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From idol to art: African 'objects with power': a challenge for missionaries, anthropologists and museum curators

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Citation

Leyten, H. (2015). *From idol to art: African 'objects with power': a challenge for missionaries, anthropologists and museum curators*. Leiden: African Studies Centre. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/32748>

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a challenge for missionaries,
anthropologists and museum curators

African Studies Centre
African Studies Collection, vol. 59

From idol to art

African 'objects with power':
a challenge for missionaries,
anthropologists and museum curators

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Published by:
African Studies Centre
P.O. Box 9555
2300 RB Leiden
The Netherlands
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<http://www.ascleiden.nl>

Cover design: Heike Slingerland

Cover photos: Left: An Ikenga of the Igbo, Nigeria. Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford
Middle: Asuman, probably of the Ashanti, Fanti and Sefwi, Ghana. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal
Right: Nkisi mabiala ma ndembe of the Yombe, Congo. Courtesy of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

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Maps: Nel de Vink (DeVink Mapdesign)

Printed by Ipskamp Drukkers, Enschede

ISSN: 1876-018x
ISBN: 978-94-6173-720-5

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For Clémence

Contents

Glossary *vi*

Foreword *xv*

1. FROM IDOL TO ART: INTRODUCTION *1*
 - 1.1 Two *Epa* masks in a missionary museum: A case study *1*
 - 1.2 *From Idol to Art*: Research question *11*
 - 1.3 Theoretical framework *15*
 - 1.4 Objects with power *29*
 - 1.5 Plan and structure of this book *35*
2. *IKENGA, MINKISI AND ASUMAN* *40*
 - 2.1 *Ikenga* *40*
 - 2.2 *Minkisi* *49*
 - 2.3 *Asuman* *65*
3. THE PRECOLONIAL PERIOD 1850-1900 *81*
 - Introduction *81*
 - 3.1 The missionary perspective *83*
 - 3.2 The anthropological perspective *99*
 - 3.3 The curatorial perspective *116*
4. THE COLONIAL PERIOD: 1900-1950 *139*
 - Introduction *139*
 - 4.1 The missionary perspective *140*
 - 4.2 The anthropological perspective *164*
 - 4.2 The curatorial perspective *188*
5. THE POST-COLONIAL PERIOD: 1950-2000 *215*
 - Introduction *215*
 - 5.1 The missionary perspective *216*
 - 5.2 The anthropological perspective *241*
 - 5.3 The curatorial perspective *263*
6. EPILOGUE *284*

Index of figures *291*

Bibliography *314*

Glossary

A.

- Abirifo* (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) A herbalist (*dunsini*).
- Abonsam* (Ashanti, Fanti, Ewe [Ghana]) Spirits (*abonsam* or *throwo*) that are both beneficial and malicious. Missionaries usually considered them to be evil spirits.
- Abosom* (singular: *Obosom*) (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) Spirits that are venerated in public shrines and are attended by special priests (*akomfo*).
- Abuk* (Dinka [Sudan]) A spirit, also called a 'Power' or 'Divinity' (Lienhardt 1961). *Abuk* is responsible for a good harvest.
- Abusua* (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) One's maternal family. Ashanti and Fanti have a matrilineal kinship system and kinship is determined by bloodline.
- Adinkra* (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) A cotton cloth that is hand-printed or painted with symbols and is worn by men and women on special occasions.
- Aduro* (singular: *Oduro*) (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) See *Oduro*.
- Afa* (Ashanti, Fanti, Ewe [Ghana]) A spirit (*abosom* or *tro*) that is venerated in a cult and is housed in a public shrine. The cult was introduced and became popular at the beginning of the 20th century, especially in the Volta Region.
- Ajala* (Yoruba [Nigeria]) One of the *orisa* responsible for the modelling and 'baking' of a person's head (*ori*) before birth.
- Akala aka* (Ibo [Nigeria]) Spiritual marks that are made on a child's hands before birth as an indication of the pact made with its *chi* about its destiny in life. These marks also indicate the strength of its right hand (*ikenga*).
- Akomfo* (singular: *okomfo*) (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) A priest responsible for a local shrine and its cult for an *abosom*.
- Akua* (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) The name of a woman born on a Wednesday. Each child receives the name of the day in the week on which it is born.
- Akuaba* (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) The child (*ba*) of a woman born on a Wednesday (*Akua*). According to legend, a woman born on a Wednesday who had problems getting pregnant was advised to commission a doll in the form of her ideal child and carry it in her wrapper as if it was a living child. Not long after that, she would become pregnant and have a baby girl. The Ashanti and Fanti, being matrilineal, prefer to have girls rather than boys.
- Akyi wadie* (Ashanti [Ghana]) Hateful things such as gestures, types of behaviour or words that have been forbidden by an *abosom* and cause physical or spiritual damage to the agent if they are performed or uttered. The term is commonly translated as 'taboo'.
- Ala* (Ibo [Nigeria]) A manifestation of *chi*, the power that pervades the universe. *Ala* is the power that is manifest on earth.
- Alose* (Ibo [Nigeria]) Powers that protect humans.
- Amandzee* (Fanti [Ghana]) The question that opens a ceremonial greeting between two parties who are meeting after a long absence. Among the Fanti, the receiving party asks how the other has fared since they last met. The answer is always '*bòkòò*' mean-

ing ‘things are well’ (even if they are not). The Ashanti have the same ceremony but ask the question ‘*amanayè*’.

Amuin (Baule [Ivory Coast]) The Baule believe that there are powers beneath the visible world that affect all life. They are called *amuin* and can be made visible through objects, masks, figures and shrines. Their support in daily life is requested by every Baule.

Asamando (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) The realm where the deceased live, especially those who are considered as the ancestors (*nsamanfo*). When a person dies, maternal blood (*mogya*) is transformed into *saman*, the maternal ancestor.

Asantehene. (Ashanti [Ghana]) The King (*ohene*) of all the Ashanti. Until about 1700 AD, the Ashanti organized themselves in extended families, each with its own head and one family provided the chief of the village (*ohene*). Around 1700 AD, Osei Tutu received the golden stool (*sikadua*) from the sky in which he saw the ‘soul’ of the Ashanti nation and of which he became the overall chief or king. This form of government still exists among the Ashanti.

Ase (Yoruba [Nigeria]) Vital energy. The Yoruba believe that all cosmic forces possess *ase*, but some people possess more than others. *Ase* is a power that can cure but can also cause disease. It can be beneficial or malicious.

Aseda (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) When someone needs a *suman* (an object with power, sometimes called ‘juju’), he approaches a person who possesses one. In return for a counter gift (*aseda*), the owner will make a *suman*.

Asuman (singular: *Suman*) (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) See *suman*.

Atingli (Ewe [Ghana]) A spirit *tro* that has its own public shrine in many villages is venerated in a cult and guarded by a local priest (*tronua*).

B.

Babalawo (Yoruba [Nigeria]) A priest in the *Ifa* cult.

Bakisi (singular: *nkisi*) (Yombe, Vili [Congo]) Personified spirits that are called upon to cure specific diseases or problems. They are ‘embodied’ and made accessible in a material form called *minkisi* (singular: *nkisi*).

Bakulu (Yombe [Congo]) Certain *minkisi* that are directed towards the identification of witches and adulterers (usually among relatives) are said to be imbued with ancestral spirits (*bakulu*) that give them additional power.

Banganga (singular: *nganga*) See *nganga*.

Basimbi (singular: *simbi*) (Yombe [Congo]) These are the dead who, unlike ancestors that take care of their descendants, have a relationship with the entire community and control local circumstances, such as epidemics, rainfall and harvests.

Basiw (Bamana [Mali]) Objects with power, such as masks, statues and amulets, are believed to be imbued with *nyama*.

Batakari kese (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) When a chief went to war, he was dressed in a ‘uniform’ covered with amulets or talismans (*asuman*). Today, a chief may wear this dress on ceremonial occasions, such as at his enstoolment.

Bayi/bonsamkomfo (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) A local priest (*okomfo*) who specializes in herbs and charms against witchcraft and is in charge of an *abosom* shrine.

Bilongo (Yombe, Vili [Congo]) Often translated as ‘medicines’. *Bilongo* are herbs, leaves or parts of animals (claws, hair, skin or genitals) that provide protection or power to the person who uses them. Pouches attached to *minkisi* that contain *bilongo*

are found on the figure's stomach, head or back and are sometimes covered with a mirror.

Biyombe (Yombe [Congo]) The language spoken by the Yombe.

Blolo (Baule [Ivory Coast]) Sometimes translated as the 'other world' or the 'here-before'. *Blolo* is the place/condition where the unborn live in duplicate until one half decides to be born into the world of men and women.

Blolo bian (Baule [Ivory Coast]) Usually translated as 'a woman's spirit mate'. A *blolo bian* is the spiritual counterpart that stays behind in the *blolo*. The two halves make a pact about lifespan, career and particulars of their stay on earth. The woman will commission a statue of her *blolo bian* that she can consult if she encounters problems. This figure is often an idealized male.

Blolo bla (Baule [Ivory Coast]) A 'man's spirit mate', like the *blolo bian*.

Bo nun amuin (Baule [Ivory Coast]) Sacred masks belonging to a secret society. They are kept in the forest and may not be seen by the uninitiated and women.

C.

Cak (Nuer [Sudan]) Commonly translated as 'creation'. The notion of *cak* contrasts with *kwoth*, which is described as Spirit. See *kwoth*.

Chi (Ibo [Nigeria]) Although this was considered the name of the Supreme God for a long time, *chi* is a life essence attributed to the entire universe. Every human being (and also animals and inanimate things) has *chi*. A man's *chi* is married to his wife's *chi*. Its power enables a person to accomplish things in life and achievements are objectified in his/her *ikenga*.

Chi-neke (Ibo [Nigeria]) Translated as the 'Great *Chi*' as a description of the power that pervades the universe.

Chi-ukwu (Ibo [Nigeria]) Another word for the 'Great *Chi*' that is often abbreviated to *Chukwu*, *Chuku* or *Cuku*.

Chiwara (Bamana [Mali]) Sometimes spelt as *Chiwara*, it represents a communal power called *Nyama* for the members of the association of the same name. It encourages peaceful cooperation between a man and his wife, and between the sun (the male principle) and the earth/water (the female principle).

D.

Dama (Dogon [Mali]) This is a second burial that is organized by the Dogon months or even years after the first burial. It serves as a festive entry for the deceased into the realm of the ancestors and marks the end of the period of mourning.

Dente (Ewe [Ghana]) A powerful *tro* that lived in a cave on the banks of the River Volta at Kete Krachi for generations. After Lake Volta was created, but before the area was flooded, the *Dente* moved to a new location.

Dibia (Ibo [Nigeria]) A local priest or diviner who is comparable to an Ashanti *okomfo* in Ghana.

Didon (Yoruba [Nigeria]) Translated as 'luminosity'. *Didon* is one of the criteria for the Yoruba to determine the sculptural beauty of manmade objects, such as a mask or a statue.

Dufa (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) Herbs that are used as medicine by a herbalist (*dunsini*).

Dunsini (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) A herbalist.

Dzo (Ewe [Ghana]) Objects with power that are used by the Ewe of the Volta Region in Ghana. *Dzo* consist mostly of natural objects, such as feathers, bones, egg shells, strings, bark or herbs. Many appear in the form of a string that is worn as a chain or tied around a person's arm, leg or waist. They can also consist of powder or liquid or a mixture of herbs and water. *Dzo* are empowered by a local priest (a *dzoto*).

Dzoto (Ewe [Ghana]) A local priest who is an expert at making and supplying *dzo*.

E.

Edzi-ndu (Ibo [Nigeria]) Translated as 'viable life', the notion refers to a condition of good health, wealth, longevity, having offspring as well as tranquillity and order within one's community. A person who possesses *edzi-ndu* is considered someone for whom all is going well.

Ekwensu (Ibo [Nigeria]) A power that is feared for its evil influence on people's lives. Early missionaries equated *Ekwensu* with the devil.

Ekpe (Ibo [Nigeria]) One of many societies or associations among the Ibo. At masquerades, dancers wear masks representing *Mmwo ogbegu*, the maiden spirit that symbolizes beauty.

Epa (Yoruba [Nigeria]) An association of women and also the name of the masks worn at masquerades by male dancers to celebrate the power of women. It represents the collective interests of women before the king and in the councils of senior chiefs.

Ere ibeji (Yoruba [Nigeria], Fon [Benin]) Twins (*ibeji* means 'two'). It is believed that the *orisa* that wanted them to be born together also wants them to continue their lives together. If one of them dies, a little statue is made that is taken care of together with the living child.

Esu (Yoruba [Nigeria]) One of many *orisa*. *Esu* is committed to improving communication between this world and the other but is also the trickster who creates confusion and chaos amongst humans. Those who respect *Esu* will become wealthy.

H.

Honhon (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) A person's breath that s/he receives at birth and is one of the elements that constitutes *nipa* (or *nyipa*), i.e. a human being. The other elements are *mogya* (maternal blood), *ntoro* (the father's characteristics), *sunsum* (the person's character) and *kra* (or *okra*) that is sometimes translated as 'conscience'.

I.

Ifa (Yoruba [Nigeria]) One of many *orisa*, *ifa* is situated on the border between this world and the other world where the *orisa* reside. It is committed to improving communication between the two sides and is at the core of the *ifa* oracle, which is when the *Babalawo* recites verses to a client. The latter may stop the recital if he hears a verse that applies to his problem.

Ike (Ibo [Nigeria]) Power. The concept of *ike* has a central place in Ibo religion and culture as it is 'something' that gives a person the power to achieve something in life: success, wealth and/or a career. The word *ike* is also in the concept of *ikenga*.

Ikenga (Ibo [Nigeria]) An object with power and the objectification of a person's achievements. The etymology of the word is probably *ike* (power) and *nga* (to drive or push for success).

Ile ori (Yoruba [Nigeria]) *Ase*, the life force for the Yoruba, constitutes *iwa*, the person's character that resides in one's head (*ori*), making it the most important part of the body. The head becomes the focal point of a special cult: *ile ori* (*ile* means 'father' or 'father's house').

Iwa l'ewa (Yoruba [Nigeria]) Character (*iwa*) means beauty. For the Yoruba, a noble character (residing in the head) radiates beauty to the outside, i.e. on one's face.

Iyalode (Yoruba [Nigeria]) The title of the leading woman in *Epa* society.

J.

Jijora (Yoruba [Nigeria]) One of the criteria that determine sculptural beauty. *Jijora* means a resemblance to the subject and implies a balance between the extremes of portraiture and abstraction. A Yoruba artist prefers to depict an old man as an energetic, youthful person.

Jogi (singular: *jok*) (Dinka [Sudan]) See *jok*.

Jok (Dinka [Sudan]) A spirit or power. The concept of *Jok* differs from European concepts of spirit.

K.

Kola zima (Yombe [Congo]) Charcoal. It is one of the elements frequently used in a *nkisi*.

Kefu myin (Oku [Cameroon]) Good medicine that gives its owner health and success. Power in Africa can be beneficial and malicious.

Kefu keba (Oku [Cameroon]) Dangerous medicine. See *kefu emyin*.

Kici (Vili [Congo]) An object with power. The word was translated by early missionaries as 'holy' but also as 'evil'.

Kioka [Congo] (literally: burning) This religious movement emerged in 1890 and burnt all the *minkisi* in an attempt to restore morality in the country. This movement is one of several that tried to eradicate pagan practices, such as the cult of *minkisi*. There was also the Kibanguism movement in the 1920s.

Kodi (Yombe [Congo]) A large snail shell often found on *minkisi* figures.

Komo (Bamana [Mali]) One of many powerful associations among the Bamana. Its masks are dramatic and strong (*warakun*). Its *nyama* (power) protects its members (blacksmiths in the community) against witchcraft and magic and strengthens a man's virility and a woman's fertility. It can also have the opposite effect. *Komo* is responsible for the initiation of boys.

Konda (Yombe [Congo]) The word *konda* means to hunt and forms the basis for the large, aggressive *minkisi* figures called *nkondi*.

Kono (Bamana [Mali]) A power association of the Bamana. Its main goal is to increase the fertility of both women and the land. It brokers peace between warring parties but can also create the opposite effect.

Kore (Bamana [Mali]) One of the many Bamana associations. Like the *kono*, *komo* and other associations, *kore* assures its members of increased virility, i.e. their male power (*nyama*).

Kra (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) *Kra* (also spelt *okra*) is one of the elements that constitutes *nyipa* (*nipa*) or a person. *Kra* is considered a person's life force and may increase or decrease depending on how a person cares for his/her *kra*. The word was translated by early missionaries as 'soul' but more recently it has been seen as a person's conscience. A person receives his/her *kra* on the day they are born which is why Ashanti and Fanti are named after the day of the week on which they are born. (A boy born on a Sunday is called *Kwesi*, a girl *Esi*.) *Kra* gives a baby its *nkrabea* (destiny).

Kukonga (Lega [Congo]) One of the words used by the Lega to describe the aesthetic qualities of their achievements. *Kukonga* means 'to promote harmony and unison when singing together', *kwengia* 'to be shiny', *kwanga* 'to be in good order' and *kuswanga* 'to be at peace'.

Kunde (Ewe [Ghana]) One of the *trowo* (spirits) that were introduced at the beginning of the 20th century, each with its own cult, shrines and devotees. See *Afa*, *Dente*, *Tigaree*, *Atingli* and *Yewe*.

Kwanga (Lega [Congo]) See *kukonga*.

Kwengia (Lega [Congo]) See *kukonga*.

Kwoth (Nuer [Sudan]) The concept of *Kwoth* (translated in the past as Creator God by early missionaries) is difficult to describe. It can be understood as a contrast to *cak* (creation). *Kwoth* determines what happens in the world but can be influenced by prayer and sacrifice.

L.

Legba (Ewe [Ghana]) *Legba* represent *hebieso*, which is one of the spirits of the sky. *Legba* are believed to control lightning and thunder.

Luhemba (Yombe [Congo]) Chalk or white clay, which is used in the making of a *nkisi* figure.

M.

Makaya (Yombe [Congo]) *Banganga* do not want to be associated with *minkisi* because of their negative image. Instead, they call their objects with power *makaya* (leaves) or *min'ti* (herbs).

Mawu (Ewe [Ghana]) One of the many *dzimawuwo* that are translated as 'spirits of the sky'. As *Mawu* has always been considered more powerful than the others, early missionaries equated him with the Christian notion of the Creator God.

Minkisi (singular: *nkisi*) (Yombe [Congo]) See *nkisi*.

Minkuyu (Yombe, Vili [Congo]) Ancestral spirits that can empower *minkisi*.

Min'ti (Yombe [Congo]) See *makaya*.

Mmotia (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) Dwarfs who play a main role in the myths of origin.

Mogya (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) Maternal blood, which is one of the elements that constitute a *nipa*. As Ashanti and Fanti are matrilineal, maternal blood determines kinship relations (*abusua*). See *kra*.

Mpemba (Yombe [Congo]) The deceased, the ancestors.
Mpezo (Yombe [Congo]) Whitewash that is often found on *minkisi* figures.

N.

Ndop (Kuba [Congo]) Images carved for a deceased Kuba king that represent him. The image was not a portrait as such as the king was recognized by a symbol, like the board game in a *ndop*.

Nga (Ibo [Nigeria]) To drive or to push. See *ikenga*.

Nganga (plural: *banganga*) [Central and East Africa] A local priest in charge of a shrine, a diviner or a herbalist. In large areas of Central and East Africa, this person is called a *nganga*.

Ngolo (Yombe, Kongo, Vili [Congo]) Vitality. *Ngolo* is considered the foundation of the community, guarding and ensuring the harmony and balance between the different elements in the community. It is seen as the master symbol of Kongo religious practices and objects with power (*minkisi*).

Nhialic (Dinka [Sudan]) Literally: 'up' or 'above'. The word *nhialic* may refer to the sky but can also mean 'father'. In order not to confuse it with the Christian concept of God, it has been described as 'Divinity' (Lienhardt 1961).

Nipa (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) A person or individual. *Nipa* (also spelt *nyipa*) consists of several elements such as *kra*, *sunsum*, *homhom*, *mogya* and *ntoro*.

Nkandika (Yombe [Congo]) A red kernel that is attached to a *nkisi* to block *kandika* or the paths of witches.

Nkisi (plural: *minkisi*) (Yombe, Vili [Congo]) An object with power that appears in many forms (human or animal). A *nkisi* consists of two parts: an object (that can take different forms) that serves as the carrier or the container of the other part, and the *bi-longo* (medicines) that give the object its power. Some *minkisi* are privately owned and serve personal needs, while others belong to the community and are placed in public places. A *nkisi* can only function if it has been consecrated by an *nganga*. Each *nkisi* has a personal name, sometimes given on the basis of the medicines used to make it, sometimes in view of a specific disease that it is said it can cure or a marriage problem or conflict between two or factions in a community or between villages.

Nkonde (plural: *minkondi*) (Yombe, Vili [Congo]) Tall *minkisi* figures that are usually covered in nails or iron blades, with their right hand raised in a clenched fist. They can chase witches and mediate between warring factions and can also cause serious disease and even death in persons who are suspected of witchcraft and/or other crimes.

Nkrabea (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) A person's destiny that is set by his/her *kra*. See *kra*.

Nsa (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) A locally produced alcoholic beverage like palm wine or gin that is used during a libation ceremony for the ancestors. Over time, *nsa* was replaced by imported gin but under the same name.

Nsamanfo (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) Maternal ancestors. A person's blood becomes a *saman* after his/her death. Only a person who lived well into old age, was a parent and grandparent, did not commit any crime and did not die of a 'bad' disease (such as leprosy) was venerated as an ancestor in the past.

- Ntoro* (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) One of the elements that constitutes a *nipa* or a person. *Ntoro*, which is also called *sunsum*, represents the good qualities passed on by a father to his child. See *kra*.
- Numuw* (Bamana [Mali]) Blacksmiths, who are consulted as healers of the sick and as diviners and who form the *Komo* association. See *Komo*.
- Nyama* (Bamana [Mali]) Translated as ‘life force’ or ‘active energy’. For the Bamana, masks (*basiw*) are objects with power that possess *nyama*. This power can be increased or decreased and masks thus have to be fed with sacrifices of fowls so that their *nyama* can increase. The power then permeates the members of the association and, ultimately, the whole community.
- Nyame* (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) Originally the *abosom* of the sky and also called *Nyan-kopon*. Early missionaries who acknowledged *Nyame*’s power as greater than that of other *abosom* equated him with the Christian concept of the Creator God.
- Nyamedua* (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) The tree (*dua*) of *Nyame*. The Ashanti and Fanti have no cults, or shrines or priests for *Nyame* but in many (especially older) houses one can see a tree where a pot with an egg in it has been placed in the branches. This is the tree of *Nyame* but the egg is not considered as a sacrifice.
- Nyankopon* (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) See *Nyame*.

O.

- Obosom* (plural: *abosom*) (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) Commonly translated as ‘spirit’ and in the past as ‘small god’. In most cases, an *obosom* has its own cult, a shrine, devotees and an *okomfo* as its guardian. *Nyame*, which is the *obosom* of the sky, is a notable exception. An *obosom* can cure or cause disease and protect against certain evils (or cause them).
- Oduro* (plural: *aduro*) (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) Commonly translated as ‘medicine’. *Oduro* can consist of herbs, leaves, pieces of textile, animal skin and bones or any other ingredient that through its form, name or association may have a connection with the disease or problem.
- Ogboni* (Yoruba [Nigeria]) The name of an association of influential citizens that used to be a counter balance to the authority of the king. It has meeting places and its members are recognized by special objects.
- Olorun* (Yoruba [Nigeria]) One of the most powerful *orisa* or spiritual powers. *Olorun* breathes *ase* (life force) into a baby at birth. *Olorun* is thus seen by many as the creator of life. According to myth, *Olorun* created the earth at a place that is now called *Ile Ife* (the seat of the King of Ife).
- Oludumare* (Yoruba [Nigeria]) Another name for *Olorun* as the creator of the world. See *Olorun*.
- Ori* (Yoruba [Nigeria]) Literally a ‘head’. *Ori* is the focal point of a special cult. See *Ile ori*.
- Orisa* (Yoruba [Nigeria]) The Yoruba acknowledge a multitude of spiritual powers that they call *orisa*. These powers influence everybody’s daily lives positively or negatively. It is, therefore, everyone’s daily goal to remain at peace with the *orisa*. This peace is achieved through prayer and sacrifice, the observance of rites and rules, and the intervention of *babalawo*. Each *orisa* has its own cult, festivals, devotees, cult objects, rules and regulations (taboos). The well-known *orisa* are *Shango*, *Gelede*, *Eshu* and *Ifa*.

S.

Sala (Kapsiki [Cameroon]) Also spelt *Shala*. Although the word has been translated as ‘God’ or ‘god’, recent fieldwork shows that the Kapsiki themselves do not distinguish between a natural and a supernatural world. *Shala* is a vague term but is essential for understanding Kapsiki religion and society.

Saman (plural: *nsamanfo*) (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) A maternal ancestor. Ancestors reside in the *asamando* and only a person who lived well, had children and grandchildren, was successful in life, did not commit any crime and had no ‘bad’ disease becomes an ancestor. S/he is then revered and called upon to help those relatives who stayed behind. Ancestors have shrines and sacrifices and drinks (libation) are offered to them.

Sikadua (Ashanti [Ghana]) Literally golden (*sika*) stool (*dua*), which is sometimes called *Sikadua* Kofi because, according to myth, the golden stool descended from the sky on a Friday (*Kofida*). See *Asantehene*.

Shinankwe (Kapsiki [Cameroon]) Shadow or it is sometimes translated as ‘spirit’. For the Kapsiki, every object has a shadow, while each person has two *shinankwe*, one white and the other black. In their own words, they have ‘a full shadow and a half shadow’. The white shadow belongs to the living body while the black one belongs to a corpse and is buried with the body. With this notion of *shinankwe*, the Kapsiki are able to explain a number of phenomena in their own lives and in their relationship with others that would otherwise remain obscure.

Suman (plural: *asuman*) (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) An object with power that is, in most cases, privately owned. The word has been translated as ‘charm’, ‘talisman’, ‘fetish’ or ‘juju’. A *suman* can be obtained for almost any purpose: to protect a hunter from the dangers in a forest, to keep thieves away from a house or farm, to generate money for its owner, to cure or inflict a disease or to protect a person against witchcraft or magic. As a rule, a *suman* has no public shrine, cult, or public acclaim.

Sunsum (Ashanti, Fanti [Ghana]) Another word for *ntoro*. See *ntoro* and *kra*.

T.

Tigaree (Ewe. Ghana) One of the *trowo*, sometimes translated as ‘earthly gods or spirits’. They were introduced at the beginning of the 20th century with their own shrines, cults and guardians. See *Afa*.

Tro (plural: *trowo*) Sometimes translated as ‘spirit’ or ‘earthly god’. The role of *tro* in the community may be compared to that of *obosom* (Ashanti, Fanti) or *orisha* (Yoruba).

Foreword

The title and sub-title of this book not only refer to its content but also reflect three crucial stages in my life.

I was a missionary in Ghana between 1961 and 1971 at a critical time in the history of the Catholic Church in the period before, during and after the Second Vatican Council. I had learned to consider the Catholic Church as the guiding principle in my life and its doctrine and spirit permeated my whole existence. I derived my identity from the Church and it gave meaning to my life. But during the ten years that I spent in Ghana, I gradually began to realize that the Church had a very different meaning for many Africans from what it meant to me. Institutions in the Church, Canon Law, the liturgy and its views on marriage and sexuality all appeared to be creating a gap between the Church, its bishops and priests on the one hand and African perspectives on the other.

I decided that I needed to examine the norms and values of African cultures and indigenous religions and so I applied to Oxford University where I studied social anthropology under Prof. Wendy James for two years from 1973 to 1975. I learned to look at culture and religion from a perspective that differed from that of the Catholic Church and came to the conclusion that working within its constraints was not the course I wanted to pursue. I resigned from the priesthood.

After my anthropological training in Oxford, I was an Africa curator at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam between 1975 and 1995. This was a critical period in the museum's history as it was making the transition from being a traditional museum of ethnography to a centre for development cooperation. I became involved in presenting African objects to a Dutch public and my dilemma was how to combine the complex meanings of African 'objects with power' with a museum concept that emphasized the political and economic relations between the First and Third Worlds.

My concern about the future of museums of ethnography led me to apply for a position as a lecturer of museology at the University of Amsterdam where I specialized in museums of ethnography from 1984 to 1997. I then became a lecturer of museology at the Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam, where I stayed until 2002.

My experiences from these related yet very distinct careers have prompted me to reflect on the contributions each of them has made to the understanding of African cultures, and objects with power in particular. Objects with power were treated by missionaries and early anthropologists as expressions of idolatry and superstition but a gradual change in the appreciation of such objects can be noted over the last 150 years. They are no longer considered as idols but are admired as objects of art (even if they are 'primitive' art). Missionaries hesitated for a long time before reassessing their views of indigenous African religions and the objects with power that played a role in them. Anthropologists started to search for the meaning of these objects in the middle of the 20th century and developed new interpretations of cultural phenomena. And museums of ethnography, especially those with a colonial or missionary background, found themselves in a dilemma when African countries became (politically) independent and European missionaries in the Catholic Church lost their dominant position in local churches.

If personal motives had been the only reason for writing this book, it would have become a biography. I am aware of my personal involvement in the subject but have tried instead to research the perspectives from which missionaries, anthropologists and museum curators operated over the past 150 years. Although I have been active in each of these fields, I have not always been aware of the influences that theoretical constructs may have had on my work and that of other missionaries, anthropologists and museum curators.

As this thesis is the outcome of 65 years of involvement in Africa, I owe a great deal to many people. I can only mention some of them here. I am grateful to the late Father Frits van Trigst SMA, my professor of exegesis and the first director of the Afrika Centrum, who invited me to be his museum assistant between 1955 and 1961. He taught me to love African art. I am also grateful to the numerous Sefwi men and women of Ghana who admitted me into their private worlds, and especially the late Papa John Mensah of Bibiani for his fatherly advice when I was still a young, inexperienced missionary. All of them taught me about the African 'personality'. I am grateful to Prof. Wendy James, my tutor at Oxford University who taught me social anthropology, and to the late Bernard Fagg and his wife Catherine for their hospitality and for introducing me to the world of British Africanists. I am also indebted to the late Nico Bogaart, a former director at the Tropenmuseum, who started me on my way to an international career in the museum world. I would also like to thank my promoters, Prof. Walter van Beek, who suggested I write this dissertation, and Prof. Paul Post for their guidance in the process of writing this book and for teaching me to reflect on my life. I am grateful to the director, Prof. Ton Dietz, and his staff at the African Studies Centre in Leiden for their support and assistance over the past five years.

I am particularly grateful to my sons Joris and Diederik and my daughter-in-law Liselore for their love and moral and practical support, and to my little grandsons Milan and Alexander. Above all, I want to thank my wife Clémence. For the last forty years she has been my fountain of love and wisdom, and my source of inspiration. I dedicate this book to her.

From Idol to Art: Introduction

1.1 Two *EPA* masks in a missionary museum: A case study

Father Jacques Geurtz, a member of the Dutch province of the Society of African Missions (SMA),¹ crated and shipped one or perhaps two *Epa* masks from Nigeria to his parents' address in the Netherlands in 1924/25. Later, they were on display in the Afrika Centrum (AC) at Cadier en Keer until 2012 when the AC closed.² (see Figure 1)

Figure 1 Masks of the *Epa* society. Yoruba, Ekiti-province, Nigeria. Such masks were danced to celebrate the power of women. Missionaries have long been unaware of the true nature of these masks³



a



b

¹ The SMA was founded in 1856 by Mgr. de Marion Brésillac in Lyons. A minor seminary was built in the village of Cadier en Keer near Maastricht in 1892.

² The AC housed the collections assembled by missionaries in West Africa and additional purchases were made when Father Frits van Trigt was its director (1946-1977).

³ Further particulars of each figure in this book can be found in the *Index of Figures* on page 291.

Epa masks feature in a society of the same name that is particularly strong in Ekiti District, the most northern part of Yorubaland in Nigeria. The Yoruba-Ekiti wood carvers are known for their large sculptures, such as veranda posts, doors, statues and masks like the *Epa* masks. An *Epa* mask always has a hollowed-out helmet type of head that covers the dancer's head. On top of this wooden helmet, tall wooden human or animal figures form a superstructure that often depicts a horse and rider (a chief), a woman carrying objects of power or a woman with a child on her back and one on her lap.

The two masks in Figure 1 show a woman with a child on her back and another on her lap. Both women are dressed in a wrapper but their breasts remain uncovered. And both have an elaborate necklace that would seem to indicate that they are of noble birth. It is rumoured that, on opening the crates, Father Geurtz's father was shocked to discover that his son had shipped two masks that had, in his view, a distinctly erotic quality to them. How Father Geurtz obtained these masks is not clear but he was working as a missionary in Benin between 1920 and 1925. Did he travel up north to Ekiti District and acquire one or both masks there? This would have involved a journey of some 200 km on untarred roads and missionaries did not own cars in those days. Did someone from Ekiti District travel south and show him one or both masks? According to an informant, Father George Laugel, an American member of the SMA, was a missionary in Nigeria between 1911 and 1933 and was working in the Ekiti area where he apparently obtained the smaller *Epa* mask in the AC's collection. He presented the mask to a Dutch missionary (it is not known who, perhaps Father Geurtz) in Nigeria, who forwarded it to the SMA in the Netherlands, probably to be used in missionary exhibitions.⁴

The next thing we know of the two masks is that they had a prominent place in a missionary exhibition in or around 1925, as they can be seen in a photograph taken of the SMA stand at the exhibition (see Figure 2). It is packed with African objects that surround an oil painting of the founder of the SMA, Mgr. de Marion Brésillac.

Behind the table, Father Erkens can be seen in his cassock. He is clearly the man in charge of the stand who would be telling visitors about Africa, pagan customs and the joyful tidings of the gospel that the SMA and other missionary congregations were bringing to the continent. There is also a boy behind the table. Was he Father Erkens's nephew or was he a seminarian? An interesting detail in the photograph is that Father Erkens has covered the breasts of the two female figures on top of the masks with a piece of cloth. Presumably he found their bare breasts too confronting, especially for the school children who used to visit his stand in large numbers.

What did Father Erkens tell his visitors about Africa? As far as we know, there were no pre-established programmes for visitors. Father Erkens was also not the only missionary engaging in this kind of propaganda work as there were dozens of SMA missionaries working at these exhibitions. The main criteria required were personal experience in Africa, eloquence and the ability to keep visitors spellbound and a certain persuasive power to encourage visitors to contribute financially to the missionary work.⁵

⁴ Between 1920 and the mid-1960s, missionary congregations used to organize joint exhibitions to introduce a wider public to the value of missionary work and to demonstrate their achievements. See Frese (1960: 31); Dirkse (1983: 38-49); Zijp (1983: 27) and Coppus (1988).

⁵ I manned the SMA stand at three missionary exhibitions in different towns in the Netherlands in 1964/1965.

Most missionaries preferred to be surrounded by scores of different objects at these exhibitions and they used them to illustrate their narratives. They tended to show farmers' tools, such as hoes or machetes while they were talking about agriculture, a drum or a xylophone when they spoke of music and dance, household utensils when they were explaining work in the home, and ritual objects when describing indigenous religions. The *Epa* masks may have been used in the latter category but we do not know exactly what Father Erkens told his visitors about the meaning of the *Epa* masks. He himself had been a missionary in Dahomey and Nigeria from 1911 to 1919. In Nigeria, he worked in Oyo, Ibadan, Oshogbo and, of more relevance to this thesis, in Ekiti District. He may have seen *Epa* masks being used in their original context, perhaps during the annual *Epa* festivals. He may have received information about *Epa* from dancers or members of the society. At the age of 32, he returned home for good and became a propagandist, recruiting young students for the seminary at Cadier en Keer and raising funds for Catholic missions. Part of his job was to organize the stands at the missionary exhibitions in which some thirty other missionary congregations also participated, alternating with Father Pierre Knops and others. Father Knops had worked among the Senufo of northern Ivory Coast but was not permitted to return to his post by the French colonial government as he had been involved in Senufo secret societies, which was forbidden by the authorities. Father Knops was well acquainted with the Senufo as he had studied their rituals and customs and published quite extensively on them.⁶

Figure 2 Father Erkens at a missionary exhibition in 1925



⁶ Knops (1932).

The information that the propagandists at the missionary exhibition presented to visitors may have come from personal communication with the ‘natives’ among whom they had worked in West Africa. Father Knops was familiar with the traditions and rituals of the Senufo and Father Erkens with those of the Yoruba, but the information that they gave about ethnic groups or cultures with which they had not had direct contact, could have been obtained from hear-say when they met missionaries who had been working in these cultures. Other sources of information were virtually non-existent. There was hardly any scholarly literature around on the Yoruba in the first decades of the 20th century and even if it had been, it was almost certainly not available to the SMA missionaries.

On the other hand, propagandists at missionary exhibitions were not there to teach anthropological courses on the Yoruba or any other African culture. Their reason for being there was twofold: firstly, it was their mandate to promote the cause of the Catholic faith and, more particularly, the cause of their own missionary congregation, the conversion of the pagans in the regions that had been entrusted to their missionary care. In the case of the SMA at that time, this was Nigeria, Dahomey (present-day Bénin), Togo, the Gold Coast (Ghana) and Ivory Coast. In practical terms, this meant that visitors were to be coaxed into donating generously to this good cause and that young boys were to be invited to join the ranks of the heroes (the missionaries) and register at the SMA seminary. To achieve this, only experienced and eloquent missionaries were invited to present information at the exhibitions. The second reason for organizing the exhibits was so that the missionaries could depict African non-Christians as ‘pagans’, ‘idol worshippers’ and ‘poor souls in the hands of Satan’. This, they believed, would encourage visitors to support their good work as missionaries.

From this perspective, the accuracy of the information on concrete ritual practices or customs was not the most important aspect as the missionary did not consider himself (nor was he) an anthropologist or ethnographer, but a missionary who had left his home and family to preach the gospel and convert the pagans in faraway and hostile Africa. Texts written by missionaries about their experiences in Africa and published in missionary magazines bear witness to this.

As far as their missionary mandate was concerned, the SMA propagandists who ran these exhibitions were not primarily concerned with the accuracy of their information about the objects on display but more with their main task, namely persuading their visitors to support their missionary work. It is therefore assumed that they used the objects at their disposal on the exhibition stand for that purpose and, by doing so, wittingly or unwittingly, encroached on the original meaning of these objects as they were perceived by the Africans who had used them. I am inclined to deduce that the two *Epa* masks may have played an ambiguous role in the exhibition strategy. If in their former ‘lives’ (to speak in Appadurai’s terminology)⁷ they were the proud and meaningful property of respectable families with which they honoured their dead relatives, they were probably used to illustrate the perverseness of African ‘pagans’ in their ‘second lives’ in these exhibitions, as is ‘shown’ by the nudity of the women presented in the superstructure of

⁷ Appadurai (1988).

the *Epa* masks. In addition, the masks were said to have been used in dances that missionaries tended to consider as bordering on superstition, magic and witchcraft.

The first part of the history of these *Epa* masks is one of confusion and ambiguity. The masks were obtained in Nigeria, crated and shipped to the Netherlands without any accompanying information concerning their place of origin, their role in society, the name of their carvers, their meaning, etc. The next step was that they were incorporated in a missionary exhibition that had no intention of narrating their original meaning or context. A further ambiguity can be seen in the way they were treated. First of all, they were not registered in any collection when they arrived from Africa and, as a result, some got lost or stolen and were never missed, as will be seen below. In between exhibitions, they were stored in the attics or cellars of convents and seminaries. If they were damaged by poor storage, moisture or neglect, they were left behind or thrown away and were subsequently replaced by new shipments from Africa. They were displayed in exhibitions without any regard for their integrity. And I even saw masks fixed to an exhibition panel with long nails right through them.

In short, the items were treated not as respectable objects from another culture with their own meaning but as utensils for missionary purposes, i.e. these objects were seen as proof of the perverseness and superstition of pagans in Africa. We can speak here of the appropriation of African ritual or religious objects by missionaries for their own purposes.⁸

The history of the *Epa* masks took on a new dimension in 1946 when the Dutch province chapter of the SMA organized a Provincial Assembly and decided that the African objects would be given a permanent exhibition. This was realized in the glazed veranda of the newly purchased building of the major seminary at Aalbeek (Limburg). Father Frits van Trigt,⁹ the Professor of Bible Studies there, was put in charge of retrieving objects from cellars and attics in other SMA buildings and selecting the most aesthetically attractive items. And then with the help of a fellow carpenter, he made some simple display cases and pedestals even though he was not given any funds for a professional display. He also began a register in which each object was recorded and given a number, starting with the letters AE, referring to Aalbeek Ethnographic Collection, followed by three numbers: the first was the year of access, the second the consignment of that year, and the third was the number within that consignment. As van Trigt was unable to retrieve the year or date when each of the hundreds of objects had arrived in the Netherlands, he decided that all of the collection would be assigned the current year of accessioning, namely 1946. After the completion of the register, however, he omitted to inscribe the numbers of the register on most of the objects. When I started work as van Trigt's assistant in 1955, the majority of the objects, especially the larger ones, had no registration numbers, which led to some problems. In or around 1950, the smaller of the two *Epa* masks had not been returned to Aalbeek after it had been loaned to a missionary exhibition and nobody knew where it was. Van Trigt was invited to be a guest curator at the Ethnographic Missionary Museum in Tilburg in 1958 and subsequently recog-

⁸ Missionary exhibitions are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.3.1.

⁹ Father Frits van Trigt SMA, 1910-1977, was ordained as a priest in 1935 and studied exegesis in Rome.

nized 'his' *Epa* mask in one of the display cases there and arranged for its return to Aalbeek. When the Tilburg museum closed in 1987 and the collection was transferred to the University Museum in Nijmegen, the accompanying register had 'missing' by the *Epa* mask, which suggests that van Trigt did not discuss the return of the mask to Aalbeek with any of the board members in Tilburg.

Van Trigt was not an anthropologist and had never been to Africa when he embarked on his mission. He had a vision though and wanted to show visitors to the museum and the public at large through his publications that Africa was lagging behind the rest of the world economically but that its creative and artistic powers had produced sculptural masterpieces, that were recognized as such by the international art world. Van Trigt wanted to veer away from past stereotypes and present Africa as a continent that deserved to be approached and studied in its own right. This vision was translated into a programme at his museum and because its collection consisted at that time of mainly objects from Nigeria and Ivory Coast, he began to broaden it with the goal of having each major West African 'tribe' represented by at least one object. An object should, most importantly, have aesthetic qualities. As he lacked funds, he did not hesitate to sell parts of his own collection that he considered to be of inferior quality, or items that were 'doubles', in order to generate money for the purchase of a new 'piece'. The Aalbeek Collection was transferred to the new museum, the Afrika Centrum, at Cadier en Keer in 1959.¹⁰ (see Figure 3)

One floor of the AC was reserved for the special pieces in the collection and these were beautifully illuminated in smart display cases while the other floor housed everyday objects. The general emphasis was on the objects' aesthetic aspects and the labels provided very little information about the function of an object in its original context or its meaning for the society from which it came. At the same time, guided tours would sometimes elaborate on some of the objects by narrating the horrific practices of such secret societies as the Porro.

The two *Epa* masks were part of a large collection that was loaned to the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht in 1972. In the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, van Trigt described the masks as follows: 'the superstructure depicts a woman with two children, representing Mother Earth'.¹¹ This attribution was new but there was no mention as to where the information was taken from. It may well be that the author, as a biblical scholar, was sensitive to metaphors, was tempted by the emerging interest in environmental issues in Dutch society and the position of the world more generally to see the commanding figures of the women on top of the *Epa* masks, with two little children and impressive breasts that seemed to indicate that they could feed all the world's children, as mother earth. If so, this is another example of appropriation. However, in this case it was not appropriation by missionaries but by an intellectual trying to change the negative image that Africa had suffered for so long into a more positive one. The aim was to put the continent on the global map as one that always cared for the earth (Mother Earth).

¹⁰ For a history of the 'Mission House' at Cadier en Keer and its buildings, see van Brakel (2002).

¹¹ Van Trigt (1972).

Figure 3 Father van Trigt welcoming guests at the opening of the Afrika Centrum in 1959



The Afrika Centrum was reorganized and refurbished in 1980 and the exhibition area was divided into two more or less equal parts: one showing traditional Africa, and the other a modern Africa. (see Figures 4 and 5)

Figure 4 Traditional Africa at the Afrika Centrum in 1980



Figure 5 Modern Africa at the Afrika Centrum in 1980



The objects in the collection were subordinated to the basic concept, not to the individual meanings or contexts of the objects but their general role in a 'traditional' society or religion. The *Epa* masks were, thus, put on display in the unit that was dedicated to women in their role as mothers, alongside twin statues, fertility figures, dolls and female masks from Sierra Leone. The *Epa* masks were, once again, not shown in their original context or given their original meaning but were subordinated to a museum concept that had become popular in an era when the emphasis was on concepts rather than individual objects. The Tropenmuseum, which was reopened in 1979, had developed a new concept with three perspectives: each department was to place 'man' in a central position (and not the object); it was to focus on development and change; and it was to highlight the relationship between 'them' and 'us'. The Afrika Centrum was partly modelled on the concept that was adopted in the Tropenmuseum and this brought about yet another appropriation, in which the original meanings of the *Epa* masks were subordinated to the Dutch museum concept.

When I was acting as interim curator at the Afrika Centrum in 1984, I co-edited a new catalogue that elucidated the basic museum concept by explaining the meanings of a number of the individual objects. One of the motives behind this catalogue was to answer criticism by experts on African art who felt it was not right to subordinate a collection so rich in meaning and context to a 'general museum concept'.¹²

For the first time, research was conducted on the basis of the existing literature. The ethnographic literature on the Yoruba, including the Ekiti Yoruba, had increased in leaps and bounds in the 1970s and 1980s and had led to the understanding – for the first time in the history of the Afrika Centrum – that *Epa* masks featured at 'celebrations of Yoruba cultural values in the context of remembering and honouring important events and persons'.¹³ During such celebrations, several large masks appear in a fixed order, the last being the mask of kingship. Preceding this mask, the *Epa* mask appears, a mask imaging the beauty and power of a woman. Although the dancer is male, the mask represents the leader of all the women in the community and carries the title of *Iyalode*. Together with *Esabinri*, her second-in-command, she represents the collective interests of women before the king and on the councils of the senior chiefs. They also have the authority to take disciplinary action against women who have seriously violated social or political convention. These masks often wear precious necklaces that are carved out of the same piece of wood, and are the beads associated with chieftaincy. The two masks at the Afrika Centrum fit the descriptions given in the literature, especially of the precious necklaces, and can be identified as *Iyalode*. As the mask dances gracefully through the crowds of spectators, the dancer receives and acknowledges the praises of the people, especially women, who call for her blessing and help in bearing children. The mask belongs to a particular lineage group that may recall deceased relatives but it represents collective social experiences at communal celebrations.¹⁴

The two *Epa* masks at the Afrika Centrum resemble the masks that Fagg identified as being carved by the master carver Agbonbiofe in the period between 1900 and 1914 in

¹² Leyten (1984).

¹³ Fagg, Pemberton & Holcombe (1982: 72).

¹⁴ Pemberton (1982: 78).

the town of Efon. There, the masks were not called *Epa*, as elsewhere in Yorubaland, but *Elefon*.¹⁵ On the basis of this study, I have suggested that certainly the taller *Epa* mask, but probably also the smaller one, were carved by the same Agbonbiofe. Fagg, for many years the deputy keeper of the Africa Collections at the British Museum, did substantial fieldwork on individual Yoruba artists and is still considered an authority in this field.

It was gratifying for the staff at the Afrika Centrum to finally, sixty years after the arrival of the masks in the Netherlands, learn their original meaning. But then the question arose as to what or to whom these *Epa* masks owed their original meaning. For me, the answer is twofold. In the first place it was the carver who modelled a piece of wood according to a fixed pattern so that the entire community would recognize the object as an *Epa* (or an *Elefon*) mask. And secondly, it owed its meaning to the context in which the mask featured. i.e. the annual celebrations, the masquerade, the spectators, the chief and the elders, the men and especially the women who felt united behind it. The context was also made up of the praise songs by the spectators and the graceful dancing as it was performed by the dancer.

Continuing with this line of thought, we may conclude that the two *Epa* masks lost at least half of their meaning as soon as they left their Yoruba-Ekiti context in 1924 or 1925. They were taken out of their local context: they were decontextualized. As long as they remained part of a museum context – an altogether alien context – they would be unable to assume their original meaning. They were remnants of a meaningful past, symbols of a historical context, and were recognizable because the carver had shaped them in an *Epa* style, and nothing more.

The *Epa* masks derived their meaning from two elements: the carver and the context. The latter is especially relevant to this thesis. The context of the annual celebrations makes it clear that the meaning of the masks was attributed to them by those who participated in the festival. We are talking here about consensual attribution. Meaning may be explained as the identity of the masks: they derive their identity from the context. Later in this book, I discuss ‘objects with power’ and ask from what or from whom these objects with power derive their identity, their meaning and indeed their power. The answer I suggest is that here too it is the context from which they derive their power, hence their name ‘objects with power’. In other words their power is not inherent to them.

The newly obtained information on individual objects in the collection, including the two *Epa* masks was confined to the Afrika Centrum’s 1984 catalogue and did not alter the displays or the labels. Over the years its displays were altered for several reasons and, until 2012 when it closed, one floor was reserved for the collection’s ‘top’ pieces and another for educational programmes. (see Figure 6) The labels offer little information about the meanings of the objects: the visitor was just expected to appreciate their beauty.

When looking back at this period in the history of the Afrika Centrum, it can be noted that yet another appropriation took place. It was the curators who subordinated the meanings of the objects to the general museum concept, distinguishing between the

¹⁵ Fagg (1982: 42).

‘old’ Africa and the ‘new’ and displaying objects from its collection to suit the museum’s concept. This concept was incorporated under pressure due to the political situation in the country: development cooperation had become a leading social and political issue and action groups were propagating equal rights for developing countries, with organizations such as the Peace Corps, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers (SNV) taking centre stage. This emphasis drew attention away from the original meanings of African objects in museum collections in order to establish home-grown meanings. In other words, an appropriation was taking place but, this time, by museum curators.

Figure 6 The collection in 2004, with the focus on aesthetic qualities



Throughout this period, questions were being asked in the Dutch museum world about whether objects in museums, especially museums of ethnography, belonging to the cultural heritage of a culture in Africa, Indonesia or elsewhere should be returned or repatriated. UNESCO and the ICOM (International Council of Museums) had outspoken opinions on this issue. Yet the Dutch government delayed ratification of the 1970 UNESCO Convention until fairly recently.¹⁶ In 1994, Dutch museums of ethnography unilaterally decided to apply the Convention to their acquisition policies and to the issues of return and restitution. Although the staff at the Afrika Centrum did not actively participate in this discourse, there was a sense of unease about the possible return of certain objects in the collection, especially regarding the two *Epa* masks that

¹⁶ Leyten (1995).

belonged to Yoruba cultural heritage. Some time ago, I suggested that the two *Epa* masks (and a number of other objects in the collection) were of a different category. They are about a hundred years old, but over 80 years of their life time they had been part and parcel of a Dutch missionary context. This specific context in which they featured in several roles and had been appropriated by missionaries, art historians and museum curators successively, attributed several new meanings and identities to them. It is probably more justifiable to speak of the masks as being part of a Dutch or missionary context than of a Yoruba context. In other words, the arguments for not returning the masks to Nigeria appear to be stronger than those supporting their return. At the same time, the masks are recognizably Yoruba Ekiti objects and we probably know the carver by name. Their origin is not disputed. We cannot, therefore, claim that the masks have an exclusively Dutch or missionary identity and should speak here of a shared cultural heritage.¹⁷

By 2012, the SMA was no longer able to finance the Afrika Centrum and the museum had to shut its doors. Its entire collection was sent on loan to the Missie Museum in Steyl-Tegelen that belongs to the Society of the Divine Word (SVD).¹⁸

1.2 From Idol to Art: Research question

The case study of the two *Epa* masks may appear to be an abbreviated history of the Afrika Centrum. This is not the case. The history of these two masks, which spans a period of over a hundred years, is one of appropriations and also of objectifications. It has been a history of shifting meanings, depending on place and time.

This opening case study focuses on the way two *Epa* masks were appropriated by those who handled them: the early missionaries in their missionary exhibitions, Father van Trigt in the 1960s and 1970s, and the curators who developed a new concept for the museum that housed them around 1980. Different significances were attributed to the objects by the people who worked with these objects to suit their own objectives. The case study is about the people who imposed their ideological, theoretical, social or political views on these objects and, by doing so, appropriated the meanings and identities of the objects. The case study demonstrates the very elements that I will examine in this thesis.

It is also a history of objectifications. The Yoruba carver, way back in about 1914, had been commissioned to make a mask, or perhaps two or more masks, for the annual celebrations of the *Epa* festival. He was not free to choose a form, a shape or a way of expressing the meaning of *Epa* as he was bound by tradition to carve the masks in a specific manner – a seated woman, covered in a wrapper, her breasts exposed, feeding a child. Only by sticking to the traditional image, which was called a prototype by Gell in his theory of agency, was he able to ‘create’ an object (in this case a mask) that ‘objectified’ the ideals of womanhood as they existed in the community: a woman’s role as

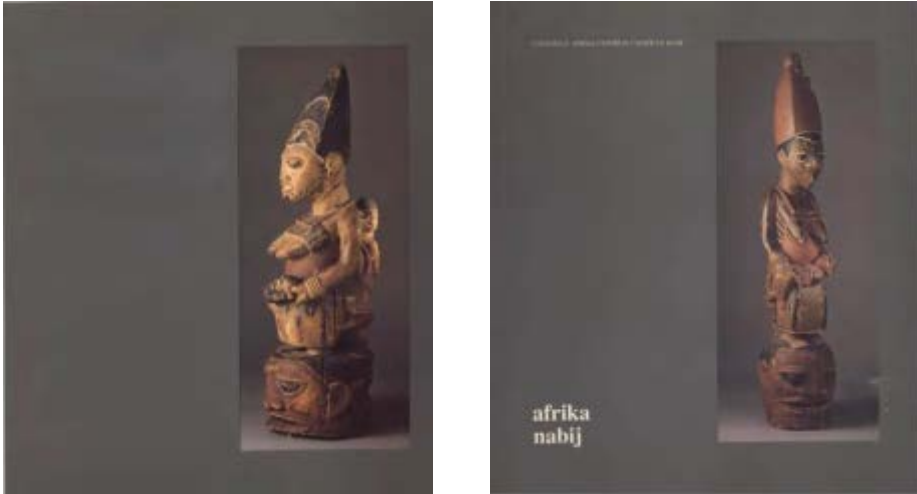
¹⁷ Leyten (2012).

¹⁸ Photographs of several objects that used to belong to the Afrika Centrum in Cadier en Keer and are still the property of the Society of African Missions (SMA) have been reproduced in this book, with their kind permission.

mother, as a wife, as a defender of tradition and as being responsible for norms and values.

When the two *Epa* masks appeared in missionary exhibitions in the 1920s, they dominated the display due to their size and their features. The father in charge of the display, who covered their breasts with a cloth and probably forestalled improper allusions by visitors, may not have been aware that this act would in fact evoke even greater curiosity. For the missionary whose task it was to draw the attention of the visitors to superstition, idolatry and the moral degradation rampant in Africa, the two *Epa* masks may have served as objectifications of the views he held about Africa. He may have looked at them as *idols*. And many years later, the same two *Epa* masks adorned the cover of the Afrika Centrum's 1984 catalogue. (see Figure 7)

Figure 7 Front and back covers of the 1984 museum catalogue



They were given a place of honour in the exhibition as masterpieces of classical African art. They objectified the sense of beauty that was attributed by European art lovers to the African carver and, within six decades, the same two objects had been transformed from idol to art.

The history of these *Epa* masks can be seen as one of shifting meanings. The shift depended on the place and time in which the masks were featured. In their original context, they featured in the annual masquerades of the *Epa* festival and they were kept in a safe place out of the view of the public between festivals. They kept their meaning but it was not activated as this happened during the festival.

After they arrived in the Netherlands, the masks were occasionally displayed at missionary exhibitions where they were attributed with a new meaning by the missionary in charge. They were presented as objectifications of superstition and idolatry but were then tucked away again in the cellars or attic of a convent or seminary, together with

masks, statues and cult objects from other African tribes. They did not receive any special treatment in these storerooms because of their original meanings: they were merely objects for missionary exhibitions. The fathers who were assigned to organizing exhibitions could choose which objects they wanted to display to illustrate the 'stories' they would tell.

After Father van Trigt had 'discovered' their beauty in the 1940s and 1950s, and had given them a place of honour in his permanent exhibition, and later on one at the Afrika Centrum, their meaning gradually became transformed from idol to art. Their place in a respectable museum gave them a new meaning: they had become art objects.

When the Dutch province of the SMA decided that it could no longer afford to financially support the Afrika Centrum in 2012, the two masks and hundreds of other objects in the collection lost their meaning again. They lost their significance as objectifications of superstition in missionary exhibitions that promoted the good cause of the SMA missionary presence in Africa. They also lost their artistic value as propaganda for the appreciation of African art and culture by the SMA fathers. The entire collection was handed over to the SVD fathers at Steyl-Tegelen and, once on display there, the *Epa* masks may again acquire a new meaning.

This study investigates how objects with power, which are assumed to have belonged to indigenous African religions, have been dealt with by three different categories of non-Africans: missionaries, anthropologists and museum curators. Why were these three categories chosen? Europeans have been visiting Africa since the 15th century as soldiers, merchants and, in the colonial period, as civil servants and diplomats. Yet no categories of Europeans have been more involved with Africa than missionaries, anthropologists and museum curators. Missionaries have lived and worked with Africans in their villages and shared their food since the middle of the 19th century. They have seen the way in which Africans lived their faith in rituals and religious practices and how they gave objects with power a place in their lives. Anthropologists have studied African cultures since the middle of the 19th century, initially from the accounts of travellers, soldiers and merchants, and, since the 20th century, based on their own fieldwork. The third category is curators of the museums of ethnography, which were founded from the middle of the 19th century onwards and a distinction can be made between (former) colonial museums, academic museums and missionary museums, all of which display comparable collections but their perspectives with regard to the attribution of meaning differ.

My research question is as follows: from which perspectives have missionaries, anthropologists and museum curators looked at objects in three distinct periods: the pre-colonial period (1850-1900), the colonial period (1900-1950) and the post-colonial period (1950-2000)?

Missionaries, anthropologists and curators have engaged in discourses with Africans but also with people at home, i.e. students, the faithful and visitors to exhibitions. In the 19th century, these discourses created or reproduced social realities originating from the perspectives that the three categories chose when looking at Africa and, more particularly, objects with power. One of these social realities was that these objects were seen as essentially religious objects and were always associated with idolatry and superstition.

As such, their efficacy was seen as emanating from some (intrinsic) religious power. Objects with power were commonly called idols (hence the title of this book), first by Europeans who had an interest in seeing them as expressions of idolatry and superstition but at times by Africans too, though it is not always clear why they considered them in this way.

In the second half of the 20th century, a shift in meaning gradually occurred among European anthropologists and museum curators. The emphasis on idolatry and superstition disappeared to be replaced by the appreciation of these objects with power (especially those resembling human or animal figures) as art (hence, again, the title of the book). Missionaries, however, have been slow to accept a new meaning for objects with power.

In this book, I refer to a number of objects with power from different African cultures but it is impossible to discuss them all in detail. I have, therefore, chosen three different categories of objects with power: Ibo *ikenga* figures from southeast Nigeria, *minkisi* objects from the Yombe and other ethnic groups in western Congo, and *asuman* objects from the Ashanti and Fanti in Ghana. I will discuss them at length in Chapter 2 and come back to them in subsequent chapters when I consider how missionaries, anthropologists and Africa curators have handled them. I selected these three categories because they were considered anti-aesthetic, especially in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. When I discuss them in Chapter 4 (on the colonial period), I quote prominent scholars of African art, such as Kjersmeyer and Himmelheber who showed low appreciation for *Ikenga* figures. These objects – objects with power – have been easy and tangible targets for the Eurocentric views held by missionaries, anthropologists and curators over the past 150 years. These objects have become a challenge for Europeans.

Africa – its climate, its environment, its peoples, its cultures and its religions – differs from Europe in many ways. Africa challenged Europe to come and see these differences, to study them and admire them. But, as always in a challenge, the party that is being challenged has the liberty to react according to its own views, ideas, perceptions and emotions. There is the risk of misperception and misunderstanding, and even of prejudice. Instead of admiring the other, the challenged party may negate it or hold it in contempt.

This is an exploratory study starting from a hermeneutic paradigm. It is a history of African objects with power, in the context of their cultures and religions. I will argue that missionaries and curators, and to a certain extent anthropologists too, have identified these objects so closely with idolatry and superstition that they have created a social reality or, according to others, a myth without foundation. As a consequence, their efficacy was seen as the work of some spiritual or supernatural power.

I hope to arrive at the meaning of these objects with power in their social and, in some cases, religious context: their efficacy as conveyors of power, bringing wealth, good health and strength (power) to individuals or groups, is the result of their agency and this causes events to happen. They are not due to some supernatural power. I arrive at my arguments by using three sensitising concepts: appropriation, critical discourse analysis (that I call the power of definition) and agency.

1.3 Theoretical framework

1.3.1. *Appropriation*

I frequently refer to the concept of appropriation in this book and have followed the research of Frijhoff.¹⁹ The concept of appropriation had a negative connotation in the past. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, it became a key concept in the social sciences and was applied to the use of texts or ideas for a specific objective other than the one intended by the author. In other words, it was applied when another significance was attributed to a specific (material or immaterial) object, which suited the context of the user. Appropriation is understood as the active reception or adoption of the cultural goods that are being presented, thereby attributing a new significance to them.²⁰ The emphasis is laid on the attribution of meaning as a crucial element in the process of appropriation. Baxandal²¹ points out that any intellectual appropriation of an object or an image implies a form of interpretation by the receiver.²²

Appropriation occurs especially in a cross-cultural context. Chapters 3 and 4 present examples of such appropriation so one example will suffice here. For the Ibo of south-east Nigeria, the concept of power is central to their culture.²³ After converting to the Catholic Church, they expected 'power' to emanate from religious forms and rituals: baptismal certificates were guarded as if they were entry visas to heaven, and Holy Communion was understood to be carrying the full powers of Jesus. When someone suffered from an ordinary illness, he hoped to be cured if he took Holy Communion. On the other hand, anyone living 'in sin' would refrain from Holy Communion, as it was feared that it might destroy them. This one example shows how the process of appropriation attributes meaning to something, that differs from the meaning that the original producer, in this case the Catholic Church, had in mind.²⁴

Appropriation of values and symbols must be understood as a process of selection and of discarding certain meanings and attributing new ones, meanings that were not intended by the person who presented the goods but that make sense in the specific context of the user. The process of appropriation thus becomes a methodical instrument to gain control of the goods that have been presented by the other party and originate from another culture. In this sense, appropriation takes place in a cross-cultural context: cultures and signification systems that are opposed or foreign to each other are merged,

¹⁹ Frijhoff (1997; 1998; 2003).

²⁰ Frijhoff (1997: 100); Frijhoff (2003: 13); Weimann (1983: 474); Roth (1988) and Cook (1993).

²¹ Baxandal (1985).

²² An example of appropriation is the 19th century assumption that 'high art' belonged to the domain of the upper class. Yet, the process of appropriation of this art by the *bourgeoisie* in the same century began with the founding of museums and the establishment of public funding. During the process, the *bourgeoisie* attributed new meanings to it, drawing on their collective taste (Sherman 1987; Bourdieu 1979).

²³ Okorochoa (1987: 263).

²⁴ In liturgical praxis in Europe, it is also becoming evident that the appropriation of the Holy Communion by the faithful has been less consumptive than the Church authorities had hoped and, in some cases, imagined to be true. See Frijhoff (1997: 105); Caspers *et al.* (1995).

whereby a new significance is generated. The motives that set this process of appropriation in motion must be sought in attempts to ward off inimical situations and come to terms with powers and values that are experienced as threatening.²⁵ At the same time, appropriation may not be seen as an end in itself or as an end to the cultural process. Appropriation can be considered successful only if the user's behaviour has been affected by it.

Okorochoa and Meyer demonstrate how a dominant party, in this case the Catholic Church in Nigeria and Protestantism in Ghana, can present a message to the local population that is foreign to them. The dominant party expects the target group to understand the message and its intention. In addition, the dominant party will do everything in its power to make the target group understand the significance of its message exactly as it has been intended. Yet, time and again, the process of understanding develops differently and new meanings are attributed to the goods received by the target group.²⁶

Appropriation takes place with the attributing of a new meaning in the specific context of the user of the goods. This may be after an experience of alienation or even the theft of treasured values within a power relation or as a response to a sense of threat. It is the user (the recipient) who produces his own personal or collective meaning and attributes it to an object, form or value that in the signification system of the one who presented them had another function or meaning.²⁷ The process of attributing meaning, i.e. appropriation, is always a form of criticism or correction of any existing dominant images.

A good example in this context is the phenomenon of pilgrimages. The church authorities may mould them in an ecclesiastical, liturgical and spiritual signification system but the pilgrims themselves may appropriate them, i.e. attach another meaning to them, for instance as an instrument of healing, an expression of superstition, an emotive form of historicization or of legitimizing a collective consciousness.²⁸ The literature provides numerous cases of appropriation by pilgrims, devotees and ordinary folk of popular religious practices in the Netherlands and elsewhere, sometimes against the wishes of the ecclesiastical (parish priests, bishops) and secular authorities.²⁹

Appropriation can also be identified with the concept of acculturation. This is when two groups of individuals who belong to different cultures establish lasting and direct contact that leads to changes in the pattern of culture in one or both of the partners.³⁰ After the Second Vatican Council, the notion was introduced in missiological circles.³¹

²⁵ Frijhoff (1997: 101); Fabian (1986) and Meyer (1994, 1995).

²⁶ This reminds me of my philosophy classes when students were taught the scholastic adage *quidquid recipitur, modo recipientis recipitur* (whatever is received is received in the manner of the recipient). The adage emphasizes the particularity of the recipient but notions of 'receiving' and 'reception' are no longer used in the social sciences as they are associated with passive consumption. See Burke (1992, 96-98).

²⁷ Frijhoff (1997: 104).

²⁸ Post (2000) analyzed the Miracle of Dokkum in 1990 in terms of appropriation and shows how the parish priest, the faithful, an archaeologist and the tourist office, each in their own manner, attributed their own meanings to the event.

²⁹ See also Frijhoff (1977); Wingens (1994); Post (1998, 2000, 2006); Margry (2008) and Coleman (2005).

³⁰ Redfield (1936).

³¹ Bongba (2006: 349).

This prompted debate among scholars and church officials in Africa as it was not clear whether it was only the Africans who would have to change or whether the Church itself was equally prepared to adjust to African cultural traditions, i.e. to acculturate.³²

It is important to distinguish between appropriation and acculturation. Acculturation implies that certain elements are accepted by the recipient, while others are not. It also suggests that an important part of the meaning attached to the goods by the person presenting them is accepted by the recipient without being appropriated.³³ If all the elements presented to the recipient are accepted, then we speak of assimilation. However assimilation – or complete integration – exists only in theory.³⁴

Another distinction between the two concepts is that acculturation presupposes a process of exchange of (immaterial) goods between two cultures. Yet the dominant party does not permit the receiving party to handle the goods as it pleases and to exploit them to create a new meaning or new culture (as appropriation implies) that is independent of the provider. Acculturation is, therefore, hard to combine with the concept of appropriation. In the case of appropriation, the receiving party does not accept goods that are presented indiscriminately but attributes its own meaning to them.³⁵ The recipient does not reproduce the meanings of the goods presented but s/he becomes a producer in his/her own right by producing a new meaning for the goods.³⁶ By so doing, the receiving party adjusts or adapts the goods and their meanings in such a way that they become acceptable, viable, bearable and humane. From this point of view, the ‘reception’ of another culture or other cultural elements is at the same time the production of yet another new culture.³⁷

Frijhoff seems to suggest that the process of appropriation takes place not just in a cross-cultural context but, more specifically, in a context where one part (i.e. one culture) is dominant and the other is subordinate. When applied to the position of the Catholic Church in Africa and certainly until the middle of the 20th century and to its (European) missionaries, one is inclined to conclude that the African culture, being the subordinate party in relation to the Catholic Church, is the one to appropriate the ‘message’ presented to it by the Church. I think this is a one-sided view of the situation. Throughout the first hundred years of missionary activity in Africa, the Church showed an ambivalent attitude to indigenous African religions and their objects with power. On the one hand, missionaries tended to belittle them as ‘powerless’, ‘non-existent’, *quantités négligables*, while, on the other hand, they described these phenomena as ‘pagan rituals, instigated by the Kingdom of Darkness and of Hell (versus the Kingdom of Light and of

³² See Chupungo (1995) and Lukken (1996). A similar discussion was held about other concepts introduced during or after the Second Vatican Council: adaptation, accommodation, contextualization, indigenization and inculturation. These concepts are discussed in Chapter 5.

³³ Frijhoff gives the example of the Manuals of Social Etiquette in the 19th century in which the ‘lower classes’ are exhorted by the authors who are themselves members of the upper classes to behave in a civilized manner. The reader may internalize a number of rules of behaviour so that they become ‘habitus’ as Bourdieu (1979) put it.

³⁴ Frijhoff (1997: 106).

³⁵ Burke (1982: 197-204).

³⁶ Rooijakkers (1994).

³⁷ De Certeau (1990) describes the *invention du quotidien* or the daily operations through which human beings give meaning to their lives.

Heaven)’, as the producer of the ‘Realm of Evil’ or the ‘Devil’, hereby implying that they were formidable forces that had to be overpowered in the process of converting Africa. Missionaries often spoke of paganism in terms of a war: the ‘other’ was the enemy under the leadership of Satan that had to be defeated and if ‘we’ were not always alert, ‘they’ might do us harm, for example, by retrieving converts from us or by undermining our good works. Missionaries were the dominant party in Africa for a long time and imposed their views on the subordinate party. Yet, they too appropriated African norms and values and African views on objects with power. They called these objects ‘idols’ but also ‘primitive art’. Both terms were alien to Africans.

Missionaries appear to have turned the tables: the indigenous religions in Africa did not dominate all spheres of African life but situated themselves as the subordinate party. Consequently, in their exhibitions and publications, missionaries appropriated the objects with power and attributed then new meanings: they were made symbols of an idolatrous and superstitious religious culture. The case study of the two *Epa* masks above is a good example of this.

The process of appropriation has to do with the exercising of power. I have already indicated that the Catholic Church used its position to impose its norms and values on its African converts. They, in turn, did not passively internalize these notions but appropriated them, i.e. attributed a meaning to them that differed from the Church’s meaning. I also use the example of the Ibo interpretation of baptismal certificates and the Holy Communion. This appropriation may be seen as a form of power, not by the dominant but by the subordinate party: the power of the weak. It is even called the ‘weapon of the weak’. The Catholic Church has also appropriated elements of African culture and religion, as will be shown in Chapter 5.

This study intends to contribute to the existing knowledge domain concerning appropriation by examining three categories of objects with power.

1.3.2 *The power of definition*

The relationship of the Catholic Church (and the other Christian churches) with African cultures can be described as a discourse, as was formulated by Fairclough and others.³⁸ Fairclough talks of a linguistic practice or ‘text’. Discourse has also been described as a discursive practice or ‘interaction’, as well as a social practice or ‘context’.³⁹ Interaction (or discursive practice) occurs between the speaker and the listener (or the author and the reader of a text). A text only makes sense to someone who makes sense of it and the process of making sense of it may rest on assumptions.

If a missionary at a missionary exhibition addressed an audience with little knowledge of Africa by saying ‘these objects with power are expressions of idolatry and superstition’, Catholic visitors assumed that the missionary was right because they believed that he had witnessed these events while in Africa and had come to this conclusion as an outcome of his research. In other words, the missionary assumed the power of definition.

³⁸ Fairclough (1992, 72) and Wijzen (2010).

³⁹ Wijzen (2010).

Context (or social practice) also influences the interpretation of a text. Fairclough refers more particularly to the social positions of the speaker and listener. A discourse may then be interpreted in a ‘top-down’ or a ‘bottom-up’ process.⁴⁰ One’s social position can affect one’s interpretation of the text, as any perspective or reality is, to a large part, determined by a person’s position. A European missionary visiting a remote village where white men were a novelty enjoyed a status of authority because of their appearance, knowledge and expertise, and the reputation of being a European. His sermons were a ‘top-down’ discourse but those who listened to them were inclined to accept the words as being true and convincing, prompting them to opt for conversion.

The European missionary himself had no liberty in preaching a message that differed from the official Church doctrine. ‘The distinguishing feature of any discourse is that it is restrictive, it controls and in many ways even determines what can and cannot be said within it.’⁴¹ In this book, I will, however, give examples of missionaries who felt justified in deviating from Church doctrine.

Critical discourse analysts study participants’ perspectives, not as such, but how they are related to the social positions of the participants and, more particularly, to their interests in reproducing or transforming the societal order.⁴² This approach implies that critical discourse analysts distinguish different dimensions of one and the same practice and look at them from different perspectives: the individual dimension or micro perspective; the institutional dimension or meso perspective; and the societal dimension or macro perspective.⁴³

The European missionary engaged in a linguistic practice in which he informed his listeners of his own views and those of the Church. He also engaged in a discursive practice, referring to the teachings of the Church and perhaps to the beneficial policies of the (colonial) government. When looking at social practice, we note that the missionary positioned himself as a ‘real’ specialist in the religious (theological) field, reproducing a hierarchical relation to his listeners, and serving the interests of the Church.⁴⁴ The missionary, speaking on behalf of his church, assumes the power of defining what is correct and incorrect, what is good for his converts and what is not.

The critical discourse analysis is not interested in participants’ views as such. It is interested in how participants’ views are related to their social positions and to their interests in maintaining or transforming the status quo.

Translated into religious discourse we can distinguish the dimensions of the individual believers, their identification with the religion or the religious institution, and the societal context in which religious institutions operate. Thus one can discriminate when participants [the missionaries] speak for themselves as individual believers, when they speak as representatives of a religion and as citizens of a country.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Fairclough (1992: 81).

⁴¹ Stringer (2005: 12) and Foucault (1972: 50-55).

⁴² Fairclough (1992: 65); Wetherell (2001: 383-387); Wijzen (2010: 3).

⁴³ Fairclough (1992: 69).

⁴⁴ Wijzen (2010: 4).

⁴⁵ Wijzen (2010: 3).

Language not only reflects a pre-existing reality but also contributes to the construction of reality.⁴⁶ By identifying with the policies of his Church, the missionary reproduced a social reality and chose a perspective that positioned him as an expert, as a defender of Church policy and as a supporter of its norms and values. On the other hand, the convert also chooses his/her perspective: if s/he has confidence in the priest's expertise and in the reputation of the Church, and if s/he agrees with the laws and regulations of the Church or if s/he considers conversion a legitimate gateway to a modern life, s/he will accept the priest's views as social reality and not argue with him.

A missionary speaks and operates from a certain perspective and reproduces his church's policies depending on the extent to which he identifies with them. He may also have chosen a different perspective if he disagreed with his church's policies and wanted to transform them. In either case, the missionary chose his own perspective and interests. If his church called indigenous African religions idolatry and superstition and the missionary reproduced his church's views, he would have created (or reproduced) a social reality among those listening to him. A social reality is distinct from a factual reality. If the social reality is presented with conviction and authority, it might be accepted by those who were listening as fact. The listeners may have had their own perspective and their own reasons for accepting the social reality as fact. The following chapters present examples of the ways in which European missionaries and Africans chose their perspectives and how the different discourses unfolded. The goal is primarily to discover how social realities were constructed, not whether they are true.⁴⁷

Words are never neutral. Those who sympathize with a militant group will speak of freedom fighters, while those who disagree with the group will talk of terrorists. Missionaries may speak of indigenous African religions as idolatry and superstition. Their perspective is that 'pagans' need to be converted to the 'true' religion. Africans are likely to have a different interpretation and show gratitude to their objects with power and religious cults for having given them good health, fertility and wealth.

1.3.3 Agency

The efficacy of objects with power

Objects with power in Africa have a double effect, being both beneficial and harmful. The question is how such objects with power exercise their power and how they achieve their goal, be it beneficial or harmful.

Power is described by the Bamana of Mali as an active energy (*nyama*) and by the Yoruba as a vital energy (*ase*). The Bamana say that their masks possess this power and they call them *basiw* (objects with power), while the Yoruba do not consider their masks as such. (see Figure 8)

⁴⁶ Wijzen (2013: 71).

⁴⁷ During my missionary years in Ghana I mailed letters to my parents almost weekly. They reported on my work and experiences. My mother has always kept them. After her death in 2005 they surfaced and are now in my possession. They support the experiences to which I refer in this book.

Figure 8 Helmet mask from the *Komo* association, Bamana, Mali



Power cannot, therefore, always be identified with the objects in which they are housed: the object and its power are distinct. Power can also be increased or decrease. The Bamana feed their power masks with sacrifices (chicken) to increase their *nyama*. The *nyama* of the masks permeates the associations, such as the *Komo* association, that in turn protect the community against witchcraft and magic, the power strengthens a man's virility and a woman's fertility or works in the opposite way.

The *Ciwara* of the Bamana in Mali represents a communal power, *nyama*, first of all for the members of its so-called power association but indirectly for the community at large. *Ciwara* is several things at any one time. It is a spiritual power or represents a spiritual power by making it present in the community, it may be a cult or it is one of the power associations in Bamana society. *Ciwara* encourages the peaceful cooperation between a man and his wife, between the sun (the male principle) and earth/water (the female principle). In its periodic festivals, *Ciwara* adepts dance in pairs, one carrying a male mask (depicting a roan antelope), the other a female mask (depicting an oryx antelope, often with a baby antelope on its back). (see Figure 9)

Ciwara is said to live in two worlds: our world here and the other. And it is able to change its sex; it is at home in the village but also in the bush: it is familiar with the day but also with the night; and it is a thing but also a human being or an animal. Notwithstanding these superior qualities, it can suffer hunger, must be fed and can experience despair if it is not taken care of.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Colleyn. (2006, 27) and Colleyn & Homberger (2006).

Figure 9 Male and female *Ciware* masks dancing, Bamana, Mali



Central to the Bamana concept of life is the notion that all living beings as well as all things possess an active energy or spiritual power called *nyama*. This energy or power is not stable and can increase or decrease. *Nyama* may be augmented by the acquisition of secret knowledge that is gained in initiation associations. All human activities, including agriculture, the use of iron by a blacksmith and the healing of the sick rely on the availability of secret expertise. Unlike other Bamana associations that are connected with power, such as *Komo*, *Ciware* is easily accessible. Women and non-initiates can approach the objects and offer sacrifices.

The power of *nyama* can be both beneficial and harmful for the Bamana and each community has a number of associations for both men and women. Their goal is to acquire additional *nyama* to better protect those who depend on them for a living. The *Koré* association assures new members of the growth of their virility (*nyama*) and their male identity. The association has as its main goal the furthering of the fertility of women as well as the land and it also mediates in conflicts and establishes peace between warring factions. But everyone is aware that *nyama*, the basic element of *Kono*, causes wellbeing as well as chaos. Through its *nyama*, *Kono* is able to bring life but can also suppress fertility (making women and the land infertile) and cause death.

Another power association is *Komo*, which smiths are members of. *Komo* is responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of society and protects against witchcraft and magic. It is also responsible for the initiation (circumcision) of boys. *Numuw* (smiths) are consulted as healers of the sick and diviners and their reputation is based on their skill as blacksmiths as they are able to make weapons, tools and sacred objects. *Komo* is a power association that is renowned in the international museum world for its fearful masks (*warakun*).⁴⁹ The Bamana couch their *nyama* power in the occult, the secretive or, in their own words, magic, in the use of objects with power (*basiw*), such as their masks and statues, but also in amulets of various kinds.

The Baule of Ivory Coast do not distinguish between this world and a supernatural world. However, they do acknowledge an ‘other world’ (as Vogel calls it), which the Baule call *blolo*.⁵⁰ It is the source from which all human life emanates. Everybody in this world has relatives in *blolo*. It is the condition (I refrain from calling it a place) where the deceased find themselves and is also the condition where human beings await birth. It could be called the ‘herebefore’ (as opposed to the hereafter).⁵¹ In the other world, a human being exists before birth in duplicate, with a male and a female half. One half decides to be born and makes a pact with the half that stays behind about the length of time that it is going to spend on earth, about the sort of life it is going to live and about other matters. At birth, the pact is forgotten. When the person grows up and faces crucial choices in his/her life, it is the other half (the one that stayed behind in the *blolo*) that remembers the pact and gives advice.

They are offered drinks, eggs, cigarettes and other small sacrifices and are consulted when needed. They are treated as objects with power. At the same time, the Baule do not view them as objects that are inherently sacred and if they fail to be efficacious, they may be discarded. A man’s ‘spirit mate’ is called *blolo bla* and a woman’s ‘spirit mate’ is *blolo bian*. (see Figure 10)

A man will have a statue carved of his ‘spirit woman’ (*blolo-bla*) and a woman will have a statue carved of her ‘spirit man’ (*blolo-bian*). About 75% of all Baule statues represent ‘spirit mates’. (see Figures 11 and 12)

⁴⁹ Its masks unite animal motives and organic materials in spectacular creations of birds, hyenas, crocodiles, antelopes and other animals. The masks are fed regularly with sacrifices of chickens, that provide them with extra *nyama*. The sacrifices account for the thick crusts that cover the masks, especially the older ones.

⁵⁰ Vogel (1997).

⁵¹ Vogel’s informants explained that the Baule have no statues of their ancestors. This discovery caused a stir among collectors of Baule art in the 1970s as they had always called the statues ancestor figures, as is clear from African art books published before 1980.

Figure 10 A *Blolo bla* in its owner's bedroom, Baule, Ivory Coast

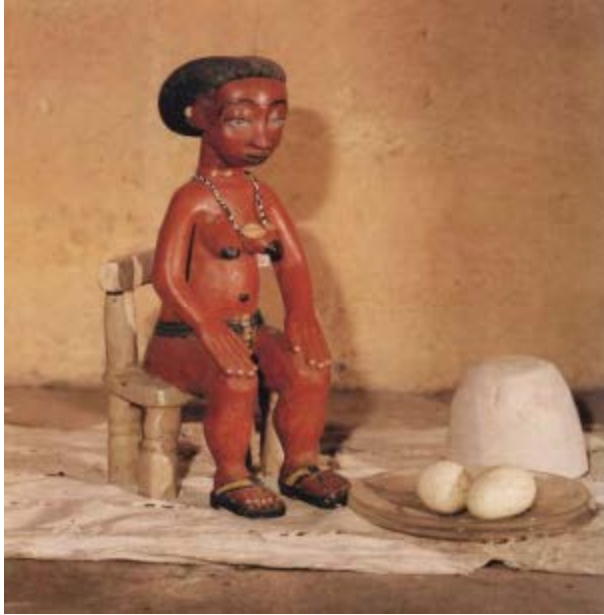
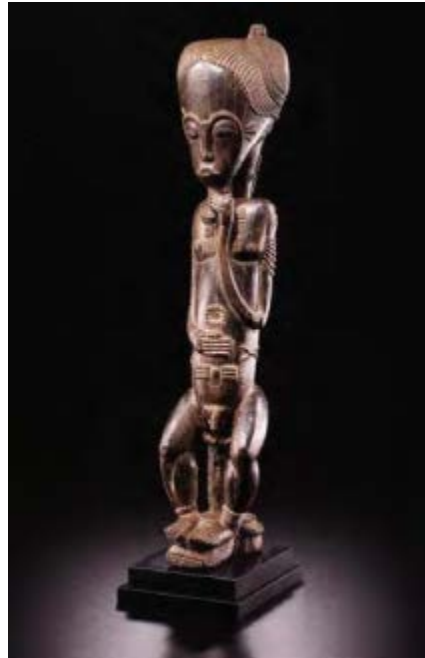


Figure 11 A *blolo bla*, Baule, Ivory Coast



Figure 12 A *blolo bian*, Baule, Ivory Coast

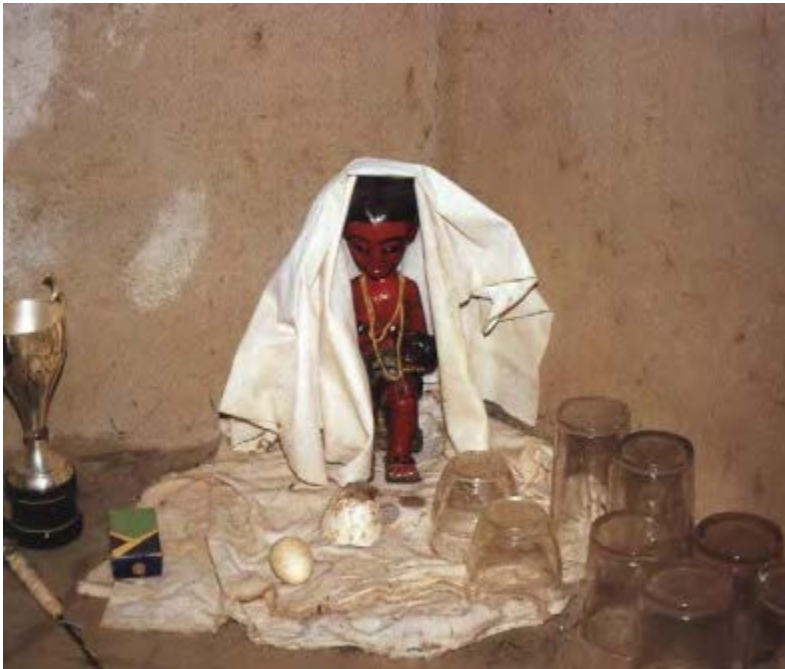


These figures are clearly objects with power. They are treated with respect, are given offerings, are consulted and the advice they give is heeded. The ‘other world mate’⁵² is carved by a professional carver in a presentational form that has often been communicated in a dream by the same ‘other world mate’ and is consecrated by the client in a special ceremony. (see Figure 13)

The statue is the place where the spiritual partner manifests him/herself, gives messages, bestows blessings or brings disaster.⁵³ The relationship with one’s ‘spirit mate’ is couched in rules and (sexual) taboos that also affect one’s earthly partner. *Blolo ba* and *Blolo bian* may be seen as the master symbols of Baule culture, which enabled us to understand its meaning. These symbols are representational objects with power, the materialization of concepts and of the power that is associated with these concepts.

A great deal of Baule thought and effort are devoted to anticipating the wishes of these [spiritual powers] and to enlisting their cooperation. The visible can only be understood by interpreting the invisible forces it conceals. Baule people tend to discuss these forces in terms of their powers and their abilities to interfere with human life, specifically their ability to kill people.” It is clear, that the Baule “do not recognize a unified pantheon of interrelated deities, but rather see the universe as consisting of a number of different powers with different characters and overlapping but clearly defined spheres of influence.”⁵⁴

Figure 13 A *Blolo bla* in its owner’s bedroom, Baule, Ivory Coast



⁵² Ravenhill (1996: 7).

⁵³ Ravenhill (1996: 4; 1994: 26); Étienne (1974: 219) and Vogel (1997: 246).

⁵⁴ Vogel (1997: 52-53).

When considering the efficacy of objects with power, questions about meaning arise. Meaning is not inherent in an object but is attributed to the object by people. If the meaning of a particular object is identified with power, then power also has been attributed to it. We speak of consensual attribution where the greater the consensus, the stronger the power. If the consensus crumbles or vanishes, the object loses its power and the cult may be disbanded.⁵⁵ The effectiveness of an object does not therefore depend on an object itself but on the power that has been attributed to it by (part of) the community. If the meaning of an object is appropriated by another group of people (i.e. by a different culture), its meaning changes and its power may vanish. The efficacy of objects with power has to be explained and can, in my view, only be explained by the concept of agency.⁵⁶

Africans are expected to believe in the power and the efficacy of their objects with power. Yet their faith in their powers is not unconditional. If a certain object with power, even if it has been efficacious for a long time, is no longer accepted as powerful, it may be discarded or destroyed. The question of the efficacy of objects with power has also affected the discourse among non-Africans living in Africa who have been confronted with the workings of objects with power there. Among missionaries, there was a tendency to believe that objects with power were, by themselves, incapable of being effective but that Africans believed they were effective through witchcraft, sorcery or magic. These missionaries felt (and they were not the only ones) that their presumed efficacy was primarily psychological.⁵⁷ Others, including missionaries and also colonial civil servants, were convinced that certain objects with power had an effect on human beings, even non-Africans, although they could not explain how they worked. They cited examples of non-Africans who had experienced inexplicable accidents in their work or in relationships with Africans. A British colonial police officer published his experiences in a book entitled *Juju in My Life*.⁵⁸

To understand the working of these objects with power, one has to know what meaning they carry within the group of believers or the community. Scholars in different disciplines have searched for the meanings of objects. Certain art historians, working from the theories of symbolic or interpretative anthropology, consider art objects as 'vehicles of meaning' (signs or symbols). These meanings have been encoded into the objects by artists and have to be decoded by spectators with the help of the knowledge they have of semiological systems. Others have argued that 'objects speak a language' (the language of things). Levi-Strauss,⁵⁹ Goodenough,⁶⁰ de Saussure,⁶¹ Faris⁶² and Pearce⁶³ are just

⁵⁵ An example was the destruction of the so-called Aro Long Juju of the Ibo in 1902 by British troops that for centuries had occupied a central place in the religious lives of the Ibo. When they realized that their 'gods' were not taking revenge on foreign aggressors, they abandoned the collapsed shrine and converted to Christianity. See: Okorocho (1987: 222).

⁵⁶ Gell (1997, 1998) and van Beek (2012).

⁵⁷ At a lecture by the psychologist Carl Jung, someone in the audience asked him whether he believed that the devil existed. His answer was: 'No idea, but he works!' (van Beek & Blakely 1994, 3).

⁵⁸ Neal (1966).

⁵⁹ Levi-Strauss (1970).

⁶⁰ Goodenough (1956).

⁶¹ De Saussure (1966).

⁶² Faris (1971).

some scholars that supported this structuralist approach that was popular among museum curators in the Netherlands during the 20th century. A number of curators maintained that each object spoke a language of its own, was a data carrier, a testimony of something else, a *Sachzeug* or an *Objet-témoin*.⁶⁴ This viewpoint came from French linguists such as de Saussure and was further developed by museologists at the University of Leicester and the Reinwardt Academy in Amsterdam. It involved the idea that objects in the Africa gallery of a museum of ethnography stood metonymically for ‘the other’ in Africa. Fabian opposed this idea⁶⁵ because, to him, such elisions denied agency and coevality as they fixed objects within racist evolutionary hierarchies or paraded trophies of colonial pillage.

Gell rejects the theory of semiotic anthropology⁶⁶ and refuses to accept the notion that art objects have a meaning or speak a language or that there is a symbolic meaning of objects. ‘I place the emphasis on agency, intention, causation, result, and transformation. I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world, rather than “encode symbolic propositions” about it. ... The nature of art-objects is a function of the social matrix in which it is embedded. It has no intrinsic nature.’⁶⁷

Gell’s theory of agency is supported by anthropologists who have long been interested in alternative conceptions of the relationship between people and things that exude a ‘special power’. To account for the power and agency of these objects, they have suggested that human beings imagine things ‘as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects, in their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols and totems’.⁶⁸

For Gell, a social agent is someone who exercises social agency, i.e. a person who causes events to happen. He distinguishes between ‘happenings’ that are caused by physical laws and actions that are caused by ‘prior intentions’. This notion of prior intentions implies attribution to the agent if it concerns a person, an actant if it concerns an object of a mind, akin to a human one, ‘if not identical. Animals and material objects can have minds and intentions attributed to them but these are always human minds in some residual sense because we have access “from the inside” only to human minds, indeed to only one of these, our own’.⁶⁹ He argues that ‘things’ are to be considered social agents. A girl’s doll is a social agent for her, and a man’s car is a social agent for him (‘it takes me anywhere’). Gell gives the example of a soldier during the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia when a soldier was not just a man but a man with a weapon (a gun or a landmine). The weapon was an extension of the man and was thus an objectification in artefact form. This is how a social agent manifests and realizes itself.

⁶³ Pearce (1992) based her research on Fleming (1982: 162-173) and the ideas of de Saussure. Her students have worked her ideas into an educational method entitled Learning from Objects that has also been used in several Dutch museums.

⁶⁴ Van Mensch (1992; Ch. 5.2.5).

⁶⁵ Fabian (1983).

⁶⁶ Gell (1998: 66).

⁶⁷ Gell (1998: 6).

⁶⁸ Brown (2001, 4); Meyer (2010: 103); Appadurai (1988); Miller (2005).

⁶⁹ Gell (1998: 17).

Gell explains the concept of social agency as a relationship between an ‘agent’ and a ‘patient’. The agent (person or object) is the agent only if there is a patient. ‘I am concerned with agent/patient relationships in the fleeting contexts and predicaments of social life, during which we certainly do, transactionally speaking, attribute agency to cars, images, buildings and many other non-human things’.⁷⁰ To me, this is the key to understanding the efficacy of objects with power and we will return to it later when discussing objects with power, such as *ikenga*, *minkisi* and *asuman*.⁷¹

A crucial notion in Gell’s theory of agency is that of ‘prototype’. The observer recognizes the object or image as ‘representing’ the original, or what Gell calls the prototype. Even an invisible being such as a god or a spirit can be represented in a figure, an image, a tree or a stone. As long as everybody accepts that the stone represents the god, one speaks of a prototype. When a Russian woman kisses an icon of Christ or the Blessed Virgin, she believes that the image’s ‘agency’ will help to cure a disease.⁷² The African worshipper who touches, holds or wears an object with power believes that the object’s agency will fulfil his/her request.

Africa has always had its own prototypes but they have been little recognized by non-Africans. African prototypes have had, amongst others, the position of ancestors, the concepts of power (as in the phenomena of *ikenga*, *minkisi* and *asuman*), the notions of the extended family and kinship systems. Anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt were among the first to discover indigenous prototypes among the Nuer and the Dinka. More recently, political and charismatic leaders have developed new prototypes that became social agents and caused political and social events to happen. Among them were Leopold Senghor (Négritude), Kwame Nkrumah (African personality) and Julius Nyerere (*Ujamaa*). Few Western analysts have recognized them as prototypes and most have ridiculed them as political rhetoric.

When we consider objects with power in the context of agency, the notion of the prototype is also applicable. Part of the relational aspect of agency is that the sculptor (the maker, the artist, the producer) or the *nganga* who has made or commissioned an object with power, for instance an *ikenga* or *nkisi* figure, has to conform to the prototype and produce a religiously stipulated image according to the conventions for such images. His object can only cause events to happen, if it triggers recognition of the god (i.e. the prototype) among his worshippers.⁷³

Africans, according to Gell, know very clearly the distinction between human beings and things (objects). What matters is agency and agency is about relations. ‘It does not matter, in ascribing “social agent” status, what a thing (or a person) is in itself; what matters is where it stands in a network of social relations.’⁷⁴

Meyer, who has conducted extensive research in the Volta Region of Ghana, has published on this belief in spiritual beings and the way it is objectified in movies and pictures. In her article entitled ‘There is a Spirit in Image’ she describes how a woman

⁷⁰ Gell (1998: 22).

⁷¹ In this context, the well-known placebo effect of medicines that are not produced to be effective, yet produce a decrease in symptoms of a number of diseases, could be mentioned. See Bensing (2000).

⁷² Gell (1998: 30).

⁷³ Gell (1998: 99).

⁷⁴ Gell (1998: 123).

becomes aware of ‘a spirit’ in a picture of Jesus that hangs on the wall of a friend’s house. According to Meyer, people are taught to approach, value, treat and look at pictures in specific ways and this ensues a process of animation through which pictures may (or may not) become agents that impress themselves on their beholders:

Religions, I propose, authorize particular traditions of looking, upon which the sensorial engagement between people and pictures is grounded, and through which pictures may (or are denied to) assume a particular sensuous presence and mediate what remains invisible to the eye. In this way, spirits and the spiritual are made to materialize in a picture, and thus become approachable.⁷⁵

1.4 Objects with power

Objects with power are commonly associated with indigenous African religions.⁷⁶ The ethnographic literature as well as the missionary literature, especially in the 19th and first half of the 20th century, almost always associates objects with power in Africa with a religious context where they feature and from which they draw their power. Curators of ethnographic museums have followed this viewpoint.

To start with, I too will speak of objects with power in indigenous African religions and do so for a methodological reason. At the end of this book, I will conclude that few, if any, objects with power draw their efficacy from being part of indigenous African religions. The efficacy of objects with power may result from factors that are not essentially religious. I will give examples of *minkisi* figures from Congo that appear in a religious context, but their efficacy (in healing, mediation and other social problems) is said to be caused by *bilongo* (medicines) that have been attached to the figure and consist of bones, fibres, shells and other substances with a direct or indirect link to the disease or problem. These substances are considered as the agencies that cause events to happen.

I have chosen the expression ‘objects *with* power’ (rather than objects *of* power) as it allows a distinction to be made between the material object and immaterial power.⁷⁷ The crown of a king or the tiara of the Pope are called objects *of* power as the objects themselves exude glamour and power, unlike an object with power that can be any object, natural (a shell, an animal’s claw or tooth, leaves or herbs) or manmade (a wooden doll, a mask, an amulet) without any direct associations with ‘power’ as such.⁷⁸ The object itself is in most cases considered to be the receptacle for the power; and sometimes the power is more specifically located in (smaller) objects that are attached to the receptacle, such as a tooth, a claw, a shell, a piece of skin or otherwise.⁷⁹ In view of their specific roles in the community, objects with power can be divided into a number of categories. I distinguish four of them.

⁷⁵ Meyer (2010: 121).

⁷⁶ Africa has many different indigenous religions. They are the religions of kinship-based communities and these can be called ‘community religions’. They are embedded in all other aspects of life and include the living as well as the non-living members of the community. These religions are characterized by an open mind towards other religions (Ter Haar, Moyo *et al.* 1992). See also Müller (2013).

⁷⁷ German anthropologists have described objects with power as a *dingliches Machtmittel* and *Macht in verdinglicher Form, machtgeladenes Stoff* (Damman 1987: 18).

⁷⁸ Africans also make this distinction when they conclude that at a certain point an object with power has lost its efficacy. The object may then be discarded (or sold).

⁷⁹ This is the case with the *minkisi* figures of the Mayombe and other ethnic groups in Congo. *Minkisi* is discussed at length in the next chapter.

Objectified prayers

The Ashanti, Fanti and other Akan-speaking peoples in southern Ghana recount a legendary woman called *Akua* (born on a Wednesday) who was desperate as she could not get pregnant. She consulted an *okomfo* (a priest at her local shrine) who advised her to commission an effigy of her ideal child and carry it in her wrapper on her back, as if it were a living child. After the *okomfo* had blessed the effigy and prayed to the *abosom* on her behalf, he presented her with the figure. She soon became pregnant and had a baby girl (*ba*; these figures have since been called *Akuaba*).⁸⁰ Her prayers having been answered, the good news spread and other women who wanted to become pregnant emulated her.⁸¹ (see Figures 14 and 15) Once a child has been born, the *Akuaba* loses its meaning. It may be discarded or given to the child to play with.⁸²

The Yoruba in Nigeria and the Fon in Bénin (formerly Dahomey) are known for their large numbers of twins (*ere ibeji*).⁸³ They believe that the *Orisa* wants both of them to be born together and therefore to live together. If one twin dies, the mother is afraid that the other will also die so, to prevent the second child from dying, an effigy is carved that represents the deceased child.⁸⁴ (see Figure 16) It will be looked after as if it was a living child: it will be bathed, fed, cared for, put to bed and awakened again the next morning, together with the living child.⁸⁵ *Akuaba* and *Ere ibeji* figures are not objects with power in the strict sense as they do not cure a disease or inflict disaster on people. They could be seen as objectifications of the prayers by women who are suffering because they cannot become pregnant and will therefore be ridiculed in the community, or by those who are grieving because of the death of a twin and who fear that their surviving child may also die. But even if these figures do not in themselves exercise any power, they may be considered instrumental in obtaining the desired effect. The figures must be seen as part of a larger set of means that women apply (together with the local priests) in order to have their needs and desires heard by the spiritual powers responsible for the fertility of women and matters of life and death of children.

⁸⁰ The typical Ashanti *akuaba* has a cylindrical body with short arms and a flat, but perfectly round head, with finely carved facial traits. The Fanti *akuaba* figure also has the cylindrical body but has an elongated head with rudimentary facial traits. See Falgayrettes-Leveau (2003).

⁸¹ *Akuaba* figures always portray girls due to the matrilineal kinship system among the Akan-speaking peoples, who prefer to give birth to girls than boys.

⁸² See Cole & Ross (1978).

⁸³ Statistics show there are 23 twins in every 1000 births in Western Europe, while there are more than 40 twins in every 1000 births among the Yoruba.

⁸⁴ It is noteworthy, however, that twin figures do not resemble babies. The female figures have the breasts of a mature woman and the male figures have the genitals of an adult man. These unexpected features have been explained as a kind of 'wishful thinking', i.e. that if the deceased child had lived to maturity, s/he would have looked like this figure.

⁸⁵ De Goede (2009); Vogelzang (1994) and Thompson (1976).

Figure 14 A Fanti *akuaba* with an elongated head



Figure 15 A round-headed Ashanti *akuaba*



Figure 16 *Ere ibeji* (twins), Yoruba, Nigeria



Representational objects with power

This category includes objects with power that cannot be considered as objectifications of prayers. They represent a superior power in another world and can be approached only when that power is made 'present' in the human context.

A central notion in Yoruba ontology is *ase*, which is sometimes translated as 'vital energy'. Everybody possesses *ase* but some have more than others. The Yoruba believe that all cosmic forces possess both positive and negative *ase*, i.e. they can be both benevolent and malicious.⁸⁶ The Yoruba have a multitude of spiritual powers (*orisa*) that, they believe, influence their daily lives positively or negatively. It is one's daily concern to remain at peace with the *orisa* and every family and community have shrines in honour of one or more *orisa*. (see Figure 17)

Figure 17 Shrine in Idofin, Igbana in honour of the *Orisa Sango*, Yoruba, Nigeria



Each *orisa* has its own cult, with adepts (organized in societies) and cult objects, periodic festivals, rules and regulations (taboos). Not all cult objects associated with these *orisa* are objects with power.⁸⁷ The *orisa Eshu* is considered by the Yoruba to be at the crossroad between this world and the next.

⁸⁶ Yoruba sayings include: 'Warmth and cold exist simultaneously' and 'Good luck and bad luck walk together'. Man has to find a balance between the two poles and accept that evil elements in life are complementary to good elements (Thompson 1976: 2/2).

⁸⁷ The *Gelede orisa* (with its society of the same name) celebrates womanhood and motherhood. There is increased power (*ase*) on women to have children and guarantee the future of their family. The annual *Gelede* festival consist of two parts: the nightly rituals that increase the *ase* of women, and the daylight festival that honours them with ebullient dances with dancers wearing the famous *Gelede*

The *orisa Ifa* (at the core of the *Ifa* oracle) and the *Eshu* are committed to improving communication between the two worlds but the latter is at the same time the trickster that creates confusion and chaos among humans. He presents adepts with riches as long as they respect *Eshu*. If they fail to do so, he robs them of their possessions. *Eshu* is depicted as a human figure on a stick, covered with strings of cowry shells (as symbols of wealth) and beads. A string of hair is attached to the back of the head and is associated with unbridled sexuality. Carrying an *Eshu* figure around in public is understood to be requesting the *orisa* to provide the adept with riches.⁸⁸ (see Figure 18)

Figure 18 Woman carrying figures of *Orisa Eshu*, Yoruba, Nigeria



masks. The masks, although closely linked to the *Gelede orisa*, are themselves not objects with power. See Figure 51.

⁸⁸ Drewal (1989); Fagg (1982); Phillips (1995); Thompson (1976); Witte (2001) and Willet (2001).

The Yoruba believe that their *ase* can be increased by prayer and sacrifice and by negotiating with the *orisa* that hold the key to the distribution of *ase*. One has, therefore, to be prudent when meeting somebody else whose *ase* could be stronger than one's own and might cause harm. As a result of this apprehension, the virtues of calm (*ifarabele*), respect (*owo*) and patience (*suuru*) are indispensable for a Yoruba to live peacefully. If one is uncertain about which path to follow, a person can consult a *babalawo* (diviner). (see Figure 19)

Figure 19 A *babalawo* consulting the Ifa oracle at Ijebu-Ode in 1982, Yoruba, Nigeria



Protective objects with power

Of all the objects with power in indigenous African religions, this category is the largest. Protective objects with power are bought at a market or made on demand to protect the individual who is going to wear it on his body, such as amulets in leather pouches on a cord with a handwritten text from the Koran. These are to protect a person against any evil that may threaten him/her: the evil eye, disease, sudden death but particularly magic and witchcraft. Other objects with power are made to protect a home against thieves or the evil eye or to protect farmland when crops are ready for harvesting and to ward off thieves. A specific category of such objects with power among the Akan-speaking peoples of Ghana is the *asuman*. These are discussed at length in the next chapter.

Benevolent and harmful powers

One of the characteristics of objects with power in African indigenous religious systems is that they have a double agency: they can be beneficial as well as harmful. This marks a fundamental difference with Christian (and European) philosophy and theology, in which good and evil and God and Satan are diametrically opposed. Across Africa, people believe in power that can be beneficial as well as harmful but (for them) this power emanates from one and the same (spiritual) force.

In the Oku kingdom of western Cameroon, people distinguish between *kefuh emyin* (good medicine) and *kefuh kebei* (dangerous medicine). The latter will cause death, the former ensures good health and fertility for women.⁸⁹

1.5 Plan and structure of this book

This book, as its title suggests, studies the transformation of objects with power *from idol to art*. The use of the term ‘transformation’ does not imply that the objects themselves alter or have been transformed but that missionaries, anthropologists and curators have transformed their views, their understanding and their interpretation of these objects. Hence the sub-title ‘Objects with power: a challenge for missionaries, anthropologists and curators’. These three groups have all encountered these objects in their work and could not avoid them as they will have been part and parcel of their involvement with Africa, its cultures and/or religions. Each of the groups had its own reasons for formulating an opinion about the objects but these opinions have changed over the last 150 years as the Church changed its approach towards African religions, anthropology developed new theories, and museums adopted a different view as to their role in society.

To guide the reader through this maze, I have organized the book into three periods and analyze the different views that each group adopted to face the challenges that African objects with power posed. For the sake of transparency, I have restricted the selection of objects with power to three case studies. Each will be studied in detail in Chapter 2. The following chapters consider the three categories of objects with power from the perspectives adopted by missionaries, anthropologists and curators.

⁸⁹ Kolosz (1986: 233-249).

Selection of the case studies

I have already referred to objects with power from different ethnic groups in Africa. These examples appear to only scratch the surface of a deeply experienced reality in an African culture. I therefore decided to select three case studies in which objects with power are researched and studied from the different perspectives by missionaries, anthropologists and curators. I have selected the *ikenga* of the Ibo in southeast Nigeria, the *minkisi* that can be found in a number of ethnic groups in the Lower Congo region, and the *asuman* of the Ashanti and Fanti (and some related ethnic groups) in Ghana. I have selected these three categories for a reason. The title of this book is *From Idol to Art* and for many, perhaps most, Europeans in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, objects that appeared repulsive to them because of their aggressive and exaggerated appearances and because they were covered with the remnants of sacrifices, such as clotted blood and egg shells, were readily considered idols. They had a strong alienating character and were seen as metaphors of the primitive and idolatrous nature of indigenous African religions. I assumed that it would be hard for missionaries, anthropologists and curators to transform them into respectable entities. This would require a fundamental change in attitude and considerable intellectual effort on the part of the three groups. I will show how, during the three periods of research, missionaries, generally speaking, barely transformed objects with power; that anthropologists transformed them into objects with a valuable meaning; and that curators transformed them into art objects.

An object with power among the Ibo of Nigeria is the *ikenga*. *Ikenga* refers to the personal achievements of a man, originally the beheading of another man and the carrying home of the severed head. *Ikenga* may be considered the objectification of this personal achievement. Once dedicated by the local priest and placed in his personal shrine, it is an object with power and coaches its owner through the hazards of life. It derives its power from *chi*, the life-giving force for the Ibo. I selected the *ikenga* as a case study because the phenomenon (the objects, the social and religious context, the meaning) used to be misunderstood and misrepresented by missionaries and early anthropologists, as well as by the few early collectors who showed an interest in *ikenga*, such as Himmelheber and Kjersmeyer whose work I will discuss in Chapter 4, and the museums that displayed them. Until about 1970, *ikenga* was described as ‘protective *jujus*’, ‘fetish’, ‘small gods’ and ‘god of war and fortune’.

I selected *minkisi* because they were first collected by European merchants and missionaries at the end of the 19th century and were described as ‘terrifying in appearance’, ‘idols’, ‘fetishes’ and a threat to colonial power. Reports lead us to believe that thousands of *minkisi* were burned, destroyed or abducted by Europeans. The emic meaning of *minkisi* has long been misunderstood by Europeans: the *nkisi* figure is basically a ‘container’ in which (or to which) ‘powerful objects’ called *bilongo* (medicines) are attached that have a beneficial or harmful effect and can cure or curse someone.

I selected the category of *asuman*, which are ‘charms’ or ‘amulets’ and, sometimes called ‘protective *jujus*’. They are known throughout Africa under many different names and in various forms but are one that the Ashanti and Fanti call *asuman*. They have not

received much scholarly attention by missionaries and early anthropologists, yet for Africans of all walks of life they have always been a kind of protection against every conceivable form of evil (theft, robbery, the evil eye, disease, jealousy and others).

Studying objects with power is fundamentally a search for the meaning of the objects in their social and religious contexts, as meaning is always attributed to them by people. The meaning of objects with power changes over time, as contexts change and different meanings are attributed to objects depending on the perspectives from which people view them. These considerations led me to organize this book in three periods and in three perspectives. The three periods coincide with the historical developments in Africa over the past 150 years and are of almost equal length. The period from 1850 to 1900 was the pre-colonial period. The gradual ‘penetration’ of Africa by explorers and military expeditions in these years was a prelude to the Conference of Berlin (1884-1885) that marked the formal start of colonialism. Missionaries ventured into the hinterlands of Africa with a divine message of bringing the ‘pagans’ to salvation. Anthropologists were not doing research in Africa but stayed in their academic circles where they developed theories based on the narratives of sailors, merchants and missionaries in different parts of the world, including Africa. In Europe, museums were starting to collect African objects although this was not undertaken by museum staff but depended on the efforts of merchants who had access to village chiefs and purchased objects from them. Objects with power were not being interpreted in their own context in this period but in most cases were judged from a prejudiced, Eurocentric perspective.

The second period from 1900 to 1950 was the heyday of colonialism in Africa. Western institutions, such as government, bureaucracy, the judicial system, education and health care were being introduced. Missionaries were quick to introduce Western Christianity with all its institutions and doctrines, which came to be called *Plantatio Ecclesiae* (the planting of the church). For the first time, anthropologists were embarking on fieldwork and publishing scholarly interpretations of African cultures and religions. Museums of ethnography became involved in expeditions into Africa to assemble consistent collections of African cultures and objects with power were being studied as elements functioning in their own context.

The third period, from 1950 to 2000, was the post-colonial period. Within a relatively short time, most African countries became independent nations and began to search for their own identities. The term ‘post-colonial’ suggests that colonialism belongs to the past but, in practice, this was not the case. Africans as well as their former ‘masters’ had to redefine their mutual relationships, a process that did not always go smoothly. The search for meaning was on with the Catholic Church holding its Second Vatican Council, which had a huge impact on missionaries and local churches in Africa. Anthropologists followed suit and studied cultures in terms of symbols and meaning. Museums of ethnography in the West developed into professional organizations, which had a significant influence on their policies regarding collecting and exhibiting objects, including objects with power.

This study is structured in three periods and in each period, objects with power will be studied from three perspectives: the missionary perspective, the anthropological perspective and the curatorial perspective. The developments of each of the three catego-

ries will be shown throughout the three periods. When I speak of missionaries in this book, I refer to European missionaries from the main Christian churches: the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Methodists, the Presbyterian Church, and others. However, most of the examples I present detail European missionaries in the Roman Catholic Church. I will not always be specific with regard to denomination when I speak of missionaries and in such cases this means that denomination is not relevant in the example under discussion.

Missionaries were the first of the three categories to arrive in Africa. They penetrated into Africa with a purpose: the conversion of pagans and they came to teach, not to learn. This one-liner conceals a deep reality: a basic attitude of ‘we know what is good for you’ by missionaries in their approach to Africans. The conviction that they came as representatives of a powerful Church gave them the perspective from which they functioned. It also gave them a sense of intellectual and moral superiority and the feeling that they were in charge, in power. It seems to me that throughout all three periods they did not essentially change their perspective very much. They continued to teach, ‘plant’ (*plantatio*) the church and convert Africans to a faith that was largely a European concept. In the third period – the period of post-colonialism – their role decreased as the number of African priests and ministers grew to such an extent that the presence of missionaries was no longer required.

Anthropologists did not do fieldwork in Africa during the pre-colonial period but did contribute to the condescending (colonial) attitude that pervaded Europe in the 19th century, by developing theories and concepts that placed Africa low on the ladder of human development. Anthropologists started to undertake fieldwork in Africa in the colonial period. Some of them associated themselves with the colonial governments, others remained independent. And in the post-colonial period, anthropologists began to study African culture ‘from the inside’. This was an altogether new perspective and, by so doing, they contributed substantially to a better understanding of Africa and corrected the negative image that they had helped to create in the 19th century. In recent years, anthropologists and scholars of religion have begun to reassess the materiality of (indigenous) religions and a serious effort has been initiated to restate the (assumedly) religious message of objects with power in rational terms.

Museums of ethnography and their curators were focused entirely on the colonialist agenda during the first two periods and they became the defenders of their nation’s colonial agenda. Since the Enlightenment, museums had acquired a reputation of trustworthiness and objectivity. I will argue that the reputation of ethnographic museums as presenting an objective, detached view of reality, i.e. the cultures of Africa, has not always been deserved. Curators of ethnographic museums engaged in a discourse with their visitors that created (or reproduced) a social reality among their visitors and described Africa as primitive and superstitious. It was not until the third period that these museums (coerced by the political developments in Africa itself) started to reflect on their historically grown position in European societies and on their *raison d’être*. Curators started to question whether there was a future for their museums. Some critical museologists believe that there is no future for them unless they fundamentally change their

course. Has this changing attitude contributed to a better understanding of objects with power in indigenous African religions?

Ikenga, Minkisi and Asuman

2.1 Ikenga

2.1.1 *Ikenga objects*

At least three ethnic groups in southeastern Nigeria have an object with power, the names of which have been translated into ‘the power of the right arm’ or ‘the power of the right hand’. The Ibo speak of *ikenga*, the Igala of *ikega* and the Bini of *ikegobo*. I restrict my research in this section to the *ikenga* of the Ibo.¹ (see Figure 20)

Ikenga objects can be distinguished as follows: (i) stones or iron objects (but very little information is available); (ii) stools with an indication of horns, representing *ikenga* (the only clear example of this is the stool that Talbot² describes as belonging to Chief Okku of Idu and the set of stools in the British Museum but these lack the horns that are distinctly carved on the seat of this stool); (iii) small, often crudely carved statuettes about four inches tall and in what Boston calls a chipped style³ (see Figure 21); (iv) smoothly carved and usually brightly painted, large statuettes made of softer wood and richly embellished (see Figure 22); and (v) the so-called *uvo* that are sometimes called altars⁴ and are placed in front of the main statuette and probably considered part of the same *ikenga*.

¹ Much of the information in this thesis on *ikenga* has been taken from my unpublished MLitt. thesis (1975) entitled ‘The Cult of the Right Hand in S.E. Nigeria’ that I wrote while at the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford.

² Talbot (1930: 98).

³ Boston (1977).

⁴ Leuzinger (1971; 187).

Figure 20 Map of southern Nigeria showing the areas where the Igbo, Yoruba and other ethnic groups live



Figure 21 *Ikenga* in the so-called chipped style, Ibo, Nigeria



Figure 22 *Ikenga* with a machete and a head, Ibo, Nigeria



Ikenga can be seen as an objectification of personal success, of a man's⁵ personal achievement in headhunting, business or farming that was transformed into an *ikenga* object. It is not surprising to find stools as objects representing *ikenga* as the stool (symbol of authority) is intimately connected with competition for power in the group and becomes an expression of achievement and social prestige. It features strongly in the taking of titles and, as such, is the hallmark of authority. The stool is the seat of the elders and is symbolic of their status. The best known and probably most common type of *ikenga* depicts a male figure seated on a stool, with two horns protruding from his head, holding a machete in his right hand and a severed head in his left. (see Figure 23; see also Figure 22) When museums in Europe display *ikenga*, they are mostly statuettes of this type. *Ikenga* that feature in rites of tioletaking, show objects related to the association. (see Figure 24) This gaudily painted figure is unusual as it is wearing a costume

⁵ In the last few decades, Ibo women have also been allowed to own *ikenga* objects.

for a masquerade and the mask resembles an *agbogho mmwo* or a maiden spirit mask (see Figures 78 a and b). The figure's genitals are tied to its body.

Figure 23 *Ikenga* with a machete and a severed head: the objectification of a man's success as a manhunter



Figure 24 *Ikenga* holding a machete in its right hand and a non-descript object in the left



The inventiveness of Ibo carvers shows in the attributes to *ikenga* statues that betray the impact of colonial rule. Some *ikengas* that were carved in colonial times depict a male holding an umbrella and wearing a typical colonial sun helmet instead of horns.⁶

⁶ A common Ibo saying was that 'all *ikengas* have horns' but when I visited the Enugu Museum in 1977, I saw *ikenga* statues wearing hats instead of the usual horns. When I asked an elderly Ibo man

(see Figure 91) The question is whether statues that display a machete and a severed head date back to pre-colonial days or to the time before the colonial administration outlawed the practice of headhunting, which accounts for depictions of the triumphant headhunter returning home with a severed head. It is doubtful if the practice of headhunting actually existed as it is narrated because if a man from another ethnic group was killed for every Ibo male, this would have had strong demographic implications.

Although there are standard patterns for each of the categories in which *ikenga* statuettes can be grouped, the details vary. Some *ikenga* statues show a highly elaborate superstructure with complex scenes featuring snakes, birds, horses, horns of different animals, soldiers, policemen and other indefinable elements.⁷

2.1.2 *The social context*

The first time in a man's life when the *ikenga* plays a role is when he attains manhood. When the community considers a young man to be sufficiently mature, he is advised to 'set up a home' and get married, but being allowed to do this means that his boyhood is over and the boy-become-man is given responsibility and a task. It is the dream of every Ibo man to be the master of his own house with a shrine, where he can receive his friends and rally support for political activities. In short, this is the place where he can show he is a respectable and influential member of the community.⁸ Yet before he effectively 'set up home' in the past, he would have had to kill somebody and decapitate him, bring the severed head home and show it to the elders and the community.⁹ This headhunting exercise could be undertaken during a war between two villages or in a private raid. In the latter case, the young man would sneak out of his village at night in search of another man (who had to be an adult from another village and visibly strong). If the young man did not return to his village, it meant that the other man had got the better of him. The victorious warrior would return to his village carrying the severed head in his left hand and the machete with which he had decapitated the other man in his right hand.¹⁰

who was showing me around about this, he replied: 'Indeed, Sir, all *ikengas* have horns. But here you cannot see them, as they are hidden under their hats'.

⁷ Fagg (1973: 151-168).

⁸ The novelist John Munonye (1969: 34) writes that setting up house 'symbolizes the family, the homestead and continuation of the lineage, as well as all that was best in these'.

⁹ It is not clear if this tradition was actually practised in the past or was a constructed tradition. Similar ones are said to have existed elsewhere in Africa. In Winneba (Ghana) during the annual Deerhunt Festival, a deer has to be caught by hand. Tradition says that a member of the royal family had to be killed but this was changed into a leopard that was to be caught bare-handed. As this resulted in too many casualties, it was decided to catch a deer bare-handed instead.

¹⁰ 'What more sacred for primitive man than war or hunt! These entail the possession of special powers and a state of sanctity that is difficult to acquire and still more difficult to preserve. The weapon itself is a sacred thing, endowed with a power which alone makes a blow directed at the enemy effective. Is it possible to entrust something so precious to the left hand?' Hertz (1960: 108). This explains why *ikenga* is also called the 'the power of the right hand'.

His return signalled the beginning of several rites in the community and in the life of the young man-become-adult.¹¹

Successful headhunting showers social prestige on the killer and is manifested by a Bini song that goes as follows 'I have cut down a man for my hand / a brave man that does not kill / that is a disgrace'.¹² When a young man had obtained the head of an enemy in war, he would ask an old head-getter to establish an *ikenga* for him. This man would not necessarily carve the statue himself but would probably commission it from an experienced wood carver. If the statue was to be a full-fledged *ikenga* figure, it would show a seated male figure wearing a short warrior skirt (with his genitals visible), holding a machete in his right hand and the severed head in the left. The figure was the objectification of the headhunter's personal achievement. Once completed, the paterfamilias or a *dibia* (diviner) would then pray to the freshly carved figure, sacrifice a cock on the *ikenga* (the blood and feathers would stick to the statue) and present it to the successful headhunter who would put it in his shrine. Once the *ikenga* had been placed in its owner's shrine, the man would not embark on any headhunting expeditions or journeys without first consulting his 'protective deity' (i.e. his *ikenga*) as it was called by early ethnographers.¹³

When the colonial administration started to suppress headhunting practices, the Ibo responded in an unprecedentedly creative manner. Not only did they gradually abandon their headhunting traditions but they designed new canons for their *ikenga* statuettes. Instead of the machete and the severed head, the new *ikengas* were endowed with the symbols of achievement in a colonial setting. The young men now attained manhood by obtaining a school-leaving diploma and getting a position in the colonial administration. 'It was in Ibo land that an insatiable desire for education rose to fever pitch,'¹⁴ With their diplomas, the younger generation gained access to 'white jobs' in government offices and the new symbols of achievement were typically the British sun helmet and umbrella and other imported or colonial items. The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has a fine selection of the latter. The Nimo figure shown in Figure 91 was collected by G.I. Jones in 1937 (Reg. 1938.15.44. Height 59.5 cm) in Awka Division. Painted black, pink and yellow, it is a seated male figure in warrior skirt (with his genitals visible) holding an umbrella and a fan-like object with a platform on which four men are shown (white men and Africans, maybe policemen?) and a horse-like animal.

The second group of activities in which *ikenga* plays a part is in title-taking and title societies. Ibo traditional society had a segmentary structure in which the men in a community are organized into so-called title societies. Title holders did not enjoy an institutionalized authority or power and their titles were not hereditary. Each title was competed for by several members of the community. Those with financial means, the power of persuasion and political support from other community members were able to turn the

¹¹ It should be noted that the methods of headhunting described here belong to the past and the colonial administration suppressed these practices forcefully in the 1930s. Warriors and headhunters enjoyed unmatched social prestige in Ibo society and were the original titleholders. The suppression of these practices by the Administration therefore shook Ibo cultural identity.

¹² Bradbury (1961: 135).

¹³ Thomas (1913: 82) and Henderson (1972: 395).

¹⁴ Ayandele (1966: 56)

power game into personal success. In other words, an ambitious candidate had to acquire the indispensable support of the collectivity to gain the status that gave him authority.

Today, personal achievement is measured differently by the community. It is no longer the headhunter but the successful businessman or farmer that is capable of planning, investing and saving, i.e. of making money, who is admired for his personal accomplishments. Title taking is thus an expression of personal achievement. The *ikenga* and other emblems that belong to the title are proof of the individuality of the effort.

The third and last time at which *ikenga* plays a part is during its owner's funeral. Death means the end of a person as an individual. For the Ibo he may, in due course, be reborn but with a different *chi*, i.e. a different personality and individuality. As *Ikenga* objects are objectifications of a man's individual achievements and a projection of his individuality, these objects are discarded. Discarding a man's *ikenga* in effect shows the community that the end of an individual is definite and separation is final. At the end of the funeral ceremony, the *ikenga* is usually destroyed and abandoned. According to Basden,¹⁵ the *ikenga* is not destroyed but handed to the eldest son at Onitsha.

2.1.3 *The religious context*

The consecration of the *ikenga* and the erection of a shrine in which the *ikenga* is placed are commemorative acts. They transform the hut into a sacred place – an *obi* – and the young man into the head of the household. The ceremony transformed 'the uncanny looking icon into an awe inspiring object of worship'.¹⁶ The *ikenga* is no longer a piece of wood but an object in its owner's personal shrine where he keeps his sacred objects. Early ethnographers described the *ikenga* in a shrine as a ritual object, a spiritual force and a vehicle of communication with the supernatural world: a 'small god'.¹⁷

A man may own more than one *ikenga* figure in his lifetime. He may commission a new figure to mark every major achievement and show the emblems that go with the achievement, for example, on the occasion of title taking. The long process of title taking starts with a solemn ritual when the candidate's carved emblems (statuettes, staffs of office), his *chi* (his personal deity) and his *ikenga* are taken into his house where they constitute his shrine and are consecrated by the *okpala* (priest). The candidate will then be ordained by an *okpala* (a local priest) in this shrine as part of the ceremony of title taking. Peace offerings are made by the family's priests on the ordinand's behalf. The candidate pays the fees and, on the day of ordination, all the members of the title society assemble at the *obi* of the chief priest of the candidate's family. Kola nuts are shared by all those present, drinks are served, the candidate is given a new title (*mkpalo*) and he performs his first religious service, i.e. pouring libation on his *ikenga* and the other emblems.

Sometime after this ceremony, there is a more public ritual when the newly ordained priest, dressed all in white, has his body rubbed with white chalk as a symbol of purity.

¹⁵ Basden (1938; 1966: 270).

¹⁶ Okorocho (1987: 195).

¹⁷ Thomas (1913); Basden (1921); Basden (1938) and Talbot (1926: Vol. II: 75).

Eagle feathers are put in his hair and he is presented with an ivory trumpet and a pair of staffs of office. These emblems may then appear in a newly commissioned *ikenga* statuette.

When at home in his shrine praying to his *ikenga*, the owner requests fertility for his animals, success in hunting and fertility among his wives. *Ikenga* is clearly addressed as the source of profit. In other words, *ikenga* is considered an object with power. The man will not commence any major undertaking until he has consulted his *ikenga* and is sure that his *ikenga* will guarantee success.

2.1.4 *Attributing meaning to Ikenga*

The early ethnographers and missionaries who wrote about *Ikenga* agreed that the genius of achievement and drive is given a symbolic representation in the figure and a tangible form. A successful headhunt is seen as the start of a man's career as the father of a family, the owner of an *obi*, a participant in the political affairs of the community and, eventually, a respectable title holder. Reports on *ikenga* say that it features on different occasions in life and these fall into three categories: those connected with head-hunting rituals; with title taking; and with funeral rites. At a man's funeral ceremonies, his *ikenga* is ritually destroyed and the figure is sometimes handed over to the man's son after a piece of the base is cut off, as a symbolic act of destroying the figure. The ritual disposal of the *ikenga* after a man's death is indicative of the fact that *ikenga* is personal and an expression or objectification of a man's individuality.¹⁸

Although early ethnographers acknowledged the personal character of *Ikenga*, they did not fully grasp the impact of the emphasis on individuality in Ibo culture. British colonial officers (primed by British ethnographers) were unwilling or even incapable of accepting that Ibo society had no central authority. The Ibo had no chiefs so the Administration decided to install so-called warrant chiefs. In a similar way, missionaries were unwilling or incapable of accepting that the Ibo did not have a central authority in religious matters either, i.e. the Ibo did not know of a Supreme God. When missionaries searched for an entry into the Ibo religious world to introduce the Christian concept of Supreme God, they found the concept of *Chi* and identified it as being equivalent to the Christian concept of God.¹⁹

If we apply critical discourse analysis, it can be seen that missionaries and early ethnographers engaged in a discourse and created a social reality that did not coincide with the actual reality. To the Ibo, *Chi* is not a Supreme God or even a god but 'a life essence attributed to the entire universe'.²⁰ Every human being has his/her *chi* and it is *chi* that constitutes interdependence between human beings, ancestors, age-mates and married people. Animals and inanimate objects have their own *chi*.

After the early missionaries appropriated the Ibo concept of *Chi* and equated it with the Christian concept of God, the next step was to assume that the Ibo acknowledged the existence of a pantheon in which the many 'small gods' could find a niche. In this

¹⁸ Chukwukere (1971: 106-112; 1972: 109-117).

¹⁹ Talbot (1926: 130); Smith (1929) and Meek (1937).

²⁰ Henderson (1972: 107-108).

context, missionaries and ethnographers appropriated the concept of *ikenga* as a personal ‘small god’, and which Smith described as a ‘god of strength and good luck’.²¹

Almost all the early sources on the Ibo failed to point out that the Ibo had no supreme God, nor a pantheon, in the same way as they also opposed any form of central authority. I will argue that *ikenga* not only was not a ‘small god’ but it does not need any supernatural backing to be efficacious as an object with power: *ikenga* must be seen as an agent.²²

This conclusion is based on two basic concepts in Ibo society: individuality and personal power. ‘Underlying Igbo social organization is an individualistic principle, which is, in fact, a pervasive trait in Igbo culture. This principle is clearly institutionalized in the concept of *chi* or “personal god” [*sic!*], which is a pronounced aspect of Igbo religion.’²³ A man’s first major personal achievement used to be his headhunting action. *Ikenga*’s connection with headhunting has been acknowledged by many ethnographers.²⁴ Basden quotes special titles on *ikenga*, such as *owa-ota* (he who splits the shield of the enemy) and *owa-ofia* (the great hunter). The link with the ancestors is indicated not only by Talbot but also by Smith and Nsugbe.²⁵

Central in Igbo religion and culture is the concept of *ike*, which can be translated as ‘power’ or ‘something’ that gives a person the power to achieve something in life such as success, money or a career. The etymology of the word *ikenga* is probably *ike* (power) and *nga* (to drive or push towards success). *Ikenga* has that ‘something special’ and can give it to its owner provided that s/he respects the *ikenga*, offers sacrifices and upholds the taboos of his/her *ikenga*.²⁶

Two elements in Ibo culture should be noted. There is that ‘something special’ that gives power. This can be one or more of the *chi* objects or *ikenga*. However this power is not given to the owner of the *ikenga* unconditionally. The relationship between a person and his/her *ikenga* is one of reciprocity. Early ethnographers described how a *chi* or an *ikenga* is blamed by owners if things do not go well and how *chi* and *ikenga* are placated to restore a distorted relationship. These ethnographers interpreted such events as resulting from the workings of a ‘small god’. I will argue that they can be explained by the theory of agency.

In this context, the social organization and religion of the Ibo can be compared to ‘a chess board of manipulatory relationships where men and spirits interact on a theoretically equal basis, each side theoretically motivated by intense self interest’.²⁷ But although *chi* and the owner can manipulate each other, the Igbo believe that it is they who strike the tune and expect their *chi* to keep time.²⁸ If the latter fails, inadvertently or otherwise, the Igbo believe they can alter the rhythm by sacrifices or other prescribed

²¹ Smith (1929) unpublished thesis.

²² See Chapter 4.2.

²³ Chukwukere (1971).

²⁴ Schön & Crowther (1842); Basden (1921: 219); Nzimiro (1972: 91) and others.

²⁵ Smith (1929: 54); Nsugbe (1974: 106)

²⁶ Okorocho (1987: 198).

²⁷ Chukwukere (1971: 110).

²⁸ The word ‘manipulate’ may sound rather cynical. When I discussed the expression with the author, he said he liked the word as it contained the Latin word ‘*manus*’ (hand), which he considered appropriate in the Ibo context.

forms of mollifications depending on the advice or injunctions of diviners or oracles. *Ikenga* is an object of power: it guides a man through life and is the spiritual force behind his achievements in both his private life (family, children) and his public life (title taking, career, financial success). *Ikenga* is the part of a man's *chi* that is responsible for his accomplishments.

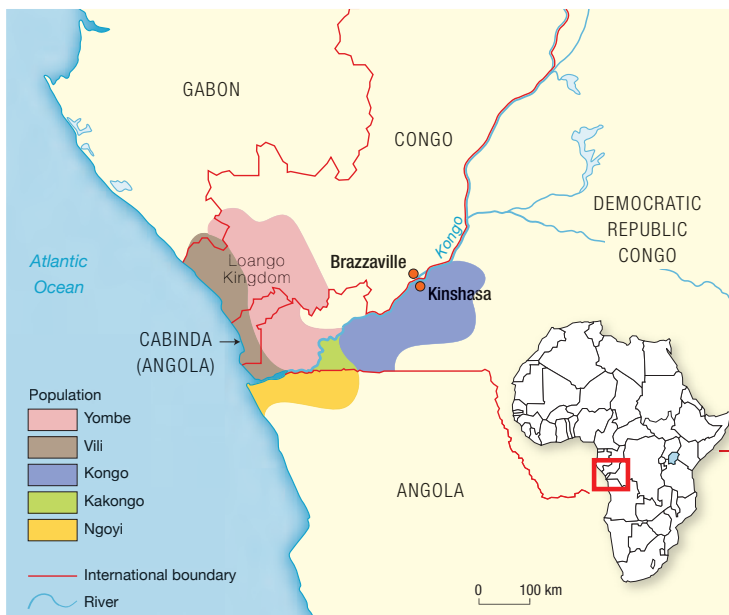
2.2 Minkisi

2.2.1 *Minkisi* objects

A number of ethnic groups in the Republic of Congo, Cabinda, Gabon and Congo Brazzaville have objects with power that they call *minkisi* (sing.: *nkisi*). The best known are the Kongo, Vili, Yombe and Songye.²⁹ (see Figure 25)

Minkisi appear in two different forms: firstly as non-descript objects as composites consisting of a number of different objects (see Figure 26) and secondly as wooden figures that were carved into effigies of human beings or animals (mostly dogs) and into which nails and other pieces of iron have been driven. (see Figures 27 and 28)

Figure 25 Map of Lower Congo showing where the Yombe, Vili, and other ethnic groups live



²⁹ Although I speak of *minkisi* in the present tense, I am aware that the impressive nail statues (*minkisi nkonde*) and other *minkisi* known from museums are no longer used in indigenous religious ceremonies in Congo itself. Yet the concept of *minkisi* remains and takes such forms as little plastic packets that are worn discreetly, ballpoint pens medicated to help boys pass school exams and special sunglasses that taxi drivers hope will protect them from accidents (MacGaffey 1993: 29).

Figure 26 *Nkisi* bag with *bilongo*,
Yombe, Congo



Figure 27 *Nkisi mungundu*, Yombe,
Congo



Figure 28 *Nkisi mawenze*, Yombe, Congo



Minkisi are manmade objects and are said to be imbued with a life force, a ‘spirit’ from the world of the dead. They are called upon to produce certain effects, such as to

cure a disease, inflict disease, cause evil to someone else or take revenge. They are said not to be able to speak or act on their own account, yet they possess a will of their own. Father Bittremieux, a Belgian missionary in Congo in the early years of the 20th century, studied *minkisi*, collecting them for the university museum in Louvain. (see Figure 29)

Figure 29 Father Leo Bittremieux with *nkisi*



Many of the captions in the catalogue that accompanied a major exhibition of these objects held at the University Museum, Louvain, in 2010, quote Bittremieux's original comments.³⁰ The missionary relates the functional qualities of each *minkisi*. For example, he describes one figure, called *pfula nkombe*, as 'a powerful *nduda* or *ndoki* – hunter, who (according to Father Bittremieux's informants) at least in the process of its consecration has required several human lives' (Cat. 9) (see Figure 30)

Figure 30 Nkisi pfula nkomba



Figure 31 Nkisi mabiala ma ndembe



A tall figure, called *mabiala ma ndembe*, was described by Bittremieux as belonging to the family of the *minkondi* and was called a *fétiche vengeur* from the region of Loango. It was used 'against a swollen stomach and swollen feet; especially for children with

³⁰ Tollebeek 2010.

a swollen belly due to eating sand' (C. 11) (see Figure 31). The figure of a dog, *semba di puva*, covered with nails carries Bittrimeux's caption: 'If a dog sniffs at this figure, it will die'; and the same object is used to cure chest pains (C. 14). Another figure of a dog, *mawenze*, was said to cause sleeping sickness and a loss of hearing.(C. 17)); a basket with zoomorphic traits, *mambinda* or *kiabala* was able to inflict abscesses as well as punish thieves (C. 18). And a human figure, partly hidden in a raffia basket or *phodi dit vola*, was said by Bittremieux to be able 'to retrieve, to suck objects from someone's body' (C. 21). (see Figure 32).

Figure 32 Phodi dit vola



Minkisi are believed to be able to cause any desired effects in a mysterious manner. Human beings are dependent on these *minkisi* for many aspects of their lives.³¹ MacGaffey goes into great detail when he describes the different objects that are grouped together as *minkisi*. A *nkisi* consists of a container (*nitu*), which could be a calabash, a bag, a box made out of bark, a pot, a shell or a wooden figure. In addition, a *nkisi* contains *bilongo*, which is sometimes translated as 'medicines'. Without *bilongo* there is no *nkisi*. The *bilongo* in a *nkisi* is chosen for different reasons. The Kongo explain the se-

³¹ MacGaffey (1990: 45).

lection through the etymology of the names of the medicines. If a *nkisi* contains *luyala* (a fruit), they believe it will deter (*yala*) harmful witches; *luhamba* (chalk or white clay) will brighten the eyes of the *nkisi*, while *kala zima* (charcoal) will defeat (*zima*) people with evil intentions and *nkandika* (a red kernel) will block (*kandika*) the path of witches. MacGaffey describes some 45 different *minkisi*, adding the comments that the Kongo informants gave Rev. Laman, a Methodist missionary in the (then) Belgian Congo when he was collecting the objects at the beginning of the 20th century.

Classifications

Classifying *minkisi* is not an easy exercise because the Kongo themselves have never paid much attention to classifications of their many objects with power. Not only have they used different names for these objects but they also applied the same names to *minkisi* that were different in form and function.³²

One classification system distinguishes *minkisi* according to the presumed origins of the life-giving spirits: water, air or earth. Each of these three elements can be divided into two further categories: *minkisi* from above (sky, heavenly waters) and *minkisi* from below (earth, earthly waters). Dupré, who drew up this classification scheme, asserts that the powers from above are generally masculine and destructive, and *minkisi* from below are feminine and productive. The classification deals with those *minkisi* in which the *bisimbi* (local spirits and nature spirits) are incorporated and excludes those *minkisi* that are related to the spirits of the ancestors and evil spirits.³³ This demonstrates the complexity of classifying objects with power.

A different classification was construed by MacGaffey³⁴ who distinguishes and classifies *minkisi* according to their roles or functions in society: divination, healing, wealth and warfare. The *minkisi* that are connected with divination are considered to be the most important instruments in tracing and identifying witches, thieves and adulterers. They are viewed as aggressive and authoritarian. As witches and adulterers and at times also thieves are usually found among one's kin, it is believed that these *minkisi* are also imbued with ancestral spirits (*minkuyu*, *bakulu*) that give them additional power and thus evoke extra fear among suspects.

Minkisi, which are associated with healing, are viewed on the other hand as caring and feminine. Said to be inhabited by water spirits, they are consulted in particular by men and women with problems related to fertility and virility. Like many spirits in indigenous African religions, they have an ambivalent nature: they are believed to heal the sick but are also able to cause a person to be possessed by a demon. 'They can be both benevolent and evil; they can attack and defend, they can threaten and acquiesce.'³⁵

Yet another classification was made by Maes,³⁶ who differentiates between *minkisi na moganga* (*minkisi* for healing diseases), *minkisi mpezo* (*minkisi* that cause diseases), *minkisi mbula* (*minkisi* that protect chiefs against witchcraft) and *minkisi nkonde* (pow-

³² Hoogma (1997: 36).

³³ Hoogma (1997: 36).

³⁴ MacGaffey (1991: 6).

³⁵ Bittremieux (1922-1927: 502).

³⁶ Maes (1935).

ers that can cause serious diseases and even death in persons suspected of witchcraft and other crimes and are the so-called nail fetishes). Each category is described briefly below.

Minkisi Na Moganga

This category consists of small objects (the largest is about 20 cm tall), sometimes with a human figure as the centrepiece and often made up of natural materials (calabashes, shells, fibres). According to Maes, these *minkisi na moganga* are owned by private individuals and are placed in their homes or on their farms to protect their property and crops against theft. Certain of these objects may be worn on the body for protection and men and women have their own objects with power. Men call on these *minkisi* to ensure successful hunting and trading activities, while women consult them for fertility, good health, safe childbirth and when looking for a husband. The minor *nkisi* are cheap, are bought at a market or from someone who makes them and do not require a *nganga* or elaborate rituals. Lutete of Lolo, one of Laman's informants, wrote about a *nkisi*: called *Lubangala* that is currently in the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm: 'I paid 50 cents for this. Dig a hole in the ground, put in white clay, the seed pot *kyala mooko*, and the horn of *nsuma* antelope. It can cure eye troubles.'³⁷

According to some researchers,³⁸ one category of *minkisi na moganga*, depicting a woman (mother) with child, are considered fertility statues or ancestor figures (see Figure 33).

Figure 33 Mother with a child, *Phemba*



³⁷ MacGaffey (1991: 49).

³⁸ Maes (1939); Roosens (1965) and Weyns (1946).

These objects are called *minkisi na moganga phemba* (*mpemba*). The word *phemba* (or *mpemba*) means both the white clay (which is a common element in *minkisi* objects) and the female ancestor who is revered for the many children she has had. The word also refers to the clan mother who brokers peace in her family. However, a distinction may have to be made: there are objects that depict a mother with a child (called *maternité* or ‘ancestor figure’ in the literature) but they cannot be considered *minkisi* in the strict sense of the word. They lack the attributes that usually adorn *minkisi* figures. Yet another account is given by MacGaffey.³⁹ According to him, a *nkisi* was hardly ever a single object but consisted of a number of objects, such as ‘a bag of medicines, a number of amulets and various other pieces of the *nganga*’s equipment’. But what dominated the constellation were two statues that formed a pair: one male and one female.⁴⁰ Makundu, another of Laman’s informants, wrote: ‘The powers of the male are more vigorous, but the female softens them. If they were two males, many houses would be burned by the storm’.⁴¹ This category adds to the complexity of *minkisi* classification.

Minkisi Nkondi

The term *nkondi* means hunter (*konda*: to hunt). It is said that these *minkisi* hunt witches, thieves, adulterers and other criminals at night. *Minkisi nkondi* are usually tall figures (between 60 and 120 cm), with a terrifying posture, aggressive looks, a raised fist and bodies full of nails and iron blades. The figures are owned by *banganga* and consulted by villagers who find themselves involved in a social conflict. Someone who is worried that he may be a victim of witchcraft, who has been robbed or whose partner has become a victim of adultery will seek help from a *nganga*. During a ritual consultation, he will ask the *nganga* to strike a nail into the *nkisi* figure that, in turn, will hunt down the criminal and cause him harm or even death.⁴² These *minkisi nkonde* were politically effective instruments that helped the people of the Loango coast to resist the European takeover of trade in the early years of the 20th century. Government officials and missionaries agreed that these ‘fetishes’ were better destroyed if they wanted to succeed in their work. ‘Missionaries burned them or carried them off as evidence of a paganism destroyed; military commanders captured them because they constituted elements of an opposing political force.’⁴³

The creation of such important *minkisi* was an expensive affair. It required not only the purchase of the object, carved by an expert, but also its initiation by the *nganga* who would be the owner of the figure and the one that gave it its power. The initiation required a time of seclusion by the apprentice *nganga* (sometimes accompanied by his wife) when he was put in touch with the powers of the ancestors from who all *minkisi*

³⁹ MacGaffey (1993: 35).

⁴⁰ Only the taller, more aggressive male statues are usually found in museum collections. Its female partner is often missing.

⁴¹ Laman (*Cahier* 258) in MacGaffey (1993: 36).

⁴² Maes (1935: 17).

⁴³ MacGaffey (1993: 33).

were derived and he learned the songs, prayers and the rules of ritual conduct of the *nkisi* he was acquiring.⁴⁴

Some of the tall (male) *Nkonde* figures were carved with (very) large genitals. For an adult to show his genitals is considered insulting so the genitals of these figures should always be covered. However, a *nganga* may decide to expose a figure's genitals to make a statement, enhance the dramatic effect of the ritual and control his audience.⁴⁵

Minkisi mpezo

The word *mpezo* refers to the whitewash with which the containers for medicine (*bilongo*) are covered. These objects are not called upon to cause someone's death but rather to cause the other to fall ill and suffer great pain.⁴⁶ What is typical for *minkisi nganga mpezo* is the cotton fillet around the head into which feathers are stuck, probably as a reference to the headdress that is worn by a *nganga* during ritual ceremonies.

Minkisi Mbula or Nduda

The main responsibility of these objects with power is to protect their owners – usually powerful persons such as chiefs and elders – against evil people.⁴⁷ *Minkisi mbula* are depicted with guns or attributes that resemble them.

The constituting element or attribute of these and other *minkisi* from Lower Congo is the container with the *bilongo* (medicines), that in many cases is covered with a glass mirror. The fact that glass was used gives rise to the idea of transparency. Indeed, it is said that the *nganga* can look through the glass and identify ('see') the evil persons (witches) that are a menace to the client.⁴⁸ A different explanation was given in 1907:⁴⁹ when a person with evil intentions approaches the *nkisi* and sees his face reflected in the mirror, he will be afraid and run away. This version is still given to anyone who asks about the mirror today.

2.2.2 *The social context*

For the BaKongo, a *nkisi* is an object with power or, as MacGaffey describes it, 'a personalised force from the invisible land of the dead. This force has chosen, or been induced, to submit itself to some degree of human control effected through ritual performances.'⁵⁰ *Minkisi* play an important role in the community. At an individual, more personal level, it is the smaller *minkisi* that are worn by the owner and serve him/her in

⁴⁴ Initiation was explained as being a stay in the land of the dead, which was reached by plunging under the surface of a deep pool in a remote part of the forest. Nsemi Isaki commented on this explanation as follows: 'The priests who do this, do not really travel under water, only their *minkisi* do that' (*Cahier* 39 in MacGaffey 1993: 55).

⁴⁵ MacGaffey (1993: 84).

⁴⁶ Maes (1935: 22).

⁴⁷ Maes (1935: 31-32).

⁴⁸ This interpretation was given to me when I visited the Bafut Museum in Cameroon in November 2009 where a *nkisi nkondi* was on display.

⁴⁹ Pechuel-Loësche (1907: 366).

⁵⁰ MacGaffey (1991: 4).

their daily routine. When consulted privately by a *nganga* at the request of an individual, small *minkisi* are used to ensure the client's wellbeing but they can also be called upon to punish someone who has inflicted harm on a client. The larger *minkisi* feature in a social context, although always with a religious foundation. They serve different purposes. For example in one case, where two clans or factions in a community or even two villages are embroiled in a conflict, the *minkisi nkonde* are called upon in a public ceremony. The figure is put in a central position between the warring parties and acts as a mediator in the conflict. The special responsibility that is ascribed to these *minkisi* is the ratification and enforcement of deals, conventions or pacts between two communities (villages) or families.⁵¹

When the dispute has been solved through (elaborate) negotiations and the parties are on speaking terms again, each party will drive a nail into the *nkisi nkonde*. The nail represents the deal that is agreed by the two factions.⁵² It is also the symbol that generates revenge if one faction breaks the deal. The *nkonde* figure will then be placed spatially between the two factions or villages, for instance along the footpath between the villages, for everyone to see and to acknowledge the truce that has been agreed on. If one of the parties breaks the agreement, it is felt that the party has sworn a 'false' oath. The punishment, meted out by the *nkonde*, can be disease or even death.

Minkisi are looked up to in awe by all those who attribute specific significance and power for the wellbeing of the individual and the community to them. Their religious and social authority is generally held in high esteem. It should be noted though that they do not represent an eternal truth or infallibility. However great their impact on a local community may be, *minkisi* are not unimpeachable and can lose their authority and, consequently, their significance and power.

When a *nkisi* gets old, its wood may deteriorate and everyone accepts that a moment will come when it will no longer be effective and will have to be discarded and replaced by a new object. If its physical condition has deteriorated to the point where the original can hardly be recognized or the *bilongo* are falling apart, it is time for the *nkisi* to be abandoned and replaced. And when the *nganga*, who was the creator of a particular *nkisi* and was responsible for it dies, the object of power may lose some or all of its effectiveness.⁵³ If devotees conclude that their *minkisi* have become ineffective because they failed to trace wanted criminals or to cure certain diseases of people who took recourse to this particular *nkisi*, they will not hesitate to dispose of them.

African societies have in the past gone through periods of cultural and religious rise and decline. Although this has occurred in many other places, such periods have only been recorded in a few regions in Africa. This is the case regarding the many *nkisi* cults in Congo (see Chapter 4). Religious practices in the Congo region have been subjected to periodic suppression by their own leaders or by religious movements that disagreed with 'pagan practices'. This phenomenon may be considered an attempt at renewal and

⁵¹ Thompson (1986: 1-2).

⁵² There has been speculation about the possible origins of the practice of driving nails into a wooden figure. It has been suggested that it came from Portuguese missionaries who brought crucifixes with them on which the body of Christ was pierced with nails. Another explanation was given by Bassani (1977: 36), that Europeans used to pierce portraits of enemies to cause their illness or death.

⁵³ Mack in Phillips (1995: 283).

has occurred throughout history. It has to be understood as people destroying their religious paraphernalia to recreate intangible truths behind the symbols that are no longer meaningful. In this case it was the *minkisi* that were destroyed so they could be replaced by new religious symbols.

It cannot be concluded that people in Congo would have abandoned their religious practices light-heartedly. When Portuguese missionaries in Congo in the 16th century demanded that their converts abandoned their names in lieu of Christian names (i.e. Portuguese names), they did not object. When the missionaries demanded, however, that they divorce their wives (except for the first one) to conform with the laws of the Catholic Church and their *minkisi*, the converts protested vehemently.⁵⁴ In other words, as long as *minkisi* were held in high esteem because of their effectiveness, the community would protect them.

Janzen, who researched these historical developments, concluded that the BaKongo have a remarkable facility for adaptation, partial obliteration of their tradition and the substitution of a new feature that says the same thing but in another way. One could say that ‘religious renewal’ is one of the traditional options available to the Kongo, so much so that Kongo cultural history can be seen as an institution that deals with religious renewal.⁵⁵

2.2.3 *The religious context*

The Bakongo distinguish between the world of the dead and that of the living and communication between these two worlds does not come easily. They recognize different groups of intermediaries, each of which is a go-between between one category of beings in the world of the dead and another in this world. This is shown in the following scheme of relationships:⁵⁶

	The dead	Intermediaries	The living
Public	ancestors	chiefs, elders	Lineages
Private	spirits	witches	Victims
Public	<i>Basimbi</i>	diviners	local communities
Private	<i>Bakisi</i>	<i>Banganga</i>	Clients

Chiefs and elders are intermediaries between the matrilineal ancestors and living lineages. The ancestors bestowed exceptional powers on the chiefs, and witches (who are always human beings) are the intermediaries between spirits, who plan to harm humans, and their victims. They are accused of using secret powers from evil spirits for personal advantage at the expense of others in the community. Their activities cause others to experience misfortune, disease and death. Diviners are seen as public figures and intermediaries between the local community and the spirits (*basimbi*), which are different

⁵⁴ Axelson (1970: 80).

⁵⁵ Janzen (1977: 69).

⁵⁶ Taken from MacGaffey (1999: 59).

from the ancestors. These spirits control local circumstances, such as epidemics, rain-fall, crops and women. *Banganga* act as intermediaries between the *bakisi* (sing.: *nkisi*) and clients who have requested the *nganga*'s advice. Unlike ancestors, who are identified and called on by their descendants irrespective of the issue, *bakisi* are addressed for their specific capacities in cases such as diseases that they are able to cure or cause or marriage problems they can solve. These spirits are embodied on and made accessible in material complexes called *minkisi*. In other words, *minkisi* are objects seen as containers for the force of the *bakisi*. The distinction between a diviner and a *nganga* is not always clear.

The Mayombe themselves say that they believe in a Creator God⁵⁷ who is said to have allocated *basimbi* (spirits) and *bakisi* to many features in nature, such as forests, rivers, tornadoes and others, and given them power over the curing and inflicting of disease. All these spirits could be called upon by an expert or a *nganga a nkisi* to solve family problems, settle disputes, seal a contract, ensure someone's safe journey, neutralize an enemy, trace thieves or cure diseases. To gain access to these spirits, they were made present in ritual objects or were, as the Mayombe said, a 'house for the spirit'. This 'house' could take the form of a human being or an animal but more often it consisted of a basket, a bag, a calabash, a bottle, a box or a stone. The house was the mere container of the power of the spirit, the *bilongo*, while the object was called a *nkisi*, but an object without its *bilongo* was not considered a *nkisi*. A *nkisi* was given a proper name connected to its history, composition or accomplishments.

In Congo it is generally accepted that it is the *nganga* that creates the *nkisi*: he may or may not be the sculptor who carves the figure – the actual carver is not the most crucial element in the efficaciousness of the object – but he assembles the attributes and attaches them to the object. He does so during a period of seclusion and, by so doing, creates the *nkisi* and makes the object unique with its own individual identity and name. He will treat the *nkisi* and attend to it individually: it is fed, anointed and receives sacrifices in its honour. Each *nkisi* follows its own lifestyle. If it is successful and effective in its role, its success can be measured by the number of nails and blades that are driven into it.

The *nganga* is the proprietor of a *nkisi* and 'activates' it for a client who in turn pays the *nganga* for his services. The *nganga* paints his body white and black for the occasion or, depending on the case, may wear a mask. A *nkisi nkondi* is (or used to be) activated by driving a nail into the figure, insulting him, pouring alcoholic beverages over the figure or exploding gunpowder near him to make him angry.⁵⁸

Another important point is that the ritual surrounding the *nkisi* figure is conducted with great care and according to established patterns. It also has to be conducted by an appointed person – the *nganga* – at a prescribed place and time. To be effective, it must comply with all of these conditions⁵⁹ and be conducted by a *nganga*, an initiated expert of the *nkisi*. Such rituals can take many forms: they may take a few minutes, several

⁵⁷ The concept of a Creator God in indigenous African religions is discussed in Chapter 4.

⁵⁸ Raymaekers (2010: 20-23).

⁵⁹ This procedure is not specific to Congo and has also been described for rituals in the Netherlands (Rooijakkers 1996).

months or even years to complete and can require the participation of one person or a whole village or more. The rituals involve songs, dances, behavioural restrictions, special enclosures and prepared spaces, and a material apparatus, all of which are prescribed.

While the priest is at work, the villagers assemble around his hut to sing. And once the *nkisi* is consecrated, it is believed to exert a mysterious power that can cure and/or cause disease, harm an enemy, chase away spooks and sorcery, and protect the owner's property. The efficacy of *minkisi* works during ritual and a ritual, in turn, works only if all the conditions are fulfilled.⁶⁰ It is believed that each *nkisi* has its own specific rules and taboos. Anyone who breaks the rules of his/her *nkisi* is likely to be punished by illness, bad dreams or by the *nkisi* losing its effectiveness.⁶¹

The elements of the ritual process include words, objects, actions and performers, all of which are equally cosmographic, though less obviously so. The words – in the form of songs and invocations – usually describe what is going on and the results to be achieved. Their significance is repeated in the objects and their actions; words are part of many ritual objects because the objects are chosen for linguistic reasons, with puns being built around their names. Objects become composites serving as containers or shrines for the powers invoked by the ritual; their outward form expresses the intended effect.⁶²

For a *nkisi*, especially a *nkisi nkondi*, to become effective, it has to be provoked or invoked.⁶³ Abuse and invocations, often in blood-thirsty language, are hurled at the figure and gunpowder is exploded in front of the statue or nails are driven into it. Angered by any injuries, *nkondi* will come into action. If a villager becomes ill within the next few days, it is assumed that *nkondi* has punished him. At the same time, the *nganga* (on behalf of the client) spells out the problem or the request.

Lord *Mutinu*. Open your ears, be alert. The villages, the houses, the people do you not see us? I have not quarrelled with anyone, man or woman. *Mwene Mutinu*, if anyone is angry with me and it is only a daylight matter, overlook it; but if it is witchcraft – proceed! Seize whoever is causing me harm, whether man or woman, young or old, plunder and strike! May his house and his family be destroyed, may they lose everything, do you hear?

It is, or used to be, the business of the *nkondi* to identify and hunt down the person who caused harm to the client by occult means.

Laman's catechist Nsemi wrote in 1915:

The construction of an *nkisi* – the ingredients and the songs – must follow the original model. If you put the ingredients together helter-skelter you injure the *nkisi* and it will become angry over your failure to arrange it properly. An *nkisi*'s strength is rooted in how it was discovered originally. The ingredients are put in as they must be, else it loses its strength and gets confused. Some people do not understand what kind of plants are capable of curing. Then also there is the kind of person who makes an *nkisi* not learned from his own people [the author means: not according to the instructions of his people] or perhaps he has no access to the parents of twins. Others will know that such an *nkisi* has been

⁶⁰ The theory is simply an *ex post facto* legitimation for a *nkisi* that works, i.e. one that commands respect because it is believed to be effective. If a *nkisi* does not work, it is said that it has not been created in the right manner.

⁶¹ MacGaffey (1993: 50).

⁶² MacGaffey (1986: 107).

⁶³ MacGaffey in Phillips (1995: 246).

designed by the person himself and that they will ridicule him as incompetent for his *nkisi* is not authentic – it does not originate with the ancestors. So many people do not come in possession of powerful medicines and this is a shame.⁶⁴

Here the catechist refers to the ‘original model’ on which a new *nkisi* is to be constructed. This can be seen as the prototype in Gell’s theory of agency.

2.2.4 *Attributing meaning to Minkisi*

When the early missionaries arrived in Congo and saw objects with power (*minkisi*), they described them as being superstitious, evil, absurdly endowed with imaginary powers and idols. A missionary who travelled through the area in the 17th century, Jérôme de Montesarchio, wrote: ‘*je rencontraï beaucoup d’idoles et objets superstitieux que je brûlai (...) en particulier, une idole de grande taille chargée d’une grande quantité d’insignes superstitieux*’.⁶⁵ He did not mention the object by name but was probably referring to a *nkisi nkonde* figure.

Bernardo Cutigliana also wrote at about the same time: ‘*En brûlant d’innombrables fétiches, plus d’une fois je me suis vu en danger de mort, mais je n’ai pas été trouvé digne de pareille faveur*’.⁶⁶ These early accounts by missionaries present a generally negative picture of indigenous African religions and the social practices that differed from what was accepted as ‘normal’ by Europeans. This continuously negative appreciation of indigenous African religions and their objects with power may be seen as a linguistic discourse on the part of missionaries. They positioned themselves as men of authority in religious matters, identified themselves with the Catholic Church and applied its instructions with regard to African religious cults and, by doing so, created a social reality that had no bearing in reality. Their interaction with Africans – both converts and ‘pagans’ – manifested the perspectives with which they operated, namely the pagans’ conversion. It also manifested the interest they had in creating this social reality, which was in effect a negative image of an African reality. Their aim was to establish a justification for their activities, even if this included the destruction of religious emblems of African religions.

There is also the aspect of appropriation of African values by the early missionaries. Without any in-depth research, many of the early missionaries appropriated the concept of *minkisi* and attached their own meanings to the cult and *minkisi* were continually branded as expressions of idolatry and superstition. Objects with power were easy targets for the missionaries as they were tangible. Opposition to religious norms and values were immaterial and harder to identify. This negative interpretation led to a strong opposition to rituals. The appropriation by missionaries was emulated by government officials who sided with the churches in condemning these practices, not so much out of religious motivation but because the *minkisi* cults were considered a threat to social and

⁶⁴ Nsemi Isaki (1915).

⁶⁵ Quoted by Lehuard (1980: 143).

⁶⁶ It should be noted that the Propaganda Fide had repudiated the use of forcible methods in the work of evangelization in its ‘Institutions for Missionaries’.(Propaganda Fide 1669). Notwithstanding these instructions, the burning or otherwise destroying of ‘idols’ was accepted practice in the Congo-Angola region.

national security. They tried to suppress the cults connected with *minkisi*, as can be seen in many publications because, in their eyes, a *nkisi* was ‘a superstitious charm (...) which has the power of exercising an occult influence’.⁶⁷ Africans could change any object, according to many Europeans, into a ‘fetish, absurdly endowed with imaginary powers’, a practice considered the product of a ‘regressive or degenerate mentality’.⁶⁸

It should, however, be noted that there was another interpretation of the objects. In 1688, Dapper, a well-known geographer in Amsterdam, wrote: ‘These Ethiopians [the Bakongo] call *moquisie* [*minkisi*] everything in which resides, in their opinion, a secret and incomprehensible virtue to do them good or ill, and to reveal events past and future’. He offers a detailed description of the fabrication and consecration of *minkisi* by the *nganga* and of the uses they were put to on different occasions. He added that ‘It is strictly speaking incorrect to talk of idolatry among these peoples (Ngoyi, Kakongo, Loango) as they recognize neither God nor Satan’, and also that their ‘Tooverkunst’ (literally: magic art) was to preserve health, offer protection against illness and death, and improve fertility. For Dapper, *banganga* and *minkisi* served the cause of goodness.⁶⁹

The Ngoyi, Kakongo, Mayombe and others who possess *minkisi* attributed their own meaning to the cult and the objects. Unlike other religious institutions that consider the ‘invisible’ or ‘spiritual’ power of an everlasting superiority over the material and visible world, the people of the Congo who use *minkisi* as intermediaries between the here-and-now and the other world do not accept an invisible power holding sway over the material world and over their thoughts and beliefs. In other words, these peoples do not hesitate to destroy their religious paraphernalia if they judge them ineffective in recreating the intangible truths behind the symbols that are no longer meaningful.

Thanks to some of the early missionaries who researched local cultures, we have accounts from the early decades of the 20th century that documented *minkisi*. Unlike the early ethnographers and missionaries in Nigeria who described *ikenga* as ‘a small god’ in the assumed Ibo pantheon, Father Bittremieux, who was a contemporary of Talbot, Meek and Basden, did not call *minkisi* ‘small gods’ and did not place them in a pantheon. He and Rev. Laman saw *minkisi* as intermediaries between the world of the dead and the world of the living. *Minkisi* exist(ed) in many different forms, each with its own name and each serving a specific purpose and curing a particular disease or solving a specific problem.

The efficacy of *minkisi* depends on several factors. At first sight, the many different substances and paraphernalia (medicines) that have been attached to the figure appear important. Most are associated with powerful or aggressive animals: there are parts of bodies of lions, leopards, snakes, bees or birds of prey. And there are the sexual organs of crocodiles, earth from the tracks left by elephants, and human elements from categories of persons such as suicides, sorcerers, epileptics or twins. Items of regalia may also be incorporated into the figures, recalling the typical attributes of chiefly dress or the

⁶⁷ Shelton (1995: 12).

⁶⁸ Shelton (1995: 11).

⁶⁹ Dapper (1686: 335) and Axelson (1977: 122).

hunter.⁷⁰ Rev. Laman's catechist, Nsemi Isaki, described a *nkisi* in great detail,⁷¹ enumerating the many ingredients combined to make the *nkisi*: a large snail shell (*kodi*), white clay that is associated with the dead (*mpemba*), red earth that is also associated with the dead (*nsadi*), the dust of leaves of a ginger-like plant that never loses its leaves and whose fruit is phallic in form (*kitundibila*), and squash seeds, which represent infants in the womb (*mbika malenga*). This charm is intended to remove obstacles preventing birth and allow the child to pass through the birth canal easily. The charm is invoked as if it were an animate being:

Eh *kinzenzi*, come, into this person who desires to give birth, who desires to sleep. Come, remove the placenta and the cord, that they be not blocked. Come, stretch out, gently for this child. Thus our fathers had children, and thus our mothers. (Nsemi 1915)

In an essay written in the Kikongo language at the beginning of the 20th century, Nsemi⁷² attempted to explain the animate character of fabricated charms. The essay was translated by MacGaffey, who did elaborate research in the same area.

Nkisi is the name of a thing we use to help a man when he is sick and from which we obtain health; the name refers to leaves and medicines combined together. Also *nkisi* is a hiding place for people's souls, to keep and compose in order to preserve life. The *nkisi* has life; if it had not, how could it heal and help people? But the life of a *nkisi* is different from the life in people. It is such that one can damage its flesh, burn it, break it, or throw it away; but it will not bleed or cry out. Yet the magicians think that a *nkisi* possesses life because when it heals a person it sucks illness out. The medicines placed in a *nkisi* are said to be as if were forces in the body to help it to work. The *nkisi* is as it is, but if it lacks medicines it cannot do a thing. So the *nkisi* has medicines, they are its strength and its hands and feet and eyes; medicines are all these. For this reason, whatever *nkisi* lacks medicines is dead and has no life. The composition of *nkisi* – the ingredients and the songs – must follow the original model. If you put ingredients together helter-skelter you injure the *nkisi* and he will become angry over your failure to arrange the ingredients in the proper order. A *nkisi*'s strength is rooted in how it was discovered originally.⁷³

The ethnic groups in Congo that possess(ed) *minkisi* saw the objects as 'intermediaries' and also powers that could solve problems of a spiritual and material nature. They made a distinction between the statue (the object) as the container of medicines (*bi-longo*) and the medicines themselves, which are considered the effective part. *Minkisi* are believed to possess life: 'If it had not, how could it heal and help people?'

If we follow Gell, we could say that *minkisi* are agents that cause events to happen. The efficacy of an object with power does not depend on the object itself but on the power that has been attributed to it by the *nganga* or the participants in the ritual. When medicines are collected and attached to the *nkisi*, which in the eyes of the *nganga* or the participants have a certain affinity or association with the disease or the problem, they facilitate the attribution of a special meaning and hence a special power to the object.

⁷⁰ Mack in Phillips (1995: 283).

⁷¹ Quoted in van Wing (1959: 206).

⁷² Laman was a Swedish missionary who worked in Congo in the early years of the 20th century. Between 1912 and 1919 he paid village catechists to do fieldwork and write down their experiences in detail. Among the twenty or so authors, there was only one woman. Laman incorporated these reports in his notebooks. MacGaffey (1986: 273), who edited and published this material, commented as follows on Laman's views of Kongo religious and social practices: 'They consistently express a male point of view even when the topic is women's activity; the bias is conspicuous in discussions of sexual relations'.

⁷³ MacGaffey (1977: 173).

Consequently, the object with power will act in conformity with its meaning and its power. As Gell writes, ‘material objects can have minds and intentions attributed to them, but these are always, in some residual sense, human minds’.⁷⁴ Applying Gell’s theory to *minkisi* implies that the meaning of these objects is not to be found in a supernatural power or divine action but in the concept of agency. Since people have attributed this meaning to their *minkisi* objects, they also have the liberty to discard them when they are no longer effective for whatever reason. History has shown that *minkisi* have indeed been discarded by those who made them, believed in them and who attributed meaning to them.

2.3 Asuman

2.3.1 *Asuman* objects

The Ashanti live in central Ghana and the Fanti in southern Ghana. (see Figure 34) They both belong to the Akan-speaking peoples of Ghana and Ivory Coast and possess objects with power that they call *asuman*. *Asuman* (singular: *suman*) are described in the literature as charms or talismans that contain a protective or curative power. *Asuman* are always material objects⁷⁵ and they may be worn about the person or hung on the walls of buildings. (see Figure 35) The *asuman* can consist of one or more recognizable objects, such as a broom, a clay pot, a bundle of feathers or animal claws or skulls, and they generally have a metaphorical relationship with the purpose for which they are used. Much of the available information on Ashanti culture and religion in the first decades of the 20th century was collected by Captain Rattray⁷⁶, who describes a number of *asuman*.

Objects with power, such as *asuman*, are common in Africa and the Ewe, the eastern neighbours of the Ashanti, also possess objects with power. These are called *dzo* and consist mostly of natural objects like feathers, bones, egg shells, strings, bark or herbs. *Dzo* are endowed with their power by a *dzoto* (a person who is an expert in the making and supplying of *dzo*) who spits saliva on the objects to give them power. Many *dzo* come in the form of a string that is worn as a chain or tied around a person’s arm, leg or waist. They can also consist of powder or liquid, or a mixture of herbs and water.⁷⁷ *Dzo* is applied in fields of (potential) affliction, such as war, health, pregnancy and birth, hunting, agriculture, trade, play, love affairs, family conflicts and a dead person’s spirits. It is an ambivalent power that is employed individually and often in secret, and can provide protection against certain evils, but can also bring about them.

⁷⁴ Gell (1998: 17).

⁷⁵ The fact that they are always material objects, unlike the *nsamanfo* and the *abosom* that have hardly ever been materialized, was the reason why I chose to study *asuman* rather than the two other spiritual powers.

⁷⁶ Rattray (1927/1959: 12-24).

⁷⁷ Meyer (1995: 112).

Figure 34 Central and southern Ghana



Like the *dzo* of the Ewe, *asuman* can be obtained for almost any purpose: to protect a hunter, to keep thieves from a house or a farm, to generate money or to make an enemy ill. A person seeking a *suman* for a particular purpose will approach someone (usually a man) who is reputed to have such a *suman*. If the owner agrees, he will make one, showing the new owner how it is done and, in return, will receive a stipulated counter-gift (*aseda*). Most *asuman* have names and those who own them may have a number of prohibitions, for example, avoiding the consumption of food with snails in it or whistling near the *suman*. (see Figure 36)

Figure 35 A priestess wearing *asuman* around her neck and carrying *abosom* figures

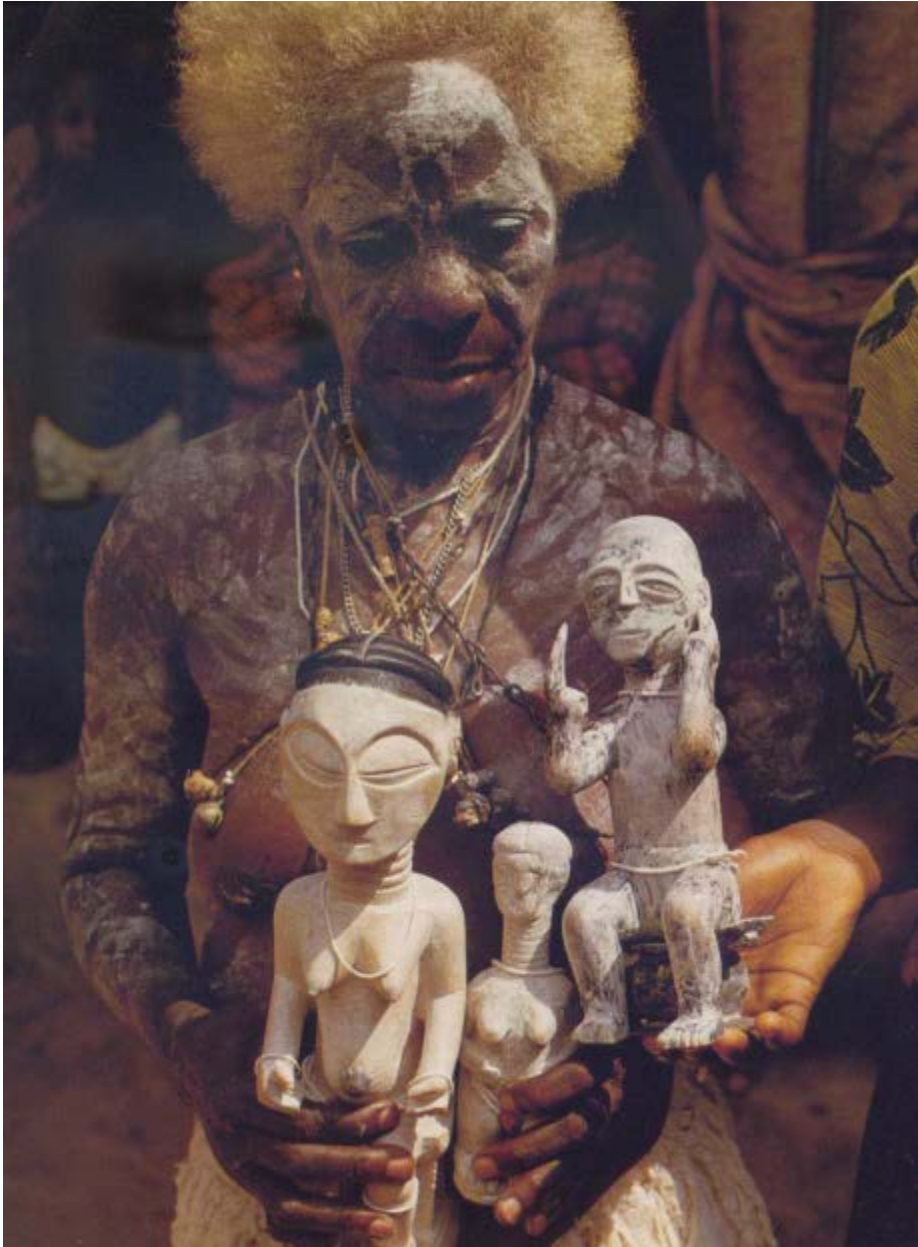
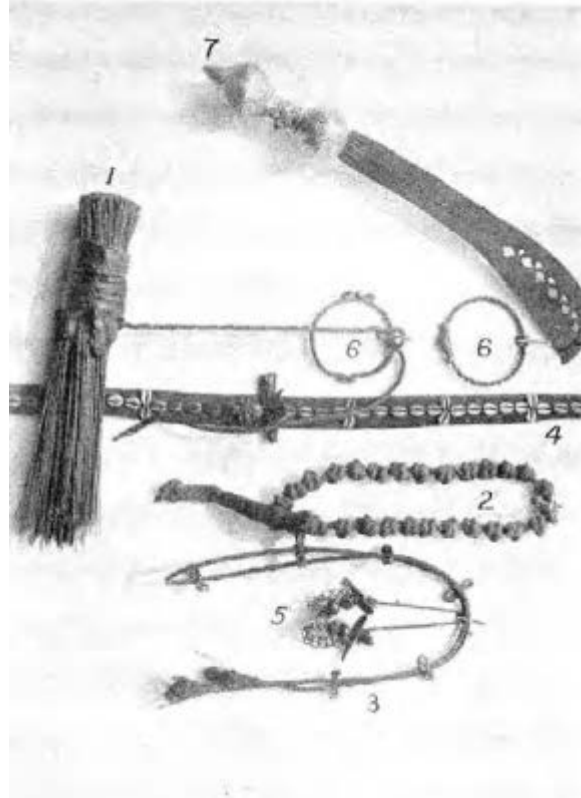


Figure 36 Different *asuman*, Ashanti, Ghana

The most important *suman* in figure 36 is called *kunkuma* (1), ‘the greatest *suman* in Ashanti’ and ‘the father and elder of all *suman*’. It resembles the ordinary household broom that Ashanti women use for sweeping out their rooms and compounds. It is a bundle of fibres (from the *palma vinifera*), held together with a rope of twisted fibre made from the *Tikyitekyerema* tree. Six small pieces of iron from an old flintlock gun are stuck into the binding round the handle. The whole is stained and clotted with *esono* dye, eggs and the blood of sheep and chickens that were sacrificed on it. Hidden away inside the broom handle is a piece of *baha* fibre that was used by a menstruating woman (‘one of the greatest and deadliest taboos in Ashanti’). The owner of this *suman* was an *okomfo* (priest) who supplied Rattray with the information. He narrated how he wanted this *suman* to be very powerful and had therefore brought the *kunkuma suman* into contact with every taboo object that was of concern to him saying ‘if I eat [that] may I not die’ (*me di a menwu*). Then the *okomfo* would pronounce every proscribed name, which he ordinarily would never be allowed to utter, in front of his *suman* saying: ‘If I hear that word or utter it by mistake, may it not touch me (*n’ka me*)’.

Rattray also describes a category of *asuman* that are found across West Africa: small leather pouches attached to a cord, which are said to contain verses from the Koran.

They are purchased from travelling Hausa traders. Like elsewhere, the Ashanti attribute great protective powers to these charms or amulets, which they also call *asuman*. One of the most impressive manifestations of these charms is when a chief appears in public (in the past on his way to a battle but nowadays for ceremonial purposes) wearing his 'general's uniform' or 'war dress' that is covered with layers of leather charms or *batakari kese*. It was believed that these charms protected the chief from attacks by the enemy. (see Figure 37)

Figure 37 Paramount chief of Ejisu, Ashanti, wearing his *batakari kese*. The leather amulets show the northern origins of this war dress. Since inter-tribal wars have ceased, this dress has become a ceremonial costume worn by chiefs on special occasions



Another *suman* needs to be mentioned here: the *Gyabom suman*.

It is a powerful charm for driving away evilly disposed, disembodied human spirits (...) the revengeful *sasa* will flee from the presence of this *suman*, which consists of a bundle of porcupine squills, a bunch of feathers of the fish eagle (...) the skull of a porcupine, several human maxillae, an *odawuru* (gong), and leaves of a shrub called *emme*...All these objects had been dyed a deep red colour by pouring over them a concoction made from the powdered bark of a tree (...) mixed with eggs (...).When a man was to be executed the *gyabom* was set upon his knees, while his head was cut off...This was to prevent the *sasa* (revengeful spirit) of his victim from returning to wreak vengeance on his executioner or upon the king who had ordered the execution.⁷⁸

Most *asuman* are privately owned to protect their owner and his/her property. Someone who feels insecure, fears that their child needs special protection against the evil eye or other threats, that their crops may be stolen or house may be broken into will have a special *suman* made. These can come in the form of strings that are wrapped around the waist, neck or wrist or as pieces of cloth or bark that can be hung over the door or at the entrance to a farm. Those carried on the body should not be seen by others and will be worn, for example, by Christians who have maintained their belief in *asuman* even though they were required by the church not to do so.

2.3.2 *The social context*

Unlike *abosom* that have public shrines and are attended to by special priests (*akomfo*), *asuman* usually play a role in the personal domain, even though a specialist (a herbalist or an expert on witchcraft) may be involved. As a rule, *asuman* have no public shrines, no places of worship and no cults in which the community partakes. In this sense, *asuman* lack a well-defined social context but the use of *asuman* can have a marked effect on the environment of the supplicant. This is explained by the ambivalent character of a *suman*: it can cure someone of a disease or affliction and it can pass that disease or affliction to someone else. In the latter case, the effects are felt in the social context. *Asuman* are generally understood by the Ashanti and Fanti as being capable of inflicting inexplicable harm on humans in the form of disease, death, economic disaster such as spoilt crops, car accidents and theft, These offensive actions are most commonly associated with witchcraft (sometimes called *ju-ju*) and have been shown to have a dramatic effect on the lives of a group or community and cause the economic downfall of large projects. They have put the authorities (school principals, police commissioners, judges and managers) in awkward situations.⁷⁹

One of the special attributes of a *suman* is its power to procure the death of any person who its worshipper may wish to have removed. The formula for achieving the death of an enemy through a *suman* is said to be as follows: the worshipper of the *suman* takes three short sticks, calls the name of the person he wishes to be killed three times and, while doing so, binds the sticks together with *addor*. This is, of course, done in secret and the three bound sticks are laid on the *suman*. The desired death will, it is believed,

⁷⁸ Rattray (1959: 14).

⁷⁹ Europeans in leading positions in the Colonial Administration had great difficulty in accommodating these incidents. James H. Neal, a British Chief Investigation Officer in the Gold Coast, published his experiences in *Ju-ju in My Life* (London: George G. Harrap & co 1966).

then take place either immediately or after some time has elapsed. Should it not occur, it is then assumed that the individual has a more powerful *suman* or that he has been protected by a more powerful *suman* or even an *abosom*.⁸⁰

Asuman, although privately owned and handled, possess qualities with a social context. They protect the owner against social evils, such as jealousy or the evil eye. The *okomfo*, quoted above, assured Rattray that the *kunkuma suman* could save him from every conceivable evil. The *okomfo* himself believed that he would always be safe and that he never needed any other protective *suman* provided he carried the *kunkuma suman* with him. He explained how this was realized: ‘the springs of the flint-lock gun bound upon the handle will prevent you being shot’; ‘this *suman* is to protect all other *suman* from chance defilement, e.g. if you have had sexual intercourse and not yet bathed and you touch something, it will do you no harm’; and ‘if you put any food, otherwise taboo, on this *suman*, you may then eat it’.⁸¹

The *okomfo* informed Rattray, on the other hand, that this *suman* also had its restrictions and its taboos: it should never be taken into the ancestral stool house (where the stools of the deceased elders of the family are kept) because the *suman* had been in contact with menstruation. And it should also never be sprinkled with water to cleanse or purify it, as is done from time to time to ordinary *suman*.

Another of the *asuman* described by Rattray is *ahunum* (literally: seeing in or through). It consists of plaited strands of a certain tree (*Tikyitekyerema*). It is worn around the forehead and pieces of the tail of the brush-tailed porcupine are attached at both ends. Its function is to help the *okomfo* to guess why somebody is consulting him. This *suman* is connected with certain taboos that, if broken, will nullify all its supernatural powers. No one is allowed to mention the word *mframa* (wind) in its vicinity, use a broom or carry it near the leftovers of a meal. At the same time, the effects of these taboos are neutralized if the *suman* is situated near the more powerful *kunkuma suman*. Rattray’s account highlights the complexities of the *asuman* phenomenon after having asked for a *suman* for his own personal protection. This showed him the restrictions that were part of the same *suman*. It was not uncommon for Europeans in public positions to use *asuman*. Neal quotes an English building contractor:

I have a lot to do with African labourers, and I’m all the time in direct contact with them. I know for certain that Juju can be extremely dangerous. And, if you want to know something, if it weren’t for an amulet that a powerful juju man made for me for 50 Pounds I wouldn’t be alive today.⁸²

The use of *asuman* is not something exclusively from the past. In spite of serious attempts to suppress these practices by ministers of Christian churches and the leaders of some indigenous religious movements, *asuman* are still very common at all levels of society. The use of objects with power has been observed among Christians of different denominations and Christians – scholars, businessmen, police officers, teachers, magistrates and others – who find themselves in vulnerable positions often make use of ‘pro-

⁸⁰ Ellis (1887: 102).

⁸¹ Rattray (1959: 15).

⁸² Neal (1966: 16).

tective devices' such as *asuman*, although they are aware that these practices do not conform to Church teachings.⁸³

The social context in which *asuman* and *abosom*, which are believed to be spirits and were described in the literature as 'small gods', featured is clear from history. The use of *asuman* and the cults of *abosom* used to increase remarkably in times of social unrest. The wars between the British and the Ashanti in the last few decades of the 19th century, the imposition of colonial rule in southern Ghana, the introduction of cash crops such as cocoa (that upset the traditional division of labour and landownership), the rapid changes in society due to the introduction of formal education and other factors all led to a genuine sense of insecurity. They fostered the growth of witchcraft beliefs and the concomitant anti-witchcraft cults, including the increase of *abosom* shrines and the use of *asuman*.⁸⁴ Anti-witchcraft shrines, such as *abosom* shrines that Ishii call *asuman* shrines, evolved as a movement to find new supernatural safeguards against the money-centred socio-economic climate that emerged in the first half of the 20th century.

In broad terms, the Asante used their *abosom* and their *asuman* as ways of dealing with unclear or unusual situations. Change was also inherent in the underlying structure of Ashanti beliefs and new exotic powers were actively sought outside Ashanti society. It was believed that they would be more powerful than their own *abosom*, which they thought had failed them. The powerful *abosom* Dente from Kete Krachi was introduced into some parts of Asante in the late 19th century, as were many lesser fetishes and medicines.⁸⁵

Dramatic changes occurred in Ashanti after 1900. The further imposition of colonial rule, the introduction of cash crops, the growth of education and the increasing impact of Christian churches caused unrest across the country and led to a backlash on traditional religious concepts and practices. Large numbers of new protective medicines (*aduro*) and *asuman* were imported from outside Ashanti to combat witchcraft and other non-physical attacks that were widely believed to be destroying the local community. Among the new cults introduced in the early 20th century were Abirewa, Hwemso (active in the early 1920s), Tigare, Brakuni, Dubi, Kankamea and others, all of which flourished between the 1920s and the 1950s and offered mystical protection, especially against witches.⁸⁶

2.3.3 *The religious context*

The Ashanti and Fanti believe in a pantheon, consisting of a Creator God (*Nyame* or *Nyankopon*), ancestors (*nsamanfo*), spirits living in the forest, rivers and mountains, and special shrines (*abosom*) and objects with power (*asuman*).⁸⁷ Due to their assumed interdependence, the position of *asuman* in the daily lives of the Ashanti and Fanti is re-

⁸³ These practices have been described for several African countries in recent years. See Okorocho 1987: 266 for Nigeria.

⁸⁴ Debrunner (1959); Ter Haar (2007); Comaroff (1993); Geschiere (1997; 2003); Akrong (1997); van Beek (1997); van Binsbergen (2001) and Ishii (2005).

⁸⁵ Maier (1981: 229-243).

⁸⁶ McLeod (1981: 70).

⁸⁷ The validity of this belief is discussed in Chapter 4.

lated to other spiritual beings. This section first discusses the concept of this pantheon and then analyzes the meaning of *asuman*.

Nyame/Nyankopon. The Ashanti and Fanti believe that these spiritual beings have a hierarchical relationship with each other and with *Nyame (Nyankopon)* at the head of the pantheon as the Supreme God.⁸⁸ The Creator God, the Supreme Being, has neither cult nor priests. The Ashanti and Fanti believe that after he created the world, *Nyankopon* withdrew into the high heavens (*Nyame* means the firmament), leaving the running of the world to the *abosom*.

Nsamanfo. It is the *nsamanfo*, the spirits of the ancestors living in the *asamando* (the realm of the ancestors) that are a daily concern for the Ashanti. As the ancestors lived on their land and in their towns, they want the best for their living relatives. The ancestors therefore attach conditions to their help and their blessings: relatives should treasure the spiritual and material heritage that the deceased left behind when they died. This implies that there are strict conventions about moral behaviour. Failure to live up to the standards set by the ancestors can cause misfortune.⁸⁹ The ancestors, *nsamanfo*, are first of all remembered and revered within their extended families. Annual festivals are held to remember them and they are asked to bless their offspring in this world. They have shrines in their family compounds but no priests, as the paterfamilias is the officiant who brings sacrifices and pour libations for the ancestors.

Abosom. The *abosom* were – and still are – considered spiritual powers (also called deities), each with its specific responsibilities towards the living, with its specific shrines and looked after by priests called *akomfo*. They grant happiness to people, or take it away. Every *abosom* has its speciality: fertility, certain diseases (smallpox, madness), infidelity, etc. These *abosom* are much revered, respected and feared. The Ashanti and Fanti believe that they depend on the benevolence of these *abosom* for a good life and that it is crucial to maintain good relations with them to prevent misfortune from happening.

The power and character of *abosom* was conveyed not so much by objects but by the possessed dancing of their priests, their prophesying and their apparent miracles. The reputation and wealth of a god were demonstrated by the size and decoration of its shrine and the numbers of attendants and worshippers. Shrines can be very effective and famous⁹⁰ and priests and priestesses at *abosom* shrines are said to have received a calling (vocation). This can take many forms. One is that a person is chosen by the *mmotia* (dwarfs) who are considered the guardians of the shrine.⁹¹ These dwarfs assist the *okomfo* in many ways: they provide him/her with information, find new medicines in the

⁸⁸ The belief in a pantheon is not specific to the Ashanti and Fanti. Bishop Peter Sarpong wrote: ‘Ghanaians, as indeed all Africans, believe in the existence of one Supreme Deity whom they regard as far greater than any other being’. Sarpong (1996: 31)

⁸⁹ Sarpong (1974) and de Witte (2001).

⁹⁰ A branch of the *Akonnedi* shrine in the Akwapim region has been set up in New York (Warren 1973: 20).

⁹¹ McCaskie (2008).

bush and even beat people on their behalf.⁹² It is noteworthy that many *akomfo* do not only rely on herbs and other natural medicines but that they consider Western medicine to be compatible with their *abosom*, as the ills treated by them are often of a psychological nature. These shrines are important in regulating social behaviour. (see Figure 38)

Figure 38 An *Abosom* shrine in Ashanti, with the books showing that the *okomfo* (partly visible) has attended School



When we speak of ‘shrines’ among the *abosom*, these need not always be understood as buildings as they can take many forms. The most famous shrine in Ashanti is the Golden Stool of Ashanti (*sikadua kofi*)⁹³ but certain gold-covered bracelets that the Asantehene wears as part of his ceremonial dress are also considered as shrines.

Abosom are known to have come and gone. Over time, new *abosom* have revealed themselves while established ones have withdrawn, for instance when their priests died or ceased to become possessed. This phenomenon has already been described for *minkisi* in Congo where the prestige and wealth of individual *abosom* fluctuated. Their prestige depended greatly on the personality of their *akomfo* and their power to advise and prophesy correctly. The reputation of a powerful *abosom* is widespread and supplicants are prepared to travel for days to consult a well-known *abosom* about their problems. The powerful *obosom* Dente, who used to reside in Kete Krachi before the town was

⁹² Dwarfs express the ambiguous feelings that the Ashanti have about ‘the bush’ (the forest). It is both a dangerous and unstructured area where humans may easily become disoriented, and is also a source of power.

⁹³ The golden stool of Ashanti is believed to have descended from heaven in or around 1700 and to have landed on the lap of Osei Tutu. The *akomfo* who supervised the ceremony, Akomfo Anokye, announced that in this stool resided the soul (*sunsum*) of the Ashanti nation and that all chiefs present should swear their allegiance to the stool and to their new Paramount Chief, the Asantehene.

flooded by Lake Volta, was consulted by Ghanaians of all walks of life.⁹⁴ Another powerful *obosom* called *Nana Bruku* lived in the mountain village of Shiare on the Ghana-Togo border and was frequently consulted by politicians and senior police officers who felt insecure in their functions.⁹⁵ Each *obosom* therefore had a shifting congregation as well as a central core of local people who offered a more enduring allegiance.⁹⁶

The power of *obosom* differs: the powers of the *obosom* of the sky and the *obosom* of the sea are greater than that of a small river or lake. In Winneba, a coastal town in Ghana, there are many *obosom* and the *obosom* of the sea is *Penkye Otu*. The Winneba fishermen depend on the benevolence of this *obosom* for their wellbeing, for a good catch and for their safe return from hazardous trips on the high seas in their hand-peddled canoes. Sacrifices are brought to *Penkye Otu*, taboos are adhered to so as to placate him and everybody who has migrated elsewhere 'comes home' for the annual festival to share the celebrations and hear the diviners' forecasts for the coming year. When I lived in Winneba in the early 1960s, I was told the following story: on Tuesdays *Penkye Otu* always came by land to visit his wife who lived some twenty miles from the shore. On the day when *Penkye Otu* left the ocean, no fisherman would go to sea (one of the taboos). The inhabitants of Winneba, who were in need of *Penkye Otu's* help would take the opportunity to place offerings in the form of some food and a few coins at the cross-roads the *obosom* passed (they knew which route he always took in the night of Monday to Tuesday).⁹⁷ The story shows how an *obosom*, in this case the *obosom* of the sea *Penkye Otu*, plays a role in the daily lives of the inhabitants of Winneba. He is considered one of the most powerful *obosom* in the coastal area, as he is believed to be the 'power' that controls the sea, its high waves and dangerous surfs, its fish (causing shoals to show up and to be invisible), its winds and its storms (which caused canoes to capsize with a loss of life each year). His annual festival – the famous Deerhunt Festival – is celebrated with pomp and pageantry, divination rites and sacrifices, and is crucial for the wellbeing of the community. At the same time, this mighty *obosom* is accessible and available for people who need his help.

Asuman. *Asuman* consist of many different objects, some of which are entirely personal while others are in the care of herbalists or other officials.⁹⁸ *Asuman* contain *dufa* (medicine) that may have limited functions, such as preventing a priest from falling while dancing in a trance (a disgraceful and unlucky thing) or preventing neck pains. But other *dufa* may cure disease or inflict harm or even kill other persons.⁹⁹ There are several categories of herbalists (men or women with special knowledge about herbs):

⁹⁴ When the inhabitants of Kete Krachi became aware of the approaching floods and evacuated their houses to take up residence in a newly built town in the 1960s, Dente had to be evacuated too. He demanded the life of a police officer before he would leave the cave where he had lived for more than a hundred years.

⁹⁵ This information about Dente and Nana Bruku was obtained during a short period of research in the Kete Krachi area in 1963 with a staff member from the University of Ghana, Legon.

⁹⁶ McCleod (1981: 75).

⁹⁷ Schoolboys, who gave me this information, added that they would hang around at these cross roads, waiting for the offerings to be put there. They would eat the food and use the coins to go to the cinema in town.

⁹⁸ Rattray (1959).

⁹⁹ Warren (1973: 19).

dunsini are herbalists who deal exclusively with herbs (*dufa*); *abirifo*; *bayi/ bonsam komfo*: herbalists who deal in charms for witchcraft and an *okomfo* who has knowledge of herbs, charms for witchcraft and is, at the same time, the *okomfo* in charge of an *abosom* shrine. In the latter case, there is a certain overlap between *abosom* and *asuman*. In some cases, *asuman* may have begun to be given the attributes of *abosom* after their power was widely accepted.¹⁰⁰

I have already mentioned the *Kukuma asuman* that was presented to Rattray. How this broom-like object is endowed with spiritual power can be deduced from its consecration by the *okomfo*. Chickens and sheep are sacrificed on the object, while the *okomfo* says the following prayer:

Kukuma gye akoko di, obi to me aduru a, mma no ntumi me; obi bo me din, din bone a, mma ntumi me; obi de 'tuo sa me so a, mma ntumi me.

Kunkuma, receive this fowl and partake; if anyone poisons me (i.e. does something to make me break a taboo) let it have no power over me; if any one invokes my name, in connexion with an evil name, do not let it have any power over me; if any one takes a gun and points it at me, do not let it have any power over me.¹⁰¹

It was not necessary for someone to attend a public or collective rite in a shrine to obtain a *suman* or to participate in an organized worship. To be protected by a *suman*, one just had to buy one or more *asuman* objects, such as strings or a cord, from a specialist and tie them around their body. All over West Africa there are open-air markets that specialize in objects with power. (see Figure 39)

Figure 39 The so-called *Fetish* market in Lomé, Togo



¹⁰⁰ McLeod (1981: 66).

¹⁰¹ Rattray (1959: 14).

The relationship between the recognizable objects, such as a broom, a clay pot or feathers, and the purpose for which they are used is not enough to make the object into an effective *suman* or an object with power. It needs to be imbued with a special power by someone who is an acknowledged expert. This is not an *okomfo*, whose function is to attend the shrines of the *abosom*, but someone who deals specifically with *asuman*. Hence the name *suman'kwafo*.

2.3.4 *Attributing meaning to asuman*

The objects with power that the Ashanti and Fanti call *asuman* have had a negative association among Europeans for a long time. The meaning that the Ashanti and the Fanti attributed to them was not acknowledged by most Europeans who commonly described *asuman* as *fetishes*, with all the negative associations, and also called them *juju* or *gris-gris*, which were derogatory terms that were popular among Europeans in Africa. Their appearance was unattractive to Europeans because of the ingredients (animal skin, genitals, blood and nails) that they were made of. Their functionality and effectiveness were unclear or even denied by them. If effects were recorded by Ghanaians, Europeans ascribed them to witchcraft. Anthropologists more readily accept their agency today, while some plead for recognition of the materiality of these religious practices.¹⁰²

The belief in a pantheon is said to have helped the Ashanti and Fanti to understand the complexities of their indigenous traditional religion, such as the interrelationships between the Creator God, the ancestors, the spirits and objects with power. It also helped them to explain how the different parts of Ashanti society and culture possessed functions in relationship to each other. The supremacy of *Nyankopon* justified the 'supreme' authority of the *Asantehene* (the King of the Ashanti).¹⁰³ The power of the ancestors justified the respect that was due to elderly people who would sooner or later become ancestors themselves. Disrespect for elders in this life may cause trouble when they become ancestors.

The question is whether and to what extent these arguments represent the original views of the Ashanti and the Fanti. In other words, did they already exist before the arrival of Europeans? Chapter 4 argues that the belief in a pantheon and a Creator God is not an original African belief. If it was, how did the Ashanti and Fanti understand themselves before the introduction of the belief in a pantheon?

I will argue that Christian missionaries who were active in Ghana since the middle of the 19th century but who set foot on West African shores for the first time at the end of the 15th century introduced this hierarchical structure of indigenous religious entities to explain their own concepts of a Supreme God (that they compared to *Nyame*), angels (that they compared to the *abosom*) and saints (that they compared to the *nsamanfo*). By so doing, these missionaries engaged in a linguistic discourse with Africans and were able to create a social reality. This discourse manifested their perspectives: they had come to convert pagans. To facilitate the effectiveness of their teaching, they looked for

¹⁰² Meyer (2012).

¹⁰³ The Ashanti themselves spell their name *Asante*; their king is called *Asantehene*, with 'hene' or 'ohene' meaning 'king'.

entries into indigenous beliefs. The ‘discovery’ of a powerful *obosom* of the sky (the firmament, the heavens) was a welcome tool and allowed then to introduce some Christian concepts, notably the notion of a Supreme God. It was tempting to identify the angels with *abosom*, and the ancestors with the saints. These missionaries positioned themselves as experts and, by using their authority at a personal level and as the representatives of a powerful Church, were able to impose their views on the local people. This imposition was successful only if the ‘locals’ accepted the authority of the missionaries and of the church and choose to be baptised. Not all ‘locals’ did so because there was opposition to the proselytizing activities of missionaries. This book aims to show how missionaries from different denominations used secular means, such as schools and hospitals, to draw ‘pagans’ into Christianity.

We may speak of a case of appropriation of indigenous African religious concepts by missionaries. They are detected in the concept of certain powerful *abosom* properties that could be applied to the Christian notion of God. They appropriated *Nyame*, one of these *abosom* (the *obosom* of the sky or firmament) and made him into the Creator God.

Missionaries did not find a Christian counterpart for the *asuman*. It is noteworthy that the Catholic Church has always known objects that the faithful believed would protect them from evil. These include crucifixes (placed over doors or carried on the body), medals with the images of the Blessed Virgin or saints; pictures of the Sacred Heart, Holy Mary, saints, Lourdes water etc.). Yet the same Catholic Church in Africa has not compared their objects with power with *asuman* or similar objects in other cultures.

Though the Ashanti and Fanti say they believe in a hierarchically structured pantheon, they appear not to be consistent in its application. One would expect them to believe that *Nyame* would rule over the ancestors, the ancestors over the *abosom* and the *abosom* over the *asuman*. On the contrary, they appear to operate at distinct levels that are independent of each other.¹⁰⁴ Ashanti and Fanti do not consult *Nyame* and do not bring sacrifices to him. They consult their *nsamanfo* whenever there is a problem in the family or lineage or one or other *obosom* (depending on the specialty of that *obosom*) if there is a problem that supersedes the family or lineage level. Then again, when an individual has a ‘personal’ problem, s/he may choose to pray to an ancestral spirit but in many cases seeks help of somebody who provides medicines (herbs) or supplies the client with an *asuman*. In other words, there is no hierarchical relationship between these spiritual powers: they exist next to each other and operate independently of each other. Their coexistence can be seen as a juxtaposition rather than a matter of hierarchy.

This view of spiritual powers in indigenous African religions is not restricted to the Ashanti and Fanti. It appears that the same coexistence or juxtaposition can be applied to many African cultures, such as the Yoruba with their concept of *orisha*, the Bakongo (and other Congo ethnic groups) with their concept of *Minkisi* in its many forms, the Bamana with the concept of the distribution of *Nyama* in the different power associations. They all coexist, each with its own role and responsibilities in Bamana society. This view alters the position and thus the meaning of the *asuman*.

¹⁰⁴ There is a saying in Akan: ‘A lion is not a better goat’, indicating that each animal has its own merits and they should not be compared in terms of ‘better’ or ‘worse’.

Another aspect that has influenced the meaning of *asuman* is its assumed religious nature. There is a long tradition among the Ashanti and Fanti, and among scholars who studied them, of viewing the meaning of *abosom* and *asuman* first and foremost as religious phenomena and as spiritual entities that derive their meaning from *Nyankopon* or *Nyame*. Reflecting on the distinction between *abosom* and *suman*, Rattray says that the main power in an *obosom* comes directly or indirectly from *Nyame*. The *okomfo* who owned the *kunkuma suman* (discussed above) told Rattray: ‘All *akyiwadie* (literally: hateful things; in Ashanti: taboos) were enjoined on man by *Nyame*. The ancestors first gave this *suman* to the *mmoatia* (the dwarfs) and they then gave it to man’. Rattray added at this point: ‘I think it is clear from the above that the *Kunkuma suman* is of the nature of a scapegoat or something that takes upon itself the evils and sins of the world.’¹⁰⁵

Rattray also suggested that the power in a *suman* comes from plants or trees and directly or indirectly sometimes from fairies, forest monsters, witches or ‘some sort of unholy contact with the dead’, i.e. contact that in the ordinary way would be unclean or repellent and has no connexion with ancestor worship.

In his attempts to attribute meaning to *asuman*, Rattray seems to become confused. At certain points he explains their meaning by referring to *Nyame*, and at others he claims that the *asuman* derive their power from the medicinal qualities of herbs or plants or trees that form part of the *asuman*. Again, he asserts that *asuman* get their power from ‘fairies, forest monsters, witches’, giving the impression that he accepts the (emic) narratives of his informants as fact.

When applying Gell’s notion of agency to *asuman*, we need to establish that a *suman* does not derive its power from *Nyame* or some other spiritual being. In addition to the arguments above in support of this view, there is another, namely the concept of *kra* (sometimes translated as soul). *Kra* is at the centre of a system that consists of variables, such as the influence of *abosom* and *asuman*, the elements that constitute the human being (*nipa*), such as *mogya*, *sunsum* and *kra* (each with its own fields of interest, family relationship, and others), the role of the ancestors and the impact of destiny (*nkrabea*) on a person’s life. *Kra* is considered someone’s life force and can increase or decrease but it needs to be nourished. This system may be seen as religious but differs in certain basic concepts from other indigenous religious systems in Africa. The Ashanti and Fanti emphasize the human aspects rather than the spirit-oriented aspects. This is clear from the almost total absence of religious images, statues and masks among the Ashanti and Fanti, which are so common among many other West African groups. At public events like festivals and ceremonies, the emphasis is on social status and political display rather than religious cults. A chief’s *kra* is personified in the person of a little girl who sits in front of him during public appearances. (see Figure 40)

Many shrines even reflect ‘an emphasis on humanity and its continuity rather than on the mysterious, unseen realm of spirits and deities’.¹⁰⁶ From the above, the meaning of *asuman* becomes manifest.

¹⁰⁵ Rattray (1959: 14).

¹⁰⁶ Cole & Ross (1977: 8).

Asuman are material objects; they may be considered ‘materialized prayers for help’; they can be called *agencies* (following Gell), causing events to happen; they manifest a person’s request for help because of some misfortune (disease, bad luck) and are also objects with power, a power to heal, to prevent harm, to pass an examination or to become pregnant. In short, they have the power to strengthen a person’s *kra*.¹⁰⁷

Figure 40 A chief, riding in his palanquin, with his *kra* (a young girl) seated in front of him



¹⁰⁷ African concepts of power imply ‘forces and domains that are invented by humans as surely as humans are shaped by them’, and thus ‘people are conscious of the fact that they have a hand in the creation of the divinities and the sacred’. Rosenthal quotes an Ewe priest: ‘We Ewe are not like the Christians who are created by their God. We Ewe create our gods, and we create only the gods that we want to possess us and not any others’ (Rosenthal 1998: 17).

The pre-colonial period: 1850-1900

Introduction

The three categories of Europeans that constitute the main actors in this book started to take an interest in Africa in the middle of the 19th century. Although they appeared to differ fundamentally in their objectives, outlook, policies and methods of operating, they had a number of things in common. Each category was relatively new on the African scene: Christianity has existed for over nineteen centuries but not much interest in Africa had been shown apart from by Portuguese missionaries between the 15th and 17th centuries. It was only in the 19th century that the churches founded missionary institutions, some of which were deliberately aimed at Christianizing Africa. Missionaries were pioneers in every respect. They knew little or nothing about the climatic conditions in which they were going to work or about African cultures, and the little they did know had been drawn from travellers, merchants and soldiers whose information was not only incomplete and unreliable but also prejudiced. This bias was manifest in the way missionaries throughout this period looked at objects with power, which were commonly called fetishes. In their encounters with indigenous African religions, the average missionary saw his preconceived ideas confirmed: these indigenous religions were forms of idolatry and superstition. Missionaries felt a justification for their divine mission in Africa, namely to convert pagans to the true faith. They may not have realized that this faith was to a large extent a European concept. There is a much used one-liner: 'missionaries came to teach, not to learn'. This expression concealed a basic reality of 'we know what is good for you; we know what you need' in their approach to Africans. If they learned the local language or showed an interest in indigenous religions, it was to facilitate their conversion strategies and find an entry into the local culture so they could introduce the Christian message (more) effectively.

Our second category, the anthropologists, did not have any prior knowledge of Africa. The discipline had come into existence in the wake of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. Anthropologists also had to develop their methods, objectives and fields of interest, the first of which was in their own (pre-)history and was inspired by theories of human evolution. The interest in African cultures and religions was not directed at a

better understanding of these cultures and religions but at finding arguments to support views on European civilization as the apex of human development. Anthropologists did not go to Africa to do fieldwork then but relied on accounts of others, including missionaries. Here too prejudices about Africa were accepted as truthful observations. Anthropologists of the period spoke of African cultures as being ‘primitive’, ‘barbarian’ and ‘savage’ and they viewed the associated indigenous African religions with idolatry and superstition.

Our third category – curators of museums of ethnography – were also new on the African scene. The first major museums had been founded less than a hundred years earlier and the first museums of ethnography were set up in the 1830s. The curators of these museums did not go to Africa, nor did they collect objects in the field. Instead, they relied on travellers, merchants and missionaries for objects as well as information about the meanings of the objects, their names and functions within their cultures of origin. Here, as with the two previous categories, the information that the curators received and subsequently presented to museum visitors was, generally speaking, incomplete and incorrect, and in many cases also prejudiced.

The subtitle of this book is *‘Objects with Power’: A Challenge for Missionaries, Anthropologists and Museum Curators*. If we ask ourselves whether the three categories in this period considered objects with power a challenge, the answer is ‘no’. In the context of this book, a challenge implies that the person or group of persons that is being challenged is prepared to venture into the unknown and search for structure and, in this case, the meaning of objects with power that was, until then, unknown. They needed to attempt to understand the culture and the religion within which the objects originated and played a role.

In the pre-colonial period in Africa, the three categories appear to have been satisfied with the information about African cultures, religious rites and objects with power that reached them through the accounts of travellers, merchants, soldiers and fellow Europeans with experience in Africa. I will show that there were no substantial developments in the ways in which African objects with power were viewed in this period and the predominantly negative opinions of European scholars remained more or less unchanged.

As a consequence, the three categories contributed little to a better understanding of African cultures and indigenous African religions, in particular objects with power. The title of this book *From Idol to Art* suggests that there was a development in the appreciation of objects with power in the period between roughly 1850 and 2000. The next three chapters in this book, each of which deals with a period of about fifty years, show this development. In the first period, however, little or no development took place in this appreciation. Objects with power were consistently viewed negatively and expressions of idolatry and superstition abounded and objects were seen as tokens of a primitive, even barbaric culture.

I am aware that I am being critical of missionaries, anthropologists and curators in the 1850-1900 period and am equally aware that this criticism is prompted by hindsight. The history of Africa has been marred by events that have had lasting and dramatic effects on political, social, and economic developments on the continent itself but also on

other regions in the world. One such event was the transatlantic slave trade, another was the imposition of colonial rule and yet another was the introduction of Christianity in its many forms.

In less than a century, colonialism and Christianity uprooted many indigenous political, social, economic and religious systems in Africa. This created its own momentum. The Industrial Revolution in Europe had prompted a search for new markets worldwide and the opening up of regions where badly needed (mineral) resources could be found. The colonial system was considered well suited to these enterprises. For numerous ambitious young men in Europe, a career in the colonial service, its armies, its administration, its educational programmes and its other institutions offered respectable prospects. Becoming a colonial officer provided prestige and an attractive salary if one was prepared to accept the hardships of a hostile climate, the loneliness of living in an unfamiliar culture and the constant risk of an untimely death. Colonial officers were children of their time: they believed in the superiority of the white race and were convinced of their *mission civilisatrice*.

European missionaries chose to be sent to Africa because they were convinced of their divine mission of bringing the light of the Gospel to the continent. They operated in a closely guarded context and accepted the Church's mainstream thinking. They also accepted that Africans were human beings, like themselves, with attractive qualities. This book will also give examples of missionaries who consciously deviated from the Church's mainstream thinking and acted according to their own conscience.

Curators of ethnographic museums, most of whom had no first-hand experience of Africa, depended on colonial officers and missionaries for their information and their collections. They should not always be blamed personally for the views they presented in their exhibitions.

3.1 The missionary perspective

3.1.1 *Missionaries and their mission*

Portuguese missionaries were, in all likelihood, the first Catholic priests to set foot on West African soil. This would have been at the end of the 15th century and is seen as the first wave of missionaries. Although the Portuguese presence in Africa survived for several centuries, their impact was restricted to the coastal areas, which meant that the Christian influence remained marginal.¹

One remarkable aspect of Portuguese influence on its overseas territories was the close bond between the Catholic Church and the State, between the King and the Pope. This bond originated in medieval Europe and remained until well after the Enlightenment in one form or another.

¹ The first wave of Catholic missionaries in the 15th-16th centuries was succeeded by the arrival of predominantly Protestant traders from other European countries. Even if they brought Protestant ministers with them to conduct church services in the castles and other European centres, these ministers were less interested in proselytizing the 'natives'. I have, therefore, chosen not to discuss the relatively short-lived Christian influence of the Portuguese here.

As important as the mutual reinforcement of State and Church was, the symbiosis of faith and culture that was so much part of medieval society was perhaps even more striking. Western culture throughout the period was markedly Christian. Faith and reason, religion and culture were so intertwined as at times to be hardly distinguishable. It was this amalgam of Europe and Christianity that the great missionary outreach of the sixteenth and subsequent centuries was to spread around the world. The institutions as well as the theology and the religious art of the period were the product not just of the gospel but of the gospel as it had entered into and became an essential component of western civilization.²

This quote affirms the power game that was being played out by the Catholic Church that, through the introduction or perhaps imposition, of a European Christianity exerted significant control over African minds and their intellectual, moral and religious ambitions.³ Although the Enlightenment in Europe led to the disentanglement of the Church and the State, the mutual support of both in the different African colonies lasted until they became independent nations.

When Africa was gradually opened up by explorers, merchants and military expeditions in the 19th century, the interest of both Catholics and Protestants in the conversion of ‘pagans’ in Africa was triggered. This led to a second wave of missionaries arriving in Africa in the 19th century.

Reflecting on the enormous undertaking of the missionary congregations in the second half of the 19th century and the ambition of converting Africa to Christianity, we may question the ways in which these congregations prepared their people for the challenges they were to meet in terms of cultural, social and religious customs. Some founders advised their missionaries on how to conduct themselves in an African environment. Father Libermann, the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, wrote: ‘Make yourselves blacks with the blacks; behave towards them as servants would behave to their masters, adapting to the customs, attitudes and habits of their masters’.⁴ Libermann had reasons for giving this advice to his missionaries as he had received reports from priests in the field who had shown an arrogant attitude towards Africans. ‘However pure his orthodoxy and great his zeal, the missionary has a terrible tendency to be pope and king at one and the same time.’⁵

Cardinal Lavigerie, the founder of the White Fathers, issued strict orders about the organization of a mission. ‘Never, under any circumstance, and under no pretext whatever, will the missionaries, Fathers and Brothers, be less than three together when they go to the Mission’.⁶ He also introduced a system of what he called ‘fraternal correction’, which meant that there would always be a measure of social control among the (at least) three missionaries who lived together at a mission post. The system was undoubtedly introduced to prevent individual missionaries who might become depressed due to the climatic or cultural hazards from taking to drink or becoming involved with women. A

² Donovan (1990: 34-35).

³ Chapter 4, which considers the colonial period, discusses how the close relationship between the British and French colonial governments and the churches in certain regions of Africa had an impact on the way Christianity spread across the continent, on how Africans were treated and how the Christian doctrine was introduced or, at times, imposed on the local people. Neither the imposition of colonial rule nor the spread of Christianity can be understood without examining the way they both exercised power.

⁴ Hastings (1996: 296). See also Ballard (2008: 59).

⁵ Ruggieri (1988: 52).

⁶ Bouniol (1929: 158).

similar warning was given by Wrigley, a Methodist minister in the (then) Gold Coast: ‘Only married men should be appointed missionary and that they must travel with their wives’. While his stated reason was that the mission needed women to work as teachers, it is likely that he feared single men would fall for ‘the temptations of all too visible flesh’.⁷

Missionaries who left Europe for Africa from the middle of the 19th century onwards were venturing into the unknown. They were not prepared for the tropical climate and its accompanying hardships. Africa was riddled with disease – different forms of malaria, yellow fever and black water fever to mention but a few – and there were no known medicines to cure them. Especially in the humid forest regions of West Africa, tropical diseases killed numerous missionaries as well as other Europeans who had chosen to go there to trade ivory, gold, pepper or slaves or who had embarked on exploratory expeditions into the hinterland. Missionaries could, however, often spend up to two years in certain regions of West Africa before they succumbed to tropical diseases.

The preparations that future missionaries – both Catholic and Protestant – received consisted of a theological training that qualified them for ordination as a minister or priest. This training was based on the study of the Old and New Testaments. Catholic missionaries were also trained in Canon Law and Moral Theology.⁸ At the beginning of the 19th century, British Protestant missionaries were regarded as having been ‘selected from the dregs of the people’⁹ and could not look a gentleman in the eye. This changed when missionaries started to be increasingly recruited from middle-class families and they came to be seen as representatives of Victorian values abroad.¹⁰

Several British missionary societies, for example the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the London Missionary Society (LMS), saw the value of an anthropological training. They established their own colleges at Oxford, Cambridge and other universities. Although their first commitment was to the theological training of future ministers, they not only benefitted from anthropological courses at university and the museums, for instance at the Pitt Rivers Museum, but also contributed to the curriculum since they had previous African experience. In 1896, Rev. Canon C.H. Robinson, the author of ethnographies on the Hausa of northern Nigeria, became a lecturer in Hausa at the University of Cambridge. By about 1900, there were more contacts between university anthropologists, for example, Edward Tylor at the University of Oxford, and missionaries in the field¹¹ who were invited to give lectures when they were on leave.¹²

⁷ Ballard (2008: 36).

⁸ Not all missionaries who worked in Africa at the end of the 19th century should be reduced to the same denominator. It is known that the Missionaries of Scheut were required to study one or more Congolese languages and the folklore of a number of ethnic groups as part of their theological training in Anderlecht (near Brussels) before they were sent overseas. The convent had a library with ethnographic publications and texts by elderly missionaries on Congo and a collection of objects from Congo. At least one of these missionaries, Father Bittremieux, benefitted from these facilities and became an expert on the Mayombe and learned to speak their language fluently. He even published articles in Kiyombe and gathered much valuable information on them. His work will be discussed in Chapter 4.

⁹ Niel Gunson (1978: 31).

¹⁰ Harries & Maxwell (2012: 1).

¹¹ Hastings (1996: 296). See also Ballard (2008: 58).

¹² Coombes (1994: 166).

Looking at the mission statements written by the founders of missionary congregations, it can be seen that they did not give instruction regarding the way future missionaries should prepare themselves for their tasks ahead. Missionaries were not required (or encouraged) to study the customs of the societies in which they would be working. Perhaps this was not always possible as future missionaries in many cases did not know even in which country they would be stationed. Certainly in the early years there were hardly any textbooks on local cultures available: scholarly research on African cultures and indigenous religions had not begun. Although these factors did have an impact, it could be argued that there was a more profound reason for the lack of preparation or, perhaps more accurately, the peculiar attitude among the founding fathers of missionary congregations. To them, the kind of preparation that we today would deem necessary for such an enterprise was not required for their missionaries. Missionaries were not expected to behave as guests of the family. They were advised to learn the local language and respect local etiquette but to remain loyal at all times to their European and Christian superiority.

This attitude – even if it was not always consciously adhered to – was founded on the conviction that theirs was a divine mission: they went to Africa to teach the Gospel, convert the pagans and (indirectly) bring civilization to this undeveloped continent. In other words, missionary congregations had a preconceived reason for guiding Africa to Christianity. There was no need, therefore, to prepare their missionaries for an encounter with indigenous African cultures and religions because they were convinced of their superiority in every respect – theologically, morally and intellectually.

3.1.2 *The founders' message*

Missionary congregations

Neither Catholic nor Protestant missionaries were sent off to work in Africa on their own. They always joined a religious society that had generally been founded specifically for the purpose of proselytizing elsewhere in the world. Some societies were set up with the explicit purpose of working in Africa, such as the White Fathers and the Society of African Missions. The advantages were primarily practical in terms of organization, facilities and financing and there were also immaterial advantages in a missionary institution. Working together and sharing a house and meals in a difficult climate and at times under pressure from opposing 'fetish priests' provided the missionaries with a source of mutual support.

Young men who wanted to become members of a missionary congregation did not always know where they would be sent to work. Even the congregation itself did not always know where the Propaganda Fide (the Catholic church's department for the *Propagation of the Faith*) would send them, certainly during the pre-colonial period. When looking at the ways in which a congregation was allocated a region by the Propaganda Fide, one has to conclude that there was a considerable measure of chance attached. To start with, virtually no founder of a missionary congregation had himself set foot in Africa. If he had a preference for a certain region, it was because he knew one or more countrymen who were working there (and who spoke the same language) and who

had maybe invited him. They might have promised to accommodate the missionaries on their arrival. This happened to the founder of the Society for African Missions (SMA): he knew another Frenchman in Dahomey who had invited him. However, the Propaganda Fide did not agree and despatched him and his fellow missionaries to Sierra Leone at the request of Mgr. Kobès, a missionary in Senegal:

The Mission that seems to me most worthy of interest, the easiest to start, is Sierra Leone. Every day I get several requests from the colony for missionaries. I have just received a new demand from the Consul of Spain and Portugal residing at that post. I had hoped that the Dominican Fathers would take on that Mission but I have heard no more about it since I left Rome. The Consul has just left for Europe, and he plans to go and explain his request to your Eminence. I take the liberty of recommending it to you.¹³

The founder of the SMA agreed and left for Freetown where he and his *confrères* died of a tropical disease within six weeks of their arrival in 1859.

Cardinal Lavigerie, the founder of the White Fathers and who had been working in Algiers as a missionary bishop, was so impressed by the expeditions by Stanley and Livingstone that he decided to move to the Great Lakes Region to liberate children who had been kept as slaves by Arab slave raiders. The Missionaries of Scheut, officially called the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM) was founded to do missionary work in China. However, King Leopold I of Belgium asked them to come to his assistance in his colony. The political scene in Congo changed dramatically though when King Leopold annexed the territory as his private property and imposed a ruthless regime on the local population, forcing them to produce prescribed quantities of rubber. If they failed to deliver, severe measures were taken, such as the cutting off of their hands.¹⁴ When international critique was brought to bear on the King, he refused to back down and decided that the international missionary congregations working in the region – the White Fathers (who were mostly French) and the Jesuits (mostly Spanish) – would have to leave the country, as he considered them hostile to his interests. He pressurized the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide by allowing the Belgian Missionaries of Scheut to take their place on the assumption that they would be loyal to their King and not disavow him. The Propaganda Fide honoured the King's request in 1888 and made missionary work a political tool.¹⁵ The King gave the Missionaries of Scheut overall responsibility for the evangelization of the natives in all of Congo, while granting the Jesuits and the Trappist monks their own territories.

The Congregation of St Joseph, founded in 1864 by Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, is better known for its place of origin: Mill Hill in London. The missionaries of Mill Hill have been active in many parts of Africa since 1895 when they arrived in Uganda to resolve a conflict between the White Fathers, who were French and had been active there since 1878, and some English Protestant churches. The Mill Hill fathers, who were English, would become a counterweight against the British Protestant churches. In 1905, they settled in Congo Free State at the request of King Leopold I. Although he

¹³ Archives of the S.C. de Propaganda Fide, Rome (APF), Congressi, Etiopia, Arabia, 1848-1857. pp. 1061-1067. Cited in Bonfils (1985: 169).

¹⁴ Vansina (2010). A detailed account of the atrocities committed in Congo by the Belgians can be found in Ballard (2008: 190-196).

¹⁵ Delathuy (1992: 67).

was apprehensive of non-Belgian missionaries in 'his' Congo as he feared they might spy on his regime and release negative reports, he made an exception for the Mill Hill Congregation, the founder of which he knew personally. The Congregation of Mill Hill fathers played a political role in the Congo Free State and would do the same again years later in Cameroon after World War I when German missionaries had to leave the country and the Mill Hill Fathers took their place.

These chance decisions had a great impact on the individual missionaries who, apart from their religious concerns about their pastoral work, had to cope with loyalties that had to do with their country and culture of origin, the political relationship with the colonial ruler and rivalries between Catholic and Protestant organizations.

Mission statements

In the process of establishing their congregations, the founders wrote what we today would call 'mission statements'. Father Arnold Janssen, who founded the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) in 1875, wrote:

We must put forth all our zeal to spread the light of the Christian faith in those vast lands where the cult of idols still holds countless human beings in the slavery of Satan. God's honour, which we strive to further, demands that we put forth all the energy of soul and body in our effort to wrench these vast and populous lands from the sway of the Prince of Darkness. (...) How wretched these people are even now in this life and how wretched they will be especially in eternity if they are not converted.¹⁶

Mgr. Melchior de Marion Brasiliac, the founder of the SMA wrote in 1856 that: 'The Society of African Missions has for its principal aim the evangelization of the countries in Africa which have most need of missionaries'.¹⁷ Cardinal Lavigerie despatched his missionaries to Africa with a clear mandate: put yourselves at the service of Africa; learn the language of the people with whom you are working; and respect the local culture. Father Libermann, the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (CSSp) in 1848, advised his priests '*Faites-vous nègres avec les nègres*' to win hearts for Christ.

These statements had a long-lasting effect on the missionaries who became members of the respective congregations. They also had, even if indirectly, an impact on Africans who chose to convert and on those who refused to do so. If we apply Critical Discourse Analysis to the mission statement by Father Arnold Janssen, we can note that he speaks in the plural, i.e. 'we must ...'. He appears to identify with his missionaries and thus *a priori* involves them in the great endeavour of 'spreading the light of the Christian faith' in Africa. He engages in a discourse with his missionaries, using a linguistic practice when putting across his assumedly personal conviction to his members. As the society's founder, he had the authority to do so and also represented the views of the Catholic Church at the time and reflected those which were held by large parts of European society. Father Janssen's aim was clear: Africa needed to be converted to Christianity. To strengthen this perspective, he positioned himself as an expert on Africa by describing it as a place 'where the cult of idols holds countless human beings in the slavery of Satan'. His reference to slavery must have appealed to many Europeans who would have heard about the raids on innocent villagers by slave raiders and the plight of those taken cap-

¹⁶ Quoted in Sandkamp (1948: 141).

¹⁷ Bonfils (1985: 169).

tive. Father Janssen compared physical slavery to that by Satan. Using such linguistic practices, he reproduced – or to a certain extent created – two contrasting social realities among his members: Africa is idolatrous and superstitious, the Dark Continent, while Christian Europe is shining with light; and Africa is weak and unable to free itself from its bonds of satanic slavery, while Europe is full of energy and strength. It was only Christianity that would bring salvation to Africa and it was the divine mission of the SVD missionaries (and others) to bring this salvation. If this was not sufficiently convincing, he added that the plight of Africans after death would be even more wretched ‘if they are not converted’. Father Janssen did not create this social reality, as the European view of Africa as a primitive continent, full of idolatry, was widespread. He just reproduced an existing social reality and made no attempt to check whether such a reality coincided with the factual reality on the ground in Africa.

Cardinal Lavigerie advised his missionaries to be at the service of Africa but approved of methods to convert Africans based on compulsory programmes. In other words, his linguistic practice or ‘text’ shows a humane approach but conceals his true perspectives of Christianizing Africa, including the use of force. Father Libermann also engaged in a discourse, although his linguistic practice differed from that of Father Janssen. Instead of referring to the ‘cult of idols’, he advised his missionaries to make themselves Africans with the Africans. This approach may appear as an effort to meet Africans on an equal footing, but the perspective that he added himself attributes a different meaning to his call: ‘in order to win their hearts for Christ’.

The Society of Jesus, better known as the Jesuits, had already worked in Congo in the 16th and 17th centuries but returned at the end of the 19th century. They settled in eastern Congo and, in line with their internal traditions of discipline and a military-style approach, they organized their missionary work in a well-defined manner. They were determined, in their own words, ‘to civilize Congo by the sword and the cross’, i.e. through the power of the State and the charitable work of the Church. In practice, this turned out to be evangelization by force.¹⁸ The Jesuits set up special villages, which they called *colonies*, where they housed orphans, children who had been purchased from slave owners and children who had been relinquished by their parents and families. Some of these villages were built around a school (*colonies scolaires*) and others around a church with farmland (*fermes-chapelles*). Each village numbered hundreds of children varying in age from toddlers to adolescents. There was a very strict regime, with a timetable for rising, saying prayers, breakfast, school classes, farm work, handicrafts etc. Any breaking of the rules was punished with corporal punishment (beatings or canings). And all the children were baptized and coerced to marry someone from the same village.

The system came under heavy critique in international reports, especially when British Members of Parliament reported on the extreme atrocities King Leopold had committed against Africans. Enquiries made by a Belgian commission that visited Congo in 1904-1905¹⁹ showed that many of the children were neither orphans nor had they been

¹⁸ Delathuy (1986: 124).

¹⁹ Francois (2001).

given away by their families. They had been taken, sometimes by force, from their native villages to the *colonies* as new converts. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Jesuits had assembled over 4000 children in their *colonies*, more than any other missionary congregation at the time. The children there had little freedom, could not go home (even if they knew where home was) and they could not marry a partner of their own choice.²⁰ The Jesuits were not outspoken in their negative attitudes. Theoretically, they doubted whether Africans, who they considered to be savages, could be civilized for practical purposes but were prepared to allow changes for the better.²¹

3.1.3 *Assumptions and appropriations*

The relationship of missionaries with Africa during the pre-colonial period could be described in terms of assumptions and appropriations. Without any scholarly research into the culture of ‘their’ people or their indigenous religious cults, missionaries assumed that their religious practices were to be understood only as expressions of idolatry and superstition.

Missionaries were inclined to explain African habits and customs as signs of a low intellectual level of thinking. The Missionaries of Scheut considered Africans as children who had to be educated emotionally, morally and intellectually. The missionaries also did not hesitate to call Africans ‘savages’, who were idiots by nature, lazy and perverse. This lack of civilization, according to them, had given rise to superstition and witchcraft beliefs. These same missionaries said they could explain their views by referring to the theory of polygenesis, which assumed that the different races of mankind had originated separately from each other and were therefore not gifted with the same intellectual qualities.²²

Generally speaking, the missionaries turned their assumptions into appropriations. This meant that, in the view of these missionaries, Africans were pagans and lived a life full of superstition and idolatry. There were also missionaries who soon discovered that many Africans were kind-hearted, trustworthy and not burdened with the fear of Evil. If, therefore, they had to adjust some of their assumptions and appropriations, they reasoned that if Africans could not be accused of personal guilt with regard to their idolatrous acts, they had in any case to be considered as victims of religious cults that were unacceptable to Christianity.

For missionaries who believed that Africans lived in fear of the powers of Evil, i.e. Satan, it was only a small step from there to the conviction that these powers of Evil resided in fetishes and fetish priests.²³ Although most missionaries had little or no knowledge of anthropology and did not conduct any research into the nature of fetishes, they had their own views on the phenomenon. The missionaries did not study these cults and the majority did not show any interest in what cults meant for Africans socially,

²⁰ Delathuy (1988: 199). See also Francois (2002: 12-20).

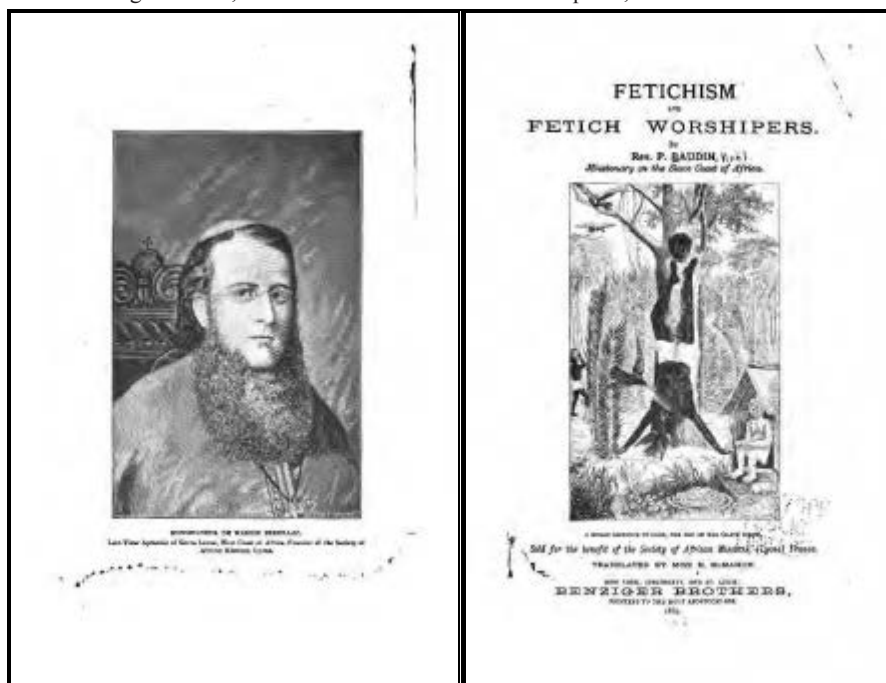
²¹ Pirotte (1973: 175).

²² Wils (1973: 175).

²³ The notion of fetishes is discussed in Chapter 3.2.2.

psychologically or even economically.²⁴ Missionaries were quick to appropriate these cults as living proof of ‘paganism’. Only by depicting Africans as the victims of slavery and the evil powers of Satan could missionaries justify their proselytizing activities that, in some instances, were accompanied by the violent destruction of heathen shrines and idols.

Figure 41 Profits from sales of this book by a French missionary that narrates gruesome pagan events, and with the founder on the frontispiece, went to the SMA



In 1885, Father P. Baudin, an SMA missionary on the Slave Coast of Africa (present-day Benin), published a book entitled *Fetichism and Fetich Worshipers* (see Figure 41) in which he wrote the following:

The statues and symbols of the gods are (...) statues of monsters, ridiculous objects, figures of birds, of reptiles or other animals; and these images, often shameful and scandalous are in everybody's hands, in all the temples, houses and public places, as well as along the roads. The indecent statue of Elegba is to be seen at the door of every house.²⁵

²⁴ Reports by travellers were published that speak favourably of these cults. One example is the publication by Olfert Dapper in 1700.

²⁵ Baudin (1885: 25). The English version of the French original was sold in the US 'for the benefit of the Society of African Missions (Lyons) France'. The frontispiece shows Bishop de Marion Brésillac, the founder of the SMA in 1856.

Figure 42a A shrine for the cult of *Orisa Odudua* in Porto Nono, Dahomey (present-day Benin)



Figure 42b Devotees of *Sango* worshipping their *Orisa*

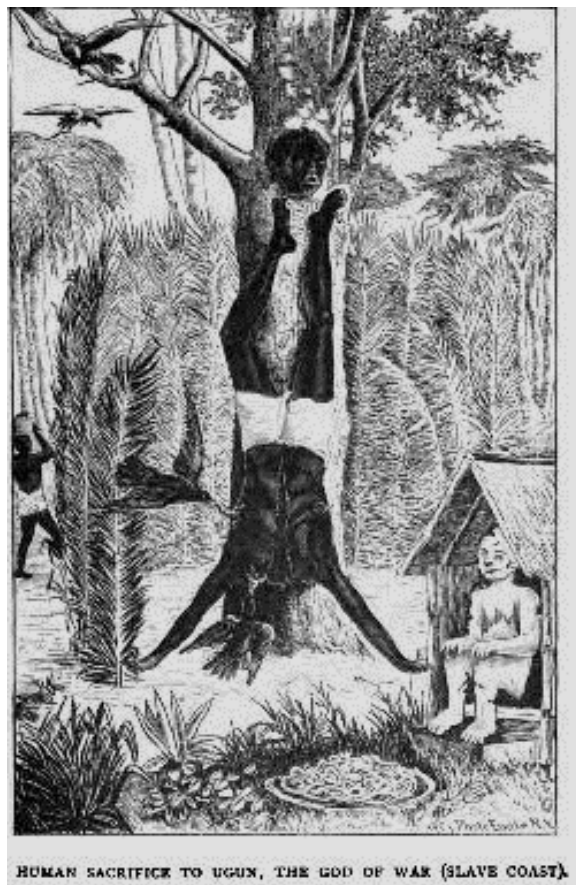


He described the statues as being ‘modelled on the ugliest type of negro, with thick lips, flat nose, receding chin – a perfect face of an old monkey’.

Although Father Baudin does not admit anywhere in his book that he witnessed an actual human sacrifice, he gives a vivid description of how human sacrifices were conducted. (see Figure 43)

The victim is gagged, and his head is cut off in such a way as to allow the blood to gush forth on the idol (...). The fetish priest opens the breast and takes out the heart which he keeps and has dried to make talismans. The heart when dried is reduced to powder and mixed with brandy.²⁶

Figure 43 The victim of an assumed human sacrifice to the *Orisa Ogun* on the Slave Coast (present-day Benin)



²⁶ Baudin (1885:87)

Father Baudin may have seen a decapitated body and assumed that this was the victim of some ritual or a human sacrifice to an 'idol'. He did not inquire whether the deceased person had perhaps been found guilty of a crime and been sentenced to death by the local authorities. These assumptions were not of the missionaries' own making. We can also read them in what I called the mission statements by the founders of European missionary congregations and are clearly indications of the views held by the founders. They must be considered assumptions, as almost none of them had set foot in Africa before they founded their congregation or had conducted any serious research. Father Arnold Janssen, the founder of the SVD, sent his priests to lands 'where the cult of idols' flourished. The Jesuits went 'to civilize Congo by the Sword and the Cross'. The same Jesuits doubted whether Africans 'could be civilized'. The Missionaries of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit complained of the 'pagan abuses, such as fetishism, polygamy and even cannibalism' that they were confronted with in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In Father Arnold Janssen's mission statement, the elements can be noted that were to determine the missionaries' attitudes towards Africa and Africans for decades to come: Africa was the 'land of idols' but idolatry kept Africans stuck in a form of slavery. This slavery was not organized by slave raiders but by the Devil himself and, consequently, the situation of these slaves was hopeless; they could not liberate themselves but depended for their rescue on Christian missionaries. In other words, Africa would be a lost continent if it was left alone and could only be saved by Europe.

Protestant missionaries were not very different. The Methodist ministers who were active in Ghana between 1835 and 1874 received instruction before they left for Africa. In the so-called 'Recommendations' that were drawn up in 1834 about the methods and ideology of the Methodists with regard to their mission work, not a word was said about learning the local language or respect for traditional religion. '*Le méthodisme est si ethnocentrique, si profondément britannique dans son identité, qu'il ignore jusqu'à l'existence d'autre civilisations. (...) L'ethnocentrisme souligné plus haut tourne en fait à l'ecclésiocentrisme, tendance qui consiste à prendre comme unique modèle et référence l'Eglise méthodiste.*'²⁷

David Livingstone, who was both a missionary and a discoverer, instructed his assistant on the Zambezi expedition in 1867 as follows:

We come among them as members of a superior race and servants of a Government that desires to elevate the more degraded portions of the human family. We are adherents of a benign holy religion and may by consistent conduct and wise patient efforts become the harbingers of peace to a hitherto distracted and trodden-down race.²⁸

A number of assumptions in the reports by missionaries can also be found in the writings of their founders. Asked how the founders of missionary congregations, all of them intelligent and experienced men with senior positions in the Catholic Church (some were even bishops and cardinals), were imbued with such negative assumptions about Africa, we must refer to the scholarly discourse that was common in European and US universities. This was equally dominated by assumptions that were developed

²⁷ Hugon (2007: 83).

²⁸ Jordan (1968: 25).

by scholars, published in scholarly and popular magazines and taught in lectures. They had not undertaken fieldwork in Africa themselves but obtained information from travellers, geographers (who had looked for the sources of the Nile or the Niger), traders and missionaries who had returned from Africa and were prepared to share their experiences with members of scholarly institutions such as the Royal Anthropological Institute. This information was used as supporting evidence for the theories of evolution and the determination of stages of development in the history of mankind as they were being developed. African 'tribes' featured low in the stages of development.²⁹

Some of the arguments that were put forward as proof of this low level of development were dubious at least. For instance, European scholars but also theologians considered monogamy as the highest stage in the relationship between the sexes. In other words, Africa, where polygamy was common, ranked low. The same applied to a number of other customs and social and economic practices, such as funeral rites and bride price. Merely because customs differed from their own traditions, Europeans were quick to denounce them as inferior. Missionaries added their own low rankings to the discourse by considering religious practices that diverged from Christian traditions as moral aberrations and, therefore, inferior. Objects with power were in particular interpreted as expressions of idolatry and superstition.³⁰

These and similar assumptions were common in academic, political and religious circles in Europe and had grave consequences for the perception and correct understanding of Africa. The assumption that Africa was undeveloped and uncivilized prompted Europe to engage in its manifold colonial activities. These included military penetration of the African interior; the extraction of raw materials for Europe's growing industries; the establishing of markets to sell European products; the moral obligation to civilize Africa; the introduction of *pax britannica* and similar concepts by other colonial powers; and, from a Christian perspective, the conversion of Africans to Christianity.

The drive to convert Africa to Christianity in the 19th century probably had more to do with a *sensus communis* in Europe regarding Africa's place in the history of mankind than with Biblical texts. The discriminatory attitude that was displayed by scholars in the 19th century was not new. Already in the 16th century, the 'negative comparison' was in vogue, for instance with Montaigne and Regius. Instead of describing what could be observed, one searched for elements that were in common use in Europe but were absent in Africa. Hodgen gives this example: 'No letters; no laws; no kings or magistrates, government, commonwealth, rule, commandments: no arts; no traffic (or shipping, navigation); no money; no weapons; no clothes (naked); no marrying'.³¹ When this way of viewing Africa was introduced in the 16th century, these negative comparisons may have played a critical role in the search for Africa's true identity. However, comparisons lingered on and in the 19th century they were used to indicate Africa's low

²⁹ Platvoet (2006).

³⁰ In retrospect, these interpretations appear to be time bound: less than 100 years later, these same objects with power are being admired as samples of classical African art.

³¹ Hodgen (1964: 199-200).

level of development on an evolutionary scale. They simply served to affirm European achievement and supremacy and had become self-congratulatory.³²

Without critical investigation into the validity of the negative images of Africa and Africans, the icon of the savage in the 19th century was determined by absences: the absence or scarcity of clothing, possessions and other attributes of civilization. The *Sunday Reading for the Young*³³ showed a drawing of Africans huddled together amidst dark, wild vegetation and commented: 'They are but one degree removed from the level of brute creation'.

The 18th century had presented Europe with the Enlightenment, a broad reorientation of intellectual discourse. Africa and Africans were discussed in this context but the way they were represented was not based on fieldwork or in-depth research as descriptions and conclusions were only drawn from travellers' accounts.

The Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, who had never visited Africa and relied on reports by others, revised his scheme of classification in 1758 and described the *Homo Africanus* (one of the so-called varieties of *Homo Sapiens*) as follows: 'black, phlegmatic, lax; black, curly hair; silky skin, apeline nose, swollen lips; the bosoms of the women are distended; their breasts give milk copiously; crafty, slothful, careless, he smears himself with fat. He is ruled by authority.'³⁴ While Hume (1711-1776) wrote:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (...) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, not even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures among them, no arts, no sciences (...) Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men.³⁵

These derogatory views continued unabated in the 19th century. The philosopher G.W.F. Hegel discussed Africans in his lectures at Jena in 1830 as follows:

The Negro represents natural man in all his wild and untamed nature. If you want to treat and understand him rightly, you must abstract all elements of respect and morality and sensitivity – there is nothing remotely humanized in the Negro's character (...) Nothing confirms this judgement more than the reports of the missionaries.³⁶

Africa, according to Hegel, did not form a part of the historical world as it shows neither movement nor development. This is a familiar theme of the 'peoples without history' that we also encounter in the work of Marx and Engels.

A vicious circle can be seen here: missionaries, who had been under the influence of negative views of Africa and Africans in their years of training (when they were being trained to 'go and teach and baptize the pagans'), returned from Africa with their negative views confirmed by their experiences. In other words, they had seen with their own eyes how depraved Africa was and how their salutary activities were indispensable to the wellbeing of Africans. Their mission was, alongside that of the colonial authorities, a *mission civilisatrice*.

³² Nederveen Pieterse (1992: 35).

³³ London (1877)

³⁴ Quoted in Marshall & Williams (1982: 245).

³⁵ Hume, *Of National Characters* (1742/1754). Quoted in Curtin (1964: 42).

³⁶ Debrunner (1979: 301).

Differing from their own, missionaries appropriated the ‘inferior’ cultures and indigenous religions in Africa. This tied in with the views held by scholars of evolutionary theory that confirmed European superiority and validated the moral obligation by missionaries to convert the locals. It is noteworthy that the Catholic Church on the one hand opposed and denounced the theories of evolutionism (as they conflicted with the doctrine of the Creation) but, on the other, supported the evolutionary views on the stages of development in the history of mankind.

3.1.4 *Heroes*

As children of their time, a (large) majority of the Catholic and Protestant missionaries believed that the negative image of Africa was a true picture. They did not take the time or trouble to study local customs and religious practices, perhaps because they felt sure that their negative image would be confirmed. But they had strong reasons, even if they were not always conscious of them, to uphold the negative images. Only then were their actions justified.

They were convinced of their superiority, they were confident that they possessed the only true faith and that they had to bring Africans to the same faith. Was this the common conviction of all missionaries? Were there no critical missionaries who opposed these views and attitudes? It is unlikely that such missionaries did not work in Africa. Generally speaking, missionaries were not always scholarly types with critical minds but were certainly hardworking.³⁷ In addition, they were trained to be law-abiding and loyal to the instructions they received ‘from above’. To justify their missionary actions, they appropriated the rituals, the religious practices and the objects with power which they encountered among Africans instead of accepting the fact that, for Africans, these phenomena had a deep spiritual meaning and played an important symbolical and religious role in their lives. Missionaries attributed the opposite meaning to them by portraying them as instruments of the Devil.

The work of missionaries in Africa in the pre-colonial period can be described in terms of assumptions and appropriations. After African cultures and indigenous religions had been assumed as being fundamentally inferior to European culture and the Christian faith, their (assumed) meanings were appropriated and new meanings attributed to them. The original meanings of *ikenga*, *minkisi* or *asuman*, meanings attributed to them by local priests and by those who had put their confidence in the objects for social, psychological, medical and other reasons, were not accepted by missionaries and civil servants. Missionaries dismissed the native meaning, instead assuming that they were objects of idolatry and superstition (*fetishes*), and attributed these meanings to the objects and the cults of which they were part. By so doing, they appropriated the negative meaning that they themselves had attributed to the objects. This appropriation entitled the missionaries, or so they believed, to destroy the objects (*fetishes*) and challenge the local priests and believers. The motives for setting this process of appropriation in mo-

³⁷ In 1912 a British Consul in Congo wrote of the missionaries there: ‘Brusque in the extreme for they are mostly of the peasant class, they are nevertheless indefatigable workers, more especially in regard to their cause to which they are espoused almost to a degree of fanaticism’ (Castens 1913: 88).

tion have to be sought in their attempts to ward off inimical situations and come to terms with powers and values that are experienced as threatening (see Chapter 1.3).³⁸ Some missionaries considered fetishes and fetish priests as the greatest threat to their work. They were convinced that only the public destruction of fetishes, which would then show that they had no power to defend themselves or to take revenge, would ultimately redeem those who put their faith in them.

According to other missionaries fetishes were merely man-made objects, to which magic powers were attributed by Africans who believed in them. But these powers (according to the missionaries) amounted to nothing and could be disregarded.

Missionaries who have actually destroyed 'idols' (it is not known how many of them have really done so) were considered (by their relatives and supporters back home) brave men, who did not hesitate to face their opponents (mainly the 'fetish-priests') headlong. When missionaries returned home and told stories of the destruction of 'pagan temples' (even if they had not done so personally), they were considered heroes. This in turn confirmed their position of authority in 'pagan Africa', where they exercised their power of definition.

Missionaries were willing to sacrifice their lives 'for God and the Church' and 'save the souls of pagans from eternal hell fire', as they were quick to admit. This heroic image of the missionary has been encouraged by the fact that missionary history has always been written by missionaries themselves or by their protégés who swallowed missionary ideology without questioning it. Such historiography was intentional, and not critical or analytical. It was designed to boost morale back home and generate human and material resources for continued evangelization. Part of these histories is the bravery of the early missionaries, with some titles speaking for themselves: *Aflame for God in the Quest for Souls in Kwa Iboe Country*³⁹ and *Cannibals Were My Friends*.⁴⁰ This kind of historiography overemphasized the role missionaries played in Africa and ignored the socio-economic and political background of the host communities. We will return to this theme in Chapter 4.

The average missionary was unable to distinguish between his own (subjective) observations, born from his own preconceived ideas and from the African perspective in which religious cults and sacred objects, however repulsive they may have been to the European eye, had an immense religious, social, psychological, emotional and even medical value for the Africans. To this average missionary, cults and objects, which did not exist in Europe (or if they did, then in a different form or appearance) that he could not understand or explain were labelled as sorcery, witchcraft and idolatry.

An example of such misrepresentation was described by Perrois about the Fang of Gabon.⁴¹ The Fang were believed to be cannibals and such rumours were confirmed by Du Chaillu who visited the area in about 1850. He saw 'through the village (...) frightful traces (...) of cannibalism – heaps of human bones'. Mary Kingsley, who travelled through Gabon between 1893 and 1895, observed the opposite and did not see any burial

³⁸ Frijhoff (1997: 101); Fabian (1986) and Meyer (1994: 1995).

³⁹ Stuart (1900).

⁴⁰ Richards (1957).

⁴¹ Perrois (2006: 13-14).

grounds or cemeteries, and thus concluded that the Fang must have eaten their deceased. Many years later, anthropologists found that the Fang buried their dead in unmarked graves so they could exhume them after some time and remove the skull and place it in a basket for safekeeping in the house of a senior member of the lineage. On top of the basket, a wooden figure (*byeri*) was placed as a guardian. The Fang were never cannibals but it took more than a century to discount earlier rumours.

Father Gustaaf van Acker explained how he dealt with the objects of sorcery that were part of the local religion:

... bones, hair, animal excrement, teeth, a hundred smutty objects and much more. (...) In order not to displease the people and not to obstruct our research, we do not want to harm all this dam filth; we had to swallow our hatred and it was only now and then, when being alone and in the dark, that we were able to topple the rubbish with an angry stamp. If we wished to work more openly and throughout the region, and replace all these satanic signs in all villages and streets by the saving cross, poor us, how much work for so few planters of the cross!⁴²

According to some reports, missionaries destroyed thousands of fetishes.⁴³

Fred Dodds, a Methodist missionary in Nigeria, wrote:

In February 1915 for the third time I arrived at Bende to attempt the new dredging and purifying of that ugly jungle pool of heathenism, with its Ooze-life of shocking cruelty, reptilian passions and sprouting evil, spreading itself brood in the shadows amidst the most fruitful land on earth (...) Thus Christianity views her domain-to-be, lifting herself high above the secret springs of paganism's turgid streams below.⁴⁴

The next chapter considers some of the experiences of individual missionaries who found themselves in a dilemma when it came to following the instructions of Church Law and their own consciences that told them to do what was good for the people. The writings by Fathers Bittremieux in Congo and Brouwer in Ghana, both of whom studied the customs and traditions of the people they were working among, will also be discussed.

3.2 The anthropological perspective

3.2.1 *Interpretations and assumptions*

Anthropology took off in the course of the 19th century and was a child of the Enlightenment. Philosophers in the 18th century, such as Hume and Adam Smith in the UK and Comte in France, had developed a firm belief in progress, which they called improvement and 'perfectibility'. This belief was one of great optimism; it was limitless. They also believed that human nature was fundamentally the same everywhere and at all times. This implied that all people travelled the same road and that they did so in uniform stages, in a gradual but continuous advance to perfection.⁴⁵ It was the key to the study of the evolution of mankind. In the context of this book, it is necessary to distinguish between different aspects of the evolution theory. Biological evolution is generally accepted as a fact. When we speak of a cultural evolution, we are observing a materi-

⁴² Van Acker (1924: 164).

⁴³ Reybrouck (2010: 89).

⁴⁴ Dodds (1977: 18).

⁴⁵ Comte (1830).

al development of tools and weapons through history. This is not difficult to assess if we take the measure of a tool's efficiency as an objective criterion.⁴⁶ It is more difficult to answer the question if ideological evolution has taken place. In other words, can we assume that a linear development in religious notions and concepts took place, as evolutionism in its strictest sense claims? Finding an answer to this question is beyond the scope of this book but it seems to be questionable. Anthropologists in the 19th century were attracted by the philosophical constructs of evolutionism and started to incorporate them in their own anthropological research. The main interest of the latter was in what used to be called primitive societies. This interest was, however, not primarily directed at understanding these societies in their own right, but rather at looking for arguments to support the views they held about their own origins. These primitive societies were seen as the pre-history of our own culture. Some anthropologists saw them as 'contemporary ancestors'. In other words, anthropologists were hoping to find important clues as to the origins of modern government, modern marriage (monogamy), religion and other institutions.⁴⁷ Scholars at the time, including anthropologists, had a greater interest in their own pre-history and their own origins than in the primitive societies from which they obtained their information. Their approach assumed that certain societies were more advanced than others and that other societies had a lower ranking on the ladder of human development. Anthropology gradually developed into a separate discipline in universities⁴⁸ where anthropologists had to develop their own scholarly objectives, their fields of interest, their research methods and the ways in which they wanted to distinguish themselves from other academic disciplines.

In terms of Critical Discourse Analysis (see Chapter 1.3.2), it can be noted that anthropology in the 19th century engaged in a discourse with a specific linguistic practice: it created a social reality in which it was able to work on its own perspectives. To show or, as they imagined, to prove that European institutions had developed from being primitive to 'advanced', it was necessary to show that African societies, from which these institutions assumedly originated, were indeed backward and primitive. Anthropology was not as interested in the European point of view that certain regions of the continent were highly developed as in the way this perspective placed Europeans at the top of the evolutionary scale while ranking Africans at the bottom of the same scale.

The search for the origins of social institutions in so-called primitive societies and their development into the highly advanced civilization of the 19th century was called a Theory of Social Progress. The theory has been described as follows:

Assuming unilinear evolution, a taxonomy of cultures is established in terms of a theory of social progress – for example, primitive, savage, and civilized. Known cultures are then classified in terms of that taxonomy, and the ethnographic data about culture in each category are used to establish generalizations about the nature of each cultural category. Theories of cultural change are used to explain how some cultures evolve from one category to the next while others remain fixed. Whenever possible, these theories of cultural change are supported by historical evidence; gaps are filled by rational con-

⁴⁶ Army generals in the 19th century disagreed and bragged that the white man was superior to the African 'because we have got the Maxim gun and they have not'.

⁴⁷ Evans-Pritchard (1972/1951: 8).

⁴⁸ Social anthropology in the UK has been a university subject with its own Chair of Anthropology in Oxford since 1884, in Cambridge since 1900 and in London since 1908.

jectures. The whole method was subjected to critical analysis, and a sophisticated methodology was worked out. However, the ethnographic data were not themselves subjected to critical consideration.⁴⁹

This quote says that ‘gaps are filled by rational conjectures’ and ‘the ethnographic data were not themselves subjected to critical consideration’. This needs some explanation. Until the beginning of the 20th century, it was not a matter of course that anthropologists did fieldwork in Africa to collect first-hand information for their theoretical constructs. They stayed at home and were later nicknamed ‘armchair anthropologists’. They collected documents, reports, accounts, letters from travellers, missionaries, traders, soldiers and diplomats. Anthropological societies routinely invited travellers and others who had returned from Africa to their meetings to share their experiences with them. There was an active search for written documents, such as diaries of expeditions and reports of extraordinary events. They even went a step further by establishing networks of scholars and travellers who were about to leave for Africa (or elsewhere) and asking them to gather specific information from the ‘natives’ for the purpose of further research.⁵⁰

Particularly welcome were accounts from scholars, also in other subjects. The biologist Darwin wrote an account of his observations of the natives of Tierra del Fuego that shows how ethnocentric even scholars of international reputation could be: ‘They like wild animals lived on what they could catch; they had no government and were merciless to everyone not of their own small tribe’.⁵¹ The ethnographic data about these natives were not themselves subjected to critical investigation but, on the contrary, the information that reached the anthropologists in their universities or anthropological institutions appears to have been studied only in as far as it contributed to the further development of anthropological theories about the origins of institutions. This amounted in many cases to a subjective interpretation by the investigating anthropologist. To elucidate this point, let me give some samples of reports and the way anthropologists might have interpreted them at the time.

European Christians working in commercial enterprises or elsewhere in Africa and who returned to Europe depicted Africa as a place where indigenous religious practices were just part of a wider lack of civilization. This was confirmed by the early missionaries who produced a picture of ‘*une chute morale*’. Especially the dances were, for the average British missionary who had been brought up in Victorian England, an illustration ‘*de la license qui régenerait les mœurs des Fante* [ethnic group in the Gold Coast]’. Polygyny also upset Europeans, especially missionaries, as they could not see it as a social institution but as ‘*une ultime preuve d’immoralité*’. The list of moral aberrations included: ‘*esclavage, ivrogerie, fornication, adultère, tromperie, mensonge, mal-honnêteté. Absence totale de principes cohabitant avec le plus scandaleuse fainé autise*

⁴⁹ Slotkin (1965: xv).

⁵⁰ The Ethnological Society of London, established in the early 1840s (and the predecessor of the Anthropological Society,) issued a list of questions on tribal customs to travellers and officials so they could contribute to the systematic study of man everywhere (Lienhardt 1969: 5).

⁵¹ Quoted by Lienhardt (1969: 10).

sont parmi les maux les plus répandues de ce pays'.⁵² This reflects, more than anything else, Europeans' ethnocentric point of view with regards to Africa.

Looking at these reports and applying Critical Discourse Analysis, we note the linguistic practice or 'text'.⁵³ Every statement created a social reality that barely concealed perspectives that positioned the speakers and authors as intellectually, morally and even humanly superior.

If such accounts came to the attention of anthropological researchers in the UK or elsewhere in Europe or the US, what would have been their analysis? If L.H. Morgan, an American lawyer turned anthropologist, had assessed this account, he would have observed that it described a number of stages in the development from promiscuity (assumed to be the oldest form of sexual relations between humans) through a form of group mating between brothers and sisters (producing what he called 'the communal family' as the first real family) to civilized monogamous marriage (as Victorian England knew it). Using the evolutionary scheme for the development of mankind that had already been drawn up, he distinguished between the stage of savagery, in which a child would know its mother but not its father (which led him to conclude that the oldest form of consanguinity would be counted through females), through the stage of the 'barbarian family' in which individual mating was the most common form of sexual relationship, polygyny (one man marrying more than one wife) that marked the importance of the senior male or patriarch, to the monogamous family.⁵⁴ It should be noted that there was, even then, no evidence of a totally promiscuous stage in the development of mankind but Morgan, when questioned about this absence, dismissed the difficulty by claiming that evidence would certainly be found. Lienhardt's answer was short: 'It never has been'.⁵⁵ In other words, it was an assumption. The reason that this assumption was if not accepted as fact at least considered as plausible must be explained by the evolutionist argument of a mirror. If Victorian civilization was mankind's highest achievement, the lowest type of culture had to consist of its opposite. So if monogamy was the highest form of sexual relationship (as in Victorian England), promiscuity must have been at the other end of the spectrum. On indigenous African religions, the Portuguese missionary Jerome de Montesarchio, who travelled through Congo in the 17th century, wrote (in a French translation): '*Je rencontrai beaucoup d'idoles et objets superstitieux que je brûlai (...) en particulier, une idole de grande taille chargée d'une grande quantité d'insignes superstitieux*'.⁵⁶

If the German-born philologist and Oxford professor Max Müller (1823-1900) had read this account, he would have concluded that it was characteristic of the oldest form of religion: fetishism. When he delivered the Gifford Lectures at the University of Glasgow in 1888, he defined fetishism as the 'belief in chance objects being possessed of miraculous powers, common among certain negro tribes'.⁵⁷ He compared savages to children who punish not only their dolls but also a table or chair that they hit. This, he

⁵² WMMS, Wrigley, 20 February 1837. In: Hugon (2007: 121).

⁵³ Fairclough (1992: 72, 80, 95).

⁵⁴ Morgan (1871).

⁵⁵ Lienhardt (1969: 14).

⁵⁶ Lehouard (1980).

⁵⁷ Müller (1907 : 100).

says, shows that both children and savages ascribe ‘life and personality – nay, something like human nature – to inanimate objects’.⁵⁸ His views were shared by many of his contemporaries who thought that certain ethnic groups (tribes) in Africa were believed to still be in the early stages of development and therefore were sometimes called ‘contemporary ancestors’. Fetishism was considered their leading religion.⁵⁹

A catalogue on Minkisi figures quotes Kenneth Clark: ‘*Les idoles païennes étaient particulièrement dangereux, car selon l’opinion de l’Eglise primitive, elles n’étaient pas seulement des sculptures profanes, mais aussi le séjour des demons*’.⁶⁰ If this account had been seen by the British anthropologist Tyler (1832-1917), he would have concluded that the text referred to the theory that he himself had come up with, namely Animism. His definition of religion was ‘the belief in spiritual beings’⁶¹ and Animism was the name Tyler gave to this belief: ‘Animism is the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings. (...) It is a general theory of primitive religion, in which external objects are regarded as animated by a life analogous to man’s.’ It should be noted here that Tylor put all his emphasis on the spiritual aspects of religion, neglecting the materiality of religion that was so evident in Africa.

The general impression that travellers, including missionaries, gave of Africa and especially of the pagan cults, is shown by Sigbert Axelson, a Swedish missionary.⁶² He recounted the following incident in November 1652 when the Flemish missionary Joris de Geel, a Capuchin priest, arrived in Ulolo, a village in Lower Congo and was shocked at the heathen rites some converts were involved in.

The missionary immediately interfered and wrecked destruction on the temple, collecting all *nkisi* and *biteke* into a large bonfire and burning the lot. Even the temple was burned down, while the missionary sang psalm 68 (67): ‘Let God arise; let his enemies be scattered, let them also that hate Him flee before Him. As smoke is driven away, so drive them away’. At this point the assembly broke out in rage against him; the first blow was struck by the *nganga*, while others stoned and battered him. Georges de Geel survived the assault itself and was taken to Ngongo Mbata where he died on December 8, 1652. The first martyr.

This account shows a missionary’s violent reaction to what he believed to be ‘heathen rites’. He confirmed in this account Clark’s view that these objects were especially dangerous but did not specify which people they were considered dangerous for. Were they dangerous for the participants in the cult? Or also for non-believers? This third example shows the strong aversion by missionaries to heathen rites, and especially objects with power. The social reality that had been created by reports from missionaries, merchants and other Europeans in Africa, which was being reproduced over and over again by other missionaries and merchants and also by anthropologists, was apparently not challenged by contemporaries. There was no critical check on these accounts to discover if the social reality coincided with the actual reality on the ground in Africa.

⁵⁸ Müller (1907: 212). He adds to this statement: ‘A savage is, in fact, the most obliging creature, for he does everything that any anthropologist wishes him to do’.

⁵⁹ Müller (1878).

⁶⁰ Fondation Dapper (1989).

⁶¹ Tylor I, 424.

⁶² Axelson (1970: 113).

Alternative accounts had however been published and were available in libraries in the 19th century. I refer here to a description of *minkisi* that was published by Olfert Dapper, the Amsterdam historian and the author of *Accurate Description of the Coasts of Africa*. He gave a detailed and, as we now know, reliable account of customs, rites, languages and other aspects of daily life in Africa. The book, which was first published in Amsterdam in 1686, was translated into French and English. About *minkisi* he wrote as follows: ‘These Ethiopians [the Bakongo] call *mosquisie* [*minkisi*] everything in which resides, in their opinion, a secret and incomprehensible virtue to do them good or ill, and to reveal events past and future.’⁶³ It is remarkable that Dapper, as long ago as the 17th century, described the dualistic character of *minkisi*, which are both beneficial and malicious. Very few authors have acknowledged this dualistic character since then, probably because it did not fit the Christian concept of God as being All Good. Dapper also acknowledged the power of divination attributed to *minkisi*, which was also contested by missionaries and a number of anthropologists who came after him. Another aspect in Dapper’s account is the absence of any racist connotations. Even though Dapper wrote his book while slavery and slave trading by Europeans were being carried out on a large scale, he did not view Africans as being ‘fundamentally inferior’. Racism did not exist in the 16th and 17th centuries⁶⁴ but emerged in the 19th century as a result of slavery and slave trading, and became a theory of legitimation of the white man’s supremacy over primitive people.⁶⁵ In other words, the descriptions by Dapper were known to scholars in the 19th century but were not taken into account by them, probably because they did not support the predominantly ethnocentric views current in the anthropology of the time.

The social reality, created by these reports from the 19th century that described Africa as being inferior to Europe in every respect, served the interests of scholars who studied the evolution of mankind and the interests of the churches that needed to justify their presence in Africa. Missionaries kept reproducing the social reality as they perceived it: African indigenous religions consisted of idolatry and superstition. Anthropological interest concentrated on early (primitive) forms of religion, an approach that Evans-Pritchard summarized as follows:

The form of religion presented by a writer as the most primitive was that which he considered to be the most simple, crude, and irrational; to exhibit most conspicuously ‘crass materialism’, ‘primeval stupidity’, ‘naïve eudemonism’, ‘crude anthropomorphism’, or ‘daemonic dread’. Many such origins have been propounded: magic, fetishism, manism, animism, pre-animism, mana, totemism, monotheism, &c. All this was for the most part pure conjecture.⁶⁶

And he also wrote that:

... an institution is not to be understood, far less explained, in terms of its origins, whether these origins are conceived of as beginnings, causes, or merely, in a logical sense, its simplest forms. To un-

⁶³ Dapper (1686: 335).

⁶⁴ Vanden Berghe (1978).

⁶⁵ Racism is said to have been instigated by Robert Knox’s book *The Races of Men* in 1850. Before then, missionaries were not inclined to look on Africans as fundamentally different from themselves but paternalistically as children. See Ballard (2008: 149). There was discrimination but no racism which as been defined as ‘the infliction of unequal consideration, motivated by the desire to dominate, based on race’ (Schmid 1996: 33).

⁶⁶ Evans-Pritchard. 1956, 311.

derstand an institution one is certainly aided by knowing its development and the circumstances of its development, but a knowledge of its history cannot of itself tell us how it functions in social life.⁶⁷

These constructs about stages of human development by ranking some peoples with a ‘low’ and others with a ‘high’ culture in the 19th century had far-reaching consequences for Africa and Africans, but also imbued Europeans with a condescending, discriminatory attitude towards them. These consequences can be observed in the way objects with power were described and analyzed by anthropologists at that time regarding two main notions: fetishism and animism, and the impact was felt throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century.

3.2.2 *Fetish and fetishism*

In the context of indigenous African religions, the notion of fetish is associated with superstition, idolatry and paganism. This is remarkable because the original meaning of the notion was not so. Today, it is generally accepted that the word was first coined by Portuguese sailors who, it is assumed, were the first Europeans to set foot on West African soil. They must therefore also have been the first Europeans to be confronted with unfamiliar religious practices, cults and cult objects. These were unlike anything they had seen at home and must have seemed inappropriate in the context of the teachings of the Catholic Church. When the Portuguese asked the natives about their proper names and their ritual meanings, they heard a vocabulary that could not be translated into Portuguese (or any other European language). To describe what they had seen in their own words, they came up with the word *feitico*, sometimes called *feitissos*, which has been translated as fetish. The Portuguese word means ‘a fabricated object’ that, in turn, may have found its origin in the Latin *factum*, which can be translated as fact, deed or action. From this point of view, the Portuguese viewed the African cults and cult objects in a factual way, and did not appear to make any moral judgment. I am inclined to conclude that, for the Portuguese sailors at the beginning of the 16th century, Africa was not an *a priori* idolatrous or superstitious continent.

The word fetish was a convenient term to describe the numerous objects with power that the Portuguese found on their voyages but that carried different names in different ethnic groups. Africa has no lingua franca: it has no central authority to define the contents, the terminology of objects with power or the rituals in which they were used. Europeans – even if they spoke the local language – were, in most cases, unable to interpret these religious phenomena in an emic manner. The belief in fetishes was, in the eyes of the Europeans, a characteristic of African religious practice. It was soon considered the distinguishing element of a ‘primitive religion’ and, for many, even the equivalent of a ‘primitive religion’.

The Portuguese dictionary *Aurelio* provides the following definition:

feitico (from *feito* and *ico*): 1. adj. artificial, facticio; 2. postico, falso; 3. maleficio de feticaros.

Other explanations as to its origin were suggested in the past. The word fetish gained popular usage after the publication of de Brosses’s essay *Du Culte des Dieux Fetiches*

⁶⁷ Evans-Pritchard (1972/1951: 38).

in 1760.⁶⁸ It provides a materialistic theory of the origin of religion and is considered one of the first theoretical works in the discipline of ethno-anthropology. De Brosses may have taken the word fetish from the Egyptian word *phatah* meaning small idols.⁶⁹ Müller disagrees with de Brosses ‘that fetishes could reveal to us the very *primordia* of religious thoughts’ and thinks that fetishism will remain ‘one of the strangest cases of selfdelusion’.⁷⁰

Due to their proselytizing activities, missionaries were quick to attack indigenous magico-religious forms and, for want of an adequate description of these religious phenomena, they lumped them all together under ‘fetish’ and ‘fetishism’. This linguistic discourse created a social reality that was reproduced over and over again throughout the rest of the 19th century and the 20th century. Milligan spoke of ‘the mental and moral degradation of fetishism’.⁷¹ On the other hand, Müller accused travellers to Africa but also missionaries and anthropologists of ‘fetishizing any religious phenomenon that they did not understand’.

The accounts supplied by missionaries to the first generation of anthropologists were taken at face value and formed the starting points for anthropological theory, such as animism. Tylor wrote as follows:

As to the lower races, were evidence more plentiful as to the exact meaning they attach to objects which they treat with mysterious respect, it would very likely appear, more often and more certainly than it does now, that these objects seem to them connected with the action of spirits, so as to be, in the strictest sense in which the word is used here, real ‘fetishes’(...) To class an object as a fetish demands an explicit statement that a spirit is considered embodied in it, or acting through it, or communicating by it. Or it must be shown that the object is treated as having personal consciousness and power, is talked with, worshipped, prayed to, sacrificed to, petted or ill-treated.⁷²

Methodist ministers working in the Gold Coast in the middle of the 19th century held these views: ‘*Fétichisme, plus encore que paganisme, est le terme employé pour désigner l’ensemble des religions de Côte d’Or*’. The word fetish was used to describe ‘*puissances spirituelles (divinités, esprits)*’ as well as sacred objects ‘*chargés d’un pouvoir immatériau*’.

‘*C’est du fétiche qu’ils ont peur (...) Oiseaux, poissons, animaux, maisons, terre, oeufs, batons, vieux haillons, tout est bon (...) pour faire un fétiche*’.⁷³

Anthropologists, unaware of the inaccuracies in the documents supplied by missionaries and other Europeans, constructed theoretical explanations and social realities that it has taken more than a century to deconstruct. An example may serve to elucidate this point. Tylor wrote the following:

One of the most natural cases of the fetish theory is where a soul inhabits or haunts what is left of its former body (...) thus the Guinea negroes who keep the bones of parents in chests, will go to talk with them in the little huts which serve as their tombs. (...) This state of things is again a confirmation of

⁶⁸ The full title of the book is *Du Culte des dieux fétiches ou Parallèle de l’ancienne religion de l’Egypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigitie* (Kochnitzky: 1958, 2).

⁶⁹ Segy (1975: 10).

⁷⁰ Müller (1907: 219).

⁷¹ Milligan (1912: 11).

⁷² Tylor (1871: Vol II, Chapter XIV).

⁷³ Those in charge of the cults were considered by Methodist missionaries as ‘*charlatans, aburant éhoutément de la crédulité de leur semblables*’. They were also described as ‘*d’empoisonneurs professionnels*’ (Hugon 2007: 128).

the theory of animism here advanced, which treats both sets of ideas as similar developments of the same original idea, that of the human soul, so that they may well shade into one another. To depend on some typical description of fetishism (...) is a safer mode of treatment than to attempt too accurate a general definition.⁷⁴

What he is referring to is probably the Fang burial practice that was connected to their ancestor cult (see Chapter 3.1.3). It was therefore not only the travellers de Chaillu and Mary Kingsley who described their (erroneous) observations, but also anthropologists. Tylor misinterpreted the burial practices as confirmation of the concept of fetishism and the theory of animism.

For many, including scholars in the first half of the 20th century, fetishism was considered the equivalent of 'primitive religion'. Early ethnographers, administrators and missionaries spoke of the decadence, degeneration and self-seeking attitude they considered to be part and parcel of fetishism.⁷⁵ The Methodist missionary Dennett was one of these (see Chapter 4).⁷⁶ Müller was a philologist and used the study of languages in his observations of religion. His views of objects with power as elements or religious cults emphasize his disdain of fetishes: 'Blood and hair and bones can teach us nothing or very little about religion, and the more carefully the two sciences of ethnology and philology are kept apart, the better, I believe, it will be for both.'⁷⁷ Yet missionaries displayed objects of this kind in their exhibitions in the middle of the 20th century to explain what pagan rituals involved.

The impact of these views on objects with power in the 19th century cannot be overestimated. When working as a missionary in Ghana in the 1960s, I was influenced by these views, as were most of my fellow missionaries. In retrospect, I must admit that I was prejudiced, but without being aware of it. I was convinced that it was right to take a firm stance against the use of fetishes. This was a rational conviction and was not challenged by encounters with anyone who actually 'used' a fetish. I remember that a young Catholic mother in a village in Ghana presented her baby daughter to me for baptism one day in 1968. While administering the rite, I saw a string of beads around the baby's neck. In a flash, I was confronted with a dilemma: was this a pagan amulet (a fetish) that had to be done away with or could I tolerate it as an indication that the baby was sick and the mother was seeking help from a local healer (which involved using an amulet)? Acting on an impulse, I sent for a pair of scissors, cut the string from the baby's neck and threw the beads into the bush. It was not until I was leaving the village that I had second thoughts about what I had just done. The emotional reaction of the mother when I removed the string from her baby's neck made me question my decision. I realized that what I had experienced was a clash between what I had been led to believe in traditional, non-progressive missiology classes during my seminary training and a more candid view of unfamiliar phenomena. My decision was an ethnocentric (perhaps an egocentric) approach but one that I believed, at that moment, was required for the correct application of the baptismal rite, a pragmatic piece of advice to the woman and a

⁷⁴ Tylor (ibidem).

⁷⁵ MacGaffey (1977: 176).

⁷⁶ Dennett (1906: 85).

⁷⁷ Müller (1907: 338).

token of the progress of Christianization. That evening I concluded that my decision to remove the string from the baby's neck had not been the right one but because I was transferred to another parish soon afterwards, I never saw the mother again.

If I apply Critical Discourse Analysis to this event, I note that I engaged in a discourse with the mother of the baby, if not in words, at least in behaviour. I positioned myself as a man with authority, a priest (the micro perspective) who was entitled to judge, on behalf of the Church, what was right and wrong in this woman's conduct (the institutional dimension or the meso perspective); I reproduced a hierarchical relationship with the mother of the baby, and decided to serve the interests of the Catholic Church that, I believed, forbade the wearing of an amulet by a Catholic. My perspective was to show the mother what the Church's position was on this point and that this position had to be respected.⁷⁸

By that evening I realized that I should have taken a different perspective. I should have changed my position in the discourse and not have acted as a man of authority who was judging the mother's conduct on behalf of the Church. I should not have reproduced a social reality that I had come to consider synonymous with the factual reality. Instead, I should have tried to transform that social reality and allow the mother to act as she did, from the perspective that the string around the baby's neck had less to do with a religious practice than with a medical therapy to cure the baby's (assumed) disease. What happened that evening was that I changed my perspective and withdrew the string around the baby's neck from the discourse that had labelled it an expression of superstition, even idolatry, and placed it in a different discourse, one in which the object featured as medicine.

3.2.3 Animism

The concept of animism is closely linked with Tylor,⁷⁹ who quotes Comte's definition of the word *fetishism* as denoting 'a general theory of primitive religion, in which external objects are regarded as animated by a life analogous to man's'. Tyler adds that he prefers the word animism to fetishism for the doctrine of spirits in general and because it confines the word fetishism to a particular part of the doctrine of spirits, namely that of material objects that are imbued with spirits. He defines religion as the 'belief in spiritual being'.⁸⁰ Animism was the name Tylor gave to the belief in spiritual beings and, according to him, 'animism is the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings, which embodies the very essence of Spiritualistic as opposed to Materialistic Philosophy'.⁸¹ 'Animism characterizes tribes very low on the scale of humanity, and thence ascends, deeply modified in its transmission, but from first to last preserving an unbroken continuity, into the midst of high modern culture.'⁸²

⁷⁸ See Fairclough (1992: 65) and Wijzen (2010: 3).

⁷⁹ Tylor (1871: Vol. II, Chapter XIV).

⁸⁰ Tylor (1871: 414 Vol. I).

⁸¹ Tylor l.c.

⁸² Tylor l.c.

Tylor's definition of animism may be viewed from two very different viewpoints. One is that the world is ruled by spirits and that animals, plants and inanimate objects have souls. We can call this animism in the strict sense of the word. The other element in the definition is that animism accounts for the origins of religion and, consequently, those peoples that live in this rudimentary stage of religious development belong to 'tribes very low on the scale of humanity'. This clearly links animism with evolutionary theories.⁸³

Tylor asked 'what causes waking, sleep, trance, disease, death? (...) during the dream something in man leaves the body to visit other places, a something resembling a shade or phantom'.⁸⁴ Dreams, visions and apparitions in sleep and at death are supposed to have revealed to man (i.e. primitive man) that his soul was distinct from his body. This belief was then transferred to other objects: animals, plants and inanimate things that have souls. From this doctrine of the soul comes the belief in spirits. Spirits, according to Tylor, are similar but they operate without bodies, like demons, fairies and genii. Unconsciousness, sickness, mental illness and trance were thus explained by Tylor and other evolutionists as being the result of the departure of the soul. Tylor thought that 'spirits are simply personified causes'⁸⁵ and refers here to the Aristotelian concept of *anima* that, when combined with a body, makes a human being. When the *anima* (soul) leaves the body, mental illnesses occurs or the person may die.

Spirits have an influence on humans but they do not operate through bodies. They are able to cause disease, bad luck and even death, but they can also cure disease, provide a person with good luck and give life. They cause things to happen, as if they were persons. In Gell's terminology, they can be called agents.

The accounts that travellers and missionaries brought with them from Africa abounded with tales of spirits. Africans believed that some of these spirits were ancestors, others were supernatural beings. Ancestors were generally well disposed towards their posterity, except when family rules had been broken. Spirits, however, could be either benevolent or malevolent, and both at different times.⁸⁶ Spirits were able to enter men and, by so doing, might cause 'possession'. In cases of spirit possession, an exorcist is needed to go through the rites of divination to establish the cause of the possession and provide the 'patient' with a remedy. This can take different forms, including public sessions during which the patient is put in a trance and given potions to make him/her vomit, or the evil is symbolically extracted from the patient's body.⁸⁷

⁸³ The notion of animism and animists is still being used in a number of Francophone African countries and distinguishes between Christians, Muslims and Animists (people who offer sacrifices to their gods).

⁸⁴ Tylor l.c.

⁸⁵ Tylor (1871: 108).

⁸⁶ Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, these spirits are called *orisa* (see Chapter 5).

⁸⁷ Many Europeans, including missionaries, reported that they were horrified when they witnessed such sessions. They were unable to see the meaning of the ritual and subsequently saw their prejudices confirmed: These rituals were pagan and primitive. I have often wondered why Catholic priests did not exercise exorcisms themselves. One of the minor ordinations that every Catholic priest received on his journey to priesthood was that of exorcist.

In several African societies there is yet another notion of spirits, one that is a crucial part of personhood and in which the word spirit is translated as 'shadow'. The Kapsiki of Cameroon call this spirit *shinankwe*. They believe that every object has one but each person has two *shinankwe*, a white one and a black one, that they compare with a full shadow and a half shadow. The former belongs to the living body and the latter is the shadow of a corpse and goes to the grave with the body. The black shadow looks like the living being and can sometimes move independently of its 'owner'. With this notion of 'spirit', the Kapsiki are able to explain a number of phenomena in their own lives and in their relationships with those of others that would otherwise remain obscure.⁸⁸

This notion of spirit is indicative of another fundamental difference between the Aristotelian concept of *anima* and the African concept of spirit (in the sense of shadow). A special characteristic of *anima* is its immortality: a person's ego and his/her individuality is grounded in their *anima* and is immortal. For Africans who act from the concept of 'shadow', the notion of immortality is entirely irrelevant. Their notion of spirit is basically one of here and now and is grounded in the relationship between themselves and the others in their environment.⁸⁹

In their day-to-day activities, missionaries have always had to take into account that spirits were all around. They are immaterial spirits and are present in ritual objects.⁹⁰ Some objects with power can be seen on the edge of a village or farm, on a stack of firewood or left behind on a farm. They serve as a charm to protect a place or property against theft, robbery and evil of all sorts. Provided those who find the ritual objects believe in their efficacy, they will refrain from any wrongdoing.

The meaning of these objects is not intrinsic but has been attributed to the objects by some ritual act. The objects may have been constructed ritually by an *nganga*, or blessed by him in such a way that members of the community accept the meaning. Belief in the attributed meaning constitutes the efficacy of the object, i.e. its agency. It is crucial that those who come across the object share the same belief and accept the efficacy, the agency. This makes the object into an object with power.

Other ritual objects have been placed in special rooms or buildings called shrines. Each family house is traditionally supposed to have such a shrine, to which, as a rule, only the head of the family has access. He will go to the shrine first thing in the morning to greet the spirits and consult them about the day ahead. Communities, especially in rural areas, will have shrines in each ward or neighbourhood with a specially appointed 'minister'. All of these spirits are responsible for the wellbeing of the family, the ward and the community at large and are dedicated to the deceased members of the family or community, i.e. the ancestors. Other shrines are dedicated to one or more spirits and worshipped in a specific cult regarding, for instance, fighting a particular disease, fertility in women, the amassing of riches or the casting out of evil spirits.

As a rule, shrines are not recognizable from the outside and a stranger will not know where a shrine is in a town or village. Missionaries were not expected to know where

⁸⁸ Van Beek (2012: 115).

⁸⁹ Van Beek, personal communication.

⁹⁰ Tylor (1871: 144) mentioned 'the doctrine of spirits embodied in, or attached to, or conveying influence through, certain material objects'.

shrines were. Villagers had reason not to reveal their location to them as it might embarrass the missionary and perhaps encourage him to take action. Unexpected encounters with shrines or spirits brought awkward dilemmas for missionaries, including myself. In 1962, I was invited to start a Catholic congregation in a certain village in Ghana and was warmly received by the villagers under the leadership of an elderly man who introduced himself as the new chairman of the Church Council. I was given a room in the chairman's house and late that night, when the village was asleep, I heard someone enter the room next to mine and leave after a few minutes. As there was a shuttered window between the two rooms and I was curious as to who it was, I softly opened the window. Looking into the room, I saw a complete shrine with wooden dolls covered in blood, trays of animal skulls, bottles and glasses, eggs, fur, and other unrecognizable objects. It belonged to the cult of *Tigaree* and my first reaction was that I wished I had not opened the window as the scene was certainly not meant for my eyes. Then I suspected that the (self-appointed) chairman of the Church Council was the *okomfo* (priest) of the cult and he was playing games for reasons best known only to himself. In any case, I had to make up my mind as to my next step. I decided not to tell anyone what I had seen, arguing that I might hamper any prospects of building up a promising new congregation if I did. After all, these villagers who in one way or another were already familiar with the Catholic Church might expect me to take some rigorous action, such as condemning the cult, barring the shrine's owner from being the church's president or instructing the villagers that I would not return as long as the cult remained, if I told them what I had seen.

From my own observations and discussions I had with older missionaries in the 1960s, I can see that missionaries, who were confronted almost daily with indigenous religious concepts of the people among whom they were working, found it difficult to analyze these concepts critically and satisfactorily. The belief in spirits was common among Ghanaians at the time and they appeared in dreams, worried people and caused sickness and even death. Accounts by Ghanaians of spirits were so convincing that missionaries dared not deny or ignore them. They had been taught that such spirits did not exist but, at the same time, were curious to know if they perhaps did.⁹¹

I will now briefly discuss four examples in which an African culture presents its view of what constitutes a human being and the elements that are important for a person.⁹² The examples show how anthropological research over the past few decades has revealed African views of what constitutes a human being, one that differs fundamentally from Christian (or European) concepts.

⁹¹ I remember that a Ghanaian friend told me of anxious nights when the spirit of his recently deceased grandfather appeared in his room. When I asked him to come and get me the next time it appeared so that I could see the spirit, he replied: 'That will be impossible because white eyes cannot see a black spirit'. Perhaps he wanted to tell me that I could not see the spirit as I was not a relative of his and/or his grandfather's.

⁹² These examples were also given in Chapter 1 but views on what constitutes the human being in each of the societies are discussed here in more detail.

1. The Ashanti of Ghana call *nyipa* a human being, a person, an individual. Every *nyipa* is made up of a number of elements. The first is *mogya* or maternal blood. Through this blood, the new-born baby becomes a member of the maternal family (*abusua*) and all members share the same blood. This blood will also indicate who the child may or may not marry in later life. After the person's death, the *mogya* becomes the *saman* or the maternal ancestor. The next element is *ntoro*, which contains the qualities of the child's father. Then there is *sunsum* or the child's character and temperament. There is also *honhon*, the person's breath that the child receives at birth and that disappears at the moment of death. Finally, there is *okra*, which is sometimes translated as conscience. It is the person's drive to act ethically. *Okra* is given to the child on the day of his/her birth by the 'spirit' of the day of birth.⁹³
2. The Baule in Ivory Coast see the essential characteristic of a person as his/her links with *blo*, for which there is no equivalent in European thinking. It has been translated as the 'Otherworld' by Ravenhill (1996) but I prefer to call it the 'here-before' (analogous to the hereafter). *Blo* is the condition in which human beings find themselves before birth. They exist as 'doubles', with a male (*blolobla*) and a female (*bloloban*) part. If one part decides to be born, it makes a deal with the part that remains behind in the *blo*. During delivery, the child forgets the particulars of the deal. If in later life the person wants to know how to act responsibly, s/he can have an image made of his/her 'spiritual counterpart' in *blo* and place it in the bedroom where it can be consulted.⁹⁴ See Figure 11.
3. For the Bamana in Mali, the central point of life is *nyama*. Every human being has *nyama*. The term has been translated as 'life force' and can grow in strength or a person can lose it. The Bamana believe that *nyama* can best be increased in the context of an association. Every Bamana community has a number of such associations, according to age, profession (smiths, hunters, traders, diviners) or gender. *Nyama* is increased through sacrifice.⁹⁵ See Figure 9.
4. The Yoruba of Nigeria believe that their lives are ruled by *orisha*, spiritual powers that are invisible but omnipresent, benevolent and malevolent, respected and feared. *Obatala*, one of these *orisha*, models the body of a child before birth but the head is modelled and baked by *Ajala*, the *orisa* ceramist. At birth, *Olorun*, which is considered by some as the creator, breathes *ase* into the body. *Ase* is the life force and can grow so that a person is successful in life or it may decrease so that a person becomes ill or suffers adversity. *Ase* constitutes *iwa* (the person's character). A good character makes for beauty (*Iwa l'ewa*). *Iwa* resides in the person's head, which means it is the most important body part. The head (*ori*) is therefore the focal point of a special cult (*ile ori*).⁹⁶

These examples (just four of many) are an indication of the measure in which African concepts of the human being differ from the European notion, but also differ between each other.⁹⁷ These native African concepts are still alive and are at the centre of African religious practices, annual festivals and everyday life. At the same time, they exist side by side with European views of the concept of personhood. Well-educated Africans who are versed in the European way of thinking will still pour libation to their ancestors in the traditional manner and are likely to have a figure of their 'double' in the

⁹³ Warren (1973: 19-20) and Rattray (1927).

⁹⁴ Vogel (1997) and Ravenhill (1996).

⁹⁵ Colleijn (2001) and Colleijn (2006).

⁹⁶ Thompson (1968).

⁹⁷ In each of the examples, immaterial elements play a major part in determining the character of a person. If these elements are called 'spirits' or 'spiritual forces', one does not need to call on spirituality to explain them. Anthropologists have the tools to combine the immaterial aspects with the physical, as both make up not only a human being but all of the (human) community.

here-before in their bedroom. Africans who have switched to the European way of life by converting to Christianity, opting for a Western education or by imitating the European way of life will have accepted a number of Western values but seem not to relinquish all their native ideas. We will return to this point in Chapter 4.

Animism – both the theory and its practical implications – has caused much confusion among Africans and Europeans alike for several reasons. The doctrine of animism as put forward by Aristotle was fundamental to European thinking as well as to Christianity. At the same time, the concept of animism as characteristic of ‘tribes very low in the scale of humanity’, as described by Tylor, was considered inferior to the Aristotelian concept. The playing down of African traditions of animism by countless missionaries, scholars, colonial officers and others ever since Tylor’s writings has greatly harmed Africa’s image in the world. It has not done justice to the complex religious concepts of African communities, and has caused Europeans to neglect and negate the actual function of African cultures. Missionaries were convinced that only God, angels and devils were spirits or ghosts in the true meaning of the word. By contrast, what Africans called spirits, apart perhaps from the ancestors, were a category of beings alien to the Christian faith. Converts therefore had to disclaim any involvement with their spirits. Generations of converts to Christianity have been trained to condemn their own beliefs, whilst Tylor and other evolutionists of his time looked for arguments to affirm their assumptions about the stages through which mankind had developed.

3.2.4 *Fetishism revisited*⁹⁸

The views developed by anthropologists in the 19th century had far-reaching consequences. They were observed inside and outside Africa until recently. They gave Africa and Africans a negative image and strengthened the prejudices about Africa which existed outside the continent. However, while working as a missionary in Ghana in the 1960s, I observed a changing attitude towards fetishism, fetishes and fetish priests compared to that in previous periods. Generally speaking, missionaries still maintained the notion that fetishism was a sign of superstition, even idolatry, as they had been trained to believe from the beginning of their missionary activities in the 19th century. When discussing the causes of these changes with colleagues, we observed that the feeling of urgency about converting ‘pagans’ had slowed or even disappeared. More and more missionaries restricted their work to their existing congregations and declined from engaging in proselytizing. The reason was that the Catholic Church had been firmly established and increasing numbers of conversions occurred almost naturally as the many Catholic schools supplied a steady influx of candidates for baptism. The result of this change in attitude was that a mentality of *laissez faire* arose with regard to non-Catholics, specifically those who practised fetishism. Fetish priests were no longer considered a direct threat to missionary work but many missionaries, like myself, did not

⁹⁸ I have borrowed the title from MacGaffey (1977). In Anglophone countries, the term ‘fetishism’ is not used much anymore but it is still used in Francophone countries when describing the use of herbs by an *nganga* (*Il est un féticheur*).

approve of converts engaging in fetish practices, such as sacrifices, visiting shrines, consulting fetishes to cure diseases, causing harm to somebody or wearing amulets.

The basic notion did not change in the old antagonistic approach to the concept of fetish or in the more recent and moderate approach to fetishism. A fetish remained – in the view of many missionaries – a product of a superstitious and idolatrous mind. With few exceptions, missionaries did not conduct critical research into the actual function of objects with power, which they tended to call fetishes. But in the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century, anthropologists and other scholars equally omitted to conduct critical research. In retrospect, it would seem that scholars at the time were pre-occupied with developing theories about their (pre-)history and looking for ethnographic data to prove themselves right. They had for a long time been familiar with the reports by missionaries, traders, colonial officers and others who described the ‘repulsive’ rituals in which fetishes featured. In the wake of the Enlightenment, European scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries introduced a yet more philosophical argument against fetishism. They liked to consider themselves ‘children of the Enlightenment’, which implied that, for them, Reason (*Ratio*) was the main source of knowledge. The philosophical discourse of the period adopted different approaches that were known as rationalism, positivism and empiricism. Empiricism was developed strongly by Saint Simon and Auguste Comte and was based on the premises formulated by Immanuel Kant: the main argument was that only the empirical sciences were able to produce reliable knowledge. This implied that, according to the empiricists, theological or metaphysical claims to knowledge had to be discarded as false. This was true for Catholicism but even more so for indigenous African religions. According to Comte, the history of mankind passed through three stages in his ‘law of three stages’. The first stage was the so-called theological stage, in which knowledge was founded on a belief in God or gods. The theological stage was divided into a stage of fetishism, of polytheism and of monotheism. The second stage was the so-called metaphysical stage, in which knowledge is founded on abstract and metaphysical principles. And the third stage is based on modern empirical science,⁹⁹ where modern man finds himself and gives preference to religions that privilege the ‘inside’ above the ‘outside’. In other words, concepts, beliefs and worldviews are more highly esteemed than rituals. Protestantism, and particularly Calvinism, saw religion as an ‘inward’ domain of religious ideas, feelings and inner convictions.

From this mentalistic point of view, scholars took it for granted that the African belief in objects with power was proof of their primitive state of mind and of their early stage of development. Following the Enlightenment, the conviction grew that fetishism was to be destroyed as a prerequisite for progress.¹⁰⁰

The scholarly discourse in the wake of the Enlightenment was more than a theoretical exercise in academic circles. Anthropologists engaged in a linguistic discourse that reproduced a social reality and described Africa as a primitive continent. They engaged in a discursive practice in which they positioned themselves as experts and passed their views on to students in their lectures and the readers of their publications. They derived their authority partly from the academic institutions to which they were attached and

⁹⁹ Comte (1865) and (2009).

¹⁰⁰ Böhne (2006).

partly from the societal prestige that they enjoyed. They influenced the *sensus communis* in large parts of Western Europe. And although they had borrowed much of their information from missionaries working in Africa, they also affected the attitudes of missionaries who took the scholarly discourse as support for their missionary activities. Here too 'lie the roots of the discourse of fetishism as an irrational attribution of life, agency and will to a "mere" thing'.¹⁰¹ They also affected the way in which colonial officers approached Africans. The concept of fetish became more than a mere object with power in some obscure village shrine. It should be described as 'a typical product of the power relations that structured past encounters between Africans and Westerners. The latter employed "fetish" to claim a superior distance from the former in their writings'.¹⁰²

The condescending, if not downright devastating, views of fetish and fetishism by Westerners of all walks of life can be aptly described as a form of appropriation.¹⁰³ An object with power (fetish) had two qualities that made it an easy tool in the process of appropriation by Westerners. First, it had for centuries gained an almost universal reputation for repugnance (as objects were covered with blood and feathers), idolatry and other qualities that made it a metaphor for everything evil in African society. Secondly, it lent itself easily to the discourse about European moral and intellectual superiority over Africans. After all, Africans were not yet in a position to challenge European assumptions, partly because they lacked the scholarly training needed for participation in the discourse and partly because the few Africans who lived in Europe were not in a position to object to any discriminatory arguments.

What would have happened if objects with power in indigenous African religions had been appreciated in their own context? What would the result have been if researchers at the time had assessed the true nature of objects with power? The probable outcome would have been that African indigenous religions, and indirectly all religions, would have been appreciated in a different way. The materiality of African indigenous religions, which is the basis of their existence but has so far been the cause of their rejection by Western scholars, would be appreciated for its intrinsic qualities. It would mean a complete turnaround in the appreciation of the concept of fetish by the West.

This reassessment, which in my view is long overdue, has only recently got off the ground. It is a complex process in which a number of notions and concepts play a part. One is the Western conviction that 'others' (i.e. Africans) are fetishists, while they see themselves as anti-fetishists. Westerners still stick to rational, empirical perceptions of reality. For them, there is an essential difference between fact and fetish. In this perception, a fetish is an idol, made by human hands yet attributed by the same man with an autonomy that it does not possess.¹⁰⁴ Latour explains that the words 'fetish' and 'fact' have the same ambiguous etymology:

¹⁰¹ Meyer (2012: 16).

¹⁰² Meyer (*Ibid.*).

¹⁰³ It should be noted that it was difficult for Europeans (missionaries and anthropologists) to discover the emic meaning of fetishes in the 19th century and at the beginning of 20th century.

¹⁰⁴ Latour (2010: 8).

The word ‘fact’ seems to point to an external reality, and the word ‘fetish’ seems to designate the foolish beliefs of a subject. Both conceal the intense work of construction that allows for both the truth of facts and the truth of minds. Joining the two etymological sources, we shall use the label *factish* for the robust certainty that allows practice to pass into action without the practitioner ever believing in the difference between construction and reality, immanence or transcendence.¹⁰⁵

‘The antagonism between religion and things, spirit and matter, belief and ritual, content and form, mind and body, is sustained by a definition, largely taken for granted, of religion as a system or, to invoke E.B. Tylor’s famous phrasing, “belief in spiritual beings”’.¹⁰⁶ Today, anthropologists researching indigenous African religions veer away from the definition of Tyler and others, and have started working from the opposite direction, namely the materiality of religion. ‘Religion is the practice of making the invisible visible, of concretizing the order of the universe, the nature of human life and its destiny. It is the practice to render them visible and tangible, present to the senses and in the circumstances of everyday life.’¹⁰⁷

By making religion visible through material objects, the invisible can be negotiated and bargained with, touched and kissed, and made to bear human anger and disappointment. The object with power can be handled, even abused or discarded, as we saw above when discussing *ikenga*, *minkisi* and *asuman*.

Not only for anthropologists belonging to Tylor’s school of thought but also for those who study religion from its material perspective, it has been inherently difficult to interpret objects with power. The categories in which Africans attribute meaning to objects with power differ fundamentally from those in the West. Moreover, different ethnic groups and indigenous religions in Africa differ in their attribution of meaning. An additional restriction can be seen in the use of (European) languages in which African researchers publish their findings. This hampers any translation of African concepts.

3.3 The curatorial perspective¹⁰⁸

3.3.1 *Museums and motives*

The differentiation in academic subjects that led to the rise of archaeology, biology, sociology, anthropology and other disciplines at the beginning of the 19th century also resulted in the setting up of museums along these lines too. The museum of ethnography originated in the period when anthropology was coming into its own and when missionaries belonging to different churches were embarking on proselytizing activities in Africa.

Museums may be a relatively recent invention but collecting has been around for a long time. People have collected different ‘things’ at different times and for different reasons. In times of war, people hoard provisions, amenities and supplies that they fear may run out. In the past, army generals looted conquered cities and lands and war boo-

¹⁰⁵ Latour (2010: 21-22).

¹⁰⁶ Meyer & Houtman (2012: 2).

¹⁰⁷ Orsi (2012: 147-158).

¹⁰⁸ Analogous to the two previous categories that I have named after those who were the ‘workers’, I have chosen to describe this category in terms of the museum workers (i.e. curators) who had a large although not the sole responsibility for collecting and collection policies in the museums of ethnography.

ty, including objects made of gold and silver, was collected and taken home where it was stored until it was needed to organize another military expedition. At times they were displayed in temples for everyone to see, and to show the military achievements of the generals.

Churches and monasteries also began collections but they were particularly interested in relics of saints.¹⁰⁹ These relics, on display in golden reliquaries, drew hundreds of pilgrims to churches or chapels and provided not only prestige but also an income for the monks. Successive popes amassed vast quantities of precious objects that they used to embellish the churches they had built.

Between the 13th and 15th centuries, when Europe was predominantly Catholic, the rich and powerful who wanted to distinguish themselves from others set up what was called a *Wunderkammer* or *Kunstammer*. They collected rare specimens of stuffed animals, gems, and plants (preferably from remote and exotic regions) and exhibited them in palaces and stately homes to show visitors the *mirabilia Dei*, the wonderful creations of God. Later on and especially after the Renaissance, wealthy citizens collected and proudly displayed paintings, statues and other (art) objects by famous artists for their visitors, especially rival nobility. These were the precursors of museums.

The first museums were formally established in the 18th century but their roots can be found in the *Wunderkammer*. This was the case with the Nationalmuseet in Copenhagen that originated from the Royal *Kunstammer* of Frederik III about 1650 and was in fact the amalgamation of several private collections, including that of Paludanus (1550-1633), a medical doctor and collector from Enkhuizen.¹¹⁰

During the Enlightenment, it was no longer God's *mirabilia* that was the motive for collecting but the achievements of the *Ratio*. The reason for collecting was a desire for knowledge and this led to the setting up of the first major museums: the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford in 1683, the British Museum in London in 1753 and the Louvre in Paris in 1793. They were encyclopaedic museums as they covered all the disciplines that were taught at universities and began to extend the subjects they offered according to the differentiation of the disciplines that scholars were developing: archaeology, biology, anthropology and others. This differentiation in turn led to the establishment of specialized museums, such as ethnographic museums.¹¹¹ Directors and curators were university trained and the museums of ethnography differed little from each other regarding the kinds of objects they collected although their motives for collecting them varied. They specialized in the acquisition of objects from cultures and societies outside Europe and that were in the process of being 'discovered' by explorers, traders, missionaries and others.

Within the category of ethnographic museums, three more or less autonomous types of museums can be distinguished: the university museum, the colonial museum and the missionary museum. They differed not in the kind of objects they collected but in their reasons for collecting them.

¹⁰⁹ There are reported to be 27 monasteries in Europe that possess the lower jaw of John the Baptist.

¹¹⁰ Dam-Mikkelsen & Lundbaek (1980).

¹¹¹ Founded in the 1830s, the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden and the Nationalmuseet of the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen are the world's oldest museums of ethnography.

University Museums

Curators at university museums of ethnography collected objects in order to study and display them in a scholarly manner. The museums were either part of a university or closely associated with them: the Oriental Museum at Durham University, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford, the Africa Department at the British Museum, the Museum of Ethnography in Leiden, the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren and the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin.

Curators of ethnographic university museums tried to acquire objects that would support ethnographers' and anthropologists' scholarly research. General Pitt Rivers collected objects that enabled him to explain a linear development of form in weapons with the same function, such as spears and bows and arrows, but also combs and musical instruments. His search was motivated by a drive to prove the theories of evolution, not only in biology but also in culture, particularly material culture. (see Figure 44)

The origins of cultural and political institutions, such as marriage, democracy, government and the state, were sought in early (pre-)history and in remote regions where people were assumed to still live in conditions that Europe had moved on from. The search was initiated by students of evolution: the development from nature to culture through the different stages of development that every culture was expected to follow.¹¹²

One of the assumptions that researchers had developed was that the origin of mankind was monogenetic and that it was made up of a psychic unity. Phenomena from different cultures that resembled each other could thus be interpreted from one and the same perspective. It was assumed that mankind had enjoyed a linear or evolutionary development.¹¹³

Pitt Rivers was a British army general who had served in several colonies before he was given the mandate to determine the most suitable gun to use in colonial circumstances. This provided him with the opportunity to assemble a large collection of traditional weapons from different countries that he displayed in his private house according to a principle of 'sequence': 'So as to trace, as far as practicable, the succession of ideas by which the minds of men in a primitive condition of culture have progressed from the simple to the complex, and from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous'.¹¹⁴ His classification concentrated on a series of objects that were grouped according to function and divided into small exhibition groups, with the aim of suggesting an evolutionary progression by placing those forms classified as more 'natural' and organic at the beginning of a series and culminating in more 'complex' and specialized forms. This is known as a morphological or typological system.¹¹⁵

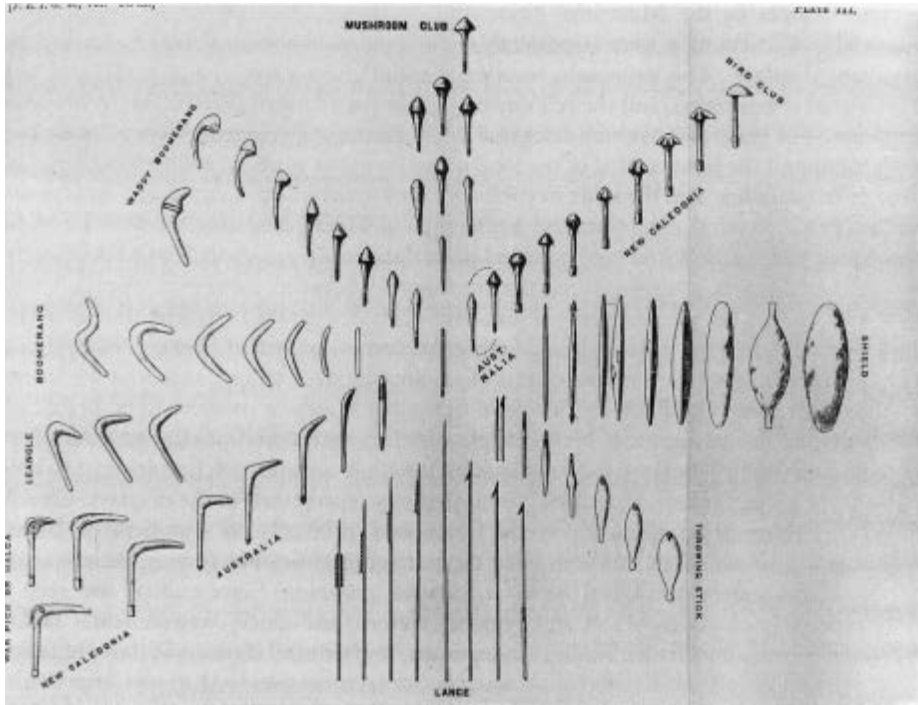
¹¹² Frese (1960: 36-44).

¹¹³ Frese (1960: 45).

¹¹⁴ Pitt Rivers (1991: 2). From his speech at the opening of his exhibition at the South Kensington Museum in 1874.

¹¹⁵ Coombes (1994: 118).

Figure 44 From a simple stick (in the middle), Pitt Rivers constructed the evolution of Australian weapons



In 1883, Pitt Rivers offered his collection of about 20,000 objects to the University of Oxford on condition that a special museum be opened to house it. The Pitt Rivers Museum is still a university museum in Oxford and although it bears his name, the collections in the main hall (the Court) have not been arranged according to his classification. (see Figures 45 and 46) The present curator, Jeremy Coote, recently wrote:

The installation of the first displays was carried out by Henri Balfour, who drew on General Pitt Rivers' ideas about the evolution of forms of material culture from simple to complex, but designed the displays to manifest his own versions of such theories. Displayed in typological series, the objects were arranged to illustrate the development of technologies, ideas and forms. After his death in 1939, and in response to changes in anthropological and archaeological thinking, Balfour's evolutionary series were dismantled from the 1940s onwards.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Coote (2011: 22-23).

Figure 45 Henry Balfour in a gallery at the Pitt Rivers Museum showing its typological classification, c. 1895



Figure 46 'The Court' or main hall at the Pitt Rivers Museum c. 1895. Very little has changed since then



*Colonial museums*¹¹⁷

Curators at colonial museums collected, as the name suggests, objects from the colonies and displayed them in the motherland. Many of these objects did not differ much from the objects acquired by the university museums of ethnography but the motives for collecting differed significantly. Colonial museums were quick to show the ‘natural talents’ of the inhabitants of the colonies, such as in basketry, pottery, weaving and textiles, and statues of gods and spiritual powers were collected from a number of countries and cultures. These included Hindu and Buddhist statues in stone or other precious materials from the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), India and other South Asian countries. The colonies were generally regarded by Europeans as having a ‘high’ culture, unlike Africa and Oceania that had ‘primitive’ cultures.

Household and other objects that illustrated daily life were specifically collected to illustrate the colonies from the perspective of the colonial government. Colonial museums were subsidized by the colonial ministries and were expected to show the public at large the beneficial work the colonial government was doing in remote areas and something of the cultures, religions and customs there, and how the motherland was benefiting from colonial activities. Colonial museums had a tradition of defending government policies in the colonies.¹¹⁸

Curators’ motives for assembling colonial collections were not initially to understand the original meaning or function of the objects they had on display. The mandate of the colonial museum was to justify its government’s colonial policy as a *mission civilisatrice*. The museum’s message was that the government’s colonial policy was beneficial for the economic, social and spiritual development of the ‘subjects overseas’ who would continue to live in desperate circumstances if the motherland did not intervene. The curators of colonial museums were able to present the colonial achievements on education (schools, teacher training), medical care (hospitals, vaccination programmes), infrastructure (roads, harbours, railways) and government (laws, bureaucracy, judicial system), although this trend was more obvious in the 20th century. They also showed the natural talents of the colonized peoples, such as their arts and crafts (weaving, basketry, wood carving), which indicated that, with European assistance, these peoples could in due course develop into world citizens. From this point of view, the colonial museum played a central role in the relationship between governments and their own citizens, but also between the government and overseas territories. They were instruments in the continuous government-sponsored public-relations campaign.

¹¹⁷ Although the heydays of colonial museums were in the 20th century, the first colonial museums opened in the 19th century, which is why they are introduced here.

¹¹⁸ Most European countries with colonial possessions established at least one colonial museum. The Colonial Museum in Haarlem (and from 1910 in Amsterdam) is the oldest in the world and was founded in 1864. The World Museum in Rotterdam opened its doors in 1885, as did the Imperial Institute in London in 1887, the Linden Museum in Stuttgart in 1890, the Übersee Museum in Bremen in 1896 and the Colonial Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (near Brussels) in 1897, to name but a few.

*Missionary museums*¹¹⁹

Missionary museums were in many respects like other museums of ethnography. They differed, however, in their motives for collecting objects and particularly in their presentation. These museums had, generally speaking, no university-trained curators but appointed one or more missionaries who had shown a special interest in African art or in aspects that were central in the museum to this position. As a rule, missionary congregations requested missionaries in the field to collect objects from the regions where they were active. The objects could be used for temporary exhibitions when missionaries spoke of their work in Africa, Indonesia, China or any other ‘mission territory’. In a few cases, these exhibitions were transformed into permanent displays in the convent or in a special building that had all the features of a museum. Their main *raison d’être* was to support the missionary activities of the congregation. Their motives for collecting and displaying objects were twofold. Firstly, the objects served to show the (mostly Catholic) visitors how ‘pagan’, ‘superstitious’ and ‘idolatrous’ the people were among whom the missionaries were working. Understandably, objects were selected for display based on their pagan appearance or the idolatrous cult in which they had featured. And secondly, the exhibition, and especially the contribution by the missionaries, served to explain that their good work was indispensable for the salvation of the souls of these ‘poor people’.

Missionary exhibitions

In the last quarter of the 19th century, the churches and missionary societies in the UK started to organize large-scale missionary exhibitions. The first was in 1867 and was considered a manifestation of a common national goal that would inspire visitors, and especially the poor, to turn their minds to a higher purpose that could elevate them from the drudgery of their own hardship. At the opening of the exhibition entitled ‘The Orient in London’ that was organized by the London Missionary Society, Winston Churchill said: ‘Even the poorest are called upon to feel for the injustices of others and to forget their own’.¹²⁰ (see Figure 47)

This appears as a new approach to the relationship between Europe and Africa. Instead of the condescending attitude of superiority and arrogance, the tune started to change to one of pity and empathy for those in Africa who were suffering even more than the poor in the UK.

This new approach is discussed in Chapter 4.

¹¹⁹ Missionary museums played a role in Christian Europe in the 20th century but their origins can be found in the missionary exhibitions that were first set up in the 19th century.

¹²⁰ Coombes (1994: 163).

Figure 47 Front cover of the London Missionary Society magazine in 1908 giving advance notice of 'The Orient in London' exhibition



3.3.2 *Acquisitions and appropriations*

Modes of Acquisition

Museums of ethnography in former colonial powers have large collections, some of them numbering hundreds of thousands of objects. If our assessment here is restricted to Africa collections, we can observe that the ways in which the collections were put together were not without problems. The first was in the acquisition process. In the 19th century, curators of museums of ethnography did not travel to Africa and objects were primarily acquired in three different ways. The first was as purchases or gifts. Curators purchased objects from Europeans living or working in Africa who had acquired them from 'locals'. Local chiefs in Africa presented objects to Europeans for different motives and the objects could be purchased by curators from merchants, travellers or others after their return from Africa. And some collections were purchased at auctions. Secondly, some museums, in conjunction with universities, organized special expeditions to Africa and elsewhere for research purposes and to acquire collections. And thirdly, a number of museums acquired collections that had been captured after the defeat of an enemy in a colonial skirmish.

Most objects were not collected by museum experts themselves in the field but were purchased from or presented by traders, missionaries, colonial officers and others.¹²¹

Figure 48 Officers from the British Punitive Expedition with bronzes and ivories taken from the Benin Royal Palace, 1897



For a long time these objects were called ‘curios’, which indicates how they were viewed by those who collected them, and at times by the curators who had them on display. Some directors or curators of museums had contacts in Africa who collected objects on their behalf. Dutch merchants who were working for Dutch companies along the coast of what is now Congo and Angola visited villages for business but they took the opportunity to enter villages and acquire objects, purchasing or exchanging them from the ‘negroes’. They had the means to ship them through their companies to the Netherlands where they were sent to the Museum of Ethnography in Leiden or to Amsterdam Zoo (Artis), which had not only a biological department (the zoo) but also a cultural department, i.e. a museum of ethnography.¹²² The same was true of colonial museums in the UK, France, Belgium, Germany and Portugal. Incidental objects, such as bronze and ivory treasures from Benin, were purchased at auctions. A British punitive expedition conquered and plundered the capital of the Benin Kingdom in Nigeria in 1897. The loot included the world-famous bronze portraits of the kings and queen

¹²¹ Willink (2006).

¹²² In 1910, the Artis collections were transferred to the newly established Colonial Museum in Amsterdam.

mothers of Benin, close to 1000 bronze plaques that had adorned the walls of the palace, ivory tusks and other objects carved in a delicate and elegant style. The Benin collections were auctioned off in London and purchased by the leading museums of ethnography of the time in London, Vienna, Berlin, Leiden and Paris.¹²³ (see Figure 48)

Some colonial powers allowed their museums to organize expeditions in which geographers, biologists and anthropologists took part. The Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde had almost 10.000 African ‘tribal’ objects when it opened in 1886. Many of these came from expeditions, such as that by Barth to Central Sudan (1850-1855), Rolphs in 1867, Schweinfurth in the Nile regions (1868-1871) and others.¹²⁴ Germany forcefully annexed large regions of Cameroon in 1884 and carried regalia and other royal objects from the palaces back to Germany. On the other hand, King Njoya of Bamum established such a good relationship with the German army lieutenant who invaded his territory that he donated his father’s regal throne to the Emperor of Germany in 1906. The throne is now in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin. (see Figure 49)

Figure 49 King Njoya of Bamum donated his father’s throne to the German Emperor. It is now in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin



¹²³ In the early years of the 19th century, Napoleon looted palaces and churches all over Europe and carried their treasures off to Paris but France was forced to return them after his defeat. The same nations had no qualms in looting African kingdoms and maintained that there were no legal grounds for return or restitution. See Leyten (1995; 1997).

¹²⁴ Paudrat in: Rubin (1984: 125-175).

There were cases of military confrontations between a colonial army and the armies of an African king that resulted in the looting of palaces and kingdoms. The booty was donated to or purchased by colonial museums in the motherland. There are no records of a colonial museum refusing to accept booty or reacting critically to such offers.

The King of Dahomey had a reputation among Europeans for being a ruthless and aggressive ruler who opposed every form of foreign domination. At the same time, he tried to establish good relations with foreign rulers by sending them presents. (see Figure 50) When the slave trade was abolished, he lost a substantial amount of income from the sale of slaves but shipped a throne to Brazilian rulers, asking them to purchase slaves directly from him.¹²⁵ In 1894, French troops conquered Abomey, Béhanzin's capital city, and looted his palace. The loot was carried to Paris and displayed in the Musée de Trocadéro. Newspapers described the action as 'A victory of Faith over Hea-thenism' and 'A victory of reason over degrading Fetishism'.

Figure 50 The throne donated by King Behanzin of Dahomey to the German Emperor, 1892



¹²⁵ Dr P. Junge, Völkerkunde Museum Berlin. Personal communication, 2014.

Decontextualization

A problem that accompanied the acquisition of African objects 'in the field' was decontextualization. Acquiring objects directly or indirectly from Africans meant that they were removed from their African contexts: their shrines, royal palaces, family homes and/or the events in which they featured.

Decontextualization is an issue that affects many museums but it is especially important in museums of ethnography when objects with power from cults in indigenous African religions are removed from their original shrines and placed in glass display cases in museums in Europe. Regal attributes that featured in pomp and pageantry in the context of royal courts in Ashanti, Benin, or Congo were then placed behind glass and became as it were a still life. Apart from their physical removal from their original context, the removal was done selectively in many if not all instances. Masquerades in Africa were (and still are) a complex combination of many elements: a colourful display of costumes made of textiles or fibres and masks made of wood, fibres or other materials that covered the dancer's face; musical instruments, especially drums; groups of dancers and singers but also the immaterial elements such as the music itself and the texts of the songs, which in many cases explain the intricacies of the dance or comment (on behalf of the dancers) and certain incidents that took place in the village during the last few months or year.

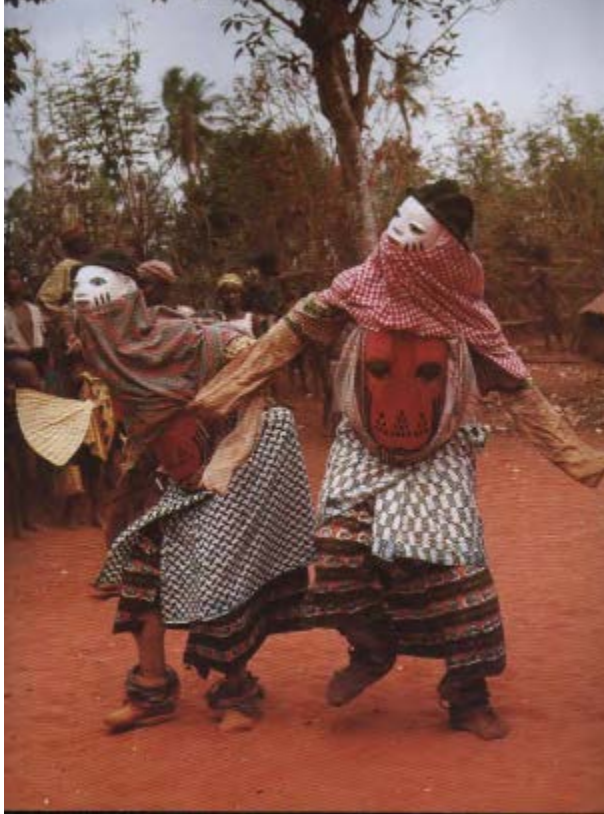
There are also dances to honour the deceased who have become ancestors (see Figures 51 and 52); dances that are prayers to the gods for rain or for a cure to end an epidemic; dances for entertainment and others to celebrate the neophytes who have just completed their rites of passage.

For the African spectators at a festival, the entire outfit of the dancer was considered the 'mask', while the complete performance, including the music, the texts of the songs and the dance movements were an indispensable part of the spectacle. However, European collectors more often than not collected the wooden facial covering that they called the mask and left the rest of the objects, including musical instruments and other attributes and, importantly, the entire context behind. To them, the facial covering, i.e. the mask, was the most attractive element and had greater aesthetic quality to the collector than the rest of the outfit. Apart from the aesthetic aspect, there were additional arguments for this selective collecting. Among them was the fear that the costumes might be infected with insects, that the dance dresses were in a poor state of repair or that they would be difficult to transport. Music and dance movements could not (at least not in the 19th century) be collected. Decontextualization therefore does not only mean that objects have been removed from their original context but also that they have been isolated from other objects with which they formed an organic cultural or religious union. This is known as selective collecting.

The same applied to religious or ritual objects. From the entire collection of ritual objects in a shrine, it would be those objects that appealed to the European explorer or collector and to the museum curator, such as a recognizable figure of a human being or an animal carved in wood, that would be removed, but offerings of eggs or fruit or even coins placed in front of the statues were left behind. Earthenware pots, perhaps filled with some unattractive liquid or half broken, as a rule were left behind too. In most cas-

es, the collector was not interested in objects that surrounded the centrepiece of the shrine, such as (modern) glass bottles or china plates, as if they played no part in the ritual.

Figure 51 Gelede masks dancing in pairs, celebrating womanhood, Yoruba, Nigeria



Many of the elements that constituted the *couleur locale* of the cult were deemed unattractive, irrelevant or even filthy, and thus not worth collecting. The result was that the mask or the statue that had been collected lost its original context long before it arrived in a museum in Europe.

Appropriation

This process of decontextualization had a significant effect on the correct understanding of objects and the meaning that they had in their original context. Curators who were aware of the problem stayed in touch with collectors in the field who had access to villages in the interior and requested that they also collect the names that the ‘natives’ used

for the objects they collected.¹²⁶ Although a number of collectors did so, the ‘native’ names that accompanied the objects were not always sufficient to describe the context in which the object featured. The result was that many objects were incomplete and the information in the displays was at times insufficient or incorrect.

Figure 52 A Dogon dancer has become *Sau*, by wearing the prescribed dress and facial cover (called the *mask* by Europeans). He is dancing at the *Dama* (second burial) of Tireku (Tireli), Mali, 2008



¹²⁶ Willink (2006: 19).

An example will elucidate this point. For many years, finely carved statues of male as well as female figures by the Baule in Ivory Coast were favourite collectibles among Europeans. Until about 1980, they were considered by collectors and art historians to represent the ancestors, as is documented in books on African art from that time. Baule statues, which the Baule themselves called *boloban* or *bolobla*, could not be understood properly by collectors in the field as Europeans (from the perspective of their Christian or even philosophical traditions) could not envisage a typical Baule concept of *blolo* (a here-before or otherworld).¹²⁷ Research by Vogel *et al.* showed that these statues did not represent the ancestor but were ‘spiritual counterparts’ in the world that precedes pregnancy and childbirth.

The Ibo *ikenga* figures were described by missionaries and anthropologists in the field as ‘Gods of War and Fortune’. The Ibo were an acephalous society without a central authority and without a God in the Christian sense. Yet the British installed ‘warrant chiefs’ and translated a vague concept of *Chi* as the notion of God because British researchers, from their Victorian perspective, could not envisage a tribe without rulers or a spiritual world without a Creator God. The curators of the museums of ethnography accepted the descriptions that accompanied the objects at the moment of accession as accurate. They were not in a position to go to Africa and check the source and origins of the objects.

The process of decontextualization facilitated the process of appropriation. Curators who lacked the correct information about the objects they acquired were tempted to make up their own versions. This happened with the interpretation of Baule *boloban* and *bolobla*, which for many years were considered ancestor figures, and the Ibo *Ikenga* that was called ‘God of War and Fortune’. It was not always a matter of not possessing accurate information. In a number of cases, curators were not genuinely interested in the emic meaning that the objects had had in their original context, as they intended to display the objects in a way that suited themselves or their museum’s director. The two Yoruba *Epa* masks, which were discussed in Chapter 1, were explained in various ways but even fifty years after their arrival in the museum, none of the explanations did justice to the meaning that the Yoruba themselves attributed to them.

The decontextualization of objects from their original African context resulted in misunderstandings and misinterpretations of their original meanings. This facilitated the appropriation of the objects and their meanings by museum curators who, in turn, attributed new meanings (including stereotypes) to them. Even if curators in the 19th century were not in a position to do fieldwork in Africa and if misunderstandings due to decontextualization could be explained, we cannot but say that the result was that these curators contributed to not only inadequate information about African culture but also to prejudices about Africa as a continent ‘low on the ladder of civilization’. Objects with power were stamped as ‘primitive’, ‘idolatrous’ and ‘pagan’ and that label stayed with them throughout most of this period.

If we apply Critical Discourse Analysis, we could say that curators engage in a discourse with their visitors when they organize an exhibition. The display is a linguistic practice in which the objects on display, the labels for the objects but also the arrange-

¹²⁷ See Chapter 3.2.3.

ment of the objects in the showcase, including the colours and the lighting, form a ‘text’ in the way Fairclough uses it.¹²⁸ This discourse creates or reproduces a social reality. The curator positions himself as an expert on Africa, identifies himself with the reputation that the museum acquired during the Enlightenment as a temple of knowledge, and could even place himself as a representative of African cultures in Europe. To the same extent that visitors accepted this position of authority, they also accepted the social reality as a factual reality as they were unable to check the information provided by the curator in his display.

3.3.3 *Interpretations and presentations*

The interpretation of objects

In the second half of the 19th century when museums were springing up all over Europe and becoming increasingly influential in shaping public opinion, they seemed to possess a superior authority. The quest for knowledge, which characterized the Enlightenment, had given them an aura of objectivity and reliability. Objects were presented as facts; objects could not lie, or so it was believed. Curators were considered experts who knew what the objects stood for and they saw themselves as experts in the interpretation of the objects. Yet, anthropologists, ethnographers and curators were aware that there were several ways of interpreting objects. Did objects possess an intrinsic meaning that could be understood by looking at the object? Or was meaning attributed to objects by those who had produced them or who were using them?

These discussions led some scholars to believe that a ‘language of things’ existed: objects (things) were thus said to have a language of their own. And anyone who wanted to know their meaning had to learn the language.¹²⁹ An *ikenga* statue could be studied as a sign in the Saussurian sense of the word: the *signifié* (signified) is the concept of achievement by the owner of the *ikenga* (the killing of another man to attain adulthood; the achievement of obtaining titles), while the *signifier* is the actual statue. It is possible to distinguish a number of smaller units within the *ikenga* figure that, in turn, could be analyzed in *signifié* and *signifiers*. The machete and the severed head were seen as *signifiers* of successful killing and many more details of each *ikenga* could be analyzed along these lines. The question remains: do they contribute to the meaning of the *ikenga* as it was understood by the owner or as it was understood in the village community or the title society? I would lean towards saying that they do not.

Another example may serve to elucidate this point: many, particularly smaller, African statues of human figures show bodily proportions with which European art historians were not familiar. While the head of the standard Greek statue is a sixth of the height of the total sculpture, the heads of many West African states account for between a third and a quarter of the total sculpture. The distance between the shoulders and hips proved to be as much as that between the hips and the feet, as research in the collection at the Africa Centre showed.¹³⁰ This system may be valuable for a systematic analysis

¹²⁸ Fairclough (1992: 72, 80, 95).

¹²⁹ See De Saussure (1966).

¹³⁰ Van Trigt, personal communication, 1957

of the proportions and could be considered part of the ‘language of things’ but does not, in itself, contribute to any understanding of their meaning. It is people who attribute meanings to objects (see Chapter 2).

Objects, for example dance masks, that were dissociated (decontextualized) from their original context lost their original meaning. The people who once attributed meaning to the objects – the dancers, musicians, participants and onlookers – are also no longer there. The decontextualized objects are given new meanings in their new environment, i.e. the museum context. Curators, museum staff (educators, museum guides) and even visitors attribute new meanings to them in a process of appropriation. These meanings change over time, as the history of the two *Yoruba Epa* masks described in Chapter 1 shows.

Many curators are firmly convinced that a museum provides a secure and neutral setting in which objects will not deteriorate as they would in their original context in everyday life in a challenging climate or where they could be damaged by insects. A museum will preserve them forever. The British Museum houses statues that were designed to stand in the open in squares or on the spires of churches and the gables of public buildings. And paintings that were made for churches and religious ceremonies may hang on the walls of profane buildings.

Curators of ethnographic museums believe in the same principles of conservation and longevity. The question is not whether this principle is also adhered to by those Africans who attributed the original meaning to the object. Could it be that certain objects were made for a singular event and then left to decay? The Dogon are known to have little appreciation for ‘old’ objects that have served their original purpose and they discard them. They are puzzled when European art lovers prefer the ‘old’ to the ‘new’. Certain Dogon traders do not hesitate to make new masks ‘old’ to fulfil the wishes of their European customers.

The presentation of objects

To show their superiority, museums prided themselves on their displays of objects of exceptional quality, archaeological importance, exotic beauty and/or unique sculptural quality. A museum’s reputation was measured by the quality of its objects, especially its ‘top’ exhibits. Objects in a collection were seen as adding distinction and the purchase of objects was an entry permit into the elitist, highly revered world of connoisseurs. Such objects were not, first and foremost, objects of study but of prestige. Curators did not hesitate to appropriate the meanings of objects or the context in which they had featured to suit their own purposes. Pomian speaks of ‘semiophores’ – objects laden with meaning – even if they have lost their original meaning and are not being collected for their original meaning.¹³¹

Famous examples in this respect are the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum, which were removed from the Parthenon Temple at the Acropolis in Athens in the early years of the 19th century and shipped to London to add prestige to the museum. Lord Elgin’s argument for their removal was the poor state they were in and the inadequate mainte-

¹³¹ Pomian (1990: 54).

nance they were receiving in Athens. An even more notorious example is Napoleon's amassing of precious works of art during his military expeditions through Europe and Egypt, and their subsequent housing in museums in Paris to turn the city into the cultural capital of Europe. In his megalomaniac views of his Empire, he had no qualms about stealing collections.

The new museums of the 19th century, including museums of ethnography, mirrored the intellectual discourse regarding the cultural superiority of Europe and the low status of 'primitive' peoples. The objects collected and acquired by curators of the ethnography museums and the way they were displayed said more about the collectors and the curators than about the cultures from which the objects originated.¹³² Motives for collecting had been the personal and subjective tastes of collectors and curators and much of what the museums of ethnography presented to their visitors had little relevance for the 'native view'. As indicated above, many African objects had been collected selectively and were incomplete. Any information about 'native meaning' that came with them was often incomplete and, in many instances, incorrect. All the objects on display suffered from the process of decontextualization. Curators were unable to recreate the original context and so created a new context that *de facto* alienated objects even further from their original meaning. They appropriated the original context and meaning of the acquired object for their own goals and those of their museum. When the French conquerors of the capital city of Abomey (in present-day Benin) laid their hands on the royal throne of King Béhanzin and shipped it to France, they interpreted the skulls of conquered enemies, which adorned the seat, as proof of the wicked character of the king and his armies, taking it as a sign of cannibalism. The curators did not contradict them.

For some museums, their goal was to show their colonial superiority over primitive people in Africa while others aimed to attract European visitors to come and admire exotic 'specimens' of African origin. These were often objects but sometimes human beings, such as Saartje Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus', a young woman with large buttocks who was taken from Southern Africa in the early 1800s to go on display in European museums. (see Figure 53)

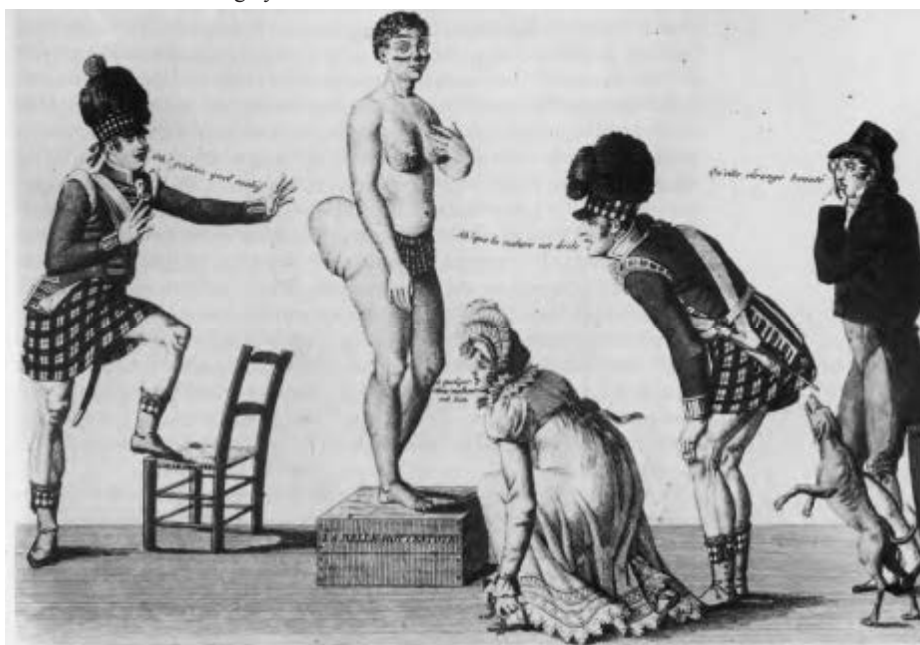
Ways of presenting objects

For university museums of ethnography, the scholarly study of objects added yet another perspective to the objects: evolutionary theories. This contributed little to a better understanding of either the objects or the cultures from which they originated. At the other end of the spectrum, curators of popular museums of ethnography were keen to show the public their curiosities and, by so doing, strengthened the negative stereotypes about Africa that existed in Europe at the time. Certain assumptions about race and racial characteristics in relation to Africa were already common currency among the

¹³² Africa curators of ethnographic museums who were trained as anthropologists prefer to talk of 'material culture' rather than 'African art'. Yet when they visit auction houses, they know how to distinguish between a 'good piece' and a 'top piece'. If their budget allows it, they will purchase the latter even if the former would convey the object's original function and meaning to museum visitors just as well.

growing middle-class public.¹³³ Most curators did little to disprove these notions. On the contrary, as museums were associated with the rising authority of anthropology, they too acquired a certain credibility.¹³⁴

Figure 53 Saartje Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus’. Comments: ‘Oh! Goddam, what roast beef’, ‘From every misfortune may some good’; ‘Af! How comical is nature’; ‘How strangely beautiful!’



I have already discussed the way in which Pitt Rivers presented his collection, namely according to theories of evolution: ‘linearly, in terms of externally defined formal or functional qualities, to convey an ethnocentric message of conservative evolutionary gradualism’.¹³⁵ He developed his ‘Principles of Classification’ that he discussed in lectures and speeches, and applied them to his own collection. ‘Progress is like a game of dominoes. All that we know is that the fundamental rule of the game is sequence.’¹³⁶

In most museums of ethnography in Europe and America in the 19th century, curators did not follow the ideas of Pitt Rivers but grouped objects together according to their place or culture of origin. The American Museum of Natural History in New York combined exhibitions on nature with exhibitions about the world’s cultures. After its

¹³³ Coombes (1994: 166).

¹³⁴ Feuchtwang (1973: 71-100).

¹³⁵ Stocking (1985: 8).

¹³⁶ Bowden (1984: 2).

opening in 1894, Franz Boas became a curator, and later Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University where he taught a number of outstanding anthropologists. He opposed the evolutionary display of objects, as introduced by Pitt Rivers, maintaining that ethnographic collections should be arranged according to ethnic group (he called them 'tribes') to show the peculiar style of each group. According to Boas, cultures were integrated wholes produced by specific historical processes rather than universal evolutionary stages and he organized his exhibitions in New York along these lines.

This approach to the systematic ordering of objects developed into the theory of diffusionism. Diffusionists criticized the notion of a linear progression from simple to complex, and from primitive to advanced. Some believed that all cultures originated from one point in the world, namely Egypt. Others, notably in Germany, believed that cultures existed in 'circles' (*Kulturkreise*). This model looked for comparable cultures that existed in a given evolutionary period and they were developed in linear historic strata (*Kulturstufe*). American scholars developed a model that they described as 'culture areas', a diffusionist notion. These theories, which were developed in the 20th century, are discussed in Chapter 4.2.

It is noteworthy that early anthropological field research, inspired by the theories of diffusionism and 'culture areas', was conducted on islands: the studies of Tikopia (by Firth), the Tobriand Islands (by Malinowski) and the Andaman Islands (by Radcliffe-Brown) are particularly well known. Being isolated and surrounded by water, they would, it was assumed, more readily fit into the system of 'culture areas'. It was probably for this reason that fieldwork in Africa, which was not an island and could not be divided into 'culture areas' in the strict sense of the word, started later. One may wonder if the emphasis by early anthropologists on studying 'tribes' (i.e. ethnic groups in a more or less demarcated area) was not inspired by these island studies. If this is the case, van Beek has suggested that we could speak of an 'islandization' of Africa.¹³⁷

Generally speaking, museums of ethnography that were not closely connected to a university were not concerned with theories of interpretations and presentations. The Royal Museum of Central Africa covered only this geographical area and arranged its collections from the region along tribal lines. The museum's overall atmosphere was one of condescension towards an uncivilized race. This was emphasized by a larger-than-life sculpted scene in the middle of the museum that depicted a savage-looking, masked (African) member of a secret society who was wearing iron hooks on his fingers and was attacking a victim. (see Figure 54)

The Horniman Museum in London, which was founded as a private museum in the 1880s, focused on the slave trade and the material cultures of Dahomeyans or Zulus, both of whom were viewed as aggressive fighters with a penchant for human sacrifice and gratuitous violence.¹³⁸ A journalist at the time gave the following description of the museum's galleries:

Although the African collections [in the Horniman] have very little fascination from a picturesque point of view, yet they are attractive to us, because they portray the vast difference that exists between the civilised and uncivilised races of the world. The dress, the weapons used, the domestic utensils

¹³⁷ Van Beek, personal communication, 2012.

¹³⁸ Coombes (1994: 115).

and other articles seem so peculiar to the Western eye that it is almost impossible for us to imagine that at one time in the annals of Great Britain a similar state of affairs existed.¹³⁹

Figure 54 The Leopard Man in the Museum Tervuren



The author compares the state of uncivilized races to the presumed uncivilized state in which his forbears had lived and implies that, due to their own endeavours, the British became a civilized nation. He also suggests that the uncivilized races lacked the initiative and energy required to develop into a civilized nation.

World exhibitions

Special open-air exhibitions called ‘world exhibitions’ or ‘colonial exhibitions’ began in the 19th century.¹⁴⁰ The ethnocentric perspectives that were visible in the museums of ethnography were even more evident in the world exhibitions and particularly so in the colonial exhibitions that drew tens of thousands of visitors, not least because they showed living ‘specimens’ of men and women from the colonies living (temporarily) in

¹³⁹ From a series of articles about the Horniman Museum that appeared in the *Examiner* in 1896. Cited by Coombes (1994: 117).

¹⁴⁰ Barringer & Flynn (1999).

huts, cooking their native food and dancing to the rhythms of drums.¹⁴¹ ‘Natives’ were exhibited in carefully reconstructed villages and were asked to perform ritual dances for spectators. The message behind these presentations was that, after the often violent subjugation of aggressive tribes, the world exhibitions were to show that the process of civilization that was being undertaken by the European colonial powers was bearing fruit.¹⁴²

These exhibitions were huge undertakings that involved years of preparation and massive investment by governments, local authorities and private companies. One of the major concerns was how to furnish the many different exhibits with the required materials and, perhaps even more importantly, with men and women from the country on display. Deals were made with museums of ethnography that the collections assembled for the exhibitions would come to the museums after the show was over.¹⁴³

Special expeditions were organized to remote corners of the world to supply the exhibitions and the leading museums of the time with new collections. Among the museums that benefitted were the museums in Rome (1876), Oxford (1884), Cambridge (1888), Berlin (1886) and Leipzig (1885), but also the world exhibitions in London (1851), Paris (1855), Amsterdam (1883) and Paris (1889).

Tens of thousands of people visited each of these exhibitions where they could familiarize themselves with new inventions and technologies but also with colonial spectacles such as African ‘natives’ (apparently) living in their natural habitats, going about their daily chores and dancing their native dances. The effects of these efforts were manifest: the exhibitions popularized colonial museums in Western Europe; and also ethnography. At the same time, however, they created and strengthened an already existing ‘amused condescension for what looks merely crude, archaic, and childish’.¹⁴⁴

World exhibitions were temporary events where special attractions, such as the above-mentioned live performances by natives, could be staged. They were more attractive than the museums of ethnography that could only display collections of static objects. The former showed mock villages and dramatic re-enactments for visitors who may well have travelled a long way to visit the exhibition and who probably came from rural areas and had never seen a ‘negro’ before. The exhibitions were fascinating events. The possibility of possession as well as being an active participant at an event rather than simply being a passive observer was another aspect that they could offer and that was lacking in museums.¹⁴⁵

World exhibitions appealed mostly to middle-class and lower-middle-class citizens. They were not familiar with the scholarly discourse and relied for their information on what they heard and saw during such visits. And most were not critical of what they saw

¹⁴¹ This same ‘show’ was repeated at the 1958 World Exhibition in Brussels. Congolese men and women were ‘on display’ and visitors threw peanuts and bananas at them. The Congolese objected to this discriminating treatment and left the exhibition to return to Congo.

¹⁴² Nederveen Pieterse (1990).

¹⁴³ The Colonial Exhibition in Amsterdam bequeathed large ethnographic collections to the Museum of Ethnography in Leiden and the Colonial Museum in Haarlem (now the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam).

¹⁴⁴ Rubin (1984: 130).

¹⁴⁵ Coombes (1994: 113).

and heard either. The middle-class viewer was too thoroughly steeped in evolutionary doctrines related to such material to avoid associations with any interpretation of the display. The spectacular events at the world exhibitions with their live shows of Africans dancing, cooking and fighting mock battles were so overwhelming for the average visitor that any potentially critical remarks were silenced.¹⁴⁶

The inadequate way in which many objects had been collected – with incorrect information, decontextualization and subjective selection – meant that the objects on display in the museums of ethnography presented problems of meaning, even if the curators at the time may not have been aware of this. They also aggravated the rise of perspectives throwing a negative light on Africa.

As far as the continent as a whole was concerned, the curators at both the museums of ethnography (including the missionary museums) and the colonial museums collected more or less the same objects. They differed, however, in their motives for collecting and the way they displayed their objects.¹⁴⁷ The dominant museum perspective in the 19th century could be discerned in both categories: the superiority of the white man, i.e. the European race. For the curators of missionary exhibitions, the sense of superiority was projected on the Christian message of salvation from Satan and the glad tidings of the Gospel. The museum curators therefore appropriated the objects and collections by displaying them as symbols of a primitive and pagan society that was still at a low stage of development. However, the countries with colonies in Africa (the UK, France, Belgium, Portugal and Germany) showed, on the whole, a more negative image of their territories overseas than, for instance, the Netherlands with its stakes in the Dutch East Indies, Japan, Ceylon and other regions. Cultures in Asia enjoyed higher prestige than the ‘primitive’ cultures of Africa and New Guinea.

It can be concluded that curators at the museums of ethnography, and especially the colonial museums, did little to undo the negative image that Africa had had in the 18th century. They usually sided with the missionaries and anthropologists of the time and continued to confirm this negative image. Their prejudices and alignment with government policies, which were not always favourable for the ‘natives’, meant that the curators of colonial museums were not in a position to take a critical view of policies or the events that were taking place in the name of colonial policies.

¹⁴⁶ The last time that ‘natives’, in this case Congolese men and women, were flown in to feature in a mock village at a World Exhibition was for the Brussels EXPO in 1958.

¹⁴⁷ In the Central Hall of the Museum at Tervuren, one can still see a bronze statue showing an elegantly dressed elderly white man reading aloud from a book with a young naked African kneeling at his side. The text underneath the statue reads: ‘Belgium presents Congo with civilization’. There is no doubt that the civilization referred to is that of Europe and that, by implication, Congo had none.

The colonial period: 1900-1950

Introduction

The heyday of colonialism in Africa more or less coincided with the period from 1900 to 1950. It took several decades before colonial authority was firmly established in every corner of Africa, except for in Liberia and Ethiopia that were barely touched by colonialism. From about 1950 onwards, this authority started to fall apart, with Ghana being the first country to gain political independence in 1957. This chapter discusses the extent to which colonialism influenced missionaries, anthropologists and curators of museums of ethnography in their views on African objects with power.

Missionary congregations in the Catholic Church and the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches associated, and at times identified, with the colonial doctrine of civilization, even if only subconsciously. The Catholic Church developed the theological theory called *Plantatio Ecclesiae* (the planting of the church) that was viewed as a ‘colonial missiology’.

For the first time since anthropology came into its own as a scholarly discipline, anthropologists went to Africa to conduct fieldwork. In an attempt to obtain funding for their research, many of them allowed themselves to be hired as government anthropologists. Not all of them were thus able to conduct research independently of government interference. While the main focus of anthropology in the 19th century was on the origins and development of peoples and their religious customs, anthropological research in this period was more interested in how societies operated and how they functioned as communities. This interest was also instigated by the colonial authorities who wanted to understand the internal mechanisms of ‘tribal groups’ in order to be able to control them more effectively.

Museums of ethnography in Europe were able to acquire huge collections of African material culture but were then confronted with the dilemma as to which objects to put on display and which to put in storage. In many museums, *ikenga*, *minkisi* and *asuman* were not considered ‘good’ enough to be shown to European visitors. A new category of exhibitions – the missionary exhibition – was created to encourage greater awareness among Christians in Europe of missionary activities. Generally speaking missionary

exhibitions showed objects like those in other museums of ethnography, but they added objects of a Christian or Catholic nature, such as statues and crucifixes made by ‘natives’, and presented them from a missionary perspective.

4.1 The missionary perspective

4.1.1 *Missionaries in a colonial context*

In the first half of the 20th century, the Catholic Church succeeded in establishing local churches all over Africa, even in remote regions where the unhealthy climate had prevented this in the 19th century. Thousands of missionaries were active in the missions, not only priests but also religious brothers and sisters. The organization of these local churches grew from the founding of vicariates under the auspices of the Propaganda Fide to autonomous dioceses with bishops and church provinces with archbishops, though the bishops were almost always Europeans.

Rivalries

The many different Christian churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church and others, worked independently of each other. Although they all preached the Gospel of Good Tidings, they saw each other as rivals, competing to have the largest number of converts from paganism. This competition did not originate in Africa itself as the historical split in the Church during the Reformation had led to the founding of a number of Protestant churches in Europe. This gave rise not only to fierce theological battles between them but also to practices of separation in daily life. Catholics bought bread only from Catholic bakers, and Protestants from Protestant bakers only. Territorially, so-called Bible belts existed in a number of countries and regions whereby one village would be Catholic and the population of the next village would be entirely Protestant. The situation in Europe had developed into a status quo: there was no more proselytizing either way. But such a situation had not yet emerged in Africa and both Protestant and Catholic missionaries considered Africa a battleground where much could still be gained. Catholic missionaries in Africa brought this anti-Protestant attitude with them and sometimes went out of their way to show their hostile feelings towards what they considered their main enemy in the process of ‘planting’ the Church. A missionary reported, as follows, on his first ever visit to a village. As custom demanded, he started by visiting the chief of the village:

The chief, although pagan and a fetish priest, was full of joy and could not find words to express his gratitude [for our visit]. The Protestants, who had arrived in the village some months before, had scared the villagers by demanding that they should never tolerate Catholics in their village, as they came only to destroy their idols. That would then cause all sorts of calamities for them. However, I said, they should not fear. I started to explain what the Catholic faith is about, who we are and what we want. Everybody was happy, although all I told them was new to them.¹

¹ Author unknown. Afrikaansch Missieklókje (1933: 38) (this author’s translation).

The continuous frictions between Protestants and Catholics was not an exclusively African matter and was happening almost everywhere in the world. Increasingly, Christians were finding the situation untenable and felt that the frictions made a mockery of Christianity. A rapprochement between the Churches was badly needed and the World Council of Churches was founded in 1948. The Roman Catholic church did, however, not become a member.

Not only were the different churches working independently of each other but the missionary organizations within a church, such as the White Fathers, the Society of African Missions, the Fathers van Scheut, the Fathers of Mill Hill and others, also did not cooperate. They each worked in a different area or diocese that was well defined, each with its own 'religious or missionary culture'.

Ties with the Colonial Government

All of the missionaries proclaimed that they worked independently of the colonial government, which was a secular institution, unlike their own that was a religious institution. Nevertheless, all Christian organizations worked in a colonial context by assisting the colonial authority if and where they could, and calling upon the same authority if and when they needed its support.

Colonialism's first aim was to establish and then gradually expand an infrastructure that would facilitate the work of the colonial government. To keep the peace in the colony after the territory had been 'pacified' by wars and skirmishes with the 'natives', a local army had to be formed, barracks established at strategic spots and one or two tarred roads laid from the capital city into the furthest corners of the country for the rapid movement of troops. To build up an administrative workforce for the growing number of colonial offices, schools had to be set up, even in remote areas. The government restricted these schools in the first decades to the capital city and the urban areas and then hospitals were set up to provide medical services, initially for expatriates ('for whites only') but later on for the new African elite too.

The churches realized the impact these provisions could have on the country and the goodwill they created amongst the population and decided to do the same, but in the rural areas. Generally speaking, the missionary impact in the 1900-1950 period was huge, both in a positive and a negative sense. However, in a number of cases it was difficult to assess success/failure and this became known as an 'ambiguous impact'. One's judgment depended on the perspective one chose when looking at events. A positive impact meant that missionaries were admired by the Africans, especially because they learned to speak the local language, became familiar (to a certain extent) with local customs and helped villagers with their daily needs, such as caring for the sick and giving advice in solving practical problems. The churches were instrumental in setting up schools, hospitals and clinics in rural areas and these activities created goodwill and hastened the statistical success of Christianity in an age when school leavers could be almost certain of obtaining respectable jobs in trading companies and local colonial administration offices. A guaranteed income provided these clerks with the trappings that came with their new status: European dress, an umbrella, topi (sun helmet), a wrist-

watch etc.² Missionaries were the ‘motor of social, intellectual and moral development’ in many regions and their impact resulted in ‘a humanizing of imperialism’.³

Both the churches and the colonial government placed themselves in a position of power, bringing with them the intellectual, technical, military and economic skills necessary to rule a colony and overrule any opposition. In this discourse, they appropriated the power of definition. It was no longer the people of Africa, their chiefs and elders and their *banganga* (priests) who decided what was good and evil, but the colonial and ecclesiastical authorities. This was the negative side and the Christian missionaries were as much part of the colonial forces as the explorers, traders and soldiers were. There is no doubting the fact that missionaries were agents of colonialism in the practical sense, regardless of whether they saw themselves in this light. Missionaries sided with the colonial powers to establish law and order, which in many instances was nothing but the suppression of local rituals that could not meet missionary approval. Several such instances were recorded. In Gabon, for example, missionaries were appalled by certain burial rituals of the Fang and the Kota. (See Chapter 3.1.4) They used to exhume their dead some months after they were buried, sever the heads from the bodies, cleanse them and put them in a special basket with other skulls, on top of which a wooden figure, *byeri*, was placed to guard the skulls of the ancestors. (see Figure 55)

In the 1920s, missionaries successfully appealed to the French colonial government, which subsequently outlawed these rituals that were considered ‘abominable crimes’ and repugnant to Christian morality.⁴ Incidentally, the suppression of these funeral customs by the colonial government was instrumental in the shipping of many *byeri* to Europe, where they were purchased by private collectors and museums of ethnography before being proudly displayed as masterpieces of primitive art.

The German ethnographer Frobenius was in Congo in 1905 when he witnessed Father Polet at Bena Makima bring a number of village headmen into his mission in chains and jail them until the arrival of the workmen he had demanded to build his house. Father Polet was employed by the Compagnie de Kasai as a rubber collector and was hated by the Congolese for his aggressive behaviour towards them. He was subsequently wounded in a skirmish with a villager and left to die.⁵

The British colonial administration in Nigeria worked with the churches, especially the Church of England and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to establish law and order. It did not hesitate to use military force to this end. The British even destroyed the shrines of ‘native gods’ as if they were not habitations of gods whose presence in the indigenous community was regarded by local people as a *sine qua non* for a balanced society. This type of wanton sacrilege reached its peak during the so-called Aro Expedition in 1901-1902 when Colonel Montanaro captured Arochukwu and proceeded to blow up the famous Aro Long Juju or *Ibinokpabi* that had occupied a place of central importance in the religious and judicial life of the people for centuries.⁶ Encouraged by

² Ayandele (1966: 156).

³ Henkel (1989: 15).

⁴ Perrois. (2006: 18).

⁵ Vansina (2010: 102-106).

⁶ Okorochoa (1987: 222).

this spectacular success, the British went on to destroy other oracles and, using military force, opened up the Igbo heartland.

Figure 55 A Fang *Byeri* figure that guarded the skulls of the ancestors, Gabon



Protestant missionaries enthusiastically supported ‘punitive’ expeditions against the Western Ibo, the ancient kingdom of Benin, the Yoruba Ijebu and the Efik Long Juju

before following the victorious armies into the conquered regions.⁷ They settled among a defeated and demoralized people, giving them the choice of adjusting to the white men's ways, including the Christian doctrine, or perishing.

The military defeats and the realization that their gods did not take revenge on the foreign aggressors led the Igbo to believe that the white man had a secret that made him successful.⁸ The Igbo wanted to learn this secret and believed that it had to be hidden in Western education. This explains the insatiable desire for education that rose to fever pitch in Iboland. Once the religious cohesion provided by the Long Juju had been demolished, the traditional inter-village and inter-clan warfare, which had been the main feature of these atomized people, was replaced by a competition to gain access to the white man's education.

In 1904, a new rubber plantation and trading station was opened in Kubaland. The Belgian company requested that four Missionaries of Scheut run the plantation as managers and, to reward them for their services, the company promised to provide them with all they needed from Kinshasa. The plantation was, in fact, a mission station and the slaves that had been freed from slavery by the missionaries and now lived at the station were turned into a well-disciplined workforce.⁹ Nobody – not even the missionaries – were concerned about the dramatic impact of the plantation on the area's rural economy. This colonial plantation system upset traditional labour divisions and the existing subsistence economy.

4.1.2 *Assumptions and theology*

Plantatio Ecclesiae

Although the colonial powers in Africa (the UK, France, Belgium, Portugal and Germany) each used a different approach to pacify and organize their African territories, they shared one basic assumption, namely that European culture was superior in every respect. There was, therefore, no point of discussion as far as they were concerned and if Africa was ever to climb the ladder of civilization, it had to do so on the pattern laid out by the European colonial powers. The process of colonization was, in effect, the introduction or at times the imposition of European culture in all its aspects on Africa and the result was that, over time, the entire government organization, including education, healthcare and the judiciary, was structured along the lines of that of the British, French, Portuguese or Belgian motherland.

This conviction permeated not only the colonial governments in Africa but also the general public in Europe too. Even the many Christian churches followed this line of thought, with the distinction being that they replaced European culture with Christiani-

⁷ Ballard (2008: 217).

⁸ There is a widespread fear, also in Western Europe, about throwing away or destroying a sacred object. Doing so might incur the wrath of the Spirit that inhabits the object. I remember that when I was an Africa curator in Amsterdam, several people asked me if they could hand over certain objects from Africa that they were sure were causing harm to them or their relatives or friends. They wanted to get rid of these objects but dared not throw them away. I always accepted them.

⁹ Vansina (2010: 91).

ty, the Catholic faith and Christian norms and values. Instead of calling it colonization, the Catholic Church preferred to speak of *Plantatio Ecclesiae*.

The Theology of *Plantatio*, which was first formulated in the 1920s, was solidly ecclesiastical and even ecclesia-centric in its orientation.¹⁰ It emulated the basic concepts of colonialism, but transferred it to a religious level. For decades, it was the leading theological approach to missionary work. These (European) theologians were all convinced that what Africa and Africans needed to rid them of pagan practices was the effective presence of the Church, i.e. the introduction of the European (Western) model of Christianity, a Church with European institutions, internal organization, laws, liturgy, catechesis, spiritualities and religious life, theologies and theologians. Even if it had occurred to anyone that such a church was (in all aspects) alien to Africa, it was deemed necessary that this strategy was applied for Africa's own sake. However, to ensure that the church, based on a European model, became an African church, it was necessary for it to be run by Africans themselves.

Pope Pius XI, who headed the Catholic Church between 1922 and 1939, became known as the 'missionary pope'. In his *Rerum Novarum* encyclical, he insisted that missionary congregations needed, in due course, to surrender control of their missionary work to local dioceses, which would report directly to Rome. Most radically, all white missionaries had to prepare African clergy to assume the responsibilities of a diocesan bishop and establish indigenous religious orders for both men and women who would take over the bulk of the work in local communities. Pope Pius had little patience with those who muttered that the programme was premature: 'It is our will and command' was his short reply. The first Catholic priests were ordained in Uganda in 1913. Notwithstanding opposition from European missionaries, the Pope appointed the Ugandan priest Joseph Kiwanuka (b. 1899) as the first African bishop and he was consecrated Bishop of Masaka in Uganda in 1939, and Archbishop of Rubaga in 1961.¹¹ European missionaries considered his appointment as premature because African priests were not yet considered capable of taking on so much responsibility.¹²

European theologians were developing a new scholarly discipline in the same period: missiology. This was a systematic school of thought on which they could base mission work, both theoretically and practically. Ever since the Reformation and also in reaction to it, theologians in the Catholic Church had directed their attention primarily towards evangelization, which they understood as the establishment of the Church as an institute, as a monarchical and hierarchical entity and as the only instrument for individual salvation. In this way, the Church became a very clerical institution and the only 'visible vehicle for salvation'. It was especially the so-called French School at the University of Louvain, which was run by Father Pierre Charles S.J., that worked on this theory. But missiology was not the only missiological strategy in the Catholic Church. In Germany,

¹⁰ Donovan (1990: 34-35).

¹¹ Ballard (2008: 251-252).

¹² Bishop Kiwanuka proved to be a brilliant scholar and obtained a PhD in Canon Law in Rome. He was a member of the Congregation of the White Fathers and, at their meeting in 1947, he championed the international character of missionary personnel in Uganda. He opposed the British Colonial Office's policy of admitting only British, Commonwealth and English-speaking missionaries to Uganda (Waliggo 1988).

Father Joseph Schmidl at the University of Münster viewed mission work differently and called it the propagation of the Gospel and the salvation of souls.

*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*¹³

From the 1920s onwards, there was a strong missionary movement in Catholic communities in the Netherlands and in the seminaries that trained priests for future work in Dutch parishes. At the major seminary of the diocese of Breda, a missiology course was developed that strongly defended the principle of *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*. This was taught to seminarians who, as priests, would be working in parishes in their own diocese and would, in all likelihood, never set foot in Africa. They would therefore not come into contact with Africans or be in a position where they could verify the assumptions presented in the course. On the other hand, the theological contents of the course were meant to prepare them for their future work where they would inspire the faithful in their parishes to become dedicated to missionary work through prayer and financial support.

The principle that there was no salvation outside the Church implied that the Church had to be firmly established in Africa. Its presence in even the smallest African villages was seen as a *conditio sine qua non* for the effective salvation of the continent's inhabitants. For the planting of the Church to be successful, a rigid organization was set up. Rome installed church leaders, first on a provisional basis as vicars-general and later on they would have dioceses with bishops and archdioceses with archbishops, and finally the appointment of cardinals. Seminaries were opened to train African priests who were destined to eventually take over the running of the churches.¹⁴

With this well-organized structure, the Catholic Church acquired a position of power in society over the years. This power was used to exercise control over the faithful, initiate secular institutions in the field of healthcare and education under the flag of the Church and, at moments of political turmoil, pressurize the government of a country, for instance to withdraw plans to nationalize Catholic schools.¹⁵

Missionaries themselves needed to be trained. The Anthropological Institute wrote in 1907:

As the missionary and trader are usually the pioneers of colonisation the question of anthropological training is in their case one of great importance since the conduct of the first settlers usually determines the subsequent hostility or friendliness of the native towards the white man.¹⁶

This quote shows that anthropological training and the learning of local languages (as the Missionaries of Scheut were required to do during their seminary training) were not meant to give missionaries a deeper understanding of African cultures for their own sake but primarily to facilitate their work and colonial activities. The underlying idea

¹³ 'There is no salvation outside the church'.

¹⁴ In 1929, a teachers' training college with a seminary was opened in Amisano, Ghana. As there were only half a dozen aspirants for the priesthood in the first few years, it was necessary to combine the seminary with a teachers' training college. It is no coincidence that this was opened in 1929 as the colonial government had opened its first college at Achimota in Accra in 1927.

¹⁵ This happened in Ghana in 1963 when the Ghanaian Archbishop of Cape Coast successfully opposed the President's order to nationalize all Catholic schools.

¹⁶ Article in *Man* 7 (1907): 112.

presented here is that missionaries (and colonialists) had a mission, namely to teach uncivilized Africans, convert pagans to Christianity and exercise power over the continent.

Unlike Catholic missionaries, Protestant missionaries tried to bring secular anthropology into their work. They studied anthropological explanations of the origins of marriage and animism and blended them into a mobile 'African' Christianity. Catholic missionaries, on the other hand, refused to accept current anthropological trends, such as functionalism, as proposed by Durkheim, Mauss and van Gennep. These scholars viewed religion as a social and historical construction and, to them, belief was a product of the imagination.¹⁷

The contrast between Catholics and Protestants became even greater when Catholic universities with their own departments of anthropology were established in Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland. French law prevented the establishment of a Catholic university but agreed to an *Institut Catholique*. These departments subordinated the secular theories and practices of the discipline to the missionary concerns of the Church.¹⁸

A different perspective

The theology of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* was the dominant missiological policy throughout this period and was adopted as if it was the only theological option open for the conversion of Africa. This demonstrates a limited sense of a historical perspective. In the first centuries AD, there was a theological theory – the Cosmic Revelation – that was a revelation in non-Biblical religions. It was based on a number of biblical texts: God revealed Himself universally, through the cosmos, conscience and the human spirit (Hebrews 1, 1); God entered into a 'cosmic covenant' with Noah (Genesis 9); the Bible celebrates the holiness of many 'pagans', such as Abel, Enoch, Daniel, Noah, Job, Melchizedek, Lot and the Queen of Sheba. The French theologian Cardinal Jean Daniélou studied this Cosmic Revelation in the 1950s and proposed it as an alternative theology.¹⁹ Karl Rahner, the influential German theologian in the 1960s and later, argued that God, who desires all men to be saved, cannot possibly consign all non-Christians to hell. A person who lives without explicit knowledge of Christ's salvation yet lives in a state of grace may be considered an 'anonymous Christian'.²⁰

Since God is the God of the whole world, we must presume that the whole religious life of humanity is part of a continuous and universal human relationship with God.²¹ The Second Vatican Council document *Ad Gentes* describes the treasures that can be found in other religions (AG 11) and refers to the Cosmic Revelation. In his address on 5 November 2005, Pope Benedict XVI said: 'Even before discovering the God who reveals Himself in the history of His people, there is a cosmic revelation that everyone can see, which the one and only Creator, the "God of Gods" and the "Lord of Lords" offers to all mankind' (Psalm 136,2-3). This statement appears to echo the ancient theo-

¹⁷ Harries & Maxwell (2012: 14).

¹⁸ Harries & Maxwell (2012: 15).

¹⁹ Daniélou (1957: 20; 1958: 119).

²⁰ Rahner (1966: vol. 6).

²¹ Hick (1973: 101).

ry of the Cosmic Revelation, yet fails to understand the implications when applied to Africa.

The theology of the *Plantatio Ecclesiae* met with considerable criticism. Akrong speaks of a colonial missiology:

The co-option of the Universal symbols of christianity as a function of a colonial empire building was made possible by the fabrication of an imperial theology based on an exclusive and a narrow interpretation of the Judeo-Christian concept of covenant. Here election was understood as a special vocation of Western Christendom in God's economy of salvation. This allowed Western Christendom to develop the idea that it has been elected to spread Christianity and civilize the rest of the world in anticipation of the Kingdom of God as, for example, one finds in the nationalistic poems of Kipling. This imperial theology for empire building led to the mutation and transformation of theological concepts into ideological categories for political domination. The result was the 'domestication' of God's covenant of grace with all humanity in Christ, the 'teritorialization' of the kingdom of God, the 'politicization' of evangelism, and the 'imperialisation' of the symbol of Christ.²²

This 'imperialization' of the symbol of Christ was closely connected with the principle of *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*.²³ It postulated that:

... any religion (a fortiori Christianity) that lays claim to the Truth and Universality is necessarily committed to expansion and propaganda. It is impossible for this religion to view other religions as anything else than a sad aberration. It must feel the urge and the duty to replace these religions. Christianity cannot view itself as one religion on a par with so many other religions, but as the only one intended by God.²⁴

Missionaries could not (or so they thought) expect people with no culture or civilization to offer a substantial contribution to the establishment of an African church of their own. The missionaries could not envisage any other Church than the one they had become familiar with in their home countries and that had been known historically in the West. The local churches they established in Africa could not be but copies of the European Church they knew, with its personnel, its methods and its works. They saw the Church as a universal institution, symbolized by a common language, i.e. Latin, and a common liturgy and doctrine, to which all the millions of faithful worldwide adhered.

4.1.3 *Plantatio ecclesiae: The power of definition*

Discourse

The process of the planting of the Catholic Church in Africa can be studied as a discourse.²⁵ It engaged in a discourse with Africans, not only with the faithful but also with pagans who were viewed as potential converts. The Catholic Church positioned itself as an expert in religious matters, not only their own but also in matters relating to indigenous African religions. It frequently spoke out with authority on how objects with pow-

²² Akrong (2008: 63-75).

²³ The concept of the *Plantatio Ecclesiae* was based on an old adage: *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus* (No salvation outside the Church), as first formulated in the 3rd century by Cyprian of Carthage. It viewed the Church and the world as overlapping. At the Council of Florence in 1442, Pope Eugenius IV declared *ex cathedra* that 'not only pagans, but also Jews, heretics and schismatics were excluded from salvation. [...] if they do not convert to the true church' (i.e. the Catholic Church).

²⁴ Groot Seminarie Hoeven (1924: 8).

²⁵ See Fairclough (1992) and Wijzen (2010; 2013). The concept of discourse is discussed in Chapter 1.3.2.

er (*fetishes*) were expressions of idolatry and superstition, that those who venerated (or even adored) these objects with power would be lost forever and that the only safe way to heaven for them was through conversion to the true faith. Although this discourse was challenged by Africans, who called it an unproven assumption, and a number of missionaries were killed by fetish priests for undermining traditional norms and values, the discourse was successful if the ever-increasing numbers of Catholics in Africa is taken as the criterion.

One reason for the success of the discourse may be found in what Wijzen calls ‘context’ or ‘social practice’.²⁶ The social position of the missionary, his assumed superiority as a European and a religious expert, and not least the social and economic gain and prestige of ‘conversion’ made many Africans opt for conversion.

Critical Discourse Analysis looks at the perspectives with which people act. In this case, what were the perspectives of the missionaries? They sided, or at least were requested to by Church authorities, with the official theological views that the Church postulated. To make sure that missionaries at a personal level (the micro perspective) would be trustworthy representatives of the Church (the institutional dimension or meso perspective), they received thorough training in dogmatic theology, the Bible, Canon Law and moral theology. As long as a missionary’s perspective coincided with that of the Church, he reproduced it and reproduced or created a social reality. On the other hand, missionaries found themselves in situations in which they disagreed with the Church’s doctrine, its laws and its policies. They then chose to adopt another perspective and to take the interest of the recipient as a point of departure. Instead of reproducing the Church’s discourse, they chose to transform the discourse.

Africans who accepted the missionary’s viewpoints and his perspectives likewise accepted the social reality as it was presented by the Church. If they disagreed, they might choose to transform the discourse. In any case, they had their own perspectives (genuine conversion, social prestige, free education, job security and healthcare) in the discourse.

The following sections present examples of the role that missionaries played in the discourse that was part of the *Plantatio Ecclesiae* by reproducing or creating social realities or by transforming them.

The church’s power of definition

The Catholic Church cherished its position as the ‘one true Church’. The process of planting it in Africa can be seen as a top-down process.²⁷ Missionaries, supported by theologians in Europe, were so convinced of the principle of planting the Church with the laws and practices as they had come to know the Church back home that they did not hesitate to impose their notions of good and bad, of virtue and vice, and of sin and personal righteousness on newly converted Africans. They demanded monogamy from African men and women as an essential element of the faith. Neither missionaries nor the Church authorities showed any willingness to adjust Canon Law with regard to what constitutes a valid marriage: ‘Requirements that the most reactionary Roman monsignor

²⁶ Wijzen (2010).

²⁷ Fairclough (1992: 81).

would recognize to be no more than church law, and that originally arose out of the European situation'.²⁸

A course on missiology, which was taught at the main seminary of the diocese of Breda in the 1920s, showed a high level of self-complacency and overestimation of the Church's own identity. In its own words, 'The Catholic Church has such strong principles and dogmas that she can never adapt herself to the many different types of civilization and race characteristics which have been discovered by ethnographers'. But 'how can the uncivilized negro understand thoroughly the spirit of such an august religion [as the Catholic Faith]?'²⁹ The same rigid line of thought can be seen in the following:

When a pagan comes in contact with the Catholic Faith and acknowledges it as the true religion, the deceit and the vanity of idolatry and superstition becomes clear to him. From ignorance he has risen – through God's grace – to the highest level of true knowledge.³⁰

The doctrine was clear and the missionary attitude could be deduced from the doctrine.³¹ A catechism, written by missionaries at the beginning of the 20th century for Catholics in the Igbo and Efik/Ibibio area of southeast Nigeria, contained a list of so-called mortal sins. Among them were: 'joining the pagans in idol worship, invoking the spirits, sacrifice, keeping of amulets and believing in them as God, making deadly charms, celebrating funeral rites in a pagan way or participating in such rites'.³² The Catholic Church claimed for itself the power of definition and exercised this power through its dogmatic attitude towards African norms and values.

The wording and the content of this article in the Ibo catechism mirror the unwavering attitudes of the Catholic Church. They are also the logical deduction of its theological arguments, as well as of a European tradition of thinking in binary oppositions: the dualistic view of the spiritual world that is divided into the principles of Good and Evil. This view made God all-good and the Devil all-evil. It differed fundamentally from the African interpretation of the spiritual world, in which all beings are both good and bad, both benevolent and malicious. The *abosom* (Ashanti) and the *orisa* (Yoruba) can cure but can also cause harm. Where the Catholic Church chose to consider fetishes as intrinsically evil and belonging to the realm of the Devil, as opposed to the goodness of God and his Kingdom of Heaven, African indigenous religions saw a more complex world in which man bargained with the spiritual powers about good health, fertility, financial gain and prosperity.

For the Catholic Church, 'joining the pagans in idol worship' was sinful, whilst for Africans it was the crucial activity in the bartering process for obtaining spiritual and material wellbeing.

Missionaries did not apparently always understand the fundamental way in which African religious concepts differed from their own. Or if they did, they were so convinced of their own superior insights as to what was 'good for Africa' that they did not hesitate to impose their views on their converts. The doctrine of the Catholic Church

²⁸ Isizoh (1997: 23).

²⁹ Groot Seminarie Hoeven (1924: 9).

³⁰ Groot Seminarie Hoeven (1924: 52).

³¹ The case study of the two *Epa* masks in the Afrika Centrum demonstrates the same attitude among the propagandists in the missionary exhibition.

³² Isizoh (1997: 24).

was clear: it was taught in seminaries and future missionaries were instructed in it. The *Plantatio Ecclesiae* was nothing less than the imposition of a European concept of the universal Church, with its specific interpretation of law and order and norms and values, as was indicated above. The rules with regard to sexuality, marriage and human fertility (the ban on abortion), which differed so much from what in Africa was accepted practice, caused many problems, not only for Africans themselves but also for the Catholic priests who worked closely with them on a day-to-day basis.

Right and wrong

In the discourse on the *Plantatio Ecclesiae*, another aspect seems to have been overlooked, neglected or even denied. This was the distinction between the Christian concept of sin and the African concept of wrongdoing. The African concept is normative rather than moral. A Christian is taught that s/he is personally responsible for his/her conduct, including the way s/he thinks and feels about his/her neighbour. S/he accepts that his/her conscience is the criterion for honesty, integrity and all virtues. It is a moral obligation. The Ten Commandments with explicit orders such as 'Thou shalt not kill' and 'Thou shalt not steal' are the leading principles for a moral life. Acting against the will of God is the core of committing a sin.

The concept of wrongdoing in African societies is different. It is a normative concept. It is wrong to trespass a norm that is set by the community and not dictated by one's conscience. Stealing foodstuffs is wrong, except when a woman, returning from the land after a day's hard work and carrying a heavy stack of firewood or a load of millet, feels hungry. When she passes a farm where she sees some fruit or edible food, she can take it freely and eat it. She is not then exceeding a norm, for the community agrees that this situation allows her to eat something to get the energy she needs to reach home safely. She would break a social norm if she took the fruit to her house and ate it there. Another example could be that an unmarried boy and unmarried girl having sex is not in itself wrong because having sex is natural. But if the girl has not completed her *rites de passage* (her initiation), she is not entitled to have sex. If she does have sex, both the boy and the girl have broken a norm and will be persecuted for a public offence. Killing somebody is a serious offence, but not in a war between one village and another (as used to happen in pre-colonial times). Polygyny is sinful in the eyes of the Catholic Church and many others, but not in Africa. It has been accepted practice almost everywhere in Africa, was a social and economic institution and created a pact between two families. It was not an indication of a man's sexual drive, as was assumed by European church leaders. For the traditional African society, no wrong was done if a man married two wives, looked after them, took good care of them, respected them and had children by them. Neither the man nor his wives would have violated a social norm in such a case.

Evans-Pritchard heard his Nuer informants in Sudan speak about their grudges against the colonial administrators. It highlighted for him the gap between the emic views of right and wrong on the one hand and the perceptions of Europeans on the other.

He wrote as follows:

The native becomes convinced finally that the European is quite incapable of seeing the difference between right and wrong, between the proper use of a cultural weapon fully sanctioned by public opinion, such as white magic, and a heinous and cold blooded murder, such as the crime of black magic or sorcery.³³

A different perspective

The previous paragraphs may have given the impression that all missionaries acted in the same way. This was not the case. I did not conduct research or organized interviews to find out how many missionaries had adopted a perspective other than that of the official church when they were confronted with a pastoral situation that, in their view and in their conscience, justified a different approach. When I discussed with colleagues certain pastoral dilemmas that I encountered myself, I was told that it was not exceptional that a missionary might take a different viewpoint and decide not to reproduce the church's discourse but to transform it. Let me give three examples of my own experiences as a missionary in the Sefwi area of Ghana in the 1960s to illustrate this.

1. One day I was sent for by an old man. I knew him as an amiable and honest man who was always present in church services but was not baptized as he had two wives. Now he wanted to see me because 'I am old. I will soon die. I want to put my life on order, so that I may have a church burial when the time comes. I want to be baptized.' All I could answer was: 'But you have two wives. Only if you dismiss one wife can I baptize you and bless your marriage, and can you have a church burial.' The man looked away, through the open door into the courtyard where he saw both his wives busy preparing dinner. He said: 'What can I do? Both have cooked meals for me for so many, many years. How can I dismiss either of them? Whoever I send away will ask me why I am punishing her in this manner for the good care she has given me for so long?' I found myself in a dilemma: who on earth had decided that only monogamy had been allowed by God as a requirement for Holy Matrimony against the age-old practices of the whole of Africa? I looked at the old man, I saw the women in the courtyard, and I whispered: 'Come to church tomorrow morning, I will baptize you and bless the marriage with your first wife.' I did not refer again to any dismissal of his other wife. In this situation I deliberately diverged from the Church's discourse. I decided to acknowledge the interests of the old man who wanted to be baptized but refused to dismiss his second wife, his loyal partner for so many years, as would have been required by the Church as a condition for baptism.

2. In the village of Attronsu lived an old man, Papa Kwamena Afena, who was much respected for his wisdom but perhaps even more so for the fact that, together with seven other age mates, he had carried a missionary from Tarkwa to the Sefwi area along bush paths in 1918, a distance of about 200 km. (The colonial government had not yet reached this area so there were no roads.) He was the area's first convert to the Catholic Church and became the founder of the Church, which is now a diocese with its own bishop and 25 Sefwi priests. He was also the first man in the area to enter Holy Matrimony. But then the problems started as his wife did not get pregnant. After almost two

³³ Evans-Pritchard (1931: 22).

years, the families of the couple met and decided that this had not been a marriage according to customary law: the woman was allowed to go back to her family and the man was free to marry again. This is what he did. But as the Catholic Church did not accept divorce, the second marriage could not be blessed in church. As a consequence, the couple lived in sin, could not receive Holy Communion and if either of them died, s/he could not be buried in sacred soil. I accepted the Church's viewpoint that the man was living in sin, even if, for the Sefwi community, the first marriage was not considered a marriage as it had not produced offspring. I identified with the Church's discourse and reproduced a social reality, which did not coincide with the observable reality. The man too was aware of his situation but never approached me to do anything about it. He accepted the Church's verdict. I was aware that the death of the founder of the church (in the not too distant future) would be a moment of great sorrow and also of celebration for the Catholic community.³⁴

If he died, while I was the priest-in-charge, I would find myself in a dilemma and this kept bothering me. My conscience would not allow me to make an exception for this man, regardless of his accomplishments in life. All I did was to hope that he would not pass away while I was still there. I was then transferred to another position and Papa Kwamena Afena died two years later. My successor gave him a magnificent Church burial. I decided to support the Church's perspective. However much I sympathized with the plight of the old man, I felt I could not have acted otherwise.

3. One day I was driving through a village with a flourishing Catholic community when I heard women wailing, which is a sign of a burial. I stopped and walked towards the house where I heard the noise. When I entered the compound, I saw the women in one room, surrounding a coffin in which a girl of about 18 was lying. She was a beautiful girl. She did not show any signs of an accident or of protracted disease. When I entered the room, the wailing stopped. I asked them what the cause of death had been. They kept quiet, all of them. I realized immediately that they did not wish to answer my question. I realized too that they were hiding something from me and that this could mean only one thing: the girl had died as a result of an (illegal) abortion. I realized the dilemma I was in. If I asked any further questions and they answered me truthfully, I would not be allowed by Canon Law to give the deceased girl a Church burial. On the other hand, if I did not know what the cause of her death was, I would not be compromised if I buried her. I decided there and then what to do: I told the women (her mother, her aunts and other women of her *abusua* or maternal family) that I would provide the burial they wanted for their daughter and bury her in sacred soil. And that is what I did.

Again, I deliberately diverged from the official discourse of the Church. I decided that applying the Church's perspective and refusing to give her a burial in sacred soil was not the right option. After all, whatever the mother and the relatives thought of abortion, they were now mourning the loss of a daughter who had died unintentionally and, in their eyes, unnecessarily. From my perspective, the mother and the relatives had

³⁴ All over Africa, the day of one's death is considered the most important day in their life. The funeral and burial are therefore important occasions in the life of a community. See: de Witte (2001).

already been ‘punished’ by her death. Applying the Church’s law would only increase their sorrows.

Successful or not?

The process of the planting of the church belongs to the past. Has the planting been successful or not? According to some theologians, the concept of *Plantatio Ecclesiae* was successful in the sense that it established the Catholic Church firmly in regions where a different church construction, from their perspective, would have been impossible. It was also inherent in the theory of *Plantatio Ecclesiae* that after local churches had been established, their running would be left to local clergy and bishops.³⁵ This ideal did not, however, materialize until the second half of the 20th century. Within the concept, a great deal of emphasis was placed on organizational and statistical aspects. In other words, its success could be measured by the number of baptisms, catechumens, churches and catechists, Catholic marriages and burials and native priests and bishops it recorded. ‘Missionary work may be called successful, because the torch of the gospel, previously introduced by missionaries from abroad, has now been taken over by local Christians in the movement of the Third Church.’³⁶

The theologian Hans Küng disagreed with this optimistic and predominantly organizational view:

Following the example of Paul, the church became Greek with the Greek world and barbarian with the European barbarian world. However, it has not become Arabic with the Arabs, black with the blacks, Indian with the Indians, or Chinese with the Chinese. Viewed as a whole, the Church of Jesus Christ has remained a European-American affair.³⁷

We are touching here on the fundamental issue of what constitutes the essence of a Church. Was it a matter of the Church being introduced and planted ‘from the outside’ and the way it created a medium through which Africans were invited to convert from ‘paganism’ to the true Church? Or was the issue the way European church officials perceived conversion from paganism to Christianity, thus accepting the way in which Africans perceived their conversion. After all, for them it was not only a religious conversion but also the road to a new way of life or a new civilization. ‘For the Peki converts [in S.E.Ghana] “civilisation” basically meant the consumption of Western goods and the “Europesation” of their lifestyle, for the missionaries it implied the modification of outward behaviour.’³⁸ For missionaries, even gods and spirits (*trowo*) were not a fictitious product of superstition but genuine accomplices of the Devil and they preached this view on evil in their sermons. Missionaries thus continuously diabolized the *abonsam* (spirits) that, in the belief of the Ewe, were both beneficial and malicious.³⁹

³⁵ In 1961, the Catholic Church in Ghana numbered 6 dioceses and the same number of bishops, of whom one – the Archbishop – was a Ghanaian. Missionaries considered it their task to now make themselves redundant. Only a few dozen priests were Ghanaians, the others were expatriates. In 1910 Ghana had 19 dioceses, of which 4 were archdioceses and all were headed by Ghanaians. Ghana had two cardinals.

³⁶ Verstraelen (1980: 520).

³⁷ Küng (1961: 14).

³⁸ Meyer (1995: 92).

³⁹ Meyer (1994: 266).

Here again is an example of the way missionaries in all Churches misunderstood or misinterpreted the internal values of an indigenous African religion. One might also argue that missionaries were eager to claim that the Ewe religion was of the Devil's making so that they could explain it as a justification for their own missionary work.⁴⁰

We can therefore conclude that the success of the *Plantatio Ecclesiae* was not unambiguous. Between 1900 and 1950, missionaries introduced Eurocentric Church concepts and a Eurocentric Canon Law and established an organization that was a replica of European Church organization.

There was little regard for indigenous religious or social practices that were *a priori* considered incompatible with Church doctrine.⁴¹

Missionaries were confronted with dilemmas due to conflicts between Church laws and customary laws. If they obeyed Church laws, as they had sworn to do before they were ordained priests, they would disavow customary laws, some of which appeared in fact to be good and were respected and obeyed by millions of Africans, men and women. If missionaries honoured customary laws, they would go against the explicit orders of the Catholic Church and commit a sin. On more than one occasion, I found myself in such a dilemma and did not always obey Church law .

4.1.4 *Modes of appropriation*

Appropriation is understood as the active reception or adoption of the cultural goods that are being presented, thereby attributing a new significance to them.⁴² In the encounter between (European) missionaries and (African) converts to Christianity, research has been done on the way in which Africans have appropriated Christian concepts, rituals, objects and other 'goods'.⁴³ Appropriation takes place by attributing a new meaning in the specific context of the user of the goods. It is the user who produces his/her own personal or collective meaning and attributes this meaning to a 'good'. In the context of this book, I am looking at the position of missionaries in their encounters with indigenous African religious and social values. I have already indicated that missionaries 'came to teach, not to learn'. They came to convey, perhaps even to impose, a message that they described as the 'glad tidings of the Gospel'. However, Africans were not always passive recipients of this message. They had their own values, norms, rituals and customs that they cherished and were not willing to give up. These encounters, which at times became confrontations between two entirely different cultures and religions, made missionaries choose strategies that would enable them to effectively convert pagans.

⁴⁰ Meyer (1994: 271).

⁴¹ By criticizing missionaries in Africa, I may give the impression that such statements applied to all the missionaries there. This is not the case. I know from experience that most of the missionaries were genuinely committed to their work and to their faith. I am not questioning their good intentions but I am being critical of certain aspects of their behaviour as that behaviour, even if not intentionally, had a negative effect on the people among whom they were working or was harmful for the good work of the Church.

⁴² Frijhoff (1997: 100); Frijhoff (2003: 13); Weimann (1983: 474); Roth (1988) and Cook (1933). See also Chapter 1.3.1.

⁴³ Okorochoa (1987: 263); Frijhoff (1997: 101); Fabian (1986) and Meyer (1994; 1995).

These strategies can be described in terms of appropriations. I speak of appropriations in the plural here. Missionaries in particular developed several such strategies during the 1900-1950 period in which they showed their attitudes towards indigenous African religions and particularly objects with power. There are no indications that the different strategies or attitudes can be associated with specific groups of missionaries or with a specific period in which one strategy was considered stronger than another. I tend to think that individual missionaries acted according to specific strategies.

I distinguish below three different strategies, each with its own peculiar mode of appropriation.

Objects with power are idols

When Europeans first arrived in Africa, they were confronted with local customs and rituals. I have already quoted Olfert Dapper's apparently unbiased observations of *minkisi*.⁴⁴ However, the majority of descriptions of African customs and rites by Europeans sound negative and narrate how missionaries destroyed objects with power (fetishes or idols). This confrontational and, at times, aggressive attitude can be observed over the centuries, not only on the part of missionaries and colonial authorities but also on the part of Africans themselves. One category of objects with power that has fallen victim to aggression are *minkisi*. (see Figure 56)

There is a well-documented account of the battle between Affonso (1456-1542 or 1543), who was a staunch Catholic, and his brother who was a pagan. Affonso's army was guided by a 'white female figure' and he defeated his brother, became king and ordered all his *minkisi* to be burned.⁴⁵

The Kongo Kingdom was much reduced in size between 1850 and 1860. When King Nerico Lunga came to power, he blamed the *Minkisi* for the troubles and ordered that all of them be destroyed. The campaign was followed by a period of 'peace of the royal throne'.⁴⁶ But later, in 1890, a movement called *Kioka* (burning) collected all the *minkisi* and burned them in an attempt to restore morality.

The rise of Kimbanguism in the 1920s again resulted in the burning of *Minkisi*. Its founder was able to persuade the last of the *banganga* that a greater power than theirs was available in the person of Jesus Christ. *Minkisi* to him were 'evidence of self-serving attempts to improve one's lot at the expense of others, morally similar to witchcraft itself and a threat to public order'.⁴⁷ The remaining *minkisi* were burned, destroyed or purchased by Europeans.

The Prophet Simon Kibangu appeared on the scene in 1921, performed miracles in the name of Jesus and fiercely opposed witchcraft and fetishism. 'See how all these villages hastened to abandon their fetishes; see all the roads littered with fetishes of all kinds. People confessed their sins. Drums were broken, dancing forsaken,'⁴⁸

⁴⁴ See Chapter 3.2.1.

⁴⁵ Janzen (1977: 78). See also Hilton (1983: 197).

⁴⁶ Janzen (1977, 81).

⁴⁷ MacGaffey (1993: 59).

⁴⁸ MacGaffey (1969: 137).

Figure 56 This *Nkisi mbulai* was believed to drive away witches by 'shooting' at them with its 'guns'



Father Pierre Knops from the SMA was a missionary among the Senufo in northern Ivory Coast and was later active as a propagandist in the Netherlands, speaking in churches and at mission exhibitions. One of his texts from 1937 reads as follows:

The all-encompassing Kanga- and Porro Cult [a so-called secret society of the Senufo] was to me the sad proof of a deeply pitiable paganism, by which a considerable part of this people still is weighed down. The brutal cruelties, the satanic faces, the disgusting, ingrained abuses, both bodily and spiritually, formed as many indictments, and provided a sharply realistic view on what 'mission' in fact means.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Knops (1937: 19). This author's translation. The original Dutch text reads: *'Het gehele samenstel van Kagba- en Porrocultus was mij een treurig bewijs van het diep-medelijdenswaardig heidendom, waaronder het overgrote deel van dit volk nog gebukt gaat. De onmenselijke wreedheden, de satanische tronies, de afschuwelijke, ingeroeste wantoestanden naar geest en lichaam vormden even zoveele aanklachten en gaven een fel-realistische kijk op hetgeen "missie" eigenlijk betekent.'*

*Figure 57 Tùgubèlè or Senufo diviner in Ivory Coast who derives his power from a python
Photo: Father Knops*



Another negative report was by Clark, who wrote: *'Les idoles païennes étaient particulièrement dangereux, car selon l'opinion de l'Eglise primitive, elles n'étaient pas seulement de sculpture profanes, mais aussi le séjour des demons'*.

The dogmatic position that the Catholic Church took at the beginning of the 20th century and was laid down in *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* did not leave much room for discussion on the values of indigenous African religions. It is no surprise, therefore, to learn that missionaries ridiculed indigenous cults as part of their general condescending attitude towards Africans that was common among Europeans in Africa.

Rev. G.T. Basden was a British missionary in the Church of England who worked among the Ibo for about 35 years in the first part of the 20th century. He wrote two books about the Ibo. The following is from the preface to his first book:

The black man himself does not know his own mind. He does the most extraordinary things and cannot explain why he does them. He is not controlled by logic; he is the victim of circumstance, and his policy is largely one of drift.⁵⁰

Rattray, who worked as a government anthropologist among the Ashanti in Ghana in the 1920s and 1930s, conducted extensive research on Ashanti culture and religion. Yet he did little to alter the negative views that many missionaries had towards indigenous religions and objects with power. He may in fact have provided missionaries and officials with the tools required to eradicate practices in which *asuman* played a role. As these objects were often used in witchcraft activities, witchcraft also had to be suppressed, according to European church leaders and colonial officers.

Public pressure in Congo against magic and witchcraft practices has been so strong and effective in recent decades that no one has dared to admit that they were a *nganga a n'kisi*, even if others called him/her by that term. Instead, the secret *nganga* explains that s/he administers 'traditional herbal medicine', a dexterity he 'learned from his grandmother'. He calls the medicines *min'ti* (herbs), *makaya* (leaves) or *bilongo*, but not *minkisi*.⁵¹

There may have to be a caveat here. I have quoted Father Knops and his text and several others he wrote present a negative image of Africans. I knew him personally and I am inclined to nuance these views. His ambivalent views on indigenous African religions may be considered symptomatic of those of many missionaries at the time. Father Knops worked among the Senufo in Ivory Coast, arriving there in 1922. He was stationed at Sinematiali, the ancient capital of the Senufo, and became acquainted with the traditional leaders and managed to gain their confidence. He not only learned the local language but also took a great interest in their traditions, among others the *Porro* society. (see Figure 57) He was allowed to attend certain secret rituals, such as initiation ceremonies, and through his knowledge of the Senufo culture was able to correct the prejudiced views of French government officials who were determined to eradicate certain of the Senufo's practices that they considered incompatible with French notions of civilization. The result of his actions was that, after he left for a vacation in the Netherlands in 1926, he received a message from the colonial administration that his presence in Ivory Coast was no longer required.

What were Father Knops's personal convictions regarding the Senufo people that he so admired and held in such high esteem, even though he criticized some of their character traits? It seems to me that, while working as a missionary, he showed respect for the Senufo. Knops gives evidence of having good insight into the religion and culture of the Nafarra. 'Religion is so intertwined with their lives and society that its disappearance would mean the disintegration of the tribe'.⁵² He offers inside information about the secret society called *Porro*, its internal organization, its position in society, its initiation ceremonies and its secrets. This is all the more remarkable as the *Porro* society would not admit Europeans to its meetings and the colonial government did everything it could to abolish the society.

⁵⁰ Basden (1921: 14).

⁵¹ Andersson (1968: 133).

⁵² Knops (1937:23)

He took such an interest in their cultural and religious traditions that the French colonial government did not allow him to return to Ivory Coast after his home leave. But much later when working as a propagandist in the Netherlands, he had a different mandate. He had to persuade his readers and visitors to missionary exhibitions that they needed to support the SMA fathers in West Africa who were working under harsh circumstances surrounded by pagans and were being accosted by fetish priests. If this assessment is correct, we could say that Knops, while working as a propagandist in the Netherlands, appropriated the Senufo culture and religion in order to make them look like idol worshippers. He appropriated them and attributed a new meaning to them (i.e. one of idolatry and superstition) in an attempt to persuade Dutch visitors to missionary exhibitions and the readers of his articles to support missionary activities in West Africa.

We have already discussed Father Bittremieux's contribution to our knowledge of the Yombe through his study of *minkisi*. He appears to have had a genuine interest in *minkisi* and their role in the community but is known to have actively encouraged their burning and destruction by converts. In accounts of these burnings, Bittremieux talks of the 'struggle of the true religion against the powers of darkness'. He calls the success of these events 'our victory', describing it as follows: 'The evil doers are afraid, the good guys are becoming braver, and those who doubted appear to be taken in by the true faith'.⁵³

It is not immediately clear why some missionaries showed such contradictory behaviour. Hein Vanhee, the head of collections at the Tervuren Museum, feels that missionaries were pragmatic in their attempts to reach their goals but, on the one hand, they showed an interest in local cultures because of their curious customs or perhaps out of some nostalgic feeling for the simple life in a rural community. Their information was able to help the colonial government with establishing its rule. Their curiosity may also have been prompted by the strategic reason of 'getting to know your enemy'. At the same time, they remained convinced that evil practices, such as idolatry, had to be eradicated.⁵⁴ Here we arrive at the issue of appropriation. To justify their presence in Africa and their activities among Africans, missionaries and the congregations to which they belonged presented a picture of Africa to Catholics in churches in Europe and visitors to missionary exhibitions, but these did not, in many instances, coincide with the facts. Missionaries depicted Africa as being idolatrous, superstitious and primitive, and in need of civilization and conversion to Christianity. In other words, they appropriated African religions to serve their own agenda: collecting funds for further missionary activities and inviting young men to become missionaries.

Objects with power are helpful

Another mode of appropriation appears to accept African indigenous religions as an existing situation that needed to be altered to create a Christian community. Missionaries with this point of view rejected the use of force. They did not destroy shrines and temples or fight 'the others' but tried to bring about the wanted changes 'from within'.

⁵³ Bittremieux (1930: 44-54).

⁵⁴ Vanhee, Personal communication, January 2014

For that purpose, they searched the indigenous religions for ‘entrances’ through which their own Christian doctrines could be introduced and accepted by Africans. They learned the local language, tried to adjust to the daily life of villagers but, most of all, they appropriated existing religious concepts in order to carefully replace them with Christian concepts.

They looked for existing concepts within indigenous African religions that could be appropriated. They had learned about the multitude of ‘small gods’ in African religious beliefs and knew that not all of them were of equal power. Missionaries tried to construct a pantheon, in which a hierarchy of ‘supernatural beings’ became manifest. The most powerful of these beings was interpreted as the Creator God. I will argue that this is how the concept of a pantheon and of a Creator God came about.⁵⁵ The existing literature shows that many indigenous religions in Africa acknowledge the existence of a Creator God that the Ashanti call *Nyame*, the Yoruba *Oludumare*, the Kapsiki *Sala* and the Ibo *Chi*. Without any in-depth analysis of the meanings of these concepts, the early missionaries assumed that indigenous concepts could be equated to the Christian notion of the Almighty God. The process of appropriation by missionaries had a lasting effect on African converts who, in turn, became convinced that the newly acquired Christian concepts of a Creator God had been their own (indigenous) view of God long before the arrival of the white man. In other words, we observe here a double appropriation. Once a pantheon had been established, correctly or otherwise, not only the position of a Creator God was assured but also those of ‘small gods’ that could then be considered idols.

Early missionaries among the Ibo in Nigeria found it difficult to identify the most powerful god that they could introduce as the Creator God. In fact, the Ibo were a society in which all central authority was absent, not only in social matters but also in religious matters. The Anglican missionary Basden, with a background in Victorian England and a theological training, was unaware of the absence. ‘There is a distinct recognition of a Supreme Being – beneficent in character – who is above every other spirit, good or evil.’⁵⁶ According to him, the Ibo believed in a heaven and earth, in good and evil spirits, and thought that rewards and punishments were meted out by God according to merit. He did not substantiate on these claims but considered *Ikenga* as the most universal of the household gods.

In his second major work on the Ibo, which was published in 1938 under the (rather long) title *Niger Ibos: A Description of the Primitive Life, Customs, and Animistic Beliefs, etcetera, of the Ibo People of Nigeria by One, Who for Thirty Five Years, Enjoyed the Privilege of Their Intimate Confidence and Friendship*, Basden appears to be aware that his prolonged stay among the Ibo had changed a number of his ideas, as he admonishes students to ‘sublimate’ their opinions and keep their ‘pre-knowledge’ in reserve. Yet, when he explains the religious concepts of the Ibo, he repeats his 1921 views that the Ibo had a Supreme Being and that they knew of an equivalent to the Devil: Ekwensu who was ‘the master spirit who exercises lordship over all agents of wickedness’. The

⁵⁵ This concept is discussed in Chapter 4.2.4.

⁵⁶ Chapter 4.2.4 discusses the notion of *Chi* among the Ibo.

Supreme God was called Chukwu, who was head of the pantheon with so-called ‘small gods’. *Ikenga* was considered a ‘small god’.

Among the early researchers of *Ikenga* were two missionaries: Sidney Smith, a former Secretary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and G.T. Basden, a minister in the Church of England. Smith wrote his PhD on the Igbo people based on ethnographic material that he or others had collected and on existing publications. His account of *Ikenga* is short, but in contradistinction to existing opinion (that *Ikenga* is a *juju* or must be associated with magic or the ancestors), he offers a more positive view of *Ikenga*, calling it ‘God of strength and good luck’.⁵⁷

During the annual festival in *Ikenga*’s honour, licentiousness is rampant, according to Basden, who called the festival devil worship of a modified nature. When he speaks of *Ikenga*, he admits that he has no clear idea as to its emic meaning but calls *ikenga* ‘a god’, ‘a fetish’ and ‘a spirit’. Yet he believes, as he did in 1921, that *ikenga* belongs to the beneficiary powers of the Ibo.

Many, if not most, Ashanti and Fanti accept a hierarchically structured pantheon with *Nyame* or *Nyankopon* as the Supreme Being and the *asuman* at the lowest level.⁵⁸ They probably arrived at this view with the help of early missionaries and other Europeans who placed the phenomenon of the *asuman* in the lowest rank in the cosmology because they found *asuman* incompatible with their own spiritual categories. Missionaries had a tendency to equate the *samanfo* (the ancestors) with the saints and the *abosom* (small gods) with the angels but had no comparable category for the *asuman*. Secondly, they found the *asuman* repulsive and thus saw them as proof of the primitive and backward state in which the natives lived.

Father Leo Brouwer, an SMA missionary among the Ewe of Ghana in the 1940s and 1950s, wrote that the Ewe acknowledged a supreme God who they call *Mawu*. Brouwer had detailed knowledge of local customs, family structures and the religious concepts of the Ewe. He also devoted room in his manuscript to objects with power (which he called fetishes) and the rituals they played a role in. In Ewe religion, there are heavenly gods and earthly gods, with the latter called *trowo*, which Brouwer translated as fetishes. The most important among them are *Dente*, *Yewe*, *Afa*, *Tigaree*, *Kunde* and *Atingli*. For the Ewe, a magic object or *dzoka* (medicine) can be changed into an earthly god (*tro*), while the possessor of the object becomes a *tronua* (diviner). In any case, the object must prove that it possesses an unknown power that shows that it has been earmarked as a lodging by a supernatural power.⁵⁹

This approach or strategy meant that missionaries observed the existence of numerous individual spirits without any interdependence and altered them into a hierarchical construct with a supreme god, saints (that can be compared to the ancestors) and angels (that are similar to the minor spirits). This process is called appropriation. By so doing, they created inroads for their own theological doctrines and objects with power became useful in explaining the Christian concepts of God and the Devil, the relationship between God and angels and saints, and the relationship between God and man.

⁵⁷ Smith (1929).

⁵⁸ This issue will be discussed in Chapter 4.2.4

⁵⁹ Brouwer (1952: 59).

Objects with power are functional

For the third mode of appropriation, the research by Father Bittremieux, a Belgian missionary in Congo in the early years of the 20th century, is relevant. He conducted fieldwork among the Mayombe, especially on *Minkisi* figures, and acquired a large collection of *minkisi* figures from the Mayombe and shipped them to the museum at the University of Louvain. The extraordinary aesthetic quality of this collection was enhanced by the fact that Bittremieux documented each object carefully. As he spoke Biyombe fluently, he was able to gather relevant information about the objects from the horse's mouth. At the same time, Father Bittremieux wrote that the natives took recourse to spirits but that 'this recourse to spirits and their *banganga*, diviners or quacks, was not their religion, it was not the worship of supernatural beings, but the baseness and deep moral decadence'.⁶⁰ Bittremieux identified dozens of *minkisi* figures, each with its specific name and function, i.e. the effect a particular *nkisi* would have if called upon by a *nganga* or a believer. It could cause sleeping sickness, cure children with a swollen stomach or punish thieves.⁶¹

Bittremieux's research was later instrumental in the study of *minkisi* by anthropologists. As far as I know, he is the first scholar to claim that *minkisi* were not in themselves religious objects, even if they functioned in a religious context. The argument presented in this book is that not only *minkisi* but all (or almost all) objects with power are not intrinsically religious. Unlike missionaries who used objects with power to compose hierarchical religious constructs of a Creator God, with spirits or minor gods as the lowest of them (*jujus*), Bittremieux rejected this approach because it 'was not their religion'. Nevertheless, from his remarks that their 'recourse to spirits' was 'the baseness and moral decadence', he agreed with other missionaries that these people needed to be civilized and converted to Christianity. He did not say that objects with power were idols, as missionaries did who worked from the first appropriation, but he used their lack of civilization as a motive for converting them to Christianity: a third mode of appropriation.

A comparable position was taken by Father Leo Brouwer, working among the Ewe in Ghana in the 1940s and 1950s. He had an interest in the habits and customs of the 'uneducated' Ewe people and put his observations on paper in 1952.⁶² In the introduction, he describes his own position as follows:

First of all, we civilized people have the duty to accept a fundamental equality of the negro, the human equality, which must carry any further differences in culture and problems. The Ewe negro will call an amiable, helpful white man *Enye ame* (he is a human being), while he will call the ever commanding, white master *menye ame o* (he is not a human being).⁶³

The Ewe had properties that are not sympathetic to Europeans, according to Brouwer:

Pride, bragging, affectation and vanity are natural virtues to the Ewe (...) They form a counterweight against his psychotic fear for all sorts of threats and dangers.' (...) As a first class materialist and easy

⁶⁰ Bittremieux (1942: 51).

⁶¹ Chapter 2.2.1 gives more examples of Bittremieux's research.

⁶² The manuscript was not published.

⁶³ Brouwer (1952: 7).

going opportunist the black man does not strive after the 'good', but rather after the extra stroke of unexpected luck. As the morality of the Ewe is that of self interest, he cares little for feelings of love, empathy, trust and gratitude. They are present, undoubtedly, but their growth is hampered by fears and so many other obscure factors.⁶⁴

Brouwer does not in any way challenge the validity of missionary work, implying that he considered such work to be justified and useful.

The Methodist missionary, Rev. Dennett, worked among the Kongo and the Vili (he uses the old term Bavili) in Congo at the beginning of the 20th century at a time when the colonial administration was engaged in a campaign to eradicate cults associated with *minkisi* as it was convinced that they constituted sources of 'native sedition'. Although Dennett was aware of the social and religious importance of cult objects, he actively participated in a campaign to eradicate the cults and the objects. He wrote that the word *Kici* ('the mysterious inherent quality in things that causes the Bavili to fear and respect') was translated by early missionaries as 'holy', while he himself describes it as 'evil', basing his views on what people in his environment told him: *Kici* was a fetish in his view and he described the cult of *Kici* as Ndongoism. Dennett lists at least 33 major types of *nkicikici*, 'those personal amulets serving protective purposes alone'.⁶⁵

Dennett described the functional qualities of these objects with power but appears to view them as inherently religious. He justifies the missionary work as the battle against these evil practices and sources of 'native seduction'. He too appropriated the phenomenon of *minkisi* and attributed a new Christian meaning to it.

4.2 The anthropological perspective

4.2.1 *Anthropologists in a colonial context*

The process of pacification, as colonial governments called it, was usually accompanied by the force of superior gunpowder and brutal oppression. The introduction of colonial rule did not go without a hitch. Many ethnic groups (which in those days were called 'tribes') opposed the imposition of foreign laws and the loss of their freedom and identity. Administrators did not always understand them or had misconceptions about them. In some cases, force was applied to subdue these 'unruly tribes', but the result was that the natives put up even greater resistance. In such circumstances, colonial administrators called on anthropologists to study the situation and report back to the authorities so that appropriate action could be undertaken.

This request by the colonial administration was welcomed by the anthropological community. At the beginning of the 20th century, the conviction was growing that only professional anthropologists were able to conduct research in a responsible manner as they were aware of the theoretical problems in the subject they were investigating, knew the kind of information required to solve them and they alone were able to put themselves in a position where it could be acquired. This was a break with previous practice where anthropologists stayed in their ivory towers at universities and relied heavily on information provided by others returning from Africa. It was a break too with another

⁶⁴ Brouwer (1952: 34).

⁶⁵ Dennett (1906: 85).

phenomenon from the 19th century, namely the search for one's own pre-history and the emphasis on one's own origins, the result of which was that the 'other' was not studied for his/her own history or own sake. Anthropologists had participated in these searches too. Now, at the beginning of a new century, a shift in paradigm was taking place: anthropologists were starting to take a genuine interest in the 'other'. And following initiatives by Malinowski, who had done fieldwork among the Tobriand Islanders, they were eager to accept requests from the colonial authorities as the latter provided the funds to support fieldwork that, in turn, offered the researcher the prospects of a successful career in academia.

Fieldwork was a new adventure and one for which new conventions had to be developed. For Evans-Pritchard, the anthropologist in the field had to live among the natives and put him/herself

on a level with them, as far as he can like one of themselves. Unlike the administrator and the missionary, who, living out of the native community in mission stations or government posts, had mostly to rely on what a few informants told them.⁶⁶

But, while associating himself closely with the natives he was studying, the anthropologist had to keep an intellectual distance from the same people in order to remain independent in his judgements. This approach has become known as 'participant observation'.

Evans-Pritchard spent a year among the Nuer in Sudan in the 1930s as a government anthropologist. He worked under difficult circumstances as the Nuer, who were feared for their belligerent nature (see Figure 58), distrusted him and opposed every form of interference by foreigners and foreign institutions. But Evans-Pritchard came to conclusions that would have been difficult to conceive in the previous century when it was commonly assumed that Africans were savages: 'The Nuer are undoubtedly a primitive people by the usual standards of reckoning, but their religious thought is remarkably sensitive, refined, and intelligent. It is also highly complex.'⁶⁷ Evans-Pritchard's research on the Nuer will be discussed later as it is considered the pioneering study of what would be called 'symbolic or interpretative anthropology'.

Critics have rebuked anthropology for having been the 'handmaid' of colonial rule. They have also questioned the academic independence of the anthropologist in the field if his/her research was financed by the colonial administration. Turner was one who was critical of anthropologists: 'Anthropologists, before independence, were "apologists of colonialism" and subtle agents of colonial supremacy who studied African customs merely to provide the dominant white minority with information damaging the native interests but normally opaque to white investigation.'⁶⁸

Evans-Pritchard who had been a government anthropologist when he did fieldwork among the Nuer and the Azande, defended the role of the anthropologist in the field:

It is important to understand native opinion about black magic, not only for the anthropologist, but also for the colonial administrator and missionary, if they wish to show to the peoples whom they govern and teach that they understand their notions about right and wrong. The native does not so much distrust European justice and education as he despairs of the administrator and missionary ever under-

⁶⁶ Evans-Pritchard (1951: 78).

⁶⁷ Evans-Pritchard (1956: 311).

⁶⁸ Turner (1971: 33).

standing, or attempting to understand, his point of view as expressed in laws and public opinion. This despair springs largely from the handling by Europeans of such matters as sorcery, with which both missionaries and administrators frequently have to deal.⁶⁹

Figure 58 A leopard chief of the Nuer (southern Sudan) was a sacred person, a mediator and a ritual specialist, but had no political authority and was not a real chief as the Nuer had no government



From these observations, it becomes clear how much anthropologists in the field differed from missionaries working in the rural areas in Africa. As was shown earlier, certain missionaries, such as Father Bittremieux and others, did research on the indigenous religious cults of the people among whom they were working but their generally negative views of their religions and the people who practised them remained unchanged.

After saying that the natives took recourse to spirits, Father Bittremieux wrote that: 'this recourse to spirits and their *banganga*, diviners or quacks, was not their religion, it was not the worship of supernatural beings, but the baseness and deep moral decadence'.⁷⁰ The missionary was able to describe recognizable properties of these *Nkisi* but

⁶⁹ Evans-Pritchard. (1931: 22).

⁷⁰ Bittremieux (1942: 51).

failed to analyze them in the way Evans-Pritchard did. Evans-Pritchard lived among the Nuer for ‘only’ one year but concluded that their religious thoughts were sensitive, refined and intelligent, which was a far cry from the missionaries’ views of indigenous religious practices.

The differences between anthropology in the 19th century and the 20th century can be clearly seen below.

If many of the 19th century thinkers saw members of smaller-scale societies mired in superstition, ignorance, bliss, or folly, the personal connections forged in decent ethnographic fieldwork immediately deprived westerners of any illusions of intellectual or moral superiority (...) Thus the problem shifted from explaining the ostensibly irrational religious practices of others to understanding the nature of religious practices anywhere.⁷¹

Colonial governments developed policies based on how it was best to impose their rule on Africans. This was to be accomplished with as little opposition from the natives as possible. In this respect, the British introduced the system of Indirect Rule and, by adopting the policy, colonial governments presupposed that societies in Africa were coherent entities and that successful colonization could materialize if traditional societies were left untouched. They believed that their own administrative systems could simply be introduced and that it was their mandate to maintain society in its earlier functional state. The natives had to be persuaded to continue doing things as their forefathers had done them.⁷²

The view that societies in Africa were coherent societies was the subject matter of a new theoretical discipline called functionalism that was spearheaded by Emile Durkheim. In explaining functionalism within the context of social anthropology, Evans-Pritchard wrote that:

[people] can make predictions, anticipate events, and lead their lives in harmony with their fellows because every society has a form or pattern which allows us to speak of it as a system, or structure, within which, and in accordance with which, its members live their lives. The use of the word structure in this sense implies that there is some kind of consistency between its parts (...) The people who live in any society may be unaware, or only dimly aware, that it has a structure. It is the task of the social anthropologist to reveal it.⁷³

This description of his task touches on the fundamental quality of an anthropologist, namely to find out what the ‘other’ thinks and believes, and what his basic concepts and ideals are, i.e. his emic account.

Apart from functionalism, other attempts were also made to explain indigenous African religions. One was a book that psychologist Carbeth Read published in 1920, in which he argued that magic was a product of emotional states, of desire, fear, hate and so forth, and he discussed magic and animism under the heading of ‘imagination beliefs’. Although the book did not receive much attention among anthropologists, his views continued to be popular, not least among missionaries. It had long been common practice among missionaries on leave, in sermons and talks about their missionary work

⁷¹ The same applies to many missionaries who wrote about the customs of the Africans among whom they were working. Chapter 3 discussed some of these, such as Rev. Dennett (in Congo), Father Knops (Ivory Coast), G.T. Basden (Nigeria) and Father Brouwer (Ghana).

⁷² Janzen (1977: 76).

⁷³ Evans-Pritchard (1951 [1971]: 19).

and at mission exhibitions, to describe Africans as ‘living in fear’ and of living under the yoke of Satan.⁷⁴ The message was, that only the glad tidings of the Gospel could redeem them.

These constructs were an attempt to understand primitive societies with the help of psychological concepts. Evans-Pritchard was aware of similar explanations of the Nuer religion by European missionaries but disagreed with them:

For me this is an over-simplification and a misunderstanding. It is true that Nuer, like everyone else, fear death, bereavement, sickness, and other troubles, and that it is precisely in such situations that they so often pray and sacrifice (...). But we cannot say that on that account their religion is simply one of fear, which is, moreover, a very complex state of mind, and one not easy to define or assess. On the contrary, it is because Nuer are afraid of these misfortunes that one might speak of their religion as one of hope and comfort.⁷⁵

Theories about the systems by which societies function did not only throw an altogether different light on African communities but also gave a new direction to the discipline of anthropology. ‘The doctrines and approaches that went by the name of functionalism thus gave social anthropology an assured and coherent style.’ Assad describes functionalism as ethnographic holism in which the different institutions of a society are described and linked one to another.⁷⁶ From this point of view, religions (and here indigenous African religions) are parts of general social systems. Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt discovered fundamental religious notions among the Nuer and the Dinka that were crucial for an understanding of their society, culture and religion, and that could in no way be identified with Christian concepts of God. Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt were two of a relatively small number of anthropologists who dared to approach ‘their people’ without the bias of Christian concepts, as many of their colleagues at the time did. Section 4.2.3 will show how, for instance, government anthropologists Meek among the Ibo and Rattray among the Ashanti took it for granted that these peoples knew a Creator God

4.2.2 *Function and meaning*

Function

For the European colonial powers, Africa was a continent that was waiting to be exploited. To successfully open up the different regions for trade and commerce, for the excavation of natural resources and raw materials and, at a different level, for the introduction of (European) civilization, the colonial authorities needed to know how societies and communities operated, how different institutions (authority, marriage, labour and others) within each society functioned in relation to others, and how societies worked in relation to each other and to foreign powers. The scholarly discipline that studied these relationships was called functionalism and one of its pioneers was Emile Durkheim.

⁷⁴ According to Bittremieux, the Mayombe in Lower Congo acknowledged the existence of a Creator God, *Nzambi*, who was not worshipped and for whom there were no cults.

⁷⁵ Evans-Pritchard (1956: 312).

⁷⁶ Assad (1973: 12-13).

Durkheim's views on religion in relation to the community in which it operated drew much attention. In the context of this book, the study of religion is relevant as objects with power were for a long time considered part of ritual practices. For Durkheim, religion was a way of expressing social coherence in society: religion was a social fact.

Social facts are shared by a great many individuals at the same time; they exist already before the individual's birth and persist after his death; they exert a certain measure of coercion on the individual, because these concepts are vested with authority, an authority from which the individual cannot break away; they cannot be explained from the individual as such.⁷⁷

Durkheim saw religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set aside and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them'.⁷⁸

This moral community could be the church or any group, indeed society itself, and it was seen as a social fact by Durkheim. He carried it further by saying that when the group celebrated or worshiped its spirits or gods, it was in fact symbolizing or representing its society to itself. But religion, while expressing social coherence, was not only celebrating but also creating. It was creating the group as a group. Rituals are thus essential and are always effective when seen from this perspective.⁷⁹ 'If religion gave birth to all that is essential in *society*, that is so because the idea of society is the soul of religion. (...) Thus religious forces are human forces, moral forces'.⁸⁰

The emphasis on religion in theories of functionalism influenced the way many anthropologists of the time viewed objects with power in indigenous African religions. In the first place, objects with power were understood as part of the religious system of an ethnic group. *Ikenga* was seen as a religious entity and was placed in the hierarchical Ibo pantheon. *Minkisi* objects had a function in the wellbeing of individuals and the community as a whole through their relationship with *minkisi* spirits. *Asuman* may have obtained their efficacy from plants, according to Rattray, and they were always seen as religious powers.

Evans-Pritchard sharply criticized Europeans, including administrators, missionaries and doctors, for their lack of knowledge of native customs and religious practices, such as magic and sorcery.

Upon no other subject are Europeans in the tropics generally so ignorant and in no other sphere of native life is ignorance more likely to lead to infliction and destruction of good institutions. (...) We may do well to reflect that the mind sensitive to tales of sorcery reveals its own crudeness, for it has often been shown that when two civilizations come into contact the lesser is always accused of sorcery by half-studied and ill-formed judgements of the greater.⁸¹

His statement about two civilizations meeting each other can be seen in the light of theories of discourse. When European civilization and African (pagan) civilization met, the former appropriated the power of definition, even if it had not studied the latter, with

⁷⁷ Van Baal (1971: 109).

⁷⁸ Durkheim (1965: 62).

⁷⁹ Eller (2007: 21).

⁸⁰ Durkheim (1965: 47).

⁸¹ Evans-Pritchard (1951: 55) . I am afraid that Evans-Pritchard's critical remarks (and his were not the only ones) fell on deaf ears among the missionary congregations that sent missionaries to Africa.

the result being that the latter was, incorrectly, described as inferior, primitive and superstitious.

Meaning

From the day Evans-Pritchard started his research among the Nuer, he heard them speak of *Kwoth* and realized that a full understanding of the word was the key to their philosophy and religion. He translated the word as Spirit (with a capital letter), distinguishing it from our concept of God or god. *Kwoth* cannot be experienced by the senses. It is a conception that can be understood if it is contrasted with *cak* or creation and can be defined by reference to effects and relations and by the use of symbols and metaphors. Asking the Nuer to elucidate the concept is in vain, although they know that *kwoth* can be influenced by prayer and sacrifice; *kwoth* in turn determines whatever happens in the world. The concept of *kwoth* can be interpreted in many ways and makes Nuer religion both monotheistic and polytheistic. It may also be regarded as both totemistic and fetishistic. To the Nuer, these conceptions are not incompatible. 'They are rather different ways of thinking of the numinous at different levels of experience'.⁸²

Evans-Pritchard found, however, that beliefs and practices in Nuer religion formed a pattern, in which each part was subordinated to the harmony of the whole. Seen from this functionalist point of view, Nuer religion can be considered a religious system, even though it is not an entirely consistent set of ideas. On the other hand, 'it contains unresolved ambiguities and paradoxes: God is remote from man and also very near to him, he is both friend and foe, whom one summons for aid and asks to turn away, seeking at the same time union with him and separation from him'.⁸³

Lienhardt conducted fieldwork among the Dinka of Sudan between 1947 and 1950. He was confronted with comparable problems of methodology similar to those Evans-Pritchard had experienced among the Dinka's neighbours, the Nuer. When studying Dinka religion, Lienhardt found that they did not make distinctions between natural and supernatural beings nor did they admit having a separate 'spirit world'.

Lienhardt uses the term ultra-human forces that participate in human life and often affect men for good or ill. The Dinka distinguish between events that 'are of men' and others that are 'of Powers' but the two exist in the same world. What the Dinka call *jok* or spirits of various kinds are called Powers by Lienhardt. It is not only a problem of translation since the very notions of 'god or God' and 'spirits' are different from Western concepts. The Dinka know of *nhialic*, a word they frequently use that refers to 'up' or 'above' and can be used as 'the sky'. It is also referred to as 'creator' and 'my father', and prayers and sacrifice are offered to it (see Figure 59). It is used in contexts where it would normally be translated as 'God'. Yet the attributes of our 'God' and their *nhialic* are not identical. Lienhardt thus opted for the word Divinity (with a capital letter and without the definite or indefinite article) to translate *nhialic*.

Dinka religious concepts may be considered vague and non-descript by European scholars who always try to be precise in their definitions. This is not the way the Dinka view themselves. For instance, a good harvest is attributed to Divinity *Abuk*, but the

⁸² Evans-Pritchard (1956: 316).

⁸³ Evans-Pritchard (1956: 318).

Dinka can discuss the prospects for the harvest without necessarily introducing *Abuk*. 'To refer to the activity of a Power is to offer an interpretation, and not merely a description, of experience.'⁸⁴

Figure 59 Dinka men from southern Sudan sacrificing a cow, which is seen as the victim and replacing a person who has fallen ill because the Powers will accept the sacrifice and cure the sick person



⁸⁴ Lienhardt (1961: 148).

The studies of the Nuer and Dinka by Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt show that social anthropology had changed fundamentally since the 19th century. Fieldwork had increased knowledge about small-scale societies and this enabled anthropologists who were prepared to study these societies without bias or preconceptions to analyze them in a manner that had never before been attempted. For the first time, these societies, their customs, language and religion were studied in categories of thought that were not European but those of the society itself: the emic account.

The study of 'societies as wholes' show how different institutions within that society function in relation to each other: they do not by themselves present their intrinsic meaning. We also observe a gradual shift in the study and understanding of Africa. Anthropologists in the 19th century studied Africa with the aim of understanding their own (pre-)history and took the information about Africa that was presented by merchants, travellers and missionaries at face value. It resulted in an understanding of Africa as a primitive continent, and one in which objects with power were seen as expressions of superstition. During the 1900-1950 period, we can note a shift in the anthropological study of Africa as fieldwork became the basis for research; functionalism studied the relationships of institutions within a society. For the first time, studies were conducted to establish the meaning of African religious concepts.⁸⁵

4.2.3 *Anthropologists on objects with power*

As in the previous chapter, I will discuss the same three case studies *ikenga*, *minkisi* and *asuman* but from the point of view of anthropologists working in each of these groups in the first half of the 20th century.

Ikenga

As the first researcher to write systematically on Ibo religion, Leonard described *ikenga* as: 'the God [with a capital G] of virtue and fortune, and giver of strength and of all good things to those who have a house; he is the daily provider of food, and the God of good actions'.⁸⁶ Leonard's influence on later writers cannot be overestimated and his decision to call *Ikenga* 'a God of fortune' was adopted by several of his colleagues.⁸⁷ N.W. Thomas was a government anthropologist in the early years of the 20th century and wrote a report on the Ibo-speaking peoples in 1913. Being the first authoritative study of the Ibo, it had a great impact on later studies. Certain notions of Ibo society, Ibo culture and the 'Ibo personality' have their roots in his publications. With regard to

⁸⁵ It appears that a number of missionaries were familiar with anthropological theory, such as the psychological theory of Carbeth Read, and continued to think along the lines of animism, fetishism and their negative connotations long after anthropologists stopped doing so, but that certain points of view, such as Durkheim's 'Society is God' argument was considered such an affront to their theological views that these were unacceptable to them.

⁸⁶ Leonard (1906: 420).

⁸⁷ By Smith (1929: 48), Meek (1937: 39), Nzekwu (1964: 173) and Nzimiro (1972: 35) among others. When I started working in the Afrika Centrum in Aalbeek in the mid 1950s, most African human effigies were labelled as 'ancestor figures' or 'fertility figures' for no other reason than that their real meanings were as yet unknown. One exception was a statue of *Ikenga*, which was described as a 'God of War and Good Fortune'. See Figure 77.

Ibo religion, Thomas asserts that the Ibo had ‘a Supreme God at the head of the Pantheon’ and that there were ‘a large number of other powers (...) to whose position no precise statement can be obtained’. According to him, the Ibo call their Supreme God *Cuku*. He admitted that his informants had only vague notions about the relationship between *Cuku* and the other ‘gods’. In fact, he quotes ‘old men’ (his informants) as saying that they knew nothing of *Cuku* before the arrival of white men.⁸⁸

P. Amaury Talbot published a major work in four volumes entitled *Peoples of Southern Nigeria* in 1926. He was a resident of southern Nigeria and obtained most of his material in person but also made use of the writings of Thomas, Basden and others. Talbot’s approach typically made many attempts to establish general patterns of religious and other practices for vast areas and periods in West African history and to look for the common origins of peoples and customs. He found striking resemblances between Nigerian cults and those of Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Talbot also supported the theory of degeneration or ‘retrogradation’ that he argued was due to the fact that people lived in dense forests for such extended periods that they became unable to impose their will on the environment.

He was convinced that the Ibo believed in a pantheon with a Supreme God at its head. Next came the ancestors who were equated with saints, and ‘small gods’ that were similar to angels (or devils). In this construction of the heavenly pyramid, problematic phenomena were dismissed as *juju* or fetish with a pseudo-scholarly connotation: ‘Both include, in ordinary parlance, not only minor gods and spirits and their symbols but also elementals, as well as the powers created by magic. In this book, however, *juju* will be confined to the former class.’⁸⁹ That this was an unrealistic hypothesis is clear from its application to ethnography. When Talbot, in his long description of *jujus*, comes to *Ikengga* (he spells it with double g), he finds it difficult to ‘know how to classify the *Ikengga* spirits’. Talbot collected these objects with power and handed them over to the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford. One is a small wooden figure with horns to which are attached strings of cowries and a manilla. Talbot collected this object in 1916 and described it as a ‘protective *juju*’. (see Figure 60)

Some of his informants say that they are not *jujus* (*alose*) while others assert that, in several respects, they are more like the ancestors. According to Talbot, the Ibo *Ikengga* appear to be connected with their personal *Chi*. When an offering is made to *Ikengga*, the name of the dead father, coupled with that of the *Chi*, is invoked.⁹⁰

C.K. Meek published his major work entitled *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe. A Study in Indirect Rule* in 1937.⁹¹ Meek was appointed as a government anthropologist and Senior Administrative Officer in southern Nigeria after spending 18 years in similar functions in northern Nigeria. Meek was convinced that ‘one of the primary functions of religion would seem to be the formulation of rules and standards of social behaviour’. In his view, the Ibo consider *Ala* (the Earth) as ‘the fount of human morality’ and the

⁸⁸ In other words, it was the white men (missionaries) who identified *Cuku* with their concept of a Supreme God. This is a significant contribution to the debate on the concept of the Creator God. See also Chapter 4.2.4.

⁸⁹ Talbot (1926: 79).

⁹⁰ Talbot (1926: 142).

⁹¹ Meek (1937).

‘principal legal sanction’ and the priests of *Ala* are the ‘guardians of public morality’. He acknowledged the existence of ‘innumerable minor deities: water and agricultural godlings; spirits which are the personification of fortune, destiny, wealth, etcetera; spirits which are the counterparts of living human beings; and finally the ancestors, who control the fortunes of their living descendants’.

Figure 60 An Ibo *Ikenga* from Nigeria in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford that was collected by Talbot in 1916 and was described as a ‘protective *juju*’



Meek’s positive contribution to our understanding of Ibo religious concepts is that he began to turn away from preconceived notions of an Ibo pantheon in favour of the link between Ibo society and religion, one expression of which is *Ikenga*.

Leonard, Thomas, Talbot and Meek were all government anthropologists or did the work of one: they did research, interviewed informants and put the results of their findings on paper. When we – with our insight in Ibo religious concepts – look back at what they wrote in the first decades of the 20th century, it is clear that they viewed Ibo culture

and religion through European eyes, as was the case with the early missionaries. The missionaries and anthropologists, all of whom came from European nation states with a king or queen or president as head of state, could not envisage a people without rulers and with no central government. It was equally impossible for them to understand a religion without a Supreme God or Creator, as was commonly accepted throughout the Christian world. Yet the Ibo were precisely this: a 'tribe without rulers'.⁹² We may conclude here that these anthropologists were unable to study the Ibo without prejudice, just like Evans-Pritchard and Lienhard a few years later among the Nuer and the Dinka.

Did these anthropologists contribute to a better understanding of Ibo society, and objects with power in particular? The early anthropologists agreed that *ikenga* played an important role in the lives of individual Ibo men. They also agreed that there were social events at which *ikenga* was the centre of attention: headhunting, title taking and men's funerals (see Chapter 2). Does their information offer a better insight into Ibo society? Comparing their publications with those of earlier missionaries, such as Sidney Smith and G.T. Basden (see Chapter 4.1.4), we can note hardly any differences. Both groups observed Ibo society and arrived at more or less the same conclusions. What was absent in the anthropologists' reports was an analysis of their observations and any attempt to interpret information from the viewpoint of the Ibo themselves, i.e. an emic account. Chapter 5 discusses how more recent anthropological research has shown that the concept of *chi*, which the early missionaries used to make the connection with Christian notions, must be considered an essential factor in any understanding of Ibo culture and religion. Human beings, animals and inanimate beings have their own *chi* as a life essence. Likewise, the universe has its own *chi* too and this is the greatest of all *chi* as it permeates the whole universe: it is known as *chukwu*. This universe is overpowering, and therefore called 'great', but it does not of necessity impose itself on mankind. '*Chuku* lives in a compound outside the earth and the sky', an old man told Horton.⁹³

Names that the Ibo use to describe the 'great *chi*' include, among others, *chi-neke*, *chi-ukwu* and *chi-leke*. Early ethnographers and missionaries have translated these descriptions as 'the supreme being'. Henderson was probably the first scholar to interpret these notions from an altogether different point of view. Starting from the notion of *chi*, he writes that '*chi* is projected as a life essence attributed to the entire universe, a universal self called *chi-ukwu*, or *chuku*', and that 'it is implicit in the logical structure of these terms that *chi-ukwu* is a sub-category of *chi* rather than the more general class within which *chi* may be categorized'.⁹⁴

The fundamental notion of *chi* and *Ikenga* appears to be their attachment to the individual within the context of the collectivity. *Ikenga* in particular emphasizes the individuality of a person. At the same time, individualism is an aspect of Ibo society and one of its underlying principles. This aspect was observed by the early ethnographers but never received extensive attention.

The Igbo scholar Onwuejugu wrote in 1975: 'Many people nowadays do not know about *Ikenga*. The concept of *Ikenga*, however, still pervades Igbo attitudes towards life,

⁹² Middleton, (1958).

⁹³ Horton (1956: 18).

⁹⁴ Henderson (1972: 107-108).

especially towards the notion of individual effort.⁹⁵ This individual effort is meant to generate power, wealth and social prestige. From this angle, the *ikenga* collected by Talbot (see Figure 60) is not so much a protective charm (*juju*) but the expression of the owner's ambition that he will be rich one day.⁹⁶ In the last few decades, the literature on Ibo religion has paid little or no attention to *Ikenga*.⁹⁷

In conclusion, we could say that the early anthropologists contributed little to our knowledge of Ibo society and religion other than what the early missionaries had already stated. Unlike Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt who succeeded in giving an emic account of Nuer and Dinka concepts of society and religion, the early anthropologists did not go beyond observations and descriptions of Ibo rituals and practices. I am hesitant, therefore, to call them anthropologists but prefer the word ethnographers, as that is what they were: they described ethnic groups.⁹⁸

Minkisi

Minkisi were discussed in Chapter 2 and Father Bittremieux's role in our understanding of *Minkisi* was also outlined. The contributions of Maes, a Belgian anthropologist who published his findings in 1935⁹⁹ and 1939¹⁰⁰ were also considered, especially the fact that he mentioned fetishes and magic statues in the title of his 1935 article, which is indicative of his basic attitude towards *Minkisi*. The publication focused entirely on the differentiation between a number of *Minkisi* categories, such as *nkisi na moganga* (healing objects), *nkisi mpezo* (evil objects that cause disease), *nkisi mbula* (powers that protect chiefs against witchcraft) and *nkisi nkonde* (powers that can cause serious disease and even death in persons suspected of witchcraft and other crimes: the so-called nail fetishes). Maes's approach fits the functionalist tradition and the classification system he developed is one of several that have been proposed since Father Bittremieux first drew up his. As there were so many different *minkisi*, it was almost imperative for researchers to draw up systems by which to differentiate them. However useful these systems were in distinguishing between the many *minkisi*, little was said about the values

⁹⁵ Onwuejugwu (1975: 252).

⁹⁶ Both the cowries and the manilla attached to the figure in Figure 60 were currencies at the time, before the colonial authorities replaced them with the Pound Sterling. Cowries were originally found in the Indian Ocean and spread through large parts of Africa where they were appropriated as a form of currency. Manillas are of Portuguese origin and were used as ballast on ships sailing to West Africa to stabilize them. They were left behind in West Africa where they were appropriated as a form of currency.

⁹⁷ An Igbo friend of mine who lives in Holland since he was 20, told me he had never heard of *Ikenga*. After his father's death in his home town of Onitsha, he told me that, for the first time in his life, he entered the family shrine in his father's house and, to his surprise, saw an *Ikenga* there.

⁹⁸ This reminds me of a dispute between the Institute of Social Anthropology and the Department of Ethnography at Oxford University in the 1970s. The former saw itself as superior as material culture and the study of objects were 'only' for ethnographers, and immaterial culture and the study of concepts was for anthropologists. There was no contact at a formal level, even if students attended lectures in both departments. The supervisor who was assigned to me when I was writing my B.Litt. thesis on *Ikenga* for the Department of Anthropology never read my thesis. For my *viva* I was directed to the Balfour Library in the Pitt Rivers Museum, i.e. the Museum of Ethnography. The two departments have since merged.

⁹⁹ Maes (1935).

¹⁰⁰ Maes (1939).

that people themselves attributed to their *minkisi* until MacGaffey published his research findings on the Lower Congo peoples and their *minkisi* in the 1990s (see Chapter 5). A catalogue was published by the Ethnographic Museum of Leipzig in 2012 showing their collection of *Minkisi*, which dates back to the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century (see Chapter 4.3.3).

The BaKongo have shown that, over their long history, they were able to abandon their *minkisi* if they felt that they were no longer effective. If repeated petitions or even sacrifices to the *nkisi* did not produce the desired results, the owner (an individual, a family or a community) might conclude that its agency had stopped. They always maintained control over their *minkisi*. Even if at first glance a *nkisi* and its *nganga* appeared to control the individual who requested advice or the parties that asked for mediation in their conflict, it was ultimately the community that remained ‘in charge’. If a *nkisi* did not live up to the community’s expectations, it could be discarded. If, on the other hand, it cured a patient of his/her disease, this would mean that the person could retake control of his/her life. Similarly, if a *nkisi* had successfully mediated in a conflict between two parties, this implied that the community had regained control over its own existence. (see Figure 61)

Figure 61 This *Nkisi nkonde*, which is 90 cm in height, once belonged to an entire village and was kept in a separate hut because it was so powerful



The fact that a community of devotees had the liberty – or perhaps the authority – to decide on a *nkisi*'s continued presence among them or its destruction shows that the community did not feel powerless in the face of the 'sacred' and objects with power. They were aware of their responsibility and this weighed more heavily on them than the respect one might have expected them to pay to the *minkisi*. The community was a social agent that could cause the destruction of a *nkisi*. Before this, it was the *nkisi* that had been the social agent that, through its own intentions, had caused events to happen, for example, the sick were cured and criminals were punished. When the community discovered that a *nkisi* was unable to make events happen, it decided that its life had to come to an end.

Both *asuman* and *minkisi* shared the fate of being demonized by European missionaries and colonial officers who saw the objects as expressions of a barbarous, pagan culture and religion. They were suppressed, sometimes by force, by whites who were acting on behalf of the authority of the Church or the government.

Asuman

Most of the anthropological information on *asuman* in the 1900-1950 period comes from Captain Rattray, who was appointed as a government anthropologist by the British colonial administration. Rattray's publications on the Ashanti, notably his three volumes entitled *Ashanti*, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* and *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, may be considered the outcome of fieldwork with a double objective. On the one hand, he researched traditional Ashanti institutions for their intrinsic values, while, on the other, he wanted to provide the colonial administration with tools to allow the successful implementation of its policy of Indirect Rule on the Ashanti nation.

Rattray is known to have had a great affection for the Gold Coast and its people and wanted to correct the accounts by Europeans who had accused the Ashanti, who were fierce enemies of the British, of atrocities.

As West Africa has been termed 'The Land of Fetish', it seems only right and proper that we should try to discover what this term conveys to the mind of the West African himself. (...) In olden times, and in times not so long past, the Ashanti people may seem, to the superficial observer, to have been merely bloodthirsty men and women unworthy of any sympathy whatever, and yet more than one hundred years ago, when these orgies of blood were at their height, one who knew them well placed the following statement on record: "It is a singular thing that these people – the Ashantees – who had never seen a white man before nor the sea, were the most civil and well bred I have ever seen in Africa."¹⁰¹

If such praise could be bestowed on a people who were at times guilty of the deeds that have been recorded by many travellers, I thought I would try to find out how these apparently opposing characteristics could be reconciled.¹⁰²

Ethnographers like Rattray described the relationships between the different spiritual powers in the Ashanti cosmology as being hierarchical in structure. It helped them, or at least so they claimed, in understanding the complexities of an indigenous traditional religion. It also explained how the different parts of Ashanti society and culture were

¹⁰¹ Mr James Swanzy, to a Commission of the House of Commons (Parliamentary Paper No. 506, p. 32, 20 June 1816).

¹⁰² Rattray (1959: vi).

related to each other.¹⁰³ The supremacy of *Nyankopon* justified the ‘supreme’ authority of the *Asantehene* and the Supreme God was the font of morality. And below *Nyankopon* came the *nsamanfo*, who were equated by early missionaries with the ancestors. The power of the ancestors justified the respect that was given to elderly people who would, sooner or later, become ancestors themselves. Disrespect towards elders in this life might cause trouble later.

For those who accept a hierarchy in spiritual powers, *asuman* are generally considered the lowest in rank. They are always material objects with (spiritual) power and may consist of one or more recognizable objects, such as a broom, a clay pot, a bundle of feathers, animal claws or a skull that, as a rule, have a metaphorical relationship with the purpose for which they are utilized. *Asuman* become effective after they have been imbued with a special power by someone who is acknowledged as an expert. (see Figures 62a and b)

Rattray did not apparently question what the Ashanti believed: *Asuman* or objects with power are the lowest in rank in the spiritual hierarchy and are capable of inflicting inexplicable harm to humans in the form of disease, death and/or economic disaster such as ruined crops, car accidents and theft. For the Ashanti, these offensive actions are most commonly associated with witchcraft or *juju*.¹⁰⁴

Figures 62a, b

Personal *Asuman*, probably from the Ashanti, Fanti and Sefwi regions of Ghana, made of different material (leather, bones, horns, fibre, beads and calabash) and serving different purposes



a



b

Rattray devotes much attention to the classifications of *abosom* and *asuman* and, by doing so, followed a trend that was adopted elsewhere too. These classifications do not, however, explain the meaning of *asuman* and need to be considered a mental construction by a Western preference for classifications. The Ashanti themselves, even those who accept this line of thought, do not, for practical purposes, attach much importance

¹⁰³ It appears that Rattray was familiar with the theories of functionalism.

¹⁰⁴ It is no wonder that Europeans (colonial officers) in the past had great difficulty in accommodating these incidents. James H. Neal, a British Chief Investigation Officer in the colonial administration of the then Gold Coast, published his experiences in *Ju-ju in My Life* (1966).

to these hierarchical categories. When a family has a problem, it is the ancestors who are called upon; when it is a mysterious disease, it is the *abosom* that are approached; and when there is a matter that is not directly linked with either of these, the *asuman* are invited. There is no need for discussion about which spiritual power is superior to another and it is only the solution that is important. It is not uncommon to abandon one spiritual power (e.g. a certain *obosom*) if it appears incapable of offering the required solution and to go to another. If several *abosom* and *asuman* have been applied but have failed to cure an ailment, the family may eventually opt for hospital treatment as a very last resort.

To explain the nature of *asuman*, researchers have attempted to analyze the origin of their power. Reflecting on the distinction between *abosom* (gods, small gods or spirits) and *asuman*, Rattray says that the main power in an *abosom* comes directly or indirectly from *Nyame* that, in his view, is the Supreme Being. According to Rattray the power in a *suman* comes from plants or trees, and sometimes from fairies, forest monsters, witches or 'some sort of unholy contact with the dead', i.e. contact that in the ordinary way would be unclean or repellent and has no connection with ancestor worship. An *abosom* is the 'god' of the family, the clan or the nation. A *suman* is generally personal to its owner.¹⁰⁵

Rattray highlighted valuable information about the Ashanti but failed to document an emic account of the Ashanti. This may have been due to the fact that the Ashanti themselves were only vaguely aware of the discrepancies in their spiritual construction of a hierarchy of powers with *Nyankopon* at its head and the *asuman* in the lowest rank. He appears to have been an ethnographer rather than an anthropologist like Evans-Pritchard or Lienhardt who entered the field without religious prejudice. Chapter 5.2.4 discusses the anthropological theories of symbols and offers an alternative way of looking at Ashanti religion and society.

4.2.4 *Property or appropriation?*

From the existing literature on African culture, religion and art, it appears that many Africans assume that their concept of God is not just a Christian concept but that it existed even before the arrival of European missionaries. In other words, many Christians in Africa believe that their concept of God is originally African. And African theologians tend to accept this view as if it is their genuine and legitimate religious property. However there were critical comments about this assumption back in the 19th century. Ellis, who studied Ashanti religion, wrote that '*Nyankopon* is really a god borrowed from Europeans'.¹⁰⁶ So is the concept of a Creator God an original African notion or another example of appropriation?

¹⁰⁵ Rattray (1959: 23).

¹⁰⁶ Ellis (1887 [1966]: 28).

This question has been a matter of debate for centuries. Lienhardt¹⁰⁷ traced its beginnings back to Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and his description of a 'natural' society that was as yet uninformed by Christian revelations:

... [they] believe that there is a certain godly power unknown, everlasting, incomprehensible, inexplicable, far above the capacity and reach of man's wit, dispersed throughout the world, not in bigness, but in virtue and power. To him alone they attribute the beginnings, the increasings, the proceeding, the changes, and the ends of all things.¹⁰⁸

Lienhardt, on the other hand, quotes David Hume's rationalistic view:

Men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism and to sink again from theism into idolatry. The vulgar, that is, indeed, all mankind, a few excepted, being ignorant and uninstructed, never elevate their contemplation to the heavens, or penetrate by their disquisitions into the secret structure of vegetable or animal bodies; so far as to discover a supreme mind or original providence, which bestowed order on every part of nature.(...) They regard, with perpetual attention, the *unknown causes*, which govern all these natural events, and distribute pleasure and pain, good and ill, by their powerful, but silent, operation. The unknown causes are still appealed to on every emergence. (...) It represents them to be sensible, intelligent beings, like mankind; actuated by love and hatred, and flexible by gifts and entreaties, by prayers and sacrifice. Hence the origin of religion. And hence the origin of idolatry and polytheism.¹⁰⁹

Early missionaries and anthropologists who took an interest in indigenous African religions found that their informants answered questions about God or gods with great hesitation. The common reply was 'we do not know'. Lienhardt commented on this reluctance as follows:

It seems to me clear enough here, as from my experience in Nilotic societies, that it is not so much the Shilluk who is puzzled by his own religion, as that a puzzle arises when he tries to fit it into a framework of questions deriving from the theological and philosophical assumptions [by these missionaries and anthropologists].¹¹⁰

His views were supported by Father Crazzolare, one of the most outstanding missionary ethnologists among the Acholi of Uganda, an ethnic group that had clear relationships with the Nilotic groups in southern Sudan, such as the Nuer and Dinka, and that were studied by Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt.

It was taken for granted that the generic term *jok* could not mean something independent from the many particular *jogi* [plural of *jok*] with their peculiar names. Based on such supposition natives were urged by tiresome questions ... as to which *jok* among the many had created them. Such enquiries implied suppositions and questions which most probably had never occurred to their simple minds: it puzzled them, as they are still puzzled at such questions. With hesitation they answered ... that they did not know, which was more nearly approaching the truth but less satisfactory.¹¹¹

Constructed tradition

The Akan religious concepts of *Nyame*, *nsamanfo*, *abosom* and *asuman* were, in my view, misunderstood by a number of researchers (Rattray being one of them) as well as

¹⁰⁷ Lienhardt (1997: 40-49). This paper was presented at a conference entitled 'The High God in Africa' that was held at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria in December 1964. It was published after his death in 1993.

¹⁰⁸ More (1951 [1516]: 17-18).

¹⁰⁹ Hume (1956 [1757]: 46-47), original emphasis.

¹¹⁰ Lienhardt (1997: 42).

¹¹¹ Crazzolare (1940: 13)5.

the Ashanti and Fanti themselves. I think that for the Ashanti and Fanti, *Nyame* or *Nyankopon* was originally one of the *abosom* and also a very – and for some perhaps the most – powerful *abosom*. I would argue that early missionaries who were looking for inroads into indigenous religions of the Ashanti and Fanti appropriated the notion of the (most) powerful *abosom* and called him the Supreme God. Some *abosom* were certainly more powerful than others.

The *abosom* of the River Tano (the biggest river in the Ashanti region) and Lake Bosomtwi (the largest lake in the same region) are still considered more powerful than local *abosom*. My argument is that *Nyame* (meaning sky) or *Nyankopon* was the *abosom* of the sky. It takes only a small step for a missionary to equate the sky with the heavens, as was generally accepted in Hebrew and Christian cosmology. If so, it would be only a small step to believing that *Nyame* (*Nyankopon*) who until then had been one of many *abosom*, was the Supreme God, the Creator, who dwelled in Heaven. This analysis is supported by the belief that, at Creation, the sky (*nyame*) rested on the earth. The *abosom* of the sky was angry because of a woman who was pounding *fufu* and hit the sky with her pestle. The result was that the sky (*nyame*) withdrew from the earth and became inaccessible for mankind.¹¹²

Positioning *Nyame* as the Supreme God implied that other *abosom* (in Christian parlance ‘heavenly creatures’) were subjugated to the Supreme God. In this way, missionaries constructed a hierarchical constellation of indigenous religions to introduce their Christian views of God, angels and saints. In this constructed tradition, *asuman* (and comparable ‘beings’ in other indigenous religions) could not be given Christian equivalents. They were considered expressions of the Devil and were symptomatic of the low esteem African religions enjoyed in European, especially Christian, eyes. These views were based, among other things, on an ancient tradition dating back to the 18th century called the Hamitic Hypothesis.¹¹³ It claims that African peoples were the descendants of Ham after he fled Canaan and were considered ‘the lost tribes of Israel’.¹¹⁴ The missionary J.J. Williams suggested that the Asante had Hebraic connections. The same has been said of the Yoruba, the Efik and several other tribes and it has also been suggested that there was a link with Ancient Egypt. Basden claimed a Jewish link for the Igbo and, to corroborate his claim, he compared Igbo and Hebrew customs.¹¹⁵ For early missionaries, the hypothesis was especially appealing because it implied that African indigenous religions had originally been monotheist. That this monotheism had been lost or diminished was due, according to these missionaries, to distortions brought about by a reliance on oral transmission of customs through the ages.¹¹⁶ The results of these distortions (also called degenerations) was that, in addition to the Supreme God, other gods (minor gods, fetishes) emerged. The hypothesis gave missionaries both a justification and a starting point for conversion.¹¹⁷

¹¹² This belief exists in many forms in other African cultures.

¹¹³ Law (2009: 306). See also van den Bersselaar (2012: 135-154).

¹¹⁴ The Biblical story of Noah who cursed his son Cham for having ridiculed him while he was drunk is recounted in Chapter 3.1.1.

¹¹⁵ Harries & Maxwell (2012: 148).

¹¹⁶ Basden (1938: 413).

¹¹⁷ Meyer (1999: 60-62).

To re-establish the original monotheism in Igbo religion, early missionaries such as Smith and Basden, as well as early anthropologists like Leonard, Thomas, Talbot and Meek, explained Igbo religion in terms of a well-structured pantheon. They saw it as a matter of course that religion had everything to do with the relationship between man and God. Even if some anthropologists were not practising Christians, they were so immersed in an intellectual and spiritual climate that was intrinsically Christian that they could hardly conceive of a different 'climate'. It was a climate in which it was accepted that God was the 'uncaused cause and the unmoved mover'.¹¹⁸ 'As long as the instinct of causality prevails, it effectuates the higher forms of religion.'¹¹⁹ The very concept of religion, as it was developed in the 19th century, could not be understood without the concept of a God.

Even if God was not mentioned by name, there was reference to a Superior Being, as in Frazer's definition of religion: 'A propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life'.¹²⁰ William wrote along the same lines about religion: 'The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.'¹²¹ Efforts to find a suitable religious order explain why early missionaries among the Ibo instructed their converts that *Chukwu* was the Supreme God and Creator, the principle from which all values in society were derived. How influential this preaching was can be seen in an article by Egboh,¹²² himself a theologian, who wrote that the Ibo believed in the existence of a Supreme God, *Chukwu* or *Chineke*, long before white men settled in their country. Talbot agreed that the Igbo acknowledged a Creator God and that all minor gods and powers were emanations of the Supreme Deity.

In effect, the pantheon could thus be seen as a form of monotheism.¹²³

Good and evil as opposites

There is another aspect to the debate. Was the urge to prove that some of the 'lower spirits' should be equated with devils another reason for missionaries to press for the notion of a Creator God who was almighty, all-good and omniscient, i.e. the Christian concept of God? This aspect appears to have been overlooked. The philosophical notion of binary opposition between Good and Evil is central to European thought: on the one hand, there is God, the Principle of Good and, on the other, there is the Devil (Satan), the Principle of Evil. The world can, therefore, be divided into two opposing halves: virtues and vices. Those who live a just and honest life, believe in God and follow his commands will be rewarded, either in this life or in the hereafter. Those who oppose God and his commands, live in sin and commit crimes will be punished either in this

¹¹⁸ Thomas of Aquino.

¹¹⁹ Father Wilhelm Schmidt, quoted in van Baal (1971: 104).

¹²⁰ Frazer (1958: 58).

¹²¹ William (1902; 1958).

¹²² Egboh (1972: 68-72).

¹²³ This must have been a welcome idea to missionaries at the time who could then reason that if the 'small gods' were suppressed in favour of the Supreme God, progress had been made along the path towards Christianity.

life or in the next. The hereafter itself was divided in two: heaven and hell. Christians consider themselves as servants of God and will expect to go to heaven after death, while pagans were seen as agents of the Devil and go to hell after they die.

Missionaries who had grown up with this European way of thinking transferred these notions to Africa. When they discovered that many indigenous spiritual powers were both benevolent and malevolent (as they were able to cure and to destroy), they tried to reorder the relationship between man and the spiritual world. They appropriated one powerful 'spirit' (an *orisa* [Yoruba] or an *obosom* [Ashanti]) and credited him with supernatural, divine powers, in fact 'promoting' him to the position of Creator God. After that, they were able to attribute a meaning of evil to spiritual powers that opposed the Creator God.¹²⁴ (see figures 63, a,b,c and d)

By appropriating powerful spirits and promoting them to the Christian concept of God, anthropologists and missionaries wittingly or unwittingly transformed the African notion of a common source of good and evil (all beings, including spiritual beings, have in themselves the powers of Good and Evil) into a rigorous opposition between Good and Evil.

By appropriating native concepts of *orisa* and *abosom* and attributing to them the Christian concepts of a Creator God, natives as well as missionaries (and a number of anthropologists) believed that these were original concepts. It appears that they were unfamiliar with the writings of the scholar A.B. Ellis¹²⁵ who was outspoken about the concept of a Creator God in his 1887 book:

Within the last twenty or thirty years the German missionaries, sent out from time to time by the mission societies of Basel and Bremen, have made Nyankopon known to European ethnologists and students of the science of religion, but being unaware of the real origin of this god, have generally written and spoken of him as a conception of the native mind, whereas he is really a god borrowed from Europeans and only thinly disguised (...) To the negro of the Gold Coast, Nyankopon is a material and tangible being, possessing legs, body, arms, in fact all the limits and the senses and the faculties of man. (...) For this reason no sacrifice is offered to him.... There were no priests for Nyankopon. (...) Consequently no form of worship for Nyankopon is established. (...) Soon after Europeans settled on the coast of Ghana, the local population "added to their system of polytheism a new deity, whom they termed Nana Nyankupon." (see Figure 64)

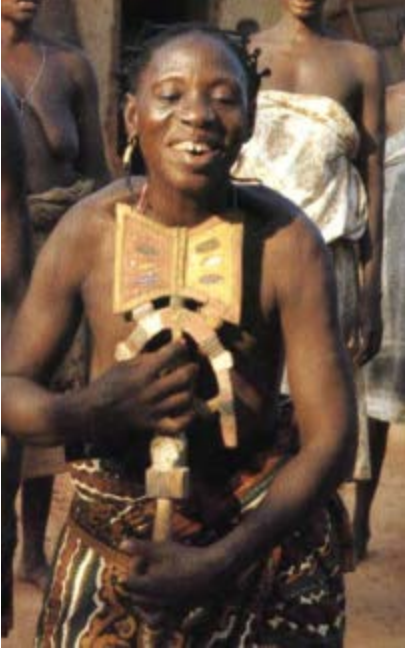
This was the god of the Christians and was borrowed and adopted under a new designation. Here the author describes a process that we call appropriation. We can, therefore, speak of a double appropriation. European missionaries and anthropologists first appropriated Ashanti concepts of powerful and less powerful *abosom* and construed a hierarchical constellation in which there was an Almighty God (*Nyame*) and, below Him, angels (the Ashanti equivalent: spirits of *abosom*) and saints (the Ashanti equivalent: ancestors or *nsamanfo*). Over time, converts to Christianity not only got used to the new interpretation of their native concepts but they appropriated these interpretations as if they had always been their own.

¹²⁴ Taussig (1980: 169-176) describes this process in his study of the Andean Indians during Spanish colonization.

¹²⁵ Ellis (1887: 28).

Figure 63 Orisa of the Yoruba, Nigeria.

- a A priestess of the *Sango* cult dancing while possessed by the spirit of *Sango* b An *Esu* cult figure with cowries and a sexually-inspired hairstyle that are signs of (desired) wealth and power



- c An *Ifa* divination tray that could be consulted by a *babalawo* client with a serious problem.



- d A ceremonial axe for the *orisa Ogun*



In ancient times, *Nyame* was considered only one of the *abosom*, even if he was the *abosom* of the sky and the firmament and was considered more powerful or influential than the others. There was no static pantheon with a hierarchy or fixed positions for the spiritual beings but they were flexible notions. People in need of (spiritual) help had the liberty to approach any *abosom* for assistance (see Chapter 2.3.4).

Figure 64 *Nyamedua*, the tree dedicated to *Nyame*, that can be found in many (older) Ashanti compounds and shrines. An earthenware pot, usually holding an egg but which is not a sacrifice, is placed in the branches



In indigenous African religions, concepts of power are considered to imply ‘forces and domains that are invented by humans as surely as humans are shaped by them’ and thus ‘people are conscious of the fact that they have a hand in the creation of the divinities and the scared’.¹²⁶ Rosenthal quotes an Ewe priest: ‘We, Ewe, are not like the

¹²⁶ Rosenthal (1998: 45).

Christians who are created by their God. We Ewe create our gods, and we create only gods that we want to possess us and not any others.’

In their studies of the Nuer and Dinka respectively, Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt, unlike early missionaries, did not start their research from the assumption that the Nuer and Dinka would acknowledge the existence of a Creator God. Instead they listened to their accounts about their lives, concepts, convictions and beliefs. They discovered that other concepts (i.e. other than a concept of God or god) were more important to them and that notions such as *kwoth* and *nialic* were key to understanding their society and religion (see Chapter 4.2.2).

In his recent study on the Kapsiki of north Cameroon, van Beek adopted a similar approach. He did not assume the existence of a Creator God: ‘*Shala* is the key term in Kapsiki cosmology; though translated as “God” in Bible translations, it is in no way a real monotheistic notion’.¹²⁷ *Shala* is, first and foremost, someone’s ‘personal god’ but each group, lineage or even *ad hoc* group has its own *shala*. The Kapsiki religion is one of relationships; *shala* is ‘the ultimate expression of a relationship more than a being’.¹²⁸ Van Beek admits that Muslims and Christians have tended to equate *shala* with God, as the Kapsiki thank *shala* for the good things in life (as a Muslim or Christian does), but this is a superficial resemblance.

We have already seen how early missionaries and anthropologists working among the Ibo misunderstood their religious concepts. Yet there were indications that the Ibo had difficulty accepting new interpretations, for example the notion of *Cuku* (also written as *Chukwu*). The anthropologist Thomas quotes the ‘old men’ as saying that they knew nothing of *Cuku* before the arrival of white men and suggesting that it was the white men (perhaps the missionaries) who identified *Cuku* with the (Christian) concept of a Supreme God. Thomas failed to recognize that the word *Cuku* is made up of *Ci* and *uku* (sometimes spelled as *ukwu*) meaning the great *Ci*.

Ci has been incorrectly described as ‘a protective deity common to both men and women’. More recently, the notion of *ci* was identified as a quality of life. *Cuku*, the great *Ci*, can then be identified as the overall quality of life that permeates the world and all its living beings. In his attempts to reconstruct the Ibo pantheon, Thomas was so preoccupied with establishing fixed positions of each religious phenomenon that he failed to note the versatility of many notions and the multiplicity of relationships between the phenomena. The concept of a static, never-changing Supreme Being was alien in Ibo thinking.

I have concluded that the concept of a Creator God in Africa was introduced by European missionaries. There have been two successive appropriations in the past 500 years. The first started soon after missionaries arrived and interviewed natives about their religious concepts, and specifically about powerful spiritual powers or gods, to find out if there was one such Power that could be considered ‘Almighty’ and the ‘Creator of the World’. Missionaries thus actively appropriated native concepts to suit their own theology. The second appropriation took longer and was the gradual acceptance by

¹²⁷ Van Beek (2012: 102).

¹²⁸ Van Beek (2012: 105).

converts to Christianity that the Creator God who they were worshipping under the original names of *Nyankopon*, *Chuku*, *Oludumare* and others had in fact existed long before any Europeans arrived.

We have already discussed how missionaries working among the Ibo in the first half of the 20th century uncritically assumed that the Ibo had a pantheon headed by a Supreme God. Comparable attempts to construct pantheons headed by a Supreme God were made for the Ashanti (*abosom* and *asuman*) and the Yombe (*minkisi*). Then there were small gods and objects with power (fetishes), some of which consisted of a single object, for instance a piece of wood carved into a figure such as an *ikenga* figure, while others had two or more elements, like the *minkisi* figures. Here we are referring to a material object that serves as a receptacle for immaterial power, which may be found in certain herbs or other materials called *bilongo*. Even if the material object is a carved figure, as in the case of the Kongo *Nkisi*, it is technically support for *bilongo*.¹²⁹ Maesen stated that the function of material object was that of a receptacle and that its value lay in its magical load.¹³⁰ Worshippers made a distinction between the physical object and the spiritual forces being appealed to.¹³¹

4.3 The curatorial perspective

4.3.1 *Collectors and curators*

Ethnographic museums acquired their Africa collections from merchants, travellers and missionaries who were active in Africa during the 19th century, as was discussed above regarding the collection of *Minkisi* that the Belgian missionary Bittremieux shipped to the University Museum in Louvain. In the period from 1900 until 1950, ethnographic museums acquired collections from ethnographers and anthropologists who were doing research in certain areas in Africa.

Collectors

These scholars took a special interest in tribal societies and, more particularly, in their material culture and tribal art. Though there were dozens of them, I will mention here only four that were particularly relevant to the Africa departments in museums of ethnography.

Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) was a German explorer, ethnologist and archaeologist who led twelve expeditions to Africa between 1904 and 1935, mainly to Congo and Nigeria. In 1932, he was appointed Honorary Professor at the University of Frankfurt and, in 1935, Director of the Municipal Museum of Ethnography. In 1897, Frobenius defined several *Kulturkreise*: cultures showing similar traits that had spread, sometimes over large regions, by diffusion or invasion. Using this theory, he tried to reconstruct universal worldviews of hunters, early planters or sacred kings. He collected thousands of artefacts from the many societies he visited and sold them to the world's major museums, such as the University Museum in Philadelphia, the British Museum, the Muse-

¹²⁹ Trowell (1967: 141).

¹³⁰ Maesen (1959: 237).

¹³¹ Nassau (1904: 75).

um für Völkerkunde in Hamburg and the Museum der Weltkulturen in Frankfurt/Main. The latter museum purchased a fine *Kuba* palm wine cup from the Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig (see Figure 65) collected by Frobenius in 1912 and acquired his collection of about 4700 prehistoric African stone paintings in 1925.

Although Frobenius was deeply impressed by the material culture of the Kingdom of Ife that dates back to the 11th century, he refused to accept that this was the work of African bronze casters. 'I was moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardians of so much loveliness.'¹³² He believed that these bronzes were made by the descendants of ancient Greek artists. He visited Mali and Burkina Faso between 1907 and 1909 and later wrote about these expeditions in *Auf dem Wege nach Atlantis*.

Figure 65 A palm wine cup, showing a human head. Kuba. Congo



¹³² Wole Soyinka quoting Frobenius in his Nobel Lecture, 8 December 1986.

Emil Torday (1875-1931) was a Hungarian ethnographer who spent nine years in Congo in the first decade of the 20th century, establishing close relationships with, among others, the Kings of the Kuba and the Luba. He studied their cultures and published his findings. He was instrumental in procuring three prestigious *ndop* or memorial figures of deceased kings from the Bushongo (the present-day Kuba). Only 18 *ndop* statues are known to exist, a number of which are still in Congo. Torday donated his collection to the British Museum and sold art objects from Congo to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.¹³³ (see Figure 66)

Figure 66 *Ndop* memorial figure of a king from the Kuba, Congo that was collected by Emil Torday and is on display in the British Museum in London



¹³³ Mack (n.d.) and Cornet (1982).

When commenting on the Frobenius Collection at the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Torday displayed an attitude towards Africans that differed markedly from that of his contemporary Europeans:

The reputed laziness of the African will be found on close investigation to be nothing else than conservatism. The negro enjoys the work he is accustomed to do, and likes to do what his father did and do it in the same way. He is the same as conservative men all over the world.¹³⁴

Hans Himmelheber (1908-2003) was a German ethnographer and anthropologist who was particularly interested in African art, which he discovered during a stay in Paris. He became acquainted with the French art dealer, Charles Ratton, and got involved in selling African art, which allowed him to finance his first expedition to Ivory Coast in 1932. He remained an independent researcher throughout his career, financing his travels through the selling of objects that he had collected while on fieldwork. He sold well-documented collections to museums in Basle, Munich, Geneva, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Cologne and elsewhere. His interest was not only in the object itself, but more in the artist who had created the works of art.

Figure 67 A mask from the Baule of Ivory Coast, collected by Hans Himmelheber between 1933-1935 and on display in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam



¹³⁴ Torday (1913:6)

He studied the artists while staying with the Baule, Guro, Atutu and Dan of Ivory Coast and elsewhere in West And Central Africa.¹³⁵ (see Figure 67) In all his research reports and publications, he pioneered the approach of quoting by name, not only his informants but especially the artists, which was innovative in ethnography at that time.¹³⁶ In his speech at the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Himmelheber observed that nobody had previously looked for the African artists who had created the objects that were now on show in museums in Europe. Nobody knew if they were priests or craftsmen, if they belonged to a special group or what instruments they had used. ‘*All diesen Frage wollte ich im Afrikanischen Busch nachgehen*’.¹³⁷ His pioneering work was widely acclaimed.¹³⁸

Marcel Griaule (1898-1956) was a French anthropologist who was known for his studies of the Dogon people of Mali and his pioneering field studies in France. He was a student of Marcel Mauss who taught him anthropology. Between 1928 and 1935, Griaule participated in two large-scale ethnographic expeditions: one was in Ethiopia and the other was the ambitious Dakar-Djibouti expedition that lasted two years and produced almost 4000 artefacts and 6000 photo negatives. All of them were collected for the Museum Trocadéro, later the Musée de l’Homme and now the Musée Quay Branly. (see Figure 68)

On his second expedition, he visited the Dogon for the first time. Their harsh living conditions on the *Falaise de Bandiagara*, as their steep rocky cliff site is called, triggered an interest in Griaule that would remain with him for the rest of his life. His close contacts with Dogon dignitaries, and especially the blind hunter Ogotommeli, gave him a great deal of information on the many facets of Dogon life. He published his findings on Dogon masks and masquerades in books that are still the standard works on the topic today.¹³⁹ In 1941, when fieldwork in Africa was impossible due to World War II, Griaule became the first Professor of Ethnology at the Sorbonne where he taught courses on methods of observation and the recording of ethnographic data.

If we compare these four collectors, it can be seen that they all had a scholarly, anthropological interest in the societies they were studying. They documented and published their observations but, above all, showed great appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of the material culture of these ethnic groups. This meant that, for the first time, objects with power were not considered idols, as they had been by so many Europeans before then. Frobenius, however, doubted if these art objects could have been made by Africans, who he still considered to be primitive in many respects. Himmelheber was pleased to note that the objects that his carriers chose as ‘beautiful’ were the same as the artists chose and the ones he himself also liked best. He was disappointed though when his informants did not understand his questions about their criteria for beauty and aesthetics. He was not aware that his manner of questioning was Eurocentric.

¹³⁵ Himmelheber (1935).

¹³⁶ Himmelheber (1960: 1976).

¹³⁷ Rösing (2004: 181).

¹³⁸ In 2014, the Rietberg Museum in Zürich (where Himmelheber’s son Eberhard Fischer is now Director) organized an exhibition entitled *Afrikanische Meister: Kunst der Elfenbeinküste* that focused on the ‘individuals hidden behind the artistic creations’ (Homberger 2014: 64-73).

¹³⁹ Griaule (1938; 1948).

Figure 68 A Dogon figure collected by Marcel Griaule and given to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris where it is part of the Musée Quai Branly Collection



Curators

While all four of the above-mentioned researchers carefully documented the objects they collected, they emphasized their aesthetic qualities when presenting them to different museums in Europe. What did the curators make of these new collections and the emphasis on their aesthetic qualities? The curators at the British Museum recognized the importance of the Kuba collection that the museum acquired from Torday. They engaged in a ten-year programme of cooperation with the famous collector. Kuba art was seen as ‘demonstrably old’, which tied in with the European taste for ‘antiques’, such as the Elgin Marbles, and the collections from Persia and other Near-Eastern cultures. The curators thought Kuba art to be important ‘also because for those museum

visitors without well-honed perception of the artistic elite it was accessible. (...) It seemed that it could be accommodated within existing European taste and expectation.¹⁴⁰

Torday also presented the *Ndop* figures as ‘portraits’ of deceased Kuba kings, something that is being hotly debated at present. The irony was that, according to Africa curator John Mack, ‘Kuba art, in fact, looked *un-African*’.¹⁴¹ Balfour, the curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum, who also acquired objects from Torday, disagreed with this view. He wrote that Bushongo art¹⁴² is a ‘more wonderful art-culture [than that of Benin] since it is strictly indigenous and uninfluenced by contact with Europeans’.¹⁴³

The curators at the British Museum displayed the Kuba material as a group against the background of enlarged field photographs by Torday. One of the photographs showed King Kot a Pe and his court, another Kuba elder, and a third photograph showed a courtier holding a king figure (*ndop*). The display drew attention to Kuba art and thus to Kuba culture too.¹⁴⁴ Mack described this display as:

An important shift in focus: any tendency to justify colonial expansion or missionary effort with reference to a lingering belief in the tenets of social evolution could be challenged on the basis of the construction of the Kuba culture. (...) By their own efforts they [the Kuba] had achieved civilisation.¹⁴⁵

Minkisi figures, mostly from private collections, were displayed at a prestigious exhibition of Congolese art in Antwerp in 1937-1938 entitled *Kongo-Kunst*. It was organized by Frans Olbrechts, who was later to become Director of the Tervuren Museum, and whose focus was mainly on the artistic and aesthetic qualities of art. However, Olbrechts insisted that ethnographic collections should, as far as possible, be ‘representative and complete’ and not based on ‘subjective criteria’ or ‘private preferences’.¹⁴⁶ The ethnographic relevance of *minkisi* did not play a role in this exhibition nor did their qualities as objects with power receive any special attention.

In 1938, William Fagg was appointed as an assistant in the Department of Ethnography at the British Museum and was given curatorial responsibility for Africa in 1946. He immediately started preparations for a major exhibition of African art by selecting the best objects from the museum’s collections and requesting the cooperation of some of the leading dealers in African art in Europe: Charles Ratton in Paris and Josef Müller in Switzerland among others. He befriended eminent collectors William and Margaret Plass and artists Jacob Epstein, Henry Moore and Roland Penrose. He organized several exhibitions of African art at the British Museum but also at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the National Museum in Lagos and the First World Congress of Black Arts and Cultures in Dakar in 1966. (see Figure 69)

William Fagg made the British Museum into a leading institute of African art during the colonial period and one of his major achievements was his attempt to identify the artists who made the art objects.

¹⁴⁰ Mack (n.d.: 81).

¹⁴¹ Mack (*Ibid.*).

¹⁴² Usually called Kuba art today.

¹⁴³ Balfour (1912: 47).

¹⁴⁴ Mack (n.d.: 86).

¹⁴⁵ Mack (n.d.: 87).

¹⁴⁶ Veirman (2001: 235-255).

Figure 69 President Léopold Sengor of Senegal admiring African masks at the First World Congress of Black Arts and Cultures in Dakar in 1966



The relationship between a curator and an art dealer was a new phenomenon in this period. Generally speaking, curators were apprehensive about associating with commercial art dealers but a number of dealers had a significant impact on the history of artistic taste and in increasing awareness of primitive art. Charles Ratton (1897-1986) was one of them. He participated in and also organized exhibitions of primitive art, including African art. Among them were the Exhibition of African and Oceanic Art at the Theatre Pigalle in Paris in 1930, the French Colonial Ethnographic Exhibition at the Musée du Trocadéro, also in Paris in 1931, Bronzes and Ivories from Benin also at the Trocadéro in 1932, African Negro Art at the MOMA in New York in 1935 and Fashion at the Musée National in Congo in 1937.

How curators reacted to the spectacular collections that were offered to their museums is in many cases not clear. The Museum of Ethnography in Leipzig possessed a fine collection of *minkisi* figures, which had been collected during the first Loango Expedition of 1875-1876. A few years later, Robert Visser donated some 350 objects, most of them *minkisi*, to the museum between 1901 and 1909. (see Figures 70 a and b)

Figure 70a,b

The Dutch collector Robert Visser collected *minkisi* figures while working in Congo and donated them to Leipzig Museum



a



b

Born to Dutch parents living in Düsseldorf, Robert Visser (1860-1937) was employed by the Nieuwe Afrikaansche Handels Vennootschap and worked for 22 years on the Loango Coast, which is today part of Angola, Congo and Cabinda. Although he never studied anthropology or ethnography, he was a self-made expert on the ethnic groups that inhabited the Loango Empire.¹⁴⁷ In a later shipment, he donated an additional 177 *minkisi* to Leipzig Museum.¹⁴⁸ He was able to collect so many *minkisi* objects as there was a growing trend among Europeans at the time to blame the *banganga* and their idols (such as *minkisi*) for every evil. Europeans seemed to literally adopt the local belief that *minkisi minkondi* killed their targets, and used this as justification for confiscating them. Visser recounted having been given a *nkisi* that was called *mabyala* (also spelled: *mabiälla*) *mandembe* by a Portuguese resident of Loango who had confiscated it because ‘it had cost the lives of thousands’.¹⁴⁹ (see Figure 71)

MacGaffey, who reported this incident, questioned its validity: ‘One has to ask who believed most strongly in the lethal powers of *minkondi*, the Africans or the Europeans?’ Missionaries burned thousands of *minkisi* because they were regarded as the

¹⁴⁷ Hein (2012: 35-43).

¹⁴⁸ More than 50 objects from this collection were lost during the bombing raids on the city during World War II.

¹⁴⁹ MacGaffey (2012: 32).

works of the Devil and many African converts to Christianity voluntarily abandoned and turned in *minkisi* for which they no longer had any use.

Figure 71 The *Nkondi mabialla mandembe* in Robert Visser's collection



Under these circumstances, collectors like Visser had little difficulty in picking up objects of interest and they sometimes took the trouble to record the indigenous name and purpose of the fetish, but rarely investigated it further. Visser, although impressed and fascinated by the aesthetic qualities of the *minkondi* figures, thought African life was a 'chaos of superstitious ideas and customs'.¹⁵⁰

Challenge

Between 1900 and 1950, the challenge to which I refer in this book's sub-title started to become more apparent. The large numbers of African objects that arrived at the muse-

¹⁵⁰ MacGaffey (2012: 29).

ums of ethnography posed a challenge to their curators: how should these objects be regarded? How were they to classify them? How should they display them? Their sheer quantity made it impossible for all of the objects to be put on display. Which criteria were curators to apply when selecting which objects they would show to the public? I will try to answer at least some of these questions below.

One fundamental dilemma for curators was deciding which African objects, and especially which objects with power, should be displayed as representing an indigenous African religion, or as art objects as some collectors suggested. Was the indigenous religion one of superstition and idolatry, as had been the generally accepted view in the previous period, or not? If the indigenous religion was not considered superstitious, what was it and how could it be referred to in a display? From photographic evidence of exhibitions in this period we can deduce that curators – consciously or otherwise – displayed their African collections in juxtaposition, lining them up next to each other with a minimum amount of information on the accompanying labels. (see Figure 72)

Figure 72 A typical display in the 1950s at the Africa Museum, Tervuren



They would restrict the information, for instance, to ‘Ancestor Figure. Baule, Ivory Coast’ or ‘Mother and Child Figure. Luba, Congo’. The reason for such brevity was probably due to a lack of more in-depth information about the objects. Sometimes the information would read: ‘Fetish Figure. Used to cure headache. Songye, Congo’ or ‘Ikenga, God of War and Fortune. Ibo, Nigeria’. The labels did not give any details about more sensitive questions regarding the nature of the indigenous religion or the objects themselves. If objects were considered art, the question would be what precisely the aesthetic value of these objects was and what made them art objects. Did Africans

have a different notion of art from Europeans? In the examples given above, William Fagg made clear choices in favour of artistic aspects when he was working with dealers of African art, such as Charles Ratton, who had himself organized African art exhibitions in Paris and elsewhere. In his many publications, William Fagg explained in detail the aesthetic qualities of African objects and, as such, became the first historian of African art.

Attributing artistic qualities to African objects during this period inevitably remained a European affair because there were hardly any African experts in this field. There was a tendency among curators to select African objects that appealed to European tastes, such as the Kuba *ndop* figures collected by Torday and the Baule figures of men and women that Himmelheber collected. It is no surprise that Himmelheber conducted his research among the Baule, Guro and Atutu of Ivory Coast, who were renowned for their delicately carved, smoothly polished male and female figures that, at the time, were incorrectly labelled as ancestor figures. Africa curators selecting objects for display along these Europe-centred lines, objects that John Mack had described as ‘*un-African*’, can be said to have appropriated the aesthetic qualities of African objects to ‘please’ their museum visitors, instead of conveying African aesthetic criteria. In this period, very little in-depth research was done as to the criteria that Africans themselves apply when judging an object to be ‘good’ (implying also: beautiful) or ‘not-good’.

4.3.2 *Issues of classification*

Classification

European art museums were already familiar with a system for classifying their collections. The method was first developed in the 19th century by Morelli who placed works of art in groups or ‘schools’ according to various common features. European art was classified by country and period (Renaissance or Baroque) and into smaller units (e.g. Florentine or Venetian Schools). Could museums of ethnography develop their own system of classification?

General Pitt Rivers had classified his ethnographic collections in the 19th century on the principle of evolutionism.¹⁵¹ By the 20th century, this method was being criticized by some scholars as it did not offer a good understanding of each object. One of those who opposed this method was Franz Boas (1858-1942), a German-born American anthropologist who did fieldwork in Canada among the Inuit, became Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University and was also curator of the Museum of Natural History. Boas was interested in the meaning of objects and was convinced that their meaning could be assessed only when they were seen in their original context.¹⁵²

He pleaded for a change of interest from the external form and shape to ‘meaning’ ‘because the same object might carry a number of different meanings’. The meaning of

¹⁵¹ Pitt Rivers and his system of classification is discussed in Chapter 3.3.1.

¹⁵² Boas in Stocking (1985: 65).

an object could not, he felt, be understood ‘outside of its surrounding, outside of other phenomena affecting that people and its productions’.¹⁵³

According to Boas, Pitt Rivers arranged objects ‘linearly (...) to convey an ethnocentric message of conservative evolutionary gradualism’, while Boas himself arranged objects ‘contextually, seeking to preserve the multiple functions and inner meanings of a given form to convey a message of liberal relativism’.¹⁵⁴

‘Culture Areas’

Franz Boas worked with the concept of ‘culture areas’,¹⁵⁵ in which the material culture of a people was recognizable through common features that were called a ‘style’. This approach resulted in maps showing specific areas or regions for each ‘style’. Geographers, like Boas, were especially interested in the concept of culture areas, as it helped them when researching the interrelationship between cultures (and ‘styles’). Boas designed the display in the American Museum of Natural History himself in such a way that it showed the similarities between certain cultures as arising from borrowing.¹⁵⁶ (see Figure 73)

Figure 73 Displays in the Ethnography Department of the American Museum of Natural History, New York, ca. 1930



¹⁵³ Boas in Stocking (1985: 62) .

¹⁵⁴ Stocking (1985: 8).

¹⁵⁵ Boas (1927).

¹⁵⁶ Herskovits (1953: 21). See also Jackinis (1985: 75).

This gave rise to theories about ‘nuclear’ and ‘marginal’ styles, with the former being considered superior, purer and presumably more authentic than the latter. Collectors, including museum curators, preferred the superior, (presumably) more authentic objects. Boas did not consider culture areas as static units and saw their boundaries as fluid. In the process of classification, one would encounter objects that showed different traits in neighbouring cultures within the same climatic conditions. This was caused, according to some, by historical processes. Historians subsequently developed a theory of successive stages over time, through which one culture developed into another. This became known as the Theory of *Kulturschichten* or Strata. Its origins were in Asia, from where it migrated to other continents. The assumption was that all cultures in the past or the present originated from a certain number of original cultural complexes of relative simplicity.¹⁵⁷ These complexes were called *Kulturkreise* and were seen as a type of culture that could be observed all over the world. One of the protagonists of this theory was Father Schmidt (1868-1954) from the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), the founder of the Vienna School and the editor of the periodical *Anthropos*. The theories of the *Kulturkreisen* were his response to those of evolutionism, which he opposed, not only because he found their arguments unconvincing but because they contradicted Biblical views of the Creation.¹⁵⁸ From this perspective, he developed the concept of an *Urmonotheismus*, which he believed still existed among the pygmies in the rainforests of Congo. The SVD considered the study of ethnography to be a valuable tool for its missionaries in their missionary activities.¹⁵⁹

Styles

Objects from regions beyond Europe that were also housed in museums of ethnography could, in this way, be classified into Polynesian art and African art etc., and then into smaller units, such as Nigerian art, and again into a Yoruba style, an Ibo style and so on. This classification was constructed on several criteria, first of all according to the region or area from which the object(s) originated (e.g. Nigeria) and, after that, by the tribe from which it came (e.g. the Yoruba). This latter classification was based on a particular mouth shape or ear lobe, or a pattern of scarification that was considered typical of the Yoruba. (see Figure 74)

Finally, they were classified according to the function that the object had in its culture or tribe of origin (e.g. a pregnant figure). This was an indispensable tool for museum curators in classifying their collections or when identifying new objects. However useful the method was for cataloguing purposes, it resulted in problems when applied to interpretation. The majority of the objects in ethnographic museums were collected without adequate data about their place of origin, date of manufacture or their ‘native’ classifications. Their original significance in rituals or in relation to kingship, agriculture, smithery or other communal activities was often not recorded either.

¹⁵⁷ Frese (1960: 59).

¹⁵⁸ Schmidt (1926).

¹⁵⁹ The Catholic University of Nijmegen appointed the SVD priest B. Vroklage as its first Professor of Anthropology in 1948.

Figure 74a, b, c

From left to right: three Yoruba objects: an *Egungun* mask, a *Gelede* mask and a shrine figure, all with comparable sculptural qualities, such as bulging eyes, scarification on their cheeks and similar hairstyles



In summary, the system of classifying objects according to styles and subsequent theories in the past did not provide a better understanding of the meaning of objects, nor did it answer other questions raised by anthropologists. The classification ‘Ibo’ or ‘Yoruba’ begs the question of what is to be understood by an ‘Ibo style’ or a ‘Yoruba style’. What does the classification ‘Ibo’ add to our understanding of the society in which an ‘Ibo object’ originated? This question is particularly problematic where the Ibo are concerned.¹⁶⁰ Anthropologists have been retreating from the over-specificity of the functionalist period that found each tribe to be a distinct ethnic unit for several years.

Classification into styles in this manner only replaces one complicated aspect of the problem, for instance how *ikenga* is used by the Ibo to define features of Ibo individuality with another and perhaps more complicated one, namely the question of ethnic self-definition for the whole range of Ibo groups.

Individual Styles

One element in these systems of classification was neglected for a long time: the occurrence of so-called individual styles. Individual carvers worked within a certain ‘style’ (or format) but added their own personal touch in the details of the carving. William Fagg did extensive research among Yoruba carvers and was able to distinguish one from another by identifying certain specific details. He also compared objects in the same category and from the same tribe with each other and could identify the hand of the same master carver even if he could not trace his name. A fine example are the neck rests of the Luba, where the caryatids all have the same hairstyle in the shape of a cata-

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Ardener (1974: 25).

ract. He called the carver the ‘Master of the Cascade’.¹⁶¹ (see Figure 75) Interviews that anthropologists conducted with individual carvers also resulted in a better understanding of the significance of certain details.

Figure 75 A slightly damaged Luba headrest from Congo showing a hairstyle popular among women in the 1920s



African Philosophies

Attempts were made to avoid the problems of endless schemes of classification by establishing general patterns and principles that aimed to underlie African ‘modes of thought’. These tend to be sweeping generalizations with no clear value to anyone. Temples’s much-quoted book on Bantu philosophy is an example of such a generalization that searches for dynamic forces in African cultures.¹⁶² And Leuzinger, who popularized African art in the 1960s and 1970s, is also known for her sweeping statements. She wrote in 1971:

In allgemeinen glaubt der Neger an eine universelle Lebenskraft, die eine allmächtiger Schöpfergott in die Welt strömen laszt und die alles Geschaffene belebt. Der neger stellt sich die Lebenskraft dynamisch und lenkbar vor, darum gilt es, sie im groszen Mengen aufzuspeichern.¹⁶³

Van Trigt is another who argued that African art is not simply an art that visualizes a concept or some spiritual power, but a *belichamende kunst* (literally: an embodying art), art that gives ‘body’ to the mysterious, suprahuman powers that pervade the universe.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Fagg (1969). Other anthropologists that were pioneers in this field include Bascom (1969); Maessen (1956); Carroll (1967); Thompson (1969) and Forge (1973).

¹⁶² Tempels (1959).

¹⁶³ Leuzinger (1971).

Appropriations

These contemplations were not based on fieldwork or research but have to be understood as appropriations, which was common practice among many curators in this period. As a result of the lack of correct information about the individual objects, the speakers or authors of these contemplations took the liberty of interpreting the objects broadly and ‘employed’ them for their own purposes, neglecting the meaning given to them by their original culture, as Leuzinger and van Trigt did. It was common practice among museum guides and staff who, with no professional ethnographic training, were expected to explain African indigenous religions, witchcraft, magic, ancestors and other African concepts to visitors. It was also common for missionaries to do the same at their stands at missionary exhibitions but, for them, ethnographic accuracy was less relevant than passing on the ‘glad tidings of the Gospel’.

Aesthetics

Among the many classifications was also the question about what the difference was between art and non-art. The study of art in the Western world is called aesthetics and two art traditions came to the fore in the 17th century: rationalism, which gave rise to neo-classicism, and empiricism. Both were based on the observation of nature. The aesthetic consisted of the reproduction of the objective reality beyond a person’s personal experience. French neo-classicists established criteria for poetry: clarity, order and simplicity. And the artist was supposed to ‘make’ art that imitated the beautiful, serene, rational structure of nature. In the UK, on the other hand, more attention was paid to the creative talents of an artist and the importance of the subjective experience of beauty, which is in the eye of the beholder.¹⁶⁵

Does the distinction between objective reality and subjective experience exist in Africa too? Did Africans view a mask or a statue as an aesthetic object, in other words as art? In the period between 1900 and 1950, little research was conducted into the concepts of beauty and its appreciation by beholders in Africa itself. Himmelheber was one of the first to research ‘native’ concepts of art among the Baule, the Guro and the Atutu in the 1930s. At one point, he asked his porters to select three items from a collection that they considered the ‘most beautiful’. He then put the same question to carvers and villagers. Each time, the same objects were selected. (He himself had also earmarked them as the most beautiful.) When he asked them why they considered the selected objects ‘beautiful’, he received woolly, meaningless comments. Himmelheber wrote in his diary that he felt he was hitting a wall of misunderstanding and incomprehension. He was probably not aware that his questions stemmed from European concepts of beauty: ‘what do you make of the “beauty of line”, and “the power of expression”?’¹⁶⁶ It would be several years before anthropologists learned to identify the emic views of Africans about the aesthetics of their objects, as will be discussed in Chapter 5.

¹⁶⁴ Van Trigt (1972). Van Trigt’s interpretation of the *Epa* mask as representing ‘mother earth’ is discussed in Chapter 1.

¹⁶⁵ Reill & Wilson (1966).

¹⁶⁶ Himmelheber (1935: 72-74).

When extra-European art forms, notably Japanese and Chinese and to a certain extent classical Javanese and Indian, arrived on the European market, such art objects were accepted and highly appreciated for their elegant beauty, their refined techniques and decorative qualities. To the majority of Europeans, however, objects from Africa and New Guinea were considered as lacking that elegance, refinement and aesthetic quality. In other words, they were considered primitive and the usual definition of art did not apply to them. But it was not only the lack of elegance in the objects that made Europeans speak of African art as primitive. The assumption in the 19th century that Africa ‘had no history’ and was therefore considered backward and primitive now changed to the assumption that Africa did not have an art history. This notion was corroborated by the fact that few or no antique objects were being excavated or found in Sub-Saharan Africa. (Egypt was the exception in Africa.) In addition, Africa did not have any architecture that had survived for centuries, unlike Europe. The ruins of Zimbabwe were considered as having been built by non-Europeans but African art otherwise fitted the overall image of backwardness in Africa that existed in Europe. African objects were considered non-art.

The low esteem art historians had for African art in the past was poignantly expressed by Woermann in a statement that summarizes the view of his generation. ‘*Die Phantasie der lachlustigen Neger ist hauptsächlich aufs Grotteske, Komische, Sonderbare gerichtet; ihre Bildnere neigt dementsprechend zur Karikatur, zur Hervorhebung des Hässlichen, des Absonderlichen, des Unanständigen.*’¹⁶⁷

Picasso and colleagues, who were credited with the discovery of tribal or primitive art, caused a change in notions of ‘beauty’ and ‘art’ among art lovers in Europe and beyond. They also instigated a debate among collectors of modern art, including primitive art, as to what material culture is and what it is that makes African art ‘art’.¹⁶⁸

Curatorial Perspective

It would appear that this debate indirectly affected displays in ethnographic museums. The museums were experiencing a sudden flood of new objects and were being confronted not only with the logistics of classifying, registering and documenting the newly arrived collections but also with having to decide which objects they would select for display in their galleries and which to keep in storage. The overall impression is that museums of ethnography in this period chose to display spectacular objects for their size, shape or exquisite beauty or according to other characteristics that would draw the admiration of the museum visitor. This is, I think, the main reason why unappealing objects, such as *asuman* and *ikenga*, did not find a place in museum galleries.

These objects did not conform to criteria set by curators and their relevance for the society in which they originated, their meaning for those who used them and/or their possible contribution to a better understanding of another culture by European visitors were apparently considered irrelevant. (see Figure 76)

¹⁶⁷ Woermann (1900: 133).

¹⁶⁸ The debate is still continuing, as can be seen in Chapter 5.

Figure 76 A rider on horseback from the Ewe, Ghana that was believed would make its owner wealthy, at the Afrika Centrum, Cadier en Keer (now on loan to SVD)



The physical restrictions of museums of ethnography, with which curators were confronted when they wanted to exhibit their collections in a responsible, accurate and honest manner, resulted in the majority of their objects being put in storage or presented in an isolated position far from their original context. Their labels did not go much further than giving a term, such as ‘ancestor figure’, ‘fertility figure’ or ‘dance mask’, with the name of the tribe from which the object originated and the country of origin. The ascription of ‘ancestor figure’ was often given due to a lack of more detailed information.

4.3.3 Curatorial views on objects with power

Ikenga

The British Museum acquired about 30 Ibo *Ikenga* figures between 1900 and 1930 but none has ever been on display except for the *Ikenga*-related *Ikega* figure (178 cm tall) from the Igala, an ethnic group living near the Ibo. The three-tiered figure shows typical *Ikenga* elements: a pipe-smoking, naked male with a machete and severed head, surrounded by other human figures and horns. This *Ikega* probably did not belong to an individual but to a lineage, which gives it a different significance. The Pitt Rivers Museum acquired half a dozen *ikenga* figures in the same period. It did not display them together but spread them over several showcases although with no context.

The Afrika Centrum at Cadier en Keer acquired an *ikenga* figure, probably in the 1920s. It was given a place in the Aalbeek Collection in 1946 and labelled ‘*Ikenga*, God of War and Fortune’, which was clearly a reference to the ethnographic information supplied by early ethnographers such as Leonard, Smith, Meek and others.¹⁶⁹ (see Figure 77)

Figure 77 *Ikenga*. Afrika Centrum, Cadier en Keer, currently on loan to the Steyl-Tegelen Missiemuseum



The three major museums of ethnography in the Netherlands did not acquire any *ikenga* figures in this period although the (now closed) Museum of Ethnography at Groningen University did obtain a small *ikenga* figure.

It is clear that *ikenga* figures did not play an important role in museums of ethnography in the 1900-1950 period, even though missionaries and anthropologists published

¹⁶⁹ See Chapter 4.2.3. Figure 79 shows Father Brouwer holding this *ikenga*, while explaining its ‘meaning’ to visitors at a missionary exhibition.

information on them. In addition, the museums of ethnography mentioned here did not only miss out on the debate about context through which the meaning of *ikenga* objects would become visible but they also did not seem to show any great interest in their meaning. What *ikenga* meant to the individual Ibo, or how it constituted his individual prowess and his position in society, was unknown or appeared to be irrelevant from a curatorial perspective.

If we look for an explanation for this indifference, I am inclined to state that these objects did not pose a challenge to curators, just as they had not been a challenge to missionaries and early anthropologists. They were attributed a meaning that was very Eurocentric and did not appeal to them. As the quotes from Kjersmeier, Woermann and Himmelheber indicate, the objects were considered to lack aesthetic qualities. Kjersmeier, whose books have long been standard works on African art, wrote: '*Malgré la fantaisie qui les caractérise souvent, les Ikenga sont communément sans grand valeur artistique. Ils sont grossièrement taillées, et les couleurs qui les revêtent (...) sont peu plaisantes à l'oeil d'un Européen.*'¹⁷⁰ Himmelheber, who visited Iboland during one of his expeditions, wrote the following about *ikenga* in 1960: '*Diese Figuren stehen auf einem tiefen Niveau, sind kaum als Kunstwerke zu werten.*'¹⁷¹

These devastating comments by Himmelheber are all the more distressing if one observes that he was also conversant with the *mmwo ogbegu* spirit mask of the Ibo, which is called 'the beautiful maiden' and was carved in a refined, aesthetically pleasing way by the same artists who carved *ikengas*. This should have drawn his attention to a different interpretation and, instead of mentioning the 'low level' of the object, he might have asked himself why the artists carved *ikengas* in the way they did. The Afrika Museum at Berg en Dal possesses an Ibo mask for *Ekpe* society that represented the maiden spirit *Mmwo Ogbegu* and symbolized beauty. (See Figure 78)

The mask shows the ideal features of a young woman: a symmetrical face, high forehead, narrow nose and fair complexion. If Ibo carvers were able to produce such 'beautiful' objects, why did they not do the same in their *ikenga* statuettes? The bodies of *ikenga* statuettes are usually carved in a coarse manner with aggressive faces. If then there is an apparent lack of skill in *ikenga* statuettes compared to *Ekpe* masks, it has to be concluded that this was not accidental or due to incompetence but was intentional, even if we do not know what the exact intentions were.

Kjersmeier and Himmelheber cannot be blamed for a lack of interest in the intrinsic qualities of African art. However, in the case of their appreciation of *ikenga* figures, they appear to apply a Eurocentric view to these objects. This view may date back to the ideals of the Renaissance with its natural, polished presentation of the human body. The absence of idealistic appearances in certain African sculptures gave rise to prejudices that can be traced back to the 19th century.

¹⁷⁰ Kjersmeier (1936: 29)

¹⁷¹ Himmelheber (1960: 276).

Figure 78a *Agbogho Mmwo*, Ibo, Nigeria, a maiden spirit mask or the mask of 'the Beautiful Girl'



Figure 78b Male Ibo dancer in the costume of the maiden spirit mask, accompanied by two attendants. Nigeria



Minkisi

Chapter 2.2 offers an account of the different aspects of *minkisi* and the cult in which they play a role. Father Bittremieux was mentioned as a missionary who did research on *minkisi*, collected them and shipped them to Belgium. Due to former colonial relations, it is not surprising that most *minkisi* outside Congo can be found in Belgium, not only in museums but also in private collections.

The presence of *minkisi* in Belgian museums has not been well documented. Most *minkisi* in museums were collected between 1885 and 1920. From the information available, it is clear that Father Bittremieux shipped most of his objects (the majority of them *minkisi*) to the University Museum in Louvain.¹⁷² As Congo was a Belgian colony, civil servants, missionaries and others who were employed there donated objects to one of the museums of ethnography.¹⁷³

Belgium's most important museum of ethnography is the Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren that houses, without doubt, the largest and, from a point of view of aesthetic

¹⁷² Ruben (2010: 29-35).

¹⁷³ Tollebeek (2010: 12). Figures were collected by missionaries in the field: the White Fathers in the Great Lakes Region (Luba), Redemptorist Fathers in Lower Congo (Mboma), Jesuits in eastern Congo (Yaha), Trappists in the equatorial region and the Missionaries of Scheut in Kasai and among Mayombe (Lower Congo).

quality the best collection from Central Africa, with a special emphasis on objects from Congo.¹⁷⁴ Although this museum is attached to the university and the curatorial staff are well qualified, it was severely criticized in the colonial period. Daniel Biebuick, an internationally renowned anthropologist, did research in its archives and collections in preparation for a fieldwork mission in Congo in the 1940s. He complained about the poor documentation of the Congo collections. *‘De hiaten en het gebrek aan gelijkvormigheid en samenhang in de ethnographische validatie van de voorwerpen waren een constante bron van frustratie voor me.’*¹⁷⁵

The museum did not always give a complete picture of the *minkisi*. As European collectors were visually attracted to figures (human or animal) rather than other forms of *minkisi*, those *minkisi* where the central object is an anthropomorphic wooden figure were overrepresented in museums and private collections. An example is the prestigious exhibition called *Objets Interdits* that was held at the Dapper Foundation in Paris in 1989 and was accompanied by a catalogue of the same title.¹⁷⁶ The exhibition consisted of only figurative objects and the accompanying text did not make any mention of the many other forms of *minkisi*.

During the process of collecting or acquiring *minkisi*, these objects were detached from the complete set of material objects with which they were associated (decontextualization) as the collectors neglected the context to which the singing, dancing, healing and court cases belonged. At times, the objects themselves were also damaged.¹⁷⁷ It is known that some of the original owners of the *nkisi* removed the *bilongo* (the pouch on its body with medicines) from the objects, before they handed it over to the European who wanted to buy it.

Father Bittremieux made a point of documenting his collected objects to the best of his ability. He sent documentation in a separate package and hoped (and expected) that the museum staff and especially the director would take equally good care of the objects. He also expected the museum at Louvain University to refund him for the expenses he incurred while collecting in the field that often implied the exchange of gifts and the shipping costs. As the director declined to do so, Bittremieux lost confidence in the museum’s management and was reluctant to ship more items. The future of the museum itself was in jeopardy when the colonial climate in Belgium changed and a new colonial museum was established by the Belgian government. It showed the changing colonial role of the country in the inter-war years and there was a growing need for civil servants and agriculturalists to assist in the consolidation of Congo as a colony. The University Museum in Louvain itself changed from an ethnographic to an art museum. Objects were no longer presented from an educational or didactic point of view but were on display simply to be admired by visitors and those attending academic meetings.¹⁷⁸ At one

¹⁷⁴ Verswijver (1995).

¹⁷⁵ Biebuyck (2001: 110). The translation reads: ‘The gaps and the lack of conformity and coherence in the ethnographic validation of the objects were a continuous source of frustration for me’.

¹⁷⁶ Fondation Dapper, Paris (1989).

¹⁷⁷ MacGaffey (1995: 285).

¹⁷⁸ After Congo’s independence, Belgian interest in ethnography and ethnographic collections decreased even further.

point, the *minkisi* figures disappeared into the basement of the museum, out of sight of the public.¹⁷⁹

An undated photograph shows the collector Robert Visser with Dr Karl Weule, the Director of the Museum of Ethnography in Leipzig. In the showcase are some of the *minkisi* figures collected by Visser. The display does not give the impression that the curators intended to highlight the artistic qualities of the objects, for example as the British Museum had done with the Torday Collection. This display is more sober: a juxtaposition of objects with a minimum of information and no aesthetic connotation. (see Figure 79)

Figure 79 Collector Robert Visser (right) with Dr Karl Weule, the Director of the Ethnography Museum in Leipzig



The fate of *minkisi* in private collections was disgraceful at times. For example, some new owners who found the figures too coarse or aggressive had the nails removed from the figures to make them more attractive. And others had their *minkisi* polished to make them shine for the same reason.

¹⁷⁹ They were only rediscovered in 1978 by Albert Maessen.

Asuman

The colonial period from 1900 to 1950 saw the largest influx of new collections from Africa in the history of museums of ethnography. Large-scale expeditions were organized to collect material culture, aided by government subsidies at home and supported by the colonial administrations that were protected, if necessary, by the colonial army or police. Shipments to the home countries were facilitated by colonial customs officers.

Objects with power, which were not as aesthetically attractive and were less appealing to European eyes and/or confirmed the stereotypical views of many visitors that Africa was primitive, were not displayed at all or were tucked away in inconspicuous corners.

The overall impression with regard to *asuman* is comparable to that of *ikenga*. There was little genuine interest in them and little attention was paid to their meaning, no attempts were made to create a context as Boas had suggested and the museums of ethnography did not concentrate on their qualities as objects with power. Museums that had *asuman* in their collections, as a rule, left them in storage and did not put them on display.

4.3.4 *Missionaries as curators*

From the 1920s onwards, missionary exhibitions became a tradition in Dutch Catholic churches as part of a 'Missionary Week', when sermons were preached about their work, missionaries visited schools, and films depicting their work were shown. The exhibition, staged in a convenient hall, was organized in such a way that different missionary congregations and societies would present themselves and show what their work entailed and the challenges they were facing. Each missionary congregation had its own stand that was manned by one of their missionaries. He acted as the 'curator' and selected the objects he wanted to show to the public and arranged them himself. He would choose those objects with which he was familiar and about which he had 'interesting' stories to tell. He stood behind a large table covered with objects from 'his' mission territory that were usually selected for their primitive and pagan character. One of the two *Epa* masks that were discussed in Chapter 1 can be seen in Figure 80 under the palm tree (which represented tropical Africa). Father Brouwer is holding an *ikenga* figure and showing it to his visitors, probably explaining that the figure is the God of War and Fortune. (see Figure 80)

The common feature was that a missionary, usually one who was selected by his congregation for his eloquence, narrated whatever he thought appropriate, while supporting his arguments with objects, especially fetishes with animal skulls, traces of blood, feathers and other repulsive elements. These instilled in the visitors the scourge of heathenism that could only be overcome by the Glad Tidings of the Gospel, which were passed on by missionaries during their work.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ Over time, these views have changed. They have been constantly discussed by the participating congregations and the public. In the 1960s, these exhibitions died a quiet death. See Dirkse (1983: 38-49) and also Coppus (1988).

Figure 80 Father Leo Brouwer (from the SMA) at a missionary exhibition around 1950, showing visitors an *ikenga* figure and standing near a photograph by Father Knops of a Senufo diviner (Ivory Coast) taken in the 1920s (see Figure 57)



Reference was already made to missionary exhibitions but this chapter looks at them from a curatorial perspective. Prof. Franz Boas demonstrated to museums how the same object might carry a number of different meanings and that a meaning could not be understood ‘outside of its surrounding, outside of other phenomena affecting that people and its productions’.¹⁸¹ Museums of ethnography were not, generally speaking, able to create a context in their exhibitions through which the meaning of *ikenga*, *minkisi* and *asuman* became apparent to the visitor.

Looking at the phenomenon of missionary exhibitions, we observe that the organizers managed to create a context in which the meaning (or rather ‘a’ meaning) of the objects on display became clear. The crucial element of the creation of context was the missionary himself. He stood amongst ‘his’ objects, dressed in his cassock and often tanned from having been in the tropical sun for so long, as if he himself was one of the objects.¹⁸² He became as it were the vocal context of the objects that he held in his hands and allowed visitors to touch. Through his evocative explanations of the objects, he created an imaginary world of pagan rituals, idols, fetish priests and the fear in which those ‘poor negroes’ lived.

These missionary exhibitions had a double message: they intended to show the pagan world on the one hand and, on the other, the necessity for Christians to bring those poor souls the glad tidings of the Gospel. Missionaries at these exhibitions created a context

¹⁸¹ Boas in Stocking (1985: 62). See also Chapter 4.3.2.

¹⁸² Unlike museum guides who stand between visitors and can only point to objects that are behind glass.

in which they appropriated the original meanings of the objects on display in such a way that it 'proved' the justification of the missionary presence in Africa.¹⁸³

The original context of each of the objects on display was not recreated: there was no shrine for the sacred objects and there was no festival in which the masks appeared. Instead, a context was created that was entirely alien to the objects. The missionary himself believed that the context that he sketched in his account of the 'function' of the mask or the sacred object was genuine. These appropriations misunderstood the original meanings of the objects and presented visitors with a negative image of indigenous African religions. However, from a curatorial perspective missionary exhibitions can be considered successful.

¹⁸³ The introduction to this book describes two Yoruba Epa masks in the Afrika Centrum and how their meanings have been appropriated in different ways over the last 75 years.

The post-colonial period: 1950-2000

Introduction

If the word 'postcolonial' is written without a hyphen, it suggests the period after colonialism. It suggests also that colonialism is over. If it is written with a hyphen, it suggests that the effects of colonialism are still being felt and that the large institutions, such as the World Bank, the IMF, the World Trade Organization and foreign-owned multinational corporations still control Africa. 'Very few will disagree that all these amount to no less than colonialism in a different guise.'¹

The most important events for Africa during the period from 1950 to 2000 are the successive points at which nations gained independence. Africa was suddenly in a position to set its own political agenda and determine the process of decolonization, even if it remained economically tied to the First and Second Worlds, as they were then called.

Decolonization was not just a sequence of facts, such as dates of independence, it was a process of change in which the oppressed became the rulers and the colonial masters had to adjust to entirely new relationships. It was the process of deconstructing old-fashioned perceptions and attitudes towards power and oppression that were adopted during colonialism. It has to be seen as a project aimed at correcting the imbalances in the world,² and clashes were inevitable.

For the Catholic Church, the single most important event in this period was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Missionaries became involved in the process of decolonization as the Churches were affected by these new relationships too. The Churches had previously been run by European bishops, church leaders and European missionary congregations. The post-colonial period was marked by the gradual phasing out of the European missionary presence and the management of the Catholic Church was taken over by African priests, bishops, archbishops and cardinals. One of the goals of the *Plantatio Ecclesiae* had been that European missionaries make themselves redundant so Africans could run their own church. Were missionaries able to conclude at the end of this period that it was 'mission accomplished'? Anthropologists developed new theoret-

¹ Olaniyan (2013: 39).

² Quayson (2000: 11).

ical approaches at this time to better understand African indigenous religions and cultures, with symbolic anthropology being one such approach. And museums of ethnography arrived at a crossroads in the post-colonial period: their colonial identity was no longer relevant and they began to question their future role.

5.1 The missionary perspective

5.1.1 *Missionaries in a time of transition*

The position of missionaries in Africa changed considerably during the post-colonial period. A number of factors played a prominent role in this process both in Africa and in Europe.

Decolonization

African nations became independent at this time and, for some, this came after a prolonged and bloody struggle. The role of expatriate civil servants and colonial officers was over and they left Africa to return home. European missionaries stayed but they soon discovered that they could not necessarily rely on support from the new governments, as they had done in the colonial period. Nationalists, Marxists and Africanists cast them as cultural imperialists and they were accused of having undermined indigenous cultures in ways that made them complicit in colonial domination.³ Recent scholarship, influenced by post-colonial theory, has described missionaries as agents in the making of colonial and metropolitan identities.⁴ Missionaries had to learn to adjust to new governments, policies and political ideologies. A number of the newly independent nations chose to adopt Marxist strategies and some of the missionaries and local priests who found it hard to adjust to a political system that in their view was immoral, atheistic and asocial delivered sermons calling for social justice. They were harassed by the government and sometimes even detained. Many young, radical activists branded missionaries as ‘neo-colonialists’ and there was no room for them in the New Africa.⁵ Some African governments planned to nationalize Church schools but these plans in turn triggered protests by the faithful. Political unrest created rebel movements. For example, between gaining independence in 1960 and 1965, tens of thousands of Congolese were massacred and 126 Catholic missionaries (priests, brothers and sisters) from ten different missionary congregations were murdered.⁶

African bishops

In response to the changing political situation in Africa, the Catholic Church established ecclesiastical hierarchies in the new nations, with Rome appointing new bishops and archbishops from the countries themselves. (see Figure 81)

³ Harries & Maxwell (2012: 2).

⁴ Thorne (2006).

⁵ When I was involved in a car accident, which was not my fault, some activists from the Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute sued me. I was later acquitted.

⁶ Kerklaan (1992: 256).

This created a new situation for the missionaries who, until then, had been guided by their provincial superiors in Europe, while bishops were usually also members of the same missionary congregation. Now the bishops were no longer *confrères* but independent Church leaders who had no loyalty to or connection with a missionary congregation. They drew up their own plans and issued their own regulations,⁷ supporting the official views of the Catholic Church regarding moral issues such as marriage, sexuality and legal obligations like celibacy for priests. For some missionaries, changing from the traditional missionary approach in the context of their own congregation to a situation in which they had to accept another form of leadership, and at times a different concept of Church, was difficult.⁸ If they found themselves in conflict with their bishop, they opted to leave and go home. But in this respect too, things were changing.

Figures 81a, b. Archbishop J.K. Amisshah of Cape Coast on an official visit to one of his parishes in Ghana, 1962



a



b

Crisis in Dutch seminaries

After World War II, Europe reinvented itself and with improved living standards came a cry for greater democracy. The Catholic Church lost much of its traditional authority;

⁷ One bishop who was displeased with the interference of the Congregation's Provincial Superior in Europe spoke of 'tele-guidance'.

⁸ When the Pope abolished the wearing of the *cappa magna* by bishops and cardinals in an Instruction in 1969, one African archbishop remarked: 'For centuries white bishops have been wearing the *cappa magna*, but now that we, blacks, have been made bishops, now you abolish its use.' The *cappa magna* (literally a great cape) is a robe with a seven-metre train.

the social prestige which had been the prerogative of the priesthood, dwindled and missionaries who had been treated as heroes because of their commitment to ‘those poor souls’ in Africa and elsewhere were questioned about the justification of their activities. The result was that the majority of the seminaries in the Netherlands shut down due to a lack of new students in the 1960s. The number of priests decreased as well since more and more of them resigned from their positions in the Church. In 1953, there were almost 8000 Dutch missionaries (priests, brothers and sisters) working overseas (outside Europe), which was more than 10% of the total number of Catholic missionaries worldwide.⁹ By 2008, the number had dropped to only 840.¹⁰

The Second Vatican Council: 1962-1965

The Second Vatican Council was the most important event in this period for the Catholic Church. This was when new ideas about its missiological task, which had been discussed and in some places already put into practice, became official. It was a shift away from the emphasis on administering the sacraments towards more community-oriented activities, such as setting up hospitals and health centres and running agricultural projects. In short, missionaries were expected to become involved in development projects. Priests in Europe and missionaries outside Europe felt that, for the Church to function – or even survive – in modern times, it was crucial that it positioned itself at the heart of society. Father Mulders from the SMA, when looking back on that period, said:

We got a keener eye for the social needs and for the riches of the values in other cultures. I did not feel any urgency to convert Africans. The Church had been planted; there were more and more small communities which were joined by more and more people.¹¹

It appears to me, that more than before, missionaries – generally speaking – were to fence for themselves. Some felt estranged from the Church and left the priesthood, others identified their missionary task with social work or development projects, others stayed trying to update their commitment to their parishioners with the new liturgical movement. Again others opted for a transfer to another country (even outside Africa) where they could do ‘genuine’ missionary work. Over time the ‘traditional’ missionary work (the running of parishes, administering sacraments) was taken over by African priests. I will therefore give only a few examples of missionary activities and to describe briefly how their successors (African bishops and priests) have followed in their footsteps.

The Missionaries’ plight

In the 1960s, Kontakt der Kontinenten was a training centre in Soesterberg where Dutch missionaries on home leave could attend courses on new theological and missiological concepts. In an interview, the then Director, Dr A. de Groot described how some of these theories conflicted with the notions missionaries already had. It became clear that missionaries in the field were in many cases so involved in their daily (practical) work that they did not keep track of the theological developments that were being proposed

⁹ Willemsen (2006).

¹⁰ Katholiek Documentatie Centrum, Nijmegen.

¹¹ Mulders (2008: 89).

by the Vatican Council. Missionaries working in the interior had little or no access to information about developments in their Church and there was no television in those days. Local radio stations hardly ever offered information about theological issues, nor did local newspapers.¹² And overseas broadcasts were hard to receive.

Certain documents from the Vatican Council caused confusion among priests who were not receptive to change. One of the Council's admonitions was about the need for greater appreciation of non-Christian religions: God's Word had always been active in those religions. Even if this appreciation was not formal recognition of religion, this was a shock for many missionaries who had been trained in the principle: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.

Another new concept concerned the notion of Church. Missionaries were used to seeing the Church as a hierarchical institution in which the priest played a leading role and where his main responsibility was administering the sacraments. Missionaries who were trained in the concept of *Plantatio Ecclesiae* attached great importance to baptisms, Holy Communion, confessions and weddings, and these statistics were sent to the Bishop who would forward them to Rome. Such figures were proof of the growth of the Catholic Church and the measure of its success. Critical missionaries were also aware that for Africans, especially those in remote villages where a missionary would only visit once every two or three months, the understanding of a sacrament was not always clear.¹³ However, the courses at Soesterberg that missionaries attended discussed why the administering of the sacraments was not a priority for the missionaries in local communities.¹⁴

The new concept highlighted how the Church was a congregation of the faithful, in which the priest was the servant and no longer the authority or a member of its top-down structure as he had always believed he was. For many missionaries this was difficult to accept as they were sure that if missionaries had not acted as they had done, there would not have been a church in Africa at all.

Missionaries all over Africa had taken pride in the building of churches, even in tiny villages. They were considered proof that the Church had been planted and were the places where the congregation assembled on Sundays for services. Even if no priest was present, a local teacher or catechist would conduct the service, sing hymns and give some religious instructions. For congregations, their 'own' church building was a matter of prestige in the rivalry between the denominations.¹⁵ For a missionary, the building of a new church or the completion of a church building by adding the roof or laying a con-

¹² My parents were aware of my lack of information and gave me a subscription to *Concilium*, the magazine that spread the new theology.

¹³ Father Kwik, a missionary in Congo, narrated how a 'married' woman with children wanted to enter into Holy Matrimony and came for confession for the first time in eleven years. When the priest asked her what sins she had committed, she remained silent: she was not aware of any sin. (For the Church, she had been living in sin for eleven years!). Father Kwik (2008: 166) noted: 'There is a clear gap in the interpretation of sin between her and me'.

¹⁴ Kerklaan (1992: 260-265).

¹⁵ In 1977, I spent some time at Omu Aran, a town in Yoruba Ekiti District. Like every other town in the area, it consisted of clay houses. A senior church member proudly displayed a professionally drafted blueprint for their new church that was to be built in concrete and would have glass windows.

crete floor was a true accomplishment. In the 1960s, missionaries were told that they should no longer emphasize the physical church building but should focus instead on bringing together the members of the congregation to make them an *ecclesia*, i.e. an assembly of the faithful.

Teaching the missionary courses at Soesterberg showed Father de Groot that there were three categories of missionaries. There were those for whom the new theology was a matter of recognition, an *Aha-Erlebnis*. For them, these developments were confirmation of what they had been thinking for some time but had been unable to express clearly.

Other missionaries disagreed: 'Let them think in Holland what they want; I for one know that what I am doing is right.' These were not always the older missionaries as some of the young missionaries also found it hard to change their views. Some of them felt uneasy about their work in Africa in view of these new concepts but did not want to go back to the Netherlands as they felt alienated from their roots. Generally speaking, missionaries felt at home in their 'stations' (parishes) in Africa. They may have lacked running water and electricity and they may not have had access to European food but they enjoyed the social prestige they had in their parishes and they had staff who cooked and cared for them. They were aware that the benefits of their sedate way of life outweighed their material hardships and that they would not enjoy the same privileges in their home country.

A third category of missionaries indicated that they had concluded that the 'old' theology did not work in Africa. They had observed that the Catholic doctrine on moral issues uprooted African converts from their traditional backgrounds but they doubted if a 'new' theology would be much better than the old one. They feared that the new approaches of adaptation, accommodation and inculturation would not essentially change the Church's approach to African indigenous religions. Their doubts about the Church structures and its doctrinal approach had made them impervious to any theological innovations and many missionaries in this category resigned from the priesthood.¹⁶

For European missionaries and many others in Africa, the post-colonial period was one of transition and marked the end of an era, namely of their missionary presence in Africa. At the same time, the Catholic Church in Europe was finding itself in a crisis too. Seminaries were closing and priests, including missionaries, were resigning. The rise and fall of missionary congregations – at least in the Netherlands – had taken little more than a hundred years.

5.1.2 *The power of definition*

The previous period had been characterized by the *Plantatio Ecclesiae*, which meant in practice that the Catholic Church imposed its own ecclesiastical structure on the young Church in Africa. The Catholic Church had appropriated the power to define what was good for Africa but, at the beginning of the post-colonial period, Africa experienced a period of fundamental political, economic and cultural change. Would this transition also imply a different attitude on the part of the Church in the way it approached Africa?

¹⁶ Kerklaan (1992: 261).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the view gradually emerged that the Catholic Church should no longer be imposed unilaterally on Africa, as had been the case in the 19th century. It was now necessary to act respectfully towards Africans and incorporate valuable elements from their culture and religion into Catholic practice. This was not seen as compromising oneself but as a process in which the Church would adapt certain practical matters to local cultural phenomena.

In the years before, the Vatican Council's new methods of evangelization were initiated with their own terminology and methods, such as adaptation, accommodation, contextualization, indigenization and acculturation. The Vatican Council affirmed a number of these initiatives and adopted them as formal Church policy. By so doing, the Catholic Church engaged in a new discourse, in which it claimed to be listening to its African counterparts and to have adapted to local needs.

This discourse may be seen as social practice, i.e. it featured in 'ideological effects and hegemonic processes'.¹⁷ Hegemony, according to Fairclough, concerns power that is achieved through the construction of alliances. The Catholic Church acknowledged that the hegemony it had exercised in the pre-colonial and colonial periods in Africa was now obsolete. The Church wanted to establish new alliances with local churches, also in Africa. It changed its hegemony by initiating hegemonic processes such as adaptation, accommodation, contextualization and others.¹⁸ In all these processes, the Catholic Church maintained its position of power and guarded the 'correct' interpretation of the Vatican Council's documents and the resulting processes. It maintained its conviction regarding the conversion of Africans and the effective obedience of local churches to its central authority. The Church also kept the power to define what elements were adaptable, which were not, and which could be accommodated or contextualized.

Vatican II's *De Liturgia Romana et Inculturatione*¹⁹ permits inculturation if the 'substantial unity of the Roman rite is safeguarded'.²⁰ The question as to what belongs to substantial unity and what does not can only be answered by the Vatican itself. The innovations that Rome introduced showed which elements did not upset the unity of the Liturgy: the change from Latin to the local language in the Liturgy and the position of the priest during the liturgy, i.e. facing the faithful.

Rome does not permit expressions of popular religiosity to be incorporated into the Liturgy. Lukken describes inculturation as the interaction or dialogue between the Gospel and Culture. It is a matter of reciprocal incorporation²¹ and the most prominent characteristics of popular religiosity are: merry-making, drama, spontaneity and creativity, the personal and the communal character, and one's own orientation towards fellow men, combined with what is genuinely human and immediate.²² Phan notes that the concept of culture changed in the transition from modernism to the post-modern age. This implied the abandonment of the Enlightenment myth that progress for mankind

¹⁷ Blommaert & Bulcaen (2000: 449).

¹⁸ See Fairclough (1992).

¹⁹ 'About the Roman Liturgy and Inculturation', 29 March 1964.

²⁰ *Servata substantiali unitate ritus romani*.

²¹ Lukken (1996: 22, 47).

²² Lukken (1996: 49).

was inevitable and that the privilege for rationality, which was characteristic of the Enlightenment, was exchanged for a celebration of emotion and intuition, which are part of African culture. For Phan, inculturation was, by definition, an 'intercultural encounter' and therefore receptive to change.²³ He noted that certain Vatican documents, such as *Varietates legitimae*, did not take such changes into account: 'Any admission of rites and gestures from the local customs into the Christian liturgy must be "accompanied by purification and, if necessary, a break with the past" (...) Obviously the Christian liturgy cannot accept magic rites, superstition, spiritism, vengeance or rites with a sexual connotation.'²⁴

The dilemma of adaptation was made painfully clear by Matthew Schoffeleers who was a Roman Catholic missionary in Malawi before he studied social anthropology and became a professor of anthropology at the Free University at Amsterdam. He contributed to the adaptation and acculturation debate in the Catholic Church.²⁵ According to him, it might be theologically difficult to translate the concept of Jesus Christ as a Saviour into an African idiom but he felt it would be plausible to consider Christ as an *Nganga*, perhaps even as the Great *Nganga*. This may appear an anthropologically sound proposal but the author, as a Catholic missionary, had reservations about his own proposal as the paradigm might not be acceptable to theologians of the official church:

One of the reasons may be a conscious or unconscious fear of introducing syncretistic notions and practices. More specifically, the official adoption of the *Nganga* paradigm would entail the established churches recognizing the objective existence of witchcraft and evil spirits

In many churches in Africa, hymns in the local language are sung during Holy Mass accompanied by clapping and musical instruments, women carry gifts of fruit and vegetables to the altar in a dance-like procession and the officiating priests are dressed in chasubles decorated with designs in local colours and shapes. But the essence of the liturgy remains the same: according to the Catholic doctrine, bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ. The Catholic Church has never allowed African foods and drinks to be substituted for bread and wine (both of which are European inventions and alien to most of Africa). In other words, the Catholic Church did not adapt anything that was considered by many as its essence to a traditional African culture and religion. A number of outward elements have changed but the core of the liturgy has not. Some critics have argued that adaptation has not been successful. Others, however, argue that, from a pastoral point of view, the African faithful feel much more at home with the liturgy because it has been adapted to their musical traditions, their sense of celebration and their relationship with the spiritual. The theological discourse on the present liturgy and the previous one is not a matter of concern for the average Christian.

Accommodation

Accommodation was also presented as a new approach to evangelization. It resembles the concept of adaptation but differs from it in as far as it allows for shifts in fundamen-

²³ Phan (2003: 59).

²⁴ No. 4 of the Instruction; quoted by Phan (2003: 73).

²⁵ Schoffeleers (1994: 73-87).

tal norms and values. Accommodation is sometimes seen as a form of syncretism, when two (or more) systems of thought or religious systems merge into one, while each system is prepared to sacrifice some of its core business in the process in the hope of creating a new and better system.

There is an ongoing discussion in the Catholic Church about which of its many traditions belong to its core business and which may have acquired the status of imperishableness, yet can be dispensed with without harming the genuine core of the faith. Accommodation refers to those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous firsthand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture pattern of either or both groups.²⁶

Contextualization

The concept of contextualization overlaps with those of adaptation and accommodation but differs from earlier ones in that it takes into consideration the fact that a culture is continuously changing. Contextualization, as its name implies, considers the context in which changes occur. This concept is receptive to change and to the intermediaries in a society that are agents of change.

The Church cannot contextualize the contents of its doctrines, or so it claims, but it may contextualize the way it presents its doctrine, i.e. its catechesis. Contextualization means: taking elements from the Christian faith that fit well into one's own culture and presenting them in a way that touches people emotionally.²⁷ According to more orthodox theologians, this concept, however genuine, runs the risk of the Church being cut off from its doctrinal roots.²⁸ 'All mission theology is contextual theology because it involves the communication of gospel truth by someone with a particular context to someone in a different context.'²⁹

The ever-changing context forces the Church to continue contextualizing its norms. In other words, the values and convictions of the Christian faith must be applied over and over again in the new context if Christians are to be able to remain (in the terminology of the Gospel) the salt of the earth.³⁰

Contextualization has always been around, also in the Bible. There are examples in the Old and the New Testaments that testify to cases of contextualization and in the history of the Church. For instance, a slow shift took place from the tradition of polygamy in the Old Testament to monogamy in the New Testament. Concerning the tenability of Old Testament traditions, Paul the Apostle decreed that if the Greeks (who were pagans) wanted to become Christians, they would not need to be circumcised. Newly baptized Christians with a 'pagan' background were not requested to eat kosher food or adopt regulations concerning ritual cleansing. And although slavery, which was a common practice in those days, was condoned by Paul the Apostle in his letter to Philemon, a

²⁶ Redfield, Linton & Herskowitz (1936).

²⁷ Keller (2008).

²⁸ Van Winden (1986: 32).

²⁹ Bevans (1994: 120).

³⁰ Lock & van Putten (2010)

viewpoint that the Church adopted to justify the slave trade, this same Church supported the abolition of slavery in the 19th century.

Indigenisation and inculturation

In the strict sense of the word, indigenization can be understood as a process in which one culture introduces or even enforces its own culture on another, i.e. a local culture has to adopt another, 'superior' culture.³¹ Missiologists will not speak of the element of force but refer to Christianity as having been brought to one culture by missionaries of another. Yet the question remains as to how and to what extent the local culture was free to adopt the new and foreign religion? Missionaries brought the 'glad tidings of the Gospel', as they liked to call their message, even if the content did not always fit with traditional African concepts, such as obligatory monogamy for converts. The message was attractively packaged, however, and was accompanied by access to education and healthcare. For many Africans, adopting the Christian faith (i.e. conversion) was the gateway to (European) civilization. To what extent could the local community and, after having been converted, the local church exercise theological autonomy, for instance in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures within their own cultural and historical context? For the superior culture, in this case the Church, the risk was that indigenization would lead to syncretism, and the Catholic Church sees syncretism as a threat to the purity of its doctrine. Since Vatican II, the concepts of indigenization and inculturation have been considered synonymous with attempts to Africanize Christian theology.³²

Some examples of adaptation

An attempt to realize adaptation was initiated by Father Kevin Carroll, an SMA missionary in Yoruba Ekiti District in Nigeria that was known internationally for its high-quality wooden sculptures, masks, statues and pillars to support verandas. For him, all European images of saints and Jesus Christ could have been replaced by images of the same saints, but in an African, i.e. Yoruba, style. He persuaded some renowned 'pagan' (as he called them) sculptors to carve statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Christmas cribs and other typically Catholic themes for the country's Catholic churches. (see Figures 82 and 83)

Father Carroll describes his influence on the woodcarver Bandele, one of the best at the time, as follows:

We would ask a Christian to tell the stories to Bandele and would then discuss the details of the carving with him, as it was not possible to leave him entirely to his own resources. For example, Bandele suggested that he should represent screws in the crucifix, rather than nails, as they were stronger.³³

³¹ Colonialism can be seen as an example of indigenization.

³² Dickson in Bujo (2006: 110-113). Tlhagale (2004: 43) and Uchem (2002: 58).

³³ Carroll (1966: 4).

Figure 82 The Flight into Egypt by Lamidi (1956) with Joseph, dressed in a Yoruba outfit, carrying an oil lamp and leading a donkey



Figure 83 The Three Wise Men visit the New-born Jesus by Bandele (1962). The wise men, dressed in traditional Yoruba royal outfits, are presenting Mary and Joseph with a chicken and a bowl of cola nuts, which are traditional tokens of welcome



Carroll's approach implies that he was apprehensive of watering down the contents of the Church's theological traditions but that he allowed the traditional (European) forms in which these contents were presented to Africa to be reshaped in what he liked to describe as a 'traditional art style'. Not everybody shared Carroll's view. Ulli Beier, one of the pioneers of modern Nigerian art, wrote:

Can the forms of traditional Yoruba art really be used to express Christian ideas? Is not the form of art always the expression of the ideas that inspired it? How then is it possible for an art-form that was inspired by traditional Yoruba religion to be adapted to express Christian ideas? (...) The Church has been able to provide the carver with new work but not with new inspiration.³⁴

Another example of adaptation was the so-called *Missa Luba* from Congo. This Mass, which was composed in 1958, used conventional Latin texts that were common in the liturgy of the Catholic Church at the time. (Since then, the liturgy has used local languages but the *Missa Luba* is still sung in Latin.) The music was based on the traditional songs of some Congolese ethnic groups, including the Luba and the Kasai. The initiative was taken by a Belgian missionary, Father Guido Haazen, in 1958. The original music was not written down but improvised. In the *Credo*, the traditional announcement on the talking drums of the death of an elder precedes the texts that describe the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ. The music for the *Sanctus* is based on a Kiluba farewell song. In the same period, comparable musical performances of the Mass originated elsewhere in Africa too: the Mass of the Savannah (Burkina Faso), the Fang Mass (Gabon), the *Missa Katanga* (Congo), the Creole Mass (Senegal) and others.³⁵ Kalumba narrates how a whole new Mass was written in 1972, drawing on local melodies, poetry, language, forms of dress, dance and symbolism. (see Figure 84) This rite was widely performed in Zaire but was eventually questioned by the Vatican as it was seen to be moving too far from the Latin original.³⁶ Liturgical experiments continued to be initiated in Zaire (Congo). Perhaps the best known is the Zairean Rite, which was approved by the Vatican in 1988 and is formally called: the Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire.³⁷

Certain elements in this liturgy should be mentioned here because they differ from choices made elsewhere in Africa. One is the place allocated to the ancestors. The liturgy accepts the Zairean concept of the human community, which consists not only of the living but also the deceased (the ancestors) and the yet-to-be-born. Each of these categories is narrowly connected with the two others. It is the ancestors who send the newborn children into the world. Critics suggested that a distinction ought to be made between the deceased who had lived a good life and those who had not, but theologians felt that only those who had lived a good life were venerated as ancestors after death and compared them to saints, who are considered saints precisely because they lived a good life. The festivities at a person's funeral are organized to celebrate the deceased's ascent into heaven and are a reminder of the early Christian concept of the day of death being a *dies natalis*. The Eucharist was presented in the Zairean Rite as a family meal to

³⁴ Beier (1960: 14).

³⁵ Kalumba (2003: 94).

³⁶ Stringer (2005: 225) and Kalumba (2003: 94).

³⁷ Bujo (2013: 59).

be enjoyed by the living and the dead, together with Jesus Christ, the first-born of Creation, and the proto-ancestor. Although the rite was officially approved, this view was not accepted by the Vatican.

Figure 84 Chasubles with traditional Congolese designs for a priest during Holy Mass



Another new element in this rite was the change in the order of the liturgy. The confession of sins was no longer placed as the opening prayer in the Mass but was moved to after the sermon. And the sermon was no longer a monologue by the officiating priest but a dialogue between the priest and the community, in line with certain African traditions of 'palaver'. In such meetings, a moral issue is presented and everybody is invited

to take part in the discussion and anyone who feels guilty can admit their guilt.³⁸ Although the Zairean Rite has a number of genuinely African elements, it cannot be transferred to other areas in Africa without a critical analysis of religious or cultural elements that may be specific to that area. Rome is not in favour of creating too many different rites.³⁹

5.1.3 *Drawing borders: The ancestors*

The previous paragraph considered how the Catholic Church appropriated the power to define what an indigenous African religion was. How this power has been exercised by Church authorities in Ghana with regard to ancestor cult will now be examined. Where does the Catholic Church draw its boundaries between what it accepts as ‘legal’ ancestor worship/veneration and what is ‘illegal’?

Modern anthropologists have observed that ancestors in many African societies are accorded a special status.⁴⁰ They lived a long life, married and fathered children, who in turn also had children, were successful in their lives as farmers or businessmen and died at a ripe old age. They were respected for their experience and their wisdom and, after death, were given a splendid funeral that was attended by many people not only from their own family but also from towns and villages in the area. After their death, they will still be concerned about the wellbeing of their descendants and help them whenever necessary. They will also request meticulous observation of family traditions. If descendants fail to do so, the anger of the ancestors will affect the living. A good and peaceful relationship with one’s ancestors is of vital importance for the living. They will, therefore, offer sacrifices to their ancestors as a token of their loyalty to them or as a way of pacifying them in cases of conflict. The ancestors will be called upon in daily prayers and acts of libation in order to receive their blessing. These acts are crucial elements in the relationship between the living members of a family and their ancestors.⁴¹

What does the Catholic Church make of ancestors in Africa? Pope Paul VI wrote a letter to Africa in 1967⁴² in which he praised the moral and religious values in the African attachment to the family, as can be evidenced by ‘the bond with ancestors, which finds expression in so many widespread forms of worship’. This appears to suggest that worshipping ancestors is permitted, but not everybody agreed. Those who disagreed based their argument on long-held convictions in the Catholic Church: Rome could not condone the worship of ancestors. Worship was reserved for God. If Africans believed that their ancestors were to be considered ‘gods’, they could therefore be worshipped. But this was not compatible with Christian doctrine. But could veneration be condoned

³⁸ Such approaches have become known outside Africa through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after the fall of Apartheid and in Ruanda after the genocide.

³⁹ Bujo (2013: 58).

⁴⁰ Not all ethnic groups in Africa have an organized cult for their ancestors. Although I speak of ‘the ancestors’ in general terms in this observation, I am aware of the differences between ethnic groups.

⁴¹ When talking about the ancestors, I omit references to God or other spiritual (supernatural) beings because, generally speaking, ethnic groups with a distinct ancestor cult see their ancestors as autonomous entities.

⁴² *Africae Terrarum*. 29 October 1967.

by the Church? One generally accepted means of venerating the ancestors is libation. (see Figure 85) Before a meal is taken, a few drops of ‘wine’ (this may be gin, beer or any other liquid) are poured on the soil accompanied by words like: ‘This is for you, grandfather’.

There were discussions in the 1950s among literate and illiterate Ghanaian Catholics about whether libation as it was practised on important occasions and at public festivals, funerals, weddings, the naming of a child, puberty rites and before building a house was allowed by the Church. The bishops appointed a committee to study the issue and their report was accepted in 1958 and became formal Church policy.⁴³

Figure 85 A chief’s senior adviser pours libation for the ancestors in Ashanti, Ghana , 1967



Among the Ashanti, Fanti and other Akan-speaking ethnic groups, a libation rite that is performed in public consists of the following elements: an opening prayer to *Nyame*, the invocation of the *abosom* (translated in the report as ‘national or household gods’) and the *nsamanfo* (ancestors). At each prayer and invocation, a little *nsa* (gin, water or another liquid) is poured on the ground and after the invocations, the reason for the libation is given (*amandzee*), followed by the supplication of the specific need(s) that

⁴³ Van der Weijden (1959).

prompted it. A general prayer and blessings for all those present concludes the ceremony.

The bishops' committee attributed the following meanings to the different elements that make up an act of libation. First, libation is seen as an act of religion, as a prayer *cum* sacrifice. The report replies that 'the *abosom* (spirits) are simply non-existent and the pouring of libation to them is obviously superstitious. The pouring of libation to the *nsamanfo* (ancestors) is likewise superstitious.' The argument for rejection is that sacrifice can only be given to God and that the honour that is given to ancestors and spirits as autonomous powers and the help expected from them are 'as many errors, which are at variance with the revealed Christian truth'. Even though the prayers to *Nyame* (Creator God) are in themselves praiseworthy, they generate objections when they form part of this rite 'because God's blessing is asked for the performance of an act, which is contrary to the first commandment'. In prayers, the ancestors are addressed as 'autonomous, superhuman beings' who are expected to grant favours 'in virtue of their own power. This power they do not possess. It is God's own – exclusive and divine.'

The report as well as the article give a juridical analysis of the libation rite. It presents a detailed description of the rite, its different elements, its terminology, the position of the performers of the rite and the responses by the public. By doing so, it creates the impression that the committee studied the rite objectively and without prejudice and that, for many years, missionaries 'preferred the attitude of patient tolerance to open condemnation and strict prohibition. (...) They realized that for the young Christians refusal to participate (...) would be interpreted as a sign of contempt for a most sacred act.' This is a correct interpretation of the attitude of many a missionary, as I myself experienced. On the other hand, van der Weijden stresses that 'the attitude of tolerance, which in the past was justified because of the ignorance and good faith of the people, cannot be maintained any longer'. With sweeping statements such as 'the *abosom* are non-existent' and 'the ancestors do not possess the powers which are attributed to them', the committee members could not but conclude that libation was not accepted by Christians. The first Ghanaian archbishop (and the committee's chairman) and the author of the article (his vicar-general) were both graduates of Canon Law. The report is a neatly formulated juridical analysis of the rite, written from an ecclesiastical perspective and without an anthropological approach that would have looked for the 'meaning' of libation in the context of society as a whole and indigenous religion in particular.

The libation debate carried on in Ghana for a number of years but the views of the country's bishops did not change. Archbishop Peter Sarpong of Ghana, an Oxford-educated anthropologist who published several articles on traditional Ashanti culture, was aware of the objections made by the more conservative Catholics about libation and he condemned it for more or less the same reasons given in the 1958 report. He published his views in 1996 and claimed that the rite was an act of worship rather than of veneration.⁴⁴ Even as an anthropologist, Sarpong apparently did not attempt to reconcile his conservative views on libation with Vatican II and repeated appeals by successive Popes.

⁴⁴ Sarpong (1996).

If this debate is considered as a discourse, it can be noted that the ecclesiastical authorities exercised their power of definition. Their position in the Church and society warranted a top-down process, according to Fairclough.⁴⁵ Their reason for issuing this report is clear: their main concern was the purity of Catholic doctrine and they wanted to create or reproduce a societal order and impose it on their faithful. Fairclough distinguished between the individual dimension (in this case, the individual missionary who was expected to pass this view on to his parishioners) and the institutional dimension (in this case, the Catholic Church).⁴⁶

The ‘attitude of tolerance’ on the part of individual missionaries has already been discussed. From my own experience, I know that it was not only a matter of ‘tolerance because of the ignorance of the faithful’, but that the individual dimension was determined by a conscious decision to act against the regulations issued by the bishops, as is clear from the next example.

On a personal note, I never doubted the value of ancestor veneration. I remember that, in 1967, the Ghanaian government provided funds for the installation of a water-supply system for the town of Sefwi Bekwai. The chief of the town invited the *okomfo*, as guardian of the local gods, and myself, as the Catholic parish priest, to accompany him and bless the spot near the river where the pumps and the water purification system would be built. The *okomfo* slaughtered a sheep that he had brought with him and allowed the blood to trickle onto the soil and into the water of the river as he softly murmured his prayers. He was aware of the history of the place: it was here that the ancestors had come to collect water for their families for generations. Now he was pouring libation and asking the ancestors to bless those who were going to build the new water works and his people, who would ultimately benefit from these works.

Then it was my turn. I sprinkled Holy Water, which I had brought with me, on the water in the river and on the river bank, praying that God would make the (future) water in the river, which in due course would be pumped up there, pure and then transport it to the town some miles away where it would be beneficial to the inhabitants. Both the *okomfo* and I worked with objects with power (the libation, the sacrificial sheep and the Holy Water) and although the objects fitted in different religious worlds, we both believed that they would be effective. The *okomfo* called on the Spirit (*obosom*) of the River to allow its water to be pumped mechanically and transferred to the townspeople. He asked the ancestors of the community to supply sufficient water to all the townspeople to quench their thirst and satisfy their needs. I prayed to the Almighty God that He might give the people of this town health and welfare through the supply of this water.

It was a remarkable scene. The *okomfo* and I did not engage in conversation, we did not greet each other in a traditional and elaborate manner, yet we had a silent, mutual respect for each other. There was no rivalry but, instead, the feeling that both of us did what we thought best for the community, which consisted after all of followers of the indigenous religion as well as Christians, even if the latter belonged to different denom-

⁴⁵ Fairclough (1992: 81).

⁴⁶ Fairclough (1992: 69).

inations. The chief stood between us, like a bridge between two religious worlds that had, in the past, so often been at loggerheads.

Looking back, I am aware that my action was, if not forbidden by the Church, then at least one that was not encouraged by it. I had partaken in a ceremony in which an *okomfo* played an integral part, in which both the *okomfo* and I were acting on an equal footing. I had been trained to consider libation and the slaughtering of sheep by a fetish priest as a pagan ritual, and one that I would not want to be associated with. Yet, at this event where no outsiders were present and where it could never be said that I was acting for publicity or propaganda reasons, I saw the invitation by the chief as a 'natural' opportunity to ask for God's blessing for the people of this town regardless of their religious beliefs. I am fairly sure that the *okomfo* had the same opinion.

5.1.4 *Missionary views of objects with power*

I have already mentioned that this period (1950-2000) was one of transition for the churches as they had to adjust to changing political, economic and social circumstances. In a number of ways, this transition affected how missionaries of all denominations looked at objects with power.

Father Brouwer, an SMA missionary among the Ewe in southeastern Ghana wrote:

Fetishism is the worship of various material objects, which through rituals, a ceremony, receive a consecration or through an accidental strange event have been made into a lodgings for an earthly god. In most cases they are protective fetishes, *nunuwo*. One localizes them in order to be able to profit from their extraordinary powers. On the one hand fetishism is the belief in powerful, supernatural beings, both good and evil, created by *Mawu* (God) and endowed by Him with full powers to control the destiny of the world and of mankind, through regulation, through bestowing awards and punishment. On the other hand fetishism is a firm belief in sorcery.⁴⁷

Brouwer accurately described what he observed without the prejudices popular among missionaries, but argued nevertheless from the notions of fetishism that were commonly accepted at the time. He assumed that fetishes (such as *Legba*) had received their efficacy from *Mawu* (the Creator God) and he thus associated them with sorcery. (see Figure 86)

The rapid increase in African priests and ministers in the major denominations also resulted in a growing number of African theologians with an interest in indigenous religions as well as a relationship between the churches and these religions. Among the new generation of Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians were those who identified with the traditional Christian concepts, including norms and values regarding sexuality and marriage, and pagan practices as they had been preached by missionaries to their faithful as the one and only true doctrine. This theological attitude implied that indigenous religious rites and practices had a negative connotation and were considered superstitious and idolatrous.

⁴⁷ Unpublished manuscript, Brouwer (1952: 44).

Figure 86 An Ewe Legba. near Dzelukofe, Volta Region, Ghana



A conservative attitude can be observed in the Yoruba minister and theologian E.Boalgo Idowu. Speaking of indigenous Yoruba religion, he discussed the images, objects or emblems of the *Orisha* that appeared in many forms as statues, stones, staffs, plates and others and were the material elements of Yoruba cults. (see Figure 87)

Many of them can be considered objects with power:

They are designed to be a means to an end, but can easily become an end in itself. This is where idolatry comes in. Men can become 'fools' who actually exchange the glory of the living God for the images of mortal man, who actually bow down to wood and stone. This is a sin. There can be no doubt that as man advances in knowledge and attains clearer spiritual vision, he *could* grow above this kind of material aid to his beliefs. Among the Yoruba the *crude* and *absurd* emblems will certainly pass away with the passage of time.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Idowu (1994: 62-63).

Figure 87 Dance staff to honour the *Orisa Shango*, Yoruba, Nigeria



Idowu added that the *Orisha*, which he translated as ‘divinities’, had to be considered a later invention that was made by local priests who had many (egoistic) reasons for doing so.⁴⁹ He also felt that Christians, especially those born between 1930 and 1960, continued to believe in objects with power, which were traditionally considered pagan but that they tended to incorporate them in their devotional practices. He referred to the old customs of performing (second) burials, polygyny and attending the *Osu* cult. *Osu* is one of the *orisas*, the queen of the river with the same name. She is invoked through prayers and sacrifice so that she can provide the devotee with *ase* (life force).⁵⁰ There is a strong belief in Yoruba society that *ase* must be acknowledged and used in all social matters. Converts to Christianity share this belief and try to incorporate it in their private lives, much to the contempt of some church leaders.

The Catholic Bishop of Owerri, Mgr. Unegbu, complained in 1980 that many Catholics ‘relapse into practices long renounced as incompatible with their Christian faith and

⁴⁹ Idowu (1994: 219).

⁵⁰ Drewal (1989: 16).

morals'. He spoke of 'neo-paganism' saying that the Catholic faith 'cannot be compromised. It cannot be an adaptation of the new values to the old ones.'⁵¹

Bishop Unegbu's firm views betray the simmering conflict among the faithful in Christian Churches that went almost unnoticed and was not discussed publicly but was everybody's daily concern. The Christian Churches have, ever since they arrived in Africa, challenged pagan practices. It was relatively easy to suppress cults that used material (physical) objects with power when these objects were visible in public ceremonies. But there were ritual practices, such as the pouring of libation or maintaining a personal shrine in one's house, that were exercised in secret or in private and were hard to detect. As a good many members of a community depended on the successful application of these rituals, it was in everyone's interests to keep quiet about what was going on.

The rationale behind these practices was founded on myths. Since humans had disturbed the harmony that existed between them and God, it was vital for them to engage in elaborate rituals and taboos to restore this harmony. Ancestors had to be venerated and the 'gods' (the *orisa* of the Yoruba and the *abosom* of the Ashanti and Fanti) had to be worshipped through rituals, for example by offering sacrifices.⁵² All over Africa, rituals and taboos are performed for an individual 'from the womb to the ancestral world'.⁵³ They have been and in many cases are still part and parcel of everyone's lives and thus of each community. They play an important part in the wellbeing of individuals and in maintaining harmony between members of a community.

In the same generation of theologians were also scholars who had studied indigenous religious practices in an independent manner, veering away from European prejudices that had described these religions invariably as paganism, fetishism and idolatry for more than a century. In other words, they developed an African theology that would be able to adapt Christian truths to indigenous religious concepts. Cyril Okorochoa, an Igbo Methodist minister and theologian, was one of them. For him, the central element in Igbo religion and culture is the notion of 'power'. There is a 'something' that gives man the power to achieve money, promotion or success. *Ikenga* has that power and 'can give it to me if I take good care of it and if I live up to the "taboos" of my *ikenga*'. He goes back to one of the probable etymologies of the word: *ike* means power and *nga* means to drive or to push towards success. He does not identify the *ikenga* figure with a 'small god' or a fetish, as was done in the past.

Okorochoa considers the concept of power as being characteristic of all indigenous religions: 'A religion is useful and worthy of profession if it embodies and imparts this power. Otherwise it is to be rejected and a "power-full" alternative must be sought.'⁵⁴ He describes how, in Igbo religion, if an *arusi* (cult object) becomes troublesome and overbearing rather than productive and benevolent, it is 'shown the wood from which he is carved', i.e. the object is discarded.⁵⁵ Such events have been recorded in the history of the Igbo, with a well-documented example being the destruction of the Aro Long Juju

⁵¹ Idowu (1994: 266).

⁵² Magesa (2002: 193-243).

⁵³ Mbiti (1991: 87-152).

⁵⁴ Okorochoa (1987: 198).

⁵⁵ This is a recurrent feature not only in Igbo religion but in others too.

(one of the most powerful cults in the region) in 1901-1902 by British military forces. When the Igbo subsequently discovered that the *arusi* (gods) did not take revenge, they concluded that they had lost their power and were discarded and forgotten. This implied that the Igbo had to look for a 'powerful' alternative. To Okorochoa, this was the key to understanding why the Igbo converted *en masse* to Christianity and explained why they were able to discard these 'gods' without fearing repercussions or problems and could then create new ones.

Okorochoa continues this argument by stating that the Igbo search for 'power' can also be seen as a search for salvation or *ezi-ndu*. This *ezi-ndu* means 'viable life' or 'a life which goes far beyond merely being alive to include such desirabilities as health, prosperity, longevity and offspring as well as tranquillity of order within society'.⁵⁶ Whoever possesses *ezi-ndu* is considered to be a 'saved man' or 'someone for whom all goes well'. When things do not go well for somebody, this is interpreted as the gods taking revenge on the person because he has broken a taboo. In traditional Igbo religion, this was no reason for despair: there were many cults around that could solve problems. This demonstrates how, for the Igbo, 'worship is a means of bartering blessings from these gods and is therefore conditional'.⁵⁷ It also shows that one characteristic of traditional Igbo religion and culture is its ability to respond to change by way of accommodation, resilience and redefinition of values.

This is an important observation by Okorochoa because European missionaries, ever since they arrived in Africa in the 19th century, have explained the talents of Africans of 'accommodation, resilience and redefinition of values' as being symptoms of an opportunistic mind that did not reason from principles or stick to agreements and that was capricious and unreliable. These characteristics, which to Europeans were proof of a low morality, were analyzed by an African scholar as belonging to the African psyche, without attaching any moral judgement to them. Okorochoa felt that 'inherent religious values are the determinants of the people's response to a change-agent'.⁵⁸ And for Igbo Christians, the belief in power is the essence of life, of society and of religion. A man's personal power was materialized in his *ikenga*, as was explained earlier. But this power is not an end in itself: it must always lead to its goal, namely salvation (*ezi-ndu*). Success in business, happiness in one's family and good health bear testimony to a man's salvation. Another Igbo characteristic is the association of purity – more specifically, moral purity – with divine blessing. The one is caused by the other. It is also a *sine qua non* for the enjoyment of the favours that the gods shower on men who live a morally pure life.

5.1.5 *Mission accomplished?*

This period of transition was characterized by a gradual decrease in the number of expatriate (European) missionaries. I have given several reasons for this decline. However there is one other reason. When the missionary policy of *Plantatio Ecclesiae* was estab-

⁵⁶ Okorochoa (1987: 204).

⁵⁷ Okorochoa (1987: 206).

⁵⁸ Okorochoa (1987: 207).

lished, its goal was not only to create local African churches headed by African priests, bishops and archbishops but to work towards a situation in which European missionaries would become redundant. By the end of this period, this had been reached in a growing number of African countries where not only the number of European missionaries had become negligible but also their role in the daily running of the church. Had their mission been accomplished?

Numerically, the planting of the Church can be seen as having been successful, with over 150 million converts in slightly over 100 years. All over Africa today one finds parishes, dioceses and archdioceses run by African priests, bishops, archbishops and cardinals. And the number of Catholics is still rising.⁵⁹ But did missionary activities create a genuinely Christian population in Africa?

Scholars have studied the impact of Christianity on Africa⁶⁰ and some feel that Christianity has never truly penetrated the hearts and minds of Africans.⁶¹ Writing about the Dinka of Sudan, Lienhardt said that 'The acceptance of the Church came through foreign secular ideas of progress and development, for the most part material, which had little to do with the main evangelical purposes or teachings of the missions.'⁶² Okorochoa describes some case studies of young Nigerians who could be placed in the category of the 'relapsed'. Mr X is a successful, young engineer and a practising Anglican who decided to become a member of a 'brotherhood', an organization, forbidden by the Church. He explains his action: 'Somebody in my position needs strong protection. I am young, rich, successful in my business but I know I have many enemies. I need protection. These people [the brotherhood] have powers to see what ordinary people do not see.'⁶³

The recognition that a growing number of converts have returned, if not forever then at least temporarily, to their indigenous religion is widespread. Some have compared the phenomenon to a farnish, which barely covers what is underneath but does not penetrate into the material. Bishop Unegbu spoke of a 'relapse into practices incompatible with the Christian faith'. According to Kirby, they are doing so in search of identity and cultural authenticity. On the one hand, one could question the sincerity of their religious conversion, while, on the other, we might ask whether this return means an abrogation of the norms and values that were part of Christian (in many ways, modern) life. After all, conversion to Christianity involved, in many cases, accepting a new identity, enjoying a western-style education and becoming part of a capitalist society. It has been observed that (young) Africans have deliberately opted for conversion to a 'Western' Christian Church in order to receive a Western education and thus attain a respected status in society and maybe even a scholarship to a university overseas. We might, therefore, prefer to speak here of a dual identity one Western and one African. In some circles this is called living in two worlds or syncretism. In my own personal circle, I know several people who have managed to combine two apparent contradictions in one

⁵⁹ Africa has about 150 million Catholics, which is about 17% of its total population.

⁶⁰ See Ayandele (1966).

⁶¹ Kirby (1994: 57-71).

⁶² Lienhardt (1982: 81-95).

⁶³ Okorochoa (1987: 272).

and the same person.⁶⁴ I tend to compare this to the eclecticism one has in architecture where elements of different styles are brought together in one new building.

A Roman church

The local church in Africa remains in essence a 'Roman' Church (see Figure 88) and the attitude of the official Church has certainly become more benevolent towards African traditions in recent years. It is now more flexible about incorporating traditional African elements in its ceremonies.

Figure 88 A Western-style wedding in a Roman Catholic Church in Ghana, 1966



When it comes to the core of the liturgy (the Eucharistic Prayers) and legislation with regard to marriage and sexuality, the Church's openness to adaptation and other theories is much less. Generally speaking, African bishops support official Church doctrine: they oppose same-sex marriage, object to the use of contraceptives and defend the celibacy of priests.⁶⁵ At grassroots level, however, the discussion is not about doctrine and sacraments but about the problems of daily life.

⁶⁴ One was my former house boy, who I sent to a good secondary school. He went on to university, became a French teacher and then the headmaster of a renowned secondary school. And after he retired, he was delighted to accept the chieftaincy of his native town.

⁶⁵ The Protestant Church in Africa is also known for its conservative attitude towards moral issues.

The dichotomy between the two levels of concerns – of perceptions and perspectives – can be explained through the concept of ‘discourse’. Throughout history, different groups have had different discourses: the nobility and the peasants, men and women, monks and laymen. Baumann developed this idea in *Contesting Culture*.⁶⁶ What each group was doing, he argued, was to use a range of different discourses that changed depending on who they were talking to and what they were talking about. He introduces the notion of ‘dominant discourses’, which is used by members of the political establishment and that everybody had to engage in if they were to gain political ends, and ‘demotic discourses’, which were internal discourses in different religious communities.

It is crucial for an organization or culture that is dominant to be aware that their dominance is not absolute. ‘There is no such thing as a universally normative culture, one complex of symbolic systems superior to all others. Nor is there a single set of religious rites to which all peoples must conform in order to close the distance between God and humankind.’⁶⁷

In addition, Baumann developed the idea of the ‘dual discursive competence’, which implies that every individual is able to switch between two or more different discourses at will, depending on the context. When applied to the African situation, it could be said that religion and liturgy are the ‘dominant discourses’ of the official church and that devotion, including ancestor veneration, the use of objects with power and the belief in spirits, is the ‘demotic discourse’ of the common people.⁶⁸ Missionaries have always used the dominant discourse on the explicit orders of their Church authorities but have also learned to appreciate indigenous religions. At the same time, however, they have, through their emphasis on the Roman doctrine, obscured the manifestations of local devotions. If the latter were tolerated at all, this only happened because they were considered minor players in the larger dominant discourse.

Notwithstanding unctuous texts in official documents, the Church has not been inclined to bow to the African reality of a respectable faith. Such Papal addresses tend to be formulated in general terms, leaving it up to the audience to draw its own conclusions and to put admonitions into practice. It is hard to disagree with them. Yet, critical African theologians speak out when discussing the theoretical proposals that are presented to the local churches in Africa. ‘The theology of inculturation, so often preached triumphantly in African churches, is a pompous irrelevance, truly and ideologically, a superstructure at the service of the bourgeoisie.’⁶⁹ The theology of inculturation is thus part of the dominant discourse.

When preparing the 1995 Synod with the Pope, African bishops issued a statement saying that they considered the theology of adaptation to be outdated. In its place, they adopted the theology of incarnation and demanded that Rome officially recognize their views. Referring to Vatican II documents that showed a more sensitive attitude to local cultures, they proposed an ‘incarnational approach, the aim of which is to produce a rite that is African not only in language and song, but also in thought, form and ceremony’.

⁶⁶ Baumann (1996). See also Stringer (2005: 150).

⁶⁷ Hillman (1993: 70).

⁶⁸ Stringer (2005: 151).

⁶⁹ Bujo (1992: 72).

In other words, they wanted to adapt the liturgy to local needs. A concrete proposal was to introduce a new Eucharistic Prayer – the central prayer in the Holy Mass during which the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ.

Rome's reaction was univocal: there were already four approved Eucharistic Prayers, all of which had been proposed by local churches in Europe. An additional one from Africa was superfluous and considered illegal. Rome added that it felt the time not yet ripe but that 'after a period of time' an African Eucharistic Prayer might be added. The African bishops were disappointed and wondered why Rome was encouraging local churches to stand up and voice their opinions while discouraging or disregarding initiatives by these same churches. The reaction of some African theologians was bitter: 'Does it really need 400 or 500 years, as the Pope suggests, in order to find authentic expression?'⁷⁰

The answer to questions concerning the accomplishment of the missionary assignment is ambivalent: numerically the Church has been successful, but as far as the Christian faith is concerned, there have to be some doubts. (see Figure 89)

Figure 89 Archbishop J.K. Amisshah between Father P. Giebels (a parish priest), and this author (right). Behind them are members of the Church Council, Sefwi-Bekwai, Ghana, 1967



⁷⁰ Kagame (2006).

The dominant discourse, of the bishops and cardinals, appears to support the Roman concept of Church, while the demotic discourse, of the local faithful, would seem to be more practically oriented and, in many ways, echoes the characteristics of indigenous religions and their concept of power, the duality of natural and supernatural entities, and the concept of bartering with the supernatural to acquire the desired result.

5.2 The anthropological perspective

5.2.1 *In search of meaning*

The title of this volume suggests that African objects with power were challenging for anthropologists in the three periods under discussion. During the 19th century, they relied on information provided by travellers to Africa, missionaries or merchants living there. Anthropological observations of African cultures were ‘compatible with gross prejudices and systematic distortions’.⁷¹ It appears that African objects with power were not of much concern to them at this time. Their search was focused on the origins and development of cultures and religions rather than on their meaning. According to Tylor, the origins of religion must be sought in the belief that souls inhabit all things and that this explains their behaviour. He called this belief ‘animism’. According to him, there is a ‘universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings as themselves and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious’.⁷²

Between 1900 and 1950 it was Emile Durkheim and his school who dominated the anthropological debate. In his 1912 classic *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, he searched for the ‘simplest’ forms of religious life and found it in Aboriginal Australia and called it ‘totemism’. The totem, according to him, symbolized the totemic group who were the first to worship the totem. The totemic rites maintained the coherence of the group, they revived a sense of solidarity and could be said to function.⁷³

The theory of functionalism was applied to the way in which political, social and economic systems in primitive societies worked. This information was useful to the colonial authorities in Africa in their attempts to pacify unruly tribes. And anthropologists were employed by the authorities to obtain relevant information for them. Government anthropologists, and in a number of places missionaries too, studied objects with power in their African context, describing how they functioned in the social, economic and religious life of the community. Examples of *ikenga*, *minkisi* and *asuman* were presented in previous chapters. The different interpretations of these objects by various anthropologists is an indication of why these and other objects with power were such a challenge for those who studied them.

In the middle of the 20th century, anthropology underwent another fundamental change in focus. This began in linguistics as a structuralist method of analysis of semantic domains in various languages but was extended to the study of culture. The overall

⁷¹ Liebersohn (2008: 19).

⁷² Tylor (1873: 61). See also Strenski (2008: 118).

⁷³ Durkheim (1995: 228-231). See also Strenski (2008: 123).

trend in anthropology in the US was towards the study of meaning as a distinctive feature of social order and social interaction.⁷⁴

Anthropologists who had so far mainly been interested in the way societies functioned, shifted their attention to ‘meaning’ in the 1960s. Their research veered away from analysis towards ‘interpretation’. Increasingly, culture was being studied as an open, active and dynamic entity and this change ran parallel to events in Africa itself as African nations started to gain independence. The continent did not want to look backwards but towards the future. Africans no longer wanted to be governed by colonial rules and foreign instructions (neo-colonialism) but wanted to determine their own norms and values and to identify what it meant to be African. Senghor’s *Négritude*, Nkrumah’s ‘African Personality’, Nyerere’s *Ujamaa* and Mobutu’s *Authenticité* were all searching for what was intrinsically African and what constituted the African identity.

What is at stake here is the power of imposing a vision of the social world through principles of division which, when they are imposed on a whole group, establish meaning and a consensus about meaning, and in particular about the identity and unity of the group, which creates the reality of the unity and the identity of the group.⁷⁵

These leaders were aware that they had the ability to create ‘meaning’, i.e. to determine the significance of things, actions and concepts that would become an effective instrument of (political) power.

Control of communication allows the managers of ideology to lay down the categories through which reality is to be perceived. Conversely, this entails the ability to deny the existence of alternative categories, to assign them to the realm of disorder and chaos, to render them socially and symbolically invisible.⁷⁶

Studying culture as an open, active and dynamic entity meant that symbols and symbolism within a given society were viewed in dialectic perspective, i.e. the subjectivity (also called the cultural view) of both the informer and the anthropologist were questioned.⁷⁷

Another shift away from the anthropology of the previous period is visible in the emphasis that was now being placed on the emotional and aesthetic aspects of symbolism rather than on its cognitive aspects, as was practised by French structuralism.⁷⁸ The concept of culture also changed. It began to be studied as a ‘construction’ and as a ‘text’.⁷⁹ Although there appears to be a common denominator in the different views, there was no consensus about terminology. The new anthropology was called interpretative,⁸⁰ semantic,⁸¹ semiotic,⁸² hermeneutic,⁸³ humanistic⁸⁴ or literary⁸⁵ anthropology by different authors.

⁷⁴ Darnell (2008: 35-51).

⁷⁵ Bourdieu. (1991: 221).

⁷⁶ Wolf. (1982: 388).

⁷⁷ Driessen & de Jonge (1994: 10). See also Willis (1975).

⁷⁸ Lewis (1977).

⁷⁹ Clifford & Marcus (1986).

⁸⁰ Geertz (1973; 1981).

⁸¹ Crick (1976).

⁸² Singer (1984).

⁸³ Crapanzano (1992).

The core of the new anthropological theory is ‘understanding’ rather than ‘explaining’, ‘interpreting’ and ‘symbolizing’. Interpretation is described as ‘thick description’ (Geertz), ‘translation’, ‘decoding’, ‘exegesis’, ‘creative discourse’ and ‘dialogue’. Similarly, anthropologists used different descriptions of notions such as ‘symbol’, ‘meaning’, ‘sign’, ‘icon’, ‘trope’, ‘metaphor’ and ‘metonym’.⁸⁶

Mary Douglas, Evans-Pritchard and Turner, to name but a few, took religious phenomena in African cultures at face value and studied them in an attempt to reveal what they could tell us about how other people constructed and conceived their worlds.⁸⁷ In his studies of the Nuer in southern Sudan, Evans-Pritchard had already shown how they constructed their world on such basic notions as *kwoth*. Mary Douglas attempted to make coherent and persuasive sense of the apparently irrational beliefs of religious folk in purity or in the power of ritual.⁸⁸ She considered dirt as a symbol, as defined by Geertz. ‘Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, and life to death. Wherever ideas of dirt are highly structured their analysis discloses a play upon such profound themes.’ Dirt, as Douglas described it, may be described as a ‘master symbol’, a ‘key symbol’, a ‘root metaphor’ or an ‘organizing metaphor’, with each of these notions considered a binding element of a culture.⁸⁹ These elements have been seen as an important contribution to understanding cultures from a holistic perspective: once the binding element(s) have been established, the complexities of the culture can be unravelled.

When a person or a group of persons are able to make and use symbols – in this sense of the word – it implies that they are able to attach a meaning to something where that meaning did not exist before. Turner showed that symbols mean something, but they also are something: they are real. The Ndembu of Congo speak of their symbols as *ku-solala*, a word that does not mean ‘representing’ but ‘revealing’ something or ‘making visible’ a truth or a power.⁹⁰

In the context of this book that deals with objects with power, I consider culture to be a configuration of symbols and meanings.⁹¹ A symbol is an object, a gesture, a word or tone, a colour or an image with which a meaning is conveyed. Unlike a sign, a symbol is rarely autonomous. It stands for something else, it is a ‘vehicle’ for meaning. Meaning is not a ‘thing’, it is a relation.⁹² In other words, we observe the world around us, we interpret it and we attach a ‘meaning’ to it. This is our meaning. Reality, observation, interpretation, as well as the conditions that determine the observation, such as gender, social class and the (sub)culture of the one who observes and interprets, are all indissolubly intertwined.

⁸⁴ Wilk (1991).

⁸⁵ Poyatos (1988).

⁸⁶ Clifford (1988) and Dolgin (1977).

⁸⁷ Strenski (2008: 125).

⁸⁸ Douglas (1966; 1973).

⁸⁹ Driessen & de Jonge (1994: 16).

⁹⁰ Turner (1967: 18).

⁹¹ Driessen & de Jonge (1994: 11).

⁹² The original Greek word *symbolon* (a contract and insignia) refers to the notion of identity and to a relationship between an individual and society.

Clifford Geertz works with a semiotic concept of culture. According to him, the task of an anthropologist is to interpret cultural data: informers present the anthropologist with their constructs and the anthropologist then makes his own construct on the basis of these data. For Geertz, ethnography is a ‘thick description’ of the anthropologist’s constructs. From this perspective, culture is not something inside the heads of people but a public phenomenon that ‘happens’ between people. Culture is, therefore, not a ‘thing in itself’, *sui generis*, but a context within which symbols can be comprehended. The anthropologist expounds the ‘native’s point of view’, guesses the meanings of the construct, values their importance and draws conclusions.⁹³ This relationship between the ‘native’ point of view and interpolations by the anthropologist has been described as the emic and the etic account.⁹⁴

When we try to apply these theories to indigenous African religions, it is clear that anthropologists and sociologists have come up with different definitions of religion.⁹⁵ Religion appears to be too complex a phenomenon to be covered by a single definition but each definition highlights a piece of the puzzle.⁹⁶ As this book deals with objects with power and the meanings that are attributed to them, I think that Geertz’s definition is the most suitable for my analysis of objects with power in indigenous African religions. His definition of religion is that it is:

(1) a system of symbols which act to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.⁹⁷

He sees religion a ‘system of symbols’ and culture itself as ‘a yet more extensive and complete system of symbols, a “web of significance”’.⁹⁸ Geertz, Douglas and Turner pioneered a symbolic or interpretative approach to religion or, in the case of Geertz, of culture in general. For Geertz, a symbol is ‘any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception is the symbol’s meaning’.⁹⁹

Van Beek and Blakely chose a definition of religion that combines elements of different scholarly theories: religion is human interaction with a culturally postulated non-falsifiable reality.¹⁰⁰ This definition shows the anthropologist’s approach to religion. The veracity of religious beliefs is not an anthropological concern; anthropologists discuss religious experiences and expressions within their empirical context only. This is methodological agnosticism. This definition combines the ‘insider’s view’ (the native’s point of view, the emic view) and the ‘outsider’s view’ (the etic view) that studies only the human side of the interaction. In their introduction, they refer to two methodological problems in the study of religions: the questions of translation and of comparison. They understand translation as the ‘expression of cultural meaning from one cultural system

⁹³ Driessen & de Jonge (1994: 14).

⁹⁴ See also Chapter 1.3.

⁹⁵ Among them are Frazer (1958, 58); James (1902/1958); Durkheim (1965: 62); Radin (1957: 3); Wallace (1966: 107) and Ortner (1978: 152).

⁹⁶ Eller (2007: 7).

⁹⁷ Geertz (1973: 90).

⁹⁸ Geertz (1973: 5).

⁹⁹ Geertz (1973: 91).

¹⁰⁰ Van Beek & Blakely (1994: 2).

into a different cultural system'. In other words, 'How can a religious system be "transcultured" into another culture?' They state that 'cultural expressions can be understood but never fully, and can be communicated transculturally, but not without loss of meaning and the creation of new meaning'.¹⁰¹

Problems of translation have not been the concern of anthropologists alone, but equally of religious leaders, theologians and missionaries who translated the Bible, liturgical texts and church hymns from a European language into African languages. European theological notions such as 'faith', 'guilt' and 'heaven and hell' are untranslatable in most or all African languages. At times it was political, social or psychological sensibilities that inhibited a literal translation. James, for example, narrates that a literal translation of the popular British hymn *Onward Christian Soldiers* 'could appear provocative in the Sudanese context'.¹⁰² Problems of translation also occurred through what Lienhardt called:

linguistic parallax: that is, a shift in the sense of words resulting from a different external perspective. (...) Missionaries have lent new meaning to Dinka religious language, not by altering the sense of individual words, but by creating new patterns of association between words.¹⁰³

Blakely, van Beek and Thomson devote the first part of *Religion and Translatability* to case studies taken from field work experiences.¹⁰⁴

5.2.2 *Contesting views*

Having discussed the views of anthropologists in the second half of the 20th century, I wish now to compare them briefly with those of missionaries in the same period to show how the missionary and anthropological discourses took different directions during the post-colonial period. They became contesting views.

In the context of Vatican II, the Catholic Church initiated a number of strategies, such as adaptation, acculturation, contextualization and indigenization (see Chapter 5.1). For anthropologists who work from the Blakely, van Beek and Thomsen definition, these approaches imply 'transculturation' or 'translation', including 'loss of meaning'. It is hard for the Catholic Church, from the perspective of its perseverance in doctrine, to accept that 'translation' or 'transculturation' of its doctrine involves 'loss of meaning and the creation of new meaning'. This is borne out in contributions by Kirby,¹⁰⁵ Schoffeleers¹⁰⁶ and Thomsen.¹⁰⁷

In older definitions of religion, which dealt with the relationship between man and God, a generally accepted distinction was made in Europe between the concepts of 'natural' and 'supernatural'. Missionaries and early anthropologists assumed that these or similar notions also existed in indigenous African religions. Missionaries explicitly

¹⁰¹ Van Beek & Blakely (1994: 3).

¹⁰² James (1988: 136).

¹⁰³ Lienhardt (1982: 81-95).

¹⁰⁴ Blakely, van Beek, Thomson (1994: 21-117)

¹⁰⁵ Kirby (1994: 56-71).

¹⁰⁶ Schoffeleers (1994: 72-88).

¹⁰⁷ Thomsen (1994: 89-99).

sought an opening in the 'native' cosmology to introduce their concepts of a supernatural world, the domain of an Almighty God who created the (natural) world. Many an African informant when asked about this distinction politely obliged. I argued in Chapter 4 that many beliefs in a Creator God in heaven (i.e. a supernatural world) were actually attributed by missionaries to these cosmologies but without any proof. The Yoruba Methodist Minister E. Bolaji Idowu who believes in a Supreme God, Oludumare, said of Him: 'a Personage, venerable and majestic, aged but not ageing, with a greyness which commands awe and reverence. He speaks; He commands; He acts; He rules; He judges; He does all that a Person of the highest authority will do.' It is clear that these attributes were borrowed directly from an image of God in the Christian tradition. Yet Idowu maintains that Yoruba indigenous belief was a 'primitive monotheism' that had been revealed by 'the living God Himself, Who has never left Himself without witness in any age or generation'. In other words, the concept of a Supreme God and a Supernatural world existed before the arrival of European missionaries.¹⁰⁸

Several anthropologists, however, found that the groups they studied did not distinguish between a 'natural' and a 'supernatural' world. Evans-Pritchard found the absence of this distinction among the Nuer, Lienhardt among the Dinka, van Beek among the Kapsiki and Vogel among the Baule. Reflecting on his fieldwork among the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard wrote: 'It is true that for the Nuer there is no abstract duality of natural and supernatural, but there is a duality between *kwoth* (spirit), which is immaterial rather than supernatural, and *cak* (creation), the material world known to the senses.'¹⁰⁹ He went on to explain that rain or an epidemic are by themselves tangible. They belong to the material world, but if the rains fail to come on time and the crops cannot grow or if it falls in torrents so that the soil is washed away, the rain is *kwoth* because it is a sign, a symbol of something 'spiritual'. Another of his examples refers to the vulture, a tangible bird, and as such nothing special but if it settles on the roof of a barn, it is considered a bad omen. The vulture becomes *kwoth*.

Another cause of confusion is the association (at times identification) of the notions of sky and heaven in Christian cosmology. The Hebrew in the Old Testament spoke of seven heavens, the highest of which was the abode of Yahweh. All of these were located on high, in the sky. This concept was adopted by Christianity. It is no wonder that missionaries tried to put this concept across to their converts in Africa and elsewhere. They saw similarities in the myths that they heard narrated in several African societies about the 'creation of the world'. For the Dinka, the Divinity (the sky) originally rested on the earth. People could move between the sky and the earth along a rope that linked the two. There was no death and no suffering. There was a grain of millet every day, enough for a day's meal. One day, a woman planted her own millet and, while weeding, her hoe hit the sky (Divinity) and she severed the rope and withdrew the firmament from the earth. This is still the situation today. Man was left to toil for his daily food, he suffers and eventually dies. Lienhardt learned from the Dinka that they considered Divinity's punishment too severe for such a relatively small offence. Yet they felt that Divinity's withdrawal represented the total situation as they knew it today and that the

¹⁰⁸ Idowu (1994: 36).

¹⁰⁹ Evans-Pritchard (1956: 123-143).

difference with the original situation was not altogether negative. 'Men and women now are active, self-assertive, inquiring, acquisitive.' The negative part is that 'man is subject to suffering and death, ineffective, ignorant and poor'. Lienhardt's comments on the narrative are that Divinity's withdrawal from man as the result of a comparatively insignificant offence (by human standards) presents the 'contrast between equitable human judgments and the action of the Powers which are held ultimately to control what happens in Dinka life'.¹¹⁰

A similar myth surrounding creation is told in a number of ethnic groups in West Africa. For the Ashanti in Ghana, the sky (the firmament) originally rested on the earth. The sky was edible and provided daily food for men and women. One day, a woman decided to pound millet in a mortar and her pestle hit the sky (the name of the sky is the same as the name that Christians use for God: *Nyame*). When this happened three times, *Nyame* withdrew from the earth and the sky could no longer be reached. Along with many other missionaries, I saw the resemblance with the Biblical story of Paradise, where the woman accepted the apple from the snake and encouraged Adam to eat from it. Eve has always been blamed for this original sin. When I mentioned this resemblance to an Ashanti anthropologist, Peter Sarpong, he replied: 'You misread the myth. Do not blame the woman. On the contrary, it was the woman who first decided to take the initiative for making her own food and caring for her beloved. The myth credits the innate power of women in our society.'¹¹¹

Van Beek has been conducting fieldwork among the Kapsiki in northern Cameroon for the past forty years and he too feels that 'the term "supernatural" is not very apt for an understanding of the invisible beings'.¹¹² His informants compared the relationship between this world and the 'other world' to the two sides of a piece of paper: one can see only one side but the other side is always there. Divination is the means of communication 'with the other side'. Sacrifice affirms the relationship between the two.¹¹³ Reference to the other world does not imply a veneration or worship of ancestors. 'Kapsiki religion is one for the living, not for the dead, geared to the exigencies of social, political and married life, not at the shadowy afterlife the individual is believed to be heading for.'¹¹⁴ And, according to van Beek, the notion of a cosmological system is foreign to the Kapsiki: 'No one ever presents a total view nor a coherent theology'. Differences of opinion on religious matters are common and present no problems. 'Religion is lived, not speculated upon. Whatever cosmology one may adopt, it is the relationship not the theology which counts.'¹¹⁵ The Kapsiki live in a religious complex of sacrifices, divination, initiation rites, myth and magic.

The notion of *shala* is central in Kapsiki religion. Although the word has been translated as 'god', it is in no way a real monotheistic notion. *Shala* is a personal god. But, van Beek writes,

¹¹⁰ Lienhardt (1961: 28-55).

¹¹¹ Sarpong, personal communication., 1970

¹¹² Van Beek (2012: 101).

¹¹³ Van Beek (1987: 65).

¹¹⁴ Van Beek (1987: 78).

¹¹⁵ Van Beek (1987: 67-68).

I am not alone; I am part of several large social units. My *shala* can easily shade into our *shala*, and any collective entity has its own *shala* as well. (...) The notion of *shala* has a kind of structural vagueness that in fact is essential for its understanding. As so often in African thought, these notions are first of all more practical than theological.¹¹⁶

The term *shala* can be used in many expressions, all of which relate to just *shala*. ‘So the core of Kapsiki religion is an almost purely relational concept, part of a human-based social theology.’¹¹⁷ He declines to use the word ‘spirit’ as a translation of *shala*, as it is the supernatural ‘other’, while for the Kapsiki, *shala* is the ‘supernatural self’. ‘Thus the volition and agency of a person and his *shala* coincide.’ The concept of *shala* is the key to understanding Kapsiki cosmology. ‘*A shala menete*, God did it, the usual utterance of acceptance in the face of adversity. Resignation but also joy and fear are appropriate versus *shala*.’¹¹⁸

Vogel, who conducted fieldwork among the Baule of Ivory Coast, claims that: ‘The Baule do not make a distinction between a visible and an invisible world’.¹¹⁹ They know that beneath the surface of this (visible) world are powers that affect all life. A great deal of Baule thought and effort are devoted to anticipating the wishes of these powers and enlisting their cooperation. They are called *amuin*; they are invisible but when a physical support, such as an object, a figure, a mask or shrine is made for them, they become accessible to men and women for cult purposes. The Baule have the term *blolo* that is often translated by the ‘other world’. *Blolo* resembles this world with its villages, elders and families. At the same time, the concept of *blolo* includes a sense of vagueness and distance; it is neither above or below this earth, nor is it where the dead are buried. But *blolo* is also the source of human life, from where each new-born baby comes. Each Baule man has a spirit wife (*blolo bla*), each Baule woman has a spirit husband (*blolo bian*) and both may interfere in an individual’s life.¹²⁰

Anthropological fieldwork has shown that the Christian distinction between the ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ is not tenable in indigenous African religions. Again, as in the assumed similarities between the Christian concept of God and that of an assumed Creator God (or Supreme Being) in indigenous African religions, we have to conclude that missionaries have too readily decided that key elements in both religions can be compared or even interchanged.

As missionaries instructed their converts in the ‘true religion’, trained their catechists to pass these instructions on to their catechumens and erected schools to teach (proselytize) future generations of Christians, the majority of today’s Christians have never been instructed in their indigenous religious beliefs, practices and rituals but have come to accept imported religious concepts as their own and as having been handed down from generation to generation. Many Christian teachers, ministers and even scholars with PhDs in theology are not aware of the impact that the arrival of Christianity had on African cultures and beliefs.

Elochukwu Eugene Uzukwu, an Ibo priest of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, admits that it was European missionaries who introduced the concept of the Creator

¹¹⁶ Van Beek (2012: 103).

¹¹⁷ Van Beek (2012: 125).

¹¹⁸ Van Beek (2012).

¹¹⁹ Vogel (1997, 52).

¹²⁰ Vogel (1997: 67). See also Ravenhill (1993; 1996).

God but adds that the Christian adoption of the African name of God is to be seen as ‘a great moment for Christian theology’. He attributes this feat to the flexibility of African gods: ‘This flexibility saved gods of the African traditional religions, *Chukwu*, *Onyame*, *Oludumare* and so on from the fate of the Graeco-Roman [gods] that were radically uprooted.’ He proudly announces that, thanks to missionary creativity, the names of the indigenous *abosom* and *orisa* will be preserved for eternity.¹²¹

This analysis is another example of appropriation. First, it was by missionaries who were quick to appropriate concepts in indigenous African religions (such as the concept of the powerful *Orisa* or *Abosom*) that resembled – however vaguely and incorrectly – their own notions. They did not hesitate to appropriate these concepts to suit their Christian teachings. Later on, Africans were so used to Christian teachings that they lost touch with their own religious traditions and appropriated Christian concepts (of a Creator God and the supernatural) to suit their own (indigenous) beliefs. When we look at this form of appropriation in the three periods under discussion in this book, it can be seen that when missionaries arrived in Africa, they had not expected to encounter indigenous African religions so openly. They did not hesitate to introduce their own Euro-Christian notions in Africa. This was done in the pre-colonial period without any questions being asked. During the colonial period, anthropologists did fieldwork in Africa for the first time and a number of them assumed that certain notions that they were familiar with back home would also exist in Africa. These notions were assumed to be universal. The few anthropologists, such as Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt whose research findings deviated from mainstream Christian notions, were unable to make a lasting impact on missionary thinking. In the post-colonial period, anthropologists were virtually unanimous in their assessment of indigenous African religions being fundamentally different from Christianity. Their research and publications appear not to have had any significant impact on missionary thinking, as I showed in the discussion above on the new strategies of the Catholic Church.

5.2.3 *Animism revisited*

Chapter 3.2.4 discussed Tylor’s definition of animism as being ‘the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings’. He equated religion with the ‘belief in spiritual beings’ and followed assumptions developed in the period of the Enlightenment, such as a sharp distinction between spirit and matter, one that was extended to views on objectivity and subjectivity and to reason and sentiment. It was the sign of a highly developed culture if it accepted spirit as being superior to matter in every respect. Animism was, therefore, applicable to societies and cultures that tended to make nature or things into subjects or social beings.¹²² Tylor assumed that animists looked at the world very much like children and in an unreal way: it was a question of cognitive underdevelopment. The argument was that primitive societies were unable to distinguish between subject and object,

¹²¹ Uzukwu (2012: 45).

¹²² Albers & Franke (2012: 7).

between society and nature. Latour's reply to this argument was: '*Dies sei in keiner Gesellschaft möglich*',¹²³

In recent years, scholars have begun to reappraise the much-despised animistic views of primitive societies. According to them, the Western world would do well to be aware of the importance of things.¹²⁴ In this world, animism and science are mutually incompatible. From an objectivistic viewpoint, it is difficult to explain why certain people tend to 'speak with things' (or sing, dance or relate to them). Bird-David, who did fieldwork in southern India, describes how naturalists felled trees and plants, arranged them in parts, took them with them to their laboratories, researched them and finally published the results. They published 'objective' data, while the natives in the same area spoke to the trees, observed them, related to them, noticed changes in their growth patterns and expected the trees to do the same with them. People and trees therefore became more and more involved with each other and took responsibility for each other. This, according to Bird-David, is the process of 'relatedness' (German: '*Verbundenheit*') rather than the creation of dichotomy.¹²⁵

One aspect, which has already been referred to, needs to be included in this discourse. It is the notion of 'duality'. Igbo philosophy, like many indigenous African philosophies, acknowledges the principle of duality. According to the Igbo, all things exist in pairs. A human being has two hands and two feet. Each person has two parents, a father and a mother. Every person 'makes' both male and female children. The cosmos consists of two worlds: the spiritual and the human. Man needs both worlds to be happy. So the world of ideas should be made up of dual concepts too, ideas that are each other's opposites, yet exist together. This leads the Igbo to believe that a modern Christian should also acknowledge ancient values.

The philosophical concept of dualism appears to be incongruent with the European mindset. The logical systems of Europeans prefer sharp distinctions with an 'either-or' approach. God can only be described as all-good, omnipotent, omniscient. The origin of evil cannot be laid in God because He is intrinsically good and cannot therefore be the cause of evil. Religious traditions have created a principle of evil called Satan. In Africa, this approach is non-existent. Indigenous African religions and philosophies are based on the concept that everything is of a dual nature: both good and evil. God is not only able to protect me, he can also do me harm. For an African, everything in man's environment has the capacity to be benevolent and malicious. A tree can provide shelter and firewood but it can also crash on a passer-by and kill him/her. (see Figure 90)

Rattray gives an example of Ashanti 'relatedness' with their environment. He describes how an Ashanti craftsman carefully approaches a tree whose wood he plans to use for a stool or a drum. He will propitiate it (or the spirit of the tree) by offering an egg, saying:

Osese tree, receive this egg and eat it, do not permit the knife to cut me. (...) I am coming to cut you down and carve you, receive this egg and eat it (...) do not let the iron [the axe] cut me; do not let me suffer in health.

¹²³ Latour (2009).

¹²⁴ Albers & Franke (2012: 9).

¹²⁵ Bird-David (1999: 85). See also Bird-David (2012: 43).

Figure 90 Craftsman propitiating a tree before felling it. Ashanti, Ghana



Much later, after he has felled the tree and used the wood to carve the stool or drum, he will call on the spirit of the tree to re-enter the material substance where it dwelt when the tree was still alive. This explains the subsequent rites of consecration of the completed stool or drum. Rattray explains how, for the Ashanti, the stool becomes a shrine for the disembodied spirit of the *osese* or the *nyame dua* tree. The drum becomes the potential home for the spirit of the *Tweneboa* tree and also of the elephant, whose ear forms its membrane. A new home is provided for the spirit, one that is acceptable to him. The spirit will learn that a new ‘home’ (the shrine) always awaits him. He will eat there and be tended.¹²⁶

The example shows the close relationship the Ashanti have with their natural environment, in this case, with certain trees. They try to place themselves in the position of the trees and view things from their perspectives. This is how they effectuate their relatedness. At times, the simple presentation of an egg and a prayer may not be enough to establish the desired relatedness. Then the instrument of trance is required. Shamanism is considered the means to cross ontological boundaries and to arrange relationships between human beings and non-human beings.¹²⁷ Although many believe that shamanism does not occur in Africa, trance is a common phenomenon in indigenous African

¹²⁶ Rattray (1927 [1959]: 5-6).

¹²⁷ Viveira de Castro (2012: 77). See also Viveira de Castro (2004: 463-484).

religions and a means of knowing the other, which is not possible in daily communication. It is the opposite of Western objectivistic epistemology. To Westerners, the process of objectification (German: *Verdinglichung*) or fetishism is their greatest worry or fear. ‘*Am Anfang beschuldigten wir die Wilden, Repräsentationen und Realität zu verwechseln, nun beschuldigen wir uns selbst.*’¹²⁸

Objects that are used in indigenous African religions and were identified with idolatry, superstition and a low level of civilization for so long are now being viewed from an altogether different perspective. A growing number of scholars are showing interest in the material aspects of religion. Objects (material culture) are indispensable for religious experience. Latour wrote: ‘We help to fabricate the beings in which we believe’.¹²⁹ Fabricating something, according to Latour, is not simply an instrumental act in which the maker is unaffected. It is a process of generation in which subjects and objects are mutually constituted. Humans are shaped by and shape the material world in such dynamics.

The production of meaning in indigenous African religions is not ‘disembodied and abstract, but deeply sensorial and material’.¹³⁰ Religion makes the invisible visible and the intangible tangible. It appears that anthropology and the study of religions are joining hands in the appreciation of indigenous African religions.

5.2.4 *Anthropological views of objects with power*

Ikenga

The chapter on the colonial period (1900-1950) referred to Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt’s analyses of the Nuer and the Dinka. Both these anthropologists searched for meaning in the constructs that their informers presented them and concluded that *Kwoth* (Nuer) and *nhialic* (Dinka) were the very notions crucial for an understanding of their respective cultures. These were the master symbols, as Geertz would call them, that linked kinship systems, politics and religion. I will now search for the master symbol in the literature on *ikenga*.

Chukwukere, a young Ibo anthropologist at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, wrote an article on *ikenga* but extended his research to fundamental concepts of Ibo religion.¹³¹ He put forward three hypotheses concerning the nature of *ikenga* in the context of Ibo culture and religion. The first was that ‘underlying Igbo social organization is an individualistic principle, which is, in fact, a pervasive trait in Igbo culture. This principle is clearly institutionalized in the concept of *chi* or “personal god” (sic!), which is a pronounced aspect of Igbo religion.’

The second hypothesis was that ‘the idea of *chi*, essentially a centrifugal force, has apparently receded in the wake of Christianity and allied Western cultural imports into a holistic centripetal force identifiable with the omni-God of Christianity’. And the third was that ‘despite this apparent fusion of *chi* with God, the underlying principle of indi-

¹²⁸ Viveira de Castro. (2012 : 92).

¹²⁹ Latour (2010: 39).

¹³⁰ Meyer (2012: 28).

¹³¹ Chukwukere (1971: 106-112).

vidualism in the former remains the dominant Igbo motive of action'. For Chukwukere, the cult of the right arm is an objectification of a man's personal achievements. His first achievement in life is (or to be more precise, used to be) headhunting. After that, there were the achievements of title-taking. An *ikenga* statue was made as an objectification of the owner's achievement. (see Figure 91)

The relationship between *chi* and *ikenga* is clear when we see that *chi* is 'objectified', i.e. that *chi* takes material forms in *chi* objects, which are placed in a man's personal shrine. The fact that the *chi* objects, representing the person's *chi* in his shrine, are discarded on his death, emphasizes the point that *chi* is something altogether personal. At the same time, some of the *chi* objects are taken back home to be placed in the son's shrines to represent his deceased father in his role as an ancestor. (The ritual is called 'to take the father into the house'.) This signifies that the link with the living is not altogether severed even after a person's return to the spirit world. There is an element of continuity in Ibo society, a vertical link.

The present analysis of the word and notion of *chuku* differs from the one that early missionaries and anthropologists accepted as emic. The concept of *chi* is indeed basic to an understanding of Ibo culture and religion as well as the relationship between the individual and the community. For me, the notion of *chi* is the master symbol for understanding Ibo culture. *Chi* constitutes the meaning of each individual, his relationships with other human beings, his relationships with his ancestors and his place in life.

The Ibo believe that everyone is created 'in duplicate' and that the representative in the spirit world of the body and its possessions is the duplicate or *chi* with its possessions. *Chi* is the essence of life.¹³² When an individual chooses to enter the world, he makes a pact with a particular *chi* and selects his length of life and future activities, in short, his destiny.¹³³ This is then marked on the individual's hand as his *akala aka* (marks of the hand). Two points in this account demand our attention: the emphasis on the individuality of a person, and the fact that the marks are made on the hand and not on any other part of the body. There is a direct link between these *akala aka* (and the man's destiny, his personal achievements) and his *ikenga*, (the strength of his right hand).

Chi, which was traditionally translated by 'duplicate' or 'over-soul', is distinct from the human person and yet is his life essence. *Chi* determines a person's destiny by making a pact with the individual before birth and it is subsequently blamed by the person if things go wrong in his life. Sacrifices are made to *chi* to make things go well again.

As a duplicate in the spirit world, *chi* is intimately involved with the individual's life. A man's *chi* marries his wife's *chi* in the spirit world.¹³⁴ The *chi* is thus an essential link, both horizontally and vertically. Horizontal links exist between the living connected with one particular *chi*, a man's age mates, his wife and his family. A vertical link is established between the ancestor and the individual through *chi* but also between him

¹³² Talbot (1926: 297).

¹³³ This resembles the Baule concepts of *blolo* (the 'spirit' world), as described by Vogel (1997) and Ravenhill (1993).

¹³⁴ These notions resemble some of the concepts that the Kapsiki of north Cameroon hold (van Beek 2012).

and the great *chi* that pervades the universe: *Chuku* (the great *Chi*). *Chi*, in effect, is the essential link between ancestors and the living, and it fixes a man's position against his historical background as well as in his family. *Chi* may be considered the master symbol in indigenous Ibo religion.

Figure 91 Ikenga depicting the achievements of its owner: a position of authority in the colonial government, symbolized by a British umbrella, his horse and his body guards



There are different aspects to the notion of *chi*. There is, on the one hand, the rather abstract notion that *chi* is an over-soul and duplicate. This is carried into the personal sphere when Ibo speak of ‘my *chi*’ and ‘your *chi*’. The *chi* is responsible for his wellbeing and when things go well for a man, he will credit his *chi* for it. When a man has bad luck, he will say: ‘My *chi* has done badly’ (*chi I me jum*).

On the other hand, *chi* is objectified in many different forms and becomes a tangible object, more or less independent of its owner, so that it can be addressed in prayers and sacrifices as something outside the person. *Chi* objects can take many forms. One is the figure of *ikenga*. Discarding *chi* objects – such as a man’s *ikenga* when he dies – symbolizes the severance of the personal link between the owner and the object. *Chi* objects representing the ancestors are taken into the household shrine. The link with the ancestors is thus established through the descendant’s personal shrine and the *chi* objects.

Although every human being is born with his *chi* and his destiny has been laid out for him, nobody knows which particular *chi* is the duplicate of that person. A diviner (*dibia*) has to be consulted and, through divination, he can find out about the person’s *chi* and then establish which prohibitions have to be observed and which sacrifices need to be made.

The *dibia* also assists in determining which ancestor formed the pact that resulted in the person’s identity. The person (or others on his behalf) then objectifies the *chi* in one of many forms. One is a stick of the *egbo* tree (*Newbouldia laevis*), which is cut, placed in a bowl and fed periodically, as happens among the Nri-Awka. This stick is called *okposi* (or *okpulu chi*) and symbolizes both the dead ancestor and the individual’s *chi*.¹³⁵ It is discarded after the owner’s death, showing that it has been part and parcel of the individual but it loses its meaning with the owner’s death.¹³⁶ Although a person’s life pattern is set out before birth, the individual has the freedom to act and pursue his own ideals of honour and prestige in society. This ambition and any subsequent results, such as a successful career, are represented in *ikenga*, which is the part of a man’s *chi* responsible for his achievements.

Many, especially older, *ikenga* hold a machete (or cutlass in Nigeria) in their right hand. The symbolism of the machete reminds one of the spear symbolism of the Nuer, as detailed by Evans-Pritchard,¹³⁷ who described their sacrificial rites, with the officiant walking up and down past the animal, delivering his invocation and brandishing his spear in his right hand, with the beast awaiting its death. The movements of the spear in his right hand emphasize his words: opening and closing his fingers on it, poising it in his hand, raising it as though to strike, making little jabs in the air and so on. These movements are an integral part of the expression of intention. The meaning of the symbolism is at once evident but there is more too. The spear is not only a weapon or tool, it is a projection of the self and stands for the self. The spear is an extension of the right arm and stands for the whole person:¹³⁸ it represents their strength, vitality and virtue.

¹³⁵ Basden (1930: 46).

¹³⁶ Smith (1929: 45).

¹³⁷ Evans-Pritchard (1953: 1-19); also in Needham (1973: 92-107).

¹³⁸ Needham (1973: 92).

This is the very concept that is at the heart of *ikenga* or the cult of the right arm. A man's arm is more than just another part of his body. It becomes a power in itself, a projection of his will to succeed in life, objectified in turn in the *ikenga* statuette that proudly displays the machete in its right hand and the effect of that power, with the enemy's severed head in the left. In the same way that the Nuer 'spear is not just a weapon but also something which stands for a very complex set of social relations',¹³⁹ *ikenga* can be understood only when we consider its relations with *chi*, the ancestors, age mates, paternal authority, *ekwensu*, the earth and other powers that together constitute the spiritual and social world of the Ibo.

The parallels between *chi* and *ikenga* are clear. However, their relationship is more complex. Whereas *chi* is generally considered a man's life essence, the particular power in man that makes him a warrior and a leader and allows him to achieve great things in his own life for the wellbeing of himself, his family and probably the community at large is expressed in the concept of *ikenga*.

This interpretation of the ethnographic data offers a different view of Igbo culture from that presented in the early decades of the 20th century. The central concept of Igbo culture is power. It is expressed in objects such as *ikenga*, in songs, rituals, prayers, gestures and institutions. All of these derive their meaning from *chi* and ultimately from *Chukwu*, which is the Great *Chi* and should not be mistaken for the Creator God (as missionaries did).

I refer here also to the concept of *shala*, as described by van Beek¹⁴⁰ and discussed earlier in this chapter. The notion of *shala* is so central to the indigenous Kapsiki religion that it may be described as the master symbol. Understanding *shala* is the key to understanding Kapsiki culture.

Minkisi

Early anthropologists (and missionaries) attributed meaning to *minkisi* according to the way the many objects with power were classified and their functions in society. They were used, for example, to cure disease or to cause disease, solve disputes in the community and broker deals between factions.¹⁴¹ An *nkisi* was 'created' by an *nganga*, not perhaps by actually carving the figure but by assembling the parts required for its functioning. These were called the *bilongo*. After its 'creation', it was fed and anointed and sacrifices were made in its honour. A *nkisi* was activated during a ritual by insulting it, pouring alcoholic beverages over it and exploding gunpowder near it so as to make it angry. The common ritual in which *nkisi* features was (and still is) a social gathering when the participants sing and dance in a special enclosure. Once activated, the *nkisi* is believed to exert mysterious powers.¹⁴²

In the past, anthropologists attributed functional meanings to *Minkisi* and other objects with power. According to symbolic anthropology, the key to understanding the essence of *minkisi* lies in the notion of an object with power. As indicated in Chapter 1,

¹³⁹ Needham (1973: 99).

¹⁴⁰ Van Beek (2012).

¹⁴¹ Their functions are discussed in Chapter 2.2.3.

¹⁴² The efficacy of the *nkisi* will be discussed in Chapter 5.2.5.

a distinction is made in this volume between the material object and the power attributed to it. The objects have been clearly described, including the ingredients (*bilongo*) that are considered to possess the healing power for specific diseases (analogous to the shape or form of the ingredients) and problems. What then is this power? Axelson reported how the Kongo used to object to the missionaries' demands that they abandon their *minkisi* and their wives (except for the first one) as this would rock the foundations of their society. This ultimately concerned the harmony or the balance within the community, the basis of which was *ngolo* or vitality.¹⁴³ The BaKongo were aware that their *ngolo* was crucial to the continuation of their society. *Ngolo* was responsible for the fertility of women and crops, peace and harmony in the relations between individuals and for their lineages.

They created *minkisi* as instruments to uphold the values of the community and guard their community's *ngolo*. They attributed power to the *minkisi* and, by doing so, requested their *minkisi* to cure the sick, solve their problems and mediate in conflicts. The catechist Nsemi Isaka wrote: '*Nkisi* has life; if it had not, how could it heal? But the life of a *Nkisi* is different from the life in people. It is such that one can damage its flesh, burn it, break it, or throw it away; but it will not bleed or cry out.'¹⁴⁴

Nsemi spoke of a *nkisi* that had 'life': 'If it had not, how could it heal?' But its life differs from human life because it is, in BaKongo belief, given to the *nkisi* by powers in the invisible world (see MacGaffey's scheme). This belief fails to admit that first of all, it is the community itself that attributes this power to it. In BaKongo philosophy, where nothing is only good or only evil, the principle of vitality also harbours the principle of death or, more broadly, the principle of chaos, human suffering (disease, misfortune) and conflict. These same characteristics are also attributed to *minkisi* figures. They can cure disease but can also inflict disease. The fundamental question for the individual, as well as the community, is how they can achieve peace between these conflicting principles.

It is the principle of vitality (*ngolo*) that appears to be the master symbol – as symbolic anthropology understands it – of Kongo religious practices, especially the *minkisi*. The objects used in religious practices are material objects that come to life only after having been consecrated, and then only when activated prior to the ritual. The *nganga*, the rituals, the words, songs, gestures, onlookers and participants all focus on the achievement of peace, which includes the absence of disease, ruined crops, disaster and conflicts. The power of the *nkisi* can be advantageous to man or can ruin him. The concerted action of those partaking in the ritual is the main instrument for peace. And the common wish for peace – and all that is associated with it – attributes power (meaning) to the *nkisi*.

Minkisi have been described as:

metaphorically constructed extra-human agencies through who direct confrontation between human beings is mediated and rendered manageable; the dead, revitalised through the human properties at-

¹⁴³ Axelson (1970: 80).

¹⁴⁴ MacGaffey (1977: 173).

tributed to the objective foci of ritual, replace the living in taking responsibility for affliction, accusation and punishment.¹⁴⁵

Figure 92 *Nkisi* whose fist points to the earth (the ‘below’) and the upright thumb to the sky (the ‘above’)



Asuman

Anthropologists of the colonial period described *asuman* as a religious phenomenon, seeing them in relation to *Nyankopon* and *abosom*. They gave *asuman* the lowest rank in the pantheon. *Asuman* were also described in their social role in society and as an asset in man's personal search for good health, fortune and security. They offer protection to the individual protecting the person himself and his personal property and they

¹⁴⁵ MacGaffey (1988: 203).

can help a person pass an examination or a woman become pregnant. In short, they are a power that fulfils the needs of a person. *Asuman* clearly functioned in society as well as in an individual's life.

However, to find the 'meaning' of *asuman*, it is necessary to apply a different approach. I will start from the Ashanti concept of *nipa* (person) and, more particularly, from the concept of *kra* (sometimes translated as soul).¹⁴⁶ Rattray and others have shown that any *nipa* possesses a number of spiritual entities that they have translated as 'souls',¹⁴⁷ (see Figure 93) These souls together constitute the person: they are the *mogya* (mother's blood), *sunsum* (spirit), *kra* (soul) and *homhom* (breath).¹⁴⁸

Figure 93 A man proudly holding his new-born child on a stool of authority, wearing a festive *Adinkra* cloth for the occasion, Ashanti, Ghana



¹⁴⁶ Although I refer to Ashanti, the same concepts exist among all the Akan-speaking peoples of Ghana, such as the Fanti, Denkyera, Wassaw, Gomoa, Agona and Brong.

¹⁴⁷ See Chapter 3.2.3.

¹⁴⁸ De Witte (2001: 24); Rattray (1927); Sarpong (1974); Amponsah (1996) and Bartle (1983).

A person acquires his *mogya* (blood) matrilineally and it is through one's blood that one is related to all living and dead members of one's (matrilineal) family or *abusua*. The *sunsum* (spirit) or *ntoro* comes from the father at the moment of conception through his semen. The *sunsum* or *ntoro* is responsible for *suban*, i.e. one's character, genius or temperament. In other words, it gives a child his/her personality. The *kra* (soul) is received from *Nyankopon* at birth and is said to be a farewell gift from *Nyankopon* before the child starts his/her life on earth. *Kra* is a small particle of *Nyankopon* himself, making the person a human being and giving him/her a destiny (*nkrabea*).¹⁴⁹ *Kra* is derived from the spirit of the day on which the person was born. *Kra* therefore enters the child at birth and sustains the person's conscience and his life. Finally, there is the concept of *homhom* (breath), which is also described as the breathing image of *Nyankopon* and brings the body of an unborn baby to life. According to Kofi Antubam, the *homhom* becomes the *kra* at birth, settling down in the child as its life-long spiritual guide and giver of life.¹⁵⁰

When a person dies, these elements have different destinies. The body (including the *mogya*) is buried and left in the ground to decay. The person's *kra* returns to *Nyankopon*, from whom it originated; the *sunsum* (according to some, the *kra*) of the deceased continues to live in the *nsamando* (the place where the ancestors reside)¹⁵¹ as it did when the person was alive; and the *homhom* (breath) returns to *Nyankopon* to become part of his life-giving breath. Although missionaries translated these Ashanti and Fanti concepts as 'soul' or 'souls', there are some fundamental differences between them. According to the Christian tradition and going back to pre-Christian times, a human being has a body and a soul. In this tradition, the notion of soul implies that it was a fixed, permanent, static entity, according to many breathed by God into a person some time during pregnancy. This soul would return to God after the person's death and exist eternally. From the description given above, it is clear that this concept is alien to the Ashanti and other Akan-speaking peoples of Ghana. For them, the concept of *kra* (any translation will blur the Twi meaning) is a flexible entity. A person may acquire 'more' *kra* or may lose some of his *kra*. In other words, a *kra* can increase in power or diminish in power. This is borne out at death: it is the old man or old woman with many children and grandchildren and who was successful in life and respected for his/her wisdom who has much *kra* and becomes an ancestor. On the other hand, in the past, when a baby died within eight days of birth it was not even buried: its *kra* had not reached the status of a *nipa* (a human being). Criminals and those who suffered incurable diseases (such as leprosy) were also not buried (their bodies were thrown into the 'bad bush'). It was believed that their *kra* had lost all its human qualities so they could not become ancestors, and access to *nsamando* (the abode of the deceased) was thus prevented.

Every human being (*nipa*) should increase his *kra* to develop all his capacities fully. These capacities include those that he inherited from his mother and her family through *mogya*, and from his father through *sunsum* or *ntoro*. These should be developed in the

¹⁴⁹ De Witte (2001: 24).

¹⁵⁰ Antubam (1963: 39).

¹⁵¹ According to Warren (1973), it is one's *mogya* that becomes a *saman* and enters the *asamando*, while the *ntoro* remains behind to care for the man's children who have the same *ntoro*.

context of the *nipa*'s matrilineal family and his father's spiritual mandate. Their development will not only benefit the person him/herself but also those from whom s/he inherited them. There is a strong sense of reciprocity between the agents.

Increasing one's *kra* is a daily responsibility that requires diligence, dedication, hard work and diplomacy. Even then, it demands the assistance of the *nsamanfo* (the ancestors), the *abosom* and the *asuman*. But the *nsamanfo* and the *abosom* are not static entities that are always ready to come to a person's help. This is part of their flexible nature and calling for assistance from the *nsamanfo* and *abosom* requires constant bargaining. Spiritual assistance involves prayers and sacrifices. From the perspective of the development of a *nipa*'s capacities, there is continuous concern about one's *kra* losing its power as this will mean that a person will need protection from *asuman*.

In symbolic anthropology, the concept of *kra* is considered the master symbol for the understanding of the indigenous religion of the Ashanti. *Kra* is at the centre of a system that consists of variables, such as the *abosom* that can cure a disease or inflict it, and *asuman*, which are able to protect and harm a person. *Kra* is also the master symbol among the elements that constitute the human being (*nipa*), such as *mogya*, *sunsum*, *ntoro* and *homhom*.

It has already been argued that *asuman* have no hierarchical relationships with *Nyame* or the *abosom* (spirits). They are almost always personal objects with power and cure disease and solve personal problems.

We may learn that amulets and bodily markings function, to many Africans, in much the same way that the carrying of religious medals, rosary beads (...) function for many Europeans. These are devices for warding off evil and promoting good luck, they are psycho-social and culturally approved ways of generating a measure of emotional security in a world full of threats.¹⁵²

The power that cures is said by Rattray to derive from herbs, blessings by *akomfo* or ritual specialists. From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, however, I wish to argue that it is *kra* (the master symbol) that attributes power to the *asuman*.

5.2.5 Efficacy

In the post-colonial period from 1950 to 2000, the anthropological discourse resulted in at least two scholarly achievements that, as far as Africa was concerned, contributed to a better understanding of its indigenous religions and cultures. One was the attention given to the notions of 'interpretation' and 'meaning'. This approach enabled researchers to study an indigenous African culture as a 'configuration of symbols and meaning'.¹⁵³ Culture is considered 'a context with which symbols can be comprehended'.¹⁵⁴ Central in this approach is the notion of the master symbol, as developed by Mary Douglas.¹⁵⁵ Symbolic anthropology did not search for the function of a particular fact, object, ritual or custom in its community or society as earlier researchers had done.

¹⁵² Hillman (1993: 72).

¹⁵³ Driessen & de Jonge (1994: 11). See also Chapter 5.2.2.

¹⁵⁴ Geertz (1973).

¹⁵⁵ Mary Douglas (1966: 5).

I have shown how the master symbol of *chi* empowered *ikenga*, how *ngolo* empowered *minkisi* and how *kra* empowered *asuman*. A second scholarly achievement from this period says more about the way in which objects with power were efficacious. It is called the theory of agency and was developed by Alfred Gell.¹⁵⁶

In this theory, previous explanations of mysterious causes of events (the cure for diseases, the solution to problems, success in business) in terms of witchcraft or magic became irrelevant.¹⁵⁷ The efficacy of objects with power depends on their 'power'. However 'power', just like 'meaning', is attributed to the object by a group (the community) or by a person (an *nganga*). Here we speak of consensual attribution:¹⁵⁸ the greater the consensus, the stronger the power. If the consensus crumbles or vanishes, the object loses its power and may be disbanded.

Gell calls this power a social agent: it is something (or somebody) that causes events to happen. 'Animals and material objects can have minds and intentions attributed to them, but these are always, in some residual sense, human minds.'¹⁵⁹

According to Gell, people recognize an agent if they recognize what he calls a prototype. The statue of an *ikenga* is recognizable to everyone in the Ibo community as an *ikenga*. After its consecration, the statue is acknowledged as an object with power. *Ikenga* is a social agent that causes events to happen. The *ikenga*'s owner is the patient and the beneficiary of the events caused by the agent. In other words, the statue of *ikenga* is recognized and acknowledged as an agency that exerts influence and power on its devotee (the patient, the owner) and is instrumental in establishing the owner's reputation among age mates, in the village and in the title society of which s/he is a member.

The position of *minkisi* differs from that of *ikenga*. Where *ikenga* was a personal cult, and the patient was an individual, most *minkisi* are social agents in a public setting with a group, a family, a community or, at times, several groups. In the case of the Bakongo, it is the community that is the agent. It attributes meaning to the *nkisi* so that it becomes effective or, in Gell's words, causes events to happen. The *nkisi* will be effective as long as the devotees recognize the prototype. It is interesting to note here that *minkisi* were discarded or destroyed in the past, not only by missionaries and/or the colonial administration but also by devotees themselves. It can be concluded that, at a certain point, these devotees decided that they no longer recognized the Prototype because the material with which the *nkisi* had been made had deteriorated so much that it became unrecognizable or because the *nkisi* was no longer effective.

This is probably why sculptors or artists, when carving new figures, have to work within socially and culturally established boundaries so that in each new figure the prototype is recognized. Yet MacGaffey reports how the artists who produced *minkisi* stretched the norm within which the Prototypes of these objects could be recognized. Some *minkisi* incorporated traded goods, such as tobacco tins, imported hardware, pieces of glass and china. In towns, where owning a traditional *nkisi* may be frowned upon,

¹⁵⁶ Gell (1997; 1998).

¹⁵⁷ Gell (1998: 17).

¹⁵⁸ See Chapter. 1.3.

¹⁵⁹ Gell (1998: 17).

it is reported that specially produced ‘ballpens’ (which help a student to pass an exam) are recognized as *minkisi*.¹⁶⁰

Chapter 5.1.4 considered the perceived ‘relapse’ of converts or, as others call it, the search for authenticity, the ‘dual identity’ of well-educated Africans or the perceived risk of syncretism. Is the birth of new Proto-types being witnessed here and are Christians in Africa changing their traditional prototypes into new ones? These new prototypes may not (yet) be clearly staked out but if the spectacular growth in Christianity is an indicator, they seem to be in the making and are already becoming social agents that are ‘causing things to happen’.¹⁶¹

5.3 The curatorial perspective

5.3.1 *Ethnographic museums in the post-colonial period*

The origins of museums of ethnography coincided with the start of colonialism. Colonial museums were an immediate product of colonialism and missionary museums were also closely connected with the activities of missionary congregations.

Between 1950 and 2000, relations became more distant as African countries gained independence. As the Catholic Church was now being run by Africans, European missionaries stopped playing such a central role. The result of these political, social and religious developments was that museums of ethnography and especially the colonial and missionary museums found they had an identity crisis. It was dawning on a growing number of curators that museums of ethnography were rapidly becoming redundant and relics of the past. ‘We too think that the need for traditional Museums of Ethnography has disappeared.’¹⁶² The signs of this identity crisis were becoming increasingly evident.

First of all, many of the curators and their staff concluded that they could no longer use the name ‘colonial’ or a name that reminded the public of colonial connotations. The Colonial Museum in Amsterdam was renamed the Tropenmuseum (literally Museum of the Tropics), the Museum of Geography and Ethnography in Rotterdam was renamed the Wereld Museum (World Museum), in London the Ethnography Department of the British Museum changed its name to the Museum of Mankind, as did the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, Ottawa’s Museum of Civilizations and Bremen’s Uebersee Museum in Germany. The newest museum of ethnography in Paris is now named after its location: Musée du Quai Branly. Some of these museums did not, however, change their approach, presentations or their name for various reasons. Well-known examples include the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, which deliberately kept its original – evolutionary – arrangements of collections and the Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren near Brussels.¹⁶³

There was growing opposition among curators to some of the terminology that was popular in museums of ethnography, for example the use of the word ‘primitive’ in ex-

¹⁶⁰ MacGaffey (2013: 31).

¹⁶¹ When a new Pope was elected in 2013, a Ghanaian cardinal was considered a serious candidate.

¹⁶² Curator Shatanawi in Muskens (2010: 117).

¹⁶³ The museum started updating its displays in 2013.

pressions like ‘primitive peoples’ and ‘primitive art’.¹⁶⁴ Africans found the term discriminatory and condescending but dealers in ethnographic art, including auction houses, magazines and periodicals, were less sensitive to the criticism and continued using the term.¹⁶⁵ The Louvre and the Musée du Quai Branly decided to omit the title ‘primitive art’ and instead began to talk about *Les Arts Premiers*.¹⁶⁶ (see Figure 94)

Figure 94 a, b, c *Tribal Art* sticks to its outdated title, while the Louvre changed *Arts Primitives* to *Arts Premiers*



Another problematic term was the word tribal. People used to talk about ‘tribal societies’ and ‘tribal art’, with the argument being that African societies, unlike those in Europe, were organized on the basis of tribal groups and tribal affiliations. By using the term ‘tribal art’, the aim was to make it clear that each ‘tribal group’ produced art and artefacts in its own peculiar style of carving or production. Anthropologists and Africa curators argued that the term suggested a reality that did not always exist. Moreover, the word ‘tribe’ was introduced by colonial governments to indicate administrative units and it thus carried a derogatory connotation among critical Africans.

Yet others spoke of ‘traditional societies’ and ‘traditional art’. The term suggested that there was a pre-modern or pre-industrial society and that its art could also be called traditional. Anthropologists and Africa curators argued that this term was inadequate as it implied that a traditional society was one that was not subject to change. This is not supported by historical research.

Ethical questions entered the debate too. One concerned the display of sensitive material and questioned whether a museum was allowed to exhibit objects that could not

¹⁶⁴ There were only a few regions in the world where ‘primitive art’ was produced: Sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania (especially New Guinea) and the Arctic regions where the Inuit were called Eskimo by Europeans and Americans.

¹⁶⁵ Hiller (1992) and Rubin (1984).

¹⁶⁶ Martin (2000).

be shown to the non-initiated in their original context. They asked whether it was ethical for a museum of ethnography to exhibit human remains or objects with power from indigenous religions that, in their original context, were kept secluded. Here too, curators disagreed among themselves, although Africa curators were not very vocal in the debate as most of the disputed cases came from other continents.

A number of museums of ethnography owned objects that were known to have been looted or acquired during periods of war. These museums claimed that, at the time of acquisition, the action was not illegal, but this view changed during the post-colonial period. When African countries became independent nations in the 1960s, they discovered that much of their own cultural heritage was on display in former colonial museums in the West. A well-documented case is the looting of Benin (Nigeria) by a British punitive expedition in 1897 when the palace of the *Oba* (King) of Benin was plundered and the city was ransacked. (see Figure 95)

Figure 95 British soldiers taking part in a military expedition against Benin display their loot, Benin, Nigeria, 1897



The loot consisted of thousands of exquisite bronze and ivory objects that had previously decorated royal palaces and shrines. They were shipped to London and auctioned off mainly to the leading museums of ethnography at the time in London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin and Leiden that were interested in purchasing pieces from Benin.

A concerted effort by newly independent countries at the United Nations led to the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the return and restitution of collections acquired through illicit traffic. The debate that ensued between the countries of origin that demanded their return and the museums that housed the collections (supported by their governments) has still not subdued.¹⁶⁷ Many Africa curators opposed the return of collections that they considered to be their rightful property. To date, very few objects of African cultural heritage have been returned to their countries of origin and there is no legislation that declares these acquisitions illegal. These museums and their governments cannot therefore be ordered to return the objects. In my view, the attitude of the museums mirrors the sense of superiority shown in the 19th century, which was bordering on arrogance. If Africa curators in the West and African museum curators respect each other as colleagues and the keepers of their national cultural heritage, solutions can be found to the issues of return and repatriation through consultation.

Changes of name and policy barely concealed the problematic situation in which museums of ethnography found themselves due to developments in their former colonies. The plight of these museums of ethnography will be elaborated on in the next section.¹⁶⁸

The period from 1950 to 2000 not only marked the end of colonialism and its impact on missionaries, anthropologists and museums of ethnography but was also a time of great political, economic and social change in the Western world. The international museum world was also affected and the shift of emphasis in the relationship between museums and society lasted for many years, starting in the 1940s and 1950s. It resulted in critical analysis of the museum as an institution, collector, maker of exhibitions and educator. It also affected its relationship with society, its visitors, the scholarly discourse, its ways of exhibiting objects and the technology of conservation. In 1946, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) was founded in Paris and a number of (inter)national committees, including the International Committee of Museums of Ethnography (ICME), were set up too. The discussion about museums was conducted at university level and a new scholarly discipline gradually emerged: museology, which is sometimes called museum studies. A Department of Museum Studies was founded at Leicester University and the University of Amsterdam founded a Chair for the Museology of Museums of Ethnography and the Anthropological Study of Material Culture in 1969.¹⁶⁹ In Leiden, the Reinwardt Academy was founded in 1976 as a training institute for museum professionals on a museological basis, although it was later transferred to Amsterdam.

The basic point of critique of the traditional museum was that it was too self-centred and inward-looking. There was growing concern among critical museum staff, especial-

¹⁶⁷ Corbey (2000); Renfrew (2000); Heilmeyer & Eule (2004); ICOM (1995; 1997); Leyten (1995; 2004); van Beurden (2001); van Beurden (2012) and Bedaux (1998).

¹⁶⁸ Even adaptations in their names and activities were not able to keep all the museums of ethnography running. There were eleven museums of ethnography in the Netherlands in 1980 but only five of these were still open in 2012. Of the six that were forced to close (mostly due to a lack of funding), two were university museums (in Groningen and Nijmegen), two were city museums (Breda and Delft) and two were missionary museums (in Tilburg and Cadier en Keer).

¹⁶⁹ Dr Hetty Nooy-Palm was the first professor to be awarded the chair. I succeeded her as a lecturer in 1984 and from 1997 until 2002 was a lecturer in museology at the Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam.

ly members of educational departments, about the museums' lack of involvement with their visitors (their social, cultural and economic background) and with society at large. In general, one could say that curators were not part of the vanguard in this respect. Their main concerns were their collections, their scholarly activities (publications, lecturing) and their exhibitions.

1950-2000 saw a professionalization of museums and a certain departmentalization of different disciplines within the museum: the management, the curatorial staff, the education department, the departments of collection management, conservation and restoration, and the support staff.¹⁷⁰ Each of these departments would attract professionals and, in some cases, external experts were also sought. It gradually became common practice to hire in external professional designers for permanent and temporary exhibitions. In this context, museum curators were expected not only to be conversant in their specific disciplines but also to be knowledgeable about the theoretical (museological) frameworks of the museum as an institution, its history, its role in society, its responsibility for cultural heritage, its relationship with visitors and caring for its collections.¹⁷¹

Critical reflections on the role of museums in society prompted new types of museums: eco-museums, neighbourhood museums and community museums, each with their own target groups and goals. They all had one characteristic in common: they wanted to direct their attention to the community in which they were based; their main emphasis was no longer on collections but on people and they wanted to generate a feeling of identity among the members of their community. The museums of ethnography were not oblivious to these developments and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam was at the forefront of the new museological concept.

5.3.2 *Tropenmuseum: A new concept*

Africa curators of museums of ethnography were increasingly aware of their colonial past and tried to change not only their name and outlook but also their contents. The World Museum in Rotterdam joined forces with action groups in the city that were actively promoting a greater awareness among its citizens concerning issues related to poverty, hunger and development in developing countries. The Tropenmuseum, financed by the Netherlands Ministry of Development Cooperation, developed a new policy with three main points of interest: the Tropenmuseum would give first place to man (in developing countries); to problems of development (also in these countries) and to the manifold relations between 'them' and 'us'. The curators deliberately put their collections in second place. The new approach drew both enthusiastic and critical comments from visitors, but scored well in the national and international media.¹⁷²

Part of this process was a switch in the museum's orientation. The approach of the traditional museum of ethnography had been object-oriented, with collections being seen as the *raison d'être* of any museum. In this period, increasing numbers of muse-

¹⁷⁰ Van Mensch (1989).

¹⁷¹ Van Mensch (1992).

¹⁷² Faber (2011); Scholze (2002) and Muskens (2010).

ums switched to a community-oriented approach.¹⁷³ The Tropenmuseum became a leader in this respect. For its Africa Department and also for the Afrika Centrum in Cadier en Keer, this meant that the community or society-related themes were the subject matter for the permanent exhibition (rather than objects), such as agriculture, education, economics, development, healthcare and indigenous religions. Each theme was related to the daily lives of Africans.¹⁷⁴ African material culture was not a theme in itself but was subordinated to the other themes.

Another approach was based on the concept of experience. This meant that the emphasis of museum activities (exhibitions, guided tours) was less on the acquisition of knowledge, as had been common practice, but more on the sensory experience. Museum activities were organized such that visitors would become emotionally involved.¹⁷⁵ An important part of the debate concerned the role that a museum, and particularly a museum of ethnography, would or was supposed to play in its own society. Drafting a new museum concept required knowledge about the visitors and their expectations regarding the museum.

A new Africa gallery

When I was appointed as the Africa curator at the Amsterdam Tropenmuseum in 1975, I was commissioned to set up a new Africa gallery as part of a major refurbishment of the entire museum. There was to be a fundamental change in the museum's role and the focus would now be on issues of development cooperation. I became involved in debates about the identity of the museum and its relationship with society. The Education Department at the Tropenmuseum had, over the years, acquired a great deal of information about its visitors: about their reasons for visiting, their profiles, their behaviour at the museum, their preferences in the different galleries and other information that was helpful in designing an exhibition policy. Questions that visitors raised while on guided tours through the (previous) Africa department included: 'Does an African mother feel grief when her child dies?', 'Do Africans wear masks every day?', 'Why do African farmers not work harder so that they earn more money and avoid famine?' and 'Do African children also celebrate their birthdays?'. It was new to me that such questions, which mirrored 19th-century stereotypes, were still being so commonly asked and it brought it home to me that many of the visitors were less interested in the meanings of the objects and in anthropological theory. If a new Africa gallery was to do justice to Africa, these stereotypes clearly had to be the subject matter of the presentation of Africa through collections, images, sounds and other museum techniques. The new Africa

¹⁷³ Sola wrote: 'We do not have museums because of the objects they contain, but because of the concepts or ideas that these objects help to convey'. (Sola 1986: 17).

¹⁷⁴ This perspective made curators collect objects showing daily life, such as cola bottles and second-hand clothes.

¹⁷⁵ This raised questions about the possibility of conveying the meaning, the sense and the sensation of, for instance, the *Gelede* festival of the Yoruba in Nigeria that is held in honour of womanhood or motherhood and the power of women. (see Figure 51) These concepts are 'experienced' by the Yoruba who participate in the festival but are not visible in the masks, which are danced. The masks display scenes of daily life, at times even provocative scenes, which to Europeans seem to be a far cry from honourable concepts.

gallery would not just present factual information but would invite visitors to critically examine their own, often stereotypical, notions of Africa and Africans.

Careful consideration of possible answers to these questions led to a refurbishing of the Africa gallery: the new gallery would have nine units, each with a specific theme, such as agriculture, history, daily life, religion or healthcare. Each theme was to present an impression of Africa that was observable and verifiable but, at the same time, countered the stereotypes of many visitors. The 'daily life' unit showed part of a Nigerian Yoruba compound, with rooms around an inner yard and a roof of corrugated-iron sheets. A motor bike stood in the inner yard (see Figure 96d) and one of the rooms was transformed into a bar with a refrigerator, chairs, tables and (Star) beer bottles (see Figure 96a). Another was made into a Yoruba shrine and showed a *babalawo* (priest diviner) welcoming a young man who wanted to consult the *Ifa* oracle (see Figure 96f). There were texts explaining the different parts of the display on the walls.¹⁷⁶ A woman could be seen doing her hair in a bedroom and the accompanying text narrated her daily care for her children. The selection of an urban Yoruba house (rather than the well-known hut with a thatched roof) was made to counter the stereotype of Africa as a primitive continent.¹⁷⁷ The Yoruba house in the gallery was located at a market, complete with stalls and traders. (see Figure 96c and e)

This gave us the opportunity to show how many European or Chinese-made items there were for sale in Africa, including second-hand clothes, medicines, spare parts for cars, bicycles and motorbikes but also watches and plastic containers.

As the Africa curator at the Tropenmuseum, and married to the deputy head of its Education Department, I realized that the role of European museums of ethnography, including colonial museums and missionary museums in the post-colonial period had changed fundamentally. In my view, the main reason was to be found in the loss of the colonial museum's original mandate, namely communicating to the European public the importance of the government-run colonial programme, and showing visitors the beneficial work (financed by the same government) that was being done for the 'natives' in overseas territories. With the colonies becoming independent, this mandate lost its relevance. The same applied to the missionary exhibitions and missionary museums. With the rapid Africanization of the Catholic Church, missionaries were becoming redundant: their missionary mandate ceased to play a role; seminaries were closed due to a lack of vocations; and the Catholic Church had been firmly planted in Africa. It no longer needed European missionaries or their activities. Missionary exhibitions were discontinued and all but one of the missionary museums in the Netherlands was closed in the post-colonial period.

Due to this awareness, critical curators and other museum staff reflected on their identity as museums of ethnography. A century-old tradition of presenting Africa as primitive and underdeveloped had become obsolete, and was even considered unjustified. An entirely new approach was needed: Africa and Europe had to be viewed on an

¹⁷⁶ On seeing the Yoruba shrine, a young Yoruba artist on a course in the Netherlands exclaimed: 'This is absolutely wonderful. It is a perfect replica of my grandfather's shrine.'

¹⁷⁷ The gallery opened in 1979 before tourism to Africa had really started and when TV documentaries on African daily life were still scarce.

equal footing. The new Africa Department at the Tropenmuseum consciously developed a programme to address the stereotypes held by some of its visitors. It refrained from showing photographs of masked dances, starving children, primitive huts and voodoo rituals. Instead, it showed an urban house, men and women at work and playing with their children, and people generally enjoying their leisure time. The emphasis was on how African men and women were 'like us', with feelings of love and friendship and loyalty towards their children and family members.

Figures 96a, b, c, d, e, f A replica of a Yoruba townhouse in the Africa gallery at the Tropenmuseum, 1986



a



b



c



d



e



f

Critical scholars and museum professionals in Africa joined in the debate, as I discovered in 1982. The Nigerian government had organized a major travelling exhibition called 'Treasures of Ancient Nigeria' with objects from *Nok*, *Igbo Ukwu*, *Ife*, *Owo*, *Tsoede* and other centres of Nigerian art that had never before been seen outside Nigeria. It toured a number of museums in the US before starting a similar tour across Europe visiting Oslo, London, Stockholm, Hildesheim and Paris. I had wanted to have the exhibition at the Tropenmuseum and went to see Dr Ekpo Eyo, the Director of the Nigerian National Museum, in his office in Lagos. When I tabled my request, his answer was short and decisive: 'I will give permission for this exhibition to be shown in Holland, but only in the Royal Palace on Dam Square, or the Rijksmuseum, but certainly not in the Tropenmuseum or any other museum of ethnography. They are tainted by their condescending and colonial attitudes towards Africa.' This ended the meeting. As the directors of both venues in Amsterdam were either unable or unwilling to host the exhibition, it was never shown in the Netherlands. Ekpo Eyo made a clear statement by condemning the ethnographic museums' condescending attitude towards Africa, and he appropriated his own African art (that was considered primitive by these museums) by placing it on a par with the world's 'high art' that was shown in royal palaces or the Rijksmuseum.

In the context of the Tropenmuseum's attempts to counter stereotypes, I curated a major exhibition *Wit Over Zwart* (White on Black)¹⁷⁸ in 1990. (see Figure 97)

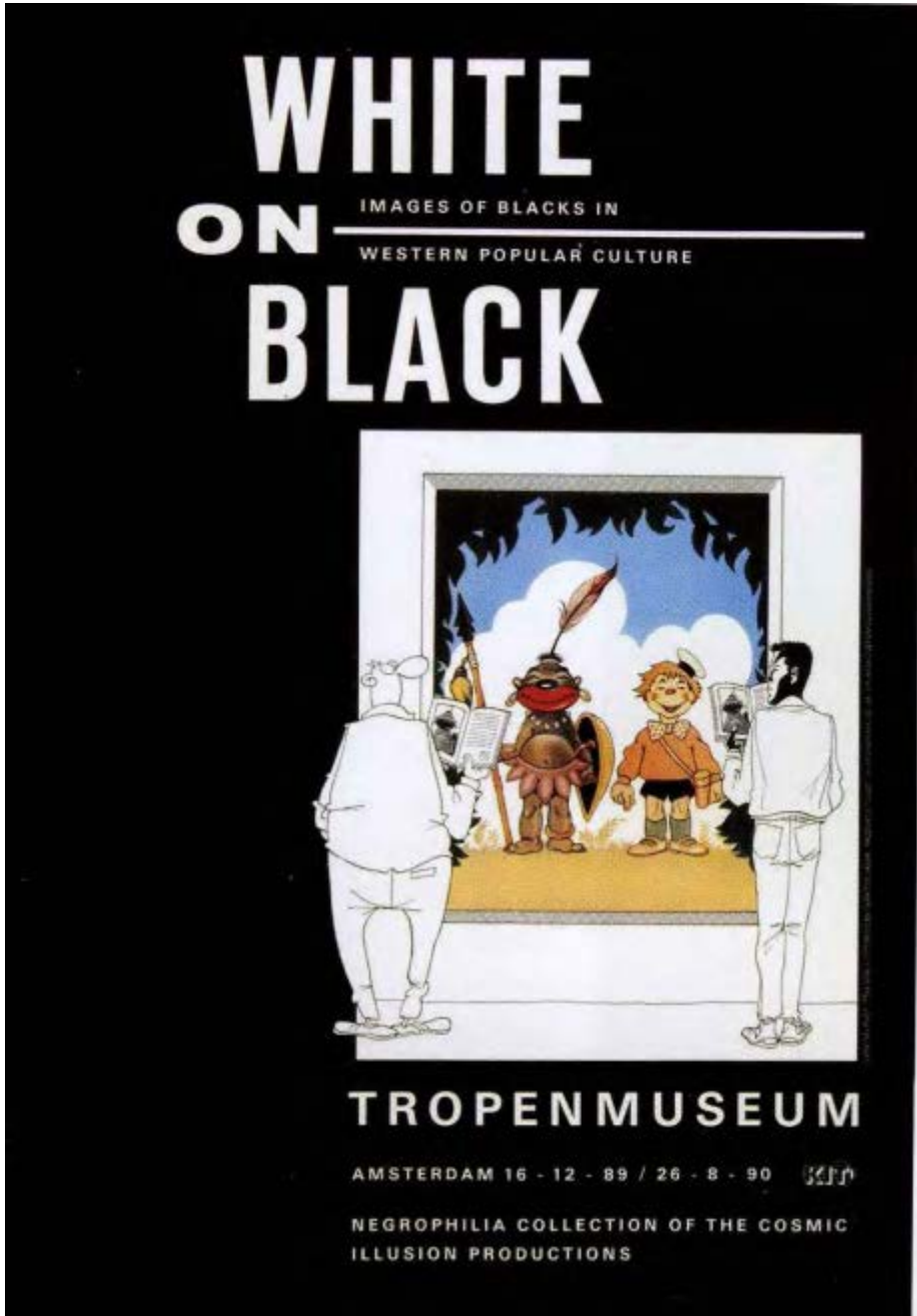
It confronted its visitors with their stereotypes regarding Africa and 'blacks' in general. It was a unique event: a museum of ethnography, namely the Tropenmuseum, had come full circle, from exhibitions showing an exotic Africa to Europeans and now confronting Europeans with their stereotypes about Africa, which the museums of ethnography themselves had helped to create and communicate over the previous century. The museum of ethnography, in this case the Tropenmuseum, displayed a self-purging capacity that was unique and drew much attention both in the Netherlands and abroad.

There was more. When museums of ethnography started to collect objects from Africa in the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century, these objects were still in use. Exhibitions in museums of ethnography (almost) never mentioned the age of the objects on display. Even if they were old, perhaps fifty years or more, they were assumed to have played the same role and had the same meaning as objects that were collected more recently. '*Synchronismus herrscht über Diachronismus*'.¹⁷⁹ A number of curators became aware that their collections were not capable of presenting an accurate picture of present-day Africa. After all, most of them dated back to times when they were still in common use in large parts of Africa. But in many countries, these times were now a thing of the past. The Tropenmuseum was one of the first European museums of ethnography to experiment with a new approach by starting to collect objects that showed present-day Africa: handmade toys of wire or cardboard, cola bottles, plastic and enamel pots that were rapidly replacing earthenware pots and hand-printed cloths (*pagnes*).

¹⁷⁸ The exhibition was accompanied by a publication of the same title by Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1990). The English-language version came out in 1992.

¹⁷⁹ Leyten (1991: 29).

Figure 97 Poster advertising the White on Black exhibition at the Tropenmuseum in 1990



And another new tradition was also undertaken: the museum started to exhibit modern and contemporary art from so-called developing countries. This was initiated because the museums of modern art in the Netherlands refused to acknowledge this art from ‘outside Europe’ as ‘art’ in its own right.

Figure 98a The Modern Art from Africa exhibition at the Tropenmuseum, 1980



Figure 98b Paintings on square masonite boards by TingaTinga and Mpata, Tanzania



In 1980, I curated the first-ever exhibition called *Moderne Kunst uit Afrika* in a Dutch museum¹⁸⁰ (see Figure 98) and other museums followed suit during the 1980s.¹⁸¹ Although the exhibition was a major success with extensive media coverage, the museum’s management stuck to its policy: exhibiting non-western art occasionally was permitted, but its purchase was not. The Tropenmuseum organized a conference in 1985 and invited curators of art museums to discuss the introduction of non-Western contemporary art in Dutch art museums.¹⁸² The reactions were less than promising.¹⁸³ The Tropenmuseum, the Wereld Museum in Rotterdam and the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal continued to attract contemporary African art and artists.¹⁸⁴ (see Figure 99)

The 1980s saw a breakthrough in non-Western contemporary art in museums in the West, such as the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris in 1989.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ The exhibition was accompanied by a book entitled *Moderne Kunst in Afrika* by Harrie Leyten and Paul Faber.

¹⁸¹ Among them were the Wereld Museum (Rotterdam), the Afrika Museum (Berg en Dal) and art museums in Groningen and Amsterdam. See Faber (1989).

¹⁸² Leyten (1993).

¹⁸³ One of the concluding remarks by a curator of an art museum was: ‘If next time you show us real art, we will see what we can do’. See also Leyten (2004).

¹⁸⁴ An example is the stone sculpture from Zimbabwe that was first introduced in the Tropenmuseum’s 1980 exhibition and was displayed in the university park in Wageningen in 1989 and again in Baarn in 1994 and at the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal. See Leyten (1989; 1994).

¹⁸⁵ Martin, J.-H. (1989)

Figure 99 a, b, c Stone sculptures from Zimbabwe in the gardens of the Afrika Museum at Berg en Dal: Earth-hog by Bernard Matemera; African Genesis by Bernard Takawira; and Women and Elephant in the Field by Kakoma Kweli



a



b



c

5.3.3 Material culture or African Art?

One area that caused confusion in the post-colonial period between the museums of ethnography and the art museums was the debate about what to call African objects. Anthropologists spoke of material objects, while art historians used the term African art. Material culture has been described as ‘that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behaviour’.¹⁸⁶ Anthropologists and ethnographers, including Africa curators who were in most cases anthropologists, studied objects that were made or produced by ethnic groups as part of their culture, along with religious rites, kingship, warfare, architecture, music and dance. It was generally assumed that *l’art pour l’art* (art for art’s sake) did not exist in Africa.

Art historians studied the same objects from a different perspective, namely for their aesthetic and artistic qualities. But the art historians who wrote about African art could not fall back on an African art history, as there was none. Moreover, art historians, trained in the aesthetic and artistic traditions of the Renaissance that in turn derived their principles from ancient Greece, struggled with an art form in Africa that had clearly never been in touch with the ideals of the Renaissance and was, therefore, considered ‘primitive’.¹⁸⁷

As curators as well as directors of museums of ethnography have – almost without exception – been anthropologists, it was more or less taboo for them to talk about having African art in a museum of ethnography. However, during the period from 1950 to 2000, a gradual shift in curatorial disciplines becomes manifest and, by the end of this

¹⁸⁶ Deetz (1977: 24-25).

¹⁸⁷ Gombrich (2000: 39).

period, art historians, archaeologists and scholars of different disciplines were being appointed curators.

In this context, it is relevant to quote the Belgian ethnographer and anthropologist Jan Vandenhoute, who warned European art critics about their Eurocentric views on extra-European art. 'Aesthetic experience includes a quantity of other aspects, e.g. the experience of ugliness, of horror, of the hateful, of surprise, of the comic, the tragic, the religious'.¹⁸⁸ Vandenhoute also drew attention to the differences between art museums and museums of ethnography. 'In the ethnographic museums the object is culturally or humanly interesting, in the art museum it is primarily "beautiful" or "original"'.¹⁸⁹

Art historians selected the illustrations for their books on African art carefully, choosing objects that were 'pleasing to the European eye'. The smooth, feminine statues of the Baule (incorrectly called 'ancestor figures') were very popular. The early books on African art presented no more than a few samples of 'art objects' of each 'tribe' so the cultural heritage of each ethnic group appeared to be restricted to this selection of objects. In most cases, the objects, which were not shown as they would have been used in their countries of origin, were chosen from museums or private collections in Europe or the US and were generally considered to be top pieces from each culture. Over time, this had a negative effect as some samples appeared repeatedly in publications on African art and certain ethnic groups became identified with their top pieces only. This was to the detriment of other expressions (which were considered by some as being of inferior quality) of religious practices, symbols of power and royalty, household goods, tools and other objects that anthropologists call material culture.

Although the first books on African art were published in the first half of the 20th century,¹⁹⁰ it was only after the end of World War II that the study of African art took off and a large number of books on African art and African material culture appeared.¹⁹¹ Museums of ethnography then started to take an interest in African art.

Although Africa curators with an anthropological background continued to speak of material culture and avoided notions such as African art, when they showed up at auctions they had a good eye for the aesthetic qualities of a piece and did not hesitate to admit that they had bought or seen a 'top piece' when referring to aesthetic or artistic qualities. The leading books on African art in the past fifty years were written by anthropologists who had done (anthropological) fieldwork in Africa but they had an appreciation of African art and did not hesitate to use the words 'African art' in the titles of their publications. An example is Susan Vogel, who did her anthropological PhD research among the Baule of Ivory Coast and called her thesis *Baule. African Art. Western Eyes*.¹⁹² Others include Daniel Biebuyck,¹⁹³ William Fagg,¹⁹⁴ Suzanne Preston Blier,¹⁹⁵ Luc de Heusch,¹⁹⁶ Francois Neyt,¹⁹⁷ Marie-Louise Bastin,¹⁹⁸ Rogier Bedaux.¹⁹⁹

¹⁸⁸ Vandenhoute (1961: 374). In recent years, art museums have allowed 'ugly' objects to be called 'art'.

¹⁸⁹ Clifford (1985: 142).

¹⁹⁰ Himmelheber and Kjersmeier are discussed in Chapter 4.3.3.

¹⁹¹ Gerbrands (1957).

¹⁹² Vogel (1997).

¹⁹³ Biebuyck (1969).

¹⁹⁴ Fagg (1969).

¹⁹⁵ Preston Blier (1998).

Wouter van Beek,²⁰⁰ Barbara Blankenstein,²⁰¹ Jean-Paul Colleyn,²⁰² Joseph Cornet,²⁰³ John Henri Drewal,²⁰⁴ John Pemberton²⁰⁵ and Mary Nooter.²⁰⁶ All of these anthropologists or archaeologists had a keen insight into African art.

Notwithstanding the outstanding qualities of the books on African art that I have already mentioned, there are few books specifically on the art history of Africa. One of the first was by Frank Willett,²⁰⁷ followed by one by Jan Vansina entitled *Art History in Africa*,²⁰⁸ and Monica Blackmun Visona, Robin Poynor, Herbert Cole and Michael D. Harris's *A History of Art in Africa*.²⁰⁹

The anthropologist Robert Thompson found that the Yoruba had nineteen different criteria to determine sculptural beauty, among which were a moderate resemblance to the subject (*ijjora*), implying a balance between the extremes of portraiture and abstraction, visibility (*ifarahon*), luminosity (*didon*), by which is understood a shining smoothness of surface so that the whole sculpture offers a play of light and shade, a straight upright position (*gigun*) including a symmetrical arrangement of the parts of the sculpture, youthfulness (*odo*), and 'coolness' or composure (*tutu*), a quality that is sought in human behaviour too.²¹⁰ (see Figure 100)

According to Biebuyck,²¹¹ the Lega have words to express the aesthetic appeal of the finest carvings. Some of these terms associate beauty with order: *kukonga* means to produce harmony and unison by singing together; *kwengia* means to be shiny like a well-polished chair or statue; *kwanga* means to be in good order like a country that is thriving; and *kuswaga* means to be at peace.

The debate on the perception of beauty is very much a European affair. In a traditional African society, the debate would not centre on the notion of beauty but rather on whether an object was 'good', i.e. if it corresponded with the criteria set by society and if it could, therefore, function properly in the cultural or ritual context for which it had been made. Biebuyck describes a class of sculpture that represents a human figure with a distended belly. These depict a woman who committed adultery while pregnant and who died because she had ritually polluted herself. In some communities, he records how a piece of naturally twisted wood may be substituted for the carving. This branch was evidently accepted by the community as an apt means of communicating the same intended message. From this perspective, the debate is relevant for this thesis on objects

¹⁹⁶ De Heusch (1995).

¹⁹⁷ Neyt (1993).

¹⁹⁸ Bastin (1982).

¹⁹⁹ Bedaux (2004).

²⁰⁰ Van Beek (2000; 2012).

²⁰¹ Blankenstein (2007).

²⁰² Colleyn (2001).

²⁰³ Cornet (1971).

²⁰⁴ Drewal (1989).

²⁰⁵ Drewal & Pemberton (1989).

²⁰⁶ Nooter (1996).

²⁰⁷ Willett (1974; 2002).

²⁰⁸ Vansina (1984).

²⁰⁹ Visona a.o. (2000).

²¹⁰ Thompson (1968) and in d'Azevedo (1973: 18-61).

²¹¹ Biebuyck (1969: 129).

with power, which are after all objects made by humans – professional artists or otherwise – to serve a specific purpose. If an object, meant for a ritual performance, is not qualified as ‘good’ by members of a society, it will not receive its power and will subsequently become ineffective.

Figure 100 Onile figure of the Ogboni society, representing a founder of the community, Yoruba, Nigeria



The tendency by curators to display their collections in a manner that pleases the visitors (high-tech showcases, exquisite illuminations, displays emphasizing the objects’

aesthetic qualities) affects the very concept of an ethnographic museum. The traditional distinction between museums of ethnography that focus on material culture and art galleries, art museums, heritage sites and art fairs may become blurred. As long as these museums depend on funds generated by tourism and leisure activities, there is a risk that they will feel compelled to enhance the visual appeal of their collections in order to capture the public's attention. If this happens, are these museums not falling into the trap of reinforcing the very perceptions of exoticism and 'otherness' that academic anthropology as well as some curators themselves have repeatedly sought to defuse?²¹²

The changing outlook of ethnographic museums brings us back to the title of this book: *From Idol to Art*. These museums have travelled a long way since the middle of the 19th century when curators assumed that Africa was primitive and that its material culture was pervaded by idolatry. No ethnographic museum today speaks of idols. And when objects with power are hard to understand, they may not be displayed in the galleries. There is a distinct tendency to understand objects with power as elements in a culture with which many Europeans are not familiar, but they still deserve respect.

5.3.4 *Curators on objects with power*

The new approach and the new museology have changed the perspectives with which curators viewed objects with power.²¹³ The original contexts of the objects were adapted to the tastes of museum visitors. The museum aimed to create an attitude among visitors, namely that mankind was one large family and, that what Africans and Europeans had in common was more important than the differences between them.²¹⁴ Curators explained indigenous religions in notions that sounded familiar to Western ears and the new museum concept demanded that the daily lives of Africans and their development receive full attention. In this way, it supported the ideals of the multicultural society. African objects that did not fit into this view were not given much attention.²¹⁵

The result of these approaches was that certain objects with power received little attention in most museums of ethnography and *ikenga* figures were hardly ever on display in Dutch museums of ethnography in the post-colonial period. Or if they were, they would not find themselves centre stage. Another argument seems to me to be the lack of correct information on the nature of *ikenga*. Did curators still see them as 'small gods', as they were described at the beginning of the 20th century? Were curators familiar with the latest research on *ikenga* or other objects with power? The same applied to an even greater extent to *asuman*. They did not get any attention because they were not attractive for Europeans, their meaning was not always clear and, if it was clear, it could bare

²¹² Harris & O'Hanlon (2013: 9).

²¹³ Vergo (1989).

²¹⁴ As a curator, I therefore decided not to show any photographs of so-called primitive dances or rituals in the permanent exhibition on Africa.

²¹⁵ Faber (2011) and Scholze (2002).

Figures 101 a, b The Spirit and Power of Vodun from West Africa exhibition at the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal, 1996



a



b

ly be communicated to visitors. The case of *minkisi* was slightly different. The Museum of Ethnography in Leiden has the country's largest collection of *minkisi* and is of outstanding ethnographical value, with most objects dating back to the 19th century. Yet the presentation of these *minkisi* in the past decades was no different from that of other objects in the museum. They were shown in an aesthetic manner and no attention was paid to their cultural or religious context. The *minkisi* were not displayed from a 'native's' point of view or from an anthropological perspective that would have accentuated their agency; they were exhibited as other 'lifeless' non-dynamic objects.²¹⁶ Hoogma concluded that the curator who was responsible for the Africa section until 1989 did not consider the *minkisi* to be 'living objects' with 'dynamic capacities of an agency'. Since the reopening of the museum in 2000, some fifty *minkisi* have been on display. Their selection was made on the basis of their aesthetic qualities, diversity of form and age. No attempt was made to place the *minkisi* in a context that does justice to their specific capacities as 'agencies'. This is communicated in the accompanying texts in the gallery.

It should be noted here that a single object in a museum display should not be interpreted as *the* object that constitutes a cult. Many people in Europe who show an interest in African art associate the concept of *nkisi* (or nail fetish or other terms to indicate these objects with power) with the single object in museums of ethnography or private collections where, as a rule, the other elements that make up the ritual are absent. Moreover, museums have tended to collect only those *minkisi* that appeal to European eyes, i.e. the figurative objects, recognizable human or animal forms rather than the amorphous composites that are made up of shells, pieces of cloth and bones. An example was seen in the prestigious exhibition at the Dapper Foundation in Paris in 1989 under the name *Objets interdits* that was accompanied by a catalogue of the same title.²¹⁷ The exhibition consisted of figurative objects only and the accompanying text did not make mention of the many other forms of *minkisi*.

One museum of ethnography in the Netherlands, the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, deliberately focused on objects with power after it opened in 1956. It was originally a missionary museum and was initiated by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (CSSP). It had a major exhibition called *Achter Spiegels. Spiegel- en Spijkerbeelden uit Nederland-Kongo*²¹⁸ in 1981, *Spiritualiteit en Genezing in Tanzania*²¹⁹ in 1993, which was followed by *Geest (en) Kracht. Vodun uit West-Afrika*²²⁰ in 1996, *Hemelse kruiden en aardse kwalen. Afrika als etnofarmacologische schatkamer*²²¹ in 1999 and *Ubangi* in 2007. Each exhibition was accompanied by a publication.²²² The curators worked hard to create an environment that allowed their visitors to see the context in which the objects featured in Africa. Scholarly research on the subject was mirrored in the exhibition texts and films that showed the objects *in situ*.

²¹⁶ Hoogma (1997: 66).

²¹⁷ Fondation Dapper, Paris, (1989).

²¹⁸ 'Behind Mirrors. Mirror and Nail Figures from Lower Congo'.

²¹⁹ 'Spirituality and Healing in Tanzania'.

²²⁰ 'Spirit (and) Power. Vodun from West Africa'.

²²¹ 'Heavenly Herbs and Earthly Ailments'.

²²² See Grootaers & Eisenburger (2002).

5.3.5 *Appropriation*

Ethnographic museums, especially colonial museums and missionary museums, were deeply affected by the political, economic and social changes that occurred in the second half of the 20th century. The colonial museums and the missionary museums disappeared and their buildings and collections were refurbished and given new names. The Tropenmuseum is a good example of what these museums underwent.

Did the 'new' museums of ethnography contribute to a better understanding of African culture, religion and objects with power? Were they able to convey to their visitors the African meaning of these objects and material culture in the sense described by symbolic anthropology?

I have tried to show how ethnographic museums had previously failed to understand the meaning of African culture and religion as it is seen by Africans themselves. In the 19th century, ethnographic museums appropriated the meaning of African objects to support their evolutionist theories and show that European civilization was superior to the African way of life. African objects with power were displayed in a manner that assumed a degree of backwardness and superstition of African cultures and religions. In the first half of the 20th century, this attitude continued to prevail in these museums and if it did change, as I have shown for the British Museum, it moved towards an appreciation of the objects' aesthetic qualities.

In the 1950-2000 period, there was a tendency among museums in Western Europe to position themselves at the centre of their own societies to incorporate the opinions and expectations of their visitors in their displays and their educational programmes. They became community-centred. The objects collected and displayed were from the community in which they were situated and the themes of exhibitions and programmes were the concerns (poverty, exclusion, gender issues) of the 'locals'. For the ethnographic museums, this was altogether different. Their collections came from non-European cultures and the themes of their exhibitions were those relevant to African societies, such as agriculture, drought, ancestors and voodoo.

What were their relationships like with African communities and cultures? Did Africa curators consider their museums mere showcases for African objects? Or did they see themselves as representatives or ambassadors of the African people? What type of exhibition techniques, in their views, did justice to African objects? Did an African mask against a white background in a nicely lit showcase reflect the colourful dance in which it once played a part?²²³

The main problem for Africa curators was probably that almost all their objects had lost their original context: they had become decontextualized. They were given a new, unfamiliar context in a clean, impersonal, static museum situation. Many curators saw few problems with exhibiting African objects according to European standards of display. 'When we "museumfy" other cultures (...) we exercise a conceptual control over

²²³ It should be noted that a mask in a museum is usually exhibited without the costume that, for an African, is an integral part of the mask.

them. When this process involves high technology we are demonstrating and exhibiting the superiority of our technology.²²⁴ This was a new form of appropriation.

Museums of ethnography originated in anthropology but the relationship between the two has not always been clear. A number of these museums were attached to universities and the director and one or more curators were likely to be professors. Yet it was sometimes hard to ascertain from their exhibitions and publications how far the latest anthropological theories had been incorporated. The (former) *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris, and the Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, both of which are (or were) part of the university system, did not demonstrate any academic influence in their presentations. Anthropological theories about 'master symbols' and 'meaning' were not distinguishable in the displays even though the individual curators did fieldwork at a scholarly level or published books based on research of their own collections.²²⁵

Curators in some museums had done fieldwork on a specific ethnic group and collected material culture that they were able to document correctly. These museums stand out as having valuable collections and displays about specific ethnic groups. The Lindenmuseum in Stuttgart specialized in the Kingdoms of Cameroon, the Afrika Museum (Berg en Dal) in the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Museum of Ethnography (Leiden) on the archaeology of Mali. With these exhibitions based on solid fieldwork, the meaning of the objects on display was put firmly in a context that was reminiscent of its original context in Africa. Other museums of ethnography placed objects from various ethnic groups together to present a thematic exhibition, a historical analysis or an aesthetical exhibition.

There are, however, ethnographic museums that appear to have been immersed in a strong reconfiguration process. Their dependence on government funding and their struggle for survival in a fiercely competitive cultural world made them opt for an approach in which the overall image of the museum itself was the main focus of attention and a high number of paying visitors was a leading principle in the selection of themes for temporary exhibitions, not the 'native perspective'. Having a top piece in one's collection was seen as a new and valuable asset for the museum in the eyes of the (inter)national museum world. The meaning of individual objects was subordinated to the general objective of the museum.

The Tropenmuseum's transition from being a colonial museum (with a focus on the East and West Indies) to being a museum centre for development cooperation implied that the museum's emphasis had drifted away from its collections and the meaning of its objects towards issues of economic and social development in developing countries. The museum became an internationally renowned example of this new approach and drew museologists and museum professionals from all over Europe who came to see how the new concept had materialized. The Dutch government, its main funding party, was more than satisfied with the results.

It appears to me that the Tropenmuseum and other museums were practising a new form of appropriation. Although they claimed to represent the native point of view on

²²⁴ Ames (1992: 23).

²²⁵ Curators at the Dutch museums of ethnography in Leiden, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Berg en Dal produced publications about their collections.

issues of development cooperation ('natives' want schooling for their children, they want transistor radios, watches and fertilizer for their crops), the curators did not present the perspectives of these same 'natives' on indigenous cultures and religions. The emic account was missing.

Is there a future?

What is the future of ethnographic museums? Do they have a future? 'Let us begin with a provocation: the ethnographic museum is dead.' This was the first line of an article about the future of the ethnographic museum by curator Clare Harris and Michael O'Hanlon, the director of the Pitt Rivers Museum.²²⁶ Their argument was that 'It has outlived its usefulness and has nothing more to offer in pursuance of its mandate as a location for the representation of 'other' cultures.' Although they appear to relativize their statement in the rest of the article, it is significant that such eminent museum professionals did not hesitate to become involved in the debate with bold pronouncements.

If there were still museums of ethnography including colonial museums and missionary museums operating from their original concept, one might say that they indeed would have no future.²²⁷ Their original mandate has become obsolete. There are no more colonies for colonial museums to report on and no more missionaries and almost no missionary congregations to provide information for missionary exhibitions and museums (or for which they can generate propaganda).

The references to 'ethnography' in the title of this category of museums (Dutch: *Volkenkunde*; German: *Völkerkunde*; French: *ethnographie*) have become obsolete. The subjects, which at one time were scholarly disciplines at university level, have all but vanished from the curricula.

The collections that were assembled by museums of ethnography in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century and were used to illustrate the social or religious situations in Africa then have lost their value and have, to a large extent, become historical collections. They can still be used to illustrate historical contexts but are incapable of presenting an accurate picture of present-day Africa.

Since their foundation, museums of ethnography have constituted a special category and housed the art or material culture of primitive people outside Europe, especially those in Africa, Oceania and the Arctic regions. Their art was not considered 'high culture' and would, therefore, not be displayed in national art museums. Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum is home to a fine collection of Asiatic art but its constitution forbids any displays of primitive art. If the condescending colonial and missionary approach to African material culture is something of the past and if Africa is seen at the level at which we see our own cultural heritage, then it would be advisable to declare that museums of ethnography are now obsolete. If they wish to have a future, they will have to become part of some kind of 'universal museum' where the arts of all cultures can find a niche. Joint enterprises between museums in the West and those in Africa could also result in exchange programmes for the benefit of all concerned

²²⁶ Harris & O'Hanlon (2013).

²²⁷ Leyten (1991a; 1991b; 1990).

Epilogue

This book, entitled *From Idol to Art*, has analyzed the historical development of the discourse in which missionaries, anthropologists and curators have been engaged since the middle of the 19th century regarding objects with power. The word ‘art’ in the title may appear to be the final point in this development but this is, in fact, misleading. The process is still continuing. I expect that the emphasis on the aesthetic, as we have been witnessing it over the last few decades, will lead to greater attention for the meaning of these objects. There appears to be a growing and better understanding of the ‘materiality of religion’. Calling these objects ‘art’ is an appropriation by Western art historians as objects with power were never seen as art objects by the Africans who created them or used them. Africans have also recently ‘discovered’ the aesthetic qualities of their material culture and this appropriation is yet another phase in the continuous process of appropriations, especially that by missionaries and curators.

To demonstrate this Eurocentric discourse, I selected three categories of objects with power. They each hailed from a different region in Africa, served different purposes in their communities, and were unappealing, unaesthetic or even repulsive for Europeans. It was not difficult therefore for missionaries to call them idols, for anthropologists to call them fetishes and for curators to ignore them and not display them in their museums. They were probably the most difficult objects for Europeans to see as art and they were symptomatic of the low esteem in which African cultures and religions were held.

The average missionary, certainly at least until the middle of the 20th century, left for Africa without being familiar with its material culture and its meaning and role in society since anthropology and ethnography were not part of the curriculum in most major seminaries in Europe at that time. Given the absence of accurate knowledge about objects with power, it is not surprising that missionaries adopted the narratives of travellers, soldiers and other Europeans who had visited Africa and spread stories about the primitive and pagan practices they had seen there.

Missionaries were convinced of their divine mission, which is why they wanted to go to Africa. Back home again, they were hailed as heroes and brave warriors who had endured hardship and danger for the sake of Christ and the salvation of Africa. Their position in Africa as well as in Europe was one of unchallenged supremacy. There is no

reason to doubt their good intentions and we assume that they were kind-hearted and caring towards their converts, that they treated the sick as well as they could and helped solve problems in people's daily lives. In retrospect I must conclude, however, that their attitude towards indigenous African religions and cultures was one of rejection.

Although anthropologists did not do fieldwork in Africa in the 19th century, they did not hesitate to use data and information that they collected about Africa from missionaries, travellers, soldiers and merchants in their academic discourse on the evolution of mankind. Theoretical constructs, such as fetishism and animism, were designed in the first place to support the ideas of the evolutionary stages that mankind had, it was assumed, to go through before it could reach the heights of civilization as it existed in Europe. These theoretical constructs had a negative effect on Africa's reputation in Europe. It was depicted as primitive, barbaric and at a low level of evolutionary development and was used by anthropologists to enhance Europe's identity as the apex of human achievement in the 19th century.

Museums see their collections as their *raison d'être* and, without them, there would not be museums. When applied to ethnographic museums in the 19th century, however, it has to be concluded that the justification for their collecting policies existence is at least dubious. African collections were collected haphazardly, without proper documentation in most cases, and they were not exhibited as meaningful representatives of their cultures. They were usually not displayed on a systematic basis and the overall impression has to be that curators of ethnographic museums presented Africa and Africans as 'curiosities'.

In the first half of the 20th century, in the heyday of colonial rule, the Catholic Church established what Akromong called a 'colonial missiology'. The Church was convinced that it possessed the only true faith and the only way to salvation. And its decision to make *Plantatio Ecclesiae* its leading policy on the basis of the adage *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (There is no salvation outside the church) was a logical consequence of this conviction. Some missionaries reportedly burned pagan objects with power and destroyed pagan temples, acting on the conviction that paganism had to be eradicated and replaced by Christianity. This apparently prevented missionaries from searching for the indigenous meaning of objects with power. Instead, they used the stereotypes with which they grew up at home and during their seminary training.

To Europeans, African objects with power were unfamiliar and incomprehensible even though they were no enigma for the average missionary in Africa. Missionaries gave the impression that they knew what they were: fetishes, idols and expressions of superstition and paganism. Even if Africans told missionaries that these objects had the power to cure disease and protect them from witchcraft, the missionaries could only pity these 'poor people' for their lack of knowledge and their naïve beliefs.

Other missionaries interviewed Africans about their religious practices, their norms and values, searching for African concepts and notions. They did not intend to adapt their own views but to find those that were compatible with their own or could be made to comply with them. Some missionaries mastered the local language, translated Biblical texts into the vernacular and were able to transform the unfamiliar into the familiar: they could transform a pagan into a Christian. They succeeded in reading their Christian

God into *Nyame*, the Ashanti *obosom* of the sky; into *Oldumare*, the Yoruba *orisa* of the firmament; and into the Ibo's *Chukwu* (*Chi-uku*). The African notions of *obosom* and *orisa*, which were originally seen as fetishes, were 'upgraded' into concepts that were compatible with Christian doctrines. However, missionaries failed to see that a number of elements, which were crucial in the African understanding of an *obosom* or an *orisa* such as the concept of duality (the 'gods' can cure as well as cause disease), were opposed to the Christian notion of an all-good Creator God.

When anthropologists went to Africa at the beginning of the 20th century, they were not knowledgeable about African cultures apart from the (biased) information that they had collected from missionaries, travellers and explorers who had returned to Europe. A relatively large number of anthropologists were employed by the colonial authorities and expected to study a 'tribe' – usually one that had opposed pacification – and find out how it could be subjected to colonial rule.

Anthropologists distinguished themselves from the average missionary. Missionaries went to teach Africans about the glad tidings of the Gospel but anthropologists, with their strong sense of curiosity, went there to learn from Africans. Some anthropologists succeeded in deciphering the cultural code in which Africans expressed themselves, and by which they lived their lives. Instead of looking for an opening in an alien culture through which they could find similarities with European cultural phenomena, such as rites of passage, concepts of God and the supernatural, and notions of life and death, they looked for notions that were crucial to the understanding of the culture or society. This approach resulted in what anthropologists who came after them called the 'master symbol'. They succeeded in unveiling the enigma of African cultures and managed to translate the emic account, which they gathered from their informants, into an etic account and, by so doing, gained insight into African cultures from the inside.

However accurate their observations may have been, two important elements are missing in most of their accounts: historical insight and what could be called a helicopter view. African societies had no written sources about their past but had detailed oral traditions instead. However, European scholars, including historians, did not consider these to be reliable sources of information until recently. The result was that anthropologists then had hardly any historical background on which to base their observations. Another omission in this period (the first half of the 20th century) was any relationship with neighbouring tribes as the demarcation of 'tribal areas' was a colonial invention to facilitate their administration and jurisdiction. It was based on the (assumed) unity of language or dialect and territory by a group of people. Any anthropologist who had mastered a language usually restricted his research to the people who spoke that language. These flaws together resulted in the widely accepted conviction that Africa was a continent without a history and that each tribe lived in isolation, as if it were an island.

Museums of ethnography were set up to conserve people's heritage and present the cultures of peoples living in remote regions to visitors. But they too worked from different perspectives. Colonial museums supported their governments in their 'civilizing mission' by organizing exhibitions that showed the need to civilize African tribes. Missionary exhibitions and museums presented their visitors with a pagan Africa and a view of how the continent could be saved through the Christian faith. They confirmed

already-existing prejudices. Museums of ethnography flourished in the colonial era as they acquired larger collections, also from Africa, and sometimes from missionaries such as Father Bittremieux in Congo, sometimes from merchants such as Robert Visser, and sometimes from ethnographers like Frobenius and Griaule who accumulated thousands of artefacts during their expeditions into the interior of Africa.

After Picasso and other modern artists ‘discovered’ African art as a source of inspiration, a new category of collectors emerged, such as Emil Torday and Hans Himmelheber. They had a keen eye for the aesthetic qualities of African objects and this changed the discourse among curators and dealers in ethnographic items. African objects were no longer curiosities but art objects.

The ever-increasing influx of collections prompted curators to develop systematic methods of ordering them. Franz Boas’s concept of ‘culture areas’ became standard practice in most ethnographic museums, emulating the colonial system of partitioning Africa into tribes. Africa – the Other – was reduced to geographical units labelled, for example, as ‘Yoruba’ or ‘Ibo’, while any study of what the label ‘Yoruba’ or ‘Ibo’ actually implied was neglected.

The tables turned for European missionaries in Africa in the post-colonial period as a succession of African nations rapidly became independent. This fundamentally altered the power relations between former colonies and their masters and the process of decolonization also affected developments in the Catholic Church. Its missionary character and strong European footing now changed and it began to be governed in Africa by newly appointed African bishops and clergy. European missionaries were no longer in charge.

The Catholic Church, especially during and after the Second Vatican Council, developed new approaches to its catechesis to accommodate Africa’s search for identity. Liturgical renewal became the main issue in the discourse between the central authority of the Catholic Church and the African hierarchy. The Catholic Church in Africa, run by African bishops and clergy, did not only adapt the Roman liturgy to local African values but also – paradoxically – affirmed and copied the Roman structure of the Church as it had developed in previous decades. African bishops adopted, as a matter of course, the Roman regulations regarding marriage (monogamy), sexuality (no contraceptives) and celibacy.

From the colonial era onwards, Evans-Pritchard, Lienhardt, Douglas, Turner and others all studied African cultures from within, without trying to explain the unfamiliar in European notions. They were pioneers in the process by which anthropologists reinvented themselves by adopting an unbiased, open approach to the unfamiliar and, by so doing, learned to understand an African culture from within, in the way those living the culture understood it. This open approach has become standard practice for anthropological fieldwork, as is clear from the studies of, for example, the Kapsiki by Wouter van Beek and the Ewe by Birgit Meyer and others. They present an anthropology of religion that is focused on meaning and the rationality of indigenous religious action and thought.

Ethnographic museums were also affected by the radical political changes in Africa. They could no longer call themselves ‘colonial’ and had therefore to transform them-

selves into museums with a different anthropological or ethnographic character. Some opted for an emphasis on development cooperation and economic development in Africa, such as Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum, while missionary museums found that they had outlived their mandate and had to reinvent themselves, as the Afrika Museum at Berg en Dal has done, or they would disappear altogether.

A number of ethnographic museums had to shut as they were considered redundant in the new geo-political world order. Those that have remained open have had to reinvent themselves, much as anthropologists did, in order to ensure a viable future, for example as museums of world cultures. However, in spite of their ambitious titles and goals, classical Western cultures have hardly been included in their presentations to date.

The emphasis in many former ethnographic museums is on the aesthetic, including the aesthetic aspects of African material culture. We can observe here a transformation in the African galleries from the exotic and the unfamiliar to the aesthetic and the enjoyable. African art is no longer seen as primitive in a pejorative sense, even if the word 'primitive' is still used, but instead is presented as yet another example of 'high' art. Prices for top African pieces are skyrocketing at auctions today and curators know how to spot good pieces, even if their meaning may be obscure. They have been able to transform the 'idol' (as they used to call objects with power) into art.

Is this development to be judged as positive? When curators of ethnographic museums were unable to provide answers to visitors' questions about the meanings of objects on display, some of them opted for a secure approach: they focused on the aesthetic qualities of the objects and presented them in nicely lit showcases against serene backgrounds of attractive earth colours that were meant to represent Africa. In this way, they camouflaged their lack of knowledge about the objects' meaning. They thought they could confine themselves to generic descriptions of the objects, such as 'ancestor figure', 'fertility figure' or 'power figure'. What seemed an intelligent method of presentation was, from this perspective, a testimony of poverty or perhaps paucity.

The adoption of African objects as art objects is another appropriation. It is different from other appropriations in the past but the process is still recognizable. In the first half of the 20th century, curators, many of whom had no fieldwork experience in Africa, were quick to appropriate a number of cultural phenomena that differed from their own and attributed the meaning of an uncivilized being to them. This discriminating attitude was visible in exhibitions but, in the last few decades, the approach has changed as curators attributed aesthetic qualities to African material culture, some of which Africans themselves would have perhaps recognized. Even if the discriminatory approach of the past has (apparently) disappeared, the attribution is nevertheless one of appropriation.

Curators, even those with an anthropological training, appear to have lost touch with academic discourses with regard to African material culture. This was partly as a result of developments in the anthropological world itself that, for a long time, saw the study of material culture as being inferior to its own achievements in matters of theory and methodology. Controversies between social anthropology and ethnography bear testimony to the rift.

I have given various examples of how missionaries have consistently appropriated African objects with power. To make sure that the institutions, doctrines and moral laws of their Church would be seen by everyone as superior to the indigenous African religious cults, missionaries were quick to describe Africans as fetish worshippers. Missionaries appropriated African notions and translated them into European or Christian concepts to suit their plans. Objects with power were consistently ridiculed as being incapable of rendering the goods that adepts believed they would. And priests and priestesses of local shrines were consistently described as charlatans and quacks.

Missionaries and curators used their position of relative authority, especially during the colonial period, to impose their views or those of their Church or museum on others. They assumed the power of definition, as I have called it. Missionaries appear to have been apprehensive of anthropological theories as they were assumed to deviate from the Church's teachings. An example is the theory of evolutionism that many anthropologists supported, but that was rejected by the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church has always conducted its own discourse and developed its own dynamism, as was seen during and after the Second Vatican Council. It neglected, either consciously or otherwise, to learn from the insights into African cultures and religions that anthropologists developed in the 20th century. These anthropologists rebuked missionaries for operating from a biased perspective, while the latter were unwilling, according to anthropologists, to accept African cultural phenomena as either meaningful or valuable.

Although a number of anthropologists who researched tribal customs considered these customs a risk for a successful process of colonization – with Victor Turner describing anthropologists as ‘subtle agents of colonial supremacy’ – many anthropologists left their ivory towers and took up fieldwork as part of their core business. By so doing, they established anthropology as an academic discipline in its own right and discovered the intrinsic qualities of African cultures.

Part of the discourse that missionaries, anthropologists and curators conducted with regard to African objects with power was the question about whether these objects were effective or not. Were they able to cure or did they cause disease? The answers were manifold. Some Europeans attributed their efficacy to magic or witchcraft, others denied their effectiveness, while yet others believed that objects with power were manifestations of the Devil. In this book I have argued that their efficacy can be explained by Gell's theory of agency. The question of efficacy is one of meaning. Meaning is not inherent to an object but is attributed to the object by people. If meaning is identified with power, then power too is attributed to the object. I have called this ‘consensual attribution’: the greater the consensus, the stronger the power. This power, and by implication the object with power, is an agent, and one that ‘causes events to happen’ (Gell)

This book has traced the gradual transformation of African objects with power from idol to art. Originally viewed as fetishes and idols, their conceptual development into functional objects with a meaning, into objects with a strong relationship to the ancestors and into objects of art has been discussed. This transformation took place as a historical process marred by prejudice, obstructions and even violent clashes. But despite

all this, African objects with power have today reached a point where they are respected or even admired, at least by Westerners, if not always for their own meaning then at least for their aesthetic qualities. Generally speaking, Europeans were, in the past, unable to detect the meaning of an *ikenga*, *nkisi* or *suman* and their role in their culture of origin from their outward appearance. Much additional information has been required for a European audience to be persuaded to understand and appreciate their meaning. As the required information was not available in most cases, it is not surprising that Europeans, including missionaries, curators and some anthropologists, resorted to stereotypes and took refuge in appropriations. This way, they could attribute their own interpretations to the objects.

Much has been achieved in the last 150 years as far as our understanding of African objects with power is concerned. By bringing together the views of missionaries, anthropologists and curators on African objects with power, I have tried to contribute to the multidisciplinary study of indigenous African religions. Despite the progress made to date, objects with power remain in many respects enigmatic and continue to be a challenge for all concerned.

Index of figures

- 1a Mask of the *Epa* society. Yoruba, Ekiti Province, Nigeria. Polychrome wood. Height: 133.3 cm. Carved by a member of the Adeshina family from Efon-Alaye between 1900 and 1914. Collected by Rev. Father Jacques Geurtz of the SMA in 1924 or 1925. Collection: Society of African Missions (SMA), Cadier en Keer. On loan to the SVD Missiemuseum Steyl-Tegelen since 2012.

“The northern Yoruba, especially the Ekiti en Igbomina, have associations, dedicated to special *Orisa* (spirits), such as *Elefon* and *Epa*. Their masks are danced during annual festivals (harvests), sometimes also during funerals of members of the association. Most of these masks consist of a kind of type that covers the dancer’s head. On top of that one or more human figures are carved, such as a rider on horseback, a mother with twins, which is called *olomyeya*. Notwithstanding the heavy mask on his head, the dancer has to do acrobatic jumps. When he succeeds, it is seen as a good omen. At certain occasions dozens of masks dance in pairs.” (Leyten 1984: 44. Author’s own translation)

Photograph: John Dummer in Leyten (1984 cover). Courtesy of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.

- 1b Mask of the *Epa* society. Yoruba, Ekiti Province, Nigeria. Polychrome wood. Height: 110 cm. Collected by Father Geurtz of the SMA in 1924 or 1925. Collection: SMA, Cadier en Keer. On loan to the SVD Missiemuseum Steyl-Tegelen.

Photograph: John Dummer in Leyten (1984 cover). Courtesy of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.

- 2 Father Erkens at a missionary exhibition in 1925. Archives of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.

- 3 Father Frits van Trigt at the opening of the Afrika Centrum in 1959. Archives of the SMA, Cadier en Keer. The photograph was taken on the top floor of the museum where the theme was daily life. On the left is a wooden, ceremonial Ashanti stool with a seat supported by an eagle. A fishing net and two objects with power are displayed on the back wall: a wooden figure of a person that has become blackened by the remnants of sacrifices (blood and eggs), and a model of a canoe. Ewe, Ghana. Fishermen supplicated them for a good catch and their safe return from the high seas. Next to the net are two ceremonial paddles of Fanti origin, Ghana.

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.

- 4 Traditional Africa at the Afrika Centrum in 1980.

“In this part of the exhibition the ancestors take centre stage. We become familiar with the African domestic economy which is carried by small groups, united by family ties and ritual or other relationships. The economic activities concerning the construction of houses, concerning agriculture, hunting, fishing and handicrafts are shown through art objects and household

goods. In this traditional part of the exhibition attention is given to the education of children and bodycare.” (Leyten 1984)

The overall impression of this part of the exhibition is of a sacred forest where ‘spirits’ dwell. The mask to the right (Baule, Ivory Coast) hangs from a fictitious tree.

Photograph: Father. J. Gooren in Leyten (1984: 14). Courtesy of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.

- 5 Modern Africa at the Afrika Centrum in 1980. This shows the modernization of Africa with an emphasis on Western elements such as individual achievement, the capitalist economy and urbanization. The pillar suggests a pile of coins as a symbol of the capitalist economy.

Photograph: John Dummer in Leyten (1984: 14). Courtesy of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.

- 6 Interior of the Afrika Centrum in 2004. The two showcases to the right house the collections of gold weights from Ghana.

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.

- 7 The front and back covers of the 1984 catalogue *Afrika nabij*. Harry Leyten & Kees Simhoffer (eds).

Design: Kees Simhoffer. Courtesy of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.

- 8 Helmet mask from the *Kòmò* Association, Warakun, Bamana, Mali. Wood, animal horns, pig hairs and fibres. Height: 50.8 cm. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

“The headdresses of *Kòmò* (komokun) are dramatic, explicitly tactile, and very powerful. They unite animal motifs and organic materials into a spectacular creature that includes bird, hyena, crocodile, antelope, and more.” (Colleyn 2001)

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

- 9 Two *Ciwara* dancers. The masks simulate a ritual coupling. Bamana, Mali, Dyele, 1987.

“The mask, named - according to location - as *Wara-kun*, *Namakoro-kun*, or *Sogo-ni-kun* is composed of a hood made of red fabric or from fibers dyed black, a skullcap from cotton, plant fibers on basketwork, and a crested headdress on top. The costume comprises a tunic covered with black fibres. The headdress is usually carved from *dondol* wood (bombax cornui). It presents a complex symbolism based on animal motifs. In the region of Ségou, the male mask is larger, with a strongly pronounced sexual organ, placed under the collar, in the openworked part of the socle. It takes the Hippotragus antelope (*dajé*) for its model, while the female - smaller and carrying its child on the back - takes the oryx (*sogo-ni*) for its model.” (Colleyn 2001: 202)

Photograph: Jerry L. Thompson in Colleyn (2001: 202, Figure 43). Courtesy of the Africa Center, New York.

- 10 A *Blolo bla* in the owner’s bedroom, Baule, Tiébissou Region, Ivory Coast. 1982. Height: 19 cm. ‘Figure of an other-world woman, belonging to the sculptor Koffi Nianmien, with clay mound and egg offerings’ (Ravenhill 1996: 39).

Photograph: Lap Nguyen Tien in Ravenhill (1996: 39, Figure 15).

- 11 *Blolo bla*, Baule, Ivory Coast. Wood. Height: 34.6 cm. Catalogue no. EO.1979.1.29. Collection: Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

“This is the First Baule figure ever published and probably the first in a museum collection. It was collected by Maurice Delafosse who noted: ‘Wooden statue representing the wife of a chief named Aya(a woman’s day name).’ This was surely the chief’s spirit wife, though Delafosse published it as a doll. Delafosse: ‘Dolls do not represent any particular individual; they are toys or bibelots which serve to amuse girls or to ornament dwellings; children and young women give them a name, dress them, decorate them with beads and jewelry, and play with these statuettes as our children play with dolls. The subsequent history of this figure is mysterious. It was one of a group of objects Delafosse gave to the Trocadero museum, (now Musée de l’Homme) at the beginning of the 20th century. A male figure from an unknown source now in the Musée de l’Homme collection bears the accession number on Delafosse’s list. I came upon this piece undocumented in the collection of the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire in Brussels in the 1970s where it seems to have arrived years earlier as a gift. Along with all the African objects in that collection, it was subsequently transferred to Tervuren, where it resides today.” (Vogel 1997: 250-251)

Photograph: Susan Vogel (1997: 241). Courtesy of Susan Vogel, California.

- 12 *Biolo bian*, Baule, Ivory Coast. Wood. Height: 55 cm. Collection: Simone Dominati.

“The original purpose of a Baule sculpture can only be guessed at once it has left its original context. The surface is a partial indicator – but not entirely reliable: spirit spouse figures tend to be clean, without kaolin or sacrifices on them. This artist has perfected the Baule aesthetic of balanced asymmetry, and has created the closed outline that is preferred.” (Vogel 1997: 240-241)

Photograph: Hugues Dubois, Brussels in Vogel (1997: 241).

- 13 *Blolo bla* in owner’s bedroom, Baule, Ivory Coast. Kami in 1978.

“Mbra shrine. These shrines (...) exemplify the aesthetic dimensions of villages and bush. The spirit wife is civilized, associated with human society and is kept clean, fed ‘cool’ food in a dish like a person, and protected from dust (and wayward glances) by a white cloth.” (Vogel 1997: 50)

Photograph: Susan Vogel (1997: 50). Courtesy of Susan Vogel, California.

- 14 *Akuaba*, Fanti, Ghana. Wood. Height: 33 cm. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Catalogue no. 41-37. A typical Fanti *akuaba* has an elongated head, unlike the Ashanti *akuaba* that has a round head.

“The difference in shape has – erroneously – been interpreted with regard to the sex of the desired child: dolls with a round face would have been carried if a girl was desired and a doll with an elongated head for boys.” (Grootaers 2002: 257)

Photographer unknown. In Grootaers (2002: 257, Figure 286). Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

- 15 *Akuaba*, Asante, Ghana. Wood, Coloured wooden beads on a rope. Height: 28 cm. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Catalogue no. 373-1.

“One recognizes the ideals of female beauty in the long neck with the greasy rings, the high forehead, the long nose continuing in the eyebrows and the small mouth. This doll wears a string of beads, a decoration which may possibly serve to enhance the ritual power of the *akuaba*.” (Grootaers 2002: 255)

Photographer unknown. In Grootaers (2002: 255, Figure 282). Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

- 16 *Ere ibeji* (twins), Yoruba, Ila Orangun (Igbomina), Nigeria. Wood beads dyed white and indigo. Height: 30 cm. Carved by Akiogun Fakeye. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Catalogue no. 221-2.
 “Female twin figures have a highly raised hairdo with a central crest of hair. This so-called *agogo* hairdo was typical for brides in the 19th century and is still in use among male Sango priests. When a twin is born, it is believed that they are meant to stay together for ever. If one dies the mother will commission an *ere ibeji* or twin figure, which will be fed and bathed and clothed as if it was a living child.” (Grootaers 2002: 93)
Photographer unknown. In Grootaers (2002: 93, Figure 86). Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.
- 17 Shrine in honour of the *Orisa Sango*, Idofin, Igbana, Yoruba, Nigeria, 1961. Nigerian National Museum Archives, Lagos. “The *arugba* Sango, the large figure with bowl, is the principal sculpture found on Sango shrines in Igbomina and Ekiti towns. This carving is in style of the workshops in Osi Ilorin in northern Ekiti” (Drewal 1989: 153). The photograph shows pots, cups, saucers and bottles (including a bottle of beer) used when offering sacrifices to the *Orisa Sango*. In front of the *arugba* are several dance wands in honour of Sango and behind the large earthenware pot to the right are two *Ile ori*, translated as ‘father of the head’. These containers are made of leather and cowrie shells and are where a man’s head (*ori*) is venerated as the principle source of *ase* (life force).
Photograph: P. Allison in Drewal (1989: 153, Figure 167). Courtesy of the Center for African Art, New York.
- 18 Woman carrying figures of *Orisa Eshu*, Yoruba, Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1977.
 “At the time of the annual festival for Esu in the Igbomina town of Ila- Orangun, an Esu devotee from Obajoko’s compound carries her Esu shrine to the market to dance in honour of her lord. The grouping consists of paired male and female figures, suggestive of the wealth and fecundity that Esu can shower upon those who acknowledge his power.” (Drewal 1989: 29)
Photograph: J. Pemberton III in Drewal (1989: 29, Figure 26). Courtesy of the Center for African Art, New York.
- 19 *Ababalawo* beginning a divination rite.
 “Babalawo Kolawole Ositola beginning the rite of divination. He marks the crossroads pattern in the *irosun* powder on the surface of the *opon* Ifa and rhythmically taps the tray with an *iroke* Ifa while invoking the presence of ancient Ifa priests. Porogun Quarter, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria 1982.” (Drewal 1989, 21)
Photograph: J. Pemberton III taken at Ijebu-Ode, Yoruba, Nigeria, 1989 in Drewal (1989: 21, Figure 12). Courtesy of Center for African Art, New York.
- 20 Map of southern Nigeria showing Igbo (also spelt Ibo), Yoruba, Igala and Bini areas. These ethnic groups are known for their *ikenga* (*ikega* or *ikegobo*).
Design: N. de Vink Mapdesign (2014).
- 21 *Ikenga* in so-called chipped style, Ibo, from Orlu District, Nigeria. Wood. Height: 12 cm. Collected by Gwilym Iwan Jones in 1937. Collection: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Catalogue no. 1938.15.47. The statuette is unpainted and shows two horns and two faces on a stool-like base.
Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

- 22 *Ikenga* with machete and severed head, Ibo, from Nimo-Awka area, Nigeria. Wood painted black, pink and yellow. Height: 48.5 cm. Collected by Gwilym Iwan Jones in 1937. Collection: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, Catalogue no. 1938.15.45. It shows horns, a machete and a severed head and a stool. The genitals are clearly visible and the face has *ichi* markings. All the elements in this figure clearly refer to a successful manhunt by its owner, the personal achievement that allows a young man to set up house, get married and start a family.

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

- 23 Ibo *Ikenga* with machete and severed head from Nigeria. Wood. Size: 53 x 14 cm. Collection: Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Provenance unknown.

Photograph: Irene de Groot. Courtesy of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Amsterdam.

- 24 *Ikenga*. Anambra State. Awka, Igbo, Nigeria. Wood with pigment. Height: 570 mm. Collected by Gwilym Iwan Jones in 1937. Collection: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Catalogue no. 1938.15.43. It is painted in black and yellow with a white face and is holding a machete in the right hand and a non-descript object in the left. This *ikenga* appears to be dressed as a dancer from the *Mmwho* men's society. These masks perform every three years at boys' initiation ceremonies (Basden 1921: 225, Figure 78). As *ikenga* figures are projections of their owner's achievements, it can be assumed that the owner of this figure was a prominent member of this society.

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

- 25 Map of Bas-Congo with the names of Yombe, Vili, Kongo, Kakongo and Ngoyi ethnic groups that are known for their *Minkisi*.

Design: N. de Vink Mapdesign (2014).

- 26 *Nkisi* bag with *bilongo*, Yombe, Congo. Cloth, beads, metal, rope, fruit peel, red clay, feathers and various other non-descript materials. Height: 34 cm, diameter: 31 cm. Collected by Missionaries of Scheut. Collection: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

Photograph: Hugo Maertens in Tollebeek (2010: 98). Courtesy of the Katholieke University of Leuven.

- 27 *Nkisi mungundu*, Yombe, Congo. Wood, metal, cloth, rope, pig's teeth, paint, glass, cowrie shell and beads. Height: 112 cm. Collected before 1914. Collection: Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren. Catalogue no. E.O. 0.0.19845. 'The name of this *nkisi* is associated with the bird *mungundu*, which produces a squeaking sound. It is believed to cause chest pains' (MacGaffey in Tollebeek 2010: 77).

Photograph: R. Asselberghs in Tollebeek (2010: 77). Courtesy of the Royal Africa Museum, Tervuren.

- 28 *Nkisi mawenze*, Yombe, Congo. Wood, glass, metal, textile and fibres. Size: 24.5 x 21 x 62 cm. Collected by Missionaries of Scheut. This object was shipped from the Kangu Mission Station (Congo) in 1915 but was held at the British Museum for safekeeping because of World War I. Since then it has been in the collection at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren. Catalogue no. E.O. 0.0.22451. 'This object was believed to cause sleeping sickness and loss of hearing' (Tollebeek 2010: 92).

Photograph: J.M. Vandijck in Tollebeek (2010: 92). Courtesy of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

- 29 Father Leo Bittremieux with *nkisi*, 1911(?). Archives of the Missionaries of Scheut.
 "Bittremieux left for Congo before it became a Belgian colony. King Leopold II had appropriated a large part of Central Africa and had it recognized by other European nations as a Free-state. In order to strengthen his hold on the region, the King called on Belgian missionary societies, such as the Missionaries of Scheut. The sea port town of Boma was the first settlement, followed by Kangu, a town in the interior. Leo Bittremieux, 19 years old, was stationed there in 1899." (Tollebeek 2010: 37)

Photographer unknown. In Tollebeek (2010: 38).

- 30 *Nkisi pfula nkomba*, Yombe, Congo. Wood, metal, resin, mirror glass, pigment, fibre and cloth. Size: 57 x 18 x 15 cm. Collected by Bittremieux at Kangu in 1909. Collection: Musée de Louvain-la Neuve, Louvain. Catalogue no. UCL- A7. Bittremieux describes *Pfula Nkombe* as 'a powerful *nduda* or *ndoki* hunter, which requires a number of human hearts, at least during its consecration'. He adds that 'one claims to know that nine human hearts are hidden behind the mirror. The figure played a role with nightly rituals, according to several informants' (Tollebeek 2010: 82).

Photograph: Hugo Maertens in Tollebeek (2010: 82). Courtesy of the Musée de Louvain-la Neuve, Louvain.

- 31 *Nkisi mabiala ma ndembe*, Loango, Congo. Wood, metal, resin, mirror glass, cloth, fibre, leaves, fruit peel and non-descript materials. Size: 65 x 36 x 20 cm. Collected by Bittremieux at Kangu in 1909. Collection: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

"*Mabiala ma Ndembe* is considered one of the most important types of *Minkisi* from the coastal areas at the end of the 19th century. Bittremieux describes it as a 'fétiche vengeur', an avenging spirit from Loango. It was said that it was used 'against swollen stomach and feet; for children suffering from swollen stomach due to bad food.'" (Tollebeek 2010: 85)

Photograph: Hugo Maertens in Tollebeek (2010: 85). Courtesy of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

- 32 *Phodi dit vola* from Yombe, Congo. Wood, resin, cloth, mirror glass, fibres and animal skin. Size: 26 x 20 x 17 cm. Collected by Bittremieux at Kangu in 1909. Collection: Musée de Louvain-la Neuve, Louvain. Catalogue no. UCL- A7.

"Bittremieux reports that this is an instrument for the *nganga* to 'remove objects from someone's body. He may have referred to medicinal applications and to the treatment of victims who had been hit by stones or weapons.'" (Tollebeek 2010 : 97)

Photograph: Hugo Maertens in Tollebeek (2010 : 97). Courtesy of the Musée de Louvain-la Neuve, Louvain.

- 33 Mother with child, *phemba*, from Yombe, Congo. Wood. Height: 27 cm. Collected by Missionaries of Scheut at Kangu. Collection: Musée de Louvain-la Neuve, Louvain. Catalogue no. UCL- A5.

“The function of mother-and-child figures from Mayombe is uncertain. Perhaps they have been used during fertility rituals or they may have been part of the possessions by a chief.” (Tollebeek 2010: 156)

Photograph: Hugo Maertens in Tollebeek (2010 : 97). Courtesy of the Musée de Louvain-la Neuve, Louvain.

- 34 Map of central and southern Ghana showing the areas where Fanti, Ashanti, Sefwi and Ewe ethnic groups live, known for their *asuman*.

Design: N. de Vink Mapdesign (2014).

- 35 Priestess carrying *abosom* figures and wearing *asuman* around her neck. Enchi, seat of the Aowin paramount chief. 1972. Ghana.

Photograph: Herbert M. Cole (1977: 21). Courtesy of Herbert Cole.

- 36 Different *asuman*, Asante, Ghana.

No. 3: ‘*Ahunum*. The name means “seeing in”, or “through”. It is worn around the forehead. It helps a priest to guess at the errand of anyone consulting him.’

No. 4: ‘Also called *ahunum*, and its use is similar to that *suman* just described.’

No. 5: ‘*Apo*. It is a charm against bad medicine which might cause you to fall down when dancing. To do so is considered a great disgrace and extremely unlucky.’

No. 7: ‘An *afona* (sword). The priest informed me it was for his particular god to cut a path with, when the king went to war’ (Rattray 1927: 12-17).

Photographs: Rattray (1927: 12). Courtesy of Oxford University Press

- 37 Paramount Chief of Ejisu, Ashanti, in his *batakari kese* or war shirt. The shirt is covered with *asuman* (amulets) to protect him from enemy spears and arrows when he was leading his army into battle. Nowadays, these *batakari kese* are worn on special ceremonial occasions. They are not restricted to southern Ghana but can be found across West Africa from Senegal to Cameroon. The display of leather amulets clearly refers to the dress’s northern origins. Herbert Cole (1977: 19) commented as follows on the photograph of the Paramount Chief: ‘In addition to the usual leather amulets and horns, other talismans are cased in repoussé gold, silver, and brightly colored felts, while the caps have festooned ropes of similar amulets.’

Photograph: Herbert Cole (1976). Published in Cole (1977: 19). Courtesy of Herbert Cole.

- 38 Ashanti shrine, Ghana.

“The main focus of a shrine is a symbol of the deity, a collection of sacrificial offerings and other substances in a container. This accumulation is most often referred to as the “fetish” by English-speaking Ghanaians. Platforms are built and walls are decorated or draped with cult materials: stools, figures, swords, cloth, containers, and other objects are carefully arranged. The ensemble constitutes a self-conscious display of the power of the god by showing its material wealth along with its symbols of spiritual strength.” (Cole 1977: 99)

Photograph: Herbert M. Cole (1977 : 99). Courtesy of Herbert Cole.

- 39 The so-called Fetish Market in Lomé, Togo. The photograph shows skulls of antelopes, buffaloes, monkeys, crocodiles and other animals as well as dolls that appear to be meant for use as twin figures.

Photograph: Rev. J. Smits 1963

- 40 A chief riding in his palanquin at a durbar with his *kra* (a little girl) seated in front of him. The palanquin is carried by the chief's attendants and is draped with a precious, hand-woven *kente* cloth. Another attendant is holding an umbrella high over the chief's head. A durbar is a festive gathering of chiefs from the region, each carried in his palanquin and shielded from the sun by a state umbrella (as in the background). A durbar may be held on the occasion of the enstoolment of a paramount chief. The chief in this photograph is holding a state sword (*afena*) by the hilt. Only a chief is permitted to hold a sword in this manner and everyone else holds it by the blade, indicating that the bearer is not poised for battle or planning to cause harm. The little girl seated in front of the chief, is his *kra* (sometimes translated as 'soul'). Her hat is covered with gold ornaments, her body painted with yellow circles (the colour of gold). Information from Cole (1977, Kyeremateng 1964).

Photograph: Herbert Cole. Courtesy of Herbert Cole.

- 41 The cover of *Fetichism and Fetich Worshippers* written by Father Baudin (1845-1887) from the SMA in 1885. He was a missionary on the Slave Coast (present-day Bénin) and on the frontispiece is a portrait of Mgr. de Marion Brésillac, who founded the SMA. He left for Sierra Leone in 1859 with six colleagues, all of whom died within two months of their arrival. Foreword by Rev. Augustin Planque, the co-founder of the SMA, who describes its foundation in 1856 and the early history of the SMA for an American public. The book was translated from French into English by Mary McMahon. Baudin describes his experiences as a missionary and the indigenous religious practices of the inhabitants of the Slave Coast. Published in New York and Cincinnati by Benziger Brothers. Collection: Americana Section of the New York Library, Full catalogue. Record MARCXML.

- 42a 'The Goddess Odudua and Fetich Temple Posto Noyo' (Porto Novo is the correct spelling). Illustration from the book by Father Baudin. *Odudua* is the Yoruba *orisa* who, according to the creation myths, founded the first human settlement, the city of Ife, and became its first *oni* (king). His sons founded the other city states of the Yoruba. (William Fagg 1982: 73).

- 42b 'The God Chango and the three goddesses of Yorouba'. Illustration from the book by Father Baudin of devotees of the *Orisa Shango*, prostrate in front of his statue. An artist's impression of how fetishes were worshipped by them. It is not clear which three goddesses are meant.

"According to legend *Shango* was the fourth king of Oyo in Western Nigeria. His reign was restive. He was successful in many battles, mainly because of his magic talents. Fire and smoke belched from his nose, which caused enemies to flee and his subjects to fear him. He was also able to summon lightning. After his death his subjects made him an *orisa* who is able to command thunder and lightning." (Müller 2000: 120)

- 43 Human sacrifice to Ugun, the 'God of War'. An illustration from Baudin's book, *Ogun* is the *orisa* of iron and is worshipped by all those who work with iron, such as blacksmiths and carvers. He is the *orisa* 'to whom all other *orisa* bow'. *Ogun* is also the patron deity of hunters and warriors, those who take life to sustain it. His shrine consists of palm fronds skirting a tree (Fagg 1982: 196). The drawing shows a man who has been killed

and beheaded and has been hung upside down from a tree. The severed head has been attached to the tree between his feet. Birds of prey are attacking the body of the dead man, one extracting his entrails, another tearing flesh from his bleeding throat. The white figure in the shrine probably represents *orisa Ogun*, the God of War.

- 44 The evolutionary scheme of Australian weapons drawn up by Auguste Lane-Fox at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford in 1906. Photo archives of the Pitt Rivers Museum. Coombes (1994: 118). Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

- 45 Henry Balfour in a gallery at the Pitt Rivers Museum, showing typological classification c. 1895. The photo dates from 1890-1895.

“Interior of the Pitt Rivers Museum, taken in the south side of the Upper Gallery looking west towards the old staircase between the galleries and the Court. Henry Balfour sitting on case in middle of gallery looking at displays of weapons on open screens on the south side of the gallery. This is before they installed upright cases above the desk cases which are all in situ.” (Description Pitt Rivers Museum)

‘There does not appear to be an accession or card catalogue entry for this photograph/album’ (Petch 06/09/2006).

Photograph believed to have been taken by Alfred Robinson (1963-1938). Collection: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, Catalogue no. 1998.267.94.5. Coombes (1994: 119). Courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

- 46 Photo of the ‘court’ or main hall at the Pitt Rivers Museum c. 1895.

“Interior view of Pitt Rivers Museum Court displays, looking towards eastern side and showing 2 totem poles. Note that the two totem poles donated by Tylor in 1887 are present, but not the large framed painting *The Life of Many Shots* (donated 1895).” (Description of the Pitt Rivers Museum)

Photograph believed to have been taken by Alfred Robinson (1963-1938), Collection: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, Catalogue no. 1998.267.95.3. Coombes (1994: 143). Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

- 47 Front cover of the London Missionary Society’s magazine with a notice of its exhibition, May 1908. Archives of the Church Missionary Society Library, London.

- 48 Punitive Expedition, Benin, Nigeria, 1897. Photographed in Benin City, Nigeria. Gelatin silver print process. Size: 16.5 x 12 cm. Contributed by Paymaster Rear Admiral H.S. Measham. Collection: British Museum, London. Catalogue no. Af, A79,13,

“Photograph (black and white): group of six European man sitting, surrounded by Benin objects, several other men are sitting in a building at the back, the six men are wearing western-style clothes and helmets.” (Curatorial collections and research enquiries, Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, 2014)

The dark bronze figure on the left is currently the property of the National Museum of Ethnography in Leiden.

Photographer unknown. In Coombes (1994: 8). Courtesy of the British Museum, London.

- 49 Throne of King Njoya’s father. Height: 175 cm. Wood, beads, cowrie shells and cloth. Collection: Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. Registraion no. III C 33341 a-b. Gift from King Njoya. Bamum, Cameroon. In 1902, a German expedition under the command of Lieutenant Sandrock reached the Kingdom of Bamum (Cameroon) and its capital city, Fouban. King Njoya received the Germans hospitably. Sandrock was so impressed by

the reception as well as by the way the kingdom and the royal court were organized that he decided not to annex the kingdom but to establish good relations. The Germans introduced new building techniques and crops (palm oil, beans and peanuts) and, in return, the King donated his father's throne to the German Emperor. It is now one of the most important pieces in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin. The throne is carved from one piece of wood from a tree trunk. Royal thrones were the most prestigious artefacts that the kingdom's craftsmen could make and they had to be as perfect as possible (Beumers & Koloss 1992).

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin.

- 50 Throne of King Béhanzin. Wood. Height: 127 cm. Donated by King Béhanzin of Dahomey to Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany in 1892. Collection: Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. Catalogue no. III C 5550.

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Völkerkunde Museum, Berlin.

- 51 *Gelede* masks dancing in pairs. Yoruba, Nigeria.

“Originally, the *Gelede*'s purpose was to combat sorcery (the many magico-religious practices that endanger the social equilibrium and traditional customs) and, in so doing, was associated with *Efe*, appears especially at night, the *Gelede* only performs during the day. Many authors on the subject claim that the *Gelede* issues from the power of the ‘mothers’. The two female masks represent twins. The Yoruba, like some of their neighbours, hold twins in great esteem, and their presence in a family is a sign of good fortune and happiness. In addition to the head mask with the elaborate plaited coiffure, the two dancers are rigged out with false wooden breasts, and wear jangling anklets called *iku*.” (Huet 1995: 132)

Photograph: Michel Huet (1995: 133).

- 52 Masked Dogon dancer at a *dama*. Masks are central in the burial ceremonies of men for the Dogon living on the Bandiagara Cliff. Two major rituals accompany death: the funeral with the burial just after a person's death, and the *dama* that is the mask festival and is held some years later. The *dama* concludes the mourning period and lasts for several weeks with daily dancing. The Dogon have a vast number of different masks, each with its own meaning, that dance during the *dama*. The masks and their rituals usher in a new existence for the dead: that of ancestor (Van Beek & Holyman 2000). This mask is called *émna saû* and is a Samo mask. The Samo live in western Burkina Faso, not far from Bandiagara. In the past, they were feared for their slave-raiding expeditions among the Dogon but, in the dance, they are ridiculed and dehumanized. The mask speaks (all other masks produce animal sounds or shrieks) Dogon but only poorly; it jabbbers, stammers and mumbles, showing the onlookers that it is not a real human being. The photograph was taken by Wouter van Beek during the 2008 *dama* at Teri Ku in the southern half of Tireli. He collected this rare mask for the National Museum in Bamako (Van Beek, personal communication).

Photograph: Wouter van Beek. Courtesy of Wouter van Beek.

- 53 The so-called Hottentot Venus: ‘La belle Hottentote’. A satire on the Hottentot Venus, a pastiche by Saartje Baartman from the Cape Colony who was seen as a medical curiosity in London and Paris in the 1800s. Ethnicity: Khoikhoi.

“In the course of the nineteenth century, Europeans began to show a deeper interest in the African woman. The overriding image was that of the black woman as sexualized women- as it was in America, but the European views were more complex. There were several stages and facets to this process of imaging. Initially the Hottentot female was regarded as the prototype of the African or black woman. African female sexuality was equated thereafter with female sexuality

generally, which in accordance with nineteenth century medical views was considered 'pathological'. At the beginning of the century the 'Hottentot Venus' caused a medical and popular sensation. The so-called 'Hottentot apron'- which referred to an enlarged clitoris- and *steatopyga*, or large behind, which had been described by eighteenth-century travellers in South Africa, could now be viewed by all and sundry in the figure of Saartje Baartman." (Nederveen 1990: 181)

Print of Baartman (1789-1815). Restingplace: Vergaderingskop, Hankey Eastern Cape, South Africa.

- 54 The 'Leopard Man', plaster figure, showing an attack by a member of a secret society. Collection: Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren. Catalogue no. HO.0.1.371.

"This plaster figure represents a leopard man (*anito*) and a sleeping man. It has been made by Paul Wissaert and was commissioned by the Ministry of Colonies. In the early 1930s there were rumours of blood lusty leopard men in Belgian Congo. Disguised as leopards they were said to kill innocent people 'en série'. Such stories confirmed the myth that the 'savage native' tried to undermine the colonial authority. However, it was an isolated phenomenon of political blood feud. The leopard man proved to be an efficient instrument of revenge for local political troubles. The phenomenon got a boost in the period 1934-1935 when traditional associations were hard pressed by the colonial administration and the missionaries. Through terroristic acts they tried to uphold the unstable position of traditional structures." (Website of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren. Accessed 10 October 2013)



Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

The plaster figure is displayed in the marble central hall of the museum and in the niches behind the figure are gilded bronze statues, one of which (reproduced here) shows a richly dressed Belgian man with a scantily dressed young African boy, accompanied by the text: 'Belgium donates the civilisation to Congo'.

- 55 *Biyeri* figure from a reliquary ensemble, Fang, Gabon. Wood. Height: 56.2 cm. Collected before 1934. Collection: Tropenmuseum Amsterdam. Catalogue no. 4133-67. Previously in the collections of G. Oudshoorn (1965) and then Charles Raton, Paul Guillaume.

"The exceptionally beautiful, male *eyima byeri* figure at the Tropenmuseum came from the former collection of Paul Guillaume (1891-1934). It is carved from hardwood and the body had been rubbed with palm oil over an extended period. As a result, it has taken on a deep black, glossy appearance. *Biyeri* figures primarily served as guards that defended the relics. As such, the figures were not themselves objects of veneration; that was reserved for the *byeri* (ancestors), who in turn were intermediaries between humans and supreme beings. Under pressure from the Catholic mission and the French government, the Fang were forced to destroy their reliquaries. Today they are made only for commercial purpose." (Faber 2011: 86)

Photograph: Irene de Groot. Courtesy of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Amsterdam.

- 56 *Nkisi Mbula*. Lower Congo. End of the 19th century. Wood, vegetable material, glass, mirror glass, cloth and brown, white and red pigments. Height: 32 cm. Collection: Natural History Museum, Stralsund. Catalogue no. Maf 32138. ‘*Night guns* point into directions West, North and South (...) The great number of night guns suggests that their function was specifically to ward off witches’ (Deimel 2012: 104).

Photograph: Ehard Schwerin. Courtesy of Deutscher Kunstverlag, Berlin/München.

- 57 *Túgubèlè* or diviner of the Senúfo of Northern Ivory Coast. Archives of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.

“Diviners can be male and female. They derive their knowledge from three animals: The chameleon, the tortoise and the python. These diviners are herbalists and can prepare medicines from the flesh of the python, which is able to kill a person.” (Gottschalk 2009: 31)

Photograph: Father P. Knops (1927). Courtesy of the Archives of the SMA, Cadier en Keer. The photograph has been part of missionary exhibitions of the SMA fathers. See Figure 80.

- 58 A leopard-skin chief: *Kuaar Muon*. Nuer, Sudan. Although called a ‘chief’, the word may be misleading. He is a sacred person with no political authority but is a ritual specialist with political importance. These chiefs and mediators are arbiters in disputes over cattle and in situations demanding the sacrifice of an ox or a ram. A leopard-skin chief has a sacred association with the earth (*mun*) that gives him certain ritual powers in relation to it, including the power to bless or curse. He alone wears a leopard skin (*twac*) across his shoulders. (Evans-Pritchard 1940).

Photograph: Evans-Pritchard (1940: 222). Courtesy of Oxford University Press.

- 59 Dinka men sacrificing a cow. Sudan. Cows are the Dinka’s most treasured possessions. Each animal is known individually according to its colours and the shape of its horns. Sacrificing a cow is therefore a special occasion accompanied by extensive ceremonies. It starts with elaborate invocations that enumerate the motives for the sacrifice of a cow (a person’s recovery from illness or the settling of a dispute between clans). After the animal is killed, the meat is distributed among the members of the family following a set pattern. The cow is seen as a victim or a prisoner awaiting its death. It is given to the agents of sickness, to suffer in the place of the man (Lienhardt 1961 [1970]).

Photograph: Godfrey Lienhardt (1970: 113). Courtesy of Oxford University Press.

- 60 *Ikenga* figure with cowries and a manilla. Ibo, Nigeria. Wood, plant, cowrie shell and bronze metal. Height: 11 cm. Collected in 1916 by Talbot and described by him as a ‘protective juju’. Collection: Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford, Catalogue no. 1916.45.110. The cowrie shells and the manilla attached to this *ikenga* probably reflect the owner’s financial achievements.

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

- 61 *Nkisi nkondi*, Yombe (or Woyo?), Cabinda, Angola. Wood, iron, mirror, glass, cloth, vegetable fibres and other non-descript materials. Height: 90 cm. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Catalogue no. 172-1.

“This *nkisi nkondi* belonged to the entire village community and was so powerful that it was kept in a special hut, guarded by an *nganga*. It had numerous functions in the community: defending the village against the outside world, supporting the village elders, punishing and killing criminals. It also ratified treaties, the oaths taken at initiation ceremonies, the settling of disputes and the identification of witches. The fingers of the right hand of this *nkisi* form a cir-

cle, but the thumb points upwards. The two are said to symbolise the earth and the sky and refer to *Nkondi's* decisions which constitute an indissoluble pact between the two." (Grootaers 2002: 572)

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

- 62 *Asuman*. Probably from Ashanti, Fanti, Sefwi and other Akan-speaking peoples in southern Ghana. Different materials such as bones, horns, calabash, fibres, leather, beads and metal. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

62a Shows a large tooth containing 'medicine' to ward off evil (theft, burglary, witchcraft); three leather pouches with 'medicine' as protection against harm, to be carried on the body; a calabash (with rope) containing 'medicine' against evil and beads with medicinal powers.

62b Shows ropes coiled up to ward off evil, a canine tooth with 'medicines', a bead on a string with medicinal power and a metal bracelet for good luck

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

- 63 Some *Orisha* of the Yoruba.

63a A *Sango* possession priestess dancing. Olori, Nigeria, 1975. 'Sango possession priestess dancing with her *ose Sango* dancewand, the emblem of her lord, whose power is evidenced in thunder and lightning' (Drewal 1989: 146.).

Photograph: John Henri Drewal (1989: 146, Figure 155). Courtesy of the Museum for African Art, New York.

- 63b *Esu* dance staff, Osogbo, 19th century. Wood, beads and cowries. Height: 46.5 cm. Private Collection.

"*Esu* the guardian of the ritual way, bestows riches upon those who follow the sacrificial way of life and steals from those who do not acknowledge his authority, *ase*. Hence, *Esu* figures are often laden with beads and cowries, signs of wealth and power. The sexual symbolism in the myths and iconography associated with *Esu* is emphasized in this figure. Its owner encased the long phallic hair shape, a hallmark of *Esu*, in a elaborately decorated beaded sheath." (Drewal 1989, 29).

Photograph: Richard Todd in Drewal (1989: 28, Figure 23). Courtesy of the Museum for African Art, New York.

- 63c *Ifa* divination tray. Wood. Height: 34 cm. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Catalogue no.180-6.

"At the heart of Yoruba traditional religion is the ritual of divination, called *Ifa*, and a vast corpus of oral literature known as *Odu Ifa*. The rite of divination is performed whenever a person or group comes to a priest of *Ifa*, who is called *babalawo*, 'father of the secret', with a serious problem, such as the barrenness of a wife, a series of untimely deaths in a family, the fear of witchcraft, or anxiety over a journey to be taken. *Ifa* will also be cast to establish the dates for festivals for the deities, *orisha*, and for the ancestors, and above all to discern the sacrifices that must be made, and to whom, that one's life may be propitious. In many Yoruba towns, prior to the New Year festival, the priests of *Ifa* will carry the great tray of *ifa*, *opon Ifa*, in procession to the place of the king and perform a rite called *Odun Idafa*. As each of the many questions is put to *Ifa*, the priest of *Ifa* will cast the sixteen palm nuts and slowly make the eight Marks of an *Odu Ifa* in the *iyerosun* wood dust on the tray. The assembled priests will chant in chorus or once at a time the appropriate verses from *Odu Ifa* that has appeared. The verses will suggest whether the year to come will be propitious or problematic; further divination will determine

what sacrifices will have to be made by the king and the chiefs to assure the peace and prosperity of the town in the year ahead.” (Fagg 1982: 114)

Photograph: Ferry Herrebrugh. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.



Although badly worn, the tray shows the head of the *orisa Eshu* with its large eyes and a unity of nose and mouth in the upper part of the rim. The tray also shows four characteristic *Eshu* figures on the rim with their heads at right angles to their bodies. There are also images of mudfish, which refer to royal ancestors who are considered the founders and protectors of society.

- 63d Ritual sword, Yoruba Nigeria. Copper alloy. Height: 41 cm. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Catalogue no. 171-31.

“Swords like this are known as *ada*, *agada* of *ida*. They are placed on the altars of *Ogun*, the god of iron, the river goddess *Oshun* and the creator-god *Obatala*, and identical pairs of them can be found in some *Ogboni* lodges ... The handle consists of the figure of a drummer with a drum on his knees, attached to the drummer. The bell serves to attract the deity’s attention.” (Witte 2004: 83)

Photograph: Ferry Herrebrugh. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

- 64 *Nyamedua*, the tree (*dua*) dedicated to *Nyame*, can be found in many, mostly older, Ashanti compounds and shrines. Ashiem, Ashanti, Ghana. 1970.

Photograph: This author.

- 65 Cephalomorphic head cup for palm wine. Kuba, Democratic Republic of Congo. Wood, brass, camwood powder, palm oil. 19th century. Height: 21 cm., diameter: 7 cm. Collected by Leo Frobenius. Purchased from the Museum für Völkerkunde, Leipzig, 1912. Collection: Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main.

“Anthropomorphic cups were objects of prestige in Kuba culture. Many, especially those decorated with brass, could be used by kings only. The hairdo on this cup resembles coiffures which were popular in the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Informants told Torday that a winglike hairdo was a privilege of Kuba kings. The cup has been smeared with *tool* (also called *tukula*) a reddish mixture of palm oil and certain fruits with which many Kuba men and women decorate their bodies. The remnants can still be seen in the grooves.” (Verswijver 1995: 341-342)

Photograph: Stephen Beckers, Frankfurt/Main, 2009. Courtesy: Weltkulturen Museum.

- 66 *Ndop* memorial figure of a king of the Kuba, Congo. Wood . Height: 54.5 cm. Collected by Emile Torday in 1905. Collection: British Museum.

“Portrait figure commemorating Shyaam aMbul aNgoong, the founder of the Kuba kingdom. He ruled in the first half of the 17th century, though the figure was probably carved in the late 18th century. The image at the front of the plinth is a game board which he was reported in oral traditions to have introduced among the Kuba. Collected at Nsheng the Kuba capital. ... Within the whole of the Torday collections (which runs to nearly 3.000 pieces in the British Museum alone) three objects were outstanding. These were representations of Kuba kings, including that commemorating the founder of the ruling dynasty, Shyaam aMbul aNgoong (or Shamba Bolongongo in Torday’s orthography). To Torday they seemed (wrongly as it happens) like portraits done from life, as would be appropriate in a society where kingship itself was revered. The figures appeared the very embodiment of the legitimacy of Royal power. Unlike so many of the objects Torday had documented, these appeared to have been deliberately preserved, even treasured. Indeed, Torday’s own account, confirmed by the independent witness of Hilton-Simpson, suggests that it was precisely because the king and his court were impressed with the image presented to them of the British Museum as a treasury of the finest in World cultures that they were willing to dispose of these examples and a fourth which was given to Torday as a leaving present. In style and conception the figures were eminently accessible to European taste- rounded and naturalistic, not angular or resistant to interpretation like the African sculpture that was just beginning to be appreciated in the more innovative studios in Paris.” (Mack, undated: 17)

Photograph: In Mack (undated) cover. Courtesy of the British Museum, London.

- 67 A mask of the Baule, Ivory Coast 1930-1935. Wood. Height: 33 cm. Donated to the Tropenmuseum by W.G. Tillman, 1994. Previously in the collections of Carel van Lier, Charles Rattou and Hans Himmelheber (who collected the mask between 1933 and 1935). Collection: Tropenmuseum.

Photograph: Irene de Groot. Courtesy of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Amsterdam.

- 68 *Dogon* figure. Mali. Collected by Marcel Griaule. Donated to the Musée de l’homme, Paris. Collection: Musée Quay Branly. The figure has been attributed to the ‘Maitre des yeux obliques’, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle. Wood. Height: 59 cm. Formerly in the collections of Charles Rattou and Hubert Goldet. Musée Branly acquired the figure in 1999. Catalogue no. 701999.9.2.

“This figure has been handed down from one generation to the next, and has probably been in the possession of a spiritual leader, in whose shrine it functioned as the representation of an ancestor. Probably it is the image of a founding father. Some statues which show comparable style elements may have been produced in the same workshop, which could be named (using an expression introduced by Hélène de Loup) the workshop of the ‘maitre des yeux obliques’.” (Musée Branly website)

Photograph in Musée Branly, Paris. Courtesy of the Scala Archives, Firenze .

- 69 President Léopold Senghor admiring African masks at the First World Congress of Black Arts and Cultures in Dakar in 1966. Born to Catholic parents in 1906, President Senghor was awarded a grant to study Literature at the University of Paris and was the first African to be awarded a PhD in France in 1935. He taught at a secondary school in France and was elected as the first president of Senegal at independence. In 1984 he was appointed a member of the *Académie Française*. While in France, he developed the concept of *Négritude* with Aimée Césaire and Léon Damas. It promoted the brotherhood of all Africans and encouraged Africans (including their descendants in the diaspora) to be proud

of their heritage and culture but not to the exclusion of certain elements of European and American culture, especially the sciences.

Photographer unknown.

70 *Minkisi* figures.

70a *Nkondi*, Vili, Congo. Collected by Robert Visser before 1903. Height: 70 cm. Wood, cloth, vegetable material, iron, feathers and cowrie shells. Collection Museum für Völkerkunde, Leipzig. Catalogue no. Maf 9008.

Photograph: Esther Hoyer in Deimel (2012: 70). Courtesy of Deutscher Kunstverlag, Berlin/München.

70b *Nkondi*, Nquinde, Vili, Congo. Collected by Robert Visser before 1904. Wood, iron, glass, mirror glass, porcelain beads, cloth, vegetable material and brown, red and white pigments. Collection: Museum für Völkerkunde, Leipzig. Catalogue no. 9469.

“The ethnographic museum of Leipzig routinely honoured its patrons who lived in remote areas of the world and to encourage them to collect objects for the museum. They were given special charters. Paul Visser too had such a charter. On June 12, 1901, Dr. Karl Weule, the museum director, wrote the following letter to Visser, at that time living at Banana (Congo): ‘It is well known to me from my sojourn in Berlin, how well you know what to collect. You have so far remembered Berlin handsomely, honourable mr. Visser, from now on us too! We have so far collections from Loango, but mainly from the area North of the Congo river, which are very nice, but which badly need to be completed. Especially the fetishism has been poorly treated.’ (Deimel 2012: 37)

Photograph: Esther Hoyer in Deimel (2012: 72). Courtesy of Deutscher Kunstverlag, Berlin/München.

71 *Nkondi Mabialla mandembe*, Chiloango, Vili, Congo. Collected by Robert Visser before 1903. Height: 87 cm. Wood, iron, mirror glass, cloth, animal skin, vegetable material and brown, white and red pigments. Collection: Museum für Völkerkunde, Leipzig. Catalogue no. Maf. 8917. Robert Visser’s comments on this figure were as follows: ‘His existence has cost thousands of human lives. Only through the intervention by the Portuguese ambassador the killings were stopped. I obtained this figure through the kindness of the Portuguese ambassador’ (Deimel 2012: 62, 72).

Photograph: Esther Hoyer in Deimel (2012: 63). Courtesy of Deutscher Kunstverlag, Berlin/München.

72 View of various displays at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren in 1963. Catalogue no. HP.1963.1.205. Collection: Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, 1963.

“By treating the objects ‘neutrally’ and by ‘naturalising’ them as ‘specimens’, the museum claimed to be the protector of indigenous traditions against foreign influences. The concept ‘tribe’ thus became an autonomous identity. Guided by a selection of objects the showcases were to present the different Congolese populations. The presentation avoided every suggestion of mutual connections and unity. (...) The average museum visitor and a large part of the European literature about African art lumped culture, ethnicity and artistic styles together: a hotchpotch of the ‘primitive’, ‘local’, ‘unchangeable’ (i.e. ‘natural’) and ‘eternal’. The assumed identity of a tribe was coupled with language, territory and style. The myth of the traditional and the authentic got mixed up with the notion of ‘tribalism’, which denied any dynamic connection between indigenous cultures.” (Wastiau 2000: 65)

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

- 73 The displays in the Ethnography Department of the American Museum of Natural History in New York between 1930-1950.

Photographer unknown.

- 74 Three Yoruba objects: (a) an *Egungun* mask; (b) a *Gelede* mask; and (c) a shrine figure. They have comparable sculptural qualities, such as bulging eyes, scarifications on their cheeks and similar hairstyles (Drewal 1989).

- 74a Detail of an *Egungun* mask danced to honour the ancestors. Abeokuta 1978.

“The headdress that includes images of a human head with hunter’s coiffure surrounded by carved onkey and hornbill skulls was made by a master sculptor in the Esubiyi workshop, Abeokute, Nigeria.” (Drewal 1989: 212, Figure 245)

Photograph: Drewal (1978). Courtesy of the Museum of African Art, New York.

- 74b *Gelede* mask. Ipokia, Nigeria, Wood, clay and black pigment. Height: 27 cm. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Catalogue no. 160-99.

“The erect central lock of hair on the mask is a reference to an initiation ceremony in which a magic substance is rubbed into shallow incisions in the scalp. (Fagg & Pembert 1980). Initiates go into a trance as the power of the god takes possession of them through the incisions. They no longer cut or shave their hair at the point where the incisions are made. The lock of hair is known as an *oshu* and the wearer as an *adoshu*.” (Witte 2004: 14)

Photograph: Ferry Herrebrugh. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

- 74c Detail of royal figure with servants. Wood. Height: 71.5 cm. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Catalogue no. 158-3.

“This group was made by the sculptor Oniyide (c.1875-c.1947), from the famous Adugbologe family of sculptors in the *Itoko* district of Abeokuta. According to Henry Drewal, the work of Oniyide and his sons Makinde and Salaku Ayo (or Ayola) is typified by long, narrow, full-lobed ears, angular, pronounced nostrils, lenticular eyes and short legs.(...) According to Fagg the group represents the Alake of Abeokuta, surrounded by four servants with ceremonial. The king is holding a kola nut in his left hand and a fly whisk in his right.”

The sculpture was probably a status symbol for one of the Alake’s reception chambers. (Witte 2004: 68-69)

Photograph: Ferry Herrebrugh. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

- 75 Anthropomorphic headrest. Luba. Shaba. Collected by Comm. O.Michaux between 1890 and 1897. Size: 17 x 12 cm. Wood. Catalogue no. EO.0.0 23473. Collection: Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren. Headrests are common in large parts of Africa. They are made to preserve the intricate hairdos of women, some of which took up to 50 hours to accomplish and had to last for at least two or three months. This particular hairdo is called *mikanda*, meaning ‘steps’ or ‘little waterfall’. In the ethnographic literature, the carver of these objects (they all resemble each other), whose name is unknown, is called ‘Master of the Cascade’. These headrests were personal and were sometimes buried with their owner (Nooter 1996).

Photograph: R. Asselberghs in Verswijver (1995: 217, Figure 177). Courtesy of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

- 76 Rider on horseback, Ewe, Ghana. Soft wood and polychrome (blue and white). Cloth. Size: 21 x 18 x 8 cm. Collection: SMA, Cadier en Keer.
 “The figure represents a woman on horseback and is from a shrine at Tsiamé, a village near Abor and Keta in the Volta Region. Ghana. Together with other objects it belonged to a priest and was consulted by people who had financial problems. The cult demanded that men sought refuge with a female figure in a square room, women with a male figure in a round room.” (Leyten 1984: 55)
Photograph: Pierre Schreurs in Leyten (1984: 54). Courtesy of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.
- 77 *Ikenga*, Ibo, Nigeria. Size: 68 x 12 cm. Collection: SMA, Cadier en Keer. On loan to the SVD, Missiemuseum Steyl-Tegelen. The figure holds an object in each hand: possibly a knife in the right hand and maybe a gun in the left. The figure carries a pouch on its back, possibly for gunpowder.
Photograph: John Dummer in Leyten (1984: 36). Courtesy of the SMA, Cadier en Keer.
- 78a *Agbogho Mmuo*, a so-called Maiden spirit mask or the ‘Mask of the Beautiful Girl’, Ibo, Nigeria. Wood and mirrored glass. Size: 60 x 21.3 cm. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Catalogue no. 376-5.
 “*Agbogho Mmuo*, a Maiden Spirit mask worn with an elaborate appliqué costume by the middle grade of the men’s society at funerals and festivals in which the masquerader mimics women’s activities. (Willet 2002: 90, 167)
 Masks of the Mmuo- men’s society represent a deceased woman with an idealized image of female beauty. The masks perform every three years at the occasion of the initiation of boys.” (Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal)
Photograph: Ferry Herrebrugh. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.
- 78b Photograph of a male dancer with his *Agbogho Mmuo* mask, including the wooden ‘mask’ that covers the face. The costume clearly shows female characteristics. The dancer is accompanied by two attendants who take care of her during the dance.
Photograph: Rev. G.T. Basden, a missionary in the Church of England who was active among the Ibo for about 35 years. In Basden (1921: 225).
- 79 Collector Robert Visser and museum director Dr. Karl Weule in front of the Visser Showcase in the old Grassi Museum in Leipzig. Archives of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig. In a letter to the museum in 1903, Visser wrote about his collecting activities: ‘... therefore I have paid even more attention to and over the years taken notes exclusively of the spiritual lives of these peoples, which I will hand over to you when I return home (hopefully in April)’ (Deimel 2012: 42).
Photographer unknown. In Deimel (2012: 41). Courtesy of Deutscher Kunstverlag, Berlin/Munich.
- 80 Father Leo Brouwer showing an *ikenga* figure to visitors at a missionary exhibition in circa 1950. Archives of the SMA. The *Epa* mask can be seen under the palm tree (representing Africa). On the rear wall on the left, there is a photograph of a diviner, also called a fetish priest by the Senufo in northern Ivory Coast.
Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the SMA in Cadier en Keer.

- 81a Newly appointed Archbishop J.K. Amisshah of Cape Coast on an official visit to one of his parishes, 1962, Ghana.

Photograph: This author.

- 81b Archbishop wearing his *cappa magna*.

Photograph: This author.

- 82 The flight into Egypt by Lamidi in 1956, a detail of the doors for the Catholic Chapel, made by Lamidi, at Ibadan, Nigeria.

“I am frequently asked, ‘how do you inspire your carvers with Christian feeling?’ I do not think that the old pagan work was the product of deep religious feeling and I do not attempt to force the carvers outside their traditional limits in these matters. I narrate the stories, answer the carvers ‘questions, discuss technical details, and help them to improve their interpretation by frequent repetition of the same themes. The stories themselves provide inspiration, and I, a European - unfortunately for my work in many ways - must be careful not to interfere too much in imposing my own ideas and emotions.” (Caroll 1966: 91)

Photograph: Father Kevin Caroll (1966: 91) of the SMA.

- 83 The three Wise Men visit the new-born Jesus. Christmas crib set by Bandle in 1962.

“I had been experimenting with several carvers in 1947 without much success when Bandle arrived. He told me he was a Catholic with the name ‘George’; he seemed to think a Christian name was a recommendation. However, the carving he brought with him – a modern soldier, new in subject, old in style - was indeed a recommendation and I at once engaged him to work for me. (...) Bandle conceives his work in four stages following the preliminary work of cutting the log, splitting it and clearing away surplus wood. Each stage has a name (a) *ona lile* - blocking out the main forms with an axe or adze; (b) *aletunle* – working over the main forms and breaking them into smaller precise masses with adze or chisel, e.g. the forms of ears, hands and eyes; (c) *didan*- smoothing the forms, chiefly with knife or chisel; (d) *fifin* cutting Sharp detail such as hair, eyelids and pattern work; this is chiefly the work of the knife. In the preliminary rough work and in the early blocking out the apprentices give considerable help. The second stage, being concerned with the precise definition of the masses and their interrelation, is very much the work of the master himself. Smoothing may be left almost entirely to the apprentices. The final sharp cutting, *fifin*, is best done by the master (...) the old carvers used a rough leaf, *erinpin*, to smooth certain carvings.” (Caroll 1966: 95)

Photograph: Father Kevin Caroll (1966: 95) of the SMA.

- 84 Chasubles for a priest during Holy Mass with traditional Congo designs (Mveng 1967) .

“The Catholic Church in Africa tried to privilege a renewal of the liturgy that would integrate symbols and forms from African traditions. On these hangings, we thus see the three bas colours of the African shades of colour, a symbol of the human condition, and a series of geometric and figurative motives that trace a continuity between Christianity and African cosmology: the man and the ‘cosmic circles’, the ovals and the small hells, symbol of fecundity and of life, that are ‘the symbols of the redemption of our salvation’ (Mveng).” (Bargna 2000: 202)

Photograph: Ivan Bargna (2000: 5). Courtesy of Ivan Bargna, Milan.

- 85 A senior advisor to the chief pours libation for the ancestors. Ashanti, Ghana.

Photograph: This author 1967.

- 86 *Legba*, Ewe, near Dzelukofe, Volta Region, Ghana. 1963. Clay, cloth, whitewash, cowrie shells, vegetable materials and remnants of sacrifices (blood, eggs and non-descript materials. A decapitated fowl rests on the top)). *Legba* figures are representatives of *Hebieso*,

one of the *dzimawuwo* (spirits of the sky) and considered one of the spirits that control lightning and thunder. Other representatives are the ax (*sofia*), thunderstone (*sokpewo*) and a piece of iron (*ebi*). A *legba* is a guardian who warns a priest of impending danger (Brouwer 1952: 40).

Photograph: This author 1963.

- 87 *Oshe* (dance wand) used in the *Shango* cult. Oro Igbomina, Yoruba, Nigeria. Wood. Height: 52 cm. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Catalogue no. 495-1. Cult objects used for *Shango* can be recognized by the images of a double axe, which symbolizes the stones that *Shango* hurls from the sky during a thunderstorm (Grootaers 2002: 81). ‘The thunderstones on the head of this dance staff with a kneeling female figure which is used in the cult of *Shango* are in the shape of hare’s ears. The woman is wearing earrings and old-fashioned lip plugs, and a *tirah* amulet round her neck’ (Witte 2004: 193).

Photographer unknown. In Grootaers (2002: 81). Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

- 88 A Western-style wedding in a Roman Catholic church, Ghana 1965. The priest officiates facing the altar, his back towards the couple and the congregation and conducts the service in Latin. Men and women sit separately in the church (women on the right, men on the left of the aisle).

Photograph: This author, 1966.

- 89 Archbishop J.K. Amisshah between Father P. Giebels SMA (left), the parish priest, and this author. Behind them are the members of the Church Council, 1967, Sefwi, Bekwai, Ghana, including the headmaster of the Catholic middle school (in the white shirt), officers of the CYO (Catholic Youth Organisation) and a storekeeper (with the tie).

Photograph: This author.

- 90 Before felling a tree to make a drum or a stool, the craftsman propitiates it, praying ‘Do not permit the knife to cut me’, Ashanti, Ghana, 1927. Out of respect for the *abosom* of the tree, the officiants have bared their chests. Children look on.

Photograph: R.S. Rattray (1927: 4). Courtesy of Oxford University Press.

- 91 *Ikenga* with superstructure, Ibo, Nigeria. From Nimo Group, Awka Division. Painted black, pink and yellow. Height: 59.5 cm. Collected by G.I. Jones in 1937. Collection: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Catalogue no. 1938.15.44. It shows a male figure in warrior skirt (genitals visible), holding an umbrella and fan-like object. There is a snake around the head that supports the platform with four figures (perhaps policemen) and a horse-like animal.

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

- 92 *Nkisi*, Yombe, Nigeria. Wood, resin, mirror glass, cloth, fibres, pigments and other non-descript materials. Size: 38 x 18 x 16 cm. Collection: Musée de Louvain-la Neuve, Louvain. Catalogue no. UCL A8.

Photograph: Hugo Maertens in Tollebeek (2010: 124). Courtesy of Musée de Louvain-la Neuve, Louvain.

- 93 A man proudly holds his new-born child during the outdoor (name-giving) ceremony eight days after the baby's birth. Adiembra, Ashanti, Ghana. 1968. The child is presented to relatives and neighbours for the first time and the father presents his child with a nugget of gold called *krasika* ('gold for the soul'). Sometimes it takes the form of a golden ring with a heart or a decorated egg as a symbol of fertility. While presenting the ring, the father will say 'Be a child after my heart. Behave in a manner that people recognize me in you' (Leyten 1984: 37). He puts a few drops of water and then of gin in the baby's mouth, saying: 'Be always honest: if you taste water, call it water, if you taste gin, call it gin.'

Photograph: This author, 1968.

- 94 The magazine *Tribal Art* (a) sticks to its outdated title, while the Louvre changed the words 'Arts Primitives' to *Arts Premiers* (b) and the British Museum talks about *Tribal Image* (c).

- 94a *Tribal Art*, Summer 2012 XVI-3 no. 64. *Tribal Magazine* (ISSN 134-2990) is published quarterly by Primedia, Inc of California: San Francisco. The cover shows a figure by Zian of Belewale (?-1960), Dan, Cote d'Ivoire. Wood, aluminium and fibre. Height: 63.5 cm. Provenance previously undocumented but proven to be from the Raphael Antonetti Collection. Musée du Quai Branley. Catalogue no. 73.1963.0.163.

Photograph: Patrick Gries, Galérie Torre. Courtesy of Scala, Firenze.

- 94b *Connaissance des arts*: 'Les Arts premiers au Louvre, Afrique, Asie, Océanie, Amériques'. Published by Musée Branley, April 2000.

Photographer unknown.

- 94c The tribal image, wooden figures of the world (Willam Fagg). Published for the Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Publications Ltd (1970).

Photographer unknown.

- 95 British soldiers who took part in the punitive expedition against Benin display their loot, 1897, Benin Nigeria. Collection: Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Catalogue no. PRM 1998, 208.15.11. On the ground are dozens of centuries-old bronze plaques that decorated the walls of the *Oba*'s palace.

Photographer unknown. Courtesy Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

- 96 A remake of a Yoruba town house in the Africa Gallery, the Tropenmuseum, 1986.

- 96a One room was refurbished as a bar with Star beer, a fridge, a wireless playing popular Nigerian music and an electric fan.

- 96b The front of the bar with a wall painting showing an immaculately dressed, pipe-smoking gentleman and a voluptuous reclining woman. The house is in the market (on the left).

- 96c The women's market with foodstuffs and household goods, second-hand clothes, and medicines. The hustle and bustle of market sounds can be heard.

- 96d The inner courtyard with a motorbike and a wooden homemade bicycle. Laundry is being dried.
- 96e The men's market with ironware, sandals, spare parts and a watch repairer's stall.
- 96f The *shrine*. A *babalawo* (local priest) receives a young man who wants the *Ifa* oracle to be consulted.

Photographs: Joris O. Leijten. Courtesy of Joris O. Leijten.

- 97 Poster of the exhibition 'White on Black, Images of Blacks in Western Popular Culture', 1989- 1990. Paper 119 x 84 cm. It appears to show a scene at the exhibition: on a wall a caricature can be seen, in which a white boy is smiling, while his dark-skinned friend is the stereotypical half-naked, wild negro, carrying a shield and spear. Looking at the gaudy painting are two visitors to the exhibition, a white man and an African. Both are holding an exhibition catalogue. The white man realizes that he is standing next to an African and, while observing him closely, notices that he lacks the typical features of a 'negro'. On the other hand, the African observes the white man and wonders why his appearances do not show up in the caricatures of the exhibition. The exhibition caused some commotion as a number of visitors were not amused to see themselves in the mirror that this exhibition held in front of them.

Designer unknown. Courtesy of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Amsterdam.

- 98 Impression of the exhibition 'Moderne kunst uit Afrika' at the Tropenmuseum in 1980.
- 98a The exhibition showed works by Jacob Afolabi, Jimoh Buraimoh, Valente Malangatana, Bernard Matemera, Middle Art, Mukarogba, Ibrahim N'Diaye, Rufus Ogundele, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Pili-Pili, Ibrahim El Salahi, Tinga-Tinga, Twins Seven, Seven and others.

Photograph: This author.

- 98b Some paintings on square masonite boards by TingaTinga, Mzata and their workshop. Tanzania. 1960-1975.

Photograph: This author.

- 99 Stone sculptures from Zimbabwe in the gardens of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

- 99a 'Earth hog' by Bernard Matemera. Stone. Height: 71 cm. Catalogue no, 520-13. Bernard Matemera (1946-2002) was one of the outstanding artists at the sculptors' village of Tengenenge and had exhibitions in New York (1968), Paris (1970) and London (1981). The earth hog is not particularly popular as it roots up the earth but symbolizes peace and quiet. (Grootaers 2002: 180-181). See also Leyten (1989, 1994).

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

- 99b 'African Genesis'. Benard Takawira. Stone. Height: 94 cm. Catalogue no. 539-2. Bernard Takawira (1945) trained as an agricultural instructor and has broad international interest. He does not support the idea that modern Zimbabwean art is bound by tradition, as was claimed by Frank McEwen, the first director of the National Gallery in Harare (1957-1973). This sculpture tells the story of the Creation, which began in Africa. Africa is the cradle of mankind (Grootaers 2002, 180-181; see also Leyten 1989,1994).

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

99c 'Women and elephant in the field'. Kakoma Kweli. Stone. Height: 64 cm. Catalogue no. 559-12. Kakoma Kweli (Angola, 1905) had been a railway worker and a labourer all his life until, at the age of 82, he embarked on sculpting. He was interested in the interaction between man and spirits. His work is characterized by simplicity, as in this sculpture, yet it carries a power that exceeds time and culture (Grootaers 2002, 180-181; see also Leyten 1989, 1994).

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

100 *Onile*. Yoruba, Ijebu, Nigeria. Terracotta. Height: 70 cm. Collection: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Catalogue no. 349-1. *Onile* figures belong to the *Oshugbo* or *Ogboni* society, which consists of the oldest and wisest men and women in a Yoruba community. These figures probably represent the founders of the local community and are kept in a secluded shrine. This unique figure has a male counterpart, that is currently in the Walt Disney-Tishman Collection (see Vogel 1981: 55). Grootaers (2002: 90).

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

101 Views of the exhibition 'Spirits and Power of Vodun from West Africa'. 1996.

101a 'One has to allow the unfamiliar into one's self and therefore not shun the confrontation with the other.' (Weinholt 2000) This was the goal of the Vodun exhibition. It wanted to make the visitor familiar with the Vodun religion, which still flourishes in Togo, Benin and Western Nigeria. (Grootaers 2002: 369-370).

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

101b Vodun exhibition 1996. View of the shrine of *Sakpata*, the vodun of the smallpox (left) and wall paintings of *Dan*, the rainbow snake vodun, with its altar (right). The text on the wall reads: 'Vodun are living powers which, connected with other gods and with a remote Creator God, influence the reality. Devotees are continuously in touch with Vodun powers, in order to propitiate them in favour of themselves and the community' (Grootaers 2002: 370).

Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

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