THE SISALA UNIVERSE:
ITS COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE
(An Essay in Cosmology)

BY

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In his introduction to Guardians of the Land, Schoffeleers (1978, 5) noted that the conviction among African peoples that 'management of nature depends on the correct management and control of society' is a profound intuition at the heart of their ecological thinking. This conclusion of Schoffeleers, though arrived at from his study of the territorial cults in Central Africa, is also applicable to certain peoples in West Africa (Awolalu 1979). That the earth/land should be attributed such a position of prominence in these African cultures is not surprising. For, if on the one hand the Earth/land is regarded as the universal provider and sustainer of all living beings, (the womb as both source of life and depository of the umbilical cord) it is also the home for the ancestors (the tomb). Thus, linked with the beginning and end of human existence, the earth embodies for these African peoples the very mysterious character of life itself.

However, if the land is a key symbol through which many of these peoples structure and relate to their universe, their representations and imaging of the land are as varied as their natural and cultural environments are. This paper is devoted to the study of the land/earth as it is viewed by the Sisala² of north-western Ghana. The Sisala are subsistence farmers in the West African savanna region who are still very dependent on the forces of nature to eke out their existence from the land by means of very poorly developed implements. Their conception of the land is thus influenced by their mode of production and their beliefs about nature's contributions to their livelihood. I argue that the land is a multivocal symbol for the Sisala. As a personalised being, the land is regarded as the supra-human mediator of all the inter-personal and ritual relation-
ships among humans and between the latter and the supra-humans. As a locality, it is also believed to be the structured cosmos, the stage on which human life is acted out. The centrality of the land as locality and personalised being is made focal in the institution of the earth cult, the life-spring of the economic, socio-political and ritual relationships and activities of the people in the village.

However, before I proceed to discuss the Sisala conception of the land under its two aspects-as a personalised being and as a locality-I find it necessary to make a brief note of the Sisala terms for the land and the meanings they connote. Linguistically, the Sisala distinguish between tenso, the ground, too, the village, and tie, the land. However, they tend to identify their land with their village (both conceptually and by the village borders). Hence tie and too are most often used interchangeably. For this reason, the tender of the earth shrine is rightly called tietina or totina. The term dunie is used when reference is made to the wider world and it often bears the connotation of 'the world of other cultures and peoples'. The term dunie is hardly used as the Sisala blur the boundaries between their lived-in-world and the universe as a whole. Hence, reference to the land, be it as a location or as a personalised being, is always in terms of tie/too. If tie, under both of these aspects, manifests itself as a unity, it is also experienced, at times, as a plurality of differentiated beings/localities. It is to the Sisala vision of the land, firstly as a being in relationships, and secondly as a structured spatio-temporal entity that the rest of this essay will be devoted.

The Land as a Being in Relationships

The Sisala believe that the land is much more than what we perceive of it. The following accounts from two informants summarise the Sisala vision of the land;

Wiise (the Supreme Being) created Tie second only to Himself. Besides Wiise, nothing else is as important as Tie. It is on Tie that we walk and sleep. It is also Tie which provides food for ourselves, the animals, and the plants. The rivers, the hills and all living things live on Tie. What could we do without Tie? If Wiise wants to give you blessings, he has to pass through Tie.

and also

There is no way you can escape Tie. The fact is that, if you die and have to go to Wiise, it is Tie which has to accept you first. Our ancestors lived on it before us. Now they are under it -at its bottom. They are all within Tie, though they are now on the other side of it.