tourists. Random and purposive sampling techniques were adopted. A total of 5 focus group discussion sessions, consisting of between 6 and 8 participants in each session were carried out. Each encounter lasted for more than an hour. The schedule was drawn in a flexible way to accommodate the convenience of the interviewees. Interviews were conducted in Yoruba or English Language, depending on the choice of the research participants. As participant observation was used, behaviour and events were recorded and noted as they occurred, using research equipment such as tape recorder, camera and notebooks.

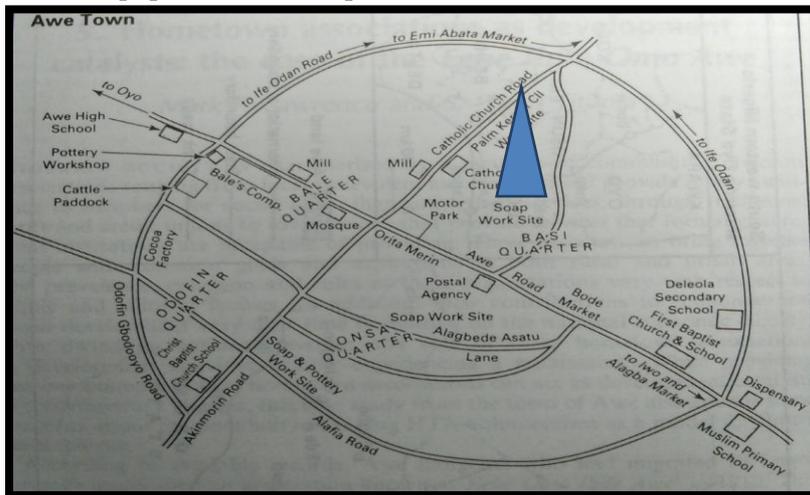


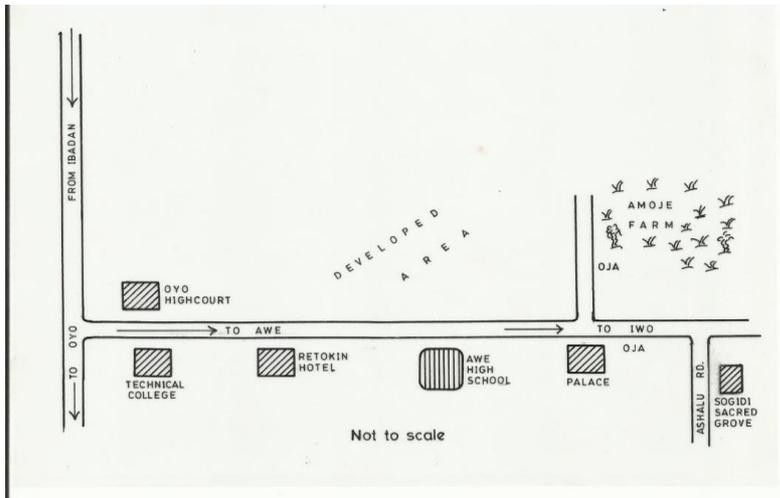
Fig. 2: Map of Awe town showing the location of Sogidi grove represented with a triangular shape as inserted (cf. Lawrence and Titilola, 1998, with modification).

Documentary evidence also provided data for the study. Collected data were analysed using descriptive and interpretive techniques. This article is a product of a fieldwork for a larger project on Sogidi grove

and sustainable tourism development in Awe. The fieldwork was carried out between the months of July and November, 2013.

### **Sogidi Grove and Meaning Making**

Sogidi sacred grove (see Plate 1 below) is located in Awe town, southwest Nigeria. According to oral history, what is now Awe-land is a vast expanse of land part of which had earlier been occupied by a group headed by a man named Ladun, who is an Ijesha man that settled at Olaromi many centuries ago. Prominence was not given to the history of the settlement until when a more dynamic group led by Ilemolu Olutokun, Ladokun, Ikumawoyi and Mafile came to settle in the area in the 17th Century. They were Ife princes who had moved out of Ile Ife, the spiritual home of the Yoruba people, after some misunderstanding on crown distribution and settled at Egba Gbagura for some period, ruled under the kingship of Ilemolu who led his junior princes out of the town again as a result of perceived injustice. They decided to come back towards Ife and got to the area where Ladun and others had settled. Afterwards, they moved farther a field and later settled beside an *aruwewe* tree, the place *Ifa* told them to settle. It is from this tree that the name of the town, 'Awe', was derived. At the same location, they met a strange woman who claimed her husband had gone hunting. The husband's name was Keyiwo, whose name gave rise to Keewo household in Awe today.



**Figure 3: Locational Map showing the Sogidi sacred Grove**  
(Source: *Field Survey, 2013*).

The discovery of Sogidi was accidental. Oral history has it that prior to the establishment of Awe town, the princes sent out hunters to search for water, and in the process accidentally discovered a flowing stream, which turned out to be a lake. They also found the fruit of *esogidi*, meaning ‘a good edible fruit’, which was with time shortened to derive the name *Sogidi*, which later became Sogidi Lake and Grove (See Plate 1). Awe town was established in 1750. The lake expanded on its own without human effort. Ever since its discovery, it does not accept any water from its surroundings and it has no tributary. Sogidi Lake is perceived as a mysterious body of water that recedes during the dry season, causing the fishes to go inside the well and later resurfaces when rainfall commences. When it overflows, it spreads across the surroundings. In the past years, around 12p.m to 1:00p.m, nobody could move closer to the lake because its environment would be too hot for anybody to draw closer.

Sogidi grove is located on a ten acres piece of land with highly diversified perennial crops, shrubs, twigs, fruit tree, and large trees such as *Adenia lobata*, *Elaeis guineensis*, *Hura crepitans*, *Diospyros mobuntensis*, *Musa paradisiaca*, *Blighia sapida*, *Citrus spp.* etc. The forest floor is undulating and drains towards the centre of the forest

where a lake is located. The forest floor is covered with many burrows of rodents and crabs close to the lake. Epiphytes are found growing on trees in search of sunlight. Flamboyant tree, *Delonix regia*, Oil palm, and *Elaeis guineensis* are abundant tree species found in the forest, and these attract the presence of birds and squirrels that feed on palm fruits. This dense forest to many Awe indigenes remains a blessing to them because of its religio-cultural and historical significance. Indeed, it is the symbol of the development of Awe town from period of the foundation of the town to the present as Awe oral history indicated. Sogidi is a goddess of fertility whose water is strongly believed by many community members to cure infertility in women, offer prosperity, heal diseases and ward off evils. The sacred water of the lake, to members of the community is “water of life”. Sogidi’s image of water therefore signifies a relation between nature, spirit and humans. The colour of the water, which is brownish while in the lake but becomes clean and brighter than normal water immediately it is fetched into a bowl or cup, contributes to the mysteries associated with the lake and the forest. An informant who resides in Awe, Tajudeen, disclosed that Sogidi Lake never dries up totally no matter the intensity of the sun and season. He also maintained that majority of Awe sons and daughters believe that Sogidi solves all problems.



**Plate 1: Entrance gate of Sogidi grove (Fieldwork, 2013).**

Awe people maintain that Sogidi grove is a gift of the Supreme Being to the town, emphasising the supernatural powers associated with the site. An informant, Funsho, who lives close to the grove, confirmed that many families in Awe use the water to bathe new babies. Mothers come to the grove to fetch water as early as 5.30a.m, and must not speak to anyone until they reach their respective homes. He added that no records of any water borne disease such as cholera or typhoid in the community since the discovery of the lake. The claim that the water from the lake cures infertility was widespread in the community. Different religious adherents - Christians, Muslims, African traditional religion - use the water for healing. This corroborates Khumbongmayum *et al.* (2005)'s position that different faiths and beliefs related to the sacred species include curing sickness, purification of household and individuals before entering a shrine. Informants also noted that people from neighbouring towns and cities such as Ibadan, Ife, Osogbo, Lagos, and many other towns and cities visit the site for one reason or the other and in the process contribute in making Awe famous among neighbouring towns.



**Plate 2: Cross section of people during 2013 Awe Day Festivals at Sogidi Grove**

**(Source: Fieldwork, 2013).**

Awe Day Festivals attract many tourists to Awe who throng the town for sightseeing and to pay visit to Sogidi grove (see plate 2 above). During this period, hospitality industry and other businesses enjoy high patronage. According to Elder Ojedele, the custodian of the

grove, people of diverse cultures have one time or the other received visions or, on consultation of a diviner, were advised to consult the grove for solution to their problems. He further claimed that people from all works of life brought items like clothes, goats, sheep, and fowl and tied them to the trees inside the grove. Such animals are never killed nor the clothes removed. These items of sacrifice disappear miraculously. He hinted:

*Okunrin kan wa lati Jos, kii se omo Awe. O ni won ni ki ounwa fi agbo funfun bo Sogidi, funra re ni o so agbo mo igi, nigbati o di ojokeji, a ko ri agbo naa mo.*

(Ojedele, Personal Communication, 14/07/2013)

**Meaning:**

One man came from Jos. He was not an Awe indigene. He said he was asked to offer white ram for sacrifice at Sogidi Grove. He tied the ram by the tree and on second day, the ram disappeared (Elder Ojedele, Personal communication, 14/07/2013).

Findings indicate that community members assemble at Sogidi grove for prayer sessions, irrespective of religious leaning, when an epidemic threatens members of the community. During such occasion, sacrifices are offered to Sogidi, having consulted *Ifa* oracle. Members of the community contribute the money for the purchase of the cow as a sign of oneness of purpose. The slaughtered animal is shared to every household in the community, while the blood of the slaughtered animal is buried at the entrance of the lake. Group consciousness and solidarity is demonstrated during such occasions, and their participation in the consumption of the beef further suggests that members of the community hold common allegiance to their ancestral beliefs and the values. Sacrifice in indigenous religious practices is meant to appease the gods and other supernatural forces. Epidemics is seen as punishment from the gods. These gods must therefore be appeased through sacrifice. The participation of adherents of various religions in the community signifies collectivity, which is demonstrated not only in the financial contributions, but also in collective prayers, and by their collection of a share of the meat from the sacrifice. To ensure compliance, the community frowns at the

violation of the communal rituals. Participation of adherent of various religions in these activities also demonstrates the cultural hybridity that have come to characterise the personality of the postcolonial Africans (cf. Bhabha, 1994). In *Africans: A Triple Heritage*, Ali Mazrui contends that the postcolonial Africans are products of multiple cultures, which have influenced the peoples' construction of reality. In resolving the contradictions of their lives, the post colonial Africans harness from multiple realities that have come to shape their experiences, and subsequently transform their 'beingness'. The next section of this article looks at the mechanisms employed in the preservation of Sogidi sacred grove. The question therefore is: "How do Awe people preserve Sogidi grove"?

### **Preservation of Sogidi Grove**

Sacred grove, as Jamir and Pandey (2002) rightly points out, is an ideal centre for biodiversity conservation. Several endangered plants and animals are well conserved in a grove, and therefore serves as a protection for several plants and animals. Khan *et al.* (2008) reason that:

Biodiversity keeps the ecological processes in a balanced state, which is necessary for human survival. Therefore, the bio-diversity-rich sacred groves are of immense ecological significance.

They also play an important role in the conservation of flora and fauna. Besides, several rare and threatened species are found only in sacred groves, which are, perhaps, the last refuge for these vulnerable species (Khan *et al.* 2008: 277).

One of the major challenges of the preservation of biodiversity in developing countries is deforestation for various reasons, which include economic purposes and as a source of cooking gas. In most societies in pre-colonial Africa, taboos were used as instruments of preservation of sacred groves. Fear of deities or calamity of some sort ensured that these virgin lands are preserved from deforestation. Sogidi grove, Awe has been preserved for decades through the use of taboo. Some of these taboos are listed below:

- (i) Shoes are removed before entering the lake as it is forbidden to wear shoes into the grove.

- (ii) Containers are not used in fetching water from the lake. Plastic is allowed.
- (iii) Laundry and washing of cars are not allowed at the grove. Violators are beaten.
- (iv) It is forbidden to kill the fishes inside the lake.

Narratives of what befell those who harvested or killed the fish in the lake was common in the community. For instance, it was reported that a military man transferred to the town killed the fish in 1973 out of curiosity and was punished by an unseen force, as he lost his four children within seven days. He eventually left the town. Another informant, Olarika, also claimed that an Igbo man killed Sogidi fish and cooked it but it never got done. He quickly returned them back to the river, and to his surprise the fish came together and started swimming. According to the custodian of the grove, the fish in Sogidi Lake are strange. Members of the local community affirmed that some of the fish in the grove “are as big as human being while some are small, but it is forbidden to kill or harvest them”. Local narratives as presented above support Anthwal *et al.* (2006) observation that all forms of vegetation in sacred groves are supposed to be under the protection of the reigning deity of that grove, and the removal of even a small twig is a taboo.

### **Sogidi Sacred Grove in the Construction of the Collective Identity of Awe People**

Heritage, part of what a people inherited from their forebearers, includes tangible and intangible materials. Buildings, monuments, beliefs, social institutions, traditions and landscapes constitute part of the heritage of a people. Pantazotos (2019) reasons that people pay attention to heritage because it is believed, rightly or wrongly, that the past “helps us to understand who we are today and how we got here” (Pantazotos, 2019: 129). As a part of the heritage of Awe people, Sogidi grove holds temo-spiritual significance to members of Awe community, and its history and its socio-cultural life are tied to the history of the community. Boldly engraved on the perimeter fence of Sogidi grove is ‘Sogidi is Ours’, indicating the sense of ‘We’ness characterising the people’s attitude to Sogidi grove. Various socio-cultural activities, invoking meanings and values that define the Awe people are conducted near Sogidi grove. Awe Day Festival celebration that connects Awe people to their ancestors and the lifeways of the people

passed on to them by their forebearers terminates at the grove. During the festival, members of the community celebrate their cultural heritage, invoking the metaphysical beings that link their physical and spiritual worlds. As Ayisi (1972) affirms, festival is the only means apart from worship whereby a man has sought from time immemorial to express his awareness of transcendental being outside himself. During community festival, ordinary chores are set aside while humans celebrate some events, affirm the sheer goodness of what is or observes the memory of a god or help in a distinctly human activity (Cox, 1972). Such festive periods are usually periods of re-enactment, remembrance of particular phenomena because of their utility and intrinsic values. Awe Day Festival is organised by Awe Day Directorate (Egbe Omo Ibile Awe Central Planning Committee).

Awe Day Festival is celebrated within the second or third week of the month of November annually. During this time, Awe indigenes in diaspora are expected to return home to join in the joyous celebrations that showcase the people's cultural heritage and beliefs. It is also a time of bonding for community members. The weeklong cultural activity offers the people the platform to reaffirm their shared identity, drawing on cultural symbols and ceremonial. Music and dance, 'baby show', Sogidi dance, cultural night, *Okudiye*, *et cetera* are organised to re-establish their belief in their collective identity. Particularly significant is 'Sogidi Dance', in honour of Sogidi, invokes the people's sense of gratitude to Sogidi, and to reconnect the people to their founding fathers, in appreciation to the gods for the gift of Sogidi. Chinyere Ukpokolo has drawn similar conclusion on the power of cultural symbols and ceremonials in the construction of a group's identity. In 'Self Representation and the Construction of the Igbo World among Students in a Public University in Nigeria' (2015), she has argued that Igbo students at Roseville University (pseudonym) draw on cultural identification and maximally employed same to "construct social boundaries and concretise the group's position in the public space" (Ukpokolo, 2015: 31). Interestingly, some Awe Day programmes (see Table I below) have been reconstructed to accommodate modernisation and for greater acceptability. *Okudiye* means 'dead chicken'. Awe people are jokingly called '*Omo Ajokudiye*', meaning, 'the child of one who eats dead fowl'; and they respond with, '*Eeyanwo ni o je tie laaye*', meaning, 'Who can eat his own fowl alive'. During Awe festival, a night is set aside as *Okudiye*

night, and this starts around 11.30 p: m on Friday till Saturday morning. Chicken delicacies such as roasted and fried chicken, and chicken *suya* are eaten with assorted wine, beer and palm-wine. Traditional and *juju* musicians are invited for entertainment throughout the night. In the same vein, 'Baby show' is a modification of the cultural expectation of showing baby to Sogidi goddess in pre-colonial time. In contemporary times, 'baby show' has become a day for health talks. Medical experts are invited to educate parents on how to care for their babies in order to prevent childhood diseases. Culture is dynamic, so also heritage is not 'frozen'. The open-endedness of culture allows incorporation of new realities emerging from interaction with people elsewhere. Aspects of the Awe culture that do not enjoy wider acceptability are discarded while new ones are grafted as evident in 'baby show' programme.

From all indications, Awe people build group solidarity around Sogidi grove, and its cultural significance. This common allegiance agrees with Emile Durkheim's postulation that the nature of solidarity among members of rural and urban societies differs. According to Durkheim, in rural society, what exists is mechanical solidarity as community members build solidarity on common beliefs, values and collective conscience. On the contrary, in urban society, solidarity is organic. Heterogeneity characterising urban population, and division of labour and specialisation that mark economic life in urban society, lead to the entrenchment of organic solidarity. Relationship is contractual and rules and codes guide people's behaviour. For members of Awe community, allegiance to common beliefs and values associated with Sogidi contributes in building group solidarity among group members, and defining the people's collective identity. The grove is the centre of their 'being', and gives them a 'we' feeling, and 'consciousness of a kind' (cf. Francklin Giddens). This consciousness separates them from other such groupings. Besides, Sogidi grove represents 'village square' of a kind in the community, hence many important community event take place at the site. Sogidi, as "water of life", is believed to be instrumental in the preservation of the life of the community and the community members. Sogidi has therefore come to represent the past, the present, and because of the people's belief in her healing powers and ability to give children, she also represents the survival, future and the continuity of Awe people. Indeed, groves are imbued with meanings that define how members of a local community relate with

landscape and construct reality that defines their collective identity. Informants, however, revealed that some indigenes do not believe in the efficacy of the water to solve human problems.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This article presented an exploration of Sogidi sacred grove in the construction of the collective identity of Awe people, southwest Nigeria. Sogidi grove is imbued with meanings, values and significances that point to the 'beingness' of Awe people. Allegiance to community beliefs and values associated with Sogidi grove binds members together and contributes in defining the people's collective identity. As long as the preservation of the site is achieved, Awe people, for a long time to come, are likely to continue to view the grove as their collective heritage and source of the community's peculiarity. The site has also become a source of economic empowerment to members of the local community, particularly during Awe Day Festival as tourists flock to the community for relaxation and site seeing. Sogidi grove demonstrates how humans construct meanings of landscape and use same to shape group identity. As a rallying point for members of Awe community, Sogidi's relevance in defining the collective identity of Awe people is phenomenal. Cultural hybridity and schizophrenic identity that have marked the personhood of the postcolonial African is evident in the participation of the adherents of dominant religions in the community – Christianity, Islam and African Traditional religion - in reverence to Sogidi. Nevertheless, some members of the community doubt the efficacy of Sogidi water to cure diseases.

It is obvious that threats to the biodiversity in the grove exist. Although the indigenous preservation mechanisms have contributed and still contribute to the sustenance of the site, local council authorities could employ forest guards to safe-guard the site to augment the local taboos. More importantly, conservation education should be encouraged by the community leadership to ensure constant preservation of the cultural heritage. With modernisation, urbanisation and migration, cross-cultural contacts will certainly affect people's perception of cultural practices in local communities, with the implications of challenging existing beliefs as evidenced in the narratives on the military man from the north and the Igbo man from

the south east, Nigeria, who doubted the rationale behind the reverence given to Sogidi sacred grove.

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