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A religion of film. Experiencing Christianity and videos beyond semiotics in rural Benin

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A Religion of Film

Experiencing Christianity and Videos
Beyond Semiotics in Rural Benin

Johannes Merz

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A Religion of Film

Experiencing Christianity and Videos Beyond Semiotics in Rural Benin

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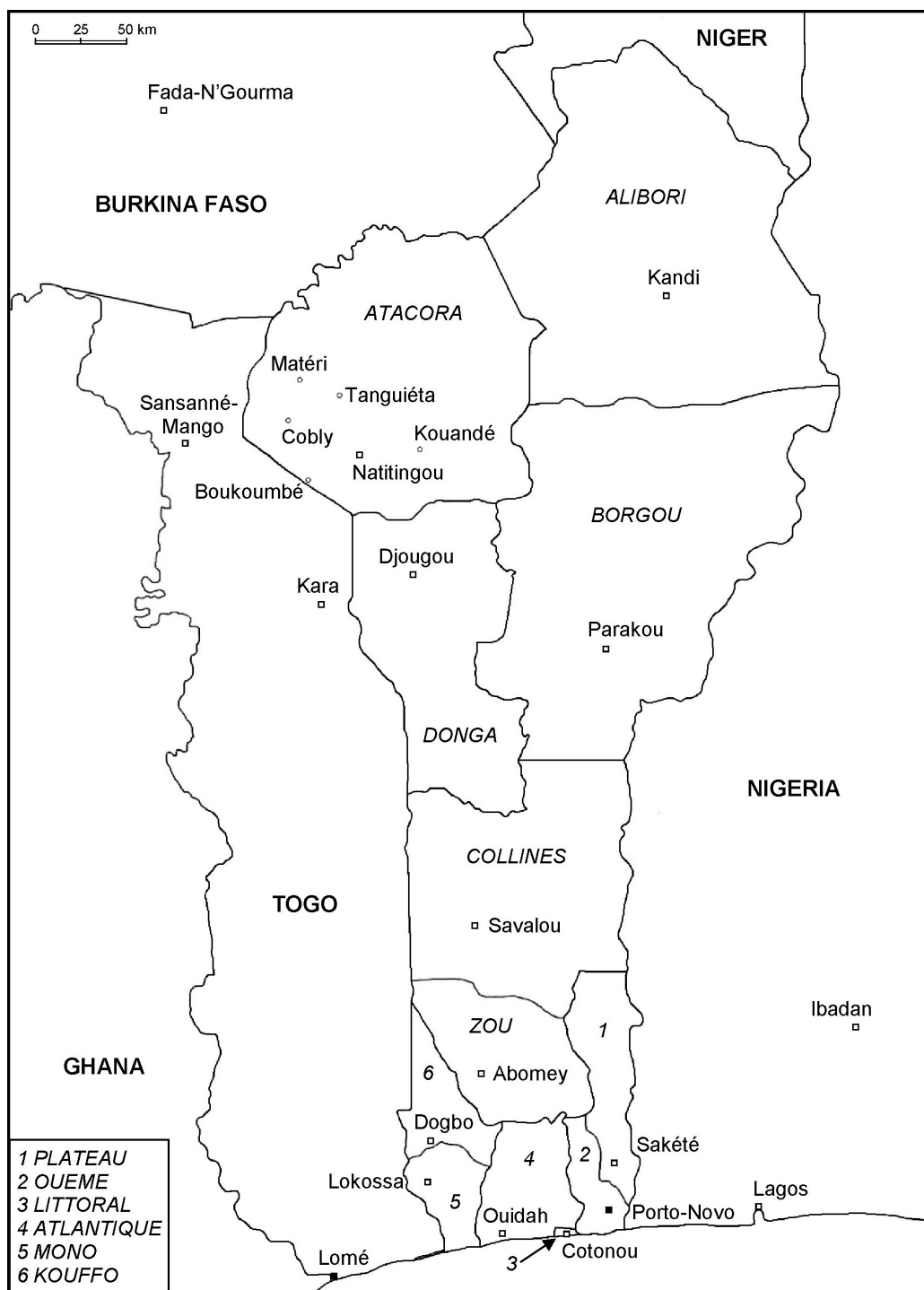
My sincere thanks go to the people of the Commune of Coby in northwestern Benin who have accepted my intermittent presence among them since 1995 and who have come to see me as part of their lives and families. My research would not have been possible without their support, interest and active participation, most notably in the town of Coby and the villages of Touga, Oroukparé and Tchokita, as well as few people from Oukouatouhon, Kountori, Didani, Nanakadé, Okommo, Bagapodi and Boadi. I particularly would like to express my gratitude to the people who were willing to be interviewed, usually several times (see Appendix).

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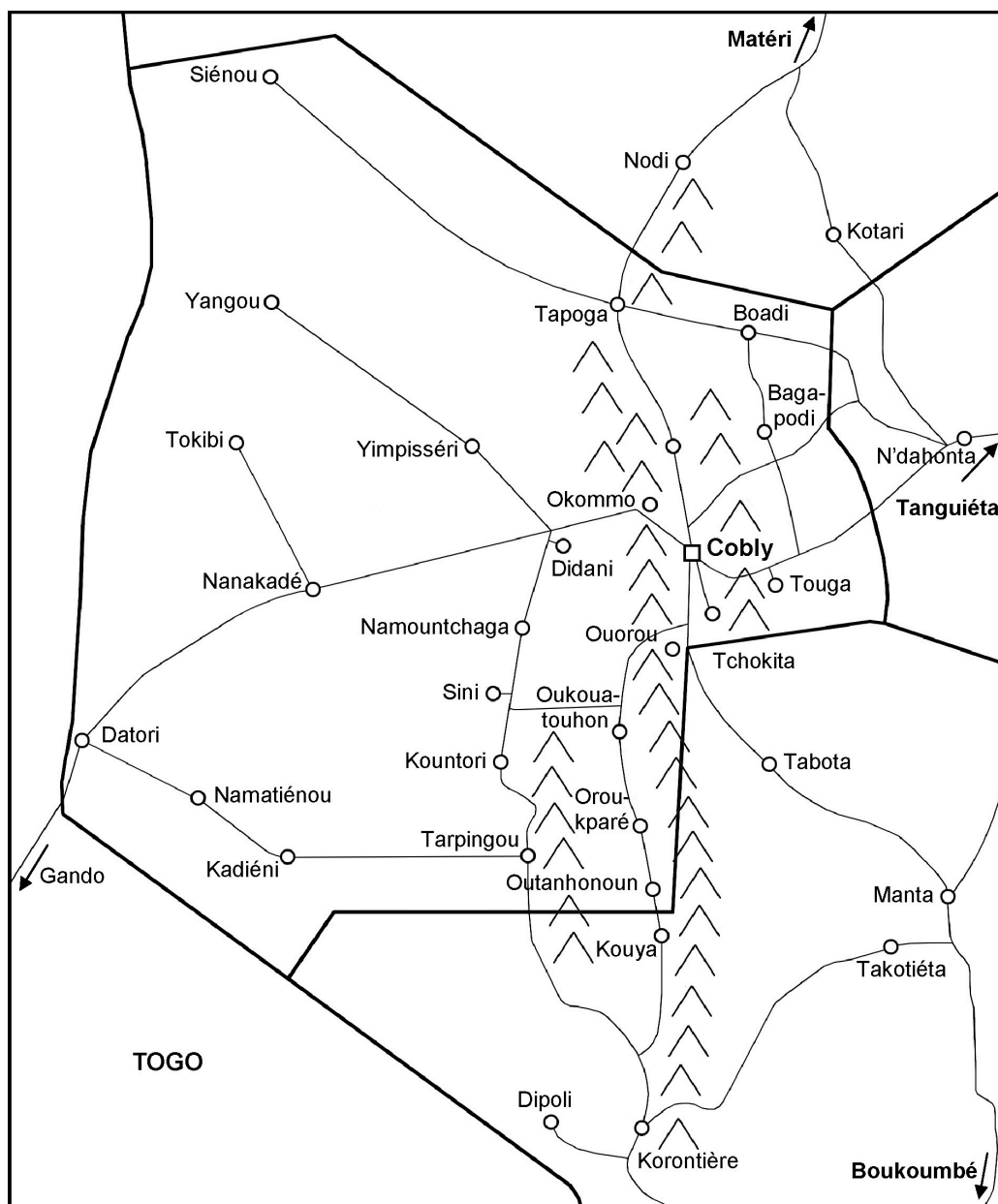
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Map 1: The Republic of Benin with surrounding areas.



Map 2: The Commune of Cobly with surrounding areas.

Introduction

In 2002, Paul Eshleman of the American Jesus Film Project claimed that their flagship known as the *Jesus Film* was “the most-watched, and the most-translated film in world history” (2002: 69). Seven years later, Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra (2009) declared Nigeria the “Christian movie capital of the world” in the influential American evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*. In more academic circles, New Testament scholar Adele Reinhartz speculated that “it may well be the case that more people worldwide know about Jesus and his life story from the movies than from any other medium” (2007: 1), while Asonzeh Ukah commented for Nigeria: “The medium of video has become one of the preferred channels for the communication of religious truth, hope, ideas and propaganda” (2003: 226).

These different observations indicate a trend in evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity towards an increasing use of films and videos.¹ This raises the question, which I address as the overarching theme of this book, of whether we are witnessing a shift in certain forms of Christianity from a religion of the book towards a religion of film. Such a shift from text to film would have wide-ranging implications not only for Christians but also their wider socio-cultural settings, both on a local and global scale. I address the various factors that contribute to such a shift and discuss its implications for rural Benin. I propose that the best way to approach this theme is to study how contemporary Christians engage with audiovisual media. More specifically, I am interested in how people watch and experience Christian films, what they make of them and how these films become part of their lives and the world they live in. In order to grapple with such questions and fully understand the results of my ethnographic research, I need to move beyond semiotics, which has been one of the foundational premises of Western science.

With Nigeria having become the world leader in the production of Christian video films, West Africa seems an ideal place to study this phenomenon. While obvious places may be cities in southern Nigeria or Ghana, such as Ibadan or

¹ Charles Hirschkind (2006: 121) notes a similar trend in Islam in Egypt where aural media are dislodging print media (see also Eisenlohr 2009; Schulz 2012).

Accra, I chose a less likely area for my research on Christian films, namely the rural Commune of Coby in the northwest of the Republic of Benin. Coby is often considered one of the remotest parts of the country and those Beninese from outside the region who have heard of it associate it with backwardness and as being steeped in tradition. State employees, such as teachers or policemen, resent being sent to work there and missionaries often consider it a difficult place to work given that its people are largely “unreached” (cf. Mayrargue 2005: 247), a current missionary euphemism for “pagans”. My knowledge of the area, on the other hand, made me realise that the Commune of Coby would be a fascinating site for researching people’s experience of Christianity and video films. Especially during the last two decades, the younger generation have become increasingly interested in all things they consider modern, whether mobile phones, television sets, videos or Christianity, thereby participating in the trends of the wider region. Older people often stayed more sceptical towards these developments, promising an interesting mix of views and opinions in a society that is facing rapid and significant social and cultural changes.

In this book I discuss three Christian films that are all known in the Commune of Coby and that have been used in evangelistic events and sometimes circulated on Video CD or DVD: *Jesus* (1979, produced by John Heyman) has been made in American evangelical circles with the goal of global evangelism; *La Solution* (*The Solution*, 1994, David Powers) was produced by American missionaries in Côte d’Ivoire; and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (*Yatin: Place of Suffering*, 2002, Christine Madeleine Botokou) is a Beninese video production that has a direct link with the Nigerian Christian film industry.

I am particularly interested in how people watch and experience these films, focusing not only on their contents, but also, and maybe more importantly, on their materiality. I include what people make of television sets as material objects that are usually used to watch videos. Furthermore, it is important to discuss the history and backgrounds of the films and how they became popular in rural parts of Benin. This allows me to link my research with regional and global trends of Christianity and address my overarching question of whether Christianity is shifting its focus from Biblical texts to Christian films.

The Media Turn, Materiality and Semiotics in Anthropology

Anthropologists only started to take a real interest in media in recent decades, most notably thanks to Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin:

We now recognize the sociocultural significance of film, television, video, and radio as part of everyday lives in nearly every part of the world, and we bring distinctive theoretical concerns and methodologies to our studies of these phenomena (2002: 1; see also Spitulnik 1993).

Since then, the field has further developed to the extent that Matthew Engelke (2010) talks of “the media turn”, the name he gives to this trend that has brought questions of media and mediation to the foreground in anthropology and related disciplines.

The media turn in anthropology has also been influenced by, and benefitted from, developments in media and religious studies. Early film theory, for example, already talked of the magic of film (B. Meyer 2003a; R. O. Moore 2000), which more recently developed into thorough studies that compare film and religion in terms of ritual, narrative, experiential and even material similarities (Lindvall 2007: 203-223; Lyden 2003; J. Merz 2014; Plate 2008; Stout 2012). Film and religion converge even more strongly when films pick up religious themes (Plate 2003b). While Jesus films constitute the most prominent religious genre (Bakker 2009; Kinnard and Davis 1992; Malone 2012; Reinhartz 2007; Tatum 2004), the West African film industry (or Nollywood) and its derivatives have developed a specifically Pentecostalist aesthetic (B. Meyer 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004b, 2005, 2006a; Pype 2012; Ukah 2003, 2005, 2012).

The recognition that both film and religion rely on material mediation is a further crucial development that has come to anthropology through religious studies (Eisenlohr 2009, 2011; de Vries 2001; Engelke 2007; Larkin 2008; B. Meyer 2009a, 2011b; Morgan 2010b; Stolow 2005). In this line, Birgit Meyer has argued that “media are intrinsic to religion” (2006b: 434) in the sense that religion itself is “a practice of mediation” (B. Meyer and Moors 2006: 7). Furthermore, she observed that media “‘vanish’ into the substance that they mediate” (B. Meyer 2011b: 32), thereby becoming accessible to audiences in an immediate and experiential way. The presence of media has often been taken for granted and this may be the reason why the materiality of media only recently became a topic of

interest in anthropology. As Larkin has rightly proposed: “What media are needs to be interrogated, not presumed” (2008: 3). The immediacy and mediation of media and religion has thus an “irreducible materiality” – to borrow an expression from William Pietz’s (1985: 7) characterisation of fetishes – that I consider central to the study of any media. This focus on the materiality of media links in well with anthropologists’ renewed interest in materiality more generally. Daniel Miller, for example, has argued that “we need to show how the things that people make, make people” (2005: 38).

Questions of immediacy and mediation are semiotic in nature (Eisenlohr 2009) and are therefore based on one of the most foundational principles of Western science that can be traced back to Aristotle (Jensen 1995: 17). Not surprisingly, semiotics is a topic that regularly resurfaces in anthropology (Mertz 2007). Besides, it is relevant to the two main areas of my interest: the materiality of media and media reception. Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic semiology supplied the basis for structuralist anthropology and has been found wanting mainly because of its underlying dualistic nature (see, e.g., Engelke 2007: 29-31; Keane 2007: 22). C. S. Peirce’s semiotics, on the other hand, is not dichotomous, but presents a triadic model of signs that is processual (Peirce 1940; Short 2007) and thus allows anthropological theory to be moved beyond the strictures of a linguistically determined framework. Building on this, Webb Keane (2003, 2005, 2007) shows that semiotics can and should be extended to include the study of materiality as well. For him, signs are no longer limited to the representational practice of language and images, but can also sufficiently account for material presence that is part of the world.

The representational nature of films has also been accounted for through semiotics (Ehrat 2004; Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis 1992; Metz 1991 [1974]; Wollen 1972). When it comes to media reception and audience studies, Stuart Hall (1980) provided a basic but influential model that again builds on semiotic principles. One of his main points is that media production and consumption never happens in a social and cultural vacuum and that various socio-cultural factors of both media makers and consumers are crucial to the study and practice of media.

While these various topics and theoretical perspectives are important to my work and provide the basis for my main argument, I also find their omnipresent semiotic undertones limiting. Other anthropologists (see, e.g., Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen 2010: 8-9; Ellen 1988: 226-227; Newell 2007: 468; Pels 1998b; Sansi 2011: 32-33) have indicated unease with semiotics too, especially when it comes to the study of fetishes and witchcraft. More direct challenges of semiotics' supremacy in anthropology and related topics, however, are few with Ruth Marshall (2009) presenting maybe the most elaborate and eloquent work so far. She begins her study of Nigerian Pentecostalism by claiming:

Whether religion is seen as symbolic, metaphoric, or metonymic, or even in terms of an imaginary, it is more or less reduced to its function of signification, forgetting that its is, perhaps above all, a site of *action*, invested in and appropriated by believers (R. Marshall 2009: 22, emphasis in original).

Shifting the anthropological focus from meaning to practice is certainly crucial in moving beyond semiotics, but it simply leaves semiotics behind without further addressing or considering it. Instead, while I affirm that a semiotic framework cannot sufficiently account for the more experiential and immediate aspects of both media and materiality, I propose that we need to move beyond semiotics without abandoning it. I suggest doing this by introducing the more action-focused process of "presencing", which can account for the semiotic as well as the more experiential and immediate ways of meaning making.

Questions of semiotics, media and materiality are foundational to the main argument of this book. At the same time there are further developments in anthropology that influence and shape my study in minor but nonetheless important ways.

The Postsecular Turn and the Anthropology of Christianity

The semiotic and experiential nature of film watching indicates that the secular and the religious may not be as separate as the Weberian notion of disenchantment and other unilineal theories of secularisation have often implied (Casanova 2006). Indeed, when it comes to Africa, such a differentiation "stubbornly resist[s] the distinction between sacred and secular" (R. Marshall 2009: 3; see also S. Ellis and ter Haar 1998, 2007; Chapter 2). Even in the West it is currently

questioned through the recently observed resurgence of religion and the proclaimed postsecular turn (Habermas 2008; Gorski and Altınordu 2008: 56; McLennan 2010). This has led to a problematisation of secularism, most prominently by Charles Taylor (2007), and its disentanglement with modernity. The resulting distance of scholars to the political doctrine of secularism, and an indirect approach to studying it, has also facilitated anthropology to take a closer look at secularism (Asad 2003; Bangstad 2009; Cannell 2010; Hirschkind 2011; Mahmood 2006, 2009). Similarly, Talal Asad has argued that the very notion of religion “as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent” (1993: 41) is not a universal phenomenon but rather a Western historical development. As a result, the analytical value of the notion of religion, too, is being increasingly investigated and questioned (see, e.g., de Vries 2008; Keane 2008).

It is certainly no coincidence that both Asad (1993, 2003) and Fenella Cannell (2006, 2010) have taken an interest in the seemingly opposed notions of secularism and Christianity. It has been widely accepted that both secularism and religion are closely related and that they share similar histories, as they both come out of Europe’s and America’s Judeo-Christian heritage (see also Casanova 2009: 1063; Smith 2010: 113-119; C. Stewart 2001; Taylor 2007). More importantly, they have become major notions by which modernity is discussed. Accordingly, I not only need to assert that both secularism and religion are expressions of the complexity of modernity, but also that they intricately belong to it (cf. Pels 2003a: 3-4).

Asad (2003: 21; see also Casanova 2009) makes the distinction between secularism as a political doctrine and the secular as an epistemology and an ontology. For Asad the secular conceptually precedes secularism and is a historically shifting notion that “brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life” (2003: 25; cf. Cannell 2010: 86). In its most basic sense a secular perspective values rationality and critical thinking, and focuses on what is observable and empirically accessible in this world, thereby providing the basis for semiotics. Complementarily, a religious perspective has come to stand for belief, imagination and a preference for the immaterial and transcendent, thereby having more affinity with the experiential and immediate side of film watching.

The secular and the religious, however, cannot be seen as mutually exclusive categories. Rather, they directly depend on each other, with the secular being differentiated from the religious by degrees (Bangstad 2009; Hirschkind 2011). For example, David Gellner (2001: 338) rightly calls most contemporary European Christians “secular”, although they might not agree with such a label. That this is possible is stressed by Saba Mahmood (2006) who argues that secularism itself tries to reshape religion by secularising it and by rendering it into abstracted beliefs and doctrines that do not contradict the secular. In this way, secularism can even adopt a distinctly theological agenda. In the efforts to fight terrorism and fundamentalism, for instance, the United States tries to promote the secularisation of Islamic societies through historicising the Quran as part of a “moderate Islam”. Neither is secularism non-religious since it has become prescriptive (Smith 2010) and even missionary in a sense, most notably by advocating and enforcing democracy and the universality of human rights in an attempt to redeem the world (Asad 2003: 59-62, 127-148; Robbins 2003: 196).

Even though the religious and the secular have been used to dichotomise religion and secularism, these examples make it clear that the two notions need to be seen as overlapping and interdependent. Retaining them in this dynamic way and extending them beyond the West, as Sindre Bangstad (2009) and José Casanova (2006) advocate, the notion of the secular as relating to the religious can be employed for unravelling the dynamics of African modernity, and the processes that define it, in more differentiated ways (see Chapter 2). The dynamics of the secular and the religious are further helpful in making sense of the nature of film watching as depending both on secular semiotics and religious and immediate experience.

Christianity as the quintessence of “religion”, together with human experience, has often been pushed to the side of academia by secularism, making it into a religious Other (see, e.g., Harding 1991), which then allowed it to be studied as part of anthropology (see, e.g., Coleman 2000; Crapanzano 2000; Harding 2000; B. Meyer 1999b). For many anthropologists, however, Christianity remained too closely associated with their own backgrounds. Yet, since the postsecular turn scholars increasingly accept that a dichotomy between the secular and the reli-

gious is not tenable, leading to a more critical attitude and greater openness towards studying both the religious and the secular.

The time was ripe for Joel Robbins (2003) to propose that Christianity, following the example of Islam, should become a focus of anthropological enquiry, namely under the label of an “anthropology of Christianity”. The goal of this sub-field is to establish a common ground of enquiry and fostering dialogue among those involved in the study of Christianity. Different anthropologists have since contributed to the development of the anthropology of Christianity from various theoretical perspectives (see, e.g., Bialecki 2014; Bialecki, Haynes and Robbins 2008; Cannell 2006; Engelke 2007; T. Jenkins 2012; Keane 2007; Robbins 2003, 2004a, 2007). The main result so far is that Christianity is increasingly seen as a legitimate and interesting area of anthropological research.

One of the challenges of the anthropology of Christianity is the diversity of Christianity itself (Robbins 2003: 193), which makes it difficult to define it as an object of research (Bialecki 2012). When it comes to Africa alone, even to classify the various strands of Christianity has proven notoriously difficult, especially thanks to the explosion of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity at a global level (P. Jenkins 2002; Robbins 2004b). While B. Meyer (2004a) speaks of Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, Paul Gifford (2008b) more cautiously calls them Pentecostal-like forms of Christianity. Whatever the labels used, it has been well established that these new types of churches started to mushroom in the 1990s first in Nigeria and Ghana, then spilling over to their neighbours, such as Benin. I prefer to think of this development more generally as a process that I call the “Pentecostalisation” of Christianity that comes in degrees. Such Pentecostalisation is not limited to Pentecostal and charismatic churches, but has an increasing impact on African Christianity in its more established forms, as well as on a wider public square (see, e.g., B. Meyer 2004b; B. Meyer and Moors 2006). Neither is Pentecostalisation limited to urban areas, but is also increasingly reaching more rural parts of the continent (Piot 2010), such as the Commune of Coby (see Chapter 1).

Christians of Protestant heritage can be subdivided into various groups and movements. In this book, I focus on evangelicals, who stress the importance of conversion and the value of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God (Robbins

2004b: 119-120), and Pentecostals in the broadest sense, who often show an evangelical commitment while also being “orientated towards the immediate experience of the Holy Spirit” (N. Haynes 2012: 124; see also R. Marshall 2009: 79; Robbins 2004b: 117).

Having staked out the overarching direction and wider theoretical premises and issues that form the basis for this book, I now turn to discussing its background, mainly by addressing reflexive and methodological questions.

Doubting the Jesus Film

The idea for this book began with ambiguous and even antagonistic feelings towards the *Jesus Film*. Around 1990 Campus Crusade for Christ, the organisation that promotes the *Jesus Film* globally, used it in one of their widespread evangelistic campaigns in my country of origin, Switzerland. At the time, while having developed an interest for film generally, I did not care for explicitly religious films, such as Jesus films, biblical epics and the like, to the extent that I stoutly refused to watch the *Jesus Film* for several years. This was undoubtedly due to my upbringing in the Swiss Reformed Church whose reformer, Zwingli, is renowned for his particularly strong aniconic stance coupled with a focus on the biblical text (Goody 1997: 67-68; McDannell 1995: 13).

My general interest in film accompanied me during several trips to Ghana in the mid-1990s, when I noticed that locally produced video films, often of an explicitly Christian nature, started to appear on VHS in Accra’s markets (B. Meyer 1995). They fitted my maybe idealised understanding of postcolonial Africa in which Christian mission and church life would be owned and directed by local people. On the other hand, the use of the *Jesus Film* as an appropriate tool for global evangelism slowly accentuated my doubts. Even if dubbed into local languages, the use of the explicitly American film seemed a direct prolongation of the now often critiqued evangelical missionary efforts that go back to the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile the *Jesus Film* continued to be dubbed into dozens of languages and promoted across the globe, including Africa. The film was distributed on videocassette, shown in cinemas and on television and, maybe most importantly, during elaborately staged evangelistic campaigns. By the turn of the century, the

Jesus Film had become iconic of the use of media mainly by evangelical missionaries. It had now gained in prominence and was praised in evangelical circles with an unrestrained optimism “as one of the greatest evangelistic success stories of all time” (Boyd 1999: 14). In spite of this seemingly remarkable development, I noticed a distinct lack of critical reviews or proper studies that could either substantiate the statistical claims or address my doubts in other ways (but see Mansfield 1984; Steffen 1993; Wiher 1997).

In 2002 my wife and I moved to Benin, where we started to work as anthropologists for SIL Togo-Benin, which is part of SIL International, a faith-based NGO, and which initially welcomed me during my first fieldwork in 1995 (J. Merz 1998). Formerly known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics, SIL International specialises in practical language development and Bible translation. We soon learnt that Campus Crusade for Christ, the main promoter of the *Jesus Film* regularly approached SIL to help translate its script into local languages. Invariably, the topic of the appropriateness and validity of this aspect of the work came up in conversations with colleagues. I became aware that I was not the only one who had reservations about the *Jesus Film* (see also Dart 2001: 28), but nobody could properly articulate why we felt uneasy about it. In spite of this, it was generally thought that SIL’s involvement in this work could at least contribute to the quality of the script’s translation. Several colleagues encouraged me to continue thinking critically about the *Jesus Film*, which first lead to the publication of an article on the topic (J. Merz 2010) followed by the research for this book.

SIL International, Anthropology and Mission

It has become almost a given that by working for SIL International², I find myself identified as a “missionary”. Since, at least in Europe, the image of the missionary remains haunted by its past link with colonial propaganda and modernisation, this identification makes me at best feel uneasy. I find that in academic circles, too, SIL and its Christian character continue to be discussed after having been repeatedly accused and vindicated (see, e.g., Dobrin and Good 2009; Hartch 2006;

² In this introduction I discuss SIL International (<http://www.sil.org/>) according to my experience of working for the organisation. This means that I am expressing my opinion of SIL and do not claim to present an organisational position.

Headland and Pike 1997; Hvalkof and Aaby 1981; Noll 2009: 97-105; Olson 2009). The enigmatic character of SIL – Hartch calls it “[c]learly... a strange organization” (2006: xvii) – often leads to furtive descriptions and hasty conclusions, firmly placing it into the religious camp, notably as “a fundamentalist Protestant group” (Keane 2007: 44, to quote one example). This provides ample grounds to marginalise SIL on ideological grounds (Olson 2009: 651), and to dismiss the organisation as part of the “repugnant cultural other”, as Susan Harding (1991, 2000) described “American Protestant fundamentalists” from her anthropological perspective.

The relationship between anthropologists and those they perceive as missionaries, especially of Protestant and evangelical orientations, has been riddled with tensions and ambiguity to the extent of stigmatisation and the exclusion of the latter (see, e.g., Burton and Burton 2007; Delfendahl 1981; Hiebert 1978; Priest 2001; Stipe 1980; van der Geest 1990, 2011; van der Geest and Kirby 1992). Peter Pels (1990, 1999) has argued that missionaries were often accused of collaborating with colonialists, while anthropologists tried to distance themselves from mission and colonialism, at least rhetorically, in order to assert themselves as the sole specialists in their field of expertise. By doing so, a complex and multifaceted relationship was reduced to the dichotomising discourse of colonialism itself, playing off secular anthropologists who learn against religious missionaries who teach.

Today, these tensions linger, especially since many anthropologists, including myself, feel at least uneasy with missionaries’ proselytising efforts especially when they are demonising and iconoclastic. At the same time, some secular anthropologists recognise that missionaries have played a crucial role in establishing anthropology with its ethnographic focus as an academic discipline, that several now classic monographs have been written by missionaries, and that missionaries have often provided crucial support for anthropologists’ fieldwork (Burton and Burton 2007; Higham 2003; Pels 1990, 1997: 172). Sjaak van der Geest has provocatively proposed that missionaries and anthropologists are “brothers under the skin” (1990; see also Burton and Burton 2007: 215). This development is undoubtedly linked to contemporary anthropology’s continuing deconstruction of dichotomies, which also prepared the recent postsecular turn (see above). On this basis it be-

comes necessary to accept that the validity of the missionary/anthropologist dichotomy, which has been extensively based on the distinction between the secular and the religious, has become outdated.

After over twelve years of direct work experience with SIL International I find it hard to identify with other anthropologists' descriptions of the SIL organisation that identify it as essentially religious and missionary. While SIL has been undergoing a series of important structural changes in recent years, it retains a hybrid character, stressing both an academic and a Christian commitment, which gives it both its unique and complex character. SIL does not evangelise or preach, baptise or start churches and has never promoted these activities since its foundation in 1934 (Olson 2009: 650; Handman 2007: 176; Hartch 2006). Accordingly, SIL International is registered in Benin as an NGO (cf. Alokpo 2001: 69, 2003: 83-84), and at an international level, UNESCO and the UN formally recognise SIL as an NGO. Central to SIL's work is, as Kenneth Olson put it, the "indigenous people's right to self-determination" and what "we call 'service to all'" (2009: 651). The organisation recognises academic research not only as a tool for Bible translation but also as a goal in its own right (Olson 2009: 648-649). Especially in the areas of language development and literacy, SIL works at a local level with anyone who is interested regardless of their religious orientation. In Benin, for example, SIL has cooperated over the years with secular government bodies for the promotion of local languages and literacy. For SIL, this too is a goal in its own right.

In Beninese languages where SIL is engaged in Bible translation, the work usually necessitates a close cooperation with local churches, which are increasingly encouraged to take on the main responsibility and bulk of the work. SIL started to work in Benin in 1981 at the invitation of a local Protestant pastor and continues to seek community initiative and local partnerships for the purpose of Bible translation. SIL's goal is to facilitate the process of making the Bible available in local languages to those who are interested without directly engaging in proselytising activities. Since even Bible translation is an essentially semiotic and secular activity (cf. Sanneh 2009: 43), SIL actually appears considerably more secular than religious.

Even though SIL International is a linguistic organisation (Handman 2007; Hartch 2006; Olson 2009), anthropology has always been part of its efforts, at

least to some extent. Working as an anthropologist for SIL means that I am encouraged to pursue an academic career, which includes conducting my own research according to my interests, as presented in this book, for example. At the same time I also contribute to SIL's goal of involving and training members of local communities in the development of their languages, Bible translation and related activities.

In my main role as an anthropologist for SIL I offer my expertise to colleagues and teach those who seek to work with SIL, regardless of their religious and socio-cultural backgrounds. Even though I have trained as a secular anthropologist, I cannot realistically detach my Christian identity and commitment from being an anthropologist. Rather than trying to place myself somewhere on a continuum between anthropologist and missionary, however, I find it more appropriate, especially from a postsecular perspective, to position myself as a postsecular – and by extension postreligious – anthropologist with a Christian standpoint or subject position (B. M. Howell 2007; Meneses, *et al.* 2014; Priest 2001).

Engaging in Anthropology from a Christian Standpoint

The idea that minority groups within anthropology claim specific standpoints, especially if they divert from the stereotype of a secular male heterosexual white anthropologist, is nothing new (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 13). Identification with a specific standpoint still means to work within the discipline of anthropology. This requires an academic commitment, which, at the very least, is based on a “minimal secularism” or a “methodological agnosticism” (Gellner 2001: 339).

The purpose of standpoints is to encourage anthropologists to reflect on their own particular perspectives more systematically by becoming aware of their position's limitations and strengths and how it can be used for the benefit of specific research situations. In addition, standpoints allow for an easier reflexive exchange with colleagues and promote a kind of reflexivity that is particularly important not only when the religious is part of a standpoint, but also when those whom anthropologists research are religious (Bielo 2013; Ewing 1994; C. Stewart 2001). This means that anthropologists more generally should account for their specific standpoints in a reflexive way. Especially from a postsecular perspective, anthropologists need to consider their position in terms of the dynamics of the

secular and the religious and be open to other standpoints. Failing to do so runs the risk of becoming prescriptive, and thus in a sense missionary, largely by claiming “the moral high ground” (Meneses, *et al.* 2014: 89) against differing standpoints, regardless of whether self-identification tends more towards the religious or the secular.

Since the aim of anthropology is studying social, cultural and religious diversity, a plurality of different standpoints, including more explicitly religious ones, not only promises to be instructive to anthropology (cf. C. Stewart 2001: 328), but could prove strategic as well. Standpoints can also facilitate those who have typically been the objects of anthropological enquiry to become increasingly engaged in the discipline, and they open up the possibility for the inclusion of non-Western epistemologies (Nyamnjoh 2001).

A specifically Christian standpoint in anthropology needs to recognise the diversity of Christianity itself (Robbins 2003: 193). It accepts that there is a spiritual dimension to human beings (Headland and Pike 1997: 5) and affirms at least the possibility of “an agency of divinity” (B. M. Howell 2007: 384; see also Bialecki 2014). This necessitates the need to resist the uncompromising reduction of spirituality, beliefs and emotions to rational arguments and notions that exclude the possibility for anthropologists with more explicitly religious standpoints, whether Christian or other, to make valuable contributions. While such approaches have typically been advocated by scholars with a faith commitment (B. M. Howell 2007; J. Merz 2004; Meneses, *et al.* 2014; Priest 2001), their academic value is increasingly recognised and theorised also by (post)secular scholars, such as Paul Stoller (Stoller and Olkes 1987), Katherine Ewing (1994: 572), Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar (1998, 2007), Adam Ashforth (2005) Ruth Marshall (2009), Tanya Luhrmann (2012) or Jon Bialecki (2014; see also Chapter 4). Indeed, doing otherwise seems to defy the discipline’s objective of seriously engaging with counterparts on terms of coevalness (Fabian 1983).

By claiming a postsecular Christian standpoint, then, I essentially advocate an anthropology that affirms its largely secular heritage, while simultaneously opening itself to the possibility of experiences that go beyond the empirical and scientifically provable. I consider this a necessary foundation on which it becomes feasible to move beyond semiotics, a step that is essential to explain sufficiently

the ethnographic phenomena I encountered in the Commune of Cobly, as I argue in Chapter 2.

For me, then, engaging in anthropology from a Christian standpoint means the reflexive development of a hybrid identity defined by my Christian perspective that is simultaneously at ease in secular academic, Christian and field situations, even if it is riddled with ambiguity and paradoxes. In doing so I place myself consciously in the “epistemological abyss” (Ewing 1994: 571), or “being in between” (Bielo 2013: 5). Harding (2000: 58) calls this gap more neutrally, the “space of ethnography”, the area where belief and disbelief, as well as the secular and the religious, meet and overlap. Such a hybrid identity helps me to adjust to different ways of life both experientially and semiotically by seeking to understand and translate critically the experience of counterparts (Marcus 2008: 7), both strange and familiar, into (post)secular academic discourse. Doing anthropology in this way thus means a blurring of the “self” and the “other” to the extent of conflating the two.

To stay true to anthropology as the study of humans, anthropologists need to adhere to the idea of a common humanity as our basis (Bowman 1997), while focusing their interests on difference and change (Marcus 2008: 2). There are always going to be tensions between a common humanity and the diversity of cultural experience. As a result, whatever standpoints anthropologists occupy, their relationships are subject to ambiguity, and at times even anxiety, whether it stems from their own engagement with difference, or from research participants with whom anthropologists engage. Maybe such ambiguity and anxiety is not only part of the predicament of anthropology, but also simply of being human in the contemporary world. Bearing this in mind, I now discuss my fieldwork more specifically and the methodology used for this project.

Doing Fieldwork in the Commune of Cobly

The relationships anthropologists establish and maintain not only with their research participants, but also with the wider communities of their research locations, are important for shaping fieldwork and influence the nature and quality of its results. James Bielo rightly affirms: “Ethnography, whatever else it might be, is a relational endeavour” (2013: 5; see also Banks 2001: 179). Especially since good

relationships are often time-consuming and difficult to establish and to maintain in the field, it is crucial to pay them close attention.

I arrived for the first time in the Commune of Coby in rural northwestern Benin (Map 1) in November 1995 and settled in the village of Touga (Map 2) for five months of fieldwork. The villagers were willing to accommodate me thanks to an SIL colleague who had negotiated with them on my behalf before my arrival. Apart from a local pastor who had moved to the village not long before me, as far as I am aware, I was the first foreigner to live in their community. They gave me the use of the only house with a corrugated iron roof and the pastor, who had experience of working with whites and knew French, became a valuable and gifted research assistant.

Even though much of my initial research focus in 1995 was exploratory, my main area of interest was people's religious experiences, including Christianity and later witchcraft (J. Merz 1998, 2004, 2008). Fieldwork proved difficult, since I had to build relationships while already relying on them for research purposes. Having a shared Christian basis with my assistant considerably facilitated our rapport and his interest and investment in my research project. In spite of this, many people, especially older ones who remembered colonial times, were reluctant research participants and sometimes – to my frustration – refused to provide information I was seeking, mainly by remaining silent or claiming ignorance on a topic. Many years later, a man who by then had become a good friend, reminisced that although my presence was tolerated, I was indeed perceived as intrusive by some. I also widened my relationships beyond the village where I lived and found that people of other parts of the Commune of Coby were envious of Touga, since the presence of a white man associated them with the important symbolic value of progress and development. As many anthropologists have experienced, coming back to the research area, as I did in 1997 for a couple of months, proved advantageous.

Even though I became involved with people in the Commune of Coby as an anthropologist from the very beginning, I identified myself as a Christian and often attended Sunday church services, also as part of my fieldwork. I have never aligned myself with a specific denomination and continue to attend services in different Protestant and Catholic churches fairly regularly. As a rule, I do not get

involved in denominational church activities and I try to decline offers to preach, although this has not always been possible. I am fairly sure that my attitude sometimes casts doubts on my Christian sincerity. This is especially the case for members of churches who stress a Christian identity that is firmly rooted in their church community as a replacement for their abandoned non-Christian families (cf. Laurent 2003: 98-99; Piot 2010: 54-55).

For many people, my association with SIL and my interest in Bible translation, especially since 2002, further affirmed my Christian identity. While I personally support the idea of a Bible translation into Mbelime, the majority language of the Commune of Cobly, I have always refused to become a Bible translator, since I consider this the task of the local churches. In 2011 the Christian community founded the interdenominational and ecumenical *Association pour la Bible en Mbèlimè* (Association for the Bible in Mbelime), an organisation set up to supervise the translation project at a local level. It became official in 2012, the year that three local translators started their work. Although the project was in the end initiated with considerable input from SIL, I was not part of this in any way, mainly because I have been on study leave since 2010. My involvement with Bible translation remains anthropological in nature, working in the background of those directly involved. So far I have helped the translators to do their own anthropological research – two of them already have anthropological degrees – and I expect to be called on to help the translators to achieve better socio-cultural relevance in their work.

Other areas my wife and I have been involved during the years is the production of secular literature in Mbelime and working towards an Mbelime-French dictionary. We have also participated in a church-initiated series of workshops from 2003 to 2005 that had as their goal to compose Christian songs. Our main role was to motivate Christians to take their own socio-cultural backgrounds, which they often neglect and even demonise, more seriously and to engage more with it. The workshops resulted in cassettes of Christian songs that use local song styles.

As I learnt later during my fieldwork, taking an explicitly Christian standpoint seemed natural, since for most people whites are by default inalienably associated with Christianity (see also Chapter 4; Keane 2007: 47; Robbins 2004a: 174;

Rosenthal 1998: 20). Claiming an agnostic, atheistic or anti-religious position would be met by considerable scepticism and incomprehension. Indeed, I have come to consider a Christian standpoint an asset in my field situation and research interests, as it helped me to think through my culturally shaped secular scepticism of Protestant roots and permitted me to be more open and sympathetic towards people's religious lives, whether this could be labelled Christian or not (B. M. Howell 2007; J. Merz 2004; van der Geest 2011: 260-261).

Generally, I find it easy to work with most people, regardless of their religious orientation. Men who are in charge of maintaining various shrines, for example, often proved easy to approach and sometimes to befriend. While I found many of them largely indifferent towards Christianity, some demonstrated a certain amount of scepticism, especially since Christians sometimes overtly condemn their shrines (see Chapter 5). Others, on the other hand seemed more open towards Christianity. Especially owners of the newer Tigare shrines consider them as similar to churches, and sometimes even complementary. One of the owners of a Tigare shrine proudly declared himself a baptised and confirmed Catholic. Even Touga's community priest, whom I had known for many years until he died in 2013, and whom I came to respect deeply for his selfless commitment, was happy to associate with me. Even though he was known to disapprove of Christians, he told me in an interview: "May *Uwienu* (God) help him [referring to me]. As I run around for the benefit of people, he too must run for their good. We're both struggling for the good of the people, so that they can be healthy and sleep in peace" (28 Feb. 2011). A few days later, he continued: "Our hands are the same for both of us. We're one person and we have the same blood. We both pray to *Uwienu* (God). He [God] is the only one. He [referring to me] prays to *Uwienu* and I pray to *Uwienu*. He [God] is the only one" (interview, 2 Mar. 2011). He thereby acknowledged our dependence on God regardless of our origin or faith, our work for him, and not least our shared humanity.

On the other hand, working with Christians sometimes proved difficult, mainly because of their attitude that I found at times exceedingly judgmental and condemning. In the Commune of Cobly, the most devout Christians, especially of Protestant persuasion, do not publically associate with the *paiëns*, the French term they use for those they do not consider Christian. While talking to the *paiëns* may

be seen as acceptable behaviour, even being present during an offering at one of the shrines while doing participant observation is definitely viewed as problematic. For devout Christians this constitutes attending and identifying with an event that is potentially harmful due to its supposed demonic character and that could set a bad example leading less established Christians astray. Doing research with *paiëns* without evangelising them and that could potentially expose me to demonic dangers earned me criticism also from an expatriate missionary to the extent that I felt my motives and faith were being questioned (cf. Olson 2009: 647). Maybe the missionary's concerns for me were not far from those that Harding's colleagues felt, as they feared that researching fundamentalist Christianity could lead to her conversion (Harding 2000: 58; see also Cannell 2006: 4).

In early 2010, after having worked with SIL and lived in Cobly for over seven years, I started my research on the three Christian films. Taking a Christian standpoint continued to prove generally fruitful, as it did before, and now provided me with the further advantage of gaining access to Christians and Christian institutions, also nationally and internationally (cf. Meneses, *et al.* 2014: 101). This was important in tracking people down and getting access to information on the three films and their use in evangelism.

By 2010 I had gained a generally good understanding of the local socio-cultural and linguistic situation, which meant that I was able to design my research more precisely, especially by coming up with relevant and pertinent questions. Maybe more importantly, my wife and I noticed that, by this time, we had become well established in several communities, something which takes time (Fortes 1975: 251). We especially noticed that our closer acquaintances, both Christian and non-Christian, started to open up more and more when discussing issues or doing research with them. This allowed me to have sometimes deep and long discussions while I still could get away with showing some ignorance. My long-term engagement with people in the Commune of Cobly, then, provided me with "methodological and epistemological advantages [of missionaries] which most anthropologists lack" (van der Geest 2011: 259; see also Dobrin and Good 2009: 627; Meneses, *et al.* 2014: 84). I can best summarise these advantages by neither being a complete outsider nor insider (Narayan 1993), but as providing a platform on which fieldwork in terms of coevalness becomes viable.

The Commune of Coby is an administrative area in northwestern Benin that is ethnically so complex (see Chapter 1) that I could not limit my research to the ethnic majority group, the Bebelibe, who only started to acquire a collective identity in colonial times. Several men who participated in my research identified themselves as Kuntemba, while many women who had married in the Coby area came from different ethnic backgrounds, most notably from the neighbouring Betammaribe. This is why I find it best to limit my study geographically, rather than ethnically, namely by talking throughout the book about “people of the Commune of Coby”. I use this generalising phrase primarily for referring to the participants in my research as well as people more generally who live in the Coby area and who are part of the socio-cultural continuum of the West African savannah in which I conducted my fieldwork.

I chose the town of Coby and the villages of Touga, Tchokita and Oroukparé, as main sites for research, while I also drew on additional old and new contacts in the villages of Oukouatouhon, Kountori, Didani, Nanakadé, Okommo, Bagapodi and Boadi. I worked with a total of 124 main research participants whom I interviewed a number of times over the three-year period of my fieldwork (see Appendix). I made sure as far as possible to include old and young of both genders, sharing various educational backgrounds, experience of films and religious interests. In spite of this, my sample represents a higher percentage of those claiming to be Christians than found in the wider society, probably as a result of voluntary research participation (see Chapter 5) and the explicitly Christian topic of my research project.

In total, 58 of the 124 participants claimed church attendance (13 Roman Catholic; 20 *Église Ministère de Jésus Bénin*, 21 *Église Évangélique des Assemblées de Dieu*, 4 other Pentecostal churches), even though some do not actually attend a church.³ In the village of Touga, which I know well, for example, only 8 of 14 participants who claimed to be affiliated with the *Église Ministère de Jésus Bénin*, actually attended its church services. 65 research participants did not claim church attendance. While 26 of them had never been to a church service, 39

³ Given that most self-declared Christians would have known of, or assumed my Christian background, it is possible that some presented themselves as Christians in order to appear more favourable.

stated that at some point in their lives they had attended at least one of the Christian churches, but left again after varying lengths of time. Only one participant was a practicing Muslim, which is representative of the wider population of the Commune of Coby. The low presence of Islam among local people mainly stems from their historically conditioned antagonism to Islam and the reluctance to give up alcohol and pork, which are both important parts of celebrations and funerals (see also Chapter 1). The different backgrounds of the research participants led to a diversity of views and opinions that I found at times challenging to account for, but proved important to analyse changes currently happening in the Commune of Coby (see Chapter 2).

I started my fieldwork by conducting an audience reception study of the three Christian films with 104 viewers, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5. Then, I shifted my research focus to media and materiality more generally, and how this links in with film watching as an experience. I continued to work with most research participants who had participated in the reception study. For some people, however, it seemed inappropriate to ask for their continued participation since they obviously struggled with the artificial nature of formal interviews, meaning that some were no longer happy to work with me, while some had moved to Nigeria and others had died. I thus wanted to find more participants, and since the original sample had a bias towards Christians, I included eight owners of Tigare and Nkunde shrines, three community priests and three video parlour owners, most of whom I knew already from previous research. For this second stage of my fieldwork I worked with a total of 107 research participants.

When referring to research participants, I use pseudonyms that represent the kind of name they use for themselves. It is noticeable that French (or Christian) names predominate. Such names have become popular in the Coby area due to their modern undertones and many people have chosen a French name for themselves as adults. This means that names are not a good indicator of religious interest and affiliation. Some Christians, especially older ones, for example, have decided to maintain local or Muslim names, while there are many people who are known by their French names, but do not attend church.

Individual semi-structured interviews were my main source of information. They varied greatly in length and depth, depending on the interviewees, their

knowledge and their abilities to deal with the interviewing situation, as well as the relationship they had with me. Since my knowledge of Mbelime, the main language in the Commune of Coby, is not sufficient to conduct in-depth interviews, I worked with an interpreter when the research participants' knowledge of French was inadequate. I mainly worked with Bienvenue N. Sambiéni, a man in his mid-thirties who has been my main research assistant since 2004. He has a pleasant and open character, which makes him popular with everybody. From my perspective he is also suited to help in research as he is passionate about his language, and during the time he has worked with us, he has also gained a keen interest in his culture and has developed an idea of what anthropology is about. Although he was a member of the *Église Ministère de Jésus Bénin* in the past, he stopped attending it when he moved to Coby in 2002. Being from the village of Oroukparé, he was particularly helpful when doing research there. At times when Bienvenue was not available, or when I drew on contacts that go back to the 1990s, I worked again with my old research assistant and pastor, Jonas Gnammi, who has since retired.

I digitally recorded the interviews with the permission of the concerned, which allowed us to focus on the conversation. While I mainly worked with Bienvenue's or Jonas' recorded spontaneous interpretations, the recordings allowed me to check specific wording in Mbelime and they sometimes helped me to clarify where interpretations were ambiguous. All direct quotes from interviews used in this book are translations of transcriptions of interviews in the original languages. I tried to render the ideas the participants expressed into clear and natural English while staying as close as possible to the original meaning. Bienvenue and Claire Kombetto assisted me in this.

Interviewing women proved more difficult than interviewing men, as I expected from past experience. Women are generally less independent, since they often come from different areas due to exogamic marriage patterns, and because especially older ones submit to the authority of their husbands, sometimes to the extent that I found it impossible to interview them. Changing attitudes among younger women means that they proved more open and especially widows were much more forthcoming, and were therefore valuable research participants. Even though I was conscious about gender differences during interviews, especially as

women often faced a male interpreter and myself, it is interesting to note that Francesca Moratti (2009: 82), herself a woman, encountered the same problem of reluctance when doing research into Internet use with generally younger women and in more urbanised areas of Benin. As a result of this problem only a third of my research participants were female during the reception study, which was reduced to a quarter during the second stage of my research.

Having discussed the pertinent background information, I now present a brief overview of the five chapters and the main arguments of this book. I end this introduction by briefly discussing the importance of my research for anthropology more generally and media practitioners more specifically.

Overview

In Chapter 1, I introduce the area of my study, the remote Commune of Cobly of northwestern Benin, by reassessing its alleged backwardness from a historical perspective. As the area has always been part of wider regional developments, including trans-Saharan trade that predates the arrival of Europeans on the West African coast and the transatlantic slave trade, Cobly has been involved with modernity for a long time. While early explorers of the late nineteenth century sometimes gained a romantic impression of the area, French colonialism with its civilising and modernising aims inverted its prior modernity. This resulted in the people of today's Commune of Cobly being recast as the most backward colonial subjects, who came to occupy one of the remotest parts of the colony. I argue that colonial modernity had a deep impact on people, not only through ethnicisation, territorial reorganisation and increased security, but also on their self-esteem and self-image.

Following the colonial impact, people slowly regained their former dynamism, openness to strangers and high mobility as they adapted to the colonial imposition and the later postcolonial nation state. This process has accelerated, particularly since the 1990s, as Christianity, education and media have not only become more accessible, but are increasingly popular, especially among the younger generations.

I present the main theoretical argument of this book in Chapter 2 by focusing on how people in the Commune of Cobly understand the materiality of shrines,

the Bible and words. I found that people often do not make a difference between the matter and spirit of things. The stone of a shrine, for example, is not simply a stone, but rather a being in its own right that relies on the coexistence of spirit and matter. In this sense many people consider everything that exists as intrinsically alive, sharing and participating in a world of agentive relationality. While I characterise this view of materiality as “transmaterial”, I find it impossible to account for it in terms of Peircean semiotics. This is why I introduce the process of presencing, which extends semiotic meaning making to include more experiential and transmaterial presencing that stresses action. I thereby go beyond semiotics and its representational stance that is based on structured signs, which I find too limiting to account for the breadth of human experience. People engage in different ways in the complex process of presencing, which I describe through an interplay of two presencing principles. In order to account for transmateriality, I propose that many people in the Commune of Cobly primarily use the transmaterial presencing principle. The semiotic presencing principle, on the other hand, accounts for more semiotic aspects of presencing and both complements and replaces transmaterial presencing to varying degrees; a process I call “semiotification”. The process of presencing results in entities, which can also include structured signs, that occupy the world of agentive relationality and then allow people, animals and things to interact with each other.

Colonial modernity, seen as a bundle of processes, affects the way people think of their world and how they live in it. Most importantly, semiotification results in the categorisation of beings according to their agency, which now becomes centred on humans. Things, on the other hand, are increasingly void of life and agency and become commoditised. I demonstrate that part of this development is that transmaterial beings, such as shrine entities, are both spiritualised and materialised, resulting in independent spirits that can now temporarily occupy the matter of stones or possess people. This view of shrines can be submitted to semiotic analysis through the shrine becoming the symbol in the Peircean sense of its associated spirit, thereby widening and reconfiguring the interplay of the two presencing principles. I end this chapter by showing that semiotification can never be fully achieved, but leads to a dynamic where spirit and matter are identi-

fied and detached from each other to varying degrees for different sorts of entities.

In Chapter 3 I shift the discussion to the three Christian films *Jesus*, *La Solution* and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance*, which are all well known in the Commune of Coby where they are often used for evangelism. I analyse the films' content and place their production within the genealogy of different Christian films that go back to the advent of the medium. Jesus films have been among the earliest films made and are now recognised as a genre in their own right. Although the *Jesus Film* (1979) is part of this development, it can be distinguished from other Jesus films by its evangelical background and its prominent use in global evangelism. An important part of the success of the *Jesus Film* is its promotion among American evangelical Christians as the Word of God on film, which necessitates a combination and interplay of both the transmaterial and semiotic presencing principles.

While Christians have always made films, the 1940s saw a shift in American evangelical filmmaking towards more dramatic films, which were also produced for mission and evangelism. *La Solution* (1994) is an example of this filmic tradition, intertwining a modernising narrative with an evangelical one, thereby presenting what I call the aesthetics of colonial modernity.

The third film, the Beninese *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002), comes straight out of the Nigerian Christian film industry, which I trace back to church drama and American dramatic mission films. Contrary to *La Solution*, however, *Yatin* comes out of Pentecostalist Christianity with a strong focus on spiritual warfare that is visualised through special effects. More generally, *Yatin* draws on the conventions of Nollywood, which is now often accepted as its own unique form of video filmmaking.

Watching films is only possible through appropriate technology. In Chapter 4 I argue that such technology is never neutral and needs to be studied as part of the experience of film watching. Indeed, watching films makes people forget that the materiality of media also plays an important role. By studying the cultural biography and life of television sets and iconic images, most notably photographs, films and videos, I aim to fill this gap. Technology is further important since it allows people to see images with their own eyes, and learn by watching and imitating

them. Consequently, film watching has become a popular and important part of people's lives in the Commune of Cibly.

Photographic images gain their power through iconically depicting and indexing people and things. While this can allow for the iconic trait of the semiotic presencing principle to become more prominent, photographs remain more than representations, since they can also make present what they show by providing depicted people and ancestors with material extensions.

Seeing photographs of ancestors and identifying their presence with the photographic image constitutes a kind of "transvisual" seeing. Generally, people have a keen interest in transvisuality, by which I mean seeing beyond the material. Dreams and visions are typical of transvisuality, since they allow people to gain access to the less visible parts of the world. I argue that witchcraft is also a form of transvisual power, because it not only allows people to perpetrate evil deeds in the less visible world, but can also be used to gain knowledge from the less visible world and engage in creative acts, such as making television sets. Some people explain that it is a television's transvisual power that allows it to work. For a significant number of people television sets become powerful or live entities that provide visual access to the less visible parts of the world just as dreams and visions do. Television sets thus provide a transvisual technology that people use to watch videos in order to gain a deeper knowledge of life in the more or less visible parts of the world of agentive relationality, which they inhabit.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I present and analyse the findings of my reception research for the three films. Since most audience studies have been done in Europe or America I find the current theory of film reception insufficient to account for film watching in Africa. Especially the American *Jesus Film* led to a wider variety of interpretations than the other two films made in West Africa, raising the issue of its incongruity, as I call it. Drawing on cultural and epistemological questions of the incongruity between the film and its audiences, I identify different ways that contribute to a broader interpretive field of plural meanings.

I argue that films should not be analysed as trying to convey a specific message. Rather, viewers use films as presencing resources, which they exploit by drawing on their prior knowledge and experience, and by drawing on the interplay of the two presencing principles to guide their presencing. This results in an

interpretative field of plural meanings that can also account for why some viewers failed to recognise that the films were even Christian, watching them rather as directly relevant to their specific life situations. When watched by viewers who have no or limited knowledge of Christianity, I found that these films do not promote conversion to Christianity.

Films can only establish a preferred meaning for specific groups of people, who learn to watch the films in a specific way, usually by employing the semiotic presencing principle that accounts for correct sign interpretation. Accordingly, I contend that committed Christians in the Commune of Coby have come to watch Christian films in similar ways. They discuss their preferred meaning among themselves and share this during film screenings through comments and running interpretations. Becoming Christian, then, means to adopt the preferred meaning of such films at least to some extent. The *Jesus Film* has become important to Christians because it is not only the Word of God on film, but actually becomes God's Film for some, similar to how the Bible is God's Book. Dramatic Christian films, on the other hand, work as visual sermons that allow people to learn from them according to their preferred way of visual learning. It is especially due to the similarity of dreams and films that the latter become an important part of Christian life by gaining a life of their own and by becoming actors in the world of agentive relationality.

I conclude this book by returning to my overarching theme of the shift in Christianity from a religion of the book to a religion of film. I argue that such a shift is indeed happening at least among those who currently live and experience the kind of Pentecostalising Christianity that is found in the Commune of Coby of northwestern Benin.

Based on this overview I suggest that my book offers various arguments that could be relevant to different anthropologists interested in the areas of materiality, Christianity, witchcraft, as well as media and its reception. Furthermore, my findings and conclusions have potentially significant implications for anthropology as a whole discipline, since I question the validity of semiotics as one of its underlying premises. My introduction of the process of presencing as a form of action-based meaning making beyond semiotics could especially deepen our

understanding of how humans engage with their surroundings and the world, which they inhabit.

On a more practical level, my findings are relevant for media practitioners and missionaries who seek to use films and videos with the goal of conveying specific messages. Educational or religious films, especially if they are dubbed and employed cross-culturally, may not always lead to the desired change in attitude or behaviour in the target audience. This is why media practitioners need to ask themselves whether film or video is the best medium for a specific communicative purpose, and if this is affirmed, they need to pay close attention to their target audiences' social and cultural backgrounds, including how media and their technologies are perceived. Since not all settings in which films and videos are consumed are the same, not even within the small West African country of Benin, I advise media practitioners to assess and adapt their products in relation to their target audiences and think through issues of distribution and access. My findings imply that media practitioners bear a responsibility for their products, especially since audiovisual media can never be neutral. I hope that this book can contribute towards media practitioners becoming better aware of the nature of the media they produce as well as their possible impact – both desired or undesired – on potential audiences.

Chapter 1:

Modern Frictions in the Commune of Coby

In 1900 both film and cars arrived in West Africa (Green-Simms 2010: 210). It took at least another 20 years for cars to make it to the Atacora region of north-western Benin where they began to circulate on the new roads built by forced labour (Alber 2002; Desanti 1945: 214-215). When exactly automobiles carried film equipment to the area for the first time remains uncertain, but the new medium had certainly reached Coby by the late colonial period. Both moving pictures and moving vehicles have been considered emblematic markers of modernity (Green-Simms 2010: 210; Gullestad 2007: 144; Larkin 2008: 74; Mbembe and Roitman 1996: 160-161; B. Meyer 2002: 71; Verrips and Meyer 2001: 177; cf. Harbord 2002: 1).

Cars, whether they carried film projectors or not, announced themselves by their noise (cf. Kirsch 2008: 54) and left the fascinated people who witnessed the spectacle with the sensorial irritations of stifling and lingering fumes, exemplifying the ambivalence that colonial modernity had already started to bring. Colonial modernity often becomes manifest where fumes are puffed out. Indeed, the two notions of modernity and fumes share many similarities. Both are elusive and fuzzy, but nonetheless pervasive and intrusive. Fumes, like modernity, can neither be contained nor controlled; they come in ephemeral wafts or fads. Both fumes and modernity are usually mediated materially, most formidably through the combustion engine. Motors have become ubiquitous in the region (see, e.g., Gewald, Luning and van Walraven 2009; Verrips and Meyer 2001), whether in the form of motorbikes, generators, mills, chainsaws, cars or lorries.

Motors power globalisation both literally and metaphorically, thereby promoting the contact of remote communities with transnational socio-cultural, political, economic and religious trends. Like the effects of modernity, fumes particularly manifest themselves in more urban areas, such as the town of Coby, from where motorbikes spread them even to the remotest villages, just like roads promoted the spread of modernity in colonial Dahomey (cf. Alber 2002). Since even remote West African communities need to be seen “as existing within modernity” (Piot

1999: 1), I affirm that all people in the Commune of Coby follow some sort of a trajectory of modernity, most notably by consuming media and by participating in the monetary economy, and, usually via their children, in the institutions of schools and churches.

In the Commune of Coby modernity with its dualising effects has become a topic of everyday conversation, as is the case elsewhere (see, e.g., Ferguson 1999: 84-85; Keane 2007: 48; Spitulnik 2002a), and most people see themselves as being part of *upaanu* (the new times; cf. Gullestad 2007: 14). Especially today's younger generation has developed a seemingly unrestrained sense for all things new and modern (Piot 2010), whether education, Christianity, swift and easy transport or locally generated electricity to recharge mobile phones, and more importantly for this study, to power video technology.

In this chapter I demonstrate what it means to be modern in today's Commune of Coby and how people actively participate in *upaanu* (the new times). This allows me to set the scene for this study and to introduce the main groups of people in the Commune of Coby. A solid understanding of the issues that relate to modernity requires a historical perspective (cf. Geschiere 2013: xxii; T. Jenkins 2012: 470), which means that I need to reassess critically earlier constructions of backwardness in the Coby area that are based on the colonial legacy.

During colonial times the people of the Atacora region were quickly cast as the most reactionary and backward people of the colony. For example, in the villages surrounding the town of Coby, some people claim that exhaust fumes kept "fetishes" away. Conversely, they also state that some fetishes were able to stop the production of fumes by incapacitating motors, whether motorbikes or generators, within their vicinity. This example shows how colonisation was experienced as a temporal rupture through promoting a forward looking and secular "modernity" of machines that was categorically opposed to the inhibiting backward religious "tradition" thought to be inherent in fetishes – a notion that has come to stand for the African Other, but is itself a product and part of modernity (Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988; Sansi 2011). This rupture missed the fact that Africa itself was a modern invention (Mudimbe 1988) and that modernity in the area predates colonialism. In fact, colonial modernity could only assert itself because the opposed categories of "modernity" and "tradition" occupy the same time and space (Fabian 1983;

Gilroy 1993: 191; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Latour 1993). In other words, modernity not only signifies a constructed clash between two temporally distinct and thus opposed sides, but also demonstrates a tight relation between the two since machines and fetishes take each other seriously by influencing and affecting each other. The result was not a conflict between “tradition” and “modernity”, but rather frictions between different groups of people who came to identify with different aspects of modernity, which, in turn, led them to follow different trajectories.

Modernity is an ambivalent, paradoxical and multifaceted notion that remains central both to anthropology and the ethnographic realities found in Africa (Englund and Leach 2000; Ferguson 1999; Geschiere, Meyer and Pels 2008; Thomassen 2012). Even though modernity has usually been seen as tightly linked with Western hegemony, it is more appropriate to consider the roots of modernity in Europe’s and America’s translocal interactions with the rest of the world (T. Mitchell 2000; Piot 1999: 21). Accordingly, translocal modernity in the Atacora region of Benin, as I elaborate in this chapter, needs to be traced back much further than colonisation or the arrival of the combustion engine, namely to the establishment of trade relationships between the West African coast, Europe and America, most markedly through the Atlantic slave trade (Gilroy 1993; Piot 1999, 2001; R. Shaw 2002), and even earlier trade relationships which preceded the arrival of Europeans (Dramani-Issifou 1981; Johnson 1970; Ogundiran 2002; R. Shaw 2002: 26-27). The later colonial expansion and the more recent unilineal and teleological modernisation theories further asserted and popularised modernity by elaborating its genealogy and adding to its complexity (Ferguson 1999).

The project of Western modernity has never been achieved and will never be accomplished, Bruno Latour (1993) has famously argued, since modernity is both conflictual and incomplete by relying on dichotomous others for its assertion. In this sense, Peter Geschiere, *et al.* (2008) maintain that modernity needs to be seen as fragmented and relational. They propose to resist the relativistic illusion of the equality of multiple modernities of contemporary anthropology (Thomassen 2012; see also Keane 2007: 47; McLennan 2010: 17), by affirming both a genealogical commonality and socio-cultural diversity and distinctiveness. These genealogies of modernity express themselves through multiple trajectories that occupy the same

time and space. These trajectories are shaped and directed by how people deal and interact with each other, with their neighbours and with transnational flows and globalisation (Appadurai 1996; Keane 2007; Latour 1993).

In this sense I show in this chapter how people in the Commune of Cobly in the Atacora region of Benin have been following different trajectories of modernity, which can genealogically be traced back to translocal modernity of the precolonial period, as well as the later colonialism, capitalist modernity and more recent theories of modernisation. The result is a modernity that is characterised by people following different trajectories, which have common genealogical roots, but with competing and even conflicting interests, leading to frictions between them. In other words, modernity taken as a whole is a bundle of processes that manifest themselves in varied ways in different places, at different times and among different groups of people, rather than as a single package that is taken on board by whole communities (cf. Thomassen 2012: 167). These processes are always contested and negotiated, and often lead to an appropriation of some of the available traits, shaping and directing different trajectories, but without replacing them.

I argue that colonial modernity redefined people in the Commune of Cobly in terms of an inverted modernity by recasting them as reactionary and backward. Such inversions or reversion of modernity are not uncommon, as James Ferguson (1999) demonstrates for the Zambian Copperbelt and Suzanne Brenner (1998) for a once modern neighbourhood of the Indonesian city Solo that chose to revert its trajectory and has since become “recast as a signifier of tradition” (Brenner 1998: 7).

Before the inversion of modernity, however, the communities found in today’s Commune of Cobly had already embarked on their own trajectories of modernity in precolonial times. These communities developed through the necessity of accepting and integrating strangers who were displaced by the turmoil caused by the Atlantic slave trade. Communities had to nurture a sense of belonging within them and alliances between them in order to withstand the different external threats. Since long distance trade networks also traversed the region, communities were already exposed to translocal flows well before the arrival of Europeans and had become part of translocal modernity well before the colonial period.

Colonialism accentuated earlier trends of resistance and promoted an ethnisation along linguistic lines. It also reorganised space and repositioned the Commune of Coby from being integrated in a wider region to one of the remotest and most inaccessible parts of the new colony. At the same time, colonialism brought security, which allowed people to regain the high mobility that marked the pre-colonial period. Especially after World War II men ventured on seasonal migration, first to Ghana and later to Nigeria and other parts of Benin. While they sought adventure and opportunities for gain, they also colonised new land and initiated a growing diaspora. As transnational flows of commodities and ideas to the Commune of Coby had dried up during this time, people set out to tap into them in other places.

More recent times have seen a slow but steady consolidation of the independent state first through a Marxist-Leninist Revolution, then through democracy and decentralisation. Presently, people are increasingly open to all things modern leading to an increased interest in education, Christianity and media. This is linked to an almost unrestrained acceptance of technology, such as television, video and mobile phones. Regardless of their respective trajectories of modernity, people of the Commune of Coby participate in *upaanu* (the new times), which they recognise as having come with the arrival of Europeans.

An Image of Inverted Modernity

In the French colony of Dahomey, the people of the Atacora region of today's northwestern Benin, who appeared to be the same to outsiders due to their elaborate two-storey houses, their apparent nakedness and non-centralised social and political organisation, were generally referred to as "Somba" (Desanti 1945: 54). This name soon became a synonym for backwardness, insubordination and hostility, or in other words, it fell victim to the colonial inversion of modernity (Grätz 2000a; Kousse 1977: 56, 137; Mercier 1968: 23-28, 467-474; N'Tia 1993: 107; Tiando 1993: 100-101).

Since I first arrived in the Commune of Coby in 1995, I have found it increasingly hard to correlate any of the alleged negative traits with the socio-cultural situation I have observed and come to appreciate. Especially in recent years it has become clear that the younger generations want to turn the tables on their image

of an inverted modernity that has been constructed and imposed on them during colonial times. Many have developed a keen interest for the growing availability of video technology, mobile phones and motorbikes, which they now embrace with unrestrained vigour. In light of such developments, I need to evaluate the colonial image of inverted modernity, which I trace in more detail in this section by introducing the location of my fieldwork.

At the western edge of the Atacora region, bordering Togo, lies the Commune of Cobly, which is today mainly inhabited by a cluster of agricultural communities that came to be called Niendé or Nyende, and later Bebelibe (Map 2). These communities populate the valleys and plains around three chains of rocky hills that are significantly smaller than the main Atacora mountain range, to which they belong (Koussey 1977: 18). The longest ridge of the Cobly mountains, as I call them, runs from Tapoga about 32 km south to Korontière in the Commune of Boukoubé. It is flanked by two shorter parallel ridges between Kountori and Oroukparé to the west and between Cobly and Touga to the east. The Commune of Cobly, which is part of the northern West African savannah, is a densely populated area of 825 km² and counted 46,660 inhabitants in 2002, of which an estimated 70% speak Mbelime as their first language (Tchegnon and Guidibi 2006b).

While ethnic identities were mostly forged during colonial times, from today's perspective, the communities that see themselves as Bebelibe neighbour the Berba or Byaliba and pockets of Gourmantchéba to the north, the Kuntemba and Natemba to the northeast, the Betammaribe and Betiabe, to the southeast, the Lamba, who are mainly found in Togo, to the south, and the Gangamba and Anufu or Tchokossi to the west. These ethnic labels are usually shown on colonial maps, the most elaborate and detailed of which is by Paul Mercier (1954a), whose research goal of 1947 was to clarify the confusing ethnic landscape of the Atacora region (Mercier 1968: 11).

Outsiders perceived the people who came to be identified as Bebelibe as not having any distinctive cultural traits nor ethnic authenticity, and were often viewed by colonial administrators as "anarchic" (Cornevin 1981: 36; Person 1983: 142) and as a product of the cultural mixing of neighbouring groups, such as the Berba and Betiabe (Maurice 1986: 4), thereby defying the modern notion of "purity" (Latour 1993). Accordingly, the Bebelibe came to be seen as the most

backward among the Somba from whom they were split as a distinct group in the colonial administration's efforts of ethnicisation. They remained marginal in colonial writings and were often only named in passing. Their negative image was perpetuated most markedly in the promotional children's novel written by the French Catholic priest Joseph Huchet (1955 [1950]), which, from today's perspective, is of little ethnographic use. He makes the Niendé appear reactionary, stubborn, disobedient, lazy, infantile and superstitious (88-90). He writes that for the Somba, they are sneaky thieves (46) and fools (50), whereas the Berba fear the Niendé (15), they do not mix their blood with them (13) and that the Niendé find human meat better than dog meat (18). Huchet then has a boy scout recount a story of a wicked Niendé who caught children to eat (111), implying also an accusation of witchcraft. By explicitly associating the Niendé with cannibalism, Huchet stigmatised them with the ultimate characterisation of savagery (Heintze 2003).

The legacy of this marginalisation and stigmatisation still lingers. Even today, the neighbouring groups perceive the Bebelibe as backward, thereby actively perpetuating modern ideas introduced by colonial ethnicisation. They look down on them and often blame them for crimes committed in the region. In terms of development the Bebelibe are always considered to be a step behind everybody else and generally appear disadvantaged (see, e.g., Assah and Asare-Kokou 2004). For example, Coby has never had a government minister appointed by the head of state, whereas all its surrounding Communes have. The town of Coby – the administrative seat of the Commune – is usually the last in the country to receive important infrastructure, such as the sixth form of a secondary school (*second cycle* leading to the *baccalauréat* in 2009), a post office (in 2010), or be connected to the regional electricity network (in 2011). Government officials, such as gendarmes and teachers, do not like to be sent from southern Benin to this remote part of their country and experience it as a punishment. Some who suffer this fate then see it as their mission to “civilise” people in the Commune of Coby, since they are claimed to be “savages who live like animals”⁴ (cf. Sewane 2003: 36).

⁴ According to a conversation of southerners in a taxi on their way back to Coby in December 2012. A friend who is fluent in Fon, the main southern language, shared the taxi and could follow their conversation.

The southerner's attitude is noticeable in their condescending behaviour towards the people of Coby, who respond to this with apparent passivity, which in turn only further accentuates the perception of backwardness. Pastors from southern Benin too, who come to Coby to establish their respective denominations, usually have this same attitude. As a result, some have concluded that Coby is a very difficult mission field with people not responding to the Gospel as they had expected from their prior experience in the south.

Due to such views that still persist, I need to re-evaluate prior ethnographic work, the colonial image and the history of different communities that inhabit the area of the Commune of Coby. I start by focusing my attention on questions of belonging, how communities were shaped, how they interact with each other and how in colonial times they found a shared sense of ethnic identity that continues to define them.

Belonging in the Commune of Coby

In 1894, the German Hans Gruner, starting from Togo, led an expedition north to the Niger River. The following year, on their way back, they crossed the Atacora mountain range moving westwards, probably only a few months after a French expedition under Decœur had moved through (Cornevin 1981: 381-382; Drot 1904: 282, 285). They were among the first Europeans to pass through the area that constitutes today's Commune of Coby. Gruner and his expedition probably travelled through the northern areas of the Commune on paths used by caravans and ended up in Datori from where they headed back to Sansanné-Mango in Togo (Gruner 1997).

Three years later, in 1897, Germany and France signed a treaty in Paris that directed how the border between their new colonies of Togoland and Dahomey should be drawn (Desanti 1945: 35-38). In late 1899 a joint expedition reached the remote northern border area in order to explore their new annexations and try to delimit the two colonies, which was finally achieved in 1913 (Mercier 1968: 431). At the end of the rainy season the expedition reached the hot and humid undulating plains west of the Coby mountains that are part of today's Commune of Coby, passing through today's Korontière and Datori. They encountered exten-

sive marshland, but also populated areas (Plé 1903; Preil 1909; Person 1983: 141).

These early accounts remain sketchy. They comment on the dense population of the Atacora region, especially in the mountainous areas, and their extensive fields and herds of cattle. More importantly, they made reference to the impressive and fascinating houses that were described as “castles” (Bertho 1952; S. P. Blier 1987; Grätz 1999; Maurice 1986; Mercier 1954b; Padenou and Barrué-Pastor 2006; Schilling 1906; T. Shaw 1977) and that the popular authors, Marie and Philippe Huet, recently characterised as “the major visual symbol of ancestral Somba culture” (2012: 18, translation mine).

Early explorers also mentioned an absence of political organisation, and duly noted the nudity of people, sometimes commenting on their beauty. It is clear that these early explorers were impressed and fascinated with the archaism and sophistication they thought to see, an image reminiscent of the “noble savage” that lingers in the writings of colonial administrators and missionaries alike (cf. Tiando 1993: 101). Photographers and explorers have perpetuated this image (e.g. Boremanse 1978; Chesi 1977; Englebert 1973), which also featured in a short documentary film entitled *Au pays Somba* (1957, Service de l’information de la République du Dahomey 1963: 67) and in Jean Rouch’s ethnographic fiction film *Jaguar* (1967). The image also continues to be exploited for tourism (see, e.g., Grätz 2000a: 678; ONATHO [ca. 1985]; Vinakpon Gbaguidi 2011).

Going back in time to the centuries that precede the arrival of the first whites, I can note, together with Emmanuel Tiando (1993), that scholars have not given enough attention to the history of the whole region. Mainly based on oral accounts, scholars generally agree that the peoples of today’s Atacora region moved in from the west and northwest in successive waves (Cornevin 1981: 35-42; Dramani-Issifou 1981: 664; Mercier 1968; N’Tia 1993; Reikat, *et al.* 2000; Tiando 1993: 97-98). Although these authors have given different dates for the beginning of these movements, archaeologist Lucas Pieter Petit (2005: 122) fixes them in the late seventeenth century. This was also the time when the Atlantic slave trade started to impact the whole region (Piot 2001: 160-161). Historians and anthropologists generally acknowledge that the Atacora mountain range served the migrants as a refuge and that they enjoyed relative safety and independence from

raids from neighbouring, politically more centralised groups (Cornevin 1981: 31-32; Dramani-Issifou 1981: 657; Goody 1978; Koussey 1977: 18; Mercier 1968: 4; Norris 1984: 164, 1986; N'Tia 1993; Piot 1996: 33, 1999: 31). These raids undoubtedly were the reason why early European explorers sometimes met with armed resistance, while at other times, they came across deserted villages and homesteads (Preil 1909) – the people having sought refuge in the mountains. Roger N'Tia (1993: 112) claims that it was these raids that pushed the “Niendé” eastwards to their present locations in the Commune of Cobly, thereby closing the last wave of people movement and setting the scene for the beginning of colonisation.

This historical understanding leaves many gaps and questions and presents the occupation of the Atacora region as a progressive movement of already distinct ethnic groups. By focusing on specific historical aspects of people in the Commune of Cobly, I aim to redress some historical questions and provide background information that I feel is helpful for apprehending the present situation characterised by *upaanu* (the new times).

Inventing the Bebelibe

Ethnic identities have often been invented, imagined or constructed during colonial times and thus need to be regarded as modern (Ranger 1983, 1993; Vail 1989). British colonial administrators were not alone in assuming that African peoples were primarily organised into “tribes” that were headed by “chiefs” (Pels 1996, 1999: 285-286). French administrators were equally keen to identify and classify the peoples they encountered through a typically modern mindset by organising the colonies into homogenous *cantons*, the administrative unit known in today's Benin as *commune* (Cornevin 1981: 423; Desanti 1945: 85; Geschiere 2009: 13-16; Mercier 1968). In independent Benin, ethnic identity has become part of the nation's fabric and is further promoted by discourses of the national government and maybe more importantly, intellectuals at a local level (Bierschenk 1992, 1995; Grätz 2000a, 2000b: 119, 2006; Guichard 1990).

Similarly to how Jack Goody (1956) describes a collection of Dagari-speaking people of today's northwestern Ghana, the peoples of the Atacora region did not have names that could be used to refer to distinct ethnic groups. Naming the

peoples of the Atacora region has been a continuous challenge and outsiders came up with various names by which to call them. Even before the arrival of Europeans, Muslim traders referred to the inhabitants of the Atacora region as “Kafiri”, unbelievers (Desanti 1945: 54; Fossagrives 1900: 294; Mercier 1968: 8; N’Tia 1993: 107; Person 1982: 110; Tidjani 1951: 40). By the end of the nineteenth century the early European explorers were calling the peoples of the mountains “Soumba” or “Somba”, while those in the western plains were labelled “Barba”, an evocative name that was also used for other non-centralised groups in northern Togo (Asmis 1912: 89; Gruner 1997: 350) and the Bariba or Baatombu of today’s northeastern Benin (see, e.g., Law 1999). In spite of this generalising terminology, early explorers already seemed aware of the complex socio-cultural and linguistic situation of the whole region (Gruner 1997; Plé 1903; Preil 1909). Being remote and relatively difficult to access, the Atacora region only started to be forcefully integrated into the colony in the 1910s. During these times the colonial administration referred to the non-centralised groups of the whole Atacora region as “Somba”. They already recognised that the Somba consisted of different “races” who spoke different “dialects”.⁵ It was only during later years, as colonial administrators gained better knowledge of the people, and as Catholic missionaries started to study their languages in the 1940s (Cornevin 1981: 440; Grätz 2000a: 681-685), that different socio-linguistic groups were split from the “Somba”. Paul Mercier was the first anthropologist who conducted research in the Atacora from 1947. Studying under Marcel Griaule, he was able to shed more light on the ethnic complexity of the region. As a result, during late colonial times, the name “Somba” was only retained for the groups who share Ditammari as their language, namely the Betammaribe, the Betiabe and the Besorube (Mercier 1954a: 13, 1968: 9-10). Today, this more restrictive use of the derogatory name “Somba” is often replaced by “Betammaribe”, which is now ambiguously applied both to the Ditammari speaking groups in a larger sense (including the Betiabe and Besorube) and the narrower sense (excluding the Betiabe and Besorube).

As a consequence of this colonial ethnicisation, a collection of different heterogeneous clans near the Togo border, that could not be classified otherwise,

⁵ According to an ethnological report of 1923 (Archives Nationales du Bénin, Porto-Novo, 1E4 2-7).

were lumped together. The Swiss anthropologist Hugo Huber (1973: 377, 1980: 50) correctly recognised their origins as either autochthonous or coming from neighbouring groups, while Mercier (1968: 101) considered them to be the most significant example of the general heterogeneity of the Atacora region (see also Kaucley forthcoming 2014). Colonial administrators initially identified them as “Niendé” (Roure 1937; Salaün 1947). This name as an ethnic label was clearly problematic, since the people for whom it was used did not have a collective name for themselves nor did their complex socio-cultural composition allow clearly definable limits (Mercier 1954a: 14, 1968: 7, 10-11; see also Goody 1956). What made the grouping together of these communities possible was their shared language that Emmanuel Sambiéni (1999: 36) describes as the “cement” that holds the people together. Mercier (1949) was the first to apply the label of Niendé specifically to the language.

While Mercier implies that the name Niendé may have been attributed to them by their neighbours (1954a: 14),⁶ it is equally likely that it was a colonial invention. “Niendé” stems from the local phrase meaning, “I said...” (Cornevin 1981: 36; Koussey 1977: 47 n.68; Mercier 1968: 39 n.60), and the story goes that people repeatedly reiterated what they said when the French did not understand them (Rietkerk 2000: 141). These days, due its image of backwardness, the word “Niendé” has assumed a derogatory meaning (cf. Koussey 1977: 47).

Today, people prefer to call themselves Bebelibe (sing. Ubielo), and their language Mbelime, “the Ubiero way” (Rietkerk 2000: 141). Interestingly, this name was already mentioned by Mercier (1968: 19) in a phonological variant (“Bèbèribè”) as the name given by the “Somba” to the Berba.⁷ “Mbelime”, as a name for the language, can be traced back to the *Sous-commission de Linguistique Mbèlimè* that began its work in 1975, but only became official in 1981. The *Sous-commission* launched the first literacy campaign in 1978 and sporadically continued to develop Mbelime as a written language and to revise its orthography (S.

⁶ Maurice (1986: 224) claimed that the Betiabe called the Niendé “Bakwatuba”. This name, however, seems to be a version of Bekpetuube, the name of the Oukouatouhon community.

⁷ In recent times, this has sometimes given rise to confusion between the Berba and Bebelibe of today (cf. Koussey 1977: 47).

Merz, *et al.* 2013; Sous-commission de Linguistique M'Bèrimè 1981).⁸ The new names of Mbelime for the language and Bebelibe for the people seems to have been an instant success, used for the first time in writing by Koussey (1977) and started to replace the now derogatory “Niendé”. This development was possible thanks to the wide-ranging reforms of Mathieu Kérékou’s new Marxist-Leninist regime (Allen 1989; Hounkpatin 1987), which included the rehabilitation and recognition of local cultures and languages. Accordingly, the government founded the *Commission Nationale de Linguistique* and the *Direction de l’Alphabétisation et de la Presse Rurale* to research the linguistic situation in the country, establish a sociolinguistic atlas, describe languages with the goal of establishing orthographies and start literacy campaigns for adults (Hazoume 1994: 19-27; Igué and N’Ouéni 1994; Saxer and Grossenbacher 1987: 51-54; Tchitchi 2009: 9-10).

A brief sociolinguistic survey conducted in 1998 revealed that Mbelime as a language is by no means uniform. Especially in the zones where Mbelime meets its neighbouring languages, people are multilingual and there can be significant cross-linguistic influence to the extent that the Mbelime speaking communities of Korontière in the Commune of Boukoumbé are not always accepted as being Bebelibe. Generally, however, there is reasonable comprehension between the communities of the whole Mbelime-speaking area (Hatfield and McHenry 2011; Neukom 2004: 1-2). Although there are only an estimated 58,500 people who claim Mbelime as their primary language in the Atacora region,⁹ it is the most important language in the Coby area and is spoken as a second language by most Kuntemba, some Betammaribe and Gangamba. Outside the Coby area, however, whether in the neighbouring Communes of Tanguiéta, Matéri and Boukoumbé, Mbelime loses its importance and is often stigmatised.

Today, linguistically based ethnic identities continue to be propagated (Grätz 2006: 201; cf. Ranger 1993: 74). All major languages of the Atacora region have

⁸ Unfortunately, the original members of the *Sous-commission de Linguistique Mbèlimè* and other contemporary intellectuals who are still alive have not been able to satisfactorily explain the origin or meaning of the new name.

⁹ This estimate includes Mbelime speakers of the Communes of Coby and Boukoumbé taken from Tchegnon and Guidibi (2006a, 2006b). Assuming a conservative annual population growth of 2.8% gives a population of just over 58,500 for 2014. Earlier estimations for the number of Mbelime speaker were 8,000 for the late 1940s (Mercier 1954a: 22), 12,000 for the late 1960s (Huber 1979: 9) and 24,500 for 1991 (Vanderaa 1991: 7).

active literacy programmes that are coordinated by the government and supported by different NGOs. Local radio stations offer programmes in the different local languages, Bible translations are in progress and local researchers have started to write on their own ethnic groups (for Cobly, see, e.g., Kaucley forthcoming 2014; Moutouama 2004; Sambiéni 1999; Taouéma 2010).

Communities and a Relational View of Belonging

This construction of ethnicity on linguistic bases does not have much meaning in socio-cultural terms, as Mercier (1954a: 9-10) already observed. Indeed, the Atacora region is ethnically so complex that Mercier (1968) thought the existing theories about ethnic groups, current at his time, quite insufficient to explain the situation he encountered. He then based his analysis on the study of non-centralised and segmentary political systems that were part of British functionalism (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940; J. Middleton and Tait 1958). In his main work that studies the history and ethnicity of the different “clans” of the Betamaribe, Betiabe and Besorube, Mercier (1968) employs the Ditammari word *kubwoti* (see also Maurice 1986: 185; Sewane 2002: 211-213). A *kubwoti*, Mercier rightly maintained, is a dynamic and fluid form of social organisation, whose adherence does not necessarily depend on direct descent, but which provides people with a sense of “belonging” (Geschiere 2009).

Even today, this kind of segmentary and dynamic organisation remains the primary source of belonging for most people of the Commune of Cobly. I consider these socio-cultural groups, even in a form that resembles clans, as constituting “imagined communities”, as Benedict Anderson (1991) has characterised diverse social groups that have come to accept a shared national identity in Europe thanks to emerging print media. Similar to the European situation, such identity united people from various backgrounds in the Commune of Cobly through a common ritual life and a shared history, which is usually sung (Huber 1974). Even if these historical accounts talk about the origins of a mythical founding ancestor, this does not exclude members from having a diversity of backgrounds (Mercier 1968: 333).

Precolonial times have been characterised by a remarkable mobility of populations, which Adepoju (2003: 37) and Han van Dijk, Dick Foeken and Kiky van Til

(2001: 14) have described as “a way of life”. The main reason for this came from the threat of slave raids and the resulting massive movements and concentration of people, shaping the social and political organisation of non-centralised communities of the West African savannah (Piot 2001; Klein 2001; Goody 1978). The communities of the Atacora region, then, cannot be viewed simply as descent groups, but need to be characterised as imagined “borderless, fluid entities – places in which people constantly come and go” (Piot 1999: 134).¹⁰

The dynamic view of kinship found in the Commune of Coby relies on highly elastic kinship terminology that is able to capture the most diverse relations (Geschiere 2009: 83, 192, 2013: xxiv; see also S. Merz 2014: 26-27). Accordingly, it allows for the integration of large numbers of newcomers who were displaced because of slave raids (Piot 2001: 161). It has also facilitated my integration as a stranger into the society, which has resulted over time in me having different fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters.¹¹ Furthermore, the notion of “the stranger” (*usaano*, pl. *besambe* in Mbelime) includes anybody who arrives and whose immediate experiences and possible motives remain hazy or unknown. This does not only include true foreigners, such as myself, but also family members who have been absent for a while, new wives who come to live in their husband’s home and babies (Fortes 1975: 230; Piot 1999: 77). Kinship and the sense of belonging to a community, then, do not primarily depend on biological parentage, but are rather based on accepting and integrating anybody to whom the notion of “stranger” can be extended. People can thus ignore or circumvent a lack of direct parentage through the elasticity of kinship terminology. Such a dynamic situation makes it difficult, if not impossible, to speak of clans, even if such terms have been used by earlier anthropologists, notably Huber (1969). Since the linguistic diversity of the Commune of Coby does not favour the use of a local term, as Mercier (1968) was able to do, I prefer to refer to them as “communities”, a term

¹⁰ While Charles Piot (1999: 132-134, 154) stresses the difficulty of defining “community” among the Kabre and proposes to think of it as a ritual centre, I use the notion more in a delocalised way that is characterised by relationships and a shared sense of belonging (Anderson 1991).

¹¹ One of the more interesting examples was of a lady who decided that she was my “daughter”, thereby according me the authority of a “father”. Since she was at least 20 years my senior, she could, biologically speaking, have been my mother. The nature of the relationship was based on the fact that I have the same local name that her real father had.

that is less associated with the idea of “primitive society” than “clan” (Kuper 1988) and that includes the notion of vagueness, openness and inclusiveness.

Today, there are 23 communities that consider themselves Bebelibe (S. Merz 2014: 4, 58). Members of about half of them claim to be the original occupants of the land on which they live today. They are also in charge of the earth shrines, which are common among other Voltaic peoples (see, e.g., Dawson 2009; Fortes 1987; Goody 1956: 91-99; Lentz 2009). Those who do not live on the land for which they are directly responsible are referred to as “strangers”, even if they have lived there for many generations or belong to a community that owns its own land somewhere else. During colonial times, the original occupants came to be called *autochtones* “born from the soil” (Cornevin 1981: 34; Geschiere 2009). Their exact origins remain uncertain, but could go back to an occupation of the area that predates the more recent arrivals of the late seventeenth century (N’Tia 1993: 108; Reikat, *et al.* 2000: 227). Petit (2005: 108), however, found that early settlements in the Atacora region were abandoned between the twelfth and fifteenth century, leaving the question open of what happened to their inhabitants afterwards.

There is no question that the Cobly mountains were an attractive location to many new migrants during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, as pressure from raids by centralising neighbouring groups increased. Depending on the political situation, people could move into the mountains where they sometimes settled properly, or they could retain their houses on the lower slopes and valleys, then seek temporary refuge in elevated and rocky areas when needed and use these secure sites to store food away from possible raiders.

More recent centuries continued to be marked by a high degree of mobility through constant movements of socio-cultural groups, families and individuals not only due to the threat of raids, but also because of different problems they encountered. There were disputes with relatives, arguments about marriage or land, or simply the desire to start a new settlement elsewhere (Tiando 1993: 98; Koussey 1977: 83-84). At times, such problems even led to armed conflict, forcing people to move in search of new land, sometimes displacing, in turn, those that were already there. Oral accounts suggest that these movements were multidirec-

tional and did not follow the generally claimed trend of a historical southeastward movement.

Moving to different areas would have necessitated negotiations with the communities already present, typically with those who claimed autochthony. Sometimes, those newly arriving were integrated into an existing community and then adapted to its language and cultural practices (Fortes 1975: 233). Usually, their history was added to existing accounts, which allows us today to gain an idea of the extent of diversity. Other newcomers remained more independent and were in due course accepted as communities in their own right, maintaining at least some of their cultural practices and distinctive backgrounds.

The multidirectional mobility of people indicates a constant splitting, joining and integration of people and groups of people. The accommodating communities related to neighbouring communities regardless of their linguistic and socio-cultural traits, mainly by forming various alliances that were crucial for the cohesion of the area as a whole. Accordingly, the different communities maintained alliances of friendship, often with their direct neighbours, which also served defensive purposes. More importantly, all communities engaged in marriage alliances through the exchange of women (Huber 1969; Kaucley forthcoming 2014; Koussey 1977: 164-166; Mercier 1968: 339; Tidjani 1952), a practice that was made illegal in 2012. The Bebelibe communities, as well as some of their neighbouring groups were strictly exogamous, seeking women from outside of their communities. The preferred method was the direct exchange of two women between two families from two different communities, leading to a direct reciprocity with neither of the two parties being treated differently and assuring the resulting alliance to work both ways. Sometimes, if there were no marriageable women available within the family, the debt could be passed on to the next generation or a future husband could provide services and goods to gain a woman (Huber 1969; S. Merz 2014: 8-15). Recent decades have seen significant changes in marriage practices, with love marriages becoming more important and with the exogamic rule being relaxed. Despite this, many continue to respect the principle of marrying somebody from outside of the community.

The patriline is important for belonging to a specific community, since descendants remain members of their fathers' line, which provides the sung histories

and thus a crucial sense of belonging. When people meet each other for the first time, they often exchange the name of their patrilineal community in order to figure out how they are possibly related. This is highly likely, since specific marriage alliances tie communities together. In addition, the matrilineal side of the family equally plays a fundamental role in the lives of people (cf. S. P. Blier 1987: 8; Maurice 1986: 165-167), sometimes going back two generations (S. Merz 2013: 23-24, 2014: 51). The maternal uncle, or a related representative, is even more important than one's own father (S. Merz 2014: 30-33; cf. Piot 1999: 125-126). If people encounter irresolvable problems in their communities, especially with their direct parents, or if they have specific material needs, they can turn to their maternal uncles, who have an obligation to help whenever possible. These matrilineal relationships should be actively maintained throughout life and have important implications for the ritual life of the family, as they can determine the spreading of shrines and initiations. They are also reinforced during funerals, which, as Geschiere has observed for Cameroon, become "a dramatic acting out of the map of kinship and affinity that links persons and groups" (2009: 192). A body can only be buried once the representatives from the matrilineal community of the deceased have arrived to help with the proceedings (cf. Maurice 1986: 166; Koussey 1977: 153). During the secondary funeral – a big memorial celebration usually held at least a year after the primary funeral – it is the matrilineal side of the deceased who decides on the volume of sorghum beer and pigs that will be provided by the patriline for the extensive festivities (S. Merz 2014: 53-56).

This principle of dual kinship affiliation means that all men directly rely on two communities, their father's and their mother's (cf. Mercier 1968: 46, 333). Women, since they are usually married outside their patrilineal communities, gain a third community affiliation, namely the one of their husbands and children. A married couple thus needs to maintain direct kinship links with up to four distinct communities. Once new women are added to their family, either as co-wives, or as wives for their sons, the relationships to other communities can further proliferate with every woman that joins the family, although multiple relationships with closely allied communities are more likely.

The result is an extremely elaborate and dense network of relationships of kinship and alliances between different communities that do not have much respect

for today's modern ethnic lines. While such relationships are most pronounced with the immediate neighbouring communities, they become less important as the distance increases. As a result, the eastern communities who are ethnically part of the Bebelibe have a lot more in common with their neighbouring Betammaribe and Kuntemba communities than with the Bebelibe communities of Datori at the western edge of the Commune of Cobly. The Datori communities meanwhile – one of which is of Waaba origin from the Atacora mountains – have assimilated to the Gangamba and Tchokossi communities whom they border.

The socio-cultural situation of the Commune of Cobly, as well as its neighbouring areas, thus needs to be understood as a highly fluid, dynamic and mobile socio-cultural continuum of distinct and unique imagined communities (cf. Goody 1956). Such communities are centred on a mythical ancestor, a shared history and a common ritual life and are allied with each other through proximity, friendships and above all marriage. In light of this, the source of their sense of belonging does not only stem from the communities' internal cohesion, but also comes through the dispersed relationships that communities maintain with each other. Ethnic identities, Thomas Bierschenk observes, are "born within social relations" (1992: 509) and thus rely both on communal adherence and demarcation, allowing for the widespread social cohesion that characterises the Atacora region (Mercier 1968: 411). This underlying relational view of belonging is inherently dynamic and can adapt and reconfigure itself as relationships between different communities develop or diminish. It thrives on the interplay of the historical affirmation of each community with the relationships they maintain with others. Both reinforce each other, allowing them to demonstrate a social openness that strives for inclusion and integration.

While the idea of the modern ethnic identity of the Bebelibe has become important and continues to be consolidated through their shared language, it is equally clear that the different relationally defined communities persist and may even become reinforced. In some communities, local leaders and priests of community shrines have recently organised reunions for their community and the ones with whom they maintain different alliances, inviting both local residents and the diaspora. Such reunions have the goal of strengthening community belonging, but they equally consolidate the alliances that give the different commu-

nities their relational character. At the local level this sense of belonging to a community remains important and is widely discussed, sometimes in relation to access to land and local political power. Generally, however, the question of autochthony and land ownership has not led to serious conflict, since it is defined not only through community belonging, but also through residence. Furthermore, the French counterparts *allochtone* or *allogène* (foreign) have not entered local discourse. Autochthony in the Atacora region, then, is much more historicised than it is politicised and ethnicised, but nonetheless provides an important aspect in defining alliances between different communities.

In this section I have demonstrated that the communities found in today's Commune of Coby have become the backbone of socio-cultural cohesion through their dynamic openness towards neighbours and newcomers, even though they also showed resistance to threats and used the Coby mountains as a refuge. Mercier (1968: 17, 242) has observed that the people of the Atacora region have never been completely isolated, as colonial writing sometimes implied (cf. Koussey 1977: 101). It is thus important to reassess the main historical aspects of today's Commune of Coby and how the area was shaped by being steadily integrated into the wider West African region and to areas beyond.

The Modernity of the Precolonial Period

During archaeological excavations east of Coby, Petit (2005: 95, 141) found three cowry shells, beads and foreign pottery in a layer he dates back to the ninth century. These artefacts must have come with Muslim traders from North Africa and indicate an early but already modern integration of the area into the wider regional economy that predated the arrival of Europeans on the West African coast. Once European trade had started, cowry shells were quickly established as a widespread currency throughout West Africa and also became an integral part of political, religious and ritual life (Dramani-Issifou 1981; Johnson 1970; Ogundiran 2002; Şaul 2004; R. Shaw 2002: 43).

In the Atacora region cowries started to have a significant impact between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (Johnson 1970: 34, 36; N'Tia 1993: 120). People adopted them as part of initiation costumes and integrated them into the divination process. Even today diviners expect their

clients to provide cowries for the divination process and as compensation for their services (R. Blier 1991: 83; Huber 1973: 388-392; Koussey 1977: 106), even though they no longer have much market value. Cowry shells, then, are part of translocal modernity and are symbolic of the trajectory of modernity that colonial modernity equated with “tradition”.

Cowries mainly arrived in the Atacora region through caravans, both from trans-Saharan and later coastal trade (Koussey 1977: 104; Mercier 1968: 248). Caravans transported mainly kola nuts, but also salt, potash, livestock, slaves, textiles, leather, iron and agricultural goods between the kingdoms of today's southern Ghana and the Hausa states of northern Nigeria, starting as early as the fifteenth century (Abaka 2005; Akinwumi 2001; Brégand 1998; Goody and Mustapha 1967; Iroko 1988; Lovejoy 1980; Norris 1984; Tcham 1994). While the main trade routes passed through Djougou in today's Benin, Sansanné-Mango in neighbouring Togo also played an important role in regional trade as of the late eighteenth century (Norris 1984: 164). Different sources mention a longer secondary route linking Sansanné-Mango with Kouandé in Benin, passing through today's Commune of Cobly (Akinwumi 2001; d'Almeida Topor 1995a: 93, 1995b: 282; Desanti 1945: 221; Drot 1904: 283, 286; Gruner 1997: 112; Koussey 1977: 106; N'Tia 1993: 122; Plé 1903: 25-26). The importance of this road, which predates the foundation of Sansanné-Mango (Rey-Hulman 1975: 311), is indicated by Mercier, who refers to Datori as an “old caravan centre” (1968: 101) and by Wilhelm Preil, who mentions a “wide trading road” (1909: 139). Based on oral accounts Théophile Moutouama (2004: 111-113) affirms these observations and adds Nanakadé and Cobly as places where caravans often stopped and traded, at least in a small measure and often through exchange (cf. Şaul 2004: 72). Local accounts recognise the precolonial existence of a *Zongo* quarter in Cobly, the part of town where Hausa and other Muslim traders lived and where caravans usually stopped. The inhabitants of *Zongo* remained segregated and, unlike other foreigners, were never absorbed into local communities (Fortes 1975: 239-241; Goody 1956: 11). M. Hartveld, *et al.* (1992: 7) give 1898 as a date for the foundation of Cobly *Zongo*, while Sambiéni (1999: 41) traces it back to 1888. During this time the volume in trade in the region increased as heightened threats of bandits had rendered southern routes more dangerous (Akinwumi 2001: 336-337). By 1906

the trade route through the Commune of Coby had become more important than its more southern counterpart (d'Almeida Topor 1995b: 282). What people in Coby remember better, although usually with shame, is that their ancestors burnt Coby *Zongo* and subsequently assassinated and expelled all its inhabitants. This attack can be linked to changing tactics of some raiders, who sometimes disguised themselves as caravan traders (Kaucley forthcoming 2014; Koussey 1977: 131) and might have been the reason for the more widespread retaliation on traders and *Zongo* quarters in the Atacora region of 1913 and 1914 (Mercier 1968: 435).¹²

One of the lasting effects of this incident was that the Muslim influence in Coby was almost eradicated. Islam has never been important in the rural parts of the Atacora region (Maurice 1986: 405; Mercier 1968: 55; Quillet 1994), and remains marginal in the Commune of Coby. Since colonial times, Muslims from the wider region slowly started to move again to the town of Coby, where they work as butchers, market traders and government officials. Although some Mbelime-speakers have converted to Islam, I estimate that they constitute less than 1% of the total population in the Commune. Generally, I found that Mbelime-speakers feel considerably less attracted to Islam than to Christianity, because it has stringent laws and discourages the consumption of alcohol and pork (cf. Cros 1989: 62), which are both important in funerals and other major events. Often, conversion to Islam needs a major motive, such as becoming part of Muslim trade networks.

More generally, the attack of Coby *Zongo* expressed a suspicion towards foreigners that must have intensified as the general insecurity of the area steadily increased during the nineteenth century. People came to regard strangers with heightened suspicion (cf. Sewane 2003: 255), which hampered their mobility. Local accounts imply that even visiting other villages became difficult (cf. Allman and Parker 2005: 34; Fortes 1975: 231). As a reminder, insecurity was the primary reason for people seeking refuge in the mountainous areas of the Atacora region, such as the Coby mountains. Even in their new locations people were not safe from outside aggressions. Occasional raids from the north and the east con-

¹² Hartveld *et al.* (1992: 7) and Sambiéni (1999: 41) place the attack on Coby *Zongo* between 1902 and 1904, dates which seem to me at odds with general regional trends as outlined in this section.

tinued and raiders from Kouandé and other places in the Borgou region east of the Atacora mountains sometimes ventured to Coby and beyond on horseback (Brégand 1998: 129-148; Cornevin 1981: 181; Iroko 1985/86; Koussey 1977: 114-116; Moutouama 2004: 37; N'Tia 1993: 117; Person 1982). The main historical event of precolonial times that affected today's Commune of Coby was the incursion of the Anufɔ or Tchokossi, who moved from today's Ivory Coast and established the new settlement of Sansanné-Mango on the banks of the Oti river in Togo in 1764 (Asmis 1912; Kirby 1986: 33-40; Norris 1984, 1986; N'Tia 1993: 118; Rey-Hulman 1975; Tcham 1994). This new centralised chiefdom subdued the surrounding people, such as the Moba, Konkomba and Gangamba, and forced them into paying tribute. This led to further eastward movements with Gangamba joining existing communities that remained independent or forming new ones. It seems that even some Tchokossi joined in these movements (Moutouama 2004: 31-32, 36-38). On the other hand, at least one of the communities near Coby accepted Tchokossi domination. As a result they were free to move to the more fertile plains west of Coby, where the population appeared much more subdued by early explorers (Plé 1903: 24; Preil 1909: 141-142).

Beyond their zone of direct influence and subjugation the Tchokossi organised regular raids during dry season to collect food and slaves, often venturing as far as 80 km from Sansanné-Mango (Norris 1986), and even further into the Atacora mountains (Koussey 1977: 117). People in the Commune of Coby remember these raids (cf. Mercier 1968: 102). The Tchokossi tried to catch whomever they could regardless of age and gender. As strategies of defence people surveyed the area for threats and alerted each other. In case of the arrival of raiders, they would hide women and children, and sometimes the men attacked intruders with poisoned arrows. At the time, people in the whole area valued horses. Since raiders also arrived on horseback, it soon became difficult to distinguish between enemy and friend. As a result, people discouraged the use and breeding of horses so that anyone on horseback would be recognised and treated as an enemy. Raiders took slaves either back to Sansanné-Mango or eastwards, most notably to Djougou. Either they kept slaves to work locally or they sold them on. Both practices consolidated the captor's political and economic positions (Asmis 1912: 78; Brégand 1998: 75-77; Iroko 1985/86; Norris 1984, 1986; Rey-Hulman 1975). While some

slaves may have been sold inland to the slave markets of the middle Niger valley (Allman and Parker 2005: 29), there is clear evidence that slaves from the Atacora region were fed into the Atlantic trade, often passing through the kingdom of Dahomey (Curtain 1969: 196; Law 1989, 1999; Dramani-Issifou 1981).

Even though the direct impact of the slave trade on the Atacora region may never have been as serious in numerical terms as for areas further south (Person 1983: 142-143; Piot 1996; Curtain 1969), its ramifications should not be underestimated. The first European visitors to the area provide a snapshot of the situation before the colonial conquest that shows a devastated region in turmoil, further evidenced by people's aggression and suspicion towards the visitors (Gruner 1997; Plé 1903; Preil 1909), a situation that remained largely unchanged until the French occupation of 1913 (Desanti 1945: 258).

The progressive incorporation of the Commune of Coby into the economics and politics of the wider West African region during the precolonial period resulted in a consolidation of translocal modernity, "a modernity that long predates European conquest" (Allman and Parker 2005: 236).

By the end of the nineteenth century, West Africa became part of capitalist modernity by being irreversibly linked to Europe, America and beyond through the trade in slaves and other commodities (Gilroy 1993). Throughout the precolonial period the communities as we know them today showed a remarkable dynamism and the ability to adapt to continually changing circumstances and insecurities. As Charles Piot has aptly noted, "During this time every village on the continent was touched, and most remade, by their encounter with slave raiders and expanding kingdoms" (2001: 159; see also Allman and Parker 2005: 33; Klein 2001; Piot 1999: 29).

It is now time to return to the early European explorers who marked the advent of a new period for the Commune of Coby. From a local perspective I understand their arrival at the end of the nineteenth century as a direct continuation of the raids and insecurity of precolonial times (Koussey 1977: 134). While the communities tried to continue using their so far successful strategies of staying independent, they soon found that they could not compete with the colonising efforts. Instead, they increasingly felt the effects of a temporal rupture and spatial reconfiguration that colonial modernity brought and forced on them in an unpre-

cedented way. In the following section I analyse the significant and growing impact this had on people of the Commune of Cobyly.

The Temporal Rupture of Colonial Modernity

One of the main effects of colonial modernity was an unprecedented temporal rupture (Fabian 1983; Latour 1993) that people in the Commune of Cobyly experienced. It significantly affected their modern trajectories with the result that they found themselves recast in terms of a backward and static tradition. Insecurity and change had been part of the way of life for centuries, and people had devised strategies to cope with them, a view that fits well with anthropology that stresses continuity. Such continuity thinking should not deter anthropologists from also recognising that there can be discontinuity as well, either through Christian conversion, or the arrival of modernity (R. Marshall 2009; Robbins 2007). Indeed, the coming of colonial modernity to the Commune of Cobyly proved to be of a different calibre than the people had so far experienced. Colonial modernity was so forceful that old strategies of defence and adaptation were no longer successful. For the first time in their memorable history, people were forced to accept the domination of outsiders who increasingly dictated a different way of life. Colonial modernity depended on various processes of dichotomisation to legitimate and assert itself to the detriment of a marginalised and stigmatised Other (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Ferguson 1999; Gullestad 2007: 9; Latour 1993; T. Mitchell 2000: 25-26; Pels 1997: 165; Piot 1999: 173, 2010: 6). When Europeans ventured into the project of colonisation they hardly expected the various difficulties that foreshadowed the contradictions and the ultimate failure that colonial modernity produced.

After the early explorers had passed in the last years of the nineteenth century, the Atacora region remained difficult to access due to the lack of roads and the continuing hostility of its population. It was only in 1913 that the French founded administrative posts in Tanguiéta, Natitingou and Boukoumbé, once the western border of the colony had been fixed (Desanti 1945: 55, 83; Grätz 2006: 113; Mercier 1968: 431). The French colonisers could now systematically occupy the Atacora region, and were usually carried in hammocks to the remoter areas, such as Cobyly (cf. Desanti 1945: 214; Iroko 1992). The French started to establish

colonial rule by trying to take a census, gain manpower for the construction of roads and recruit men to fight in World War I.

People became increasingly discontent and offered localised resistance. During 1916 and 1917 Kaba, a Natemba, became the leader of a more organised and armed revolt against the colonial imposition that started in the vicinity of Natitingou. In response, the French brought in an army with artillery. They succeeded in subduing the revolt after Kaba's mysterious disappearance. In a concerted effort to show their superior military power, they continued successfully to punish and subdue the people of the Atacora region (Cornevin 1981: 420-422; d'Almeida Topor 1995b: 104-115; Garcia 1970; Grätz 2000a: 680-681; Maurice 1986: 125-129; Mercier 1968: 434-441). Local accounts claim that Kaba's rebellion reached as far as the village of Touga at the eastern side of the Coby mountains. This is corroborated by Maurice (1986: 127) who mentions that the French army moved towards Coby, where they met with little resistance.

Colonial sources also refer to "the existence of fortified hideouts in the Makéri [Matéri] and Kobli [Coby] regions" (Mercier 1968: 492 n.468, translation mine), which may be a reference to the more localised resistance of the village of Yimpisséri that people in the Commune of Coby remember well and that probably happened in 1917 (Hartveld, *et al.* 1992: 7).

The fairly easy submission of these revolts meant that the French could accomplish their census, collect taxes, recruit more soldiers and build the roads with more authority and vigour than before (d'Almeida Topor 1995b: 139). By 1920 administrative reports became more positive as the process of colonisation finally showed results (Grätz 2000a: 681; Mercier 1968: 443-444). While measures of active and armed opposition were now no longer feasible, people in the Commune of Coby continued to resist more passively, by hiding important people, showing ignorance or misinforming colonial administrators, seeking interventions of a religious nature against colonialists, or simply not complying with colonial orders. This suspicion and antagonism towards foreigners and the state continued to be observed until recently (Grätz 2006: 110-111). I became aware of it, especially among old people, when I first arrived in the Commune of Coby in 1995. Their suspicion was accentuated, I learnt during later years, by my eating their food, an

action they linked to building relationships and gaining local knowledge, ultimately facilitating the integration of strangers (Piot 1999: 112-113).

As the colonial project advanced, today's Commune of Cobly experienced not only the effects of a temporal rupture, but also a spatial reconfiguration. The raids stopped, which allowed people to regain their former mobility by moving more freely. They could resettle in the valleys and plains or occupy new and so far little inhabited areas where they could farm more extensively and on more fertile grounds (Mercier 1968: 449-452). The caravan trade routes were abandoned as trade shifted to the coastal corridor and inland often within the limits of colonial borders (Igue and Soule 1992: 51). From the 1940s weekly markets became the main conduits for local trade, with Cobly hosting one of the main markets in the region (Grätz 2006: 121). More generally, economic and political power drained to the capitals of the south, Porto-Novo and Cotonou, over 600 km away.

Colonial administrators appointed chiefs haphazardly at the village level and made them answerable directly to themselves. Even though this new position ran contrary to the political ideas of non-centralised societies, administrators thought them indispensable for effective administration and interaction with the people (Alexandre 1970; Desanti 1945: 85; Salaün 1947: 260; Geschiere 1993; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1987). Accordingly, the administration of the Atacora region remained riddled with problems well into the 1930s as many chiefs were neither respected nor interested in exercising power (cf. Desanti 1945: 57; Grätz 2006: 115-116; Mercier 1968: 446, 481). The chiefs were put into an ambiguous position as they were expected to represent the colonial state and enforce indigenous law at the village level – often neither efficiently nor effectively – passing up through regional hierarchical structures to the Métropole, not only the centre of French law and administration, but also of civilisation and history (T. Mitchell 2000: 7).

In due time, French administrative policy led to a bifurcation of the colonial state, dividing its inhabitants into *évolué* citizens who ruled over uneducated subjects (Mamdani 1996), each group supposedly followed its own normative trajectory, that came to be associated either with “modernity” or “tradition”. A unidirectional movement of modernisation went hand in hand with the French civilising efforts of creating a local elite that Cornevin described as having “per-

fectly assimilated the elements of French culture” (1981: 502, translation mine). It was this elite that took over the administration of the new nation after independence in 1960, a largely symbolic event that provided a high degree of political continuity with its colonial predecessor, especially in the rural north (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2003: 153).

Hubert Maga, the first president of independent Benin, pursued the colonial politics of modernisation with renewed vigour and particularly inflicted it on the Atacora region, which he knew from his time as a school director in Natitingou. At independence, this region was still perceived as backwards beyond the acceptable and deserving of a consorted civilising effort to allow its integration into the modern state. Accordingly, with the promise of better healthcare, Maga ordered the forced regrouping of the spread out rural populations into villages and that people clothed themselves, at least for going to market. His often-violent interventions had little success and are still remembered by people of the Commune of Coby with discontent (Grätz 2006: 123; Hartveld, *et al.* 1992: 7; Huber 1969: 260, 1973: 378; Nemo 1962: 23).

As with a neighbourhood of the Indonesian city Solo that was once considered modern (Brenner 1998), Coby had regressed from a main regional conduit for translocal flows into a sleepy and subdued provincial village in only a few decades. It even gained a reputation in Benin of being at “the end of the earth” (Meijers 1988: 4, translation mine) and, although quite erroneously, was thought of as “more of a crossroads with houses than a village” (Caulfield 2003: 185). An image of a static and timeless “tradition” that was orientated towards the past seemed to have got a firm grip on Coby around the time of independence. It continued to linger, affected people’s and even the intellectuals’ self-esteem and penetrated their consciousness (Geschiere, *et al.* 2008: 2; Tiénou 1991: 289). This image of conservatism and temporal distancing also manifested itself in ethnographic writing, especially through employing the ethnographic present (Fabian 1983), as was typical of functionalist approaches (Allman and Parker 2005: 16). The Swiss anthropologist Hugo Huber who lived in Sini from 1966 to 1967 presented ethnographies that describe an essentially functioning “traditional” society, often using the present (1968, 1969, 1973, 1974, 1979). In his later writings, however, Huber (1980) clearly states that especially the younger Bebelibe had

already been caught up in the acceleration of modernisation. In spite of this, outside observers continued to perceive the inhabitants of the Commune of Cibly in terms of an inverted modernity, which rubbed up against colonial modernity to produce friction between those seeking to be “modern” and those who apparently remained traditional.

Modern Frictions

The arrival of Europeans and the resulting rupture that came with colonialism has marked the perception of history in the Commune of Cibly like no other event in people’s memory, splitting history into two eras, the old times (*ubɔɔyɔ*) and the new times (*upaanu*). Additionally, people are aware that each generation has its particular changes and often refer to specific periods according to who was president of the country at the time. People also remember changes in terms of the arrival of material goods and commodities, be they the proliferation first of bicycles, then motorbikes, or, more recently, the availability of mobile phones. Institutions with secularising agendas that are linked to the modern state leave a mark in the memory of people as well, whether this concerns churches, schools, democracy or media.

At first sight, then, *upaanu* can be understood as a direct result of the forceful trajectory of colonial modernity that the French imposed and that became embedded in the independent modern state. It was generally expected that the resulting frictions with other trajectories of modernity could be resolved according to unilineal modernisation theory, which also depended contradictorily on maintaining the modern dichotomies. In this sense the institutions of missions and schools that have their roots in the colonial project promoted religious and secular redemption from the abyss of traditionalism by trying to lead people – sometimes forcefully – to the enlightened civilisation that the modern state promised (Asad 2003: 60-61).

Such idealised expectations, however, remained largely confined to the minds of those who proposed them. Instead, colonial modernity has often led to a kind of split subjectivity, with local identity becoming defined against outside identities, which they often adopt at the same time (cf. R. Marshall 2009: 21, 23). On the Aru archipelago of Indonesia, for example, Patricia Spyer (2000) describes

how such a split subjectivity of “Aru” and “Malay” developed to the extent of becoming part of ritual expression.

Similarly, in the Commune of Cobly, *upaanu* has come to stand for a notion that goes well beyond the ideas of colonialism and modernisation. *Upaanu* is equally characterised by the high mobility and dynamism found among peoples throughout West Africa. This dynamism became part of the trajectories of modernity that predate the arrival of Europeans and continued to be maintained against the modernising solutions that the modern state tried to prescribe. As a result, people started to participate during colonial times in seasonal labour migration from the savannah belt to the coastal areas, thereby tapping into transnational flows of commodities and ideas that largely escaped the control of modern states and undermined their modernising efforts. While the democratisation process of the 1990s continued to pursue a modernising agenda, it also opened up avenues for an exchange that eases the modern frictions, which have characterised the bifurcation of the postcolonial state, ultimately bringing together the *évolué* citizens and the uneducated subjects.

Mission and Schools

While the Roman Catholic church has a long history on the West African coast dating back to the seventeenth century (Labouret and Rivet 1929), missionaries only reached today’s Commune of Cobly recently. The first missionary of the Roman Catholic *Société des Missions Africaines* (SMA), Joseph Huchet, initially travelled to Natitingou in 1937 and installed himself there in 1941. The parish of Tanguiéta was founded in 1946 and Boukoumbé followed in 1948. Missionaries started to work in 1947 in Cobly, which remained part of the parish of Tanguiéta until 1970. The Catholic mission in Cobly slowly but steadily developed. In 1969 a new church was built and in 1984 a community of sisters moved to the town (Cornevin 1981: 440-441; Ghanaba 2011; Hartveld, *et al.* 1992: 7; Huchet 1946).

In the Atacora region, Catholics were particularly keen to offer education and to promote the schooling of girls (Künzler 2007: 133). In Cobly, the first Catholic private school opened in 1947, which was also the first school in the Commune. While the Mass was read in Latin during the early years, the Catholic Church also valued the use of local languages and tried to engage in literacy well before the

government initiatives of the 1970s. Later, they translated their lectionary into Mbelime, using the first official orthography.

The first Protestant missionaries to arrive in Cobly came from the American Assemblies of God. This originally Pentecostal denomination started its work in Burkina Faso in 1921, a place they considered strategic, since its central location would allow them to reach neighbouring countries (Laurent 2003). Accordingly, an American missionary moved from Burkina Faso to northern Benin in 1945. After the colonial administration had recognised the new denomination, the Assemblies of God opened their first mission station in Natitingou in 1948. Between 1950 and 1951 work also started in Tanguiéta, Boukoubé and Cobly (Akibo 1998; Hartveld, *et al.* 1992: 7), and soon other churches followed in the villages surrounding Cobly, first in Tapoga and Kountori.

From the beginning, the Pentecostal missionaries' goal was to educate a local clergy at their Bible school in Natitingou and hand over the work to them as soon as possible. The school opened its doors in 1949 and trained pastors from Burkina Faso, Togo and later Dahomey (Akibo 1998; Alokpo 2003: 26-27; Cornevin 1981: 453-454). In order to gain candidates for their Bible school, the missionaries recruited children in different places and gave them a basic education at their mission station in Tanguiéta until they opened their first primary school in Cobly in 1960. After finishing their schooling, candidates were asked whether they felt God's call to become pastors and wanted to continue their training in Natitingou. The first Beninese graduated from the Bible school in 1955, among them men from Cobly. Three years later, the denomination came under African leadership and became known as the *Église Évangélique des Assemblées de Dieu*. Generally, their work proved difficult and only progressed slowly. In 1961, they counted 75 converted Bebelibe as part of their membership (Cornevin 1981: 454).

Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries were the main promoters of education, more so in the area of today's Benin than in other parts of Africa, helping Dahomey to gain the name of "Africa's *Quartier Latin*" (Künzler 2007: 129; Tardits 1962: 267). Missionaries opened their first schools on the coast during the pre-colonial period and contributed significantly to the education of a colonial elite that came to feel at ease in both religious and secular environments and took over

the administration after independence (Cornevin 1981; Garcia 1971; Künzler 2007; see also Kirsch 2008; Pels 1999).

The French law of 1903, that separated church and state and prescribed the secularisation of education, was also adopted by the colonial administration of Dahomey. The new law had little effect on confessional schools since they enjoyed a strong position in the colony (Cornevin 1981: 438; Garcia 1971: 62-63; Künzler 2007: 43, 128-130). Generally, colonial education – whether secular or confessional – ignored local knowledge and imposed a largely secular French curriculum that became known for its civilising and assimilatory attempts that taught pupils that their ancestors were the Gauls (Dravié 1988: xi; Garcia 1971: 83-84; Künzler 2007: 45-49).

The first state school opened in the Commune of Coby in the village of Sini in 1959, and the second one in Tapoga in 1960. Recruiting children for the new schools was not always easy and often pressure was used. As a result, people in the Commune of Coby retained a high degree of scepticism towards their children attending schools even after independence. In several communities, people asked for religious intervention at their shrines, so that the children would not succeed in school and would be returned to their parents.

Especially in rural areas of the Atacora region, schools developed slowly, even though schooling for the first two years was made compulsory in the colony of Dahomey as of 1949 (Künzler 2007: 50). For the whole Atacora region, Mercier (1968: 470-471) gives a schooling rate of 3% for 1951 and of 13% for 1961, while Claude Tardits (1962: 268) gives schooling rates for northern Dahomey of 14.3% for boys and 3.2% for girls in 1955. In the rural Commune of Coby, the rates would have been considerably lower. An assessment for 1988 showed that 95% of women and over 80% of men were illiterate, and only 10% of secondary school pupils were girls (Heywood 1991: 11).

By the time of Kérékou's Marxist-Leninist Revolution of the 1970s Coby had its own elite that had primarily been educated by missionaries. Many of these people were part of the Revolution that, for the first time since independence, brought important political changes. In 1979, for example, the government recognised Coby as a *district rural* with its own local administration (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2003: 153; Grätz 2006: 127-128; Kaucley forthcoming 2014). In

terms of education, the Revolution promoted equality and secularism in schools, which were meant to be compulsory and free for everybody. As a result most private and confessional schools were nationalised in 1976 against the wills of those running them (Allen 1989: 105-106; Tall 1995a: 197). During this time, the government built more schools in the Commune and the first secondary school opened in Coby in 1985. By the end of the 1980s, however, Benin faced a growing economic crisis, which also affected education, culminating in the government cancelling the 1989 academic year (Künzler 2007: 140, 144).

While a group of educated Christians slowly grew during the colonial period and early independence, outsiders continued to perceive the large majority of the population of the Commune of Coby as reactionary and as lost to their traditions. In spite of such a perspective based on ideas of modernisation, people continued to follow their own trajectories of modernity that had their roots in translocal modernity of the precolonial period.

Migration and Mobility

As I indicated above, the relative security that colonialism brought to the area allowed people to regain their former mobility as “a way of life” (Adepoju 2003: 37; H. van Dijk, *et al.* 2001: 14; see also de Bruijn, van Dijk and Foeken 2001). In the Commune of Coby people first started to move to more fertile areas nearby and some soon ventured further afield. Young men were probably attracted to seasonal labour migration during the interwar period when the economy in the Gold Coast experienced a boom thanks to the expanding cocoa plantations (Goody 1956: 9-10; Rey 1975: 242-243; Rouch 1956: 53-56). To give a rough idea of the importance of these movements, Pierre-Philippe Rey (1975: 251) reported for the neighbouring Gangamba that up to half of working-age men were absent due to seasonal migration during the 1970s, while John Igue (1983) estimated that 10-15% of the total population in northern Benin moved southwards (cf. Allman and Parker 2005: 94; Cleveland 1991). In the following decades, the pattern of seasonal migration shifted according to the political and economic situation. During the 1970s Nigeria’s oil boom attracted seasonal migrants but decreased again as foreigners were expelled in 1983 and 1985 (Adepoju 2003; Igue and Soule 1992: 148; Künzler 2007: 138). Places in Benin too, started to attract migrants, espe-

cially Parakou and the sparsely inhabited central areas of the country. While most migrants return after some time – usually after several months to a couple of years – a few always stay behind. Today, there is a considerable Bebelibe diaspora of unknown size in Ghana, Nigeria, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. Cities in Benin, especially Tanguiéta, Natitingou, Parakou and Cotonou, now have sizable Bebelibe communities and the sparsely inhabited areas of central Benin continue to attract Bebelibe migrants (Doevenspeck 2004; Hatfield and McHenry 2011: 4; Le Meur 2006: 347, 349; Tchegnon and Guidibi 2006b: 16). Despite their dispersal, the Bebelibe diaspora retains a link with their home communities (cf. Adepoju 1974; Geschiere and Gugler 1998; Piot 1999; H. van Dijk, *et al.* 2001: 23).

Especially young men quickly took a liking to the migratory adventure, which helped them to acquire clothes, bicycles and other modern goods (Rey 1975: 252; Rouch 1956: 194; Tchegnon and Guidibi 2006b: 16). More recently, migrants return with radios, corrugated iron sheets, motorbikes, mobile phones and even televisions sets. Today, almost all men of the Commune of Coby have participated in seasonal migration at least once in their lives to the extent that this practice has become a kind of modern initiation into adulthood. More importantly, seasonal migration significantly helped to maintain access to transnational flows of commodities after colonisation led to the collapse of caravan trading. Migration also demonstrates an interest in being part of the wider world and in participating in capitalist economy to an extent that goes well beyond the conservatism that had been ascribed to the people of the Atacora region.

Time away from Coby has been crucial in shaping the participating men's trajectories of modernity. At their destination they had the opportunity to experience new things in their own time and on their own terms. Many of the first generation of migrants, for example, experienced mass media for the first time and several remember watching their first film during their time in Ghana, central Benin or Nigeria. Often, men acquired goods that were associated with their new experiences and returned with them to their home communities. In this way they became mediators of modern commodities that steadily became absorbed into everyday life and experience, be they bicycles, metal roofing or clothes (cf. Pels 1997: 169). While the precolonial period saw cowry shells being incorporated into initiation costumes (see above), more recent times saw the addition of plastic

dolls, soft toys, sunglasses, towels and bras – a development that Piot (2001) has also documented for northern Togo.

Being away also meant becoming exposed to new religious ideas and practices. Migrants, who were in Ghana during the 1940s and 1950s learnt about an anti-witchcraft movement that started in southern Ghana, swept eastwards along the coastal corridor, reaching as far as Gabon, and caused serious concern among colonial administrators and missionaries alike.¹³ The focus of these movements was shrines that have their origin in the savannah belt of northern Ghana. Pilgrims from the southern forest area sought them out and sometimes acquired them. At their new southern locations they were thoroughly transformed into shrines specialised in fighting witchcraft and became part of local religious expressions. Kunde, closely followed by Tigare, was taken from near Wa in north-western Ghana to the southern forest area as early as 1918 and developed during the 1920s into major movements with Kunde also spreading into today's Togo. Tigare continued to disperse well into the 1950s when migration from the savannah belt to southern Ghana was well established (Allman and Parker 2005: 137-140). What is less known is that southern owners of anti-witchcraft shrines sold them on again to northern migrants who took them back, where they were reabsorbed, together with the traits they gained while in the south (Kirby 1986; J. Merz 1998; Parker 2006: 373-375; Schott 1986; Tait 1963; Zwernemann 1975, 1993).

Although anthropologists writing on anti-witchcraft shrines in the 1950s and 1960s recognised them as being directly tied to the effects of colonial and capitalist modernity, they were difficult to understand in terms of a functionalist view of “traditional religion” that tended to oppose modernity. Instead, Goody (1957) argued that the shrines had precolonial precedents and thus did not constitute a new phenomenon. While it is hard to substantiate either of the two views, they both affirm the unprecedented importance and transnational extent of these anti-witchcraft movements. Building on these arguments, I understand West African anti-witchcraft shrines as exemplifying the dynamism of trajectories of modernity

¹³ This anti-witchcraft movement has been widely discussed (see, e.g., Allman and Parker 2005; Apter 1993; Cessou 1936; Christensen 1954; Debrunner 1961; Field 1960; Goody 1957; Kramer 1993; Manière 2010; McCaskie 1981; McLeod 1975; J. Merz 1998; Morton-Williams 1956; Rosenthal 1998; Tall 1995b, 2005; Ward 1956).

that came to stand in friction with colonial modernity. In this sense it is not surprising that they appealed to northern migrants, especially when they moved because of problems in their home communities, or feared the threat of witchcraft when returning as rich men. Accordingly, during the 1950s, some migrants started to return from Ghana with Tigare shrines, which were particularly popular at the time, as the shrines promised to deal with their problems in their home communities. At first, people greeted the arrival of the new shrines with suspicion. It did not take long, however, for Tigare shrines to establish themselves as a new religious orientation and to be accepted as “strangers” among existing shrines, in a similar way in which foreigners were readily accommodated in precolonial times.

During the 1970s a new form of shrine called Nkunde or Belekundi, was introduced to the Cibly area from neighbouring Togo (Zwernemann 1975). The new owners thought it was more powerful than Tigare and soon a murder was accredited to Nkunde, which was rumoured to require human blood (cf. Allman and Parker 2005: 179; Rosenthal 1998: 210). In this way Nkunde was caught up in the anti-feudal witch-hunt of early 1976, which was part of Kérékou’s Marxist-Leninist Revolution (Allen 1989: 65-66; Kahn 2011; Sulikowski 1993; Tall 1995a: 197). Local authorities in Cibly tried to imprison Nkunde owners and destroy their shrines. In the mid-1990s Nkunde experienced a comeback, and together with Tigare, spread further within and beyond the Commune of Cibly, a movement that continues to this day.

A second religious influence that became important during 1980s came through migrants who attended church services and returned as Christians with their Bibles as a material expression of their new faith (cf. Kirsch 2008: 89). Some joined local churches and sometimes they become local church leaders themselves (J. Merz 2008). Migrants have thus connected with the recent Pentecostalisation of Christianity, both of Catholic and Protestant orientation, along the West African coast and in the transnational and global networks that these new churches and movements maintain.¹⁴ Some migrants and members of the diaspora attend various evangelistic campaigns that are regularly advertised in West African cities,

¹⁴ Pentecostalism in West Africa and its transnational tendencies have been well documented (see, e.g., Asamoah-Gyadu 2004; de Surgy 1996, 2001; de Witte 2005; Fourchard, Mary and Otayek 2005; Gifford 1998, 2004, 2008b; Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010; R. Marshall 2009; Marshall-Fratani 1998; Mayrargue 2001, 2004; B. Meyer 1998a, 2004a; Piot 2010).

such as the German Pentecostal Reinhard Bonnke's mega-events (Gifford 1987, 1992; Gordon and Hancock 2005; Hackett 1998, 2003: 62; Lease 1996), which he held in Parakou in December 1996 and in Cotonou in December 2012.

People in the Commune of Coby were thus able to maintain the dynamics and fluidity of socio-cultural organisation and the high mobility that characterised the precolonial period. As the Commune was marginalised and stigmatised during colonial times, people looked further afield and made the effort to move away in their search for opportunities to share in the trends and opportunities of the wider region.

Democratic Renewal and Decentralisation

The end of the Cold War coincided with the failure of many African states with Benin being among them (Piot 2010). Having acknowledged that the state was bankrupt in 1989, Mathieu Kérékou renounced Marxism-Leninism and stepped down. In early 1990, a National Conference convened under the leadership of the Archbishop of Cotonou, which launched Benin's Democratic Renewal. This move towards democracy was generally hailed a success and advocated as a model for other countries to follow. Benin received a transitional government and a new constitution based on secular French ideas, which a referendum ratified at the end of 1990. The first of regular presidential elections was successfully held in 1991 (Allen 1992; Bierschenk 2009; Heilbrunn 1993; Vittin 1991).

In the 1990s everybody in Benin talked about democracy, which people in Coby often understood as a new freedom and liberty – a notion often linked to modernity (Keane 2007). Especially young people and women benefited from this tendency and NGOs advocated it, most prominently the Dutch-sponsored PADES that had women's right as one of their foci (Hartveld, *et al.* 1992; PADES-Coby 1997; SNV-Bénin 1997). More generally, NGOs became progressively important in the 1980s, since funders saw them as a way to bypass the heavy and sometimes corrupt states that were heading toward crises (Piot 2010). While in other countries NGOs have replaced the withdrawing state in many areas at a local level, this move was not as radical in Benin. Here, the state continued to control NGOs, which in turn, depended on the state for their success (Grätz 2006: 148; Bierschenk 2009: 352-353; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2003: 162).

In Benin, the new constitution of 1990 had already paved the way for decentralisation, but it took another twelve years of political discussion and preparation until the first communal elections were finally concluded in early 2003. Decentralisation has the goal of reinforcing democracy at the local level and thus of promoting the transformation of the subjects of the colonial legacy into citizens of a modern democracy. An elected council and a mayor were now in charge of each Commune and were given power to increase the so far very limited presence of the state at the local level. In many ways, decentralisation continues the process of extending the centralised state to the remoter areas of the country that was initiated during colonialism. Each Commune now has its own budget and is responsible for fulfilling its own development. Outside observers and most people of the Commune of Coby welcomed decentralisation. Its success, however, is a matter of debate since decentralisation merely localises many problems that had already been ingrained in the Beninese state for a long time (Assah and Asare-Kokou 2004: 29; Bierschenk 2009; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2003; Langley, *et al.* 2005; Le Meur 2006).

In practical terms, decentralisation led to a more active local administration that seeks to work with NGOs and benefit from whatever they offer. Apart from women's rights, education and micro financing, this has mainly been in the development of infrastructure in the Commune of Coby. In recent years, the provision of better roads, clean water and energy has been central and has promoted the rapid urbanisation of Coby. The town received evening-time electricity in 2005 and was finally hooked up to the regional electricity grid in 2011. This has impacted town life in significant ways, as Winther (2008) has shown for rural Zanzibar.

The churches of Coby, too, have benefited from the crisis of the state and decentralisation and increasingly benefit from the trend of global Christianity's centre of gravity shifting southwards, as Jenkins (2002) first described it. Since the 1990s, both the Catholic Church and the *Église Évangélique des Assemblées de Dieu* continued to grow and remain important institutions in the Commune. Especially in the town of Coby their members are among the most economically active and successful and often have important positions in the local administration and public life. More generally, with the Catholics' involvement in the National Con-

ference (Bierschenk 2009: 342), the public conversion of Kérékou to Pentecostalism before his democratic election in 1996 (Mayrargue 2005: 245; Strandsbjerg 2000, 2005a, 2005b), and current president Yayi Boni's quieter evangelicalism (Mayrargue 2006: 165), Christianity has become firmly linked to Beninese politics, democracy and the modern secular state. More generally, Ellis and ter Haar (1998: 464-465, 2007) have observed that the religious cannot be separated from secular politics in Africa (cf. B. Meyer 2004a; Tall 1995a).

Both the Catholic Church and the *Assemblées de Dieu* continue their work in the Commune of Cibly and spread to new villages where they build chapels and churches. A new and larger Catholic church was inaugurated in the town of Cibly in 2004 and the following year the bishop of Natitingou ordained the first Mbelime speaking priest. While the *Assemblées de Dieu* have a longer history of Mbelime speaking clergy, they started constructing a new church in 2007, which is designed to accommodate their growing numbers.

New Protestant and Pentecostal denominations started to arrive in the Commune in the 1990s. The most important one of which is the American initiated *Église Ministère de Jésus Bénin* that goes back to 1994 when a Togolese evangelist moved from Togo to Tanguiéta, followed by an American missionary a year later. They started to plant churches in the northern Atacora region, focusing on the Cibly area. Their approach was to target villages that at the time did not have any church presence and added various developmental activities to their agenda (J. Merz 1998: 46-48), as is also typical of new churches in neighbouring Togo (Piot 2010: 54). The novelty of this approach in the Commune of Cibly led to considerable interest, also in the villages of Touga and Oroukparé where I did research, with many people starting to attend church services regularly. By the 2010s, however, virtually all of the *Église Ministère de Jésus Bénin* congregations had shrunk significantly. While a few of those leaving the *Église Ministère de Jésus Bénin* joined a different church, such as the *Assemblées de Dieu* or the Catholics, most stopped attending church.

The Beninese *Église Pentecôte de la Foi* came to Cibly also in 1994 (J. Merz 1998: 45). Having its origins in the Ghanaian *Church of Pentecost*, it was established in southwestern Benin from where it started to spread further afield (de

Surgy 2001: 23; Fancello 2005). Pastors in the Cibly area are usually from Benin's south and find their evangelistic work difficult.

Since the 2000s, Cibly became caught up in the regional trend of Pentecostalisation and the proliferation of new churches, both of Nigerian origin and founded through local initiatives (Alokpo 2001, 2003; de Surgy 1996, 2001; Mayrargue 2001). Different new denominations come and go, often together with men who are sent to Cibly to fill government positions.

To talk in terms of figures, Laurent Ogouby (2008: 54-55) claims that in the Atacora and Donga regions the percentage of Christians rose from 10.6% in 1992 to 24% in 2002, showing a trend of significant growth. Even though regular church attendance clearly remains lower in the Commune of Cibly most people have at some point in their lives been exposed to Christian teaching, either directly by attending church services or evangelistic campaigns, or, in the case of older people, through their children. As Etienne¹⁵, a young farmer, who had never attended church rightly observes: "Today there is nobody who doesn't follow God and who doesn't know the path of Christianity" (interview, 27 Jan. 2011).

Under the Democratic Renewal, education too continued to develop and become increasingly acceptable in the Commune of Cibly. By 2003, schooling rates remained low as compared to other parts of the country, but had now reached 93.01% for boys and 46.87% for girls, or a total of 70.22% (Künzler 2007: 163, 168). Under decentralisation, Communes are now responsible for providing primary education and many new schools opened in villages and areas that did not have easy access to schools yet. At the same time the offer of secondary education was extended, most importantly with a *second cycle* leading to the *baccalauréat* being added to the *collège* in Cibly in 2009.

In spite of the quantitative growth, state schools continue to face many challenges, including strikes, absenteeism and poorly qualified teachers. A constant lack of funds and rising schooling costs further lead to low success rates in the national exams (Künzler 2007: 172-178, 187-190). This is why private schools that follow the national curriculum have become popular again for those who can

¹⁵ I use pseudonyms for research participants who feature in this book. In doing so, I maintain the nature of names (French/Christian, Muslim or local), while stressing that names do not reflect religious orientation (see Introduction).

afford them. The first opened in Coby in 2002, followed by a Catholic school in 2006 and the *Assemblées de Dieu* restarted their own school in 2012. The rapid expansion of schooling in Benin coupled with a weak performance of its economy has led to an inflation of education (Künzler 2007: 81), as now even a *baccalauréat* is no longer sufficient to guarantee employment.

Schooling has become very important in the Commune of Coby and most people, even in remote villages, are keen to send their children to school. Emmanuel, an older man who never had the opportunity to attend school, put it bluntly: “If a child is born today, ... and if you don’t entrust him to the whites for his education, the child will be lost” (interview, 20 Feb. 2012). Many parents now see it as their main job to assure that children go to school and provide the means for them to do so. Most people now consider schools important since they give children the opportunity to develop intellectually and gain diplomas, or, in other words, the promise to succeed in life. The communities that had asked for religious intervention against schooling at their shrines started to regret the low success rate of their children. They pulled together by offering cows at their shrines in an attempt to reverse their earlier actions and to seek religious favour for their children’s schooling success.

For most people of the Commune of Coby schools remain tightly associated with colonisation and the modern state, or, in other words, with *upaanu* (the new times) and the whites. When people talk about “sending their children to the whites”, they mean that they send them to school. Likewise, Christianity is perceived as an explicitly modern and “white” religion (cf. Keane 2007: 47; Robbins 2004a: 174; Rosenthal 1998: 20). Indeed, especially in the villages surrounding Coby many people do not make much of a difference between schools and churches, since both were more or less simultaneously introduced by whites as part of mission and colonialism and therefore “occupy common ground” (Pels 1997: 172; see also Engelke 2007: 53; Dravié 1988: 96; B. Meyer 1997; Renne 2002). Both the secular school and the religious church are directly linked to reading skills, which are today seen as essential to success and prosperity in life. Within the colonial project and the modern state as its extension, both churches and schools have been geared towards producing good Christians and good citizens (Pels 1999: 197; Cornevin 1981: 502).

Tightly linked to the process of democratisation is the liberalisation of the media that swept across the continent in the 1990s (Bierschenk 2009: 353; Tozzo 2005; Pype 2009: 142). In Benin, until the beginning of the Democratic Renewal, the state tightly controlled media and mainly used them for propaganda. During the 1970s and 1980s, for example, both the state newspaper *Ehuzu* and the state radio *La Voix de la Révolution* promoted the Marxist-Leninist Revolution (Frère 1996; Saxer and Grossenbacher 1987; Vittin 1993).

A year before the collapse of the Beninese state in 1989, pressure from journalists mounted and Kérékou had to release state control of the press. As a result different new and independent newspapers came into existence (Frère 1996; Heilbrunn 1993: 285). Indeed, the press came to play an important role in the Democratic Renewal (Campbell 2002: 49-51), for example by keeping track of topics that needed to be addressed during the National Conference (Frère 1996: 91). The constitution of 1990 guaranteed freedom of the press (Vittin 1993: 4) and made provision for the independent *Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication* (HAAC) that regulates media and grants concessions to private media operators. This became possible with the law of 1997 that liberalised the airwaves (Adjovi 2001: 6-7; Grätz 2000b: 123; Vittin 1993: 5-7; Silla and Bend 2008). As a result Benin had 90 radio stations and 14 television channels by 2009 (Bathily, Bend and Foulon 2009: 72).

The Expansion of the Media

Access to media in the Commune of Cibly was difficult due to its geographical remoteness and mainly developed after the Democratic Renewal. As Ulrich Saxer and René Grossenbacher (1987: 192) have rightly observed, radio is practically the only medium that has been important in rural areas of Benin. The first radio sets of the Commune came with migrants who returned from Ghana probably in the late 1950s, when affordable transistor radios started to become available in Africa (Grätz 2003: 5; Mytton 2000). Even though radios were cheaper in Ghana, and later in Nigeria, they were also on offer in local markets in the 1960s (Huber 1980: 50).

Radio-Dahomey started to broadcast in Cotonou in 1953 (Vittin 1993: 9; Saxer and Grossenbacher 1987: 62; Service de l'information de la République du Daho-

mey 1963: 69), while *Radio Parakou* followed in 1983, with more of a focus on entertainment and broadcasting in the main languages of the north (Saxer and Grossenbacher 1987: 68; Vittin 1993: 11-12). In spite of these developments and the governmental goal of providing radio coverage for the whole country, reception via shortwave in Coby remained difficult. In the early 2000s *Radio Parakou* started to transmit on FM and *Radio Cotonou* followed suit.

Between 1994 and 1996 five new *Radio Rurale Locale* were started in Benin. Among them was *Radio Tanguiéta* that covers the Communes of Tanguiéta, Matéri and Coby and broadcasts on FM in six local languages, including Mbelime. *Radio Tanguiéta* was one of the first independent community driven radio stations in Benin. Its aim is to facilitate access of rural populations to local and national information and to give NGOs, local associations and churches the possibility to broadcast (Grätz 2000b, 2003, 2006: 59-66, 2010; cf. Tudesq 2003: 79-80). In 2003, the non-commercial *Radio Dinaba* in Boukoumbé also started to broadcast with a few programmes in Mbelime. Coby is still waiting to have its own community radio station.

Radio remains the most important medium in West Africa (Grätz 2010; Schulz 2012: 77; Tudesq 2003; Werner 2006: 151), which I can especially confirm for the rural parts of the Commune of Coby. Many people have access to a radio, but lack of means to buy batteries and the poor quality of sets further limits people's access (cf. Spitulnik 2002b). People mostly prefer the news and debates, as well as educational and religious programmes on *Radio Parakou*, *Radio Cotonou*, *Radio Tanguiéta*¹⁶ and *Radio Dinaba*, depending on which languages they understand. Especially younger people also enjoy listening to music, for which they often tune into Togolese radio stations.

Newspapers, which are all published in Cotonou, are hardly on sale beyond the city and do not reach the Commune of Coby through commercialised channels (Frère 1996). An exception is *La Croix du Bénin*, the Catholic Church's fortnightly newspaper that is not directly political and benefits from a network of churches as a means for its distribution. Having started in 1946 it is the oldest independent newspaper in Benin and the only one that has survived the Revolu-

¹⁶ While doing research, *Radio Tanguiéta* was not listened to much, since it experienced a period of organisational and technical problems (Grätz 2010: 29 n.32).

tion (Saxer and Grossenbacher 1987: 84). Religious tracts and pamphlets, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses' *Watchtower* magazine, sometimes make it to Coby (cf. Kirsch 2008: 155-168). Other print media, such as novels, also remain marginal in the Commune of Coby with only a few of the more educated people enjoying occasional reading for leisure.

The first television programme was broadcast in Benin at the end of 1978 (Saxer and Grossenbacher 1987: 70-73; Silla and Bend 2008). While in the beginning television only covered the area of Cotonou, the revolutionary government wanted to make it available to everyone (Ba 1999: 31). In 1984, Parakou received a television transmitter and colour was introduced only in 2004. The limited service meant that many spectators tuned into stations in neighbouring Togo and Nigeria. Even though the government aimed to offer television to the whole country, only 66% of its territory was covered in 1985. Further transmitters were installed in Boukoumbé and other places in 1998 (Dioh 2009: 39-45). This allowed a limited reception of the national ORTB TV in Coby for the first time. In spite of this, it only became feasible to own a television set at the end of 2005 with the arrival of evening time electricity. In 2010, reception improved thanks to a new transmitter installed in Tanguiéta and in 2011 ORTB TV was offered on satellite, which has now become the preferred way of reception in Coby.

The law on the liberalisation of the airwaves of 1997 created opportunities for private television with LC2 starting to broadcast only a few months later. Three other channels followed in 2005, while recent years have seen a further growth. With LC2 taking the lead again, several of the private channels started to broadcast by satellite, thus making them available in Coby (Adjovi 2001: 12-13; Dioh 2009: 43; Silla and Bend 2008). A survey of satellite dishes and antennas showed that the town of Coby had around 250 television sets in 2011, indicating a widespread trend to displace radio as the main medium in towns and cities (Ba 1999: 101). Children and young people who do not have a television set at home often go to watch at neighbours or with friends (cf. Talabi 1989: 137), so one set often caters for several households. Among the most watched programmes are the news on Beninese and international channels, football and various soap operas including *telenovelas* (Schulz 2012; Touré 2006; Werner 2006, 2012) on whichever channel they are offered.

People also watch films on Video CDs or DVDs that they buy on Cibly market or further afield and then circulate among friends. In 2010 I counted up to six media sellers offering a wide range of genres from around the world, including pornography. The genres that people like most are martial arts, music videos, West African films and serials from francophone countries and Nigeria and Indian films (cf. Larkin 1997, 2008).

Four cinemas opened in Benin in colonial times and were run by two French corporations that maintained a strict monopoly (Obiaya 2011: 137). They seemed to have been very popular, especially with the youth (Ambler 2001: 94, 2002: 128-129) and were nationalised during the Revolution in 1976 (N’Gosso and Ruelle 1983: 11, 15). The nearest cinema for the Commune of Cibly opened during the Revolution in Natitingou, following a government policy of expanding the offer of cinemas to all departmental capitals. Since Natitingou is over 80 km from Cibly, it was not easy reach. As elsewhere in Africa, Benin’s cinemas proved exceptionally popular during the Revolution, when they showed mainly Asian, French and African films (Ambler 2002: 128; Saxer and Grossenbacher 1987: 49, 77-79, 96).

Due to the lack of cinemas in the north mobile cinema units sometimes reached the remoter areas, as was the case in neighbouring Nigeria, where they started to operate in 1931 (Green-Simms 2010: 210; Larkin 2000: 213-214, 2008: 77-78; Obiaya 2011: 133; Okome 1996: 50-53; for Ghana, see B. Meyer 2003a: 206). Word has it that colonial administrators, first from Togo and later from Burkina Faso and Benin, came to show films in Cibly during the last few years of the colonial era. The operators charged an entrance fee to watch films that were mainly for entertainment. In February 1963 two cinema lorries circulated in the north of Benin and also reached Cibly. They attracted an average of 2,500 spectators per evening, showing information, documentaries and action films (Service de l’information de la République du Dahomey 1963: 67).

By the 1990s the cinema in Natitingou had closed. In the meantime, however, “the video revolution” (Ambler 2002: 119) began to have a significant impact. Videocassette recorders became popular in Nigeria in the mid-1980s (Haynes 2011: 71; Ukah 2003: 207-208) and small informal video parlours started to show films on television sets and VHS and later DVD players for a small fee. They be-

came increasingly popular, especially in urban areas, but also spread to many rural locations (see, e.g., Ajibade 2007; Ambler 2002; Amouzou 2003; Ba 1999: 27-28; Boneh 2008: 73; Garritano 2008; Haynes and Okome 2000; B. Meyer 2003a: 208). A parlour was operating in the mid-1990s in the town of Coby, using a generator to power the equipment. With the wide availability of private television sets, video parlours lost business and ceased to operate in the town of Coby. During the time of my research between 2010 and 2012, I was aware of four young men who were running video parlours in villages surrounding the town of Coby with one of them coming to town on market day. More parlours have now opened and visitors to the five major markets in the Commune have the possibility of watching videos.

At times NGOs come to the town of Coby to show educational films, for example on AIDS or child trafficking, while churches organise the projection of evangelistic films, an area I explore in more detail in Chapter 3.

In terms of media production, so far Coby does not have much to offer. Issifou Sanhongou Abdou aka Prince Abdu'l was the first artist to record music and produce Video CDs in 2010, 2011 and 2013. In 2013 Kolanni Dieudonné released his debut audio album *Unil Tien I Bieri La*. Important ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals are sometimes videoed professionally and people now make use of their mobile phone cameras to take photographs and video clips (Arhin 1994: 315; Barber 2000: 263; de Witte 2011: 193; Förster 2013; Garritano 2008: 26; Jindra 2011: 117; Noret 2010: 82-83; Schulz 2012: 91-94).

A mobile phone network first covered the town of Coby in March 2007 and a second network soon followed. Both providers further expanded to cover most of the area of the Commune of Coby. Especially younger people aspire to own mobile phones and use them increasingly also for media consumption, either as radios or to listen to music, which can easily be shared with others via Bluetooth.

While Benin was the first West African country to be linked to the Internet in 1995, accessing it remained a challenge, especially in rural areas. Since 2005 the Internet experiences a huge success in Benin (Campbell 2002; Moratti 2009; Tutu Agyeman 2007). Around 2008 connectivity improved even in rural areas as mobile phone companies started to offer data services. In spite of this, Coby still does not have a cybercafé.

The current proliferation of various electronic media is significant, since it allows people in the Commune of Coby to feel connected with the wider region through a “virtual mobility” (Kirsch 2008: 90) that is characterised by transnational and global flows and contra-flows (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996; Thussu 2007; Wasserman 2011). In the past, the precolonial trade networks and (post)colonial seasonal migration achieved a similar effect. Today, the media help to collapse space and deterritorialise communities by mediating between different people and groups, even if significant distances separate them. In this sense, media have become crucial to *upaanu* (the new times) to the extent that life could hardly be imagined without them anymore.

Conclusion

People have described *upaanu* (the new times) as the direct result of the arrival of the whites, which can be equated with the forceful trajectory of colonial modernity that resulted in temporal rupture. In this chapter I have shown, however, that in addition to the lingering rupture, there is also significant continuity. *Upaanu* has not emerged from nothing, nor has it been solely imposed from the outside. Rather it needs to be seen as the result of local trajectories of translocal modernity that can be traced back to the precolonial period and that have been characterised, by their dynamism, openness to strangers, high mobility and by the importance of belonging to a community. The contradictions of colonial modernity and its rupturing impact came through its categorical opposition to local trajectories, which promoted their inversion and stigmatisation. This resulted in the newly created dichotomy of tradition versus modernity, which was characterised by constant frictions between its two poles. In the end, tradition and modernity could not – and never can – be contained in colonial dichotomisations since they constantly invaded each other’s space (Spyer 2000). Latour (1993) has rightly claimed that “we [in the West] have never been modern”. Parallel to this argument I need to assert even more rigorously that “Africa has never been ‘traditional’” (Guyer 2007: 196).

People in the Commune of Coby were caught up in the frictions caused by the arrival of colonial modernity. Even though they offered active and passive resistance, they were nonetheless deeply affected by repeatedly being pushed into

homogenous ethnic spaces of timeless and backward tradition. At the same time, people found new avenues and opportunities of asserting their preferences. They regained mobility as a way of life by embracing seasonal labour migration and more recently, participate in churches, attend schools, and enjoy the liberties that democracy and the media have brought. In the long run the colonial dichotomisation and the resulting frictions could not compete with local dynamics. The openness to strangers, whether in the form of people, shrines or media, was now extended to all things that came to be associated with Europeans and which are embraced with open arms (Piot 2010).

While the colonial project tried in vain to invert local trajectories of modernity, in the long run people of the Commune of Coby increasingly succeed in inverting and absorbing the process of modernisation on their own terms by recasting it as part of *upaanu*. The new times are thus characterised by negotiating the dichotomies of colonial modernity and accepting the various trajectories of modernity as occupying the same space (cf. Latour 1993: 96), certainly to different degrees, but always simultaneously. Throughout this chapter I have indicated that unilineal modernisation theories did not have the expected effects. Rather, modernisation needs to be historicised and understood as different processes that can be bundled together with other processes as part of modernity. Such modern processes shift the dynamics between different ideas and notions, whether this concerns the past and the future, the secular and the religious, or the material and the spiritual, thereby shaping different trajectories of modernity.

In the next chapter I explore this dynamic and fluid field of modernity in more depth by focusing on the materiality of things. I am particularly interested in how people in the Commune of Coby understand things and how their views are changing under the influence of different modern processes. To return to the example of “fetishes” and machines with which I started this chapter, in whatever way they are seen, they share the same space and have a common material existence within *upaanu* (the new times). As their relationship develops over time they influence each other and frictions wear down to the extent that fumes are tolerated and become part of everyday life. These days, motorbikes do not stall anymore when passing near shrines and there are not many places left in the Commune of Coby where a generator will refuse to supply electricity. Through its

various genealogies modernity has been a feature of the Commune of Cobly since the precolonial period and its most recent manifestation that is referred to as *upaanu* affects everybody and everything with ever increasing intensity.

Chapter 2:

Transmateriality and the Semiotification of Life

Things like knives or drinking calabashes are alive, I learnt soon after starting my research into the materiality of shrines, the Bible and television sets. Indeed, several research participants laconically maintained that “everything that exists has *kɛbodikɛ* [animating force] and *mtakime* [identity]” (interviews, Feb.-Jun. 2011; cf. Padenou and Barrué-Pastor 2006: 193), the twin notions that account for life in the Commune of Cobly. Their views imply a form of “animism”, a notion that shaped the discipline of anthropology from the very beginning, and which Edward B. Tylor (1871) first defined as the belief in spirits that animate bodies and objects. Since then, “animism” has been popularised and widely discussed in academic circles well beyond anthropology. Tite Tiénou (1991: 299) shows that it has also come to stand for what is often called “traditional religion” (see, e.g., Hartveld, *et al.* 1992: 12) and sometimes gained a negative and backward connotation. This happened most notably in missionary and Christian circles, where “animism” continues to be used as a euphemism for “heathenism” or “paganism” (Gullestad 2007: 229; Stambach 2009: 140; see, e.g., Sitton 1998). In a nutshell, Johannes Fabian has claimed that the notion of animism was “invented in order to separate primitive mentality from modern rationality” (1983: 152), or, in other words, to restrict the Other to the past.

More fruitful approaches to “animism” that try to overcome the dualisms of primitive and modern, and of spirit and matter, have been proposed for example in terms of perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004; Willerslev 2011), epistemology and ontology (Bird-David 1999, 2006; Hornborg 2006; Ingold 2000: 111-131; Naveh and Bird-David 2014), and anthropomorphism (Guthrie 1993; see also Gell 1998). All these approaches remove “animism” from its characterisation as a “religion” by stressing relational aspects in one way or another.

Not everybody in the Commune of Cobly anthropomorphises to the extent already mentioned. Especially those who have had advanced schooling often looked puzzled and sometimes showed signs of hilarity at the question of whether a knife or a drinking calabash was alive. Clearly, my question did not resonate with them.

This apparent and stark discrepancy in views needs to be accounted for. It is within this fluctuating range of how life, potential life and non-life are viewed, and the actions and processes that link them, that I discuss the materiality (see Miller 2005) of shrines and the Bible in this chapter.

Stewart Guthrie (1993) sees anthropomorphism as wider than animism, namely as part of perception and interpretation, or in other words, as the result of processes of meaning making. This semiotic activity is relational in itself, since it necessitates that humans interact with each other and with their environment. Guthrie argues that anthropomorphism can be a reasonable interpretation of the world surrounding us. In other words, although it always concerns the religious, it can never be excluded from science and the secular. Following Guthrie I understand the perception that both beings and things are alive in terms of processes of meaning making that can diffuse the dichotomies between humans and nonhumans and offer the potential for a more relational approach (Hornborg 2006; Kohn 2007; Morgan 2010a; Pels 2008). This is also consistent with the relational view that is foundational to Alfred Gell's (1998) and Jane Bennett's (2010a, 2010b) theories of agency that ascribe life to things (see also Asad 2003: 78). It should become clear that such an approach is particularly relevant for appreciating what I call a world of agentic relationality, which people of the Commune of Coby inhabit and in which everything can be considered alive.

Part of living in such a world of agentic relationality is that people encounter humans and nonhumans in an experiential way that refutes the foundational semiotic assumption of making a dualistic or triadic difference within the structured sign. Through dividing the most basic unit of meaning semiotics proposes an analytical framework that is reductionist and atomistic, if not dualistic, to its very core. This may be the reason why I find it impossible to use a semiotic framework to explain sufficiently things that people experience as being alive by not differentiating between spirit and matter. Semiotics, then, seems unable to account for the length and breadth of human experience that I have encountered during my research, which is why I propose in this chapter that we need to go beyond it. While I retain the notion that people actively make meaning by engaging with their senses in the world that surrounds them, I question that they consistently apply processes of signification or semiosis that, by definition, result in the atomi-

sation of meaning in the form of the structured sign. Rather, I propose that the active process of meaning making be understood as a process of “presencing” that shifts the focus from meaning to action by making present different entities, whether people, things or words. Through such presencing, various entities become identifiable, thereby supplying the basis on which different entities can engage with, relate to and act on each other.

Presencing, I argue, relies on the interplay of two different presencing principles, which I understand as describing people’s assumptions about the nature of the entities they experience. These principles also establish how various entities function and shape the world through their actions and interactions.

I begin this chapter by discussing semiotics and its limitations and by introducing the notion of “transmateriality” by which I characterise things that are both material and immaterial. This allows me to account for shrine entities and the Bible as powerful objects that people experience as alive, thereby merging spirit and matter. Such transmaterial entities, as I call them, identify a material body with the twin notion of *kebodike* (animating force) and *mtakime* (identity). *Kebodike* and *mtakime* are distributed throughout a world of agentic relationality by giving fluctuating amounts of life and agency to things, animals and human. The idea of the transmaterial as commonly found in the Commune of Coby constitutes one of the two main presencing principles that I explain in this chapter.

Colonial modernity introduced a bundle of processes that manifest themselves in varied ways by affecting how humans lead their lives, ultimately leading to what I call the semiotification of life. I propose that this process is foundational, since it finds its expression in an increased categorisation and splitting up of entities through processes that I identify as ontological differentiation and purification, materialisation and spiritualisation, and the increased differentiation of the religious and the secular. These processes all affect the dynamics of spirit and matter in humans, things, animals, shrine entities and the Bible, and lead to significant changes in the presencing process. Especially the observable variations of how humans interact with things and animals lead me to argue that semiotic presencing is becoming more important at the partial expense of a transmaterial presencing principle. Colonial modernity, then, influences the diversification and differentiation of the presencing process, most notably by introducing the possi-

bility of a semiotic principle, which I understand as the second main presencing principle.

As part of this work of semiotification, I can observe a move from a largely relational understanding of the world in which agency is dispersed to a more differentiated world where humans, animals and things are categorised. This move also leads to an increased separation of spirit and matter in which the bodies or objects of shrine entities become distinguishable from disembodied spirits, which the material shrines now come to symbolise. Such spirits, which do not seem to have existed previously, are – together with agentive words – part of new hybrids that come into existence due to semiotification.

The Semiotic Problem of Shrine Entities

In the Commune of Coby *atenwiene* (sg. *ditenwende*) or *fétiches*, come in many different shapes and sizes and they can be found in various locations. The most common type of shrine – the one that brought engines to a halt (see Chapter 1) – is called *ditade* (pl. *ataade*), which means “stone” (Huber 1968: 205, 1973: 380-382), but can also be referred to as *fesefe* (pl. *isie*) “snake” (Kaucley forthcoming 2014), since people often associate pythons with shrines¹⁷. The word “stone” refers to the “irreducible materiality” (Pietz 1985: 7) of a stone that people consider alive and that is a being in its own right.

Such shrines are typical of the wider savannah region of West Africa (see, e.g., Cartry 1987: 141-177; Dawson 2009: 82-83; Maurice 1986: 408-414; Zwerne-mann 1998: 245-255; Goody 1956: 91-99). They usually consist of a single stone, which people surround by a number of other neatly arranged stones in the shade of a tree (Figures 1-3), both for the protection of the shrines and to mark their presence, as is the case among the Dagara (Lentz 2009). Each community that counts itself part of the Bebelibe has at least one communal shrine entity that goes back to the communities’ origins and their installation in the area (Huber 1973:

¹⁷ The elusive material manifestation of a shrine entity as a python allows it to move and sometimes visit specific homesteads, which people perceive as significant. Not all pythons, however, are identified as shrine entities and they rarely appear in villages. Accordingly, there are not many people who can tell stories of encounters with shrine entities that manifested themselves as pythons. Although this phenomenon is interesting and merits further attention, it is also marginal. For the purpose of this book I limit my discussion of shrine entities to their ubiquitous stones.

380). Shrines are tied in with each community's history and are usually found in groves or on mountains. Together with the ancestors, each shrine entity chooses its priest from the community by communicating through a diviner (S. Merz 2014: 19-20). Communal shrine entities are responsible for general protection and welfare, as well as for fertility and the perpetuation of life. Additional communal shrine entities are also in charge of the community's land, the *difone* cycle of initiations and help in case of conflict or war.

Communal shrine entities can multiply by requesting through a diviner to be installed at the house of a daughter of the community, or her descendents. As people in the Commune of Cobly are exogamous, this is usually in the village of the daughter's husband. Installing the shrine entity at her house saves her from having to travel back to her village of origin to relate to the entity. The priest of the community of origin places a stone by the original shrine for a prescribed period of time or he simply takes one of the stones surrounding the main shrine entity. Either way, the new stone has spent some time with the entity and has now absorbed its vital traits (Goody 1956: 95; Lentz 2009: 126; S. Merz 2014: 91). People's understanding of materiality already implies that stones are alive in a general sense and have the potential to become beings in their own right. Through contagion with an existing shrine entity a stone realises its potential for life and becomes a specific being with a name that can now fulfil its purpose as a link between people and *Uwienu* (God)¹⁸. In the same way a community shrine can be multiplied and carried to a new location if sons of the community move away in search of new land, as is also the case for Dagara earth shrines described by Carola Lentz (2009). In this way, shrines facilitate the general mobility of people (see Chapter 1), while allowing them to remain ritually dependent on their main community shrine.

Shrine entities, then, are part of the everyday lives of many people in the Commune of Cobly, and yet, they pose a semiotic problem similarly to what Peter Pels (1998b) has recognised for fetishes. While the fetish has been characterised as collapsing the sign with its referent, or as being identical with its meaning

¹⁸ It is clear that the notion of *Uwienu* (Supreme Being) has already been widely influenced by Christian ideas and that it is therefore justified to interpret the word as "God". More generally, Greene (1996) shows that the question of Supreme Gods in West Africa has always been contested and ideas about them have been very dynamic.

(Bille, *et al.* 2010: 8-9; Ellen 1988: 226-227; Pietz 1985: 15; see also Brett-Smith 1994: 46), shrine entities do not make a difference between the constituents of signs. Rather, they escape semiotics as a representational practice, rendering them unintelligible in Enlightenment terms (cf. Sansi 2011: 32-33).

To explain and justify this argument in more detail, I need to start with C. S. Peirce (1940), who distinguishes between three basic sign types according to the relationship between the components of the sign especially in relation to its referent. The three types are the icon, the symbol and the index (Engelke 2007: 31-32; Keane 2003: 413; Layton 2003: 452-453; Parmentier 1994: 6-7; Short 2007: 214-222). The stone of a shrine entity is clearly not an icon, because the stone does not resemble the being identified with it. Neither can a shrine entity easily be characterised through a symbol, since the direct and determined identification of stone and being is neither conventional nor arbitrary. In semiotics, symbolism is typically attributed to language. For most people in the Commune of Cobly, even though a shrine entity is also associated with pythons, its stone cannot simply be exchanged for any other material object. In a visceral manner people know that it has to be a stone.

Indexes, in the paradigmatic Peircean sense, always refer and point to something else (Short 2007: 219). They have an actual but dynamic connection through contiguity with the referent, which manifests itself in one way or another in the index. This connection is shaped by a kind of logical-causal inference that is open to some uncertainty (Gell 1998: 13; Keane 1997: 79, 2003: 419, 2005: 190, 2007: 22; Layton 2003: 452-453). An example of an index is a footprint in sand that refers to the person who walked there.

Even though Alfred Gell (1998: 13; see also Layton 2003: 454) tries to present the index as purely natural, he nonetheless acknowledges that the forms of indexes are based on “traditional knowledge” (1998: 29). Indexes, then, are also culturally determined, even if only partially (Layton 2003: 260). The strength of the index is that it is particularly suited to account for the agency of material things (Gell 1998; Keane 2003, 2005; Sansi 2011: 31). Such agency, however, remains indexically linked to humans and is the consequence of their actions. For shrine entities, then, indexicality only goes so far in that it limits the shrine en-

tity's agency to either the result of human actions, or to contagion by other shrine entities, and not as being intrinsic to the shrine.

The problem of semiotics, then, consists in the model not being able to describe human experience sufficiently. Neither icon, symbol nor index can account for shrine entities, which do not make a difference between sign and referent or spirit and matter, and that have an intrinsic agency that necessitates them being understood as beings in their own right.

Presencing Beyond Semiotics

While Ferdinand de Saussure built his semiology on and around the dichotomistic distinction between signifier and signified, Peirce – more than Saussure – recognised the complexity of the structure of signs and developed an increasingly intricate and atomistic taxonomy of signs, which he never finished (Short 2007: 207). Such dichotomisation and atomisation of signs, whether dualistic or triadic, inevitably leads to a structuralist dead end (Engelke 2007: 29-31; Keane 2007: 22). This is why poststructuralist semioticians have shifted their attention from Saussure to the more pragmatic Peircean semiotics (Posner 2011). What distinguishes Peircean semiotics from its Saussurean counterpart is its processual approach, which, going beyond linguistics, allows signs to be seen as intrinsic to social practice (Hodge and Kress 1988; Jensen 1995; van Leeuwen 2005) and as part of the material world (Engelke 2007; Gell 1998; Keane 2003, 2005). In doing so, signs become embedded in everyday life. Current semiotics, then, recognises that the complexity of signs does not only stem from their potential internal structure, but also lies in how they relate to and interact with one another.

Roland Posner (2011: 23-24) implies that this largely poststructuralist approach does not actually challenge structuralism, but rather shifts the focus of semiotics from sign structure to semiosis or meaning making, and from code to discourse. Maybe the reason why the term “postsemiotics” has never become prominent is that it gets too close to the bone of semiotics. In other words, post-semiotics implicitly questions not only the validity of a theory, but a foundational principle that lies at the heart of Enlightenment thinking. And yet, I contend that it is necessary to move beyond semiotics into largely uncharted territory, in order

to be able to account for entities for which a distinction between sign and referent is unfounded, such as shrine entities found in the Commune of Cobly.

What this uncharted territory beyond semiotics looks like remains open for discussion. While I consider semiotics, especially in its poststructuralist orientation, suitable for continuing to theorise at least to some extent, the most pressing need is to find a more suitable vocabulary. The “sign”, as well as related terms, is too restrictive. Instead, I propose to use the wider notion of an “entity” that people identify not so much through the meaning making of semiosis, but rather by making it present through a process of “presencing”.

The French historian Jean-Pierre Vernant (1991), as far as I know, was the first scholar to introduce the idea that the invisible is being made present in what he calls “idols” through a process of “presentification”. For him, “[t]he task is to make the invisible visible, to assign a place in our world to entities from the other world” (1991: 153). Although he uses semiotic language to describe this for the example of Greek *xoanon* idols, he makes it clear that presentification is not representational, implying that it is not semiotic in nature. Rather, “the idea is to establish real contact with the world beyond, to actualize it, to make it present, and thereby to participate intimately in the divine” (Vernant 1991: 153). Vernant (1991: 154-155) shows that in presentification the form of the idol is not important, as is the case for the shrine entities of the Cobly area, but that it is rather ritual action that defines material presence.

Patricia Spyer (2000: 237-238) develops Vernant’s presentification for the ritual of the annual cassowary play on the Aru archipelago. According to her, the cassowary spirit becomes present in an effigy made from palm fronds only through ritual action of the men who dance with the effigy. It seems crucial that before their dance these men hunted a cassowary in the forest and return with its spirit to animate the effigy through ritual action to the extent that the cassowary, its spirit and the men become at least partly identified with each other, which, in turn, becomes manifest in the effigy’s dance. Presentification, or presencing, is not a process that simply happens, but is based on human actions and interactions with each other and with other entities, whether animals or things. Presencing, then, is an essentially relational activity.

While the idea of making present what is immaterial and absent is already evident in Vernant (1991), Matthew Engelke has more recently discussed this question as a “problem of presence” (2007), taking a more explicitly materialist approach. More generally, anthropologists have noticed and examined the problem of the materiality of absence (Bille, *et al.* 2010; Buchli 2010; M. Meyer 2012). A common denominator of such materialist approaches is that when talking about absence, whether in the form of deities or the dead, absence usually only exists in relation to what is materially present, thereby reifying immateriality by indexically locating its absent agency within the material world. While materialist approaches succeed in diffusing the material/immaterial dichotomy, they continue to draw on materialist semiotic analysis by making the absent and immaterial accessible through materiality. A materialist approach to presencing further implies that before people relationally engage with other presenced entities, they need to interpret sensory perception (Buchli 2010: 187) that establishes that something is materially present.

In practice and as part of presencing as characterised so far, people in the Commune of Cobly visually perceive a stone or heap of stones at the foot of a tree. That this stone is not merely a stone, but rather a shrine entity, not only stems from their prior experience of such stones, but also needs to be experientially established through ritual action. For example, a woman presents a petition for a child in front of a stone. If she becomes pregnant within a certain amount of time, she will ascribe this to her petition and will ask her husband to thank the stone through an offering. For her and her husband, the stone has demonstrated that it is efficacious and that it is indeed an agentive entity, and not just a stone. If her petition does not lead to a testable positive result, she will begin to doubt the efficacy of a particular stone and will consider seeking alternative solutions, such as at Tigare or Nkunde shrines or in a Pentecostal church.

Based on these works on presencing discussed so far, I understand the process as an addition or extension to a general semiotic framework of meaning making, notably for cases when an immaterial absence is materially made present, mainly through ritual action. I propose that the process of presencing can actually have a much wider and general applicability, and, maybe more importantly, that it does not necessarily rely on semiotic analysis.

People in the Commune of Cobly, for example, see stones on a regular basis. Simply seeing stones does not mean that they are made present. Rather, presencing happens when stones become relevant to people in a relational and experiential sense, for example by somebody recognising the beauty of a stone or needing it as a tool. Such recognition then leads to action, for example by the stone being picked up and used, thereby leading to a relational and experiential engagement between human and stone. A stone can now become either a sign that can be semiotically analysed, or, in line with how shrine entities are presenced, an entity that helps to constitute the world. Since meaning and action are notions that neither exclude each other or are incommensurable, I propose that presencing can offer the possibility of moving beyond semiotics.

The result of presencing, then, does not only come in the form of signs that describe and represent the world, but also from entities that actually come to constitute life. Such experiential entities always depend on other surrounding entities for their interpretation and existence, and are constantly adapting as they interact with each other. Entities are thus inherently dynamic and unstable as they are intrinsically and relationally entangled in ideas, actions, life and the material world, with which they come to be identified at the same time.

Introducing the process of presencing and its resulting relational and experiential entities, even if they continue to include structured signs, is a crucial step in moving beyond semiotics. On the other hand, while presencing as discussed so far may help to account for shrine entities, it also leads to a catchall notion that tries to account for at least two different ways in which people engage in processes of presencing, which I refer to as semiotic and transmaterial. Widening the process of presencing, then, also necessitates its narrowing by elaborating these two different presencing principles, as I call them, that describe how people make things, words and material objects present and how they come to function and act as signs or entities in the world.

Presencing Principles and Transmateriality

I develop the notion of “presencing principles” from “semiotic ideology” that Webb Keane (2003, 2005, 2007) borrowed from Richard Parmentier (1994: 142) who first used it. Keane introduced the idea that semiotic ideology is a material

extension of “language ideology” (Irvine 1989; Silverstein 1979; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994; Woolard 1998). Stressing the need of going beyond linguistic analogy by including both words and things, Keane characterises semiotic ideology as “people’s background assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world” (2005: 191). In other words, semiotic ideologies can account for signifying practices, which describe how people understand the relationship between signs and what they refer to in their environment as perceived by their senses. Semiotic ideologies explain how people view themselves in relation to each other as well as to words and things in a broader sense. This includes the materiality and immateriality of people and things and how agency works out in their interactions.

By introducing the notion of presencing principles I shift the focus from ideology to ontology and both broaden and limit Keane’s use of semiotic ideology. Through presencing principles, I extend the main idea of semiotic ideology also to account for entities that people do not experience as structured signs, just as presencing processes become crucial in moving beyond semiotics. On the other hand, I understand a presencing principle as more limited than semiotic ideology, since it describes merely one interpretive possibility that can co-exist and interplay with other principles. People can be described as using the two different presencing principles both exclusively and simultaneously, depending on the situation and circumstances. People constantly reconfigure the interplay of the different presencing principles by altering their range and, maybe more importantly, by diminishing and increasing their importance and frequency of application. The notion of presencing principles, then, has the potential to account for various kinds of presencing, whether they are more semiotic or experiential. This, as I show in this chapter, seems particularly apt for grappling with the processes that characterise colonial modernity and affect the way people experience and lead their lives by interacting with other entities.

Shrine entities in the Commune of Cobly, as I have described them so far, cannot be sufficiently analysed by semiotics that continues to talk about the immaterial being made present in a material object. In terms of presencing, shrine entities are both present and absent to the extent that it seems impossible to talk about them as immaterial and material, or as spirit and matter. This is why I

propose to characterise shrine entities as “transmaterial”, as people consider them as intrinsically present in – and therefore identical with – the stone.

I call the way by which people make such entities present the “transmaterial presencing principle”, which I identify as the first of two main presencing principles, the other being the “semiotic presencing principle”. Both presencing principles can co-exist to varying degrees. Since transmaterial presencing is largely based on action, it results in entities that are relationally, experientially and existentially dependent on other surrounding entities. This kind of transmaterial presencing becomes a crucial principle that provides the language to talk about entities that refuse to be dichotomised and analysed semiotically, and this becomes foundational for characterising life as I observe it in the Commune of Cobyly.

In this way, transmateriality abolishes the dichotomies that have come to characterise Enlightenment science and are central to structuralism and related approaches in anthropology. Through transmateriality, the widely discussed distinction between science and religion, as well as the secular and the religious, loses its categorical separation. More importantly, it fits in with the recent post-secular turn (Habermas 2008; McLennan 2010; see also Introduction). Indeed, Enlightenment dichotomies have not been helpful in understanding the transmaterial world. Stewart Guthrie, for example, was forced to admit that anthropomorphism is “by definition mistaken” even though it is at the same time “reasonable and inevitable” (1993: 204). By introducing the notion of transmateriality, such structural dilemmas can be resolved and shrine entities can become logically comprehensible and coherent to the extent that I, as an anthropologist and outsider, can accept them as true in their own right. This becomes possible not due to some form of relativism, but rather due to transmateriality’s epistemological ambiguity, uncertainty and potential for plurality that I believe is essential for taking “the Other” seriously and as coeval, and for doing ethnography (Fabian 1983; Jewsiewicki 2001; see also J. Merz 2004: 576).

As I show in this chapter both transmaterial and semiotic presencing are foundational to understanding how people in the Commune of Cobyly relate to shrine entities, Bibles and, as I will discuss in the following chapters, films and television sets. Having explored the idea of presencing, presencing principles and transma-

teriality, I now return to shrine entities and other material objects by discussing how they work as transmaterial entities.

The Animating Force and Identity of Life

Most people of the Commune of Cibly recognise that shrine entities have *kebodike* (animating force, pl. *sibosi*) and *mtakime* (identity, no pl.), the twin notions that are, together with a body, necessary for life. The presence of *kebodike* and *mtakime* gives a stone life and renders it into a shrine entity, or, in other words, makes the stone transmaterial. Those who mainly employ the transmaterial presencing principle form the most significant subset of people whom I analyse as following similar trajectories of modernity. In the following sections I focus on exploring these trajectories by first discussing how *kebodike* and *mtakime* work in humans. This model is anthropomorphically extended to shrine entities, animals, plants and things, or, in short, anything that exists (cf. Guthrie 1993: 177).

Kebodike and *mtakime* are linked and depend on each other to the degree that sometimes people confuse them (S. Merz 2013: 20; Swanson 1985: 173). Indeed, most people find it hard to characterise the two notions and describe them coherently, thereby stressing their inherent ambiguity and complexity. For humans, *kebodike* and *mtakime* are both said to be located in the torso and, together with the body, make up a living person. Their materiality is neither determined nor fixed and largely depends on a body. When people talk about *kebodike* and *mtakime* they sometimes give the impression that they are unspecified material objects, while at other times these notions appear more diffuse and immaterial. Generally, people tend to associate *kebodike* more with the action of breathing, the heartbeat and muscular contractions that people experience when being startled. Without *mtakime*, however, *kebodike* cannot provide the animation needed to make life possible.

Kebodike can leave the body while asleep in order to wander around, usually at night, while *mtakime* remains part of the body, maintaining a link with *kebodike*. These excursions are experienced as dreams and render *kebodike* vulnerable (see Chapter 4). If it is hindered from returning to the body humans die and the *mtakime* leaves as well. Rather than “soul”, as Huber (1973: 384; cf. S. P. Blier 1987: 131; Fortes 1987: 269; Swanson 1985) glossed the word in passing, or

“vital force” (Ingold 2000: 112; Willerslev 2011: 516), I find it more appropriate to label *kebodike* as “animating force”. I need to stress, however, that such animating force is transmaterial and that animation is not limited to physical manifestations.

Mtakime is always linked to *kebodike* and strengthens it. While *kebodike* does not vary much between different beings, humans have their own unique *mtakime*, which determines each person’s character and influences their behaviour (cf. Kramer 1993: 65). Some aspects of *mtakime* come from *Uwienu* (God), while other aspects carry over from the reincarnating ancestor. Together with *kebodike*, *mtakime* forms a new life (S. Merz 2013). Some people of the Commune of Coby claim that the potential life, before coming into existence, can have a say in the kind of the *mtakime* that it will have (cf. Fortes 1987: 149; Swanson 1985: 68), while others say that it is chosen and given by God only (cf. Sewane 2003: 374).

The Mbelime word *uwienu* means both God and the sun (Huber 1973: 378; Kaucley forthcoming 2014), as is the case among other Voltaic peoples (Maurice 1986: 405; Sewane 2003: 375; Zwernemann 1961). *Uwienu* is the distant origin and destination of life and the locus of potential life. *Uwienu* created the world and continues to sustain it through maintaining the flow of *kebodike* and *mtakime*. God himself, however, withdrew from the world when heaven and earth got separated, as recounted in myths (Huber 1979: 78). People usually talk about God anthropomorphically as being male and as also having *kebodike* and *mtakime* (cf. Swanson 1985: 40). His distance means that he is removed from everyday involvement in the lives of humans, animals and things but can be approached through mediating entities, such as shrine entities and ancestors, that provide a link to him.

Once a new life is formed and a child is born, the *mtakime* develops and matures over the years within its given limits. *Mtakime* can manifest itself both in a positive and negative sense. When people become priests or diviners it is due to their given *mtakime*. When somebody excels at agriculture or in animal husbandry, or is a thief or alcoholic, it is equally due to their *mtakime*. The old man Kombiénou, who has never attended church, explains a person’s character as coming from a God-given *mtakime*: “You see an alcoholic who drinks. Yes, God

has given him *mtakime* so that he drinks, it's this that makes him do things" (interview, 11 Apr. 2011).

Accordingly, the *mtakime* is largely predetermined and cannot be influenced by conscious intention. The *mtakime*, then, can also be considered the seat of people's morality that determines the moral influence of their existence on other people, animals and things. Therefore, Huber (1973: 384) is not far off the mark in interpreting *mtakime* as "destiny" (cf. Fortes 1987: 145-174; Sewane 2003: 373; Swanson 1985: 57-90; Zwernemann 1960). But there is more to it, as *mtakime* is essentially relational. It allows for reciprocal engagement and determines the purpose and morality of such a relationship. *Mtakime*, then, is better translated as "identity", even though destiny also plays a role. Finally, when *mtakime* and *kebodike* come together in a body, they form an entity of life that has agency, making it possible for humans and things to interact with each other and to act on each other.

Fluctuations of Life in Human-Animal-Thing Relations

Most people of the Commune of Cobly acknowledge that there are things that *Uwienu* (God) has made and things that humans have made. These human-made things also ultimately rely on God for their existence, as do humans, animals and trees. While everything that is alive has *kebodike* (animating force) and *mtakime* (identity), the question of how life manifests itself in different entities and how this affects their interactions, constantly fluctuates. By looking at the life of things and animals in relation to humans, I discuss in this section the fluctuating nature of life, for those who attribute it to everything that exists through transmaterial presencing.

Especially in transmaterial terms, seemingly inanimate and man-made things can also have *kebodike* and *mtakime*. Alphonse, an older Christian farmer, affirms: "Humans have *mtakime*, but a knife? Yes, it has it too. If it wouldn't have *mtakime* it wouldn't be a knife" (interview, 11 Apr. 2011). Therefore, not only humans, but also things can be considered as alive and as constituting different classes of beings (Kramer 1993: 64-65) or entities.

A drinking calabash needs *mtakime* to be useful by containing water or sorghum beer. A knife, on the other hand, is defined through being sharp. Accord-

ingly, a knife needs to have *mtakimε*, since the characteristic of its sharpness interacts with other things by cutting them. “If a knife doesn’t live, how can it cut? Cutting is the life of the knife” (interview, 16 Jun. 2011), as the old man Moutouama, who is responsible for a homestead’s shrine entity, sums it up. This does not mean that a knife can act independently of humans. Rather, *mtakimε* gives a specific identity to the knife that comes to the fore when the knife is interacting with other entities that have *mtakimε*. Humans, for example, provide through their *mtakimε* the possibility for the knife’s *mtakimε* to relationally engage with a third entity, such as dividing a piece of meat. Each thing has its specific purpose and, together with *kebodike*, *mtakimε* gives it the agency to act and fulfil this purpose in relation to other entities. A knife that is blunt can no longer cut and a broken calabash can no longer hold water. In these states people consider them dead, as they have lost their *mtakimε* and *kebodike* and therefore their purpose and ability to engage with others.

Throughout its existence, the life of things and humans fluctuates. Usually, the purpose of a knife is to facilitate human life, for example by cutting meat for cooking or by cutting open a calabash in preparation for its future use. The life of a knife can fluctuate significantly, for example when it comes to be used in injuring or killing, thereby even potentially dominating the life of humans. Some people think that when things such as knives cause harm, the thing’s *mtakimε* is exhausted or even lost.

Similarly, a stone may have life by definition through the presence of its attributed *mtakimε* and *kebodike*, but its life may never become important unless the stone enters into a relationship with other entities by being made present. Typically, people use stones in construction, to make a fireplace or use them as hammers. Doing so raises their functionality and usefulness in a relational way, thereby attributing them more life than when they remain undiscovered in the bush or when they are again abandoned after using them. During the lifetime of a stone, its life can significantly fluctuate according to how it relationally engages with other entities. The fluctuations of the life of a stone become most significant when it becomes a shrine entity through contagion with another shrine entity. When people consider a stone entity powerful, the life of the stone becomes more

important than the life of humans, since it becomes a promoter and even potential giver of life and fertility, as well as a taker of life.

The fluctuating life of entities, whether they are things or humans, is thus largely determined through the relationship that entities maintain and how these relationships work out by affecting their fluctuating life by fulfilling the specific purpose according to each entity's *mtakimε*.

A relationship between two entities can also become emotional. Some people see the *mtakimε* of things as necessary for humans to have an emotional relationship when they engage with them. Kombiénou, an old man, challenged me: "Things have *mtakimε*. If they didn't have it, could we love them? If they didn't have it, wouldn't we throw them away? Everything we love has *mtakimε*" (interview, 11 Apr. 2011). He thus models his relationship with the knife as being the same as with other humans (Guthrie 1993: 33).

This emotional relationship between humans and things is particularly accentuated for those who are said to have the *mtakimε* of a certain thing. People who have a knife's *mtakimε* love to have and use knives and are not afraid of them, even if somebody tries to stab them. Whatever they try to do with a knife will succeed. Likewise, people who have a television's *mtakimε* love television, watch every day and are said to be experts at operating the set. If such people cannot watch every day, they get discouraged and may not be able to sleep.

People often test their *mtakimε* by trying something new to see if they succeed or fail in their endeavour (cf. Sewane 2003: 382). Rigobert, for example, repeatedly tried to breed chickens without success, and his dogs constantly died. He concluded that his *mtakimε* was not suited to keep and breed animals (interview, 6 Dec. 2010). When he gave chickens to his five-year-old son a few years later, however, they bred successfully and his son's puppy developed into a healthy dog. Rigobert concluded that his son's *mtakimε* was suitable to keep and breed animals. If the result of the new activity is not satisfactory, as Swanson (1980) has shown for Gourmantché communities in Burkina Faso, people can easily explain it by saying that they were not born with the right kind of *mtakimε*. This, in turn, implies that the activity is not worth pursuing.

Many people in the Commune of Cobly also say that if humans have the *mtakimε* of a thing, they also have the ability to make it. N'sermè, another old

man, who had tried and rejected both Christianity and Islam, stated that when people succeed in making things, *mtakime* and *kebodike* always have to be there. He stressed that “where a man is, there has to be *kebodike* next to him” (interview, 28 Jan. 2011). More specifically, in a distinctly Gellian manner, the young non-Christian farmer Ntcha confirms that a television set can have *mtakime*: “It’s a man who builds a television set. It’s him who has taken his *mtakime* and has placed it in the TV before it will work to show us pictures” (interview, 3 Feb. 2011). In this sense, by receiving parts of the *mtakime* of their makers, things become alive as direct extensions of humans. This fits in with Gell’s (1998) perception that things are indexes of a social agency and thus that they index the agency and *mtakime* of their makers. While for Gell the agency of objects only works as an extension of the agency of people (Layton 2003: 451), in the Commune of Cobly, agency becomes intrinsic to things because they have their own *mtakime* and *kebodike* that is present independently of humans. Such a view, which is similar to “vital materialism”, as Bennett (2010a, 2010b) calls it, is not foreign to Western thought either. Its aim “is to theorize a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such, and to detach materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance” (Bennett 2010b: xiii). I maintain, then, that for people in the Commune of Cobly things *are* alive, even if their life fluctuates through their span of existence. Furthermore, things have an intrinsic yet autonomous agency through their ascribed *mtakime* and *kebodike*, which is distributed and relationally linked to the *mtakime* and *kebodike* of other humans and nonhumans.

The autonomy of things and humans means that they can be held responsible for their actions. For example, if humans cut themselves by accident while working with a knife, they say, “the knife has cut me” and blame the knife. If there is a dispute between several men and somebody pulls out a knife, it becomes part of the dispute and will act on its own, as do the other men involved in the dispute. In this sense, things have their own existence and especially by interacting with humans gain a cultural biography and a social life (Appadurai 1986; Hoskins 2006; Kopytoff 1986).

Thus, the fluctuating lives of humans and the lives of things depend on each other and are intricately and reciprocally related to each other. Life without things and things without life are unthinkable, and this affects and influences the

way people deal with material things. Everything that lives also shares in past and future life. Once a man-made thing is pronounced dead and the *kebodike* and *mtakime* have left, its *mtakime* reverts to a potential life that can return and become part of the *mtakime* of a new man-made thing. But it cannot return into something that God has made, such as humans, animals or trees.

Humans not only have a special relationship with things, but also with animals. Since animals are complex beings as are humans (cf. Swanson 1985: 178), their relationship too is more complex to the extent that permeability between species is possible (Jackson 1990; Kohn 2007; Parker 2006). Like the *mtakime* of things, both a human's or an animal's *mtakime* shares in past and future life through reincarnation (S. Merz 2013; cf. Erny 2007; Sewane 2003: 318-333). Usually, the dead return within their families, but there are exceptions. If human ancestors feel that they have been mistreated by their relatives when alive, they can decide to reincarnate as an animal, tree or termite mound (Fortes 1987: 132, 136; S. Merz 2013), thereby causing consternation for the living. Similarly, the *mtakime* of certain game animals, such as warthogs or duikers, can force itself into a new human life and displace the human *mtakime*. This displacement can manifest itself behaviourally and physically, for example by the presence of hairs, or fur, in unusual places. Such displacement of *mtakime* is usually the result of a hunter's ritual negligence, which often affects his descendents. On the basis of this permeability between humans and animals, it is hardly surprising that people consider animals, like humans and things, to have their own fluctuating life, autonomy and agency. They share and participate in the world through their *mtakime*.

When people say that the time has come for somebody or something to die, they do not see death as something bad. On the contrary, death allows for life to perpetuate itself and to generate new life (S. Merz 2013; cf. Ingold 2000: 113).

I now take a step back and look at the bigger picture of life in a world that people experience through a transmaterial understanding of relating to each other, to animals and to things, and in which they constantly surround and entangle themselves in entities of meaning through their agency that is distributed throughout everything that exists.

A World of Agentive Relationality

People in the Commune of Cobly usually consider themselves to be part of a world that is characterised by the fluctuating life in it and thus by the joint presence of *kebodike* (animating force) and *mtakime* (identity). Especially for people who mainly relate to other entities through what I call transmaterial presencing, these components of life intrinsically manifest themselves in the transitory forms of material bodies and other things. A single *kebodike* or *mtakime* cannot exist on its own; they both depend on their joint embodiment. Indeed, *kebodike* and *mtakime* are so strongly associated with a physical body that after the death of a human they are only able to move on and reincarnate once the flesh has decomposed, leaving the bones behind (S. Merz 2013: 31-34; cf. Sewane 2001: 195; Sewane 2003: 324).

Similarly, single humans, animals or things cannot exist on their own, as everything that lives depends relationally on everything else that is alive. Life, then, is relational and is only possible thanks to other life that precedes and succeeds it, and that presently exists. Persons, and by extension everything that lives, “do not ‘have’ relations; they ‘are’ relations” (Piot 1999: 18; see also Bird-David 1999; Jackson 1990: 63; Strathern 1988). This means that humans, animals and things are alive not only through their material existence, but also because they relate to each other through their *kebodike* and *mtakime*.

How then should this relationality of the world be understood? I have already shown how *mtakime* is relational, how it shapes and regulates relationships between people, animals and things and how it is intentional by directing the actions of, and interactions between them. I can understand agency as emanating from the interplay between *mtakime* and *kebodike*, and as being lived out in relationships by affecting and infecting other humans, animals and things to various degrees. Everything that lives thus participates through their *mtakime* and *kebodike* in distributed agency (Bennett 2010a, 2010b; Bird-David 2006: 44; Hoskins 2006: 75-76; Ingold 2000: 97; Layton 2003: 451).

In a world of agentive relationality, as I prefer to call such distributed agency in relational terms, humans and things have a mutual dependency and can reinforce each other’s fluctuating life and agency. The notion of agentive relationality can better capture the view that people of the Commune of Cobly have of

their relational world in which everything and everybody is determined to exist and in which people constantly surround and entangle themselves with transmaterial entities, such as other people, animals and things.

The notion that things, animals and humans all co-exist and share in the distributed agency through their *mtakime* means that it is tempting to talk of egalitarianism. Suzanne Preston Blier (1987: 8), for example, mentions the “balance” between patri- and matriline within social structure (see also Chapter 1) before claiming an “ideal of egalitarianism” (1987: 163) for Betammaribe communities, who neighbour and mix with Bebelibe communities, while also recognising that they do not live up to this ideal. I side with James Woodburn (1982: 445-446), however, who argues that as a rule non-centralised societies do not merit the label “egalitarian”. Indeed, social organisation as found in the Commune of Cobly is hierarchical as it is primarily subject to a principle of seniority, which in turn is based on the maturity and strength of *mtakime* and *kebodike*, or, in other words, of a fluctuating life reaching its peak. Social advancement, political responsibility and prestige are not so much gained through merit than through maturity and age, which is defined in relation to other people. Beyond humans, too, a hierarchy operates with things constituting the lowest level, followed by animals, humans and shrine entities.

As previously mentioned, shrine entities, in negotiation with the ancestors, choose their community priests. Once shrine entities and ancestors have agreed on their choice, they communicate it to the community. This usually happens when an elder seeks advice from a diviner for a preoccupation of his own. The shrine entity then indicates who has been chosen through the diviner without having been prompted to do so. The elder shares this with other elders who then seek confirmation from the entity through other diviners before a new priest is installed. Such an appointment is difficult to refuse, since priests are often said to be born with the *mtakime* of a shrine entity.

Similarly, the *siyawesi* (sg. *keyawediké*), small human-like beings that live in the bush, choose those who have the *mtakime* of divination to become diviners. The *siyawesi* then work with them by relationally providing them with a link to the distant God (Huber 1973: 386-387; S. Merz forthcoming). The *siyawesi* or shrine entities, as well as any other being, relate to people through a relationship

within the limits of their society. When the *siyawesi* choose somebody, for example, they make themselves visible to him or her while other people will not be able to see them. The relationship with the chosen person can be compared to one of parents and child with the *siyawesi* both instructing and disciplining the chosen person. Their relationship is expressed through the *siyawesi* choosing, following, catching or beating somebody and there is no indication that they embody or speak through people in any way (S. Merz forthcoming).

Since the *mtakimε* and its body, or spirit and matter, are so strongly linked that they cannot easily be separated or exchanged, intrusive or displacing possession in broad terms becomes unfeasible (Boddy 1994: 407; Cohen and Barrett 2008). Indeed, possession by an entity that takes over the host's bodily behaviour or executive control, that results in "executive possession", as Emma Cohen (2008) more specifically defines it, is impossible. For the Tallensi, Meyer Fortes and Doris Mayer (1966: 11) consider this kind of spirit possession as "inconceivable", to the point that the mere idea of it "arouses scepticism and repugnance" (Fortes 1987: 148). Joseph Koabike, an ethnographer of his own people, the Moba from northern Togo, confirmed this position by asking how spirits would even fit into a person's body (quoted in S. Merz forthcoming).

Similarly, Joel Robbins (2004a: 131) observed for the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea before their 1977 Christian revival that they did not know spirit possession. Generally, I find that anthropologists have not paid enough attention to the *absence* of spirit possession and accordingly, I assume that at least historically, it used to be more widespread than commonly assumed. For Betammaribe communities, Sewane (2001) has found rare instances of trance among women, but points out that this phenomenon cannot be compared to the possession cults that exist in neighbouring areas. She explains this through the non-centralised form of social organisation. Coming back to people in the Commune of Cibly, these observations correlate with mine that everything that has *kebodike* and *mtakimε* interacts with life through relations of identity.

Relationships that are lived out in agentive relationality, then, are not marked by a sense of equality, but rather by respect towards *mtakimε* of other life forms (cf. S. Merz 2014: 3, 28-30). A neglect of appropriate respect can lead to ritual sanctions in the form of curses, for example after having offended an elder or

ancestor, or through various forms of revenge. Other examples include people fearing sanctions for cutting wood from the grove that surrounds a shrine entity, or killing a domestic animal without justified cause. Animals should only be killed as offerings or to feed visitors. Recent years, however, have seen increasing disregard for this ideal of respect (see below).

Especially older men and those fulfilling roles of responsibility are constantly concerned about the fluctuations of life that can potentially disturb and upset the world of agentive relationality and wreak havoc by affecting or even destroying established relationships and causing premature death. Efforts of restoration largely centre on allowing different entities' *mtakimε* to mature well as they move towards their full potential while remaining within the limits of an entity's character that *mtakimε* determines. When relationships between humans and other entities, such as things, animals or shrine entities need to be restored, people make appropriate reconciliatory offerings.

At times, failure to do so leads to an *mtakimε* that has not been sufficiently nurtured in order to fulfil its life potential and can then account for idiosyncratic traits of people. A young man who not only cross-dresses regularly, but also fulfils the role of a woman by preparing and selling sorghum beer at public events, exemplifies this. His behaviour is acceptable since he is suspected of having a woman's *mtakimε*. That the female traits of his *mtakimε* have come to manifest themselves can be explained through ritual negligence. It appears that the necessary ceremonies to reinforce and guide *mtakimε* were badly or never done.

For many people of the Commune of Cobly, then, *mtakimε* can account for two seemingly opposed trends. It gives identity to the idiosyncratic self, differentiating it from others, while at the same time *mtakimε* relationally integrates and positions the self in community with humans, animals and things.

As should have become clear by now, there is much more to a world of agentive relationality than meets the eye in the form of transmaterial bodies and things. *Mtakimε* and *kεbodikε* permeate the material form to the extent that they become intrinsically part of humans, animals and things, sometimes shifting between forms and linking them together through the distributed agency that is part of agentive relationality. In the next section I discuss in more detail how beings that are alive relate to their material existence.

Transmaterial Beings and the Need for Bodies

Shrine entities, as I have described them so far, constitute a stone to which people ascribe life through the intrinsic presence of *kebodike* (animating force) and *mtakime* (identity). The Mbelime words for such entities – both the broad *ditenwende* (shrine, “fetish”) and the narrower *ditade* (stone) – are ambiguous since they refer to shrine entities as both material *and* immaterial beings (Huber 1973: 380-382). A shrine entity, then, is not a spirit in a stone, but rather the spirit of a stone (Pels 1998b; Kramer 1993: 64). It is thus best described as a transmaterial entity that refuses to be differentiated into spirit and matter. In this sense I consider them transmaterial beings that, like humans and animals, originate with God, but that are usually identified with seemingly inanimate things.

Apart from shrine entities, there are other transmaterial beings. Ancestors (*behidibe*) are present in homesteads as clay mounds (Figure 4; Huber 1968: 205, 1973: 382-384; S. Merz 2014: 7) and the *siyawesi* bush beings are accommodated by diviners in their houses in the form of small portable clay statues that are roughly human in shape (Figure 5; Huber 1973: 386-387; S. Merz forthcoming). As with shrine entities, *behidibe* and *siyawesi* refer both to the material and immaterial aspects of these beings.

All these transmaterial beings are part of the world of agentic relationality. Their transmaterial quality is shaped by their *mtakime* and allows them to assure the link between humans and God, who people experience as being distant. This is why I propose that transmaterial beings are ontologically placed between things, people and God. Even though they retain a strong anthropomorphic bias (Guthrie 1993), they have some affinity to all three, relying on a material thing as a body and providing a link between humans and God. To some degree transmaterial beings can share in a reincarnational relationship with humans. A few research participants, for example, claimed that shrine entities, similar to animals, could reincarnate into humans and vice versa.

Looking beyond the transmaterial beings of shrine entities, ancestors and bush beings, I observe that the idea of transmateriality remains important. As mentioned earlier, *uwienu* is the word for God and the sun to the extent that they become identical. Even *kebodike* and *mtakime*, which cannot exist on their own for long, can, and even must, take on bodies (Fortes 1987: 267; Maurice 1986: 418),

which “seems paradoxical” from Fortes’ Enlightenment perspective (1987: 267). People claim that *kebodike* can leave the body when asleep while staying connected to it. Sometimes people see a person’s wandering *kebodike* at night in the form of a bat or large moth. Killing these animals results in the death of the person. *Mtakime*, on the other hand, is more intricate. When a child is born, its life is fragile while its *mtakime* needs to settle and adjust to the new life. This does not always happen as it should. If babies or children are weak and often sick, or when they show special behaviour or uncommon physical traits, their father seeks advice from a diviner (cf. Piot 1999: 77-78). The problems encountered may prove to be due to a weak *mtakime* that does not settle properly and wants to leave, or it could be due to an uncommon *mtakime*, such as the one of an animal, or that of a woman in a man (see above). In such cases, the diviner is likely to advise the father to construct a smallish conical clay mound (called *dikunpuode*, pl. *akunpe*) in front of the homestead and perform a ceremonial offering on it (Figure 6; Huber 1973: 384-386; cf. S. P. Blier 1987: 131-133; Maurice 1986: 419; Padenou and Barrué-Pastor 2006: 169-170, 243). In some cases, the diviner asks for a special calabash (called *ubokitiwanbiihu*, pl. *tibokitiwanbiite*) to be added and placed inside the house. *Mtakime* maintains a link to both the clay mound and the calabash, which serve as additional abodes outside the body where it can hide in case of problems and threats. Through being distributed beyond the human body also in a clay mound and a calabash, the *mtakime* of a child is thought to gain strength and can develop normally.

If the *mtakime* of a child is not properly cared for, it may leave, resulting in the child’s death, or it may not develop as it should and later manifests itself through undesirable traits, as the child gets older. Even though the *mtakime*’s additional material forms, the clay mound and the calabash, have distinct names, their bodies can still be understood as becoming identical to *mtakime*.

All these examples demonstrate that people in the Commune of Cobly live in an imminent world where materiality is a crucial part of life (J. Merz 2014; cf. S. P. Blier 1987; Brett-Smith 1994; Padenou and Barrué-Pastor 2006; Willerslev 2011). The material aspect of fluctuating life – the body in its various forms – is neither stable nor definite and needs to be seen as transitory since reincarnation is possible. Echoing Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) and Tim Ingold (2000: 94),

the old man Moutouama explains: “Our body [*ukuɔnu*] is our clothing” (interview, 16 Jun. 2011; cf. Fortes 1987: 266). In Mbelime, the body (*ukuɔnu*) can also be called “skin” (*tikɔnte*), thus strengthening Moutouama’s metaphor.

In light of a body that is necessarily identical with its *mtakime* and *kebodike* for life to exist, Daniel, a Christian carpenter who did not go to school for long, explains the need for God to come to earth in the body of the human Jesus, as he saw him in the *Jesus Film*:

God can’t come like this [as himself] because we couldn’t see him and believe. This is why he has transformed himself into somebody who we can see and who will talk to us face to face. ... This is why he is Jesus. ... He is God himself. As we can’t see God, he has transformed himself into a man (interview in French, 23 Jan. 2011).

When there is need for interaction with beings that do not have a tangible material existence, a body needs to be provided. This is a solution to the “problem of presence” (Engelke 2007) that shows a remarkable commitment to materiality in order to give a presence to something that is absent. Indeed, this is a crucial idea behind the principle of transmaterial presencing.

Not only does a body serve as a visual reminder, but more importantly, as a point of contact that materially manifests the agential relationality and identity of *mtakime* (cf. Goody 1997: 52; B. Meyer 2010b: 108-109). It is mainly through material forms and their associated *mtakime* that it becomes feasible for humans to interact with various transmaterial beings, such as ancestors or shrine entities. These material bodies are neither representations nor icons of the entities they constitute. Rather, they are identical with the entities that give them life and provide them agency. What Pels observed for the fetish also seems to apply to a transmaterial being: “It is too powerful a presence to be mere a re-presentation of something else” (1998b: 113). Accordingly, the purpose of shrine entities and other material forms is to reveal (Brett-Smith 1994: 62; Ingold 2000: 130) or to put it more neutrally, to make present (Behrend 2003; Engelke 2007; B. Meyer 2006b).

Against this background, it is not surprising to learn that iconicity, which can easily be theorised in semiotic terms, as being representational, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Pictures, as well as photographs and films, have come from

outside the Commune of Cobly, mainly in the wake of colonialism (see Chapter 4). I have found no evidence that would suggest that representative art played any role during precolonial times (J. Merz 2014; Sewane 2003: 20). The only objects I know of that could be conceived as vaguely representative, and that I can assume to predate colonialism, are *siyawesi* statues found at diviner's houses. Their rough human shape displays a vague and limited iconicity with people (Goody 1997: 66). This can be explained through the statues providing bodies for the *siyawesi* bush beings, who themselves are accepted as being a kind of human (Figure 5; S. Merz forthcoming). Not having material bodies, diviners need to provide them for their *siyawesi*, since divination depends on diviners and *siyawesi* bush beings working together. It seems that the material used and form of the statues are secondary to the importance of providing the *siyawesi* with a body that allows people to easily identify them as specific transmaterial beings.

The example of the *siyawesi* bush beings, then, does not contradict what Nurit Bird-David (2006) also observed among the Nayaka of South India, namely that people have neither need nor desire to create and use iconic representations. More specifically, this applies to people who primarily use the transmaterial presencing principle that infuse material objects with the fluctuations of life, as is characteristic of a subset of people in the Commune of Cobly that follow similar trajectories of modernity.

On this background it is necessary to discuss how the presence of the Bible as a relatively new material object that is associated with *upaanu* (the new times) is instilled with varying degrees of life and comes to be accepted as part of the world of agentic relationality.

God's Book as a Transmaterial Being

Virtually all people of the Commune of Cobly have at least heard of the Bible and a large majority are certain that God's book has both *mtakime* (identity) and *kebodike* (animating force). Only a few of my research participants, usually old men, who are not interested in Christianity because they are responsible for a shrine entity, did not know much about it. All the others, regardless of their religious orientation, including one of the community priests of a shrine entity, expressed a high esteem and even interest in *Uwien' pɔke* (God's book) as it is called

in Mbelime. Virtually everybody is aware of *Uwienu's* (God's) existence. People often use his name as part of everyday speech and greetings (cf. Swanson 1985: 40), and generally think positively about him as the creator and sustainer of life. Accordingly, his book has a potentially wide interest. Tandjomè, an old non-Christian woman, comments somewhat dramatically:

When we were children, we didn't know about Christianity. But now we know about it. Our parents, however, already talked about the *mtakime* of God's book, saying that it gives us life and we really saw that we live. ... Without God's book nobody could live. Without God's book we would all die (interview, 11 Apr. 2011).

In this section I trace how people have come to understand the materiality of the Bible through transmaterial presencing and how they use the book as a material thing that can be alive. It is worth noting that, to date, due to its Euro-American bias, the academic discourse on the Bible in Africa is mainly limited to Bible usage and textual interpretation (Gifford 2008a: 205; G. O. West 2000).

Ƙεƣƣƙε, the Mbelime word for book found in the compound noun *Uwien' ƣƣƙε* (God's book, the Bible), is also used for anything that is made from paper. It thus refers to a material existence commonly known from calendars, voting ballots, birth certificates, police convocations, wedding invitations and educational materials. The main difference is that these forms of paper are not associated with *Uwienu*, giving the Bible a special status. This is accentuated through the somewhat mysterious origin of the book since Bibles are not commoditised to the same degree as, for example, other books and television sets (cf. Engelke 2007: 52). Several people pointed out that you could not buy a Bible on the local markets. To obtain one, you need to travel to a city or maybe ask a pastor to find one for you. David, who has never attended school, but has become a church leader, explains in more detail:

You can't buy a Bible in the markets. Even if you have the money for it, it will be difficult. If you're not a Christian, they won't sell it to you. But if you are a Christian they can sell it to you. ... It's not your money that will allow you to find a Bible (interview in French, 15 Feb. 2011).

As a result, not many people in the Commune of Cobly own a Bible and those who do often have been to school and have a leadership role in one of the churches, as opined by the old farmer Sanhouekoua: "Somebody who has been to

school is called a pastor” (interview, 11 Feb. 2011). In the town of Cobly, however, more people now have Bibles, including women and schoolchildren, since a mission organisation distributed free Bibles in 2005. In Zambia, Kirsch (2008: 102) shows that sermons are only considered unquestionably scriptural if the pastor holds a Bible while preaching. Gifford points out that for African Pentecostals, the pastor can be seen as an “Effector of Scripture” (2008a: 214) who demonstrates a good and successful Christian life thanks to scriptural blessing.

The association of a thing as a possession, rather than a commodity, with a religious expert is reminiscent of a shrine entity and its priest. Consequently, many people, especially if they are not practicing Christians, make a direct link between the Bible and a shrine entity, as both need a priest or pastor for their proper operation (cf. Kirsch 2008: 137). Moutouama, who is responsible for his home-stead’s shrine entity, recognises that “even though there are many copies of the Bible, they are always God’s book... *Uwienu* [God and his book] is similar to a *ditenwende* [shrine entity]” (interview, 27 Jan. 2011). He goes on to explain that both God and shrine entities do not like bad things. In the same line of argument, Douté, who used to attend a church but was recently chosen as the new priest for his community’s shrine entity, compares God’s book and shrine entities:

They have things in common. Our parents told me that they have things in common. Our parents told me that if you killed someone God will not want to see you in his house. A *ditenwende* [shrine entity] too, if you kill someone it won’t want to see you anymore (interview, 10 Feb. 2011).

Albert, who owns a Tigare shrine, and is also a baptised and confirmed Catholic, has no problem with considering himself a Christian who is also a shrine owner since for him the work of the two is identical (interview, 5 Feb. 2011). At the same time, however, those in charge of shrines admit that there are some differences, since the Bible, unlike shrine entities, does not require offerings.

Christians, on the other hand, especially if they come from a Protestant background, categorically deny such a direct equation between the Bible and shrine entities. For most of them shrine entities have come to be associated with the devil. In spite of this diabolising discourse on shrine entities, the idea of the Bible as shrine entity is not far from the mind of Christians. The carpenter Daniel states with a twinkle in his eyes: “I have a New Testament. It’s my fetish” (interview in

French, 14 Feb. 2011). More telling is how two older and illiterate Christian women make use of the Bible. For them, following the transmaterial presencing principle, the materiality of the book itself becomes identified with the agency that gives it power, while the writing inside remains inaccessible to them (Horsfield and Asamoah-Gyadu 2011: 188; H. W. Turner 1978: 43). The women said:

God's book is powerful. ... I can't read, but when I have God's book and dreams disturb me and I don't know what to do during the night, you need to take God's book and put it on your head. You will sleep peacefully and you won't dream anymore (interview with Céline, 11 Feb. 2011).

Look at this book [the Bible]. You have to carry it, ... even if you haven't been to school. I don't know how to read. I don't know how to hold a book, but I can pray and ask my father for what I need and you will see [know] that the *mtakime* will descend (interview with Nanhonga, 21 Feb. 2011).

They relationally identify the *mtakime* (identity) with the materiality of the book as its body. The Bible can thus become transmaterial, even though most Christians are unwilling to make the equation explicit.

The actual material presence of a Bible, then, is important and quite a few people who show some affinity between the Bible and shrine entities also claim that the book is central to a church service. You cannot really hold a service without a Bible. In a similar way, it is unthinkable to present an offering to a shrine entity without the presence of a transmaterial stone. It seems, then, that through transmaterial presencing the Bible comes to function as a transmaterial being similar to shrine entities and ancestors. Its physical and transmaterial presence is needed for communication between Christians and God. This raises the question of what kind of being the Bible is identified with through its *mtakime* and *kebodike*.

Those who have some understanding and interest in Christianity, but do not practice it, including a son of a Tigare shrine owner, clearly see the Bible as a kind of transmaterial being similar to a stone entity. Rather than providing a link to God, as shrine entities usually do, however, some identify the Bible with God himself. For Mathieu, a middle-aged man, who used to attend a church for a while, "the *mtakime* of the book ... and God's book are together" (interview, 25 Jan. 2011), thereby identifying God himself with his book. Julianne, a new Chris-

tian, makes this claim more explicit: “God’s book is together with the *kebodike* of God. God’s book is together with God himself and with his *kebodike*” (interview, 7 Feb. 2011). Such direct access to God remains suspect for some. Issifou, the only Muslim participant in my research, for whom both the Bible and the Quran are “God’s book”, explains in an interview (30 May 2011) that you should learn about God and ask him for help by reading his book. Alphonse, an older Christian who has never been to school, reinforces Issifou’s verdict by explaining its mediating role: “If there were no book of God, people couldn’t know... God’s power and worship him, and know that he’s the one who has created all things” (interview, 6 Jan. 2011).

Many Christians who have received church teaching that has its origin in Euro-American theology claim that the Bible is inspired by God. Pierre, the retired pastor, states: “It’s the spirit¹⁹ that has pushed people to write. This spirit hasn’t gone away, it’s here. The word of God is made of words that come from the spirit. The Bible has God’s spirit” (interview in French, 2 Mar. 2011). In this sense the Bible becomes identified with *Uwien’ takime*, God’s identity or, as Protestants translate it, the Holy Spirit.

The *mtakime* and *kebodike* of God’s book thus become identical to either God himself or some form of his *mtakime*. Thanks to the Bible’s *mtakime*, the book gains a fluctuating life and becomes part of the world of agentive relationality, thereby providing the possibility that somebody can have the *mtakime* of God’s book, as is the case for other things and transmaterial beings. People who have the *mtakime* of God’s book have a special relationship with it. This manifests itself in their calmness and helpfulness towards others. They do not criticise others and always behave in an exemplary way. For some they are closer to God, know the Bible by heart and freely quote from it. “When you meet somebody on a path who has the *mtakime* of God’s book”, Philippe, an older farmer, explains, “you will know that this person is like God” (interview, 3 Feb. 2011). For others, those who have the *mtakime* of God’s book are renowned for their preaching abilities and for their knowledge of the Bible. Emmanuel, who has a Catholic background, summarises it aptly:

¹⁹ Pierre used the French word *esprit*, which Protestants translate as *mtakime*.

those who have the *mtakime* of God's book are like Fathers or priests and also pastors. They can say that they are closer to *Uwienu* [God] and to those who have done advanced studies. They are the ones who are really close to the *mtakime* of God's book (interview, 7 Feb. 2011; cf. Gifford 2008a: 214).

Innocent, a young Christian literacy teacher, stresses:

Somebody who can stand up to read God's book and explain it clearly can have the *mtakime* of the book. But another person, who has gone to school and understands French well can't necessarily stand up and explain God's book. When he reads the book and wants to explain it, he does it badly and jumps pages (interview, 28 Jan. 2011).

The *mtakime*, after all, is something that is God-given and usually people are not considered to have much choice in the *mtakime* they receive.

For most people of the Commune of Cobly, whether Christian or not, the Bible has become an agentive and powerful thing that is alive through the presence of *mtakime* and *kebodike*. *Uwienu* (God) has now become intricately associated with his book to the extent that it becomes identical to him or to his *mtakime* (the Holy Spirit). This is undoubtedly why Tandjomè, even though she is not a Christian, emphasised its importance when she stated that we would all die without God's book (see above). For her, it is enough to have a few Bibles present in the village, as their *mtakime* is part of the distributed agency of which she is a part herself. The old man Kombètto, who has never been to church, explains how he feels he can benefit from the presence of Christians:

The one who follows God [the Christian]... is with God's *mtakime*. The one who doesn't follow God [the non-Christian] also follows God's *mtakime*. ... We [who don't follow God] are behind the one who follows God so that we can be strong (interview, 4 Jan. 2011).

For both shrine entities and the Bible to be effective by demonstrating a powerful life and *mtakime*, it is sufficient that at least some in the community have and actively use them, while all the others can indirectly benefit from them through their *mtakime* that is part of the world of agentive relationality. I conclude that especially for people who largely employ what I have described as the transmaterial presencing principle, God's book comes to be understood as having

the fluctuating life of a transmaterial being similar to shrine entities and ancestors.

Transmaterial presencing, as I have described it so far, is not the only principle that people in the Commune of Cobly apply. Recent decades have indicated an increasing ontological differentiation that manifests itself in how humans relate to things and animals. This also leads to changes in the dynamics of spirit and matter. In the coming sections I describe and analyse this observable ontological differentiation in terms of presencing principles and processes, as well as the semiotification of life.

Ontological Differentiation in Human-Animal-Thing Relations

While a significant number of research participants relationally engage with things as transmaterial entities, some doubt that things can in fact be alive. Colette, for example, a woman who has recently started to attend church, explains: “I don’t know if a knife or a calabash have *mtakimε*. I think that you need to make them, ... you simply make it. How could you make *mtakimε*? I don’t see how things could have *mtakimε*” (interview, 30 May 2011). Even a few old men and owners of shrine entities who are generally sceptical towards new things have started to doubt the life of things, thereby denying the possibility of humans giving part of their *mtakimε* to the things they make.

In more general terms, people who follow such trajectories of modernity, only ascribe life to animate beings that breathe, move and communicate with humans, as several educated people tried to define it (interviews, Jan.-May 2011). For these people, although inanimate things lose their life, they still retain their purpose and with it the memory of their previously clearly defined agency. But their agency is steadily fading and, as a result, the way people talk about things seems to be changing too. Especially for the younger and more educated generation things do not die anymore, they break and can sometimes be repaired. For them, things lose their *mtakimε* that their makers formerly invested in them and that provided them agency.

These examples indicate that there is a change in ontology, which I prefer to describe as an ontological differentiation that stems from doubting the life of

things. This is in many ways a subtle but complex process that is difficult to describe in ethnographic terms, especially since there is no relevant historical or comparative material. This means that I do not know whether doubting the life of man-made things is a recent phenomenon, or whether some people have always questioned their ontology.

Judged by today's situation, doubting the life of things finds its most advanced expression among those who have attained the educational level of the *baccalauréat* or beyond. Such people do not even find it necessary to justify their views and may smirk at those who maintain transmaterial notions of life. Christianity, as lived in the Commune of Coby, also promotes this trend in a way that seems similar to that of higher education. Although Christianity is usually associated with such developments, it does not prescribe it, and in villages surrounding Coby there are a few practicing Christians who retain strong notions of transmateriality and consider that all things are alive. Since there is an observable correlation between ontological differentiation and higher education, as well as Christianity at least to some extent, it becomes inevitable to link ontological differentiation to the question of modernity and the bundle of processes that go with it (see Chapter 1).

The observable trend that some people do not attribute *kebodike* and *mtakime* (or, in other words, life) to man-made things and other seemingly inanimate objects is reminiscent of what Bruno Latour (1993) calls purification. According to him, the most foundational aspect of this process is that it leads to the creation of “two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other” (1993: 10-11). Latour considers purification as the overarching goal of modernity. Indeed, as I have argued in Chapter 1, today's Commune of Coby has never existed outside modernity and it therefore seems likely that transmaterial life as I have described it so far is affected by the bundle of processes, including purification, that characterise modernity, most notably in its colonial orientation.

An important process that I count as part of purification is the differentiation between the secular and the religious, since the secular “works through a series of particular oppositions” (Asad 2003: 25; see also Keane 2007: 106; Gorski and Altınordu 2008: 61). The increasing importance of the secular as a result of puri-

fyng processes affects how material things are understood and how they are thought to exist in the world (Asad 2003: 15; Cannell 2010: 86), this in turn leads to crucial changes that I can describe through shifts in the interplay between the two different presencing principles.

In trying to come to terms with the differentiation of the secular as a purifying process, Talal Asad (2003: 99) proposes to study the notion of agency. He (2003: 21-66) intimates that shifts in agency are best looked at through the three aspects of history, man and nature, since they are the most likely to be influenced by the differentiation of the secular. These aspects are thus worthy of attention as they make a more nuanced picture of the purifying processes feasible.

The first of Asad's criteria concerns history. The most important historical event in the Commune of Cobly, as I show in Chapter 1, was the temporal rupture caused by the arrival of Europeans, dividing time into the old times (*ubwɔɔyɔ*) and the new times (*upaanu*). It is impossible to know with certainty how agency was understood in precolonial times, but judged by today's tendency of many for transmateriality as outlined above, agency must have been distributed in the world of agentive relationality in such a way that people did not differentiate between the secular and the religious.

Upaanu marks the arrival of Europeans, who have often been perceived as highly agentive beings whose *mtakimɛ* is able to produce and infuse powerful technology, who brought secular education and the nation state, but also *la religion*, as Christianity is often referred to in the Cobly area. Both colonial administrators and missionaries came from a cultural background in which the idea of the secular had led to the formation of political secularism. It is not surprising that missionaries, apart from standing for the religious, also "come across sounding like the ultimate secular modernists", to borrow the words Amy Stambach (2009: 139) uses specifically for contemporary conservative American missionaries in Kenya. In spite of this secularising trend inherent in mission, many people today understand this new white power largely in religious terms and by claiming that the whites are closer to God (see also Chapter 4). While colonial modernity made it *possible* to talk of the secular as being set apart from the religious, a clear differentiation of the two notions, as known from European or American secularism (see, e.g., Casanova 2006), does not necessarily follow from this.

An increasingly active participation in the institutions of church and school, as well as in the secular nation state, means that people in the Commune of Coby are adopting a discourse of linear history that centres on Europe (T. Mitchell 2000) and that “has become the privileged measure of all time” (Asad 2003: 43). Linear history is important in the secular nation state that celebrates its history of independence and succession of elected presidents. Through its administration, the secular state also promotes a discourse of linear history, namely by issuing birth and death certificates, identity and electoral cards, as well as school and university diplomas. With this trend, the New Year that celebrates the passing of time has become one of the most important festivals in the Coby area.

The discourse on history in colonial modernity, however, retains at least some of its religious background. History, especially in its temporally linear conception, was never stripped of its teleological Christian heritage that is linked to Christianity’s eschatology and sometimes millennialism (cf. Engelke 2009: 157; R. Marshall 2009: 56; Noble 1999 [1997]: 21-22; Robbins 2004a). Its teleology was recast as “progress” and continues to be present in ideas about modernisation and in the development industry. For people in the Commune of Coby, this means that at least some become more and more aware that they can shape history and that they feel they have a responsibility in doing so (Asad 2003: 192-193). This necessarily leads to shifts in the way people perceive agency as directly linked to the distribution of *kebodike* and *mtakime* throughout everything that is considered alive in a world of agentive relationality.

Having discussed history I now look at man and nature, Asad’s remaining two categories. While some trajectories of modernity remain little affected by processes of purification, other trajectories, especially those followed by more educated and Christianised people, are more likely to be impacted by it. In these trajectories of modernity, the twin notions of *kebodike* and *mtakime* that define both man and nature remain central, but especially the way they are transmaterially identified with things and animals change.

The ontological doubt and differentiation increasingly affects animals, as those who doubt that things can be alive also exclude animals from the human ontological zone (Asad 2003: 131; cf. Guthrie 1993: 87). Nobody I have talked to doubts that animals have *kebodike* (animating force) since animals display a vi-

tality that inanimate things do not. But when it comes to *mtakimε* (identity), some of the more educated people claim that animals cannot have it. They also start to doubt the possibility of reincarnation and hybridisation between humans and animals (S. Merz 2013). Thus, the relational permeability between humans and animals is replaced by boundaries that come to separate different categories of life.

One consequence of things and animals losing their identity is that the world becomes deprived of its relational aspect that has been characterised by the distributed agency of *mtakimε*. Its agentive relationality is being replaced by conceptual categories of humans, animals and things that are hierarchically ordered according to the diminishing agency attributed to their constituents. With a growing awareness and assertion of the self, humans maintain their *mtakimε* and *kebodike* and gain in importance at the expense of animals and things, adding a heightened anthropocentrism to anthropomorphism (cf. Bennett 2010b: 120; Guthrie 1993: 81-82, 160). The *mtakimε* of humans is freed from at least some of the earlier entanglement in the world of agentive relationality and becomes the main focus of agency. Humans become more self-responsible and self-aware in view of a more secularised nature. The fading life of things removes their prior agency and increasingly leaves them as part of a secular sphere of nature that becomes manipulated and exploited by the agency of humans. In practical terms this change hardly influences how people use knives to cut things, for example. When it comes to how knives and other things are treated, however, the prior respect accorded to all things alive is lost, which, in turn, facilitates and promotes their commoditisation.

During the last two decades, especially the town of Cobly has experienced a rapid increase in the commoditisation and monetisation of its economy, on which the growing elite with salaried jobs relies ever more, and in which a growing number of people actively participate. As a result, things not only lose their life and agency, they are also commoditised, a process that ascribes them monetary value, thereby further dehumanising them (Hoskins 2006: 75). Things that have become commodities are no longer linked to their makers, but are integrated into the economic circuits of local and global production, distribution and consumption (Appadurai 1986).

One of the most striking examples of this trend concerns meat. When I first arrived in Cibly in 1995, meat could only be bought from a Muslim butcher who offered beef once a week, if he was able to buy cattle. As the market for meat slowly developed, recent years saw a significant increase in local butchers, who are not necessarily Muslim. They mainly sell pork, which people favour over beef, on a daily basis, while a few have recently started to offer dog meat. Most meat animals, including chickens, come from villages around Cibly. Laurent, for example, explains how animals can be useful when they are sold: “Today, when you look at an animal, you know the importance of its life and suffering. And this can save you one day” (interview, 27 Jan. 2012).

More and more people like Laurent recognise that their need for money can be fairly easily met by selling animals. In doing so, they remove animals from being relationally entangled with themselves, for example by no longer using them for sacrifices or respecting a limited consumption of their meat. People are not particularly concerned whether the animals they sell have *kebodike* and *mtakime*; it is rather their actions vis-à-vis their animals that shapes the way they make them present. Danny Naveh and Nurit Bird-David (2014) argue that when the Nayaka of southern India recently adopted animal husbandry, they ceased to perceive those animals as co-persons, while the ones the Nayaka meet in the forest continue to be seen on more equal terms.

The cause of ontological differentiation, then, also lies in concrete actions that influence presencing processes. The move towards a monetary economy and the commoditisation of things and animals, directly affects how people presence the entities, which surround them, leading to things and animals that are exchanged against money being less likely to be presented as being alive. This, in turn, relationally removes and increasingly excludes them from the ontological zones of human beings as implied by Latour’s (1993) purification. The resulting sphere of nature that includes things and animals becomes essentially secular. Humans can now economically exploit animals and things without fearing the earlier threat of ritual sanctions that loomed for those who lacked respect towards life. This attitude is most marked among educated Christians who live in the town of Cibly and who have become the most enterprising and successful people in economic terms. This, in turn, at least experientially, validates their chosen religion and

provides fertile ground for the propagation of the prosperity gospel, namely “the belief that divinely authored prosperity is an index of personal salvation” (N. Haynes 2012: 126). This transnational theological orientation has become particularly significant as part of the Pentecostalisation of West African Christianity (Coleman 2000; Gifford 2004; N. Haynes 2012; R. Marshall 2009: 177-184; Marshall-Fratani 2001; B. Meyer 2002, 2007) and is slowly gaining prominence most notably in the *Église Évangélique des Assemblées de Dieu*. At least in Cibly, then, it is impossible to talk of “secularisation” as a move from the religious towards the secular. I rather see it as a growing differentiation of the secular from the religious.

The ontological differentiation between humans, animals and things leads to humans increasingly becoming the focus of agency. Humans, however, are not the only beings whose *mtakime* continues to be entangled in the relationality of agency. Transmaterial beings, whether shrine entities or the Bible, too, are affected in how their material existence is viewed when they encounter purification.

Transmaterial Beings and the Fear of Matter

Early missionaries to West Africa quickly met with practices they identified as “fetishistic”, “animistic” or, in a more biblical sense, as “idol worship”. These practices were troubling as they located agency in the inanimate objects of transmaterial beings and thereby disturbed the missionaries’ conceptual categories not only in a moral, but also a spiritual and material sense (Keane 1997: 4, 2007: 6-7, 179-181; B. Meyer 2010b). Most missionaries especially of Evangelical and Pentecostal orientation took local beliefs seriously and saw the devil and demons at work behind the material forms they encountered (cf. Priest, Campbell and Mullen 1995; B. Meyer 1997: 319, 1999b, 2010b; Robbins 2004a: 103). Such views culminated in the process of diabolisation that can be seen as a moral and religious purification and that necessitates both accepting the Christian God and his moral counterpart, the devil (Fancello 2008; Hackett 2003; Laurent 2003; J. Merz 2008; B. Meyer 1998a, 1999b; Pype 2012). In fact, the devil “is good to think with” (B. Meyer 1999b: 111) even beyond the church, especially in times that are ambivalent through continuous change. The image of the devil helps to focus evil on a single entity thereby rendering evil more concrete and easier to identify. In the Commune of Cibly the devil is now associated with a malicious

Commune of Cobly the devil is now associated with a malicious bush being called *disenpode* who seems to have been of marginal importance in the past. Nowadays, all segments of the population have accepted diabolisation at least to some extent and talk about *disenpode*. For some *disenpode* is an entity that collaborates with other entities, such as witches and shrines and ultimately seeks to disturb life. For those who are more Christianised, *disenpode* becomes God's opponent and source of evil and is thus often directly held responsible for the deeds of demons, witches and other malcontents (J. Merz 2008: 208, 211).

For Protestants and other Christians of a reformed persuasion more generally, matter is inherently suspect – even feared (Pels 2008; Spyer 1998: 8-9) – especially when it is discursively separated from the spiritual and thus secularised. Victor Buchli (2010) shows how Christ, and by extension the Eucharist, became the sole admissible prototype of the material that can make the divine present without being considered idolatrous. Other material manifestations of immateriality, however, became spiritually suspect, since there is the constant danger that the material might come to dominate over the spiritual. Accordingly, Protestants discourage, and more importantly sometimes even destroy, the material.

Protestantism sees itself above all as a religion of the immaterial Word that should bring change to the individuals' inner being (Coleman 2000: 143-144; Keane 2007; Malley 2004). Generally, the material presence of the Bible as a book is often downplayed and does not feature in theological discussions (cf. Engelke 2007: 21). The Friday Masowe apostolics of Zimbabwe take this attitude to an extreme by rejecting the Bible together with other things such as churches, altars or images. For them the materiality of the Bible poses a threat to an immediate and immaterial, or "live and direct", faith and should therefore be spurned (Engelke 2007, 2009: 166-168). In this line of practice that goes back to the iconoclasm of the Reformation, Protestant missionaries have often tried to save people from the danger of misrepresentation (Engelke 2007: 21) and aimed to free people from "false relations to things" (Keane 2003: 411).

Among the *Assemblées de Dieu* of West Africa it has become fairly common practice to destroy or "burn the fetishes" as part of true conversion and as a material statement of breaking with the past (Laurent 2003: 88; see also Gullestad 2007: 271; R. Marshall 2009; Marshall-Fratani 1998: 285, 289; B. Meyer 1997:

319, 1998a). Newer Protestant churches, such as the *Église Ministère de Jésus Bénin* are less strong in advocating this practice, since they stress an inner change in their converts that should lead to a more voluntary abandonment of shrines in due time. The Catholics have a reputation of tolerating the continuing use of various shrines, but I have noticed clear iconoclastic tendencies in the local Catholic church as well.

Jack Goody (1997: 65) has argued that the practice of “burning the fetishes” may actually have been more acceptable to the peoples of the West African savannah than generally assumed. He refers to their ambivalence to depict the immaterial, which is often more important than the transitory material forms that identify them, as I have implied above. Indeed, one does not need to convert to Christianity to abandon shrine entities. These days a number of people in the Commune of Coby have become wary of shrine entities that constantly demand ceremonial attention but seem unable to deliver what their priests promise (see also Chapter 5). This loss of purpose is often coupled with many people now doubting the life of shrine entities and thus that they have *mtakime* and *kebodike*. There is even a significant and growing minority who no longer make use of their stone entities, as they no longer consider them to be helpful or powerful. But rather than destroying them, as Christians are encouraged to do, they abandon them, thereby severing their relationship with them and rendering them inefficacious. Since their material presence remains, people maintain the possibility to restart the relationship, should they consider this important at a future point. Reminiscent of Robin Horton’s intellectualist theory of conversion (1971, 1975a, 1975b), God becomes more important in *upaanu* (the new times) as people, regardless of their religious orientations, rely less and less on the shrine entities as their link with God.

This growing importance of God is linked to more general changes of how people in the Commune of Coby perceive God. I notice that people increasingly separate *uwienu ku n daani* (*uwienu* that gives light, the sun) from *Uwienu* (God), a move I consider to be the result of ontological differentiation and Christianity’s anti-material stance. While the link between God and the sun is weakening, however, an increasing number of people, including many Christians, now see God as being materially identified with his book (see above). By shifting the material

identification from the sun to a book, God becomes more tangible and accessible, as the Bible comes to serve increasingly as a transmaterial and direct point of contact with God. This shift means a lessening need for mediation with a distant and inaccessible *Uwienu*, often through ancestors or shrine entities. This raises the question of what happens to the shrine entities' *kebodike* and *mtakime* when they are destroyed or abandoned. To answer such questions, I turn to missionaries' use of language in their attempt to share the Gospel and gain converts.

The Semiotification of Transmaterial Beings

The first missionaries who came to the Commune of Cobly during the late 1940s and early 1950s relied on local languages to preach and evangelise (cf. Sanneh 2009: 193), as there were only a few people who knew French. For this to happen, French religious concepts needed to be interpreted into the local languages. The Mbelime speakers who interpreted these notions were probably not aware of explicit translation strategies, as translation does not seem to have happened systematically or on the basis of well-informed studies (cf. Keane 2007: 132; B. Meyer 1999b: 54-82). As a result, today's Protestants interpret *kebodike* (animating force) as "soul" and *mtakime* (identity) as "spirit". The Catholics do it the other way round, but seem to be less successful in promoting their interpretation.²⁰ Accordingly, the most frequent translation of *mtakime* among Christians and non-Christians alike has become "spirit" or *esprit* in French. Since an ecumenical translation of the New Testament into Mbelime only started in 2012, there is not yet a common solution to most translation issues, such as how to translate spirit and soul.

The most commonly used French Bible (Louis Segond) uses *esprit* not only for a person's spirit, but also for the Holy Spirit (*Saint-Esprit*) and for demons (*esprits impurs*, in popular discourse also known as *mauvais esprits*). In all these instances, Protestants use *mtakime* (and Catholics *kebodike*) for interpretation, as there was

²⁰ I have not been able to establish why this should be the case. Apart from seeing this development as totally arbitrary, it is also possible that Catholics were more interested in translation, since they are known to have been generally more interested in studying language (see Chapter 1). On this basis it could be imagined that for Catholic missionaries *mtakime* captured the idea of a soul better since it includes the person's character. More generally, the apparent confusion is less radical than it appears at first sight, since *kebodike* and *mtakime* are co-dependent and both include aspects that Christians associate with both spirit and soul.

no general word for “spirit” or “spirit being” in Mbelime. Focusing on the more widespread Protestant interpretations, *mtakime* can be further qualified as *mtakitieme* (“bad” *mtakime*) and *mtakisaame* (“good” *mtakime*) thereby describing the character and morality of people. A witch, for example, is widely assumed to have bad *mtakime*.²¹ In Protestant parlance, *mtakitieme* is used for “bad spirit” or “demon” (cf. B. Meyer 1999b: 76-77; Swanson 1985: 163), while *mtakisaame* becomes “good spirit”, a word that is used for the Holy Spirit, sometimes also called *uwien’ takime* (God’s spirit). While much of the original sense of *mtakime* is thus maintained, the new uses and contexts in which these words are employed inevitably affect their meaning (cf. B. Meyer 1999b: 81-82). Maybe more importantly, these shifts in meaning increasingly influence how Christians deal and interact with the changing entities that populate their world, thereby also influencing presencing practices.

The way especially the more Christianised and Protestant research participants talk in daily life and during the interviews indicates that *mtakime* is becoming more and more a conscious being in its own right that can exist independently of a body. Accordingly, *mtakime* is no longer solely a necessary component of life; it is also becoming an entity of life itself, even though it may need *kebodike* to accompany it. *Mtakime* still relates to other *mtakime* and regulates the relationships of humans among themselves, and also with entities, such as the *siyawesi* bush beings, shrines or the new *mtakitieme* (bad spirit, demon) and *mtakisaame* (good spirit, Holy Spirit). The relational sense of *mtakime*, however, as “being relation” (Piot 1999: 18) and as sharing in the flow of *mtakime* and life more generally diminishes. *Mtakime* is increasingly being deprived of its previously necessary relational existence and material form, and its unique transmaterial characteristics or purpose is morphing into a distinct consciousness, if not a personality. The agency of *mtakime* that previously distributed its presence in inanimate things now becomes focalised and concentrated in beings, be they humans or spirits, which are now ontologically differentiated from things.

This ontological differentiation ultimately leads to a possible distinction between spirit and matter. While the process of spiritualisation leads to the produc-

²¹ I do not know whether the distinction between good and bad *mtakime* is recent or whether it predates colonialism.

tion of spirits, materialisation results in things becoming more inanimate and material (Pels 1998b). In the case of the Commune of Coby, the processes of spiritualisation and materialisation means that the close identification between the immaterial being and the material body of transmaterial entities is weakening. The final result is that the body and *mtakime* are split from each other, leading to a separation of spirit and matter. For example, several people now think *mtakime* and *kebodike* leave a body immediately after death and do not need to wait until the flesh has decomposed (S. Merz 2013: 41). When it comes to the new class of demons (*mtakitieme*) the church leader, David, asserts: “An evil spirit doesn’t have a house. It roams around and will always return to where people do sacrifices” (interview in French, 17 Feb. 2012). Practically speaking, such views are directly based on how Christians relate to spirits. Especially Pentecostals learn to rebuke demons to the extent of performing exorcisms that should separate a spirit from its illicit possession of matter.

This kind of purification and ontological differentiation goes well beyond Christianity. The shrines of Tigare and Nkunde that specialise in witch-hunting (see Chapter 1) are more material than their stone counterparts. Their *mtakime* (spirit) is not identical to the materiality of the shrine object and acts more independently of it. Before any ritual activity can happen, the owner of a Tigare or Nkunde shrine summons the spirit by ringing a bell, calling its name and requesting its presence at the shrine. Such ritual action is more elaborate as compared to ancestors or stone entities, which people address directly without summoning them (Huber 1973), as they are identified with the stone or shrine. This indicates that Tigare and Nkunde make a more significant distinction between spirit and matter as compared to transmaterial beings, thereby making it possible to talk about them in more semiotic terms.

During the regular public ceremonies at Tigare and Nkunde shrines, women and sometimes men can be afflicted by the shrine’s *mtakime*, which manifests itself in possession. This can happen either as a punishment of an adept who has broken the shrine’s laws, or as a blessing for the righteous whom the *mtakime* then uses to talk to other people as a form of divination and revelation of unseen things. Such possession manifests itself in a sudden change in the person’s behaviour, which sometimes includes speaking with a different voice, as it is typical of the kind of

intrusive or executive possession known from the coastal areas of West Africa, where both Tigare and Nkunde came from (Cohen 2008; Kramer 1993; Parker 2006; Rosenthal 1998). These symptoms are different to the ones people describe for those who are beaten or pursued by *siyawesi* bush beings, where different entities composed of spirit and matter interact with each other. As a result of the activities at Tigare and Nkunde shrines, there are now some people who accept that spirits (*mtakimε*) can freely change their abode and also temporarily enter, and especially in the case of Nkunde, speak through people.

Tigare and Nkunde shrines as well as shrine entities and transmaterial beings, which people spiritualise and materialise, demonstrate a reduced transmateriality, since it becomes possible to identify them no longer as entities, but as comprising of spirit and matter. The weakening relationship between the material shrine and immaterial entity means that shrine entities are better described in terms of semi-otics. The material aspect of a shrine entity, viewed through a Peircean slant, becomes a shrine that now symbolises a disembodied spirit that may be associated with it and be either present or absent. Furthermore, a spirit is no longer necessarily limited to its former body of a stone, but has a more arbitrary and conventional relationship to it, since it can increasingly move between different material objects and, more importantly, also enter people. This means that it becomes possible to use semiotics to analyse shrines and spirits. I believe that the reason that this becomes possible is that people begin to use a semiotic principle for their presencing, at least to some extent, leading to shrine entities and other transmaterial beings becoming “semiotified”.

Semiotification is a process that has never been identified in anthropology, since, as far as I am aware, nobody in the discipline has recognised the need to go beyond semiotics. By introducing semiotification as a process I propose that it is more foundational to modernity, especially in its colonial orientation, than Latour’s (1993) purification. Semiotification is also elementary to the various processes identified so far, such as ontological differentiation, materialisation and spiritualisation, as well as the differentiation of the religious and the secular.

The process of semiotification that I have described so far has significant implications also for presencing processes. As already noted, presencing principles describe people’s assumptions concerning the nature of the entities they experi-

ence, and establish how various entities function and shape the world through their actions and interactions. Identifying a semiotic presencing principle does not mean that transmaterial presencing ceases to be relevant. In the Commune of Coby, for example, the most educated, Christians and Tigare and Nkunde owners can be described as using semiotic presencing more often and more thoroughly than other people. I contend that the two presencing principles can both complement and sometimes even contradict each other, with one or the other coming into focus in different circumstances. Naveh and Bird-David (2014) imply that Nayaka interact differently with domestic and wild animals and plants according to their counterparts' utility, leading to different ontological views. In terms of presencing, I can account for this by people reconfiguring the interplay between the transmaterial and semiotic presencing principles for different situations. Presencing, then, can be described through a constant reconfiguration of the interplay of principles that alters how people relate to other people, things and animals, and how they experience and live their lives.

Thus the Christian view of spirits or demons and the spirit possession of Tigare and Nkunde are expressions of semiotification. This results in a more symbolic and secular materiality, while transmaterial presencing continues to play at least a certain role. It is interesting to note that this development makes it possible to speak in terms of animism, namely as “a spirit made to reside *in* matter” (Pels 1998b: 94, emphasis in original; see also Ellen 1988: 214). Accordingly, those who draw more on semiotic presencing tend to see material bodies as lifeless and symbolic objects that have the potential to serve as abodes to disembodied and immaterial spirits. The semiotifying world is increasingly characterised by categorised and demarcated entities, which rely on other entities for their survival and prosperity. Consequently, human beings, animals, things and spirits no longer relationally share in the distributed life through their *mtakime*. To the conceptual categories of humans, animals and lifeless things a new one is being added, namely that of disembodied spirits.

I now return to God's book to see how the spiritualisation and materialisation of transmaterial beings into inanimate shrines and spirits impacts how it is understood. This necessitates that I discuss the place of “words” and how they are perceived.

The Book and the Word

Christians who have had advanced schooling now often try to separate the materiality of the Bible from the Holy Spirit, God and the words contained in the book, as Kirsch (2008: 138) has shown for Zambia. Bernard, who has served as an elder for the *Assemblées de Dieu*, explains: “The Bible itself has no power. It’s only assembled papers. But the words that are in it are powerful” (interview in French, 21 Feb. 2011). Similarly, the church leader David, who has never been to school, elaborates:

You hold the Bible in your hands and you go wherever you want. The Bible can’t work. Nothing. Because the spirit [*mtakime*] that God wants to send to make the Bible work can’t come. The Bible will be useless and just like any normal book. But if you respect the Bible and believe in what is written in it, and you pray to God, he will provide (interview in French, 15 Feb. 2011).

The Bible, according to Bernard and David, has been subjected to the process of materialisation and thus becomes a symbolic object similar to what is happening with shrines. Accordingly, as is typical of Protestant Christianity, the material importance of the book is downplayed and shifted to immaterial words, whether written in the book or spoken in prayer (cf. Engelke 2009: 151). While this seems at first sight to confirm the semiotic and modern tendency to oppose matter and words (Appadurai 1986: 4), there are crucial similarities between the two. According to Keane (2007: 20) semiotic ideology offers a frame that covers both words and things, since, he argues,

how people handle and value material goods may be implicated in how they use and interpret words, and vice versa, reflecting certain underlying assumptions about the world and the beings that inhabit it (Keane 2003: 410; see also Coleman 1996).

Following this argument I observe that people in the Commune of Cobly, whose involvement in the world can be mainly characterised through the trans-material presencing principle, anthropomorphise and ascribe life to words as they do to things. Thomas, a Christian farmer, explains this view by saying that words live like humans and that they have *mtakime* and *kebodike* (interview, 17 Jun. 2011). As with things, people can have the *mtakime* of words, which means that

they have a special relationship and ability with words and others easily accept what they say. Words, humans and things, are all part of the world of agitive relationality and they have agency in its relational and distributed sense. Spoken words that hurt somebody, the old man Kombiénou claims succinctly, “can kill” (interview, 20 Jun. 2011).

Even though for semioticians words are clear cases of symbols in Peirce’s sense, at least some people of the Commune of Cobly view them in terms of transmateriality by resisting to presence them as structured signs. Words, then, become transmaterial entities and the names of things and people cease to be arbitrary, lumping words together with other beings and things that are alive. Words, however, do not only function as inalienable names. Namboni (interview, 15 Jun. 2011), who owns an Nkunde shrine, affirms the life of words. According to him, words come from God who has created them and who uses them to communicate with humans. He thus ascribes to words a kind of mediating role between different aspects of distributed agency, while at the same time they are part of *mtakime* as understood as distributed agency.

Through semiotification words can be stripped of their life as it can happen with things. But words cling to life more than things, as there are some people who hold to the notion that words can have life while negating that things can be alive. For François, an educated and urban Christian, normal words have lost their lives but words linked to the Bible remain alive:

... the words that the pastor pronounces when he preaches... can touch the heart and this is why they have spirit and soul. Maybe it’s also when somebody reads the Bible that its words can have spirit. But normal words don’t have spirit (interview in French, 18 Feb. 2011).

While the Bible becomes a symbolic object through materialisation, its words can remain transmaterial and continue to live as entities that are identified with the Holy Spirit or God. These words no longer have agency from their *mtakime*, but now gain it through their identification with God and the Holy Spirit. The words of the Bible, several Christians explained, were spoken or inspired by God and then written down by men. Accordingly, the importance is not simply to own a Bible, but to read it, or, for those who are illiterate, listen to it being read (Bielo 2008; Engelke 2009; Malley 2004). Only then can the Bible fulfil its purpose and

be presented as being alive. Marthe, a committed Christian and wife of a church leader, states: “When they read [God’s book] and you follow its words you’ll have power and strength” (interview, 3 Jan. 2011). Yves, a Catholic and son of a Tigare owner, elucidates: “It’s when you preach the Word of God that the *mtakime* [spirit] descends and enters people” (interview, 17 Feb. 2011), expressing a view reminiscent to the one of Ghanaian Pentecostals (B. Meyer 1999b: 136).

For such Christians, God’s *mtakime* has been separated from the materiality of the Bible and symbolically associated with the immaterial words it contains. The words in turn become identified with the Holy Spirit and God, and become alive by reading them. The result is the “Word of God”, a new kind of transmaterial being whose words identify God. God’s presence in his Word means also a divine agency that can act, be it on the surroundings of Christians or in them. In this sense, reading the Word of God means internalising it and gaining strength from it by adding some of God’s *mtakime* (spirit) to one’s own *mtakime*.

The idea of internalising the Word of God is widespread in Christianity (Coleman 2000: 127-131, 171) and in Islam. Both the Quran and Bible verses are commonly learnt by heart and sometimes even physically drunk (Behrend 2003: 139; El-Tom 1985; Horsfield and Asamoah-Gyadu 2011: 187; Künzler 2007: 34; Soares 2007: 209). Internalising the Word of God finds its most striking expression in some people, especially pastors, who can have the *mtakime* of God’s book, thereby literally embodying the Word of God (see above, cf. Coleman 2006: 168; Harding 1987: 174). To have the *mtakime* (spirit, identity) of God’s book means to have part of God’s Word inside the body.

The Word of God as a transmaterial being is so powerful that the materiality of the book never entirely loses its transmateriality, even if it largely becomes a symbolic object in a semiotified sense. The church leader, David, seemingly contradicts his earlier statement (see above): “If someone prays, it will work much better if he has a Bible. He can communicate with his Bible and his prayer will be multiplied. The Bible will add to his prayers” (interview in French, 15 Feb. 2011). Monique, an urban Christian seamstress, hesitatingly relates: “I heard somewhere that someone spoke with the Bible in his hands and an evil thing was present. The thing was afraid of the Bible and went away. It’s a story” (interview in French, 21 Feb. 2011). David and Monique follow a common trend in Christianity that ob-

justifies words, whether in humans, things or media (Coleman 1996; McDannell 1995). It is fairly common for people to carry a Bible during trips and to place it under the pillow at night to ward off evil – a practice that goes back to Augustine of Hippo – and people sometimes even use it in healing or deliverance ceremonies (Amewowo 1986: 19-20; Behrend 2003: 135-137; Engelke 2007: 20; Horsfield and Asamoah-Gyadu 2011: 177, 186-187; Larsen 2011: 110; Ndung'u 2000: 243-244; Ukpong 2000: 587).

Such a transmaterial use of the Bible is not limited to Africa, but has a long history in Christianity. Since the fourth century, the Bible has been significant as a material object. It became the most important artefact in medieval times and needed to be protected against damage and misuse (Horsfield and Asamoah-Gyadu 2011: 185). The Bible has never lost its transmaterial importance, not even in the Protestant strongholds of Europe and America. In many homes of Victorian America, the Bible was present as a sacred object (McDannell 1995: 67-102), to the extent that some people “regard it much as the savage does his fetish. It is to them a source of mysterious power and authority, and an object of superstitious veneration” (Moxom 1900: 344). On this basis it is not surprising that Thomas Huxley, who introduced agnosticism, popularised the word “bibliolatry” (Larsen 2011: 195-218; J. L. Marsh 1991).

David Morgan reports that during World War II American soldiers appreciated the Bible for its “talismanic and protective power” (1998: 172). More recently, Simon Coleman has observed that for adherents of the Faith movement in Sweden the “Bible itself can act as a kind of talisman, a ‘spiritual weapon’... to be carried with them wherever they go” (1996: 112). Vincent Crapanzano (2000: 4, 54-56) elaborates that for contemporary Conservative American Protestants the physical presence of the Bible is important and its physical condition needs to indicate that it is read, to the extent that “the materiality of the Bible [becomes the] presence of the divine – not representation, but presence; not sign, but actuality” (Engelke 2007: 22).

In spite of the materialised, spiritualised and semiotic rhetoric of Christianity (cf. Harding 1987: 167-168), then, transmateriality continues to be relevant not only in Cobly, but also in America and Europe. As a result, at least for those who view the Bible as the Word of God, the book is not only a material object that

submits to the principles of secular semiotics. In addition, the Bible also retains a transmaterial component that escapes semiotics, making the Word of God directly and experientially accessible. This seeming contradiction can be resolved through the fragmentary and contradictory nature of the interplay of different presencing principles, which can be used simultaneously to varying degrees to describe people's presencing behaviour. It does not seem uncommon that people use semiotic and transmaterial presencing at the same time. Indeed, Asad (2003: 9) and Brian Malley (2004: 111) imply that among contemporary Christians, especially of evangelical persuasion, different presencing principles can be detected depending on the circumstances of Bible use (see also Chapter 3).

In concluding this section I return to the Commune of Cobly and more specifically to people, who mainly engage in transmaterial presencing and thus ascribe life also to seemingly inanimate things. For them, the transmateriality of the Bible as a book allows them to relate to the Word of God in a direct way, similarly to how they relate to other transmaterial beings, such as shrine entities. When people accept more semiotic notions as part of their presencing behaviour as well, they shift their transmaterial focus from the Bible as a book to the immaterial Word of God that can be contained in a book or, for some, even in humans.

The Proliferation of Spirits and Words

While the work of semiotification slowly but steadily takes its course in the Commune of Cobly by shaping the conceptual categories of humans, animals and things, Latour (1993) and Keane (2007) rightly insist that purification, a process I regard as being part of semiotification, can never completely succeed. They claim that purification always results in new hybrids that do not fit into the newly created categories. In today's Commune of Cobly such hybrids take on the shape of both spirits and words that retain some of the formerly distributed agency. The new disembodied spirits are human in the sense that their *mtakime* has personality and agency, but also retain a non-humanness that poses a constant threat to the humanness of people. Words that have agency, as typically found in God's book, no longer fit the category of things but remain thoroughly nonhuman. Like spirits, however, they have also gained a certain humanity through their agency. Indeed, there are many similarities between spirits and agentic words, which increas-

ingly become associated with the religious. Humans, animals and things, on the other hand, remain firmly anchored in this world and become associated more with the secular idea of nature. The increasing differentiation between the secular and the religious thus also promotes the production of hybrids, and like the overarching work of purification itself, the religious cannot be purged from the life of people (see, e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; Luhmann 2012; R. Marshall 2009; B. Meyer 1999b, 2004a, 2011a; H. L. Moore and Sanders 2001b; Piot 2010; Pype 2012; Robbins 2004b; R. Shaw 2002).

The main reason that purification, and by extension semiotification, can never completely succeed is twofold. Keane understands processes of signification as constantly relying on materiality to the point that purification “can never fully separate the material from the nonmaterial and stabilize the difference” (2007: 80). Even disembodied spirits continue to depend on secularised material objects in a symbolic way both by taking temporary abode in them and people, or they afflict people in other material ways. To keep spirits separated from material objects and people becomes a major preoccupation of Pentecostal Christians resulting in the need for repeated deliverance as their central purification practice. In this sense, Engelke rightly states that “religion cannot do without material culture” (2007: 224; cf. Morgan 2010a). Even Christianity in its Protestant and most puritan forms, which are marked by their suspicion of the material, remains inherently material (Coleman 1996; McDannell 1995; B. Meyer 1997; Morgan 2012). Furthermore, following Guthrie (1993: 201), the religious will persist since presencing processes always lead to some extent to anthropomorphic interpretations. In other words, humans, regardless of their background, continue to accord at least some transmaterial characteristics to material things, especially by interacting with and experiencing them as entities without dividing them into structured signs.

This indicates a diversification, differentiation and reconfiguration of the interplay of presencing principles, most notably through semiotic presencing becoming more important. At the same time, the transmaterial presencing principle loses ground, while continuing to exist simultaneously nonetheless. Such a reconfiguration necessarily affects the dynamics of spirit and matter by leading to increasing differentiation between the two.

Above I have claimed that until recently spirit possession was not known in the Coby area. The world of agentic relationality promotes interaction between different entities through their distributed *mtakime* and thus through relations of identity. Even anthropologists have often failed to come to terms with the intricacies of transmaterial beings and their relationship with humans. Hugo Huber, for example, states that the *siyawesi* bush beings are “spirits” that can “possess” people (1973: 387), while S. P. Blier goes even further by claiming that among Betammaribe communities “intruding deities and spirits... traumatize individuals by taking up residence in their bodies” (1987: 137), a statement that is not substantiated in any way by the Betammaribe’s most prolific and reliable ethnographer, Dominique Sewane (2001, 2002, 2003).

If even professional ethnographers fail to come to terms with the subtleties of transmaterial beings, then most missionaries have probably missed it completely. This is especially the case in the Atacora region, where I am not aware of any missionaries who have seriously engaged in ethnographic research. Indeed, Priest, *et al.* (1995: 11-12; cf. B. Meyer 1999b: 43) argue that missionaries have often accepted the beliefs of those they try to convert at face value and surprisingly unquestionably, albeit often in a materialised, spiritualised and demonised – and thus semiofified – form. They demonstrate that such uncritical views have impacted the global mission movement, especially in its Pentecostal forms. Since the 1980s, missionaries often use what they call “spiritual warfare” as part of evangelisation (Hackett 2003; B. Meyer 1999b: 171-174; Stambach 2009), especially if they feel that their message is not well received or seems to lack a direct impact. They understand “spiritual warfare” as a fight against the devil, demons and other spiritual powers through prayer and, if needed, deliverance and exorcism of people, things and even places (Hiebert 1992; Priest, *et al.* 1995; Sitton 1998).

My ethnographic understanding suggests that the executive possession now often associated with a Pentecostal understanding of spirits and material objects could only have been observable for the first time in the Coby area during ceremonies at Tigare shrines as of the 1950s and is thus a phenomenon of *upaanu* (the new times) and colonial modernity. For Africa more generally, Heike Behrend and Ute Luig (1999) claim that especially in recent decades spirit possession cults have been on the increase across the continent, even though spirits are often devalued

through demonisation, which is most prominently promoted by Pentecostals. Beyond Africa, phenomena of spirit possession were also popularised in America and Europe, especially with the spread of spiritualism in Victorian times (Behrend 2005; Pels 2003b; Sconce 2000) and through changes in American evangelicalism since the early 1980s that led to a more experiential and charismatic Christianity (Luhmann 2012: 31). An increase in phenomena of spirit possession, then, seems indicative of significant ontological shifts and reconfigurations, not only in the Commune of Coby, as I describe them in this chapter, but well beyond it.

Through their activities of promoting their faith, Christians also contribute to the processes of semiotification, secularisation, spiritualisation and materialisation and thus to the production of spirits. Once identifiable spirits exist, they can be demonised by declaring them evil and by viewing them as working under the devil's domain. It could be seen as ironic that it is Christians who first helped to generate the demons from which they wanted people to be delivered and protected in order to be saved. Spiritualisation and demonisation become important for Christians, especially of Pentecostal persuasion, since disembodied spirits are easier to handle. Demons, unlike transmaterial beings of the world of agentic relationality, can be othered as part of the devil's domain and – following the biblical account – their intrusions can be dealt with through prayers of deliverance and exorcism in the continuing efforts to keep them at bay.

Today, the notion of possession by disembodied spirits temporarily entering a body is still a marginal phenomenon in the Commune of Coby. For a significant minority, however, executive possession is a conceivable possibility that occurs during ceremonies of Tigare and Nkunde. Executive possession is also readily accepted by the most fervent Protestant Christians, who often have Pentecostal inclinations, and sometimes speak in terms of deliverance, thereby tapping into the transnational discourses of Pentecostalism (see, e.g., J. Merz 2008). Such Christians follow the example of Ghanaian Pentecostals by drawing religious boundaries that separate them from the domain of the devil and his subordinate witches, spirits and ancestors. They may try to distance themselves from their “pagan” relatives, but do not go as far as completely severing their elaborate family ties, nor do they engage in deliverance as a necessity for conversion (B. Meyer 1998a, 1999b).

Becoming Christian in the Commune of Coby, then, does not only mean to accept God and the devil thereby allowing past beliefs and practices to continue to exist under the devil's domain, as B. Meyer (1999b) reports it for Ghana. Becoming Christian also means to continuously participate in various processes of semiotification, most notably in spiritualisation and materialisation, that try to keep matter separated from spirit and that changes transmaterial beings into disembodied spirits, which then can be demonised. This process necessities not only that people embrace a spiritualised form of Christianity, but also the colonial modernity of the whites with its temporalising and purifying discourses and its desire for material goods (Gullestad 2007: 10; Keane 2007: 135; B. Meyer 1997: 331, 1999b: 214; van der Veer 1996).

The work of semiotification does not only lead to differentiation of spirit and matter. It also generates the hybrids of spirits and demons, as well as agentive words that come to stand as a kind of counterpart to the hybrids of spirits and demons. Agentive words mainly come from the Bible as the Word of God. They rely on the symbolic support of God through the Holy Spirit, sometimes with the help of pastors who are recognised as being spiritual. In this sense, the use of language, both in its written and spoken forms, comes to stand central to Christians in the Commune of Coby, as different anthropologists of Christianity have shown for other parts of the world (see, e.g. Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal 2011; Bielo 2008; Coleman 2000; Crapanzano 2000; Engelke 2007; Harding 2000; Keane 2007; Kirsch 2008).

Conclusion

The dynamics of spirit and matter as described in this chapter are intricate and necessitate moving beyond semiotics. This allows me to account for entities for which people do not differentiate between sign and referent, such as shrine entities or the Bible. In doing so, it becomes helpful to understand meaning making as an active process of presencing, which I describe through two different and sometimes contradictory principles that people draw on in different circumstances and settings, both exclusively and simultaneously. Initially, I identified what I call the transmaterial presencing principle, since it accounts for entities that combine the immaterial with the material, thereby ascribing life to things beyond humans and

animal. Such transmaterial entities consist of a material body, *kebodike* (animating force) and *mtakime* (identity), which give an entity a fluctuating life that is relationally dependent on other entities. The distribution of *kebodike* and *mtakime* throughout a world of agentive relationality means that agency is distributed in everything that is considered alive, including things, animals and humans.

While this transmaterial presencing principle continues to be important to varying degrees, colonial modernity has brought a bundle of processes that manifest themselves differently in various circumstances and places and among different people of the Commune of Coby. This bundle of processes that depends on what I call semiotification, reconfigures the interplay of presencing principles, most notably by introducing the semiotic presencing principle as the second main presencing principle that people use. The analytical importance of presencing principles, which co-exist to varying degrees, is that they allow for different ways in which people engage in presencing. This in turn leads to crucial differences in how people experience the world and relationally engage with it. Most importantly, I identify a shift in people's preferences from a transmaterial to a more semiotic view of materiality that I see as directly linked to active participation in the institutions of schools, churches, the overarching secular nation state, and the economy. The result of these processes leads to an increased ontological differentiation and the creation of conceptual categories of humans, animals and things while agency becomes focused on humans. It further promotes a stronger distinction of spirit and matter to the point of their separation, ultimately leading to the semiotification of life.

The work of semiotification not only causes a more secularised materiality, but also to a new category of hybrids in the form of disembodied spirits and agentive words that are themselves transmaterial, but come to stand in a symbolic relationship to the objects which they can temporarily inhabit. Accordingly, for some people, shrines have become lifeless objects that can serve as an abode for spirits, while for others, the Bible contains the Word of God that itself retains transmaterial qualities. In between there is a diverse and complex range of views that are difficult to capture but result from the interplay between transmaterial and semiotic presencing principles.

The outcome of this interplay, which affects the dynamics of spirit and matter, is a proliferation of trajectories of modernity that people in the Commune of Coby may follow. *Upaanu* (the new times) is characterised by a growing importance of spirits, words and material objects that are increasingly commoditised. Especially in Protestant and Pentecostal Christianity, these new semiotified forms become increasingly central, mainly through the Bible being accepted as the Word of God and through the increasing importance of the prosperity gospel. As I have shown in this chapter, the agentive words of the Bible render the book itself powerful, thereby ascribing it transmaterial qualities, which even the most logocentric Protestant and Pentecostal Christians continue to rely on.

Furthermore, the history of Western Christianity has shown that Christians could not content themselves with the Bible as the only material thing important to their faith. Art in its various visual forms has always been important, often representing Jesus as the prototypical manifestation of spiritual matter (see, e.g., Finaldi 2000). Since the very beginning of film, images of Jesus have also become a recurring part of the new medium. Such images are circulated through transnational flows that are part of global Christianity, most notably through the *Jesus Film* (1979), that is widely used to promote Christianity on a global scale.

While Lamin Sanneh (2009) argues that mission and the spread of global Christianity has been characterised through the Bible's translatability, Marianne Gullestad (2007: 261; see also J. Merz 2010) observes that missionaries often continue to ignore that images, too, could be adapted to local settings. In spite of this, there is a growing Christian film industry centred on Nigeria that adapts images to local forms of visibility. Such films are often part of the recent Pentecostalisation of West African Christianity and become increasingly popular throughout the continent and beyond. The Beninese *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002) is an excellent example of this trend that promotes Christianity not only as a religion of the book, but also of film. This move from text to image, or from book to videos, will be my focus for the rest of this book. In the next chapter, I trace the history of this move and its growing impact in the Commune of Coby.

Chapter 3:

The Word of God on Film

The three films *Jesus* (1979), *La Solution* (1994) and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002) are very different in many respects. Yet, they have all been made with the goal of evangelism, and missionaries and churches have incorporated them into their activities in the Commune of Coby in northwestern Benin. The films are thus part of the global Christian film scene, which has always existed in the shadow of mainstream cinema. Furthermore, its products are often informally circulated through structures that operate parallel to commercial film distribution. As a result, the history of Christian films and their development has been insufficiently documented, and scholars have neglected their study. For the USA, Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke recently observed that “very few [scholars], if any, have specifically identified the role that Protestant films have played in constructing culture” (2011: xii) and Asonzeh Ukah noted for West Africa that the “relationship between the Pentecostal upsurge in the last two decades of the twentieth century and video production, circulation and consumption remains an unexplored field” (2005: 286).

This makes it difficult to estimate the exact global importance of Christian films, their role in mission and evangelism, as well as the extent and impact they have on those who watch them. I show in this chapter that Christian films are increasingly important at both local and global levels. Indeed, they have become a crucial part of Christianity, especially in its Pentecostalist varieties, and may even have become more important than the Bible, which they sometimes visualise and on which they build.

In this chapter I describe, discuss and analyse the three films, as well as their circulation and use. I am specifically interested in the idea and practice of using films in evangelism and the resulting transnational flows that link the American Christian film industry with its Nigerian counterpart. While I seek to contribute to the study of film evangelism in West Africa, and more specifically in Benin, I recognise that many gaps remain. In spite of this, I consider it crucial to provide

background information on the three films in order to set the scene for studying how they work for specific audiences, something I pursue in Chapter 5.

All three films show Christianity in various ways. In fact, religion and film have been habitual bedfellows since the new medium's invention. Film provides an excellent medium to present religion and to visualise the transcendent, often through the use of lighting, montage tricks and special effects.

Jesus films were among the first commercially produced films. Within a decade of their appearance, they were shown in most parts of the world. Today, Jesus films continue to be made mainly in the USA and Europe and enjoy a global appeal. The *Jesus Film* discussed in this chapter is a prime example of this genre (see, e.g., Kinnard and Davis 1992; Malone 2012; Reinhartz 2007; Tatum 2004; Walsh 2003).

Since its production for global evangelism in 1979, *Jesus* has become the flagship of film evangelism and is now viewed as the most watched and most translated film in history. The apparent success of the *Jesus Film* largely depends on evangelical Christians, especially in America, who have been willing to finance it as a global venture. To achieve this, the Jesus Film Project of Campus Crusade for Christ as good as canonised the *Jesus Film*, thus rendering it into *The Jesus Film*, the Word of God on film that is now often accepted as equal to Scripture. Through this move, the film was made a prime tool for global evangelism, at least in the eyes of those who promote it. In spite of this, I will show that the *Jesus Film* is essentially an American cultural product that builds on Christian art that developed in the early and medieval church.

From the 1940s onwards the American Christian film industry started to produce dramatic films that showed the advantages of a Christian life and how the agentive Word of God impacts the life of people. Such films were also increasingly made for global mission with *La Solution* (1994) being a good example of this development. Baptist missionaries made this film in Côte d'Ivoire following a local story. Especially since the 1960s, mission films were often produced for evangelism in the country for which they have been destined. They are typical in that they build on the missionary heritage and legacy, but nonetheless try to account for local particularities. By directly linking Christianity with modernisation, how-

ever, makers of such mission films remained committed to what I call the aesthetics of colonial modernity.

Meanwhile, the idea of showing religion in film has been truly globalised well beyond Christianity (see, e.g., Plate 2003b). In 1910, for example, Dhundiraj Govind Phalke watched a Jesus film in Bombay and was inspired to start making films of Hindu mythology. Phalke is generally seen as the father of the Indian film industry, which still regularly incorporates religious themes, including Hindu mythology and the Christian Gospels, and further incorporates religious aspects in Bollywood's characteristic song and dance sequences. For some Hindus, watching explicitly religious films or television serials in a worshipful way has even come to replace the reading of holy books and participating in public worship (Bakker 2007, 2009; Friesen 2008a, 2008b, 2012; Dwyer 2006; Gillespie 1995a, 1995b; Mankekar 1999, 2002; Wenner 2002).

The third and most recent major global film industry developed in Nigeria since the late 1980s. Its video films are characterised by the visualisation of the usually unseen. Nollywood, as the Nigerian video film industry has come to be called (Haynes 2007b), is having a significant impact throughout Africa and has even achieved global appeal. It is a multifaceted industry that is distinguished through its dynamics of constantly adapting to ever changing circumstances (Barrot 2008, 2011; Haynes 2000, 2007a, 2011; J. Haynes 2012; Krings and Okome 2013; Larkin 2008: 168-216; Şaul and Austen 2010). Part of the Nollywood phenomenon is the production of explicitly Christian video films, of which the Beninese *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002) is an excellent example. The film has a genealogical link with *La Solution*, but is also distinct, as it is thoroughly Pentecostalist. As is typical of Nollywood, *Yatin* makes abundant use of special effects to show how occult powers operate, mainly through witches. In *Yatin*, they fight against a Pentecostal pastor, thereby staging a "spiritual warfare" that has become common in Pentecostalism. The film ends, as does *La Solution*, with a triumphant Christian victory.

Religion and film are not only linked through their content. In a wave of renewed interest in the relation between the two, various scholars are currently engaged in studying how film and religion share direct structural, ritual, narrative, experiential and even material similarities (see, e.g., Lindvall 2007: 203-223;

Lyden 2003; J. Merz 2014; Plate 2008; Stout 2012). In bringing the religious to film, as is the case for the three Christian films I discuss in this chapter, the medium further supports and reinforces their religious messages. In this sense Christian films participate in shaping the worlds of those who watch them not only thanks to their content, but also due to the nature of the medium and its material mediation – a topic that will preoccupy me in the rest of the book.

Pastors, evangelists and missionaries quickly recognised the religious potential of film and their apparent advantages for communicating the Gospel to people around the globe. This contributes to a shift in Christianity from the written Word of God to the visualised Word on film, a trend that global film evangelism particularly promotes. Since this form of evangelism is foundational to the circulation of all three films I want to address it before looking at the three films in more detail.

Global Film Evangelism

With *La Passion du Christ* (1897) and *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898), Jesus films were among the first commercially produced films and continue to be made today (Bakker 2004, 2009; Kinnard and Davis 1992; Malone 2012; Tatum 2004; Reinhartz 2007; Walsh 2003). Maybe, more importantly, biblical films made by Protestants not only advanced and shaped the new medium but also came to form the backbone of an early Christian film industry. This movement that Lindvall (2007) calls “sanctuary cinema” promoted the use of silent and non-commercial films in church education and evangelism both in the USA and abroad.

Lindvall traces the idea of using films for evangelism back to journalist, attorney and evangelist, Colonel H. Hadley, who, after seeing the first two filmed passion plays in 1898, already “prophetically foresaw film’s enormous proselytizing possibilities” (2007: 58). Indeed, film promised a universal language that could be understood across the globe and that could serve as an ideal medium to transmit a message (Carey 1989). Furthermore, it would encourage the establishment of the Kingdom of God, mainly by reversing the effects of linguistic confusion as recounted in the biblical account of the Tower of Babel (Lindvall 2007: 93, 123, 194, 206; Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 8; Morgan 2007: 179; Noble 1999 [1997]: 155; Schultze 1990: 31). Similarly, Americans made utopian predictions

of human unity or world peace after the invention of the telegraph (Sconce 2000: 22), and when television became prevalent in American homes of the 1950s (Spigel 1992: 112).

This demonstrates the enormous and uncritical faith of many Americans, and especially evangelicals, in technology, which itself has been intertwined with religion (de Vries 2001; Noble 1999 [1997]; Sconce 2000; R. O. Moore 2000). More specifically, many evangelicals believe that film significantly speeds up global evangelism, that it is more effective than words in communicating the Gospel, that it attracts large crowds and that it reduces the need for sending missionaries abroad (Bakker 2004: 314; Behrend 2003: 133; Hendershot 2004; Lindvall 2007: 13; Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 8; Morgan 2007: 14, 181; Schultze 1990, 1996; Spigel 1992: 110-115). At the same time, however, film and television have also been controversial in Christian circles, especially since they were perceived as posing a threat to Christian morals (see, e.g., J. Mitchell 2005; Reynolds 2010: 461; Schultze 1996; Spigel 1992: 46-47).

The Salvation Army is the first known organisation to have used film to advance their work in Australia in 1899 (Lindvall 2007: 56-57; Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 15-16), while Wilson Carlile followed suit in his London church (Bottomore 2002). By 1920, many churches in the USA accepted films as part of their Sunday evening services, itinerant evangelists brought Christian films to rural areas and missionaries took them on their trips around the globe (Lindvall 2007: 92, 115, 160, 188).

In 1927 Cecil B. DeMille made *The King of Kings*, a Jesus film that had wide appeal. It was distributed globally and missionaries used it extensively, partly to counteract what they thought to be Hollywood's morally corrupting effects (Bakker 2004; Lindvall 2007: 193-194; Tatum 2004: 49), an idea that was also shared by colonial officials in British Africa (Ambler 2001: 83; Davis 1936; Skinner 2001). During the silent film era the new medium already became thoroughly transnational, both through commercial cinema and the efforts of missionaries.

By the end of the 1920s, the Christian film industry in the USA could no longer meet the churches' demands for new films. In addition, the advent of sound films meant that neither producers nor consumers could make the investment

needed for new technologies in the face of the Depression. The sanctuary cinema movement had come to an end.

It was only during the 1940s that the Christian film industry picked up again. Several US production companies came into existence varying from amateurish enterprises to the more professional and prolific World Wide Pictures of Billy Graham or Irwin S. Moon's Moody Institute of Science. The new sound films shifted their focus to drama, biographies and scientific films that showed the advantages and values of a Christian life (Hendershot 2004; Lindvall and Quicke 2011; Orgeron and Elsheimer 2007).

In a further trend, different denominations started their own film production and distribution. Among them was the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest evangelical denomination in the USA that sends over 5,000 full-time missionaries abroad (Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 24, 105-107; Wuthnow and Offutt 2008: 217). While SBC has been known for its conservative, critical and moralistic view of Hollywood and secular culture (Schultze 1996; Trammell 2012), they justified their move into film production by claiming that films "must be converted by the church' rather than abandoned to pagans" (Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 105). In setting up their own media production, they followed the trend of American evangelical media production. Eventually, such media also made their way into mainstream secular American culture, following Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority (Harding 2000; Hendershot 2004).

In the 1950s the Foreign (and later International) Mission Board of the SBC entered film production for world mission and became interested in providing films in the national languages of the countries they worked in. Being one of the largest mission organisations, they later partnered with Campus Crusade for Christ for the global distribution of the *Jesus Film* and significantly contributed to its success thanks to their large international distribution network (Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 107-108, 192-193).

By 1960, there was an extensive transnational network of mission organisations that often used mobile film units to show films to a wide range of people across the globe, even though it was still a costly enterprise (Ogawa and Rossmann 1961). USA-based Christian film production companies, such as Ken Anderson's International Films or Tom Hotchkiss' Films Afield started their work in the

1960s and 1970s respectively and they sought to cooperate with existing mission organisations and individuals for the circulation of their products. Like the SBC, these newer organisations focused on the production of dramatic evangelistic films that they made in the countries for which they were destined. Especially International Films specialised in using local crews and actors, while finances and film directors continued to come from the USA (Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 189-192).

Such newer postcolonial initiatives must have been influenced by the mission initiated and pioneering Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKA). The well-known and influential project ran in East Africa from 1935 to 1937 and had as its goal “to determine how Africans with no prior exposure to the cinemas would respond to the medium” (Burns 2000: 203; see also Ambler 2001: 91; Burke 2002: 43; Davis 1936: 33; Obiaya 2011: 133; Skinner 2001; Ukadike 1994). Being based on racist colonial theories of Africans’ supposedly limited intellectual and interpretive ability, the BEKA tried to adjust and simplify their educational films accordingly, resulting in boring, unimaginative and unpopular products (Fair 2010: 111-113). By the 1950s, as West Africa prepared for independence, racist theories proved increasingly invalid (Burns 2000) and missionary filmmaking accounted for this by shifting their attention to dramatic films, drawing more and more on modernisation narratives that were current at the time.

The recent popularisation of the video format in West Africa, especially in digital form (Adesanya 2000; Ambler 2002: 119; Garritano 2008; Larkin 2000), has further boosted evangelicals’ and Pentecostals’ interest in the audiovisual media. Churches could now show videos quite easily and many began to show American Christian films (see, e.g., Garritano 2008: 25; Marshall-Fratani 1998: 293). Thanks to rapidly developing digital projection technology, missionaries and evangelists find it increasingly easy to take equipment even to the remotest areas.

While the consumption of Christian audiovisual media has thus been popularised transnationally, it also became a lot easier and cheaper to make, reproduce and distribute video films of reasonable quality. This allowed the establishment of Christian video film production outside the USA. Christian films have become so important in Nigeria that Zylstra recently declared it the “Christian movie capital of the world” (2009) with an estimated 20% of Nollywood’s considerable output

being explicitly Christian. Such films are locally financed, written, acted, directed, edited and produced. They are often made in English in order to have a wider appeal and are sometimes subtitled or dubbed into French and distributed throughout Africa and beyond via their ever-growing networks.²²

Today, global Christian film production and its use in evangelism and mission enjoy unprecedented possibilities and evangelicals and Pentecostals unabatedly perpetuate their faith in the salvific potential of audiovisual technology. The media flagship of evangelistic superlatives, the *Jesus Film*, is now increasingly recognised as a major contributor to religious transnational flows (Noll 2009; Wuthnow and Offutt 2008: 223), which I now discuss in further detail.

Jesus: From Film to Global Evangelistic Tool

The film *Jesus* (1979, produced by John Heyman)²³ follows the genre of other Jesus films among which it does not stand out as special in any particular cinematographic way. What distinguishes the *Jesus Film* is that it has been turned into an evangelistic tool and praised “as one of the greatest evangelistic success stories of all time” (Boyd 1999: 14). It is now claimed to be “the most-watched, and the most-translated film in world history” (Eshleman 2002: 69; see also Dart 2001: 27; Tatum 2004: 174; Wood 2007). According to the Jesus Film Project, the film has been dubbed into 1214 languages, making it accessible to 91% of the world’s population in their mother tongue. Billions have seen the film (including multiple viewing), of whom over 200 million are claimed to have “indicated decisions for Christ following a film showing”.²⁴ In this section I plot the history of the *Jesus Film*, discuss it as a cultural product and analyse how it has achieved its claimed success by raising it to the status of Scripture.

²² Nollywood is increasingly popular both in Africa and at a more global level (see, e.g., Adeniyi 2008; P. Jenkins 2008; Krings and Okome 2013; Ogunleye 2003a, 2003b; Oha 2000, 2002; Ojo 2005; Okome 2007; Okuyade 2011; Ugochukwu 2009; Ugor 2007: 17-18; Ukah 2003, 2005, 2012).

²³ The *Jesus Film* is more readily associated with its producer, John Heyman, who seems to have had a bigger influence on the film than its two directors, Peter Sykes and John Krish.

²⁴ According to the Official Ministry Statistics for April 1, 2014 supplied by the Jesus Film Project as presented on their website <http://www.jesusfilm.org/film-and-media/statistics/statistics>, accessed on 14 August, 2014. The same site, accessed on 25 June 2013, claimed that over 6 billion people had seen the *Jesus Film*. I have noticed that, generally, their statistics have become less specific over the years.

History and Production of the *Jesus Film*

The story of the *Jesus Film* goes back to the American Bill Bright (1921-2003), who founded Campus Crusade for Christ in 1951 as an organisation to win the Los Angeles campus of the University of California for Christ. His new ministry quickly grew, expanded into other areas of evangelism, and has since become one of the world's largest parachurch organisations. Its name was abbreviated to "Cru" in 2011. Cru retains a strong evangelistic and global focus that can be situated in mainstream American evangelical Christianity. Together with the likes of Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson, Bill Bright is recognised as one of the principal evangelical leaders of late twentieth century America (Harding 2000: 18-19; J. G. Turner 2008: 2).

In Bright's official biography, Michael Richardson (2000: 167; cf. Eshleman 2002: 68) traces the idea of a film on the life of Jesus back to 1945, when the Christian film industry made its comeback in the USA. Other sources report that Bright had a vision in either 1947 or 1950 of a feature length, biblically accurate film on the life of Jesus that could be used to evangelise millions worldwide (Boyd 1999: 16; Eshleman 1985: 7). Such ideas are as old as film itself and seem to have been popularised in the sanctuary cinema movement of the 1920s (see above). Bright approached Cecil B. DeMille, director of the earlier highly successful *The King of Kings* (1927), to realise his project, but nothing came of it. It took another 30 years before the project started to unfold, when John Heyman, a British film producer of German Jewish background, presented himself to Bright. Heyman wanted to discuss his recent work for the Genesis Project, his new production company whose goal was to film the entire Bible accurately. Heyman presented parts of Genesis and two chapters of Luke that he had already filmed. Bill Bright and Paul Eshleman, who was to become the director of Cru's Jesus Film Project, were impressed and decided to work with Heyman on a film depicting the life of Jesus (Tatum 2004: 165; J. G. Turner 2008: 181-182).

Under the guidance of Eshleman and John Heyman, and with the help of over 450 scholars and leaders from a variety of secular and Christian organisations, work began on the challenging task to fulfil Bright's vision (Eshleman 1985: 45-54). Richardson assures his readers of Bright and Eshleman's "intense and scrupulous requirements that the movie adhere to Luke's gospel... [so] that all the Chris-

tian world would have a trusted, cross-cultural tool for mass exposure of the life of Christ to anyone” (2000: 168). Peter Sykes and John Krish directed the full-length feature film on location at over 200 sites in Israel using a cast of over 5000 actors of Yemenite-Jewish or Moroccan background (Dart 2001: 27; Eshleman 1985: 50, 2002: 68). The British Shakespearean actor Brian Deacon portrayed Jesus.

Warner Brothers took on the *Jesus Film* for commercial distribution while Cru retained the distribution rights for areas that were not commercially feasible under the label of “Inspirational Films”. *Jesus* was released on 19 October 1979 in 250 cinemas across the USA. It received mixed reviews and only recovered half of the total production costs of six million dollars. The deficit was paid for through a single private guarantee that had been pledged beforehand (Dart 2001: 27, 29; Tatum 2004: 174; J. G. Turner 2008: 183). In 1981, Eshleman launched the Jesus Film Project for Campus Crusade for Christ with the ambitious “mission to show the ‘Jesus’ film to every person in the world in an understandable language and in a setting near where they live” (Eshleman 2002: 69).

Unwrapping the *Jesus Film*

Jesus films can be considered to constitute their own genre, as they have their specific characteristics and problems. As with any film, they are culturally specific products that also show the ideology of their makers (Walsh 2003; see also Bakker 2004: 330; Bakker 2009: 47-50; Peperkamp 2005; Tatum 2004). Together with other Bible-based films, Jesus films follow a biblically predetermined and often well-known story that cannot supply a complete script, but must be visualised and adapted to film in significant ways (Flesher and Torry 2004; Hope 1975; D. B. Howell 2007; Reinhartz 2007; Walsh 2003: 22-23). This is necessarily done within the established conventions of the relevant film industry, which, for most Jesus films, including *Jesus*, is Hollywood. David Shepherd (2008) and Peter Malone (2012) have noted that Jesus films are not limited to Hollywood, which is most notably evident in four different Jesus films produced in India (Bakker 2007, 2009: 216-229; Friesen 2008a, 2008b, 2012; Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 198-201). In spite of this, Hollywood has established “a culturally unmarked ‘norm’ for

filmmaking” (Gray 2010: 99) and continues to dominate the global film scene (see, e.g., Dyer 1997; J. Ellis 1992: 209-210; Wuthnow and Offutt 2008: 226).

As a result, photographic images of various Aryan-like Jesuses (P. Jenkins 2002: 6) have travelled the world and audiences now often find in Jesus films a Jesus whom they recognise, and who feels natural, real, and credible (Flesher and Torry 2004: 12; Morgan 2012: 206). It is thus necessary to unwrap the apparent neutrality of the *Jesus Film* by looking at it as a specifically American product (Kwon 2010; Peperkamp 2005: 356), and by focussing on visual aspects of the film and the rhetorics that surround it.

The *Jesus Film* includes in its opening credits the following statement: “A documentary taken entirely from the Gospel of Luke”. The makers of *Jesus* asserted this on the basis of claiming to have paid careful attention to render their film as historically and archeologically accurate as possible (Bakker 2004: 324), something that Christians of different backgrounds have come to value (Peperkamp 2005; G. West 2004: 128). Contemporary New Testament scholars, on the other hand, argue that such historicity is a myth (G. West 2004) and that “claims for authenticity and historicity [of Jesus films] are naïve” (Reinhartz 2006: 2; see also Peperkamp 2005: 356). Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that historical reconstructions always fall short of being able to portray how it “really” was (Hodge and Kress 1988: 163; Iedema 2001: 191). Rather than accepting the *Jesus Film* as historically accurate, I understand it is an interpretive reconstruction and dramatisation of how Jesus’ life might have been according to the Gospel of Luke from the perspective of American evangelicalism of the 1970s.

This does not hinder Christians, regardless of their theological or cultural backgrounds, to consider the historicity of their faith as important in the sense that the biblical accounts reflect real events (Peperkamp 2005; G. West 2004: 128). For most Christians the narrative history, of which they see themselves part, is linear and God-given. It begins with Creation and the Fall, which necessitates the unfolding of a salvation narrative that culminates in the death and resurrection of Jesus. These pivotal events that define Christian identity are presented in the *Jesus Film*. The Jesus Film Project’s affirmation of the historicity of *Jesus*, even though it is not tenable by current academic opinions, feeds on the historical

interest of many Christians, setting it apart from fiction and rendering it more authoritative (Flesher and Torry 2004: 9).

In the interest of historical accuracy, the makers of the *Jesus Film* mainly chose actors who were Yemenite or Moroccan Jews. The Englishman Brian Deacon, however, played Jesus. Eshleman explains: “Deacon had been selected to play the part of Christ because he so effortlessly portrayed Jesus on the screen. His mannerisms and delivery were excellent, his speech impeccable” (1985: 59). Accordingly, viewers of the *Jesus Film* see a white Jesus with long slightly wavy brown hair and a beard. By incarnating the image of Jesus as appropriated by early European Christians and which had been established in Western art as the “true” or even “real” likeness of Jesus, the character played by Deacon is instantly and indisputably recognisable as Jesus (Finaldi 2000: 74-103; Morgan 1998: 38-39, 2012: 59, 206; cf. P. Jenkins 2002: 6).

Roy Kinnard and Tim Davis (1992: 14) affirm that the visual inspiration for Jesus films came directly from Renaissance and baroque paintings (see also Bakker 2009: 57; Morgan 2007: 168, 175; Reinhartz 2007: 7). Going further back in time, Gabriele Finaldi (2000: 8-43) and Freek Bakker (2009: 62) show that during the first centuries Christian art was exclusively symbolic. There are no known pictures or descriptions of Jesus’ appearance that had been made during his lifetime. The earliest pictures of Jesus were often modelled on Roman or Greek gods. In the sixth century, in Byzantine Christianity, an image appeared that showed an imprint of Christ’s face. The “Mandylinion of Edessa”, as it came to be called, was supposed to have miraculously appeared on a cloth after it had contact with Jesus’ face and was “not made by human hand” (Cameron 1983). It became a relic and object of veneration and more importantly for the present discussion, started to define Christ’s “true likeness”. Western Christianity followed suit with its version of the same phenomenon. The now lost original “Veronica” dates back to at least 1200 and was housed at St Peter’s in Rome (Clark 2007; Kuryluk 1991). The Veronica was widely reproduced and closely resembles the Mandylinion of Edessa. Both early images of Christ’s “true likeness” tended to be understood as relics that transmaterially identified the image or icon with the presence and power of Christ (Morgan 2012: 55-67). Both images influenced Christian art through the Renaissance to this day and have informed more recent portraits of Christ. Warner Sall-

man's *Head of Christ* (1940), for example, quickly became popular among American Protestants who sometimes accepted it in a transmaterial way for standing for Christ himself and by supplying talismanic protection (Morgan 1998: 4, 50, 172, 196; see also Dyer 1997: 68; McDannell 1995: 189-193; Morgan 2003, 2007: 209; Reinhartz 2007: 48-49). This "interpretation of an ongoing tradition of imaging Jesus", as David Morgan (1998: 38) put it, also became part the genre of Jesus films.

The whiteness of Jesus in Heyman's film is significant both in terms of colour and light. Richard Dyer (1997: 67) has observed that in medieval religious art Jesus, as well as Mary, is often painted in a pure white that contrasts with the people surrounding them. As I have already implied, the same is true in the *Jesus Film*. Jesus, thanks to his relatively fair complexion, often stands out from the crowd. In the first half of the film Jesus' clothes are off-white, accentuating this to some degree. Then, during the transfiguration almost half way through the film (Luke 9: 28-36), his cloths turn properly white and mainly stay that way until the end of the film, making him even more prominent. The general use of lighting in the *Jesus Film* is equally subtle but effective. It follows the Hollywood conventions of coming from above and sometimes from the back, which is itself based on Western art (Dyer 1997: 116-117, 125). When Jesus is shown inside a room, he is the focus of lighting, making him appear whiter than his surroundings. This is particularly marked during the scene of the Last Supper (Luke 22: 7-38). Jesus wears white clothes and takes the spatial and luminous centre of the composed picture. The disciples and areas around him remain in shadow. When Jesus stands up to distribute the bread and wine, his face moves into the shade while his head is lit up from the back rendering his hair halo-like, an effect also known from Sallman's *Head of Christ*. This use of lighting conforms to the Hollywood conventions for expressing spiritual and even ethereal qualities (Dyer 1997: 127). In terms of lighting, the film then takes a more subdued stance for Christ's arrest and death, culminating in a shot of Jesus on the cross that closely resembles Salvador Dalí's painting *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* (1951). When Jesus appears to the disciples after his resurrection (Luke 24: 36-49), the same lighting techniques from the scene of the Last Supper are employed again, bringing the film's narrative of triumph to its visual conclusion.

Light and whiteness, as well as filmic translucence, are thus crucial visual symbols of the film. Not only do they express holiness and divinity, especially of Jesus, but they also place Jesus in the visual centre of scenes as it is also known from Byzantine art (van Leeuwen 2005: 207). Furthermore, every time angels appear, namely during the annunciation (Luke 1: 26-38), to the shepherds (Luke 2: 8-20), when Jesus prays on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22: 39-46) and in the empty tomb (Luke 24: 1-12), intense light emerges from behind the silhouetted messengers of God, from where it falls like spotlights on the people to whom the angels appear. This effect was achieved by the “powerful floodlights and spotlights” (Eshleman 1985: 52) that were used during the filming. Light, of course, is itself a biblical metaphor to express the agency of the divine and holiness, and when it comes from above, that is from heaven as a place of light, the metaphor is stressed further (Dyer 1997: 108, 118). The filmic lighting accentuates Jesus’ whiteness, which itself metaphorically stands for perfection, and which symbolises the Christian enlightenment that came to be identified with Europe and the West. Whether in European religious art or in the *Jesus Film*, Christ is often portrayed as “[t]he supreme embodiment of Western humanity” (Dyer 1997: 118).

In sum, the way Jesus is represented in Heyman’s film has much more to do with Western art and European symbolism than with any form of its claimed historic accuracy (see also Kwon 2010). There have been recent attempts to break the whiteness of Jesus by letting black actors play Jesus in the South African *Son of Man* (2006) and the American *Color of the Cross* (2006, Bakker 2009; Gilmour 2009; Malone 2012; D. J. N. Middleton and Plate 2011). These films, however, as well as other attempts to Africanise Jesus, did not have a significant impact in Africa, nor do evangelical missionaries use them in their activities, mainly due to their theological unorthodoxy. In general, then, the imagery of a white Jesus continues to circulate transnationally and is also present in northwestern rural Benin through Jesus films as well as posters and calendars imported from Nigeria, Ghana and beyond (cf. Gocking 2009; Gullestad 2007: 261-262; B. Meyer 2010b: 113-116; Robbins 2004a: 174; Spyer 2008: 22).

Moving beyond Jesus’ visual appearance to the way his behaviour is portrayed, it seems that the makers of *Jesus* tried to remain as neutral, and for that reason as inexpressive, as they could. Such an approach helps to avoid offending

potential viewers and is another typical trait of many Jesus films (Reinhartz 2006: 3). Heyman's *Jesus* thus presents us with a static and portrait-like rendering of Jesus who is a friendly and essentially human person, but whose feelings appear flat (Bakker 2004: 327-328; cf. Malone 2012: 91) and who does not come over "as a person of great spiritual awareness or well-defined purpose" (Charette 2005: 361). Accordingly, Bakker claims that the film "never becomes more than a Sunday School film" (2009: 34). In the film, Jesus moves from scene to scene in a pageant-like manner. Particularly during the time of his ministry, which starts with his baptism and ends with his arrest (Luke 3: 1 to 22: 46), he is depicted as exemplary and immaculate, merging the conventions of Hollywood with the evangelical pietistic tradition to the point of sentimentality (R. F. Marshall 1999). This creates an image of human distance and difference, but nonetheless of captivating attraction. The film, Ronald Marshall has argued, "encourages us to feel sorry for him and so believe in him too" (1999: 51). This is what the Jesus Film Project aims to achieve and it does so by reinforcing its Bible-based film with a pro- and epilogue in which it makes its evangelical and conservative Protestant theology more explicit. Accordingly, the prologue sets the scene by quoting from the Gospel of John (3:16-17), the passage that evangelicals often identify as the quintessence of the Gospels. At the end, the epilogue passes frame stills from the film with a voice-over by a narrator and the voice of Jesus himself. The epilogue is designed to move people to commit to Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour by eventually joining the narrator in a prayer of commitment (Kwon 2010: 163; Reinhartz 2006: 3, 2007: 28; Tatum 2004: 171). With its evangelistic purpose *Jesus* thus invites its audiences to a private, internalised faith, which is typical of American religious expression in its conversionistic and voluntaristic character (Bakker 2004: 324; Noll 2009: 70; Walsh 2003: 13).

The *Jesus Film* is designed to live up to the expectations of evangelical audiences by claiming historical accuracy, by visualising Jesus in his "true likeness" and by conforming to their theological expectations. All these traits give the film authority and help to make it more accessible, while also breaking with the strict logocentric character of Protestantism that generally lingered until the 1970s (Bakker 2004: 313), and remains present among some Christians today (J. Merz 2010: 123 n.4). But one more step was taken, namely elevating the *Jesus Film*

above other Jesus films by declaring it Scripture and thus according it the same status as the Bible itself (Flesher and Torrey 2004: 4).

The *Jesus Film* as the Word of God

In spite of initial logocentric anxieties of portraying Jesus, Protestants and evangelicals quickly adapted to the rise of new media by embracing and exploiting them (see above). The reason for this is founded on “the assumption... that the word can be translated to other media without compromising its accuracy and authority” (Morgan 2003: 108). Brian Malley, however, qualifies this assumption: “The Bible is a text: Bibles must be made out of words. These words may be inscribed in any medium or any encoding scheme whatsoever, but it must be *words* that are so encoded” (2004: 61, italics in original).

If, therefore, media products can be shown to constitute biblically accurate texts, they may be accepted as Scripture. In the film’s original English version, the words come from an adaptation of the Good News and King James translations of the Bible. There is no doubt that all words Jesus speaks in the film are represented in Luke’s Gospel (Eshleman 1985: 46), but Eshleman (1995: 111) equally recognised that 30% of the film does not come from Luke (cf. Reinhartz 2007: 25, 262 n.216). Not only are there parts that have been omitted, but more importantly there are also scenes that have been changed and added to. The makers of *Jesus* have justified this through their perceived need to be more gender inclusive and less anti-Semitic (Bakker 2004: 325-327; Tatum 2004: 172-173; cf. Eshleman 1985: 47), while R. F. Marshall’s (1999) biblical zeal accuses the *Jesus Film* to present a sanitised Gospel that is designed to be more appealing. All this does not hinder Eshleman’s declaration that Heyman’s *Jesus* is not merely a film but “the Word of God on film” (2002: 72).

In an evangelical understanding, the authoritative, inerrant and divinely inspired Word of God that is identified with the Bible has a stable existence and agency that goes beyond language, specific translations and media (cf. Morgan 2003: 108). This evangelical assumption influences the interplay of presencing principles and how they work out in everyday life. As with any other interplay of the two presencing principles, a specifically evangelical one is never a neat system, as Susan Harding (2000) and especially Vincent Crapanzano (2000) imply.

Malley (2004) has demonstrated that evangelicals' practice of using the Bible is generally much more complex than how they talk about it and views can differ significantly even within one congregation. Talal Asad (2003: 9) confirms Malley's (2004: 111) findings that evangelicals sometimes engage in the exegetical study of the Bible as a historical document, while at other times they read it for personal meditation and devotion by seeking to make it directly relevant to their lives (see also Luhrmann 2012). Each way can be described through the domination of a different presencing principle. While the study of the Bible as a historical text largely follows the semiotic presencing principle, personal meditation on biblical texts is more experiential, thereby drawing on the transmaterial presencing principle (see Chapter 2). This may be the reason why Malley claims that "'God's Word' is not a well-bound concept" (2009: 197), providing it with its characteristic flexibility and malleability.

The typically evangelical interplay of presencing principles tends to accept the Word of God as having an absolute and stable existence beyond human experience, whose transcendent nature has been made accessible in an immanent book. In this way, evangelical Christians mainly perceive the Word of God through the transmaterial presencing principle, providing the Bible with agency and the possibility that the Word can incarnate language and give authority to those who use it, most notably pastors, evangelists and missionaries. For many evangelicals, not only humans, but also science and history need to be submitted to the Word of God. The Word of evangelical presencing thus refuses to be divided into structured signs. It is powerful in itself and can have a direct and immediate impact on somebody who is open to receive it (Coleman 2000: 143-144; Crapanzano 2000; Harding 2000; Malley 2004). Put differently, "it is the Word, the gospel of Jesus Christ, written, spoken, heard, and read, that converts the unbeliever" (Harding 1987: 168).

Eshleman claims that the *Jesus Film* – the Word of God on film – "presents the gospel clearly, greatly reducing the chance of leaving people with misunderstandings" (1985: 122). Such a logocentric position implicitly confirms Clive Marsh's (2004: 100-101) important observation that, especially in Christian circles, the importance of the visual side of film is often insufficiently understood and its communicative potential underestimated (see also Kwon 2010: 13). Eshleman's

(1985, 1995, 2002) rhetorics fit this characterisation and his claims play down, and even actively deny, the communicative role of both the film's visualisations and of media technology:

I think the number one reason [for the *Jesus Film*'s success] is that it is the Bible – the Scriptures brought to the motion picture screen. The power is not in the cinematography [*sic*], the presentation or even in the actors, but the power is in the Word of God. Because it stays close to Scripture it can be used like the Bible (Wood 1997: 9).

Therefore, “the film evangelises, edifies, teaches and makes disciples” (Eshleman 1985: 180), which is essentially the same role Paul ascribes to Scripture (2 Timothy 3: 16). Eshleman further claims that the *Jesus Film* “is as timeless as Scripture itself, for that is what it is. It is Scripture brought to life” (1985: 179). Through this identification, Eshleman enlarges Scripture beyond the textual, while he also implies that Scripture as text is associated with an inanimate and material book. The medium of film becomes necessary for instilling Scripture with life and renders it more important and relevant.

I can analyse Eshleman's discourse as playing with the two main presencing principles that I call semiotic and transmaterial. While these two principles can conflict when employed together, they also create an ambiguity that can be rhetorically exploited. Eshleman uses this ambiguity to redraw the borders of the acceptable by affirming the evangelical semiotic and secular view of the Bible as merely being a book without any transmaterial qualities. With Scripture now logically detached from the book, he shifts its transmaterial focus to film. Identifying the *Jesus Film* with Scripture is supported by the logic of their apparent transmaterial likeness, since the medium has a long history of being religious and transmaterial in nature. Scripture can now become alive through moving pictures, which cease to be images in semiotic terms and come to be identified with a kind of transmaterial life through their animation and through the life that Scripture is thought to give (Morgan 2007: 172). In doing so, the *Jesus Film* can become part of the unmediated Word of God, which typifies the evangelical interplay of presencing principles. Since the *Jesus Film* not only contains Scripture, but is also equated with Scripture, it is accorded the divine agency that only the inspired Word of God can have (Engelke 2007: 46).

Although made by men, the film's agency is further justified by its divine origin in Bill Bright's vision (see above; cf. Morgan 2007: 212). The *Jesus Film*, then, is not only inspired by God through the inclusion of Scriptural texts, but it has also been divinely sanctioned. In short: "It is a tool that God has given" (Eshleman 1985: 180). In this way Eshleman follows the tradition of evangelical rhetorics of Jerry Falwell, who constantly entangled his personal narratives with the stories of the Bible to gain authority (Crapanzano 2000: 162-166; Harding 1987, 2000), a practice that has Victorian precedence (Larsen 2011: 108). Eshleman, however, goes further in turning Heyman's *Jesus* into *The Jesus Film* – as the film came to be called in 2000 – (Bakker 2009: 32) by identifying it as the Word of God. Through the *Jesus Film*, Jesus is not only seen (Eshleman 1985); he can even touch us (Eshleman 1995), drawing on the widely recognised similarities of touch and sight (see, e.g., Marks 2000; Morgan 2012). Going even further, the Jesus Film Project claims: "When people watch JESUS in their heart language, they do not merely watch a film – they personally encounter the living God" (2011: 4).

The *Jesus Film* thus authorised, together with a transmission view of communication that contains a message (Carey 1989), allows its evangelical audiences to believe both in its evangelistic effectiveness and its universality. Since evangelicals like Bill Bright commonly teach that the Bible is infallible and true, "and that Christ wanted them to spread his good news too" (Harding 2000: 19), declaring the *Jesus Film* as Scripture simultaneously turns it into a formidable tool for evangelism.

The *Jesus Film* as an Evangelistic Tool

In order for the *Jesus Film* to become a viable tool for cross-cultural evangelism, its biblical dialogues need to be translated into different languages, before the film can be dubbed. This is one of the central efforts of the Jesus Film Project, making its film the most "translated" film in history. To dub the *Jesus Film* is now an imperative part of many Bible translation projects. Once Luke's Gospel is translated, it can be adapted to dub the *Jesus Film*. Since 2011, however, The Jesus Film Project (2012: 18) has started to use an oral translation method they call "VAST", which – bypassing the lengthy process of written Bible translation – makes more or less instant dubbing possible. Should VAST become the main

method of the Jesus Film Project, it might not be long before the *Jesus Film* will be available in more languages than the written Gospel of Luke.

Being able to offer the *Jesus Film* dubbed into a language understood by its audience is often seen as largely sufficient for communicating the Gospel. The Jesus Film Project – at least in its published publicity material – belittles the complexities of both translation and dubbing, two different processes it subsumes under “translation”. In doing so, the Jesus Film Project implies that “translation” is unproblematic (cf. B. Meyer 1999b: 58) and largely a technical and financial hurdle that should be overcome quickly and with as little effort as possible. This is indeed a trend I observe more generally among American evangelicals who engage in Bible translation (see, e.g., Peterson and Gravelle 2012).

Being familiar with the process of Bible translation through my work with SIL (see Introduction), however, I maintain that translation is not only riddled with linguistic, cultural and political challenges, but is much more complex than the Jesus Film Project implies (see, e.g., Asad 1986; Hill 2006; Gutt 2000; B. Meyer 1999b: 54-82). Similarly, dubbing the *Jesus Film* is not usually a straightforward procedure, which becomes apparent, for example, when the English word “God” (one syllable) needs to be replaced by its Malagasy equivalent of “Andriamanitra” (six syllables). Any dubbed version of audiovisual products such as the *Jesus Film* are not simple “translations” of the originals, but new hybrid media products, which have considerable creative potentials (Boellstorff 2003; J. Merz 2010; Werner 2006: 175, 2012: 100).²⁵

The Jesus Film Project goes to a tremendous effort to promote and distribute its dubbed films as widely as possible, in cinemas, on television, on videocassettes and DVDs, through the Internet, as well as by sending film teams to remote areas (Eshleman 1985, 1995, 2002; The Jesus Film Project 1997). The Project’s approach to universal distribution is often perceived as an “aggressive” form of evangelism (Noll 2009: 89; Tatum 2004: 174).

Cru and the Jesus Film Project use a capitalist business model for universal distribution, as pioneered by tract societies during early nineteenth century

²⁵ Dubbing constitutes a little explored area of media studies. Tom Boellstorff recognises that the discrepancy between lip movements and speech leads to an “awkward fusion” (2003: 236, 238), but what this exactly means for audiences and media consumption remains largely unknown.

America (Morgan 2007: 27-28), and as applied by other Evangelical media ministries (Friesen 2012: 131, 138) and mission societies (Gullestad 2007: 19). Furthermore, Bill Bright ran his own business before becoming a spiritual or religious salesman by founding Campus Crusade (J. G. Turner 2008: 51, 232). In establishing the Jesus Film Project, Eshleman (1985: 173) was inspired by Coca-Cola's business plan with the result that both companies aim to offer everybody on the globe the possibility of consuming their products. This kind of capitalist and secular thought is strong among American evangelicals and fuels what Harding calls their "sacrificial economy" (2000: 109). Churches, mission societies and parachurch organisations do not make any financial profit through their operations. In the sacrificial economy, evangelicals donate money to God's work and expect His blessings in return, whether materially or otherwise (Harding 2000: 122). It is on this principle that the Jesus Film Project raises the necessary funds to finance its global operations. As in business, the Jesus Film Project needs to advertise both its products and itself, by showing that it operates in a Godly manner and that its efforts produce the claimed results.

While granting the *Jesus Film* the status of Scripture goes a long way in making it attractive to evangelical donors, the Jesus Film Project also needs to show the results of its evangelistic efforts to justify its use of donations. This is done through promotional stories and statistics. Anecdotal stories are regularly provided on the Jesus Film Projects' website (<http://www.jesusfilm.org/stories>), as well as in other promotional materials (see, e.g., Boyd 1999; Eshleman 1985, 1995; The Jesus Film Project 2011, 2012). The Project often focuses on the specific response of a single person. Designed to appeal to American evangelicals, I find that the anecdotes are riddled with ethnocentric stereotypes, often appear sentimental and paternalistic, and are typically unverifiable.

The impressive statistics provided by the Jesus Film Project, on the other hand, are designed to show the extent of the film's impact more quantitatively. Such statistics are characteristic of Cru (J. G. Turner 2008), as well as other organisations that engage in film evangelism (Friesen 2012: 132). Statistics have a polemic character, especially when they are not properly explained and thus need to be taken with a pinch of salt. After its national evangelistic campaign "Here's Life, America" of 1976/77, Cru recorded 535,000 decisions for Christ. Cru then

commissioned a study, which revealed that only 3% of those who made a decision actually joined a church (J. G. Turner 2008: 168-170). This suggests, according to John Turner, “that Crusade often overstated its effect because it only reported on ‘decisions’ instead of long-term commitments” (2008: 170). It is probable that the figures for people who “indicated decisions for Christ following a film showing”²⁶ of *Jesus* are equally vague. I can assume that the statistics are based on counting people who respond in some way or another when being invited to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour after the *Jesus Film* has been shown during an evangelistic event. It is not made clear, however, to what exactly people respond (Steffen 1993: 273). Some will indeed make a commitment to Christ and subsequently join a church. But it is equally likely that already devout Christians present in the audience simply reaffirm their decision, that people can respond emotionally without really meaning it (cf. Harding 2000), that they respond to the miracle and use of media technology (Kwon 2010; Myers 1993) or that they merely want to be polite by expressing their appreciation for having had an interesting evening²⁷. That the statistics need to be doubted, is also confirmed in studies in Zambia (Mansfield 1984: 72) and the Philippines (Kwon 2010: 160-161), which make it clear that one viewing of the *Jesus Film* is hardly enough to make a permanent impact. Dwight Friesen (2012: 142), too, failed to see the emotional response during public screenings – for missionaries a sign of their success (Gullstad 2007: 70) – that is so often claimed in promotional literature.

Outside American evangelicalism, in more mainline denominations (Dart 2001: 28) and in Europe, where evangelicalism resonates with fewer Christians, people receive the film more critically (see, e.g. J. Merz 2010; Peperkamp 2005; Wiher 1997; and Steffen 1993 for an insider critique). Usually, the Jesus Film Project does not address such criticism in a significant way unless there is a public prompt to do so. Then, it may appear sympathetic to concerns but generally responds by reiterating its position (see e.g. Dart 2001: 28; Wood 1997: 11). I strongly suspect, however, that the Project nonetheless takes such criticism seriously and that it is aware of its evangelical rhetorics (cf. Harding 2000: 46-47).

²⁶ As worded by the Jesus Film Project on their website <http://www.jesusfilm.org/film-and-media/statistics/statistics>, accessed on 14 August, 2014.

²⁷ Sharon Merz (personal communication) observed this last phenomenon during an evangelistic event featuring drama in southern Ghana in 1998.

After all, Eshleman (2002: 70-72) readily acknowledges different challenges and difficulties.

While the Jesus Film Project maintains the advantageous rhetorical position of its flagship, the *Jesus Film*, it presents itself as a dynamic organisation that constantly adapts to the settings in which it operates. This is shown in the development of staged evangelistic events and its increasing range of products.

Evangelistic films had always been accompanied by preaching (Bakker 2004: 314). Accordingly, it has become increasingly important for the Jesus Film Project to prepare the film audiences by staging an elaborate evangelistic event that culminates in showing the *Jesus Film*, and to then engage its audience in further follow-up (Boyd 1999; Eshleman 2002: 70; Wiher 1997: 66, 72-73). All this usually happens in collaboration with local churches. The Jesus Film Project also seeks to partner with other organisations, which stage evangelistic events. For example, since 1997, Campus Crusade maintains a formal partnership with the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, which includes the showing of the *Jesus Film* (Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 193; The Jesus Film Project 2011: 15; J. G. Turner 2008: 185). Wood (2007: 26) refers to 1,500 active partnerships between Cru and organisations that use the *Jesus Film* globally.

Furthermore, recent years have seen new audiovisual products being launched. Among them is a version for Catholics of the *Jesus Film* (2000, <http://www.millenniumfilms.org/>) that provides a new pro- and epilogue. Apart from leaving out the scene of the ascension of Christ at the very end, it basically retains the original film (Peperkamp 2005: 364-370). In 2001 the Jesus Film Project added a new 14-minute introduction to the film especially for Muslim audiences.

More recently, the Jesus Film Project engaged in bigger projects: *Magdalena: Released From Shame* (2007) is a *Jesus Film* derivate that retells the story of Jesus from the perspective of Mary Magdalena, who provides the voiceover for the new film. *Magdalena* uses extensive footage of the original *Jesus Film* that is interspersed with new scenes. Additionally, the makers added several new women-focused scenes from gospels other than Luke (Malone 2012: 93; The Jesus Film Project 2011: 24-27; Wood 2007: 27). More relevant for Africa, *Walking with Jesus* (2011) is a series of five episodes made in Kenya that uses direct references to the

Jesus Film to develop typical evangelical themes, such as sin and salvation, the Holy Spirit, and growing in Christ. The series was “produced by Africans for Africans” (The Jesus Film Project 2012: 26), with Mike Bamiloye, a Nigerian pioneer of film evangelism (see below), as screenwriter. The technical production and financing, however, was American.

The Jesus Film Project retains the almost canonical *Jesus Film* as the centre-piece of its activities and relaunched it for its 35th anniversary during Easter 2014 in a digitally remastered version with a new music score. The recent audiovisual additions suggest that the Project recognises that the film as an evangelistic tool does not completely live up to what its promotional materials, stories and statistics make it out to do. I assume that a significant part of its claimed success lies in the staging of the evangelistic event, during which the *Jesus Film* is shown, in the different pro- and epilogues, and in follow-up, which increasingly uses further audiovisual materials. The *Jesus Film* thus remains a typically American phenomenon whose outstanding feature is not the film itself, but what evangelicals have made of it. Its success depends on the evangelical community, which perpetuates its typical interplay of semiotic and transmaterial presencing principles and accepts the rhetorical aura of the film. The evangelicals’ interest in evangelism and mission means that they are ready to accept it as part of their sacrificial economy, which in turn, makes universal distribution feasible.

While the *Jesus Film* has become the flagship of global film evangelism it only constitutes the tip of the iceberg of a much wider and more informal transnational production and distribution of evangelistic films. Most of these productions are Christian dramas following the lead of the Christian film industry in the USA (Lindvall and Quicke 2011). While the *Jesus Film* is a film *of* the Word, the Baptist *La Solution* (1994) and the Beninese *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002) are films *about* the Word. By indirectly building on the *Jesus Film*, they apply the Word of God to everyday life by showing the values and benefits of a Christian life (Ukah 2005: 311). Such dramatic films complement the *Jesus Film* because they seek to demonstrate concretely how the Word of God of the *Jesus Film* can impact people and change their lives.

La Solution: *Aesthetics of Colonial Modernity*

La Solution (*The Solution*, 1994, David Powers) is the third film made by the *Centre de Media Baptistes* in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Following the Southern Baptist Convention's venture into film evangelism in the 1950s (see above), American missionaries of their International Mission Board arrived in the country in 1966 (Vanderaa 1991: 28) and later set up a media centre to distribute and promote evangelistic films throughout Francophone West Africa. In the 1980s they also started to produce their own 16 mm celluloid films.

One of the main initiators of the three films, Barbara Whittington (personal communication, 21 Nov. 2012), recalls that making them took over ten years and was quite costly. It succeeded largely thanks to the determined effort of the staff of the Baptist Media Center. The International Mission Board provided the resources and a three-man crew for the production, while all actors were unpaid Christian volunteers. The goal was to produce non-commercial and evangelistic dramatic films that people across West Africa could directly relate to. The evangelistic intention was to share God's message that has the power to change peoples' lives, as for example Craig Bird (1991) showed for *Le Combat* and Marty Croll (1994) for the premiere of *La Solution*.

The Baptists were not the first missionaries to engage in such an endeavour. Lindvall and Quicke (2011: 189) discuss the dramatic evangelistic film *Suzanne* (1972) that was made by Films Afield in Côte d'Ivoire using an all-African cast. Subsequently, it enjoyed a good response with over 200 copies being circulated among missionaries throughout West Africa. The Baptists' Ivorian film production is thus a direct continuation of the American Christian film industry and its various missionary extensions.

The two first films of the Baptist Media Center, *Le Combat* (1985) and *L'Indifférent* (1985) were produced simultaneously but received very different reactions. *L'Indifférent* – written by an American missionary – was not very successful and was never widely circulated. The 40-minute film *Le Combat*, on the other hand, quickly became very popular, was shown on Ivorian television in 1986, dubbed into English and several African languages and continues to be distributed on Video CD. It is still widely used in film evangelism throughout West Africa.

Bird (1991) thinks the success of *Le Combat* is due to the film's story, written by Marcus Minomekpo, a Togolese Christian, who also played Dansou, the protagonist. Minomekpo used his own experience as a Christian to write the story and a team of missionaries adapted it into the script for the film. As its name implies, *Le Combat* shows the conflict between Christians and "traditionalists". After the newly converted Dansou withstands death threats, he burns his "fetishes" and, together with his wife and main adversary, is baptised in a lagoon.

The success of *Le Combat* led to the feature-length *La Solution* (1994) that follows, develops and refines the same formula. It was equally successful as its predecessor and continues to be distributed on Video CD and used in evangelism. *La Solution* tells the story of Ata, a career-orientated modern African, who lives with his wife Akoua and two children in a posh residential area of an unnamed West African city. The film begins with Ata and Akoua arriving in their car in their village of origin. There, Nato, the all-powerful *charlatan* of great renown, performs a sacrifice for them.

The scenes of the sacrifice – which last for over thirteen minutes – are introduced by showing glimpses of evocative ritual objects, such as a bird's head or clay mounds with faces. Then the camera jumps to a portrait of the authoritative and scary Nato whose face is painted in red, black and white and who wears a headdress with cowry shells. His behaviour is imposing and sinister, somewhat erratic and, for me, almost comic: he shouts at times, makes funny noises and pulls faces. The background music that intermittently accompanies these scenes implies – at least to viewers familiar with Hollywood conventions – tension and eeriness. Interspersed with the sacrifice itself a group performs accomplished dances reminiscent of West African *vodun* or *orisa*. The scenes of the sacrifice thus combine the visually most appealing and repulsive scenes of the film by skilfully othering and temporalising Nato and his fetishes, as well as village life more generally.

Although the film is very critical of "fetishes" and the people associated with them, it does not overtly demonise them. Rather, *La Solution* tries to demonstrate their futility and portrays priests and *marabouts* as con men whose main aim is to trick people into paying them, leaving it ambiguous as to what their real power may be. The scenes not only show fetishes, but also other strange objects whose

purpose remains mysteriously vague, thereby provoking either contempt for superstition or unease about the objects potential nature and purpose. *La Solution* thus employs the aesthetics of colonial modernity that temporalises and stigmatises “traditional religion”, as is typical of Nigerian and Ghanaian video productions, but without their strong demonising tendencies (cf. Behrend 2005: 209-210; Haynes 2011: 76; B. Meyer 1999a, 2004b, 2005; J. Mitchell 2009: 154-155; Pype 2012; Wendl 2007).

At the same time, however, the othered “traditions” are performed with considerable expertise, mainly in the form of drumming, songs and dance. According to Karin Barber (2000: 323-324) this was already common in church-based Nigerian Yoruba theatre of the 1940s and 1950s. The purpose was to present “tradition” as appealing, thereby increasing the value of Christianity, which was always portrayed as being superior.

The ambivalence of the scenes of the sacrifice both being visually tempting and repulsive, are also reiterated by Ata who implies that he did not really enjoy what he did, but nonetheless recognises the need for a sacrifice. After all, protection from enemies and success in life, such as becoming the director of a company, do not come cheaply. During the sacrifice, Nato gives Ata and Akoua a pot, which now holds their lives for their protection. The day the pot would break, Nato threatens, Ata and Akoua would die in a tragic accident. The pot also comes with several alimentary interdictions and requires a yearly sacrifice. Indeed, *La Solution* presents a widespread theme of the illicit accumulation of money and success that has been ubiquitous in Ghanaian video films (Garritano 2008: 30; B. Meyer 1995, 1998b; Ogunleye 2003c: 5; Wendl 2001: 287) and has become a “hallmark of Nollywood” (Haynes 2011: 82; see also Green-Simms 2010: 211; McCall 2002; B. Meyer 2001; Okwori 2003; Wendl 2007).

Back in the city, Ata and Akoua receive a visit from their Christian neighbours but Ata does not want to hear about Jesus. The next day at work, he receives a letter that talks about the financial difficulties of his company. Expressing his troubled feelings, a colleague recommends a visit to a *marabout* to add protection and to find the solution to his problems. During the consultation the *marabout* identifies Akoua as the root of all of Ata’s problems, implicitly accusing her of witchcraft. Even though Ata follows the instructions of the *marabout* he is finally

made redundant. He sends his wife away whom he now accepts to be a witch. He turns to drink, beats his children and then turns them away too.

While the children roam the streets they meet a Christian friend from school. She tells them about Jesus and Ata's children accept him as their friend. With the hope that Jesus could also change their father's life, they return home and announce that Jesus loves him. Soon their friend's parents arrive. The man carries a Bible, which identifies him as a Christian, maybe even a pastor or missionary. This image of Bible-carrying Christians has already been well established in American Protestant art (Morgan 2007: 97) and indicates that the person has spiritual authority and credibility (see also Chapter 2).

The eleven-minute long scene that follows constitutes *La Solution's* apex. It is logocentric due to its lengthy dialogues that confirm Christianity as a religion of the Word. The visitors learn of Ata's problems and begin to witness to him by sharing their testimony, as is common among evangelical Christians (Harding 2000; Hendershot 2004). They share how they experienced the ineffectiveness of the fetishes, which could not save their son from death. Their suffering ended only the day they gave their lives to Jesus. The Bible-carrying visitor then has Ata read Jesus' words from the Gospel of Matthew: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (11: 28). Following the typical interplay of evangelical presencing principles that accord agency to the Word of God (see above) Ata has reached a turning point and sentimental music starts to play. The visitor asserts that Jesus is the solution to all problems. The Word has now acted on Ata to the extent that he decides to try Jesus and renounces the fetishes.

After a dream during which it becomes clear to Ata that he has to deal with the pot that contains their lives, he returns to his village, Bible in hand. He seeks reconciliation with his wife and, together with their children, shares the good news of Jesus by reading Matthew (11: 28). During a village meeting Ata faces the elders and Nato. While the objective had been to discuss further sacrifices needed to restore Ata and his family, Ata turns the meeting around by declaring that sacrifices were done in ignorance and they were not needed. While he claims that Jesus was the real protector, he smashes his pot, which provokes gasps and wails. Nato angrily declares that Ata has overstepped the limits and that he would die before the cockerel crows in the morning.

While all the villagers spent an uneasy night, Ata emerges unharmed in the morning. Nato, on the other hand, is found dead. Ata uses the grief of the people to preach to them, declaring that he has found a saviour and a true protector in Jesus and encourages the villagers to accept and follow him too. Jesus, he asserts, is the solution.

The film ends with an act of iconoclasm during which several of the elders smash their own pots, thereby symbolically pledging allegiance to Jesus and breaking with their past (B. Meyer 1998a). Then, in a display of evangelical values that has become typical especially of Ghanaian video films (Ogunleye 2003c: 8; B. Meyer 2002: 76, 2003a: 212), the camera switches to Ata and his family who come together in joyful exuberance, hinting at a bright future of Christian happiness and success.

La Solution follows in the footsteps of earlier dramatic Christian films that were shot in Africa. One of the early examples, *The Story of Bamba* (1939) was made to promote mission work in the USA and is thus part of a sub-genre called “mission films” (Gullestad 2007: 217-246). Even though it tried to portray Central Africa more realistically than before, *The Story of Bamba* is still a missionary product of its time that reinforces colonial stereotypes by insisting on a dichotomisation of a timeless “tradition” against the superiority of both Western medicine and Christianity. *The Story of Bamba* was written by Americans and filmed using African actors recruited among Christians. It relates the story of a boy, nephew of a “witchdoctor”, whom missionaries rescue from an epidemic. He then becomes a medical missionary himself and successfully heals his sick uncle. As a result, the witchdoctor, too, converts to Christianity (Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 23; Reynolds 2010; Weber 2001).

Films made by missionaries like *The Story of Bamba* or *La Solution* are strongly teleological, demonstrating a move from a traditional and backward past to a progressive and modern future, clearly drawing on secular narratives of modernisation (Ferguson 1999). They use the aesthetics of colonial modernity that thrives on contrasting various dichotomies, such as village and city, backwardness and success, ignorance and education, traditional and Western medicine, fetish and Bible, lies and sincerity. The happy ending stands for the triumph of the good and Christian ways over the bad and past, which are rejected and broken. At the same

time, *La Solution* is kept denominationally neutral with no pastors or churches featuring in it, thereby displaying general evangelical values of family, sincerity, innocence, success, growth and happiness.

Films like *Le Combat* and *La Solution* have been criticised for being initiated, financed and promoted by foreign missionaries (Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 189), even though the underlying stories come from an African. The recent boom of the video film industry in Nigeria and Ghana has removed these particular concerns. In Benin, this trend of localising Christian film production started with the video film *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002).

Yatin, Nollywood and the Pentecostalisation of Christian Films

The Christian video film *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (*Yatin: Place of Suffering*, 2002, Christine Madeleine Botokou) was first made in Fon, the main language of southern Benin, and a year later in French. It is widely recognised as the first Beninese video film and the first French Christian film made in West Africa. Its success and use in evangelism beyond the borders of Benin has made it into a classic of Beninese video filmmaking (Mayrargue 2005: 248-250; J. Merz 2014). Before I discuss *Yatin* in more depth, I place the film in a wider setting by tracing its history. *Yatin* has direct and clear links to Nollywood, and more precisely the Nigerian Christian film industry.

Video films from Nollywood need to be understood as being different from earlier celluloid productions, both in Nigeria and Francophone Africa. They have become a “new cultural art” (Ukadike 2000), “a distinct form of cultural literacy” (Adejumobi 2007: 9-10) and make a “most significant and original contribution... to our contemporary world film culture” (Wendl 2007: 17). For this reason it is important to look at the roots of Nollywood, its impact on filmmaking in neighbouring Benin and how the more explicitly Christian and evangelistic branch of the film industry – to which *Yatin* belongs – developed with it. Having thus presented the background of *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance*, I then describe and analyse the film in detail.

Benin and the Nollywood Connection

The Nigerian Herbert Macaulay introduced film to Nigeria in 1903, when he hosted the first screening in the Glover Memorial Hall of Lagos, the prime venue for entertainment at the time (Akpabio 2007: 90; Obiaya 2011: 132; Olayiwola 2011: 184; Owens-Ibie 1998; Ugor 2007: 2). Four years later, in 1907, Catholic missionaries showed a Jesus film at one of their Lagos schools (Okome 1996: 46). Missionaries were thus among the earliest promoters of film in Nigeria, even though their efforts to show evangelistic films to a wider public mainly developed during the inter-war period (Ogunleye 2003a: 108; Olayiwola 2011: 184; Reynolds 2010: 462; Ukadike 1994: 30-31).

It is not known when the new medium first came to Benin. All I was able to find out was that the colonial cinema market was dominated by two French corporations from its beginning during the inter-war period (N’Gosso and Ruelle 1983: 11; Obiaya 2011: 137; Ukadike 1994: 62). Concerning film production in Benin, the Laval Decree of 1934 limited the creative involvement of Africans throughout French West Africa (Haynes 2011: 68; Ugor 2007: 3). The only evidence of celluloid filmmaking in the country dates from around the time of independence, when Dahomey produced several 16 mm documentary short films, some of which won prizes at minor film festivals (Service de l’information de la République du Dahomey 1963: 67). In spite of France promoting cinema throughout Francophone West Africa (Ukadike 1994: 70), filmmaking never caught on in Benin, as it did in other countries, such as Senegal, Mali or Burkina Faso.

The first West African video film was made in Ghana in 1987, as a direct consequence of the region’s economic difficulties, which resulted in the end of celluloid film production. Nigeria followed with its first video production two years later (Garritano 2008; B. Meyer 1999a: 98, 2010a: 45; Ogunleye 2003c: 4; Ukadike 2000: 249). Since the modest beginnings of the late 1980s, Nollywood has become one of the leading global producers of films, peaking with a release of 2,700 films in 2007 (Haynes 2011: 72), while 1,770 films were submitted to the Nigerian National Film and Video Censors Board in 2008 (Barrot 2011: 109).

In 1996, I was not able to find any film or video on VHS made in Benin on Cotonou’s markets. At that time, however, Ghana and Nigeria had already seriously entered video film production (Adesanya 2000: 43; Barrot 2008: 32) and

Yoruba videos began to make their way to neighbouring Benin. This was assured by Yoruba traders, who dominate the extensive informal trade that exists between the two countries (Igue and Soule 1992: 99-100). Especially among Benin's Yoruba speakers, these films have become very popular (Adejunmobi 2007: 4-5; Barrot 2008: 43-44; Okome 2010: 30; Ugochukwu 2009: 4). More recently, Nollywood films have been popularised throughout Benin, since some producers and distributors, who often merit being called pirates as well, now sometimes dub videos into French (Barrot 2011: 112; Ugochukwu 2009: 6).

It is not only film distribution that has spilled over to Nigeria's neighbours. Cameroon now produces its own Nollywood-style films with an estimated 80 Anglophone productions per year since 2008 (Coulon 2011; Haynes 2011: 84). In Benin, film production started in the early 2000s with *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002). *Yatin* was made by Christine Madeleine Botokou, a Beninese citizen who had lived in Nigeria since her childhood and later studied at the University of Ibadan. In 1995 she felt God's call to become engaged in evangelism and media ministry. As a result, Botokou started her own video production company and acted in several Christian videos, including Yoruba language films. Botokou was thus part of the Nigerian Christian film industry when it was rapidly developing. Returning to Benin in 1998, she started a Beninese production and distribution company, the inter-denominational Stedafilm International, following the Nigerian model (Mayrargue 2005: 248-250; personal communication Botokou, 22 Jun. 2013).

Botokou wrote, directed and produced *Yatin*, and even acted in it. Her film closely follows the conventions of Nigerian Christian films and Nollywood. It was an instant success, being shown in homes, churches, and at evangelistic events. *Yatin* has also become popular in neighbouring Togo, Burkina Faso and even Côte d'Ivoire, countries she visited on a promotional tour (personal communication, 22 Jun. 2013).

The success of *Yatin* did not go unnoticed and Pascal Legnoui of the more commercial Porto-Novo-based Akoyane Films used a very similar story with a pastor fighting against *Mami Wata*, in his debut film *Le berger* (2004). Like *Yatin*, *Le berger* proved generally successful and made its way as far as Cibly, where copies on Video CD circulated. Akoyane Films then followed with a serial of five

films, as is typical of Nollywood (Haynes 2011: 72; Ogunleye 2003b: 18-19; Ukah 2012: 221). *Le triangle des élus 1-5* (2006) used the same Christian formula of *Le berger*. Its story, however, was repetitive and drawn out resulting only in a modest success.

Another important development of commercial film production in Benin was when the multimedia company LAhA Productions co-produced *Abeni 1* and *2* (2006) together with Nigeria's Mainframe Productions. Tunde Kelani, Nigeria's most celebrated Yoruba filmmaker, directed the two successful films (Adeoti 2011; Adejunmobi 2007: 5; Barrot 2011: 118 n.127). While LAhA Productions since followed with another dozen videos made in Benin, the idea of cross-border productions remains appealing since it guarantees access to a larger market. Such cross-border productions stress the direct connection that Beninese films have with Nollywood and Yoruba films more specifically.

There is a clear potential for the continued development of a Francophone video film industry (Barrot 2011: 118). In Togo, where the market is significantly smaller, M'Bolo Music, Togo's main media producer, started video film production in 2008, mainly producing and distributing for Ewe language theatre groups. Togo has also started to produce explicitly Christian films, such as the Nigerian sponsored *L'intermédiaire* (2010, Hope of Glory Film Productions).

Filmmaking in Francophone countries remains challenging, but is slowly growing nonetheless. Even successful filmmakers, such as Christine Botokou, find it difficult to make film production a profitable enterprise and struggle to recuperate the costs incurred (Fassinou 2010). Insufficient distribution channels, especially in the informal sector, and widespread piracy only add to the problem of the commercial feasibility of Beninese films. Piracy also slows down the development of a film industry in Cameroon (Coulon 2011: 104) and continues to be an issue in Nigeria (Haynes and Okome 2000: 69; Okome 2007: 14-15; Ukah 2005: 299-303), even though Nollywood could not do without it at the same time, since it provides the all-important channels for distribution (Barrot 2008: 18; Larkin 2008: 217-218).

As in Nigeria, Benin also has a growing segment of specifically Christian film productions. Christine Botokou, for example, remains committed to Francophone Christian films, even though she faces constant financial challenges. In 2007 she

released *Le retour de la pierre*, which received mixed reviews. In 2013, she worked on the following video projects: *Le Saint-Esprit est là*, *La mirail renversée* and *Tu as besoin de lui*.

Many of the Beninese, who started their careers in film under Christine Botokou, continue to be involved in the production of Christian films. Stanislas Abiala, for example, who plays Pastor Philippe in *Yatin*, continues to act and now runs his own film production company. Contemporary videos are of varying quality, as the producers are limited by their meagre budgets (personal communication Botokou, 22 Jun. 2013).

Among the more recent Christian film producers in Benin are *Le Groupe d'Évangélisation et d'Édification "Arbre de Vie"*, which released its Fon language film *Koyi! Yissénon fon lo* in 2007. Geordy Films Production made *Le destin* in 2009, MediaGospel the serial *La promesse* in 2010, while *Foyer Electronique* presented *Ça rattrape....!* in 2011. *Les Productions Vin Nouveau* released *La beauté de la croix 1* in 2011 followed by the second part in 2012. Eden Production launched their debut *Noudo (malédiction)* probably in 2012 and followed with *Les prisonniers de l'enfer 1* and 2 in 2013. Other recent Beninese Christian films include *Jamais!!* (ca. 2012, Fon, Grace Divine Films) and *Le pouvoir de la langue* (ca. 2012, MaxMath Production).

Film production does not only happen in evangelical and Pentecostal circles, but also includes the influential African Independent Church *Christianisme Céleste* (Henry 2008; Noret 2011; St-Germain 1996), which is represented in the recent series *La puissance de Dieu* in Fon and Gun (no date, Solo Production) and the Catholic church that features in *Gbêtô: Tout se paie ici bas* (2007, SAS Productions), a Fon language film, that offers a Pentecostal solution to the spiritual attack provoked by a *vodun* priest.

Christianity in its Pentecostalist form, then, has become an important part of Beninese film production, as it already is in the Ghanaian film industry and Nollywood, where explicitly Christian filmmakers produce most of the Christian films. It is thus worthwhile to look at the links that Nollywood – and especially Yoruba video films – have with Christianity, evangelism and missionaries.

Nollywood's Christian Roots and the Emergence of the Nigerian Christian Film Industry

West African video films have often been traced back to different traditions of theatre, and sometimes popular literature, such as of the Igbo (Ukadike 2000: 254) or Hausa (Larkin 1997, 2000: 230, 2008: 205). For Ghana, John Collins (2004: 417, 419) and Tobias Wendl (2001: 285) see a clear link between concert parties, as theatre is usually known there, and Ghanaian video films. In Benin too, some drama groups started to offer their stage productions on video as early as the late 1980s, but only became interested in film production after the release of *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002).

The most important and best documented connection between theatre and video films undoubtedly comes from south-western Nigeria, where the Yoruba travelling theatre directly developed into today's industry of Yoruba video films (Adesanya 2000: 38-39; Barber 2000; Faniran 2007; Haynes and Okome 2000; McCall 2002: 86; Müller 2005; Ogundele 2000; Olayiwola 2011; Oyewo 2003). The Yoruba travelling theatre, in turn, has its roots in school and church drama, which developed from the activities of missionaries as far back as the mid-nineteenth century (Adedeji 1971; Adeniyi 2008: 241; Barber 2000: 2, 26; Ogundele 2000: 92; Ogunleye 2003a: 108). From the 1940s to the 1960s, the Yoruba travelling theatre continued to be linked to churches and mainly presented topics from the Bible. As it started to become more commercial, however, its link to churches diminished and the Yoruba travelling theatre shifted its focus to non-Biblical themes. During the oil boom of the 1970s, the Yoruba travelling theatre had reached its peak and started to use film clips in their plays, especially to present supernatural aspects that would have been difficult to act convincingly on stage (Ogundele 2000: 95). Soon whole plays were recorded and shown on television. Its success was followed by filmed productions on celluloid during the late 1970s and 1980s, which theatre companies preferred since they could retain control of their films (Barber 2000: 259). The economic crisis of the late 1980s finally pushed filmmakers towards the economically more viable video format.

The Yoruba travelling theatre and its direct successor, the Yoruba video film, are typical of popular art in that they borrow ideas from the most varied sources (Barber 1987). Having their roots in church and school, their theatre and video

continued to develop by adding elements of folktales and performances of Yoruba masquerade. Wole Ogundele (2000: 92, 99-100) sees these elements as directly responsible for the keen interest in portraying the world of spirits and the occult more generally. Witchcraft and other spiritual phenomena continue to be important in Yoruba theatre (Müller 2005) and have become crucial to Yoruba video films (Adesanya 2000: 39; Faniran 2007: 69; Ogundele 2000: 108; Oyewo 2003; Ukadike 2000: 255), to the extent that videos are “saturated with the supernatural” (Haynes 2007a: 146). Additionally, the makers of such films were also inspired by other filmic traditions, such as *telenovelas* and other soap operas (Green-Simms 2010: 211) or Indian films, from which they borrowed love stories and songs (Ogundele 2000: 99; Ukadike 2000: 245, 255).

The development of the Nigerian Christian video film industry followed similar lines and can be traced back to the 1980s. By then, the Yoruba travelling theatre was no longer strongly associated with churches and had lost much of its earlier Christian character. At the same time, mission organisations and individuals circulated evangelistic films that came from the transnational expansion of the American Christian film industry since the 1950s. Missionaries, especially from the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, also produced films in Yoruba (Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 108), and other American evangelistic films, such as the ones from Ken Anderson’s International Films, became available (Klem 1975: 58; Lindvall and Quicke 2011: 192-193). These films must have become well known in Christian circles and directly contributed to the idea of restarting explicitly Christian theatre groups.

In 1982, Kunle Ogunde founded his drama group The Word Production. Two years later, Ogunde made plans to venture into the audiovisual media and in 1986 he sought the help of Ken Anderson’s International Films, although nothing came from it (Adeniyi 2008: 242-243; Ogunleye 2003a: 109). In the same year, Mike Bamiloye started his media ministry Mount Zion Faith Ministries International. The first video film of Mount Zion Film Productions (<http://www.mtzionfilms.net/>), an arm of Mount Zion Faith Ministries International, was *Secrets of The Devil* (1987), which was technically so bad that it never made it onto the market. It was three years later, after the first Nigerian video films had already been successfully released, that Mount Zion launched their debut *The Unprofitable*

Servant (1990) followed by *The Beginning of the End* (1990). While evangelism has always been a goal of Mount Zion Film Productions, they also want to offer Christian films with solid teaching and counter the Yoruba video films with their focus on the occult (P. Jenkins 2008; Ogunleye 2003a: 110; Oyewo 2003: 142; Oha 2000; Ukah 2005: 290-291).

It is thus clear that Nigerian drama groups were aware of American Christian films and sought to enter film production even before the video format became a feasible option. With the growing success of Mount Zion Film Productions, who pioneered Christian video films in Nigeria, other parachurch organisations such as Christian Multimedia International or Evangelical Outreach Ministries followed suit. Some of these media organisations, most notably Mount Zion Faith Ministries International, also run drama schools. Today, various independent filmmakers and all major Pentecostal churches produce their own video films with Helen Ukpabio's Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries (founded in 1998) being among the most prominent ones (R. Marshall 2009: 137-138; Okome 2007; Ukah 2003, 2005, 2012).

In 1995, in this climate of a rapidly developing Christian films scene, Christine Botokou (personal communication, 22 Jun. 2013) started her ministry in Nigeria and was among the founding members of the All Nigeria Conference of Evangelical Drama Ministers (ANCEDRAM, <http://www.ancedram.org/>). Mike Bamiloye, whom Botokou knows well, initiated ANCEDRAM, which promotes cooperation between different Christian filmmakers and production companies (Ogunleye 2003a: 124). Back in Benin, Botokou continued her video ministry through her production company Stedafilm International and has become associated with the *Fondation Olangi-Wosho* (<http://www.olangiwocho.org/>), which dubs Mount Zion films into French. This organisation is based in Kinshasa, where it is well known (Pype 2012: 35) and where Nigerian Christian videos have become very popular (Pype 2013). With her roots in the Nigerian Christian film industry, Christine Botokou has not only pioneered filmmaking in Benin, she also leads the way in promoting Christian films in French throughout Francophone Africa. Thanks to dedicated people like Mike Bamiloye and Christine Botokou, "the Christian film has become one of the most prominent filmic genres in Nigeria [and Benin] in the contemporary period" (Ogunleye 2003b: 18).

Beninese Christian video films, then, are directly linked to their Nigerian counterparts and have their roots not only in Yoruba films but maybe even more importantly, also in American Christian films. For Ogaga Okuyade it is “glaringly clear that the religious films of the present are invariably indebted historically to the colonial intentions of religious films of the past” (2011: 5). Although there are similarities between the missionary made films *Le Combat* and *La Solution* and the Beninese *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance*, which comes out of the Nigerian Christian film industry, there are also significant differences, which I outline below.

Spiritual Warfare in *Yatin*

When Botokou wrote the script for *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance*, her debut film, she was not yet familiar with *La Solution*. In spite of this, *Yatin*, like its missionary predecessor, presents a dramatic narrative whose overall purpose is to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over the old and evil ways. The hero of the film is Pastor Philippe, who plays a typical witchcraft-fighting pastor, similar to how Katrien Pye (2012: 36, 80-81) has described Pentecostal pastors for Kinshasa. He moves from the city of Cotonou – a Pentecostal image for heaven (B. Meyer 2002: 121) – to a remote village called Yatin, the flipside of the modern city (cf. Piot 1999, 2010), where “tradition” reigns through witchcraft and idolatry. Pastor Philippe sets out to redeem and deliver the villagers from demons and save their souls. Like *La Solution*, *Yatin* ends in the conversion of a whole village.

The film starts in Yatin, where a priest is performing a ceremony to initiate Sika, an older woman, to a *vodun* shrine, so that she will be protected from visible and invisible enemies. As in *La Solution*, the ceremony includes copious dancing and the sacrifice of a goat. The priest asks Sika to take a cola nut from a calabash with her mouth, an act that is accompanied with a sound effect, indicating that she has become a witch, as the viewer learns later. This is typical for southern Benin, where people are said to get initiated to witchcraft, often by ingesting something, either voluntarily or involuntarily (Henry 2008: 102; Kahn 2011: 10, 22). This direct link of *vodun* with witchcraft, however, seems to be the result of the Pentecostal demonisation of all that could be considered “traditional religion” (Gifford 2008b: 281; J. Merz 2008; Pye 2012) and is foundational for the war on witchcraft which the Pastor is going to wage in the village of Yatin.

The scene changes to showing a tree at night, which symbolises a witch coven's meeting place, as known from southern Benin and northern Ghana (Kahn 2011: 11; Parker 2006: 359) and typified by Yoruba films (Oha 2000: 198-199; Wendl 2007: 8). The witches appear flying in from all sides, while the leader joins them by coming out of the tree that splits in half. The witches are dressed in long black gowns and have their faces painted black and white. The leader also wears a blond curly wig. They have long fingernails and constantly move their hands, indicating their keenness to catch souls. The leader brings greetings from their Lord Lucifer who orders them to wreak havoc in the village. The witches greet this news with forced laughter, also typical of witches in such films. They now call for their four victims that are chained together. The leader tells each of the victims that he or she is bound by a spirit and then sends them back to Yatin on self-destructive missions.

The camera returns to the village where the new witch Sika attacks a young woman by sending red bolts with white halos from her eyes into the victim's lower back who then dies in agony. Later, the film shows further evil deeds that the people of Yatin perpetrate under the witches' influence.

Meanwhile, back in the city, Pastor Philippe has a vision of himself praying and singing at the beach with his Bible in hand. He hears people calling for help and asking him to come to Yatin. Philippe learns that Yatin means "place of suffering" and he feels that God is calling him to move there with his wife, Dorcas, to face and fight evil and to save the souls of the people.

On the way to Yatin, Pastor Philippe and his wife meet a woman who is about to hang herself out of misery and as instructed by the witches. Philippe prays and the camera briefly switches to the witch tree, where the suicidal woman's double is held captive, but is now released. He explains to her how the devil works and announces that Jesus Christ is the solution, directly echoing *La Solution*. With the promise that all her problems will end, the woman accepts Jesus and is saved. Later, they pick up a boy who fled the village in despair since he had no uniform to attend school.

At the house of the boy's parents the Pastor pays for the uniform and preaches the Gospel of Jesus Christ, explaining that "the worship of idols is a terrible sin" and that Jesus would protect them instead. In this logocentric key scene of the

film that explains and discusses the Word of God, the parents accept Jesus and offer Philippe and Dorcas a house to live in. They settle in the village and continue to defy various manifestations of evil by praying against them. Philippe delivers a young man from the spirit of epilepsy, which visibly leaves the man thanks to special effects. This scene has a direct equivalent in the *Jesus Film*, indicating that *Yatin* tries to establish narrative parallels between Philippe and Jesus.

Three months later, Philippe is leading a small congregation that regularly meets for Bible study. He has now added a tie to the suit he often wears, another characteristic of Beninese Pentecostals (Mayrargue 2001: 286). The witches, however, are not happy about the perturbations that the Pastor causes. They meet under their tree and want to show Philippe who has the real authority. Their attempt backfires, however, leaving them paralysed. The witch Sika wakes up with burns all over her body and calls a healer to help her.

Meanwhile, the witches try to attack the Christians repeatedly but their attempts always backfire. These aggressions are portrayed with numerous special effects of the flow of spiritual powers and metamorphoses typical of Yoruba and other Nigerian films (B. Meyer 2001: 58; Ogundele 2000: 95). For example, Philippe and Dorcas pray before going to sleep and a man dressed in white appears and covers them with a cloth that renders them invisible. A barn owl then transforms into a witch inside the Pastor's house, but she cannot see her victims. The man in white then returns and casts white electrical sparks – a common metaphor to imagine the spiritual (Behrend 2005; Sconce 2000) – from his hand onto the witch who disappears. As a result Sika turns blind and confesses to being a witch. Pastor Philippe comes to deliver her. After Sika has confessed all her evil deeds she receives Jesus into her life.

The king of Yatin, too, is annoyed with the pastor, as he feels that his authority, and that of his gods, is being challenged. He gives Philippe three days to leave the village. Philippe refuses to leave so the king has him arrested. Since the time for annual *vodun* festival has arrived, the king decides to sacrifice Philippe, instead of the usual sheep, to the village gods. While the Pastor is tied to a tree near the shrine, Dorcas leads the Christians in prayers of spiritual warfare. Again,

narrative similarities become evident between the sacrificial sufferings of Jesus and Philippe's plight.

The ceremony begins with lavish dancing and divination. As the king approaches Philippe with a long knife, the prayers of the Christians finally take effect. The main shrine fractures and blue electric sparks burn the ropes that tie Philippe to the tree. Having noticed that God is at work, the Christians run to the shrine and join Philippe in shouting, "Hallelujah!"

The king, who has been thrown to the ground paralysed, now acknowledges that Jesus' power is superior. Pastor Philippe preaches the Word of God and collects ritual paraphernalia while the crowd of spectators becomes frantic, as they all want to become Christian. Philippe leads them in a prayer that renounces "fetishism" and ushers them to accept Jesus, while a Biblical reference to Acts (8:5-8) – a passage that reads like the script for the scene and that had provided the inspiration for the whole film (personal communication Botokou, 22 Jun. 2013) – appears on the screen. Philippe then prays for the king who regains his composure and joins Philippe in shouting, "Praise the Lord!" and "Hallelujah!"

Yatin, as a melodramatic spectacle, builds on the technically more accomplished *La Solution* by taking the spiritual realm seriously and visualising it through special effects. Whereas *La Solution* shows some doubts about the nature of occult powers, *Yatin* makes it very clear that they are real, that they pose a constant threat and that they need to be fought by prayer. The visualisation of the usually unseen and of occult powers, mainly through computer-generated special effects that are accompanied by sound effects has become a trademark, and maybe for some even an obsession, of Nollywood and its derivatives.²⁸ In this sense *Yatin* is a prime example of the Pentecostalisation of Christian video films that happened in Ghana and Nigeria in the 1990s, and has been part of Beninese films since their beginning in the 2000s.

At the heart of the narrative of Pentecostalised video films, both from Ghana and Nigeria, lies a dualism between the forces of the devil and God, often repre-

²⁸ Various scholars have touched on the importance of Nollywood's special effects (see, e.g., Barrot 2008: 25, 2011: 108; Behrend 2005; Haynes 2007a: 145; J. Merz 2014; B. Meyer 2003a, 2003b, 2004b, 2010a; Ogunleye 2003c: 5; Okome 2010: 29, 32; Okuyade 2011: 13; Pype 2009: 143, 2012: 119-127; Ukah 2003; Wendl 2007).

sented through pastors who wage war on all evil.²⁹ This “spiritual warfare”, as I have already indicated in Chapter 2, has become a crucial part of African Pentecostalism (Fancello 2008: 211-215; Gifford 2008b; Hackett 2003; Henry 2008; R. Marshall 2009: 1-15; B. Meyer 1999b: 171-174; Pype 2012, 2013). Such warfare involves a continuous struggle to maintain a clear break between the traditional past and the modern present (R. Marshall 2009: 14; B. Meyer 1998a; Robbins 2004b: 127-129). In this sense, Pentecostalist video films shift their narrative focus from a modern teleological and eschatological future to the “here and now” (Pype 2012: 220) in which Pentecostals seek to gain and maintain status and prosperity. Such prosperity is no longer an expression of temporal advancement as it is presented in *La Solution*, but becomes a spiritual sign of salvation, which often involves and even necessitates uncertainty and suffering, as *Yatin* implies.

That Botokou is interested in spiritual warfare is not only demonstrated in her films, but also in her more recent association with the *Ministère Chrétien du Combat Spirituel* that is part of the Kinshasa-based *Fondation Olangi-Wosho* (see above). This ministry focuses on prayer and deliverance, maintaining continuous prayer at its headquarters in central Cotonou. In fact, the local gods or *vodun*, witchcraft and other invisible forces of the usually unseen world in *Yatin* have been so thoroughly Pentecostalist that even the witches use distinct Pentecostal language. For example, they “bind the spirits” of their victims and later complain that Pastor Philippe has “delivered” several of them (see also B. Meyer 1998b, 2002, 2004b). To show the normally unseen in this way is designed to broaden the audiences’ understanding of the supposed importance of the spiritual realm and how the forces of evil operate (Okuyade 2011: 6), and to address them from a clearly Pentecostal perspective (Ukah 2005: 304).

The Word of God remains central to Pentecostal video films – *Yatin* too has a logocentric key scene during which Philippe explains the Gospel. Additionally, *Yatin* presents another source of agentive words in the form of prayers. Indeed, prayers become the main weapon in the fight against witches, demons and the devil and are particularly effective when accompanied by holding a Bible and

²⁹ This has been well documented (see, e.g., Haynes 2007a: 145; B. Meyer 2002: 73, 2010a: 47; Ogunleye 2003b, 2003c: 12; Oha 2000; Okuyade 2011: 5; Okwori 2003: 8; Ukah 2012: 228; Ukadike 2000: 251; Wendl 2001: 285).

adding the phrase, “In the name of Jesus!” with commanding gestures. In this way prayers become visually more expressive than the Word of God, especially if filmmakers provide special effects as further visual cues.

Special effects have been part of films for a long time. They are particularly interesting, since they can visualise things that are not normally observable with the naked eye and have thus become particularly important in religious films. The *Jesus Film*, however, only employs them sparingly and subtly, mainly through the use of light. In Indian mythological films and television serials, special effects have been employed to demonstrate the divinity of characters, and became largely computer generated since the late 1980s (Dwyer 2006: 29; Mankekar 1999: 190, 2002: 138).

It is this trend that West African video filmmakers picked up and turned into one of their trademarks. Due to their low budgets their special effects remain crude and often appear highly unrealistic and even funny, especially to an audience used to the iconic sophistication of Hollywood. In spite of this, their obviously computer generated special effects need to be understood as a powerful way to make the normally unseen visible and thus present. They cannot be made sense of within a semiotic framework, since they are not meant to represent or symbolise the normally unseen through iconic sophistication. Rather, as B. Meyer (2002: 74, 84 n.75) and Pype (2012: 119) put it, special effects visualise and reveal the unseen to their audiences, making the normally unseen present to those who watch the films. Such presencing relies on what I describe as the transmaterial presencing principle, making special effects appear veracious (Pype 2012: 101), appealing and powerful at the same time. As I have discussed elsewhere (J. Merz 2014), special effects provide films like *Yatin* with a characteristic visual form that is meaningful to African audiences and makes Pentecostal films much more visually veracious and credible than the more logocentric evangelistic films I have discussed in this chapter.

Le Combat and *La Solution* have in many ways been precursors to the Nollywood Christian films such as *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance*, that add a distinct Pentecostal twist to the narrative by visually portraying spiritual warfare through special effects. Both *Yatin* and *La Solution* have been made to demonstrate how the Word of God, as shown in the *Jesus Film*, works out in everyday life. This recognition

has indeed brought dramatic and Bible-based films together, the former supporting the latter. In this combination, films are now commonly used during evangelistic campaigns throughout Benin.

Film Evangelism in Benin and Coby

The history of film evangelism in Benin and Coby before the Democratic Renewal remains very hazy and largely unknown. This has to do with the informal aspect of this kind of activity that is hardly ever documented. Furthermore, film has neither a permanent nor continuous presence with the result that outside observers often are not aware that films are used during evangelistic events. I only learnt about specific events of film evangelism once I started to take an interest in it and ask very specific questions. Even then, research remained difficult, as people often do not remember many details.

The earliest documentation for a Christian film in Benin dates from 1982, when *Jésus de Nazareth* was one of the popular films in Cotonou's cinemas (Saxer and Grossenbacher 1987: 79). This must have been a dubbed version of Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977). American missionaries from the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention started work in Benin in 1970 (Vanderaa 1991: 3) and established the *Église Protestante Baptiste* (Alokpo 2003: 33; de Surgy 2001: 38). Michel Alokpo (2001: 69, 2003: 33) affirms that they have engaged in film evangelism, probably mainly focusing on southern Benin, where they have their congregations. I can assume that they showed the *Jesus Film* and also used their own productions, most notably *Le Combat* (1984) and *La Solution* (1994).

After the Democratic Renewal, Benin became more open to missionary activities and the government officially recognised *Campus pour Christ Bénin* in 1999. According to their director, Parfait Mitchaï (personal communication, 19 Jan. 2012), *Campus* has since established itself as Benin's main promoter of audiovisual media for evangelism, including the *Jesus Film*. They try to stimulate local film production by engaging with young Beninese filmmakers for whom they sometimes host training events. More importantly, *Campus* coordinates and maintains contact with around 45 film teams throughout Benin who come from different churches and mission organisations and who send teams to show the *Jesus Film*

programme. Since *Campus* have recognised that the *Jesus Film* on its own is not enough, their evangelistic campaigns now last for three evenings during which they show parts of the *Jesus Film* followed by locally made evangelical drama films, such as *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance*, *La Solution* or the French versions of Nigerian films, such as Mount Zion Film Productions' *The Gods are Dead* (2000), *Apoti Eri (The Ark of God)* (2001) or *The Broken Pitcher* (2009). In doing so they combine showing the Word of God of the *Jesus Film* while demonstrating its relevance to everyday life as shown in dramatic films.

While *Campus* has been instrumental in presenting their *Jesus Film* programme in most villages in southern Benin, they regret that they have not yet been able to cover the North as much as they would like. To date, there are no Christian video films from the north that could be used during evangelistic events. In spite of this, film teams have operated in the Atacora region and in the Commune of Coby, often sponsored by the *Église Évangélique des Assemblées de Dieu*. In 1996/97, for example, a team circulated in many villages in the Commune showing the French version of the *Jesus Film* on a big screen, while a pastor interpreted it into Mbelime. The projections proved very popular and attracted large crowds. Another team came in 2003 and showed the *Jesus Film* on a large screen in Coby during several nights, again attracting an important crowd. They also went to several village locations, which resulted in the beginning of at least one new church. Apart from these events the *Assemblées de Dieu* regularly offers film viewings, either on a television set or using video projectors. They use films during conferences, special church events, local evangelistic campaigns, and during funeral wake keepings.

The American initiated *Église Ministère de Jésus Bénin* started its work in the Commune of Coby in 1995. In the early days, as part of their church-planting efforts, a team circulated in different villages to show the *Jesus Film* and other evangelistic films, such as *Le Combat*, *La Solution* and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* on a large screen using a video projector. Later, from 2002 to 2004, a young man visited villages, where *Ministère de Jésus* churches had been established, by donkey cart. He offered a choice of Christian films from which the people chose two, and showed these on a television setup, stopping regularly to explain the films. In an interview (20 Aug. 2012) he said that his work resulted in new converts in many

of the churches. The most popular videos proved to be *Le Combat*, *La Solution*, the *Jesus Film* as well as the stories of Moses and Joseph. *Ministère de Jésus* continues to be interested in film evangelism and often shows videos during their yearly Easter conference.

A pastor from the *Église Pentecôte de la Foi* in Cobly invited a missionary from Natitingou who used a video projector to show an unidentified Jesus film in his church in 2010. The pastor was so impressed with this performance, that he asked me to buy him the necessary equipment when I was next in Europe. The new *Église Mission Évangélique de Dieu*, a recent splinter group of the *Église Pentecôte de la Foi*, rented a television and necessary equipment to show films during their 2012 Christmas conference. The Catholic church in Cobly too, likes to project films on big screens as part of Christmas or Easter activities. In 2012 and 2013 they borrowed a video projector from the parish in Tanguiéta.

Generally, as this incomplete survey shows, churches are extremely interested in showing films and I was not surprised to learn that about half of the Christians in the Kara area of neighbouring Togo have seen the *Jesus Film* in a church-related setting (Hill 2012: 72).

Showing Christian films, often for evangelistic purposes, is not limited to churches. TV stations sometimes offer Jesus films especially around Christian holidays, such as Christmas. Some of the video parlours show Christian films at times, as do some individuals who are keen on evangelism. During the late 2000s, for example, a teacher in Oroukparé regularly showed videos to those who came to his house. In Cobly, an enthusiastic Christian from the *Assemblée de Dieu* also regularly opens his house to show evangelistic films, mainly to the children of his neighbourhood. Generally, people watch at their neighbours' houses if they do not have a television themselves. Some also circulate Video CDs of popular films, including *Le berger* or *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance*, until they are so scratched that they do not play anymore. This means that there are extensive formal and informal networks that give most people the chance to watch Christian films and videos at some point in their lives.

Conclusion

The transnational trajectories of the three films *Jesus* (1979), *La Solution* (1994) and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002) that I discuss in this chapter have often converged at local evangelistic events during which they are shown throughout Benin. The *Jesus Film*, being based on the Gospel of Luke, has been promoted as a historical and biblically accurate visualisation of the Word of God to the extent that it becomes identified with Scripture itself. Seen through the eyes of evangelicals, the Word of God of the Bible and the *Jesus Film* are powerful, agentive and have the ability to change lives. This is specifically demonstrated in dramatic Christian films, such as *La Solution* and *Yatin*, which visualise how people are affected by the Word and change their lives as a result of it. In this way dramatic films reinforce and complement Bible-based films. They make references to the Bible in their dialogues, quote from it and even borrow narrative elements from it.

Christian films conjure up the kind of mythic realism often associated with screen media by feeding off the pervasive cinematic myth that film can present reality, especially for early and “primitive” audiences who were constantly suspected of blurring the imaginary with the real (Ambler 2001: 88-89; Burke 2002; Burns 2000; J. Ellis 1992: 77; Lyden 2003: 50-53; B. Meyer 2003a: 206; R. O. Moore 2000; Reinhartz 2007: 6). Films can achieve this by bringing religion directly to film and by becoming transmaterial to their audiences by merging sign and referent. As a result audiences can experience the Word of God on film in a more powerful and intimate way than they could with any text.

Since the invention of film, evangelical and later Pentecostal Christians sensed the importance of the new medium. They became pioneers of film and continue to exploit its communicative potential as the example of the *Jesus Film* or Christian Nigerian videos show. Film has slowly become accepted as a medium suitable for Christians and appeared to evangelicals as an exciting and powerful tool that simply *had* to be used in global evangelism. In doing so, whether they intended it or not, the Protestant focus on the Bible as a text is not only being complemented by the Word of God on film, which is increasingly used in evangelism, but may eventually even be superseded by it. For Nigeria, Okuyade claims that “the site for evangelising has moved from the pulpit to the video film” (2011: 11).

Christian films arrived in West Africa with missionaries, who were among the first promoters of the new medium. While the circulation of films certainly had its ups and downs throughout the years, the medium continues to be pushed most notably through Campus Crusade for Christ's record breaking *Jesus Film*, now claimed to be the most watched and most dubbed film in history. The *Jesus Film* is now supported by locally made dramatic films, such as *La Solution* and *Yatin*, which help their audiences to see that the explicitly white Jesus of the film has direct relevance to their lives.

In Cibly, the new medium of film probably only arrived a few years after the first missionaries, but people clearly came to see both of them as manifestations of *upaanu* (the new times). Film and Christianity have thus become intricately linked, especially since local churches, missionaries and other individuals remain among the most important promoters of the medium.

Christianity, then, especially in its Pentecostalist forms, is becoming not only a religion of the book, but also of film. Ukah has observed especially for West Africa: "The medium of video has become one of the preferred channels for the communication of religious truth, hope, ideas and propaganda" (2003: 226), since it brings the life of the moving picture to the Word of God. On this basis I suggest that in Cibly, the medium of film has become an inseparable and important part of Christianity. Indeed, I have good reason to speculate with Reinhartz that "it may well be the case that more people worldwide know about Jesus and his life story from the movies than from any other medium" (2007: 1).

The Bible as a text is no longer the only medium that Christians commonly use. God's Word now also consists of moving images that people watch. Because film combines images, movement and sound it is more engaging and experiential than written text, making it more accessible and interesting to many people. This move from text to film and the importance that the new medium has gained in West Africa needs to be explored further.

In the next chapters I shift my discussion from the three films themselves to how people of the Commune of Cibly understand, receive and watch the films. I start by discussing the importance of vision in people's lives and how films, together with the television sets that show them, have become the most popular technology that enhances vision.

Chapter 4:

Iconic Images and Transvisual Technology

While photographs and films had already come to the Commune of Cobly during colonial times, electronic media technology only followed relatively recently (see Chapter 1). Television sets and videocassette recorders arrived in Cobly in the 1990s and became popularised through the increasing availability of digital technology during the early 2000s and the provision of evening-time electricity to the town of Cobly in 2005. Television sets and DVD players have since become established as popular and distinctive objects of *upaanu* (the new times). Hence, I can largely concur with Joseph's enthusiastic claim: "There is nobody in this area who doesn't want a TV" (interview, 12 Jan. 2011). This fascination with television, which goes back to the advent of film, results from the mystery and ambiguity of a material thing that displays images of visible but intangible life. I suggest that this does not only add to the attractiveness of new media, but is also an important characteristic of how people in the Commune of Cobly understand and experience audiovisual media.

In this chapter I discuss how iconic images have arrived in the Commune of Cobly. I am particularly interested in the materiality and visibility of these images, focusing on photographs and electronic media technology. I loosely follow Igor Kopytoff's (1986) notion of cultural biography, which begins with the general recognition that new things can only be made sense of and presented on the basis of previously held knowledge (see, e.g., Parmentier 1994: 3). Due to the novelty of audiovisual media and their technology, people sometimes struggle to presence them and more generally understand how they work. This often leads to intense feelings of anxiety and excitement, sometimes even linked to utopian expectations, as I already indicated for television in the USA (Chapter 3). Anxiety of new things often concerns their ontology and agency, not so much in terms of their apparent materiality, but rather what they stand for transmaterially and what they could do to people. Such transmaterial anxiety, which is similar to what Adam Ashforth calls "epistemic anxiety" (2005: 127), is particularly accentuated when new things have a significant "power for meaning making" (van Leeuwen

2005: 4), or, in other words, what I call a high presencing potential, as is typical for film (Wollen 1972: 154).

People generally exploit the presencing potential of new things more or less successfully by identifying distinct entities. In semiotics, this process has sometimes been referred to as interpretation or decoding, or, in Peircean terms, semi-osis (Crossland 2009: 73-74; Hodge and Kress 1988: 20; Jensen 1995: 11-12). Entities first need to be identified (cf. Keane 2003: 423; Parmentier 1994: 4), which happens when people interpret sensory stimulation of light, sound, smells, flavours and material characteristics of things. What we perceive with our senses directly depends on material existence, both of our own bodies and the objects or waves of our perception. Hence, entities are necessarily human and social constructs that result from the human capacity of giving meaning, agency and life to matter. By giving entities life, humans can have an active presence in society, most notably by interacting with other humans, animals and the material world more widely. People always make entities present according to ideas that they hold about the world and how different entities relate to each other, a notion I call presencing principles (see Chapter 2). In other words, people experience the world and relate to it through entities, under which I also include signs (Keane 2003, 2005; Parmentier 1994: 23).

Entities, however, never determine or fix meaning. They constantly interact with other entities, rubbing off their qualities on each other, as for example Brent Plate (2003a: 6) and Till Förster (2013) have demonstrated for different media through what they call intermediality³⁰. As new entities are identified and begin to interact with other entities, the interplay of the transmaterial and semiotic presencing principles needs to be continuously reconfigured and refined, thereby increasing the collective experience of new things. As people engage in this process during their lifetimes, anxiety diminishes and people become increasingly comfortable about accepting and using new things. In this chapter I discuss this process for photographs, television sets and the images they show, by focusing on how people contribute to the cultural biographies of things through presencing processes.

³⁰ Intermediality is an idea derived from intertextuality, a notion first introduced by Roland Barthes (Fiske 1987: 108; Stam, *et al.* 1992: 203-208).

It seems to be in the nature of photographs and videos or films, that their images catch the eyes of those who see and watch them, whether they are new or regular consumers. In doing so, the materiality of the media slip into the background, to the extent that they disappear and give the impression of unmediated communication. “Paradoxically,” Birgit Meyer observes, “immediacy thus depends on mediation *and* its denial” (2009a: 12; see also Eisenlohr 2009: 276, 2011: 44; B. Meyer 2006b: 436, 2011b: 32). This may explain why the more material aspects of media and their associated technology have only entered anthropological discourse relatively recently (see, e.g., Engelke 2007; Ginsburg, *et al.* 2002; Larkin 2008; B. Meyer 2009a, 2010b, 2011b). Indeed, as I elaborate in this chapter, the materiality of media, even if overshadowed by the images they display or project, is crucial in shaping how people understand and experience media. “What media are needs to be interrogated, not presumed”, Brian Larkin (2008: 3) observes. Accordingly, I propose with Chris Wright (2004: 74) that photographs, and electronic media technology more generally, need to be discussed not only for what they show, but also for what they are (see also Edwards and Hart 2004). Studying films and other media, then, also necessitates studying their associated technologies, including visual and material aspects.

I begin the chapter by discussing the keen interest in vision that people in the Commune of Cobly exhibit. For them, seeing and learning with their own eyes is equally important than seeing beyond the material, both in a transmaterial way and through dreams. In anthropology, the latter have often been approached through a psychological and symbolic lens, thereby neglecting the social aspects of dreams as well as their experiential nature (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 135-137; Jedrej and Shaw 1992; Kiernan 1985; Lohmann 2003a). For those who experience them, dreams can be at least as significant as waking experiences. This stresses the importance of what I call transvisuality, which I understand as the ability to see beyond what is usually seen with the eyes either through dreams or visions.

The interest that people in the Commune of Cobly take in transvisuality also influences how they understand photographic portraits, the most widespread and important type of photographs across Africa (see, e.g., Behrend 2001; Haney 2010; Peffer 2013; Sprague 1978; Werner 2001). On a more analytical level, even though photographs are iconic, they also come to stand in an indexical relation-

ship to the people they portray, whether alive or dead, materially entangling them to the extent that even after their death, their photographs continue to mark their presence in a (trans)visual and (trans)material way.

When it comes to television sets, their transmaterial and transvisual nature becomes even more apparent. Many people in the Commune of Coby consider them in one way or another the product of transvisual power. Others claim that it also captures and displays images according to principles of transvisual power, and nearly all the research participants compare watching television in some way to experiencing dreams. This places television sets in an ambivalent position for which the recent anthropological discourse on the modernity of witchcraft provides an appropriate explanatory framework (Geschiere 1997, 2011) that is also able to pull together the different aspects through which I understand transvisual power.

I propose that for most people of the Commune of Coby the material and visual properties of television make it part of what I call “transvisual technology”. By becoming agentive entities in themselves (cf. Larkin 2008: 116), television sets increasingly become part of the world of agentive relationality. They provide people with a new and interesting way to enhance their vision through an external transvisual power that shows what cannot normally be seen with their eyes. In this sense, watching television, videos and films stimulates people’s keen interest in vision, especially for what it makes transmaterially present.

The Importance of the Eye

There is no question that in Europe and America, the visual is prominent and often treated as preferential over other senses, to the extent that it has also become crucial to semiotics. This trend has equally informed anthropology with its focus on observation (Fabian 1983: 105-141). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson observe that most metaphors used in English to express knowledge are based on visual perception, which is encapsulated in the idea that knowing is seeing; they conclude: “We get most of our knowledge through vision” (1999: 238). It is less well documented that this observation also applies to areas beyond Europe and America (Bloch 2008). Joel Robbins, for example, stated for the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea “that the verb *-tamamin* can mean not only ‘to see’ but also ‘to know’”

(2004a: 141), and concludes: “It is impossible to overemphasize how strong the Urapmin concern for vision is” (2004a: 139).

Similarly, in Mbelime, the majority language of the Commune of Cobly, the verb *ya* not only covers the semantic areas of “to see, to perceive”, but also “to understand”. The secondary meaning of acquiring knowledge in a visual way applies to the way children learn, as is the case in other parts of the world (see, e.g., Brett-Smith 1994: 62; Harris 1984). Parents encourage their children to observe them and then imitate what they do, first playfully, then together with adults before they start doing tasks by themselves. The young farmer Boniface summarises how a boy learns to plough by observation:

You were born and one day you will become an adult. One morning, your father will take a hoe and before he finishes a furrow you also take a hoe and you follow your father’s ploughing, even if you can’t do it straight yet. Maybe you think you plough well, but at first you don’t do a good job and your father won’t be happy. After a while you become an adult. You saw how your father did it and you too will start to do it properly (interview, 10 Feb. 2012).

Such visual and experiential learning by observation and imitation, even if accompanied by verbal instructions, becomes an attitude that shapes the lives of people and continues to dominate even in old age (Sewane 2002: 9-10). Dominique Sewane (2003) found that this learning attitude was so deeply enshrined, especially in old people, that it made her research among Betammaribe communities difficult. At times, old men claimed that they did not know the answers to her probing questions, insisting that she needs to *see* what people do and learn in this way.

Roger Lohmann shows for the Asabano of Papua New Guinea that hearing does not supply sufficient and truthful evidence on its own. In order for something “to be believable, words must be backed up with sensory evidence” (2000: 80), especially seeing. This is also expressed in a well-known Mbelime proverb: “The eye that sees [*ya*] is better than the ear that hears”. In everyday life, this means that people prefer not to rely on what they merely hear. They want to go in person to *see* events and ceremonies with their own eyes, and make sure that things are done properly (cf. Sewane 2003: 178). Seeing, I need to add, does not exclude

the importance of other senses, which are also part of witnessing and experiencing an event (cf. Sewane 2003: 20).

By way of illustration, corpses need to be exposed to a wider public before they are buried (see also de Witte 2011; Noret 2010: 95, 2011: 163). The burial itself is a public event that people want to witness. In July 2012, a prominent inhabitant of Cibly died and his body was buried in a coffin in his own house. This was the first time that this practice, which originates in southern Benin (Noret 2010: 60-61, 88), was imitated in Cibly. Some people were allowed access to the room and could see the body through a window in the lid of the coffin before the family of the deceased shut the room again so the grave could be cemented over. Many did not get to see the body and people were visibly upset and complained loudly when the family of the deceased refused them access to the room.

During ceremonies that include offerings, seeing is also essential. First of all, as I have already indicated in Chapter 2, people provide material bodies for transmaterial beings, such as shrine entities or ancestors. This then marks their presence materially and makes interaction with them possible. The person who presents an offering addresses the receiving entity not only with quietly spoken words, but more importantly, also through actions. For ceremonies to achieve their purpose, it is important that actions are performed in the correct way, and, as Charles Piot (1999: 101) stresses for the Kabre, they need to be seen by others.

In December 1995, for example, I witnessed the offering of two chickens, one black and the other white, to the ancestors as part of a reconciliation ceremony to end a dispute over an exchanged woman. As usual, the elders of the community gathered and continuously commented on the proceedings. An important part of their role is to supervise the actions of the younger men who actually perform the ceremony or offering (Figure 4). It is crucial to get the actions right, since otherwise, the purpose of the ceremony may not be achieved. In this way, each ritual performance provides a learning experience for younger men who in the future will become the authoritative voices in shaping ceremonies themselves.

Later, I learnt that the problems with the exchanged woman continued and that the man who had initially provoked the dispute retained an unrepentant attitude. The elders of the community then came to the conclusion that this man,

who had helped to perform the ceremony, must have deliberately changed an action in such a way that the purpose of the offering could not be achieved, but without the elders noticing it.

The ritual action of an offering is not only visually important during the actual proceedings; its result also leaves visible traces in the form of white stains left by the offered mixture of sorghum beer and flour, as well as blood, feathers or fur, and skulls, on and above shrines (Huber 1968, 1973). In addition, the person in charge of a ceremony attaches a bracelet of fur or feathers on a string around the wrist or below the knee of the person for whom the offering had been done. This material and visual evidence of the proceedings had already been noticed and commented on by early explorers (Preil 1909: 136). It serves as a reminder of ritual actions both to the wider community and the transmaterial being for which the offering had been made. Furthermore, the bracelet should remind transmaterial beings of their ritual obligation to the person who wears it, and also warn them of potential consequences, should they seek to harm the people who wear them.

The eye, then, is crucial in everyday life. It allows people to acquire knowledge and it is indispensable for witnessing what is happening in the community. In a transmaterial way, the eye also allows people to see beyond the materiality of bodies and things, an area where vision beyond the visible becomes not only possible, but also important.

Dreams: Seeing Beyond the Material

Material things surround people in the Commune of Cobly and serve them as visual reminders of the importance of aspects of the world they cannot usually see with their eyes. Transmaterial beings bring the two aspects of the world – the more and the less visible parts – together, making the less visible materially manifest and thus accessible to the eyes of people. Even though people in the Commune of Cobly make a clear distinction between the more and the less visible parts of the world, there is no strict division (cf. Lohmann 2003b: 206; Nyamnjoh 2001; H. G. West 2007: 47-48). Indeed, the two aspects constantly interfere and encroach on each other. For instance, transmaterial beings – whether shrine entities, ancestors or the *siyawesi* bush beings – not only have a transmaterial pres-

ence, they can also choose to become visible to the eyes of normal people and directly interact with them (S. Merz forthcoming), while some people, as I show below, can also penetrate the less visible part of the world. Thus, it seems appropriate to think of these two parts of the world as more and less visible, stressing that they are interdependent and overlap, thereby affecting and infecting each other. They are both part of what I call the world of agentive relationality (Chapter 2).

People associate the material and visible part of the world more often with the day, when the eyes dominate vision. During the day people can interact with what happens in the less visible part of the world thanks to the presence of transmaterial things and bodies, for example by providing offerings to transmaterial beings. In order to be able to do so, however, people need to know beforehand what is happening in the less visible part of the world, how they or their families are involved in these developments and how they need to react to them appropriately. Since knowledge is mainly gained through vision, what is happening in the less visible world also needs to be learned visually.

During the night the effectiveness of the eyes is greatly reduced and most people find this limiting and often intimidating. Reduced sight also means a diminished knowledge of what is happening around them. This limited night sight becomes completely obscured when people sleep with their eyes closed, leaving them oblivious to what is happening around them. At the same time, however, people recognise that when they sleep at night they often dream, which they explain through their *kebodike* (animating force) leaving their inert body and wandering around, while maintaining a link with the body. A very few people also link dreams to inner thoughts. During dreams *kebodike* takes over the relational and visual functions from the material body by interacting with the *sibosi* (pl. of *kebodike*, animating force) of other sleeping people, as well as ancestors, other transmaterial beings and witches. This can result in a kind of out-of-body experience that seems sometimes to be more profound than experiences people have while being awake (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937: 136-137; Fortes 1987: 267-268; Ingold 2000: 100; Lohmann 2003a, 2003b; Pype 2011: 85; R. Shaw 1992; Swanson 1985: 98-101).

Due to its transmateriality, *kebodike* is not restrained by spatiotemporal limitations of the more visible world and can sometimes travel great distances and perceive future events. Through *kebodike*, dreaming becomes experiential and relational, since people can more actively participate in the less visible world by seeing, hearing and sometimes talking to shrine entities, witches and ancestors, and for Christians, also to demons and the Holy Spirit. “During the night”, as the young man Jérémy sums it up, “it’s your *kebodike* that sees what’s happening and during the day it’s your proper body that sees” (interview, 8 Feb. 2011).

Dreams (*tidɔɔsite*, plural word without sg.), then, are an important part of life, of seeing and of gaining knowledge (cf. Goodale 2003: 163; Lohmann 2000: 81-83; B. Meyer 2006a: 301-302; Pype 2011: 90; Robbins 2004a: 134; R. Shaw 1992). Some dreams can be even more important than what the eye sees, since, as Tim Ingold puts it, “the world is opened up to the dreamer, it is *revealed*” (2000: 101, emphasis in original), or, as I prefer to say, made present.

Some dreams can help people because they are predictive (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 378-386; Pype 2011: 88). Yantékoua, a church elder, explains why dreams are important:

... sometimes you dream when you plan to travel somewhere. When you sleep you dream and you see that if you go to this place, it wouldn’t be good. The following day you say to yourself: ‘I’ve dreamt and if it’s like this I’d better not travel...’ If it weren’t for the dreams, maybe you’d go and you wouldn’t come back (interview, 24 Jan. 2012).

Other dreams have standard interpretations that are widely recognised (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937: 382-283; Spyer 2000: 254), which often predict either birth or death. If people dream of somebody catching frogs, it is a sign that a girl will be born while catching a specific type of fish means that the child will be a boy. People often take dreams that involve a yam field or house construction as a sign for a coming death in the family, while being offered food in a dream means that a witch tries to poison you (cf. Maurice 1986: 433-434). More recently, people also say that when you dream of sitting in an aeroplane you know that a witch has caught you.

More generally, people in the Commune of Cobly acknowledge that dreams are direct experiences of the present or sometimes the future. The challenge of

dreams is that they are not always clear, since entities are not always identifiable and if they are, they may not readily have equivalents in the more visible world. When people can make sense of dreams, however, even partially, they interpret them just as any other experiential entity, in a way that becomes describable through presencing. Even though entities identified in dreams are not material as such they can still be transmaterial by refusing to be interpreted as structured signs (see Chapter 2). At times, a dream entity can identify something material. A stone seen in a dream, for example, may be identified with a material stone that itself is identical to a transmaterial shrine entity. In this way the more and the less visible parts of the world become linked and intertwined to the extent that life depends on both parts. To sum up, for most people in the Commune of Cobby dreams are part of the world of agentive relationality since they are direct manifestations of various relationships.

In spite of the importance of dreams, most people do not consider them a reliable way of seeing and knowing what is happening beyond the material and do not always feel the need to act after having dreamt. Sometimes dreams are incomplete, imprecise, vague and at times simply too weird. This is why many people take dreams as a sign that something is happening in the less seen aspect of the world that needs to be further investigated by visiting diviners (Huber 1973: 389). Especially when bad or weird things happen in dreams, or when people feel attacked or pursued, some sort of ritual action might be required in order to avoid serious sickness or even death. To figure these things out, people seek the advice of specialists who have transvisual powers, by which I mean the gift for vision beyond the material.

Transvisuality

Dreams are a form of what I call “transvisuality”, since they allow people to see beyond the material, not only in a transmaterial sense, but also in a visual way. People in the Commune of Cobby often call a heightened ability to see beyond the material as having a second sight or as being able to see with a second pair of eyes (cf. Danfulani 1999: 175; Geschiere 1997: 1, 2013: 72; Henry 2008: 102; Nyamnjoh 2001: 43; Pype 2012: 42; Robbins 2004a: 140; R. Shaw 2002: 104). Transvisuality is linked both to peoples’ *mtakime* (identity) and *kebodike* (animat-

ing force). Some have a particularly strong *kebodike*, which renders their dreams more reliable. People who can truly claim to have two sets of eyes, however, often gain them through their predestined *mtakime*. Among those transvisual specialists are seers and witches, but diviners and pastors can be counted among them as well, even though their transvisuality is limited to when they make use of either divination or the Word of God. As Sewane (2003: 405) expresses it, diviners are tamed and approachable seers. Generally, however, transvisuality merits great respect since it can make present what is hidden and normally not seen with the eyes (cf. Robbins 2004a: 139-140).

Even though people do not presently call on their services as often as they used to, diviners (*bepaasibe*, sg. *upaaso*) remain among the most important people in the Commune of Cobly (Huber 1973: 388-392; cf. R. Blier 1991; Dittmer 1958; Maurice 1986: 445-446; Sewane 2003: 405-433; Tait 1952). They are able to provide people with transvisual access to the lesser-seen world, to figure out what happens there, to diagnose problems and how to remedy them. A diviner often suggests an offering to a specific transmateral being who needs to be compensated and conciliated in one way or another. Dreams are not the only reason for visiting diviners. Among other motives are sickness, accidents, infertility, misfortune, as well as important steps in life, especially around birth and death. The divination process consists of throwing cowry shells combined with the movements of the diviner's staff and is thus largely visual (Bloch 2008: S28-S29), although verbal components of asking questions are equally important.

Diviners only become transvisual when they pick up their staff. Even then, their special vision does not come so much from their own ability to see, but is rather given to the diviner through the *siyawesi* bush beings with whom they work. The *siyawesi* are thoroughly transvisual themselves and are said to gain their knowledge directly from *Uwienu* (God). The diviner, in the end, merely relays messages from God, which people acknowledge by talking about "going to *Uwienu*" when they seek to consult a diviner (Huber 1973: 389; S. Merz forthcoming).

These days, most Christians do not frequent diviners any more, since they feel that they can access God directly. Many also demonise the *siyawesi* bush beings on whom diviners rely for mediation (S. Merz forthcoming). Dreams, however, do

remain important for Christians, especially those with a Pentecostal orientation (see, e.g., Charsley 1992; Coleman 2000: 126; Henry 2008: 112; Kiernan 1985; Lohmann 2000, 2003b, 2010; B. Meyer 1998a: 331, 1999b: 159; Pype 2011; Robbins 2004a: 134). In the Commune of Cobby, Christians often say that dreams either come from God, who wants to show them something important, occasionally in a predictive or prophetic way, or they come from the devil (cf. Charsley 1992: 169), which manifest themselves as spiritual attacks. For Christians, dreams are usually revelations of the spiritual realm, which show them that spirits and demons act for or against them. For many Christians the spiritual realm has at least to some degree become disentangled from the world under the influence of spiritualisation and materialisation (see Chapter 2).

Paul, who leads a village congregation of the *Assemblées de Dieu*, claims: “When a follower of God has bad dreams, he needs to pray or inform the pastor and other people of his church. ... They will help you to pray until the bad dreams disappear” (interview, 7 Mar. 2012). When Christians in the Commune of Cobby talked with me about their dreams they usually mentioned nightmares that need to be prayed for. Consequently, most Christians pray before going to sleep, and claim that this brings them relief and assures a quiet night. In difficult cases Christians sometimes mention their dreams during church services or they directly seek the help and prayers of pastors or other experienced Christians (cf. Pype 2011: 86). Pastors are often said to be powerful, as they have the *mtakime* of God or the Bible. While some pastors are truly transvisual and claim to be able to see witches and demonic activity (J. Merz 2008: 214-215; B. Meyer 2004b: 104, 2005: 282, 2006a: 302; Pype 2012: 42), most are more like diviners who gain transvisual insights indirectly through drawing on the Word of God and/or the Holy Spirit.

While not all people are happy to count diviners and pastors among transvisual or “seeing” people, it is undisputed that the *benbuo* (sg. *unbuo*, lit. the seer) are the true seers who are transvisual through their given *mtakime* (identity; Sewane 2003: 390-406). There are many stories about them and people usually say that they mainly existed in the past. Today, there are only a few *benbuo* left and those who are true seers would never admit it. Consequently, I have not knowingly met anyone who could be called a true seer. In spite of this, it is important to briefly summarise what people mean when they talk about true seers.

The true seers are powerful, since they are permanently transvisual, thereby allowing them to experience *tidɔɔsite* (dreams) both when asleep and awake. *Tidɔɔsite*, I need to add, is a word that covers dreams and visions (cf. Kiernan 1985: 306). Many people think that true seers see in a similar way to how normal people dream. Only what they see is clear, reliable and always makes sense. Furthermore, if true seers see future events, they will necessarily happen. True seers can also consciously act and interact with what they see, something that is not usually feasible in normal dreams. When true seers walk in the bush they can see and avoid bad trees that seek to harm unsuspecting people. True seers can also see and identify witches and can thereby protect themselves and their families.

Witches (*uhua*, pl. *behɔɔpɛ*), who mainly seek to catch the *sibosi* (pl. of *kebodike*, animating force) of closely related family members at night, are also transvisual. People often consider them a kind of true seer and sometimes specify that they are “the true seers of the night”, since most people think that they do not usually see during the day (cf. R. Shaw 2002: 207).

People in the Commune of Cobly, then, have a keen sense of seeing with their own eyes. Seeing, however, goes well beyond the material, both in a transmaterial sense as recognising what is identified with materiality, and in a transvisual sense of dreams and visions through a “second pair” of eyes. The main purpose of seeing, whether in the more or less visible parts of the word, is to acquire knowledge, to be better equipped to live in the world of agentive relationality and to contribute to peoples’ wellbeing and success in life.

Shadows and Images of the Dead

The keen interest in seeing is crucial to understanding how people in the Commune of Cobly have come to appreciate photographs, film and videos. Such iconic representations, at least from a semiotic perspective, constituted a novelty when they first arrived in the Commune of Cobly during the colonial period. Since it has not been documented how images have been introduced, I present a sketch of their cultural biography, which I base on what people know today and how they remember it.

Today, people call images, drawings, photographs and film pictures *uhensihu* (pl. *tihensite*) in Mbelime, a word they also use for the shadow of people and

things. Their understanding of shadows and images is similar to other societies in Africa and beyond (Goodale 2003: 153; Pype 2012: 147-148; Strother 2013: 198; Werner 2001: 261; Wright 2004, 2008). When a person moves, the shadow moves too and people are well aware of the link between light and shadow. People are pleased to see their shadow, since this means that they are alive. Corpses, people claim, have lost their shadow together with *kebodike* (animating force). This conforms to their experience, since corpses are kept inside and are then wrapped in a cloth before being transported to the graveyard on a stretcher or, only since recently, sometimes in a coffin (S. Merz 2013: 29-33). Hence, people do not see the corpses' shadows, but only those of cloth, stretchers or coffins.

The shadow, then, is part of the life of people. It is tied to *kebodike* (cf. Swanson 1985: 105), and for some even covers it. People often say that a witch first needs to catch the shadow of people before she can reach *kebodike*. I found that people's knowledge of the purpose of the shadow is quite vague (cf. S. Merz 2013: 21) and reminiscent of Meyer Fortes' (1987: 268) brief statement that it was not significant among the Tallensi. In spite of this I found that practically everybody knows that the shadow necessarily accompanies a live body. Some add that it protects and guides a person. Others go as far as saying that the shadow is a kind of double of a person, thereby ascribing transmaterial qualities to what they actually see with their eyes. It is this idea that helps to explain why people also identify shadows with images.

Sewane observed for Betammaribe communities: "To represent a person through an image, pictorial or otherwise, amounts to catching his or her shadow" (2003: 20, translation mine). Since people feared that they would die as a result of this, they did not want to be photographed (Sewane 2003: 437; Strother 2013; see also Burke 2002: 43; Gell 1998: 102; Larkin 2008: 40-41; Spyer 2001; Werner 2001; Wright 2004).

Several research participants in and around Cobly demonstrated that this kind of thinking has also been present in the Commune, mainly in the past. Bertin, a councillor of a village chief, shares:

Many people didn't want their photo to be taken. They thought that if the whites took their photo and returned with it to their country, they could kill them. Others

said that if the whites ... take your photo and they want you, they would see you” (interview, 14 Jun. 2012).

A few specify, however, that catching a shadow would not necessarily lead to death. Emmanuel, an older ex-Catholic, for example, explains:

When a witch catches someone, she catches the shadow first. Similarly, people were afraid when their photos were taken. I know that a witch first catches the shadow of somebody before she can reach the human proper [and kill] (interview, 20 Feb. 2012).

People only die when they also lose *kebodike*, and simply taking a photograph could not do this. The real danger, then, was that the whites would be able to gain control of people through their *uhensihu* (shadow-image). Thus enabled, the whites could more easily catch people whose photographs they owned, imprison them and even kill them (Ashforth 2005: 231-235; Behrend 2003, 2009; Pepper 2013: 10; Werner 2001).

Consistent with transmaterial presencing that describes life in a world of agentive relationality, people identify an image with its iconic and indexical content, thereby making it present as a single entity. C. S. Peirce (1940: 106; see also Bell 2008: 134-135; Crossland 2009: 73; Werner 2001; Wollen 1972: 123-124; Strother 2013: 199-200) already acknowledged that an indexical link exists between photographs and the depicted. For people in the Commune of Coby, this indexical link between sign and referent of the photograph ceases to be relevant to the extent that the photograph becomes the transmaterial identification of the person portrayed. This can even be maintained after death, as Albert, an older owner of a Tigare shrine states:

This is the work of the *uhensihu* [shadow] of humans: When people see somebody who's already dead, you know that it has to be his shadow. Sometimes somebody's shadow stays behind in the village while he himself has already left (interview, 12 May 2011).

Albert makes allusion to the dead sometimes appearing to people and even talking to them. When this happens, it is usually older and powerful men who appear to their friends away from the deceased's home village. The friends, at the time of the meeting, did not know yet that the person they talk to had in fact

died. Usually, they learn later what really happened and then know that it was not the flesh and blood person that they had encountered.

Similarly, photographic portraits preserve images of people and make them visible and memorable even after death (Vokes 2008; Wendl 1998). Jeffrey Sconce (2000) argues that one of the main features of electronic media technology is its disembodiment stance. By recording and transmitting images and sound, technology removes them from the physical and bodily existence of people, but maintains them as a disembodied signal that can be transmitted, printed, projected and displayed. In this sense, electronic media technology promotes the processes of spiritualisation and materialisation as a form of semiotification (Chapter 2).

In the Commune of Cobly, then, a shadow-image that exists without a body has come to stand for the dead who are separated from their bodies as well. Accordingly, a large majority of the research participants claimed that when films and later television first arrived in the area it was assumed that they showed exclusively *behidibe* (dead people or ancestors), similar to how the people of Gapun village, Papua New Guinea, watched videos (Kulick and Willson 1994: 8). Kedanti, for example, the oldest man who participated in my research and had little experience of films, found it hard to follow the films. He stated, however, that he recognised the dead in the films because “they lowered their heads” (interview, 25 Mar. 2010). More generally, Sconce observes that “the TV set in particular can take on the appearance of a haunted apparatus” (2000: 4). Contrary to Papua New Guinea, however, where seeing ancestors in videos caused considerable excitement (Kulick and Willson 1994: 8), in the Cobly area there was a widespread reluctance, or even fear, of experiencing the disembodied images and sounds of films or television. Doing so could unknowingly expose people to seeing the ancestor who has reincarnated them. The old man Kombiénou explains why people need to be careful:

This is what we say: The children are here and they watch TV. You know, those who have died reincarnate in the children. If it's the one who has reincarnated you and you see him like this [on TV], what will happen? Won't you fall? You will fall (interview, 11 Jan. 2011).

Emmanuel, the older ex-Catholic, explains further:

If your *kebodike* is weak and you see somebody dead on TV you will worry that this might be someone with whom you share the same reincarnated ancestor. Maybe it's also the one who has reincarnated you that you saw on TV. Either way, this is why our parents were afraid of watching TV (interview, 20 Feb. 2012).

People thought that watching films or television could have the same effects as attending the burial or secondary funeral of a deceased with whom somebody shares a common reincarnated ancestor and hence the same *mtakimε*. This is possible since an ancestor can reincarnate several times. Gaston, a young Christian man, describes the possible effects: "If you see [the dead on TV], ... you could fall and start to tremble. That's how it was. Others would start to cry" (interview, 6 Jan. 2011). This fear stems from the possibility that the reincarnated ancestor of the dead person seeks to retrieve the *mtakimε* from the other living people he or she has reincarnated if they too are present at the burial or funeral (S. Merz 2013: 24-25; Sewane 2001, 2003: 85). Before a burial a diviner will announce the names of those who should not attend due to the reincarnated ancestor they share with the deceased. For watching films, however, even a diviner could not advise which ancestors might appear and who should stay away. So it was deemed best by most not to watch films and television at all. Sometimes people were even suspicious of photographs of the dead and the potential harm they could do, and destroyed the photographs of people who died.

Timothy Burke observes: "From the moment of its invention, film has provoked intense anxieties in every society exposed to it" (2002: 43). Such anxiety never lasted very long, as people quickly realised that there is in fact no danger in watching films and keeping photographs of the deceased (cf. Burns 2000: 197; Larkin 2008: 43; B. Meyer 2003a: 206). During my reception research in one of the villages in 2010 I met some elderly people who preferred not to watch television or videos. The large majority, however, watched keenly, even if the question of seeing the dead remained a topic that required at least some discussion before and during the video showings.

In today's Commune of Cobly people no longer only associate photographs and videos with the dead. Consequently, together with television, they have become important, widespread and popular. In the next section I analyse this development and illustrate how people now use photographs of the dead.

Shadows and their Photographic Presence

Uhensihu, the image-shadow, remains ambiguous due to the double usage of the word. Z. S. Strother (2013: 199) stresses that using a single word for two different things does not mean that these things come to be seen as identical. During my interviews, however, none of the research participants was able to explain the difference between shadow and image in a way that I found satisfactory. In spite of this, people know that neither photograph nor video can actually take away a person's shadow. Many also make a distinction between photographs and shadows by stating that in photographs people are identifiable, while their shadow is vague and does not allow recognition of the person with whom it is associated. Some also notice that a photograph and television can show both the person *and* the shadow of the person. Furthermore, while shadows cannot speak, the images of people seen on television do speak. On the other hand, especially older people who retain a limited experience of photographs and films, often simply claim that there was no difference between image and shadow. The apparently contradictory views clearly indicate the ambiguous status of shadows and photographs, which appear similar and different at the same time.

According to Rigobert, a well-connected Cobly resident (interview, 21 Aug. 2013), some people are starting to wonder whether people have two or even three shadows. This then would allow for photographs *and* shadows to exist at the same time, while remaining identified with the same person. What I find interesting is that there does not seem to be any indication that people semiotise photographs by accepting them as multiplications or copies of shadows made by technology. Rather, portrait photographs seem to be direct and agentive extensions of people (Gell 1998: 223) that continue to exist as part of them. The role of technology, then, is not to produce iconic representations of people, but rather, its purpose is transvisual in nature, namely to make visible to the eye what is not normally seen.

This discussion compels me to conclude that photographs are increasingly identified with the people they iconically depict, in the same way that shadows are seen as intricate parts of people. Photographs, then, are in the process of altering subjectivity (Vokes 2008, 2012; Werner 2001). They do not only visualise people, but actually come to constitute them, to the extent that there can be an actual connection to, and even identification with, the person depicted in them

(Vokes 2012: 224; Wright 2004, 2008: 375). Humans thus continue to be intertwined with the material aspects of the world of agentive relationality; their *mtakime* is no longer only directly linked to the earth mounds in front of houses (the *akunpe*, see Chapter 2), but photographs now offer a further possibility to become entangled in the (trans)materiality of the world.

In the Commune of Coby, to have a photographic portrait of oneself becomes important for being properly human, even if life as such remains possible without one. Photographs become particularly significant after someone has died. Indeed, today, people sometimes go to great efforts to procure nicely framed and enlarged photographs of themselves and their elderly parents before they die, for which they sometimes solicit my services.

Photographs of the dead have come to play an important role in burials, as is the case in southern Benin (Noret 2010: 123, 131). During burials, photos are put on public display in front of the house in which the body is prepared for interment (Figure 7). Then, a direct relative of the deceased, often a grandchild, accompanies the body to the grave while carrying the photograph. During the actual burial, the photograph is held in such a way that the photographic eyes can “see” the proceedings (Figures 8 and 9). The importance given to the proximity of body and photograph during a burial indicates a process during which the dead are allowed to shift their primary identification from body to photograph. This process becomes even more important when considering that at least some people think “that it is the person’s *uhensihu* (shadow[, image, photo]) that becomes the ancestor” (S. Merz 2013: 38). The burial thereby becomes a liminal ceremony that provides an important step for a deceased person becoming an ancestor. Viewed in this light, ritual actions around shadows and images of the dead are not new as such, but rather materialisations and visualisations of views already held. I thus agree with Zoë Crossland’s observation that both photographs and corpses “work within a similar semiotic field” (2009: 73), since they can make present a person who is absent, not only by combining iconicity with indexicality, but also by making them present.

After the burial, the photograph is returned on public display and later receives a prominent place on a wall in the house of one of the deceased’s widowed spouses or children, preferably the living room, as is the case in southern Benin

(Noret 2010: 131). During the secondary funeral, often several years later, the photograph of the deceased who is celebrated is again put on public display (Figure 10).

When I asked the research participants why photographs of the deceased are so important, the sole reason they gave was that they wanted their children to remember their grandparents (cf. Haney 2010: 144-147; Sprague 1978; Wendl 1998; Wright 2004, 2008). Marleen de Witte (2011) has observed a similar trend in southern Ghana, where photographs and other photographic derivatives of the dead have proliferated and become an essential part of any funeral. She argues that viewing ancestors in terms of remembrance partly “diverges from earlier anthropological understanding of ancestors as spiritual entities constructed by a whole cycle of rituals” (2011: 184).

Remembering the dead has been a preoccupation for a long time. People have provided them with bodies in the form of clay mounds, which make them present, so that their children can interact with them (Figure 4; Chapter 2). Such interaction takes on very material forms through ritual actions and leave material traces by which these actions could be remembered (see above). To extend the identification of ancestors with clay shrines to photographs marks an important change from the more material to the more visual and from action to remembrance.

As in other forms of mediatic mediation, photographs draw people’s attention to their iconic nature, thereby downplaying their material existence (Wright 2004). They make specific ancestors present in a dematerialised and thus disembodied way that does not require ritual action, but allows them to be present in houses in more intimate and personal ways than before. This process also shifts the dematerialised remembering of photographs towards the secular, while shrines gain a stronger association with the religious. Shrines, whether people understand them as more transmaterial or symbolic, continue to offer a space of ritual actions where offerings can be presented to ancestors.

Often, people see photographs and shrines as complementary, but especially in the more urbanised and Christianised areas, such as the town of Cobby, photographs of the dead now often replace ancestor shrines. Christians are strongly discouraged from maintaining the shrines of their fathers and mothers, which are associated with idolatry and backwardness. When it comes to photographs of the

dead, however, Christians can keep them for the sake of remembering them (cf. Wright 2004: 82). What makes photographs more acceptable than shrines is that there is no ritual action involved and both photographs and Christianity are associated with *upaanu* (the new times) and the whites. Yet, photographs of the dead do not remain without critique. Pierre, the retired pastor astutely observes:

When they look at photos [of the dead], they see their father again. Some even worship photos. ... If we are not careful, in due time, people will abandon *behidibe* [the ancestors and their shrines] in order to worship images. Then, it will be just what God said: 'do not worship images'. For Christians it's even worse than for pagans. ... My children too want my photo to enlarge. They will keep it to venerate me (interview in French, 2 Mar. 2011).

I claim that photographs and other iconic images add a stronger visual dimension to an already material world, which I see as being part of the wider processes of semiotification that characterise colonial modernity (Chapter 2). In order to account for this, I need to differentiate and elaborate on the interplay of presencing principles that people draw on. Especially within the semiotic presencing principle the more specifically iconic traits come more into focus for the presencing of photographs and other iconic images.

While diabolisation and materialisation devalue shrines and their role in peoples' lives, secular differentiation favours photographs as the current way of remembering the ancestors. This can lead to a less transmaterial and more symbolic view of ancestors in the sense that they are no longer directly identified with their shrines or photographs, but rather exist independently. Joshua Bell, for example, observes for Papua New Guinea that "these images may become vessels in which the deceased's spirit resides" (2008: 128), while their iconicity still allows them to remember specific dead individuals. Such a semiotically symbolic view becomes especially prevalent in urbanised and Christianised areas (B. Meyer 2010b). On the other hand, I need to stress, a stronger emphasis on semiotic presencing of photographs does not exclude people also using the transmaterial presencing principle at the same time. Indeed, for many people in the Commune of Coby the importance of photographs does not lie in the exact iconic representation of people, but rather in their transmaterial nature. Photographs help people to see beyond the visual and material. In recent years it has become popular to have

photographs digitally enhanced to show and make present the importance accorded to the people depicted in them.

For instance, Touga's community priest died in August 2013. For his burial, the family displayed two portrait photographs, one that I had taken in 2005 and another more recent one that was digitally remade, following an established photographic tradition of alteration, collage and montage (Behrend 2001: 48; Haney 2010: 82-89; Wendl 1998). The photographer extracted and disembodied the head from the deceased's portrait or passport photograph, which he then electronically overlapped with a lavishly clad body. The community priest's new photographic body is sitting in a leather armchair on the lawn of an urban up-market house in a way that looks as if it is hovering over the lawn (Figure 11). The new portrait is reminiscent of the ones of Yoruba chiefs (Sprague 1978), which I can explain through the influence of Yoruba portrait photography across West Africa, with Parakou in northern Benin having become an important centre for photography (Nimis 2013).

These digitally manipulated photographs, like the special effects in Nollywood videos (Chapters 3 and 5), look somewhat crude and unreal to my iconically conditioned eyes, even though they are clearly appealing for people who stress transmaterial presencing. They bring together the iconically identifiable and individual face with an enhanced transmaterial body and its surroundings that demonstrate that the deceased was indeed an important and successful person in life and in death (cf. Edwards and Hart 2004: 13-14). In the case of the deceased community priest this almost seems ironic, since during his life, he would never have dressed in this pompous way, because he would have thought that this was inappropriate for his position. This further demonstrates that photographs remain transmaterial and transvisual, rather than becoming secular and iconically representative. Digital manipulation actually enhances a photograph's credibility, since it provides additional transmaterial traits about a person's life that an unaltered photograph could not, thereby rendering them more accurate than mere representative photographs. De Witte has summarised this for southern Ghana: "Funerary photography ties into an African visual culture in which images do not so much represent, but rather contain – and thus render present – something of the person or object depicted" (2011: 202; see also Behrend 2003: 131). In this sense photo-

graphs of the dead come to function very much like the transmaterial shrines of the ancestors (cf. Förster 2013: 416; Wright 2008), which they complement or sometimes replace, adding a new dimension of iconicity to the growing importance of visibility. Photographs, like things, transmaterial beings and people become entangled in the world of agentive relationality (cf. Bell 2008: 124-125, 134). Their agentive presence marks their relation with people, making the dead memorable and rendering them transmaterially present through visibility, rather than through performative ritual actions.

When discussing photographs, films and videos, it is also important to look at their production, circulation and distribution, for which technology plays a crucial role. To explain how technology works for people in the Commune of Cobly, I need to return to the materiality of electronic media technology, focusing on the television set, one of the most popular pieces of electronic technology.

Television Between Thing and Transmaterial Being

A television set is marked by its man-made material presence (Morley 1995: 184), which fades into the background when it is turned on to show the life of animated photographic images. It is clear to everyone I interviewed in the Commune of Cobly, that television is essentially different from any other man-made thing, such as a knife or a drinking calabash, since it is also an ambiguous thing that displays images of visible but intangible life.

Today, people, who really like television and actively seek to watch it regularly, or have a set themselves, are often able to articulate their views in more detail. On the basis of such descriptions I attempt to trace the television's cultural biography in the Commune of Cobly. In doing so I focus on television's material existence and life as people view it, who can be described as favouring the use of the transmaterial presencing principle.

With its global importance, it is striking that the materiality of television sets continues to be largely ignored, in spite of repeated calls to the contrary (McCarthy 2001; Morley 1995). This demonstrates the persistent Euro-American reductionism of television to an audiovisual medium that overlooks the fact that a medium "is also a 'thing' in its own right" (Keane 1997: 8; see also McCarthy 2001: 96). Some authors touch on the importance of placing a television set in a visible

location and surrounding it with family photographs, religious images and even shrines (Ba 1999: 25-26; J. Ellis 1992: 113; Leal 1990; Lyons 1990; Morgan 1998: 167; Morley 1995; Werner 2006: 166-169, 2012: 98). Others have drawn more or less direct parallels between television sets and shrines themselves (Gillespie 1995a: 362; Lyons and Lyons 1987: 131-132; J. Merz 2014; J. Mitchell 2005; Pype 2012: 157). Furthermore, American televangelists are known to use television sets to transfer spiritual power by encouraging their audiences to touch the screen (Coleman 1996: 119; Hendershot 2004: 3; Morgan 2007: 223; Sconce 2000: 174), a practice that has also been picked up in Africa (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004: 74, 2005: 23; Hackett 1998: 267; Marshall-Fratani 1998: 295; Pype 2012: 148). These brief observations, however, have not been satisfactorily analysed and raise many questions about televisions sets, especially concerning their materiality and transmateriality.

It is hard to know exactly what people in the Commune of Coby made of electronic media technology when they first encountered it, since radios, televisions or mobile phones have already become an integral part of everyday life for most of them. The first item of technology that became generally known in northwestern Benin was the radio. It can be characterised as an inanimate thing that speaks of its own accord and has – like a television set – something ambiguous about it, since it presents seemingly disembodied voices (Sconce 2000). A radio shows remarkable parallels with a divination gourd and rattle (*kepasidenke*, pl. *sipasidensi*), which a specific kind of *upaaso* (diviner) uses. This gourd is said to contain *siyawesi* bush beings who allow diviners to see. I witnessed such a divination session in 1997 with a diviner who has since died. The diviner shook his gourd rhythmically and called the *siyawesi* by their names. Then, he engaged them in an audible conversation by asking questions on behalf of his client. The *siyawesi* responded in a faint and high-pitched, almost squeaky voice (cf. Maurice 1986: 450). While Richard Swanson (1985: 230-231) has observed this kind of divination among Gourmantché communities too, it is a practice that is fading away and mainly lingers in some people's memories. Pierre, the retired pastor (interview, 2 Mar. 2011), claims that many people who still knew about this phenomenon believed analogically that the radio contained some sort of beings that spoke like the *siyawesi* bush beings of the divination gourds. Since people knew that radios

had come from the whites, they called it *kepïenpasiké* (pl. *sipenpasi*), which translates as “the white man’s divination”. This word is still used today, even though a radio is now also referred to by the French loanword *radio*. The discussion of the radio shows that the device, man-made though it may be, can also be identified with the *kebodike* and *mtakime* it contains (cf. Spitulnik 1998: 74-75). According to this view radios provide inanimate bodies to some sort of beings; they become similar to transmaterial beings.

Pierre asserts that especially illiterate farmers would have a parallel understanding of the television set with the radio and the divination gourd as being inhabited by some kind of people, a view sometimes presented in literature (see, e.g., Ba 1999: 21; Woodhead 1987). As with photographs this smells of a simplistic view that Catherine, who attended secondary school, correctly dismisses: “If you broke the TV you won’t see any people inside. It is their silhouettes [shadows] that are there and that we follow” (interview in French, 12 Feb. 2012; see also Larkin 2008: 9).

Many people can explain that a television set is made from plastic and a “mirror” or screen. Some younger people also know that there is more to television than meets the eye: There are wires, coils and bits of metal inside, which sometimes break and need to be replaced. Generally, people are aware that some form of electricity is needed, either via a generator when operated in a village, or through a connection to mains, when used in the more urban town of Cobly. People also know that in order to get images you need to put a *cassette* (Video CD or DVD) into a player or connect an antenna or satellite dish to the television.

Some of the more educated people in Cobly know that television sets are made in factories in China or Japan and are then shipped to Africa to be sold as commodities. For them the production of television sets relies on tools and machines and has become a matter of science and technical knowledge (Appadurai 1986). Because of such views, television sets are essentially secular things that are losing their lives, a process that has affected other things, such as knives, drinking calabashes or plastic containers before them.

Even in their semiotified existence, however, television retains at least some of its transmaterial characteristics due to its ambiguous and complex existence, as Sconce (2000) has shown for America. Although the more educated continue to be

fascinated by television, they often judge television as also having significant disadvantages. They know from experience that a television set is an expensive but fragile device that can break. Getting it repaired is difficult and often costly, as it needs to be taken to a repairman in one of the larger cities. A television also consumes power, which becomes manifest when the monthly electricity bill arrives.

Technical knowledge does not only come through first hand experience of using television sets, but, according to Appadurai (1986: 41), is also linked to the spatial, temporal and social distance between technology's production and consumption sites. This helps to explain why many of the people who attribute life to television sets have a more limited technical knowledge, which is largely influenced by socio-culturally informed stories. This does not hinder people from having a good idea of what television is and what it is good for, nor does it exclude that they remain uncertain how exactly the life of television works. While most content themselves with this, some come up with theories that are based on what people already know about things.

A few people give an explicitly anthropomorphic explanation of the life of television (cf. Guthrie 1993; Spigel 1992: 50). Accordingly, television has *mtakime* and *kebodike* and is directly linked to humans. Sambiénou, an old diviner, claims: "They have put a person inside. It's like air that is inside and that works. Some people say it's not a person who's inside, but I say there is a person inside. Everything that exists is like this" (interview, 4 Jan. 2011).

For others a television set is like a man-made thing, such as a knife or a drinking calabash, that receives its *mtakime* from the person who makes or shapes it, who himself has the *mtakime* of the thing he can make (see Chapter 2; Gell 1998). According to this view, the young man Ntcha confirms that a television set can have *mtakime*: "It's a man who builds a television set. It's him who has taken his *mtakime* and has placed it in the TV before it will work to show us pictures" (interview, 3 Feb. 2011, see also Chapter 2).

Several other people consider television to have *mtakime* and *kebodike* on the basis of what they see on it, namely things that are not usually seen with the naked eye (cf. B. Meyer 2004b; Ukah 2003). The film *Yatin*, for example, shows how witches go about their evil work (Chapters 3 and 5). *Yatin* also visualises the

flow of the powers of witchcraft and counter-witchcraft. In the film *Jesus*, during the scene of Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descends onto his shoulders in the form of a white dove. The film ends with Jesus being seen alive again after he had died and the camera floats up while looking down, implying Jesus' ascension. This kind of visualisation of things normally unseen indicates to many that a television set must be alive, at least to some extent, especially since the images it can show on its screen are sometimes transvisual and seemingly alive. What the television set shows, then, stands in a transmaterial relation to the set as an inanimate thing that is nonetheless alive. For these people it is the ability of electronic media technology to make the less seen aspect of the world accessible that makes it appear to be alive and that haunt it (Sconce 2000).

A further and more elaborate explanation is to directly compare parts needed to operate a television set with the different components of life. Vincent, a young man from a village, explains:

They say that the screen of a TV can't do anything on its own. It can only work because of *kebodike*, which is the CD [or DVD] and *mtakime*, which is the loud-speaker. Then, together with a generator *kebodike* and *mtakime* will make the TV work. There is nothing that works without *mtakime* (interview, 11 Jan. 2011).

For David, a middle-aged church leader, too, a television set remains ambiguous and is clearly alive, although it is not obvious where this life is located. After reflection David concluded that its life must come from the electricity (cf. Behrend 2005: 204), thereby echoing early American views of electricity as a kind of vital force (Sconce 2000: 7).³¹ By switching the set on, it becomes alive and "the electricity then represents the television's spirit [*mtakime*]" (interview in French, 15 Feb. 2011). Others shared the idea that electricity provides a device's *mtakime*, but for David this is not enough to explain the life of electronic devices, as they also need to have *kebodike* in order to live. David continues: "If God has not given the soul [*kebodike*], the body can't start. The spirit [*mtakime*] can be already inside, but it can't start" (interview in French, 15 Feb. 2011). Drawing on the analogy of

³¹ Most people understand electricity as some form of neutral power that can give light, warmth, power a television set, or recharge a mobile phone. In this sense it is not particularly special, just as fire, which together with electricity constitutes the meaning of the Mbelime word *udaku*. In spite of this, electricity has something transmaterial about it, since it remains invisible while relying on a material form.

his motorbike and mobile phone as example devices, David compares the television set's soul (*kɛbodikɛ*) to a battery, which he thinks is needed to start the device. Batteries, as Debra Spitulnik (1998, 2002b) has shown for Zambia, are crucial to the running of electronic devices in rural Africa and receive much attention (see also Larkin 2008: 70-71).

In more general terms, television has sometimes been compared to a kind of shrine (Leal 1990; Lyons and Lyons 1987; J. Merz 2014; Morley 1995). A television set also reminds the Christian woman Baké of “people who have medicines and it's similar to the path of God [Christianity]” (interview, 6 Jan. 2011). She therefore attributes it a clear transmaterial character that removes it from other inanimate things, such as knives and drinking calabashes. A television set can thus be approximated to other kinds of transmaterial beings, that have autonomy and agency of their own and that engage with other things and beings in the world of agentive relationality. For a few who only have a minimal experience of it, television even lacks the ephemeral character of other material things: they think that a television does not stop working and cannot break unless, maybe, when its owner dies.

In spite of this affinity of television sets with transmaterial beings, especially when it is switched on, its man-made and material character remains ever present and is reinforced through its commoditisation. Even when the set is operating, its exact nature remains quite vague and accordingly I have not found anybody who claims that a television could reincarnate in humans as, for example, a shrine entity can. I thus need to conclude that a television set stands somewhere between a man-made and inanimate thing and a transmaterial being, giving its characteristic ambiguity (cf. McCarthy 2001).

The ambiguity of television sets is further accentuated by being something of *upaanu* (the new times) that is intricately associated with the power and the witchcraft of the whites, a topic that I need to explore further.

How Television Sets are Made

For most people in the Commune of Cobly, electronic media technology remains at least somewhat ambiguous, since nobody knows how to make television sets, nor do people know other people who could produce them. Two thirds of the

research participants who addressed the topic during the interviews confirmed that there was a direct link between producing television sets and transvisuality, while the rest usually accredited it to intelligence and knowledge. Everybody agreed, however, that the whites are necessarily involved in the process of making television sets. This view of the extraordinary powers of the whites goes back to colonial times. Administrators, as well as missionaries and sometimes even researchers, actively exploited their technological supremacy by presenting it as superior (Behrend 2003: 132; Gullestad 2007: 270; Larkin 2008: 39, 93; Strother 2013: 186). Technology thus came to be intricately linked to colonial modernity, the whites, and Christianity, or in local terms, *upaanu* (the new times).

I am not surprised, then, that Paul Mercier came across ideas of white technological power in Betammaribe songs. He concludes: “[T]he white man is characterised by the power of his weapons, by his extraordinary technology... [and] by his magical powers that are symbolised *par excellence* by writing and paper” (Mercier 1968: 475, translation mine; see also Jackson 1975: 389; Maurice 1986: 441).

Today, many people in the Commune of Cobly continue to view the whites in an idealistic light, as Robbins (2004a: 47) also reports it for Papua New Guinea. The notion of whiteness, however, “is no longer a matter of skin colour [only] but of social relations and access to different forms of knowledge and material resources” (Gullestad 2007: 272). People in Cobly often include Beninese politicians, administrators, teachers and pastors, especially when they are literate in French, as being part of the whites (cf. Geschiere 2013: 51).

Many people in the Commune of Cobly see the apparent superiority and goodness of the whites as largely God-given and thus part of their destiny and *mtakime* (identity). Several people expressed that they thought that whites were closer to God, or, in the words of an anonymous Otammari (sg. of Betammaribe): “The whites are similar to God!” (Maurice 1986: 441, translation mine). Gnammou, an old man who returned to his village after having lived in the town of Tanguiéta claims: “The whites have followed God and he has given them what is good. Then, they started to show us what is good. Before that we walked in darkness and we didn’t know where to go” (interview, 24 Jan. 2012). For the Christian widow Victorine, “everything that the whites make is just as if it were something that

God himself has made. I don't know what we could make that is as nice as the things the whites make" (interview, 24 Jan. 2012).

Following such views, hardly any of the research participants in the Commune of Coby dispute that television sets and other items of electronic technology come from the "land of the whites", where the whites make them (cf. Boneh 2008: 73). People often told me that the blacks could only operate and sometimes repair a television set. The village elder Kombètto states: "Nobody can make a TV set. At least we here, we can't. But we see that it comes from the whites" (interview, 4 Jan. 2011). A very few were not even sure if the whites could make a television set. The old man Sanhouekoua expresses his doubts as follows: "I don't know if they make TVs in the water or in the sky. I don't know how they do it and I haven't found out how they make a TV" (interview, 11 Feb. 2011).

Most of the research participants who say that the whites can make television sets, link it in one way or another to their knowledge, which they understand to be more powerful and different from that of the blacks. People's explanations of how the whites have gained such knowledge are interesting. A few usually well-educated people directly linked making television sets to people's secular education. If people study enough, they may attain the ability to design and produce electronic technology themselves.

Other people see a television set similarly to any other man-made thing, such as a knife and thus say that only people who have a television's *mtakimε* can produce it. For the moment, only the whites have the *mtakimε* of television and this is why blacks cannot make it. Others think that some blacks have the right *mtakimε* and, although it is not strong enough to make television sets, it is good enough to operate and repair media technology successfully.

Whether people attribute the ability to produce television sets to learnt technical knowledge or a specific *mtakimε* does not exclude the view that those who make them need to be true seers (*benbuo*) in addition. Jonas, a middle-aged man who loves to watch TV, explains this in detail:

He who is able to make a TV is an intellectual who has studied a lot. The one who invented TV knows many things and God's power is at his side during his work. God helps him further in his work while he sleeps by showing him to take this, to take that, and to stick it on this thing. He's an intellectual. You know, it's when he

sleeps that he thinks and he dreams. The next day, he gets up and notes it in a notebook and tries to find the meaning of the dream before he begins his work. He has a book of dreams to which he compares his own dreams to find their meaning. ... I can say that it's thanks to God's power and his studies. This has made it possible for him to make a TV (interview, 21 Feb. 2011).

People in the Commune of Cibly know that true seers can gain knowledge during their dreams and visions, knowledge that remains inaccessible to normal people. When true seers walk in the bush they sometimes see "things" that they want to take home with them. At times a seer learns about roots that can serve as new medicinal substances and then finds them in the bush. Sometimes, seers encounter transmaterial beings of the wild that tempt them. If the seers succumb to this temptation and pick them up, they run the danger of going mad. At other times, however, they succeed in domesticating these beings and turn them into shrine entities. Some of the community shrines have such an origin (Huber 1973: 380; cf. Sewane 2003: 399).

It is from these accounts of true seers who find and learn things during their dreams and visions, that people get the idea of how the whites would be able to acquire the knowledge needed to produce television sets. This also corresponds to a typical and widespread role of dreams, which people understand as making the less seen aspect of the world more visible and accessible. Different anthropologists have documented weavers, sculptors, photographers and others who dream of creative innovations, which they then put into practice in their work (see, e.g., Ashforth 2005: 54; Brett-Smith 1994: 169-170; Charsley 1992: 161; R. M. Dilley 1992; Glaskin 2005; Sprague 1978: 59).

As already indicated, many people in the Commune of Cibly think of witches (*behɔɔpɛ*) as a kind of seer with a more limited transvisuality. Furthermore, people often consider what witches do and how they operate to be more secretive than the ways of the true seers. Normal people do not see how witches go about their work. This renders them not only more suspicious, but also more ambivalent. Séraphin, a well-educated NGO employee for whom a television set is the product of secular and technical knowledge, explains how the power of witches can nonetheless come to be associated with television:

If somebody watched a film for the first time, he doesn't know how it [the television set] has been put together, or how films have been made. He will tell himself that to do this, you need to be a witch. In a figurative sense, this can indeed be compared to a witch (interview in French, 11 Feb. 2011).

Research participants who consider witches to be able to produce television sets in more than a figurative sense often accredit this to their *uhwahu*, the special power usually ascribed to witches, as it has been shown for other parts of Africa (see, e.g., Geschiere 1997: 3; Newell 2007: 468; Pype 2012: 147). Boniface, the owner of a video parlour in one of the villages, explains in more detail: “*Uhwahu* [transvisual power] is with the whites who can make things that will really work, such as TVs. They can make everything. The whites are together with God and this is why they can make TVs” (interview, 15 Jun. 2012).

In talking about the whites' *uhwahu*, however, several research participants stress that this kind of *uhwahu* is linked to the work of the true seers, and not so much to that of the malevolent witches who catch people's *kebodike*. Furthermore, other people stress that there are different kinds of *uhwahu*. Vincent, a young farmer, summarises this view that anthropologists have documented for other parts of Africa (Ashforth 2005: 76; Falen 2007; Geschiere 1997: 252 n.259; Piot 2010: 125; Pype 2012: 147; R. Shaw 2002: 210): “The whites know how to make good things. We, the blacks, when we say *uhwahu*, it's the one that catches people” (interview, 11 Jan. 2011).

Uhwahu is a notion that people usually translate into French as *la sorcellerie* (cf. Geschiere 2013: xviii), and that I have rendered as “witchcraft” elsewhere (J. Merz 1998, 2008). While E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937) introduced the notion of witchcraft to anthropology, Peter Geschiere (1997) and Peter Pels (1998a: 239-245, 1999) have problematised it by arguing that it belongs to modernity (see also Geschiere 2011, 2013; Pels 2003a; Sanders 2003).

The Ambivalence of Witchcraft

Witchcraft became an important area of anthropological study thanks to Evans-Pritchard (1937) who masterfully presented it as a rational and logically consistent way to organise the Azande's lives. His work opened up the field for further functionalist witchcraft studies that investigated how the phenomenon contri-

buted to the functioning of society. His views became influential and guided most of the studies of African witchcraft and sorcery that used a structural-functionalist paradigm.³² Such studies reached their heyday by the 1960s (Douglas 1970). At the same time, modernisation theories suggested that witchcraft beliefs would disappear. Consequently, the study of this apparently anachronistic relic slipped into the anthropological background until the late 1980s. By then, however, it had become evident that witchcraft beliefs had not diminished and that people now used it in seemingly new ways to express modernity by dealing with it as part of politics and the economy (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Fisiy and Geschiere 1991; Geschiere 1997; Rowlands and Warnier 1988). Accordingly, anthropologists recognised the need to revisit the study of witchcraft in light of this development, thereby increasingly discussing the shortfalls of the notion of “witchcraft” itself. Additionally, they now often linked witchcraft to the even wider idea of “the occult”, a notion that increasingly serves as a catchall for the irrational and non-scientific views that continue to mark “Africa” as distinct from the rest of the world (Fisiy and Geschiere 1991; Geschiere 1997, 2011; Henry and Tall 2008; H. L. Moore and Sanders 2001a; Pels 1998a, 2003a: 12-17; Ranger 2007; Sanders 2008).

As elsewhere in Africa (see, e.g., ter Haar 2007), phenomena related to witchcraft continue to be rampant in the Commune of Cobly. Known under the name of *uhw̃w̃hu*, these phenomena remain one of the biggest problems that people experience in everyday life (J. Merz 1998: 51). In and around the town of Cobly, gossip and rumours of *uhw̃w̃hu* continually circulate (cf. Ashforth 2005: 65-69; P. J. Stewart and Strathern 2004), often affecting those closest to suspected practitioners. “Witchcraft”, as Geschiere has famously put it, “is the dark side of kinship” (1997: 11; see also Geschiere 2013).

Studies of African witchcraft have typically described it in moralising terms (Geschiere 1997: 12; J. Merz 2008), and more recently, for example, as a “manifestation of evil believed to come from a human source” (ter Haar 2007: 8). In the Commune of Cobly, people particularly fear the work of the witches (*bɛhw̃w̃pɛ*) who

³² While Evans-Pritchard (1937) introduced the difference between witchcraft and sorcery, I share Roger Sansi and Luis Nicolau Parés’ opinion, who “do not think that an analytical distinction between the terms is tenable” (2011: 6).

allegedly catch and consume people's *sibosi* (pl. of *kebodike*, animating force). Such activities, which John Parker (2006: 363) considers similar in their essentials across the savannah region of West Africa, are generally thought to lead to the victim's death (see, e.g., Drucker-Brown 1993; Maurice 1986: 441-442; J. Merz 1998; Parker 2006; Piot 1999: 68; Swanson 1985: 101-105; Tait 1967; Zwerne-mann 1993).

While I do not want to downplay the negative impact of witchcraft on people's lives, I equally need to stress that I do not understand *uhɔɔhu* as a uniquely evil and destructive force as such (cf. Geschiere 2011: 248). *Uhɔɔhu* can also help witches to protect themselves and their families from the attacks of other witches (see, e.g., Falen 2007; J. Merz 2008: 206; Walker 1979: 130-131), and, "more generally, to succeed in life" (Geschiere 1997: 13). In this sense, witchcraft can be ascribed to people who can do things that normal people cannot, such as producing technology, or succeeding in politics. Some people in Cibly consider past presidents such as Benin's Mathieu Kérékou or Togo's Gnassingbé Eyadéma *sorci-ers*, indicating their tenacity and ability to hold on to power (cf. Danfulani 1999: 172; S. Ellis 1993: 472). Even Jesus is sometimes called a witch or sorcerer, since otherwise he could not have performed the miracles he did (J. Merz 2008: 212; Musopole 1993; see also Chapter 5).

Uhɔɔhu, then, needs to be understood as an ambivalent power, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere (J. Merz 2008; see also Akrong 2007; Danfulani 1999; Falen 2007; Geschiere 1997, 2011; Henry 2008: 102; Henry and Tall 2008: 23; Newell 2007). Accordingly, people in the Commune of Cibly do not fear it for what it is, but rather judge it by what people do with it, thereby shifting the morality of *uhɔɔhu* to those who use it (cf. Mills 2013: 28-29). This is why *uhɔɔhu* can also become something valuable and good. During recent years, Douglas Falen (2007) has observed a change in people's attitude towards witchcraft in southern Benin, with people increasingly seeing it not only as solely evil, but also as a power that can be used for good purposes. While he wonders whether this was a recent development, I propose that it is merely a resurfacing of precolonial views.

B. Meyer (1999b: 90) found indications for the Ewe of Ghana, that witchcraft used to be an ambivalent power, which then became affected by the demonising efforts of colonial administrators and missionaries (see also Allman and Parker

2005: 135) and in a wider sense by processes of semiotification. More recently Abraham Akrong (2007: 53-54) mentioned the possibility of using witchcraft for good purposes in southern Ghana, just as Falen (2007) analysed it in more detail for southern Benin. Such notions of ambivalence seem to have existed among Betammaribe communities of northwestern Benin already in colonial times (Maurice 1986: 441; Mercier 1968: 475), and I found them to be present since the mid-1990s in the Commune of Coby. I suspect, then, that the ambivalence of witchcraft is not so much a new phenomenon, but rather a resurfacing of older views that had been moralised and suppressed by colonial modernity. It is equally possible that good usage of witchcraft is sometimes simply overlooked or not seen as relevant in the face of evil manifestations of witchcraft, even by anthropologists.

Whatever the case may be, Geschiere (1997: 13) links the ambivalence of witchcraft directly to its ability to incorporate and adapt to changes easily. In semiotic terms, Sasha Newell calls this phenomenon “the signifier for the un-signifiable” (2007: 468), while B. Meyer acknowledged it as “a floating signifier” (2003a: 203), stating that witchcraft cannot actually be fully captured by semiotics. Their suggestion, however, merely describes the semiotic problem of making sense of witchcraft, rather than presenting a solution to it. Witchcraft, then, just like shrine entities, cannot be sufficiently described through semiotics (R. Marshall 2009: 22-35; Chapter 2). Rather, by going beyond semiotics, witchcraft is better understood as transmaterial, since it experientially and causally identifies the material with the immaterial, leading to its inherent ambivalence and allowing it to make sense creatively of things that cannot otherwise be explained. Witchcraft needs to be placed beyond the dichotomies that have typically characterised colonial modernity (Geschiere 1997: 21; Henry and Tall 2008: 30; Nyamnjoh 2001).

The ambivalence of witchcraft, then, can help people to make sense of things that go beyond their possibilities of understanding in any other way, giving it its characteristic dynamism and plasticity (Sansi and Parés 2011). Geschiere points out that “witchcraft is not seen as a more or less fixed, traditional residue but, rather, as a constantly changing set of notions reflecting and reinterpreting new circumstances” (1997: 222; see also Geschiere 2011, 2013).

Witchcraft Dynamics in the Commune of Coby

In the Commune of Coby, the ambivalence and dynamics of witchcraft impact several areas. Generally, I have noticed that *uhw̃hu* is increasingly linked to parts of life with which it did not have much to do in the past. *Uhw̃hu* also borrows from the French *la sorcellerie* that has become part of everyday talk in Benin (Geschiera 2013: xviii; Henry 2008: 101) and often features in the public media of newspapers, radio and television (Bastian 1993; Englund 2007; Geschiera 2003: 168, 2011: 235; Henry and Tall 2008: 22-23), as well as in Nollywood video films (Geschiera 2013: 182, 186-191; see also Chapters 3 and 5). I suggest that some areas that people thought part of the domain of the true seer in the past are now more often expressed in terms of *uhw̃hu*. Rumours of *uhw̃hu* are becoming more common in local politics too, especially now that people elect their town councils and village chiefs following decentralisation. The increased participation of the general population in politics has resulted in people affirming that politicians who show good governance and leadership have good *uhw̃hu*, while politicians who misuse funds and are generally corrupt are feared for their bad *uhw̃hu*. This development has resulted in a slow, but steady, increase in witchcraft rumours that are related to wealth, something that is well developed in many parts of West Africa.

Uhw̃hu remains a relevant and intriguing topic for everybody. Among Christians, *uhw̃hu* sometimes retains its ambivalence, but it is often demonised and spiritualised, especially in Pentecostalist forms of Christianity (J. Merz 2008). The result is that witchcraft loses at least some of its earlier impersonal and ambivalent power and, more importantly, becomes associated with the work of the devil (Ashforth 2005: 179-180; Fancello 2008: 470; Geschiera 2013; Henry 2008; J. Merz 2008; B. Meyer 1992, 1999b; Newell 2007; Pype 2012: 15-38; R. van Dijk 2001: 100). As some of the more fervent Christians in the Commune of Coby increasingly equate *uhw̃hu* with demons, they disentangle it from its earlier material support in the form of humans. For Salomon, for example, it is clear that “*la sorcellerie* [witchcraft] is an evil spirit” (interview in French, 22 Feb. 2011), while Marie, a middle-aged widow, explains further: “It is *mtakitieme* [evil spirit]. *Mtakitieme* enters them [the witches]” (interview, 29 Mar. 2010). Since witchcraft, as experienced in Africa, is not directly addressed in the Bible (Debrunner 1961:

145-146), reducing it to a demon makes it easier for Christians to deal with. People can now be delivered from the demon of witchcraft, which has become an exorcisable entity (Henry 2008; J. Merz 2008; B. Meyer 1998a, 1999b). The demonising stance on witchcraft, however, is not able to eradicate it, since, as Geschiere (1997: 43-50, 2003) has shown, witchcraft can conjure up anti-witchcraft (see also Geschiere 2013: 73-82; Kahn 2011). Accordingly, pastors and other Christians, who are often seen as specialists who can fight demons and witchcraft, are sometimes suspected of it themselves (Danfulani 1999: 170-171; Fancello 2008: 178; R. Marshall 2009: 184-185; Marshall-Fratani 2001: 43; B. Meyer 2004a: 460; Piot 2010: 114; ter Haar 2007: 17). Indeed, as Newell shows for Abidjan, “Pentecostal churches are also in themselves a form of witchcraft discourse and practice” (2007: 469).

A further important change in *uhwohu*, as I have already mentioned, is its characterisation and elaboration as a power that especially whites can use for the good, most notably for the production of television sets and other items of electronic technology. Anthropologists have documented a link between technology and witchcraft, mainly by describing how witches make use of it for their own ends. The most widely documented innovation of witches is that they now often employ aeroplanes, thereby rendering their work more efficacious.³³ Other anthropologists explicitly make reference to the witches’ alleged power to produce technological goods, whether aeroplanes or electronic media technology.³⁴

Most elaborately, Rosalind Shaw (2002: 202) describes an invisible witch-city for the Temne of Sierra Leone, which is the origin of technological innovations. This city is said to have skyscrapers, houses made of gold and diamonds, Mercedes-Benzes, shops selling televisions, VCRs and computers, and airports from which witch-planes depart to destinations all around the world. She links this witch-city to the memory of the Atlantic slave trade, thereby seeing witchcraft as part of a historical process. In other words, Shaw examines the link be-

³³ See, for example, Drucker-Brown (1993: 534), Englund (2007: 301), Geschiere (1997: 3, 59, 2013: 5, 15, 35, 63-64), Jackson (1975: 393), Merz (1998: 69-70), Newell (2007: 466-468), Parish (2003: 24), Piot (1999: 176, 2010: 121-122), Walker (1979: 127), and West (2007: 67).

³⁴ See, for example, Danfulani (1999: 172, 174), Fancello (2008: 176), Geschiere (1997: 3, 59), B. Meyer (2006b: 440), Newell (2007: 468) and R. van Dijk (2001: 106).

tween technology and witchcraft as part of the history of Europe's entanglement with Africa, similarly to how Pietz (1985) analyses fetishes.

While technology has become a truly transnational commodity, its interpretation remains part of the legacy of colonial modernity. Accordingly, in Europe and America technology is considered the result of science and rationality, whereas in Africa, it remains linked to witchcraft and the occult (Ranger 2007). While it is clear that there are different interpretations of technology in different parts of the world – it could not be otherwise – I object to the dichotomising stance that lingers even in academic discourses. This means that I need to readdress the question of the terminology through which technology is understood.

Witchcraft as Transvisual Power

Technology relies on some form of special knowledge, be it acquired through advanced study, through dreams and visions, or through other means relating to “witchcraft”. In the Commune of Coby a person needs *uhw̃hu* in order to produce technology and sometimes even to use it. Some people have characterised *uhw̃hu* as a power that people have to varying degrees and that is supposed to be particularly prevalent among the whites. Some people link the presence of *uhw̃hu* directly to people's *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force), which they say renders it stronger (J. Merz 2008: 213). A strong *kɛbodikɛ*, as already discussed, allows people to see better in the less visible world, where they can gain knowledge by observing what others do more easily, and where they can even become agentive actors. Having *uhw̃hu*, then, means to have an enhanced vision and better access to knowledge as compared to those who do not have it. This is why I propose to translate *uhw̃hu* as “transvisual power”, thereby providing it with an ontological basis, which recent anthropological discourses on “witchcraft” could not do. This also means that I can ground the diffuse and slippery notion of “witchcraft” not only in the intimacy of close relationships (Geschiere 2013: 7-13, 20), but also as an integral part of the relationships of everyday life that characterise the world of agentive relationality. People use transvisual power to gain knowledge in order to do extraordinary things that normal people cannot do, whether this means catching other people's *kɛbodikɛ* or the ability to produce television sets and other items of electronic technology.

By understanding *uhw̃hu* as transvisual power, its existence can no longer simply be brushed aside as being imaginary and implausible, which are crucial traits that characterise the rationality debate that Evans-Pritchard (1937) (in)famously introduced to anthropology (Ashforth 2005: 113-116; Mills 2013). Neither should *uhw̃hu* be taken as standing for something else, as structural-functionalist studies, and to some extent Jean and John Comaroff (1993) and their followers have done. Although they accept the religious as an important and valid object of research, they exclude it from their analysis in line with secular anthropological theories. Accordingly, they consider witchcraft as an argument *about* modernity, reducing the witch largely to a metaphorical icon of local-global interactions and processes. Such analyses make the religious conform and subject to secular semiotic signification, while forgetting that religious practice is also rooted in everyday life (Ashforth 2005: 114; Rutherford 1999: 91; R. Marshall 2009: 22-25; see also Robbins 2007). These approaches implicitly question the validity of transmateriality through their underlying semiotic framework. In doing so, they invariably recast the transmaterial as material, thereby excluding the religious to the extent of rejecting even the possibility for transmateriality and transvisuality to become valid analytical notions.

Instead, I propose to theorise beyond semiotics and call on pluralist epistemology (Geschiere 2011: 248-250; Jewsiewicki 2001; see also Chapter 2), which allows for both a continued critical analysis and an approach that at least acknowledges *uhw̃hu* as something in its own right (Geschiere 1997: 281 n.212), especially in transmaterial and transvisual terms. Such an approach, unlike more secular and semiotic ones, does not exclude linking *uhw̃hu* to other areas of life, such as modernity or the economy, since transmateriality itself is rooted in everyday practice and action. This, then, necessities “take[ing] religious faith seriously” (R. Marshall 2009: 3; see also Introduction), even to the extent of “accepting fully beliefs and phenomena which our system of knowledge often holds preposterous” (Stoller and Olkes 1987: 229; see also Ewing 1994: 572; J. Merz 2004). This is not so much necessary for its own sake, but rather for the purpose of an analysis that can account better for phenomena, such as “witchcraft”. Doing otherwise, Martin Mills (2013: 31) has recently suggested, questions the validity of the social sciences and the humanities more broadly.

Furthermore, going beyond semiotics also pushes the phenomena commonly associated with “witchcraft” beyond the usual limits of the African Other (Pels 1998a; Sansi 2011; Sansi and Parés 2011; R. Shaw 2002: 201-224). Geschiere (2003), for example, draws parallels between the “spin doctors” of American politics and Cameroonian “witch doctors”, who both work in the background and try to influence how people perceive politicians. More recently, Harry West (2007) has eloquently drawn direct parallels between doing sorcery in Mozambique with doing ethnography. He argues that both activities shape the world through what he calls embedded or living metaphors. West analytically limits sorcery to discourse, thereby mainly drawing on linguistic parallels. An approach that goes beyond semiotics, however, needs to extend West’s view to include the material and visual as well. This seems particularly important, since I understand *uhw̃w̃hu* as transvisual power, by which I assert that people gain knowledge not only by talking about it, but also in a practical and experiential way, including (trans)visual means, such as dreaming.

I have now reached the point where the notions of “witchcraft” and “sorcery” become superfluous to how I understand and analyse *uhw̃w̃hu*. I have characterised *uhw̃w̃hu* as transmaterial in the sense that it refuses to differentiate between various dichotomies, such as sign and referent or material and immaterial, thereby implying an enormous and varied presencing potential. This means that *uhw̃w̃hu* is particularly suited to account for transvisual power that, like transmaterial entities, joins the more and less visible aspects of life and the world of agentive relationality. I therefore understand *uhw̃w̃hu* as a life-enhancing power that stands both for the ambiguous and the extraordinary. It provides people with the transvisual quality to see beyond the material and thereby the ability to gain knowledge beyond the strictly visible, and to be able to be creative and productive. The old diviner Kombiénou summarises: “When a man makes something, ... there is always a little bit of *uhw̃w̃hu*. How can you make something if you’re not a witch?” (interview, 11 Jan. 2011).

Transvisual power, then, enhances the ability to acquire knowledge, to be creative and to put it into practice (Sanders 2008: 111). Indeed, it is a kind of science, as some people in Coby characterise it (cf. Ashforth 2005; Falen 2007). Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders confirm this view: “Science and the occult

have never been entirely separate” (2001a: 2). While science has tried to distance itself from subjectivity, transvisual power has always touched on questions of morality (R. Shaw 2002: 211), thereby embracing both the subjective and the objective, as well as the rational and the imaginative. Transvisual power cannot be reduced to an occult and mystical force, since it can equally be associated with common sense (Pels 1998a: 202), everyday action (R. Marshall 2009: 22; Mills 2013: 28) and in the intimacy of close relationships (Geschiere 2013). Rather, transvisual power is experiential and works at a transmaterial level, constantly seeking to diffuse the dichotomies of colonial modernity.

Maybe due to its ambivalence and presencing potential, transvisual power has in recent decades increasingly come into the open and part of public debates, be it in radio and newspaper reports, video films or Pentecostal discourse, while it also remains deeply ambiguous. Accordingly, it has gained unprecedented prominence and shapes people’s lives, while at the same time their lives can shape it. In a very similar way, television and videos increasingly become part of people’s lives.

Having discussed transvisual power at a more general level I now return to the cultural biography of television sets in the Commune of Coby, namely by exploring the relationship between television and transvisual power in more detail.

The Transvisual Power of Television

Many people in the Commune of Coby see a direct link in how transvisual power works and how a television set works. It is often younger men who are heavy consumers of television and videos who articulate this connection most elaborately and persuasively. Paul, the young man in charge of a village church, explains: “I think that the way TV functions, you know, the one who is an *unbuo* [true seer] who makes things, he can do things that normal people can’t. And TV too, it works in the same way” (interview, 7 Mar. 2012). Pierre, the retired pastor, puts it more succinctly: “Here, true seers have the same power as television” (interview in French, 2 Mar. 2011). From such a perspective, a television set has itself transvisual power, which has been placed inside it by those who make it, themselves possessors of the same power.

The reason to accord a television set transvisual power lies in how it works on two levels. Firstly, a television set needs to obtain images to display, a process

that can easily be understood in terms of the work of a witch. I have already mentioned that a witch first needs to catch the image-shadow of people in order to reach their *kebodike*. In a similar way, the image-shadow of people and things needs to be caught in order to show them on a television set. Dieudonné, a farmer with a keen interest in technology, explains this process in more detail:

Somebody can take your photo, ... but we can't see it right then. The next day, you will find yourself on the TV. They will put the image on the TV and it will be there for you to see. It is in this way that a witch works to capture images. A witch has her actions, but she can't catch you in one stroke. She will take your image in the same way that a TV does before she can attack [and kill] somebody (interview, 28 Jan. 2011).

For most people it remains ambiguous how exactly witches and television succeed in catching image-shadows. In spite of this, most people know by now that some sort of camera is needed to take photographs and videos (cf. Wright 2008: 374). In fact, with the increase in mobile phones that include digital cameras, digital technology has been popularised in recent years, and even people in remoter villages know about it.

The more interesting question is how to obtain images of things that are not usually accessible to the naked eye, such as the witches and their work as shown in the film *Yatin*. For most people this area remains ambiguous and they did not feel confident enough to give much detail. A few made it clear that all the images were acted, and the owner of a video parlour added that he thought computers helped in generating such images. Only one research participant, a young village farmer, wondered whether it was not the transvisual power of the camera itself that lets it directly see and record the witches and their work.

A second aspect of the similarity between television and transvisual power lies in how a television set shows and displays its images using light. When people in the Commune of Cobly see a light move around at night, often on top of trees or in other unusual places, they suspect that witches are out and about doing their evil work (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937: 33-35). The association of the activities of witches with nightly light or fire that moves around is widespread in West Africa. Among the Tallensi, this can take on the form of a "light ball" (B. Meyer 1992: 117) or "ball of fire" (Parker 2006: 59), while David Tait (1963: 136, 1967: 156)

speaks for the Konkomba of flashing “sorcerer-fire” that moves through the air at considerable speed. For the Akan, Hans Debrunner (1961: 20-21) describes this “witch-light” in some detail, while Jane Parish (2003: 27) refers to a “bright light” that a witch has on her forehead to guide her flight path. Piot (2010: 121) mentions that Kabre witches are now thought to be able to hide their fire, thereby becoming less conspicuous.

In the Commune of Cobly, people sometimes say that witches use their light, which usually emanates from their eyes, to attract and catch people’s *kebodike*. Vincent, a young farmer, compares a witch’s eyes to the headlights of a car (interview, 28 Feb. 2010), while the older man Gérôme calls this effect “the torch of a witch”, which helps her see the *sibosi* [animating forces] of people in the night (interview, 29 Mar. 2010). More generally, some research participants, such as Thomas (interview, 27 Jan. 2012), compare how witches gain their power and how it works for them directly to the way television works. Because of this, Jérémy, who loves to watch television, claims: “A witch doesn’t want to watch TV because the light that the TV emits is the same that the witch carries and uses for her hunt” (interview, 25 Jan. 2011). Other people say that when witches see on television what they actually do, especially in films like *Yatin*, they will either leave, or, being shocked by seeing their own actions, decide to abandon their nightly work. More generally, people say that witches do not want to see Christian films and leave.

For a few others, having television at home actually could increase your exposure to witches, as they could come to watch in your house without you knowing. Witches constantly observe what is happening. If they find some sort of problem or issue, they can play it to their advantage and more easily perpetrate their evil deeds. Another person claimed that witches themselves could use television to attract people to come and watch in their house, which again, he claimed, facilitates their evil work.

Whatever people’s view of the relationship between witches, transvisual power and television may be, there are also limits in how far the comparison can go. Dieudonné already implied (see above) that there is also a difference in how television and witches catch an image-shadow. Put more explicitly, for Yves, a literacy teacher and son of a Tigare owner:

I think that a TV catches images to show them. If it catches the images of people, the TV tries to project them afterwards. But a witch works differently. When she catches a *kēbodike* she wants to kill the person quickly. Witches don't want to show the shadows of people afterwards (interview, 17 Feb. 2011).

While both the witches' and a television's work remains ambiguous, as people find it hard to explain exactly how they operate, the result of a witch's action remains hidden and fatal, while a television's work is open, showing the images it had caught to everyone.

Transvisual and Televisual Presencing

This difference between the work of witches and the work of television is crucial, since electronic media technology has the ability to increase the accessibility to transvisual power for those who use them. The middle-aged widow Marie explains:

Cassettes [Video CDs and DVDs] can show us how *uhōōhu* [transvisual power] works. Can we know how *uhōōhu* works? It's when TV arrived that we understood how witches work. We saw how people transform themselves into witches and where they catch people to tie them up. Usually, we hear people talk about witches, but we can't identify them like in the film and we don't know who they are. We don't know how they catch people (interview, 25 Jan. 2011).

In this sense, watching videos can show people things that are normally only accessible to an *unbuo* (true seer). Many of the research participants recognise that watching videos cannot actually turn a person into *unbuo*, since being a true seer is God-given and cannot be acquired. In spite of this, virtually all research participants thought that watching television is beneficial and can at the very least help people become more intelligent. Seeing (*ya*), after all, is also understanding. Maybe I can go as far as claiming that the transvisual power of television, that shows what is not normally seen with the eyes, makes it no longer necessary for people to have transvisual power themselves, since television provides it for them when they watch. Gérôme, for example, claims: "A seer sees in the same way as a TV works" (interview, 10 Mar. 2012).

Indeed, people commonly compare watching television to some form of seeing *tidōosite* (dreams or visions). Most research participants made a direct connection

between dreaming and watching television and videos.³⁵ Yantékoua, the older leader of a village church, stated as several others did, “Television has things in common with *tidɔɔsite* [dreams]” (interview, 13 Jan. 2011). Such a connection between dreams and television or videos has, to my knowledge, only been mentioned in passing, most notably by Shaw (2002: 99) for Temne diviners of Sierra Leone, by Katrien Pype (2011) for Kinshasa and by Lohmann (2000: 83, 2010: 244) for the Asabano of Papua New Guinea, but it may actually be more widespread.

The reasons why people equate television with dreams are various. First of all, some claim that both dreams and films are organised in scenarios or sequences of images with different events following each other. When people wake up, or when the power that alimments a television set is cut, people stop seeing these images. Often, people feel more like passive observers than participants when dreaming and watching television, with images appearing from beyond their normal consciousness.

Maybe more importantly, what people see in television and videos can strongly resemble what they also see in dreams. Yantékoua, the village church leader, explains: “When I watched the film [*Yatin*], there were some parts that were like dreams” (interview, 27 Feb. 2010; see also Chapter 4). For television-lover Jérémy, too, “the cassette [Video CD] *Yatin* is similar to a dream” (interview, 25 Jan. 2011). Indeed, the makers and scriptwriters of Christian video films often claim divine inspiration or revelation of their films, similar to how Bill Bright claimed to have had a vision for the *Jesus Film* (see Chapter 3). Sometimes, West African filmmakers even maintain that they saw their films in visions and then set out to make them (Behrend 2005: 208; B. Meyer 2003b: 18; Ukah 2005: 297). Thanks to such claims it does not matter that humans make films and that some of the images are digitally enhanced through computer-generated special effects. In both videos and dreams people can see how witches try to catch people at night, and often they also see how people escape from being caught. Sometimes

³⁵ Comparing watching films with dreaming has also been part of psychoanalytic approaches in film theory. Such views, however, focus on illusion and myth and do not help to advance my discussion of dreams and films (see, e.g., Lyden 2003: 50-51).

people see their ancestors in dreams and, if video recordings exist of them from when they were alive, people can see them on television as well.

Dreams are also linked to travelling (Lohmann 2003a). Some people dream of going to Europe – to Paris, for instance – and see how wonderful it is there. Similarly, as Lynn Spigel has noted for America, television gives people “the chance to travel imaginatively into the outside world while remaining in the comforts of the home” (1992: 182). In Cobby, people often see images of Europe and Paris on television and in videos without ever having been there. Sometimes people dream of weird things they do not know or recognise and similar unfamiliar things can also be seen on television.

Furthermore, some people see a direct link between *kebodike* (animating force), watching television and dreaming, as *kebodike* follows what happens on television. Sometimes *kebodike* remembers what it has seen on television and then, during the night, people see in their dreams what they already saw on television. This, people claim, often happens when the television shows something that is frightening. Sometimes people dream of doing themselves what they have seen other people doing on television. Due to its transvisual capacity, Catherine, a secondary school student, explains that “television enters your sleep” (interview in French, 17 Feb. 2011), while Pierre, the retired pastor shared that “dreams are a television that God has made” (interview in French, 2 Mar. 2011). Charles, another Christian who attended secondary school, adds: “If you really believe in God, he will show you things in your dreams. This happens through television” (interview in French, 6 Jun. 2011).

Whether dreams or television, the images that appear to people are clearly different from what they usually see with their own eyes when awake, since both are transvisual by having the potential to make present what is hidden. This is also the reason why both African and film studies have recently rejected earlier views that suggested that audiences watched films as a direct kind of reality (Larkin 2008: 115-116; Lyden 2003: 51-53; B. Meyer 2003a: 206; R. O. Moore 2000). Rather, I suggest that people interpret dreams and television in a way that makes the visual present in a veracious way (Oha 2002: 128; Pype 2012: 101; Werner 2012: 107-108). Jenkeri Okwori (2003: 11-22) and B. Meyer (2003b: 26-27) have commented on the truthfulness that film has for Nigerian and Ghanaian audi-

ences, while some films can also be critiqued as being unrealistic or too artificial. Furthermore, Ghanaian audiences often accept films depicting the less visible parts of the world as accurate documentations of the spiritual realm. The presenting capacity of film permits audiences to understand better how evil forces work and how potential attacks can be prevented and defused (B. Meyer 2005: 286-287, 2006a: 304; see also Okuyade 2011: 6; Ukah 2005: 311).

Dreams, visions and films, then, are transvisual in nature, making present both the more and less visible, which together constitute the world of agentive relationality. Television and videos, more specifically, provide people with a transvisual technology that enhances their vision and allows them to see things beyond the material (B. Meyer 2003a: 219, 2003b: 27-28, 2004b: 105). Such technology facilitates them to see the less visible and hidden not only in dreams or through the transvisual power they may have, but with their own eyes. This provides audiences of videos and television with a powerful televisual experience that makes present what is hidden in a transvisual way.

Conclusion

In the Commune of Cibly, iconic images – whether portrait photographs, videos or films – have become popular and important expressions of what people call *upaanu* (the new times). After a brief period of anxiety caused by the introduction of new media, people started to appropriate them progressively and experientially on their own terms. While discussions and negotiations about their exact nature continue, photographs and videos have already found their place in the world of agentive relationality, in which they come to live and interact with people, as do other things and transmaterial beings. This substantiates my point of departure for this chapter, namely that photographs and films, even if they give the impression of unmediated communication, need to be studied for what they are both in material and visual terms, and how they become part of people's lives.

Especially television sets and what they show constitute a complex presencing resource that provides a multisensory and bodily experience (Marks 2000; Sobchack 2004). People apprehend television sets through transmaterial presencing and transvisual power. Transvisuality, as I characterise it, is the ambivalent ability and power that facilitates the visual interchange between the more visible part of

the world of people with its less visible part of transmaterial beings, such as ancestors, shrine entities and witches. While for some people, transvisual power is essential for making television sets, others consider the way a television set works analogous to how transvisual power operates, for example for witches. The strongest connection between television sets and transvisuality, however, lies in most people's view of a television set being a powerful or live entity that provides visual access to the lesser-seen parts of the world just as dreams and visions do. On this basis, people use transvisual technology to watch videos and films not only for what they show in an iconic way, but, more importantly, because they make the less visible part of the world accessible, providing the possibility for a deeper knowledge of life in the more or less visible part of the world of agentive relationality, which they inhabit. Vision and revelation are not only important to Ghanaian Pentecostalism, as B. Meyer (2004b, 2005, 2006a) shows, but also enjoy popularity on a much wider scale.

What is distinctive about videos and films, as well as their associated transvisual technology, is their association with the whites and with God, ascribing them a distinctly modern and Christian quality, which is only reinforced by what they show (see Chapter 3). Christians, who usually distance themselves from becoming entangled with various forms of transvisual power, often by demonising it, find in films a suitable means to stimulate their transvisual interest. Similarly, photographs can now show the dead iconically, which allows for the identification of individuals that makes them present. Through photographs, Christians can remember their dead without the need to become materially involved with them, as would be the case for ancestor shrines that they are encouraged to abandon. Photographic images, then, add a visual component to the already keen interest in the material. I can account for this shift through a further differentiation of the more specifically iconic characteristics of the semiotic presencing principle that joins the transmaterial one.

Watching animated photographic images, mainly in the form of videos, becomes fundamental for at least some of the Christians in the Commune of Cibly. "The TV also shows us the work of God. If TV didn't exist, how could you see what God has done in the past?" (interview with Marguerite, 20 Feb. 2011). The nature of film makes the less visible aspect of the world, as well as the past, acces-

sible in visible terms. This, together with the interest in visual and experiential learning as well as the content of films make television and videos “a potent catalyst for the transmission and reception of religious cultural information” (Lohmann 2000: 83).

The way people have come to understand, appreciate and use transvisual technology, I suggest, lies at the heart of the phenomenal popularity and success of video films in West Africa (see also J. Merz 2014). Especially Christian and Pentecostal videos have contributed to the significant shift from text to film. It may seem ironic that this move happens particularly in Pentecostalist forms of Christianity, which are themselves usually based on a Protestant heritage with a strong iconoclastic position. This suggests that the iconoclastic and semiotifying stance of Christianity has mainly been directed against transmateriality that identifies spirit with matter. The basis of Protestant iconoclasm, then, is a differentiation between the visual and the material. While the latter is largely condemned, the former is sometimes rhetorically reduced to text, thereby making it easier for Protestant Christians to accept (Chapter 3). Similarly, as I have shown in Chapter 2, Protestant Christians try to detach the Word of God from the materiality of the book that contains it.

Transvisual technology, in which I include photographs, videos and film, cannot keep the visual separated from the material, just as people never completely succeed in separating the spiritual from the material (see Chapter 2). Entities, whether textual, visual or material, always relate to, and interfere with, other entities, thereby entangling the visual with the material. During the making of West African videos, there is the constant threat that fake shrines could actually become associated with spirits and actors sometimes become affected by the spirits or gods they play or with which their characters are associated (Barber 2000: 261; R. Marshall 2009: 158; B. Meyer 2004b: 104, 2005: 296-297, 2006a: 306-307; Müller 2005; Pype 2012: 135). Accordingly, there is the constant tendency to resist the effects of semiotification. Photographic images, then, not only iconically depict and index people and things, they can also become identical with them to the extent that they make present what they show. This is why I can conclude that iconic images, whether photographs, film or video, constitute trans-

visual technology with its characteristic nature of providing visual access to the lesser-seen aspects of the world.

The transmaterial characteristics of transvisual technology “have a profound impact on the way images are ‘read’, as different material forms both signal and determine different expectations and use patterns” (Edwards and Hart 2004: 2-3). In the following and final chapter I discuss what audiences in the Commune of Cobyly make of the three films *Jesus*, *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* and *La Solution* and what they understand when watching them. In doing so I build on this chapter by paying attention to both the visual and material, while also adding more textual aspects.

Chapter 5:

The Life of Christian Videos

It is night. Jesus walks into the frame from the right to a shrine lit up by moonlight. Soft music is playing. Jesus briefly looks upwards, puts a cloth on his head, places his hands on the shrine and kneels down. He folds his hands and rests them on the shrine. A sideways close-up of Jesus portrays his face half hidden by the cloth. He says something and continues to move his lips while light suddenly appears on him and the shrine together with a swishing sound. Cut to a shot that shows a man-like figure clad in white surrounded by light and a voice says something. The scene turns back to the sideways portrait of Jesus kneeling by the shrine: He lowers his head again and the camera zooms in on the shrine while somebody is talking. The image now shows drops of blood appearing on the shrine.

This is a scene of the *Jesus Film* as some people in the Commune of Cobyly might have seen it. Several viewers of the film recognised shrine entities and people presenting offerings and praying to them, including, in one instance, Jesus himself. One viewer perceived Jesus regularly praying to his ancestors, whom others visually identified in the film, for example in the form of the people who constantly surrounded him. Others interpreted Jesus' death as an offering to a shrine entity, as Jesus staunchly refused to submit to the authority of its priests.

Such examples of polysemic interpretations of the *Jesus Film* do not correspond with the hopes and expectations of the film's producers and distributors. For them, the *Jesus Film* as the Word of God on film is meant to have an immediate impact on its viewers by revealing the Gospel in a direct and unmediated manner (see Chapter 3). While such polysemic interpretations may not always constitute prominent and central phenomena, they nonetheless raise crucial questions around the problem of how audiences receive media products and how they make sense of them. In this chapter I shift my attention from the producers and distributors of *Jesus* (1979), *La Solution* (1994) and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002), as discussed in Chapter 3, to the three films' reception by audiences in the Commune of Cobyly of Benin. Rather than engaging in semiotic textual analysis of reception, I

am more interested in how presencing processes work for the viewers of these Christian films, thereby shifting the attention from meaning to action and “widening the frame of reception studies to include the whole of culture” (Spitulnik 2002b: 351).

My starting point is that “texts [and media products more generally] cannot determine their own reading” (Buckland 2000: 72). Examples that support this premise range from an essay on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in Nigeria (Bohannon 1967) to various studies of film (see, e.g., Jhala 1996; Kulick and Willson 1994; Larkin 1997; Liebes and Katz 1993; Martinez 1990, 1992). Indeed, polysemic interpretations are likely to be accentuated when media products are consumed in a setting different to the one that its makers originally had in mind. More generally, it has been widely acknowledged that the “context”, or, more specifically, people’s prior knowledge and experience, plays an important role in cultural interpretation.³⁶ In spite of the recognition that media are open and polysemic, and that they rely on the context in which they are consumed, I find that communication models only manage to address these issues in a limited way and are sometimes lacking in other areas I consider important (see, e.g., Carey 1989; Fiske 1987; Hall 1980; Jensen 1995; Morley 1992).

While people’s prior knowledge and experience clearly influence the way they engage in presencing processes, thereby contributing to polysemic interpretations, I stress that the nature of media and their associated technologies themselves also need to be considered as contributing to presencing (Ginsburg, *et al.* 2002: 19-21; Spitulnik 2002b). Building on the previous chapters, I am particularly interested in how the interplay of the transmaterial and semiotic presencing principles that people draw on are involved in the presencing processes. I count these different factors that potentially influence presencing as part of what has often been referred to under the catch-all notion of “context”, which itself is multifaceted and problematic (R. Dilley 1999).

³⁶ The importance of the “context” or the wider setting in which communication happens has, for example, been recognised in anthropology (Asad 1986; Crawford 1996; R. Dilley 1999; Fabian 1995; Kulick and Willson 1994), semiotics and communication more generally (Carey 1989; Gutt 2000; Jensen 1995), as well as in media reception studies (Ang 1996; Evans 1990; Fiske 1987; Friedman 2006; Liebes and Katz 1993; Mankekar 1999; Moores 1993; Morley 1992; Spitulnik 2002b). Marcus Banks summarises this recognition succinctly: “All visual forms are socially embedded” (2001: 79).

As in previous chapters, I need to go beyond Peircean semiotics (Peirce 1940; Short 2007), its more recent material extension (Keane 2003, 2005, 2007) and social semiotics (Hodge and Kress 1988; Iedema 2001; Jensen 1995; van Leeuwen 2005). Even though such newer approaches have moved beyond purely linguistic, structuralist and dichotomising discourses they are still by definition based on the atomistic assumption that signs are dualistically or triadically structured, making a difference between signifier and signified or sign and referent. This hinders coming to terms with the more experiential and transmaterial aspect of presencing whose resulting entities cannot always be qualified as structured signs.

On the other hand, semiotic approaches still can make a valid contribution to the understanding of presencing processes since they give attention to visibility and adopt versions of constructionism as a basic framework, allowing them to share a basis with contemporary anthropology. Accordingly, I build on Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model of communication and by extension the subsequent television reception studies that made use of it. The limitations of such studies are that they remain firmly rooted in conventional semiotics and that they are centred on Euro-American settings. Indeed, apart from the notable exception of Hortense Powdermaker (1962), it is only recently that scholars have started to take an interest in studying audiences in other parts of world too, such as Papua New Guinea (Kulick and Willson 1994), China (Friedman 2006), India and its diaspora (Gillespie 1995a, 1995b; Jhala 1996; Mankekar 1999, 2002; Srinivas 1998, 2002) and Africa (Akpabio 2007; Barber 2000; Bouchard 2010; Pype 2012; Schulz 2012; Talabi 1989; Touré 2006; Ukah 2005; Werner 2006, 2012).

In the first part of this chapter I discuss and elaborate theoretical aspects of reception theory that are pertinent to my study. In the second half, I discuss the three films *Jesus*, *La Solution* and *Yatin*, focusing on how people in the Commune of Cibly experienced watching them and what they made of them. The *Jesus Film* lends itself best to discuss the effects of the incongruity of film, by which I understand socio-cultural differences between a film and its receptors. If this incongruity is significant, as is the case in the *Jesus Film*, the resulting interpretive field needs to accommodate a more diverse plurality of meanings. *Yatin* is particularly interesting as the visual codes of Nollywood make it the least incongruous and therefore most accessible film to the viewers in the Commune of Cibly. While *La*

Solution can be placed between the two other films, its narrative stands out as many viewers could directly relate to it. Most people understood *Jesus* as a film about Christianity, similar to the message of the Bible, while the other two films often present themselves as audiovisual sermons to their viewers (cf. Pype 2012: 107, 121) as they help people think through problems they face that result from shrines and witches.

The reception study demonstrates that all of the research participants in the Commune of Coby, who watched the three films with me, drew on their experience and previously held knowledge and assumptions to make sense of the films. This shows that their socio-cultural settings play a crucial role in presencing processes, inevitably leading to polysemic interpretations, or, as I prefer to call it, a broad interpretative field. Accordingly, I argue that films do not offer a message that is communicated and then either understood or misunderstood. Rather, they offer a presencing resource, whose potential the viewers try to exploit to the best of their abilities by using their knowledge and experience, and by employing the interplay of the two presencing principles to guide their interpretation. Filmic presencing results in an interpretative field of plural meanings that provides the potential for an experience to audiences that is enjoyable and that affirms and sometimes alters the way they perceive the world in which they live and with which they interact.

Presencing Beyond the Semiotics of Film

Semiotics has been highly important and influential in film theory, following both the Saussurean and Peircean traditions (see, e.g., Ehrat 2004; Stam, *et al.* 1992; Metz 1991 [1974]; Wollen 1972). Film semiotics analyses films as text, which involves the identification of signs and sign processes. I find that such secular analysis with structuralist leanings has something inherently ambiguous and even paradoxical about it, since the experiential and religious nature of film stays largely unaccounted for. On the other hand, when film analysis focuses on watching films as an immediate experience, the complexities of its production and textual existence typically associated with semiotics shift into the background. Furthermore, films often appear as credible and veracious, even though they are often artificial and fictitious. As for the materiality of films, it is clear that they

are essentially material by relying on material processes in their production and on technological commodities for their viewing. Yet, watching films is often more than material interaction and mediation, even though the exact nature of such film watching is difficult to capture in any other way than the admittedly vague term of “experience”.

This semiotic problem of “the dialectic of mediation and immediacy” (Eisenlohr 2009; see also B. Meyer 2011b) that film poses takes me back to where I started, namely to the discussion of stones, or shrine entities, in terms of semiotification and the dynamics of spirit and matter (Chapter 2). As already noted, some people in the Commune of Coby consider these stones as live entities and beings in their own right. Their relational, experiential and above all transmaterial nature makes it difficult, if not impossible, to analyse them in semiotic terms. During recent decades, however, different processes of semiotification have become popular among some people. This results in them sometimes perceiving stone entities in terms of the separation of spirit and matter. Accordingly, stones cease to be transmaterially alive and can now be conceived of as material symbols of spiritual beings that, in turn, can exist independently of their material support. Such shrines that serve as abodes for spirits become accessible to semiotic analysis.

Similarly, films can generally be watched in an experiential and transmaterial way or they can be analysed in more semiotic terms. In Chapter 2 I argue that both ways can be captured through what I call presencing. This process relies on the interplay of presencing principles that describe how people make films, as well as other semiotic resources, present and how these resources come to function as entities in the world. I can thus describe the more experiential ways of watching films as drawing on the transmaterial presencing principle, while semiotic analysis requires a presencing principle that inevitably leads to the identification of signs and are thus iconic, symbolic or indexical in nature. Both the transmaterial and the semiotic presencing principles often co-exist to different degrees for different people. Especially when people watch films in other ways than for semiotic analysis, they can usually be described as involving the transmaterial presencing principle at least to some extent. During my reception research in the Commune of Coby, the semiotic presencing principle only played a minor role

while virtually all viewers demonstrated that transmaterial presencing was central to the way they watched the three videos. This was not only the case for those who usually rely more heavily on transmaterial presencing, but also for those who are engaging with the processes of materialisation and spiritualisation of shrine entities, and for the few who clearly stated their awareness that films and videos are acted and made by humans, and sometimes enhanced by computers (cf. Lyden 2003: 4; Plate 2003a: 5).

Watching films, as well as seeing and listening more generally, is a multisensory activity, which relies on our bodies (Hirschkind 2006; Marks 2000; B. Meyer 2009a; Morgan 2012; Sobchack 2004). Accordingly, Brian Larkin characterises film as “something to be bodily experienced and lived” (2008: 186). In this sense I take films, as well as other interpreted presencing resources, as becoming part of the world people inhabit, especially when the presencing process has a strong transmaterial focus. Film, I claim, is not so much a communicative medium that conveys messages between different people and groups of people; it rather proposes itself as a presencing resource that can lead to the recognition of agentive entities that claim a presence in the world by interacting with other entities. Films like shrine entities, words, photographs or dreams, gain a life of their own and help to constitute the world by shaping what people make of it.

Zoë Crossland (2009: 73) argues that the power of photography lies in images retaining both an iconic and an indexical link to the depicted, an observation that I also see applying to film. It is this combination that gives films its “veraciousness”, as Katrien Pype calls the medium’s ability to portray “what might be real” (2012: 101; see also Werner 2012: 107-108). The notion of veraciousness expresses well how audiences relate films to their lived experience, thereby making it possible for them to watch films experientially and transmaterially. Generally speaking, the most popular films appear veracious and credible to their audiences to the extent that the mediating process involved in film watching shifts to the background. Filmmakers can achieve such veraciousness by providing footage with which people can easily identify, which builds on their prior knowledge and experience and which also contains ideas that stimulate their audiences’ interest (Plate 2003a: 7-8). In other words, filmmakers need to make their products as relevant as possible for specific audiences (cf. Gutt 2000; Hill 2006), usually by

combining how they perceive things to be with how they think they ought to be (Lyden 2003: 101-102). This renders filmmaking into an idealising enterprise, rather than a representative one to the extent that films can appear “more real than representations” (Morgan 2007: 166; see also Geraghty 2000). Films, then, do not so much represent the world, but rather create it (Carey 1989; Plate 2003a, 2008). In other words, films actually come to constitute and shape the world.

Film, then, has the ability to present itself to viewers both as an experiential event and as semiotic mediation (Plate 2008: 70). I can only account for this by moving beyond secular film semiotics to a more relational approach that is open to the religious and the possibility of epistemological ambiguity and plurality. I propose that this can be achieved through the process of presencing. On this basis I shift my attention to the study of audience reception.

Studying Audiences

Audience reception studies, especially of television programmes, became popular at the British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham, especially from the early 1980s. Scholars working in cultural studies soon recognised the importance of ethnographic approaches in their research on audiences (see, e.g., Ang 1996; Moores 1993; Morley 1992), thereby also catching the attention of anthropologists and contributing to the field of media anthropology (see, e.g., Eisenlohr 2011; Friedman 2006; Gillespie 1995b; Ginsburg, *et al.* 2002: 4-5; Kulick and Willson 1994; Lyons 1990; Schulz 2012; Spitulnik 1993, 2002b).

Hall (1980) provided a key theoretical approach through his encoding/decoding model first proposed in 1973. His model builds on semiotics and although critiqued and reformulated, has equally become highly influential.³⁷ The basic idea is that meaning is not fixed, but encoded in a message, for example, by the producers of a television programme, and then decoded by receptors. By default, media texts are open to be interpreted in different ways, thereby allowing for polysemic interpretations.

³⁷ See, for example, Ang (1996), Couldry (2004), Evans (1990), Fiske (1987), Liebes and Katz (1993), Martinez (1990, 1992), Moores (1993), Morley (1992), Spitulnik (1993), Srinivas (1998) and Tulloch (2000).

The Polysemy of the Interpretive Field

Polysemy is a notion that Roland Barthes (1977: 38-39) introduced to characterise photographs and is necessary if audiences are to accept visual media (Fiske 1987: 16, 84; Morley 1992: 83; van Leeuwen 2005: 50). Although arguments derived from Barthes (1977) and Hall (1980) help clarify why polysemic interpretations of media products exist, an explanation of polysemy in more theoretical terms is lacking. Hall (1980) and John Fiske (1987), together with other semioticians, have only been able to justify its existence within a semiotic framework. While polysemy is already implicitly present in Peirce's understanding of signs, structuralist semioticians often draw on Barthes' (1977) notions of denotation and connotation. They argue that signs evoke connotations, which then provide a kind of semiotic context in which meaning is produced. Additionally, Hall (1980: 134) sees codes as facilitating access to ideologies, which are part of the larger social setting in which communication happens. Such approaches do not, as a rule, go beyond the notion of the sign, and they are ideologically limited (Hall 1980, 1994).

Hall's (1980) particular merit stems from the fact that he recognised that audiences are actively involved in decoding a message and that their socio-cultural backgrounds also play an important role. These two areas, which I see as fundamental for explaining the existence of polysemy, continue to occupy semioticians and media scholars alike. Debates around the "active audience" include the extent to which audiences are in fact active and how such activity should be defined and understood.³⁸ When it comes to questions of "context", Peter Manning (1987: 68) queries semiotics' ability to properly account for it. Elizabeth Mertz (2007) observes that semiotic anthropologists have sometimes looked to pragmatics to address such limitations of their field (see also Buckland 2000), an area that Peirce was already interested in (Jensen 1995: 21-35). Rather than adding pragmatics to semiotics, however, I propose that moving beyond semiotics through the process of presencing can account for both semiotic and pragmatic aspects of filmic communication.

³⁸ Various scholars have written on the active audience (see, e.g., Ang 1996: 8-13; Evans 1990; Fiske 1987: 62-65; Liebes and Katz 1993; Martinez 1992: 134-135; Seaman 1992; Schulz 2012: 79; Spitulnik 2002b: 337).

Films, then, present themselves as presencing resources for their audiences (cf. Fiske 1987: 13-14). Presencing processes start with the identification of entities, whether they are words, images, material objects, or a combination of them. This happens when viewers decode a presencing resource by trying to make it relevant to their lives. They do so by drawing on their previously held assumptions and knowledge (cf. Parmentier 1994: 3), their access to specific cultural conventions, as well as their personal and social setting. I can best analyse entities as occupying an interpretive field in which they come to be connected to other entities. Effective presencing implies the establishment of new connections, as well as disconnections, between different entities (R. Dilley 1999: 37). The result of presencing processes, then, is a configuration and reconfiguration of an interpretive field. Viewed from this perspective, presencing processes do not so much lead to polysemic interpretations, but rather open up an interpretive field that constantly reconfigures the entities that populate it. Interpretive fields are part of the world, providing a space in which different and sometimes conflicting interpretations may coexist (cf. Jensen 1995: 75), thereby being able to account for a plurality of meaning in semiotic terms.

The Incongruity of Film

A crucial point of the encoding/decoding model is that Hall (1980) recognised that a producer's encoding and a receptor's decoding is not necessarily based on identical codes. Hall argued that when there is "symmetry" (1980: 131) or "correspondence" (1980: 136) between a producer's and a receptor's codes, a film acts as a relatively direct mediator between them. On the other hand, when there is "asymmetry" or "lack of equivalence" (Hall 1980: 131) – something that viewers can provoke by deliberately reading a film contrary to its intended meaning – the encoding and decoding processes result in mismatch between intended and received message.

Producers of media texts cannot and do not include everything that they would like their target audiences to understand. They only encode what they consider relevant to their target audiences, and thus bear a responsibility for doing so (Gutt 2000: 34, 190). When producers think that their potential receptors are able to draw on specific assumptions and implications that lie behind media

content, they are less likely to make them explicit (Morley 1992: 82, 84). This is why films, as any other media products, should be made for a specific audience, thereby maximising the possibility for equivalence between intended and decoded meaning, even though perfect equivalence can probably never be achieved. This was undoubtedly the scenario for which Hall (1980) developed his model.

Films are commonly watched, however, by audiences they were not intended for, leading Jayasinhji Jhala (1996) to speak of the “unintended audience”, which he illustrates with the example of rural Indians watching ethnographic films from the Amazon. Further instances of such unintended audiences include: different immigrants in Israel watching *Dallas* (Liebes and Katz 1993), audiences in the Copperbelt of colonial Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) watching cowboy films (Ambler 2001; Powdermaker 1962), Tanzanian and Hausa audiences in northern Nigeria watching films from India (Fair 2010; Larkin 1997), Francophone West Africans watching Latin American *telenovelas* (Touré 2006; Werner 2006, 2012) and to a lesser degree undergraduate students watching ethnographic films (Martinez 1990, 1992). Indeed, it seems that the iconicity of film means that any human setting suffices to exploit a film’s presencing potential at least to some extent, a presumption with which the distributors of the *Jesus Film* work (Chapter 3; J. Merz 2010).

These examples demonstrate that the production and reception of films and other media can remain completely separate from each other. Filmmakers may never have a direct link to most of their audiences and conversely, a receptor of a film may never know anything about the makers and producers of a film (Buckland 2000: 69). For producers this means that they cannot directly control the presencing processes that receptors use for their media products. The only resource filmmakers have to influence what they intend their audiences to make of their films is through the careful design of the media product for a specific audience by accounting for their setting and potential prior knowledge and experience. Once screen media are released, they become independent of their makers and assume a life of their own. Often, receptors are not concerned about media production. They will make films present in a way relevant to their lives and then consider their interpretation as veracious (J. Merz 2010: 116; see also Gutt 2000: 33). For receptors of a film, the producer stands in the background and some

people, for example in rural northwestern Benin, may not even be familiar with how films are made.

For the purpose of studying film reception I propose that where there is a difference between the codes of producers and receptors films become incongruous to their audiences. Such incongruity is always present at least to some extent. This may not be very significant, as for example when Pentecostal Christians watch *Yatin* in southern Benin, or when the *Jesus Film* was shown to American evangelicals soon after its release. If *Jesus* is shown to contemporary rural Beninese audiences, however, the film's incongruity becomes pivotal.

While Hall (1980) described the incongruity of media mainly in ideological, political and institutional terms, it needs to be widened to include the whole "context" in which film watching happens. This means there can be incongruity with any part of people's lives, including various aspects of their social and cultural setting, their prior knowledge and experience, their view of materiality, or the interplay of presencing principles that people draw on. Accordingly, in order to make a reception study feasible, it needs to focus on some specific aspects of the incongruity of film. For the purpose of the study I present in this chapter, for example, I am mainly interested in epistemological and cultural incongruity of the three films and to a lesser degree in their materiality.

Whatever their incongruity may be, films can be popular and appealing, as well as veracious. The incongruity of film, then, does not affect presencing as a process, but it does affect the *result* of such processes, largely by affecting the configurative breadth of the interpretive field.

The Semiotics of Preferred Reading

Thanks to his concern for British television reception, Hall (1980) took an interest in the meaning audiences gained from media. For this purpose, he introduced the notions of "preferred reading" and "preferred meaning" (1980: 134), although he later acknowledged that he had not sufficiently elaborated them (Hall 1994: 261). Whereas "preferred meaning" seems to be more associated with the meaning producers try to convey, "preferred reading" appears more to be connected to the decoding process.

In view of my discussion so far, namely of understanding films as presencing resources that lead to interpretive fields, the notion of preferred reading does not propose any evident analytical advantages. Of course, viewers may very well try to understand films correctly and to try and figure out the intended meaning, but there is no guarantee that this leads to some sort of preferred meaning. Especially for entertainment films a preferred meaning does not seem particularly relevant, either to producers or receptors, as long as a film is successful for the benefit of the producer and entertaining for the receptor.

When it comes to Christian films, as well as documentaries or educational films, however, meaning *does* become important, since their makers and distributors try to convey a specific message. For such films misunderstanding or even aberrant readings become relevant (see, e.g., Martinez 1990). I see this view being based on a more critical engagement and interest in the meaning of films for which the transmaterial presencing principle on its own is not sufficient. Correct meaning relies on the awareness of the distinction between different components of signs, and, maybe more importantly, of a sign's correct structure. Those who fail or struggle to align their presencing of Christian videos with its expected meaning, notably by mismatching signs and referents, can then be labelled as misunderstanding the films. I need to describe viewers who develop a sense of right and wrong readings as also applying the semiotic presencing principle, usually together with the transmaterial one.

To talk of "preferred meaning", then, is only feasible when semiotics as part of presencing comes to play a role in filmic communication. The specific meaning of a film becomes associated with a dominant ideology, to use Hall's (1980) language, or, as I prefer it, with a limited or defined social group that acts as reference for preference. When viewers fail to come to a preferred reading that is maintained by a specific group of people, those who understand the preferred meaning can then blame those who do not for being either ignorant or stupid, since they fail to correctly compose recognised and accepted signs. The notion of preferred reading itself, I need to stress, is plural and should always be seen in a relational sense as the result of the interaction between people and media products.

Should distributors of a film take a special interest in the meaning their audiences gain from their product, that is if they want to promote a specific preferred meaning within a specific audience, the only possible strategy is to influence the various contextual factors. Alejandro Martinez (1990: 46, 1992: 153-155), for example, has come to the same conclusion by discussing how undergraduate students receive ethnographic films. In East and Central Africa, a popular way to encourage a preferred reading is narration (Krings 2013; Krings and Okome 2013: 8), during which professionals provide simultaneous interpretation and comments, thereby verbally guiding the viewers' watching experience. This can either be provided directly to audiences, or by adding commentaries to the existing video products, which then can be sold or shown on television (Pyper 2013: 215-218). According to Matthias Krings (2013: 308, 316) this practice of running commentaries has its origin with missionaries, who started to show films while giving running commentaries during colonial times, and continues with showings of the *Jesus Film*.

Indeed, as I have described above (Chapter 3), global film evangelism using the *Jesus Film* has become an elaborate series of events, during which potential audiences are prepared for the screening and are followed up afterwards, while the main feature is often either simultaneously commented on, or stopped at key moments to explain the film's preferred meaning in more detail. A more recent strategy is to use additional audiovisual material to support the main feature, either through other Christian video films, such as *Yatin* or *La Solution*, or through the Jesus Film Project's recent five-part series *Walking with Jesus* (2011), that further explains the preferred meaning of the *Jesus Film*.

Control over media reception, however, primarily lies with audiences themselves and is largely experiential. As a result, the message that filmmakers try to encode into their products can in extreme cases change beyond recognition, especially in light of a heightened incongruity of films. On the basis of filmic presenting and the resulting transmateriality and life of films I continue by discussing the audience reception study I conducted in the Commune of Cobly, using the three films *Jesus*, *La Solution* and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance*.

The Audience Reception Study

The biggest challenge of doing an audience reception study on Christian video films in the Commune of Cibly are their sporadic, unpredictable and often informal showings (see Chapter 3). This is why I decided to be proactive with my research by imitating one of the venues of such films, the mobile video parlour that is well known throughout the Commune (see Chapter 1).

As sites for my research I chose the villages of Touga and Oroukparé (see Map 2), where I am well known and where I had done previous research. I also initiated contacts in Tchokita, a village with which I did not have any prior contacts. In the three villages, I approached the relevant authorities and explained my research project. They reacted positively to my suggestions and agreed to talk it over with the people of their community. I then met with those who were interested in participating and explained again my proposal. I made it clear that I intended to show Christian films that missionaries and churches have often used for evangelism, but that I only expected them to watch and discuss the films with me. I also stressed that participation was voluntary and that there would not be any financial gain for participation.³⁹ I then had a brief interview with each potential viewer to ascertain that they had understood my research project and were aware of the Christian nature of the films, after which I sought their verbal consent to participate. Since my fourth venue, the town of Cibly, was too large and heterogeneous to involve local authorities, my research assistant and I approached potential individuals directly.

Not all of those who initially showed an interest in participating actually came to watch the films. I had a total of 104 participants who watched at least one of the films with me. For each of the three films I had a research audience of between 90 and 94. The voluntary participation resulted in a more restrictive sample with a clear bias towards Christians. 55 participants claimed church adherence, while only 15 stated that they had never set foot into a church. The other 26 research participants, including a Muslim, have attended a church at some point in their lives. Since explicitly Christian media are mainly consumed by those

³⁹ It has become customary for NGOs, and in rare cases even churches, to pay local participants for attending meetings and training events. It was important to me that people did not participate in my research because they expected financial gain.

already committed to Christianity (cf. Coleman 2000: 179), my sample may actually have been fairly representative and typical of current audiences of Christian films in the Commune of Cobly.

Just over half of the research participants said that they already had seen the *Jesus Film* at least once either in a church-related setting or during an explicitly evangelistic event. About 40% of the participants were already familiar with *Yatin*, while a quarter of the research audience had seen *La Solution* previously, making it the least known film. Eight participants claimed that they had never seen a film or video before.

Following commercial mobile video parlours, I used a 21-inch CRT television set and showed the films in the evenings (Figures 12 and 13). Since the purpose of my research was the presencing potential of the films themselves, I removed an advert for Cotonou harbour from *Yatin* and skipped the explicitly evangelistic pro- and epilogue of the *Jesus Film* that are later additions to the main feature.

Even though watching films and television in Africa is a collective activity during which viewers help each other to better understand films (Barber 1997; Bouchard 2010: 104; Touré 2006: 219; Powdermaker 1962: 256-270; see also Kwon 2010: 65, 178; Srinivas 1998, 2002), I tried to limit the influence of spontaneous “explainers” (cf. Jhala 1996: 216; Wollen 1972: 119) or “video narrators” (Krings 2013), by asking the audiences to allow people to discover the films for themselves. The main reason for doing so was to counter the real possibility that some of the keener Christians already familiar with the films would choose to provide a continuous and spontaneous interpretation (Bouchard 2010; Krings 2013; cf. Srinivas 2002: 170), as is typical for explicitly evangelistic screenings of such films. While it was evident that most audiences were verbally participating in the viewing experience through short comments anyway (Friedman 2006: 306; Liebes and Katz 1993: 82-99; Srinivas 1998: 336; Touré 2006: 219; Werner 2006: 182-183, 2012: 101), the extent of mutual help and influence of the active and engaging audiences was difficult to assess. During the one or two days following the screenings, while people continued to discuss the films among themselves in more depth (Ambler 2001: 99; Jhala 1996: 215; Werner 2006: 183-185, 2012: 102), I conducted individual semi-structured interviews. Following Marcus Banks’ (2001: 96) suggestion, I sometimes used stills of key events from the films when

discussing them in the three villages, while in the town of Cobly, where it is a lot easier to recharge batteries, I showed video clips of key scenes on a laptop computer.⁴⁰ The interviews varied greatly in length and depth, depending on the interviewees and their abilities to deal with the interviewing situation. The data gathered during the interviews has a strong qualitative nature and does not easily lend itself to quantitative or representative analysis.

Moving Image and Language

Initially, I intended to focus my research on the visual side of film, which for me is the defining feature of the medium (cf. J. Ellis 1992: 52, 128-129). Silent films, after all, existed long before talkies became available. Based on Birgit Meyer (2005: 278-279) I argue elsewhere (J. Merz 2010, 2014) that the images of film are especially important for West African audiences. This reasoning stems from various factors that affect film watching. In colonial times, the sound quality of old celluloid film copies that circulated in these parts of the world was usually significantly diminished and the noise of audiences sometimes made it impossible to understand the films' language anyway, even if viewers were familiar with it (Ambler 2001: 82, 2002: 128; Larkin 1997: 412; Powdermaker 1962: 259). More recently, the sound in Nollywood films was distorted, especially in their early years, making it at times impossible to follow the dialogue (Barrot 2008: 55; Larkin 2008: 237; B. Meyer 2005: 279). Besides, many Nollywood viewers across Africa do not have sufficient English to understand the dialogue (Pyper 2013: 203). This meant that especially West African audiences got accustomed to focussing more on the image than the language of film.

On the other hand, I also recognise that the use of language can be crucial. How image and language relate to each other, partly depends on specific films. *La Solution* and *Yatin* have been made with West African audiences in mind, and the producers probably recognised the technical challenges of sound mentioned above. Accordingly, they do not contain as much dialogue and language as the

⁴⁰ Generally, I found that all people recognised the video clips, while especially older people could not always figure out what the stills were meant to show. By adding movements to images, which Powdermaker rightly described as "the essence of film" (1962: 259; cf. Sobchack 2004: 146), the medium provides an additional resource that significantly increases the presenting potential while narrowing down the range of potential meaning (Pinney 1992).

Jesus Film. In spite of this, they rely on lengthy language-focused scenes, since they both try to explain the basics of Christianity, something they both do not, and maybe cannot, visualise. The *Jesus Film* is different, since its use of language is such that it actually could be coherent without images. This is undoubtedly why the makers of the *Jesus Film* stress the importance of language and dubbing (see Chapter 3), thereby playing down the role of the images. The complex relationship between image and language in film thus kindled my interest and became a factor in my research as well.

Yatin and *La Solution* are only available in French. The *Jesus Film*, on the other hand, had already been dubbed into Ditammari, the main neighbouring language of Mbelime and I used this version in the villages of Touga and Tchokita. In Touga most participants understand Ditammari and it is the primary language for most of the women.⁴¹ I chose the village of Tchokita as one of the sites for my research, since Ditammari has become the people's primary language, even though they remain bilingual, meaning that we could conduct the interviews in Mbelime. In Oroukparé and Coby, where hardly any of the viewers understand Ditammari, I showed the *Jesus Film* dubbed into French, Benin's national language.

During my reception research I did not notice significant differences in the overall understanding of the three films between those who understood the language of the films and those who did not. This indicates the validity of the observation that moving images in film are indeed important and that language deficiencies do not seriously hinder comprehension (Werner 2006: 176, 2012: 100). On the other hand, as I mention above, individual viewers are always part of larger audiences. People interact with each other through short remarks and more elaborate comments and interpretations during film watching, as well as by discussing the films afterwards (Bouchard 2010; Talabi 1989: 137; Touré 2006: 217-219; Werner 2006: 182-185, 2012: 101-102). Also, people who struggle with the language sometimes ask for interpretive help. Furthermore, the Christian bias and prior familiarity with the films meant that the audiences had significant knowledge that allowed them to compensate for the lack of linguistic understanding.

⁴¹ Touga's closest neighbouring village is part of a Ditammari-speaking community with which the people of Touga maintain extensive alliances, including marriage (see Chapter 1).

In spite of all this, several people complained that they did not understand the language, an argument they sometimes used to apologise pre-emptively for things they may have missed or thought they had interpreted wrongly and thus could hinder them from living up to my expectations during the interviews. This indicated to me that even though people may not *rely* on understanding the language of film, they do indeed value it, since it can render watching films easier and more interesting.

The language spoken in film, then, is important. Rather than defining film, however, it supports, clarifies and reinforces the images. In other words, language – and sound more generally – can provide additional details and help to limit the range of possible meanings of moving images. Language, especially when it interplays and reinforces moving images, thus plays an important role in the process of filmic presencing. It acts as a kind of meaning adjustment mechanism for images by filling in additional information that cannot be gained from images alone (Crawford 1996: 140; Ruoff 1993), similarly to how Barthes (1977: 39-41) describes the way captions limit the meaning of photos through what he calls “anchorage” (see also Geraghty 2000: 365-366). Language, then, significantly contributes to the experience of watching films.

Dubbing foreign films into local languages raises additional issues. In Tchokita, for example, after having shown the *Jesus Film* dubbed into Ditammari, the young farmer Evariste related: “We were astonished. We didn’t know that it could happen in this way. Later, we discussed it between ourselves but we haven’t found the solution. We don’t know how the child of God manages to speak Ditammari” (interview, 10 Apr. 2010). Mathilde expressed that “he [Jesus] masters our language and this is very interesting. This is why I have understood the film well” (interview, 10 Apr. 2010). Especially when viewers are not familiar with the technology behind dubbing, it can add an additional layer of ambiguity to the films, which is worthy of extensive discussion among audiences and can itself be meaningful.

Dubbing also leads to what Tom Boellstorff calls an “awkward fusion” (2003: 236) in which foreign content is made accessible in local terms (see also Werner 2012: 100). In other words, dubbing can make images of difference appear as more familiar, and this, I argue, can influence a viewer’s interpretation and

broaden the interpretive field. For example, people whose behaviour appears strange can be more easily accepted as different when they speak a foreign language. When their voices have been dubbed into a familiar language, however, it is more likely that this strange behaviour becomes significant and even offensive, since television viewers often “privilege the familiar over the strange” (Schulz 2012: 84).

Following my interviews about the *Jesus Film*, it became clear that viewers preferred a dubbed version into a language they understand, since it helps them to exploit better the presencing potential of the film, leading to a deeper experience. This, in turn, helps viewers to find moral lessons and to engage in film watching as a learning opportunity.

Learning from Film

As I have already demonstrated in Chapter 4, seeing with one’s own eyes provides people in the Commune of Coby with a reliable and veracious opportunity to learn. Similarly, audiences can learn from films and videos, often by identifying a moral lesson from which they seek to benefit, as Karin Barber (2000: 216-225) has discussed in some detail for the Yoruba travelling theatre.

The importance of West African audiences learning from films has been demonstrated by various scholars. This applies to *telenovelas* (Schulz 2012: 82; Touré 2006: 224; Werner 2006: 173, 2012: 105), the more recent Nollywood films (B. Meyer 2003b: 25; Ogunleye 2003c: 5; Ukah 2005: 307-308) and television more generally (Talabi 1989: 137). Jonathan Haynes quotes Ousmane Sambène, whom he reports as having said: “[C]inema is our night school” (2011: 68). B. Meyer (2001: 50) and Krings (2013: 313) trace this trend back to the educational nature of colonial cinema, while I also found that it is accentuated by the general preference for visual learning (Chapter 4; J. Merz 2014).

In the Commune of Coby, most of my viewers considered it important for children to watch television and films. Séraphin, an educated young Christian who owns his own television set explained:

... films educate. If we compare children who watch [films with those who don’t], they won’t be the same. What we see educates us. It allows someone to develop. With film, you can educate someone (interview in French, 11 Feb. 2011).

People often say that children copy what they see others do and what they watch on television. This becomes most visible when, for example, children learn martial arts from karate films and new dances (cf. Ambler 2001: 100; Fair 2010: 113-114), which they sometimes perform during public events, such as celebrating the end of an apprenticeship.

Watching television and films, people usually acknowledge, is by no means an adequate replacement for going to school, since children do not learn to read or write by watching television. Rather, television and videos provide an exciting and enriching additional experience for their learning. Some people, however, also recognise that watching too much television can be bad for children, either leading to bad behaviour or failure at school, as children are prone to neglect their homework (Amouzou 2003; Spigel 1992: 54; Talabi 1989: 138).

While especially the older generation is happy to leave television and films to the younger ones, adults too, often appreciate the learning potential of watching television and videos, especially if they have never had the opportunity to attend school. Valentin, the son of a Tigare owner, explained: “Television... gives us intelligence and raises our standard of living. ... If you’re ignorant you can become intelligent” (interview, 1 Mar. 2011). Elisabeth, a middle-aged new Christian, stated further: “You know, TV is for us who know nothing. We can watch it and become intelligent” (interview, 4 Feb. 2011).

The viewers usually watched the three Christian films according to these principles of finding an educational benefit, thereby making them relevant to their lives. Often, these moral lessons remained fairly general. By way of illustration, Christian viewers of the *Jesus Film* usually found some sort of principle that was beneficial to their current situation. These included: why being a Christian is advantageous, that being a Christian also involves suffering, or that the devil will never succeed in conquering God.

Those less interested in Christianity also found lessons in the film that were not explicitly Christian. For example, for the young Tigare owner Simon, the *Jesus Film* showed that “it’s not good to make people suffer” (interview, 19 Jan. 2011), while the old diviner Sambiénou, who had never been to church, said about the film: “To follow *Uwienu* [God], this is the lesson” (interview, 13 Mar. 2010).

Sometimes, viewers linked their interpretation of the film directly to a specific situation they faced at the time, making films even more relevant. A good example of this comes from Robert, who used to attend church. He linked the *Jesus Film* directly to his job:

I've seen how Jesus suffered and this resembles what I do as a village councillor. We arrange people's houses and families by following what God has said, but people are usually not happy with us. ... When they quarrel with each other, you'll go and separate them. Then, you tell the one in the wrong to forgive the other. I saw that the film speaks the truth (interview, 15 Mar. 2010).

Especially for the *Jesus Film*, which is marked by significant incongruity, such a direct application to specific life situations remained an exception. In the next section I continue to discuss in more detail how exactly the viewers watched the *Jesus Film*.

Watching the Jesus Film

For the viewers in the Commune of Cobly, the *Jesus Film* (1979) proved to be by far the most popular film among the three, even though it features the most explicit violence and suffering, parts which many did not particularly appreciate. I found that the main reason for the interest in the *Jesus Film* is the viewers' appreciation of Jesus as a fundamentally good and moral person. Especially his healings and miracles appealed to many viewers, as also Dong Hwan Kwon (2010: 183) found for Mangyan viewers in the Philippines. Even though Jesus did nothing wrong, as several pointed out, he suffered a lot, thereby adding pity to the viewers' admiration. More generally, viewers found the *Jesus Film* very instructive, since they felt that they could learn more about the teachings of Christianity (cf. Kwon 2010: 188-189; Mansfield 1984).

For almost all viewers, it was clear that the film was about Jesus, *uwien' biike*, the child of God. In fact, I found during the interviews that nearly all viewers who watched the film already had a good understanding of the main teachings of Christianity, including that Jesus was the child of God and that he died for the evils of humanity. This also applied to some people who had never been to church before, but who have Christian wives, children or neighbours. The old man Kom-bëtto, for example, exemplified this:

I learnt this [that Jesus is the child of God] from the people of prayer [Christians]. They talk about it, teach it and pronounce his name. This is why I know that he's the child of God. Yesterday, when I followed the film, other viewers called his name and I said to myself: 'Ah, the man they talk about, it's him. It's thanks to him that we have found life.' I could recognise him easily (interview, 13 Mar. 2010).

Indeed, exposure to Christianity provided the viewers with prior knowledge on which they could draw to understand the film. Philippe, an older farmer, explained: "I went to church some time ago. I went to church and this is why I know prayer. I've never seen the film, but yesterday I saw how it works and what it showed" (interview, 15 Mar. 2010). Many people explained how, in one way or another, the film helped them to understand better who Jesus was and what Christianity was about.

For some Christian viewers, who were well established in their church and who had seen *Jesus* before, the film gained deeper significance than the other two films, similarly to how the Bible has become the most important book for them (see Chapter 2). Without the *Jesus Film*, some argued, you could not have the other two films. Bernard, who had served as an elder for the *Assemblées de Dieu*, thought that the *Jesus Film* was important

because it treats a topic that the other two films only treat superficially. But the last film [*Jesus*] treats the actual source, the origin. I could say that the two other films [*La Solution* and *Yatin*] are based on the third [*Jesus*]... In other words, the *Jesus Film* is much richer than the others (interview in French, 17 Jan. 2011).

Similarly, for Yantékoua, the leader of a village church, "the film is something that resembles what God himself does. For example, God gave intelligence to humans, so that they would make the film and that it would help other people" (interview, 13 Mar. 2010). Salomon, a keen and Pentecostally inclined Christian, went even further in claiming that the *Jesus Film*

shows the true face of God. It shows us that God has sent Jesus. And it [the film] is direct. ... People have not made it. All the other films, we know that people of this country have made them. ... But for *Jesus*, when you watch it, even if they tell you that people have made it, you'll refuse. It's as if the film shows directly the birth of Jesus, Son of God, how he came to earth. ... It's direct; it's powerful (interview in French, 18 Jan. 2011).

The Incongruity of the *Jesus Film*

The popularity of the *Jesus Film*, especially among Christian viewers and those interested in Christianity, does not mean that there are no communicative issues worth discussing. Their prior knowledge of Christianity certainly helped the viewers in their presencing of the *Jesus Film*. At the same time, however, the heightened incongruity of the film that stems from the difference between its American producer and its viewers in Coby, resulted in the audiences recognising that the film was markedly different from their everyday experience of life. Most viewers did not perceive this as a hurdle for understanding the film. On the contrary, the cultural incongruity of the film made it sometimes more attractive. Moutouama, for example, an old man responsible for the shrine entity of his mother, commented: “I liked the film about Jesus because I’ve never seen a film like this before. ... The film was new for me. I already knew other films that have black people in them. It’s the one with the whites that I didn’t know” (interview, 26 Mar. 2010). The whiteness of Jesus further confirmed the prior knowledge of many that links Christianity with *upaanu* (the new times) and white people. This implicitly affirms that Christianity promotes and seeks a “break with the past” (B. Meyer 1998a), especially though diabolisation of the old ways.

For nearly all viewers it was clear that the Jesus of the film was white-skinned (cf. Kwon 2010). For some, Jesus’ whiteness was affirmed by his long hair, itself a symbol of the transnational visualisation of Jesus (Chapter 3), and, for viewers in Oroukparé and Coby, since he spoke French. Gnammu, a well-travelled old farmer with limited experience of Christianity, watched the film in Ditammari. In spite of this, he stated that Jesus

is a white man. ... His language, the way he greets and asks, made me realise that he’s indeed white. He can’t kill anyone. He wants to arrange the country, so that it will become good and everyone will see it. This is why I recognised that he’s white (interview, 12 Mar. 2010).

Many viewers also acknowledged that even though Jesus was white-skinned, he also stood out as being different from the other people that surrounded him in the film (see Chapter 3), which eclipsed his whiteness to some extent. They easily could explain this difference by recognising that Jesus is not an ordinary (white) human, but *uwien’ biike*, the child of God. Indeed, Jesus does not have a typical

mtakimε (identity). Ntcha, a young farmer who had attended a Protestant church for a while, explained: “*Uwienu* [God] took *mtakimε* [identity] and made it enter the belly of a young woman. This shows that she became pregnant through *uwien’ takimε* [God’s identity], *uwien’ bodikε* [God’s animating force]” (interview, 25 Mar. 2010).

Virtually all viewers noticed that the cultural incongruity of the film was most recognisable in the person of Jesus and exploited it for their benefit, thereby adding to the overall experience of film watching. Despite this, several Christian viewers acknowledged that this incongruity has also led to people rejecting the film. From their prior experience with evangelistic screenings of the *Jesus Film* they had learnt that some people, who are less well disposed towards Christianity, use the obvious whiteness of Jesus as evidence that Christianity is indeed a foreign and “white” religion. Paul, who is in charge of a small congregation of the *Assemblées de Dieu*, explained this in more detail:

They know very well what Jesus has done, what happened when he suffered and how he healed many people. Everybody sees it. But they see the *Jesus Film* as something that has come from the outside. It’s from a different country with different customs. You can see that they don’t like the film. But for the other films, it’s us who have made them and they show only blacks. It resembles what we do here (interview, 26 Mar. 2010).

Watching the *Jesus Film*, then, can help people explain why they have rejected Christianity. Since such people cannot be expected to watch Christian films voluntarily, I did not come across this issue during my reception research.

Based on my findings for the *Jesus Film*, then, I can confirm that people are aware of the incongruity of films (Fair 2010: 116; Larkin 1997; Schulz 2012: 83; Touré 2006: 223). The resulting perception of difference becomes a presencing resource to audiences that needs to be made sense of, thereby adding to the overall experience of film watching and their presencing. On the other hand, many areas of the cultural incongruity of films go unnoticed, especially when viewers do not have the necessary background knowledge of the production setting of a film that would allow them to assess the exact nature of differences. This raises issues of the epistemological incongruity between the film and its viewers. Audiences easily fail to presence entities that producers would consider important and view-

ers equally can recognise entities that were not intended. In between these extremes of presencing lies a broad field of entities that producers intended a film's viewers to make present, but audiences presence them in different ways than expected (cf. Werner 2006: 178). This often happens when viewers connect the presenced entities in unexpected ways to other entities. All this variation in presencing, which is clearly accentuated by incongruity, inevitably leads to a significant broadening of the interpretive field.

Only a few viewers, especially older ones who had neither much experience of films or Christianity, struggled to follow the film, since they were not able to exploit sufficiently the *Jesus Film's* presencing potential. Sometimes they understood that it was about Jesus, of whom they had heard, but they could not always make sense of who he was, nor what he did. Gnam mou (interview, 12 Mar. 2010), for example, missed that Jesus was resurrected and explained that he was killed because he encouraged people not to pay taxes. Gnam mou probably based this on his parents' and his own experience of resisting colonialism and the modern state.

More interesting from the point of view of the plurality of the interpretive field are instances where viewers make sense of things that remain largely meaningless to those viewers in Europe or America for whom the incongruity of the film is minimal. During the scene of the Last Supper (Luke 22: 7-38), for example, Jesus passes the cup with his left hand to the person on his left, then breaks a flat bread which he passes to the right with his right hand and to the left with his left. It seems that the choice of hands was arbitrary to the makers of the *Jesus Film*, but may have been influenced by aesthetic considerations. In the Commune of Cobly, however, since normally people only interact with each other using the right hand, most viewers noticed that Jesus used his left hand and found it significant. Many interpreted from this that the people on Jesus' left were his enemies. This included Judas Iscariot, although I identified him sitting on Jesus' right side. Jesus used his left hand to show them that he knew of their plot and that this would not go unpunished. One viewer went further by musing whether those on Jesus' left were those who do not accept Christ and go to hell. A few also wondered whether Jesus used the hand the way he did simply because he was different, thereby ascribing this to cultural difference.

Questions of Powers

One of the central questions that the *Jesus Film* posed to viewers in the Commune of Cibly was the nature of his extraordinary powers and achievements. Most viewers paid careful attention to this issue and nearly all concluded that his powers did not come from medicinal substances, since they did not see Jesus using them. Nobody suspected that he might have carried such power-giving things in the bag that he often has slung around his shoulders, as Hannes Wiher (1997: 70) reported it for Guinean audience. Mathieu, a middle-aged farmer who used to attend a Protestant church, explained:

If he [Jesus] wants to do something for somebody, I don't see him take anything. He doesn't dig up roots, or peel the bark off trees [both being typical medicinal substances], nor does he run to find other things [that he could use]. He just touches you with his hand and if you had a pain somewhere... you'll see that where he touched the disease will be instantly healed (interview, 27 Mar. 2010).

Most viewers, especially those well versed in Christian teaching, already knew before watching the film that Jesus' powers as Mathieu describes them came from God. They found this largely confirmed in the film. Some viewers, however, presented complementary and alternative interpretations.

A quarter of those who watched *Jesus*, linked his powers to some form of *uhɔɔhu* (transvisual power) that they qualified as either good or coming from God. Bernard, for example, claimed that during the scene of the multiplication of the bread and fish (Luke 9: 10-17) somebody loudly commented: "Really, he has good *sorcellerie!*" (interview in French, 17 Jan. 2011). Rachelle, a devout Christian, who watched the *Jesus Film* at the same time as Bernard, further explained: "He has *uhɔɔhu*. When he took the baskets to pray, they were filled with fish. I could see that he wasn't a human like me. He's more powerful than me" (interview, 17 Jan. 2011). This more Christian and Pentecostalist sense of transvisual power is sometimes linked with the Holy Spirit. It implies the spiritualisation of *uhɔɔhu* (transvisual power), while maintaining its ambivalence by resisting its demonisation. In doing so, as I have argued elsewhere in more detail (J. Merz 2008), people equate transvisual power with what Christians often call the spiritual realm.

Other viewers assumed that Jesus must also have had the support of his ancestors in all he did, since otherwise, as some claimed, he could never have accom-

plished what he did. Martin, a young farmer who had never been to church, recognised Jesus' ancestors in "something that has come from above to cover" (interview, 25 Mar. 2010), referring to the descending cloud of the scene of the transfiguration (Luke 9: 28-36), while he also ascribed the darkness that fell after Jesus' death to his ancestors. Mathilde, who attended church in the past, saw Jesus' ancestors wrapping his body in white cloth and concluded that they helped him also to resurrect (interview, 10 Apr. 2010), probably referring to the angels that appear after Jesus was resurrected. The old man Moutouama undoubtedly drew on his assumption that films showed the dead (see Chapter 4): "Yesterday, I've seen people who walked next to him [Jesus] and I know that they were his ancestors. I didn't recognise any of the people that were in the film, but maybe they were his ancestors" (interview, 25 Mar. 2010). More generally, André assumed that Jesus' prayers were always addressed to his ancestors who then presented his petitions to God (interview, 24 Mar. 2010). It is interesting to note that all these viewers were not practicing Christians and have had only minimal exposure to Christianity. For such people, ancestors remain important in their daily lives and some even maintain an intimate relationship with their ancestors and could not imagine living without them (cf. Huber 1968: 205, 1973: 382-384). The viewers most involved in their churches, on the other hand, simply claimed that Jesus did not have any ancestors. Their view is undoubtedly influenced by church teaching that usually takes on an anti-material stance (see Chapter 2). Accordingly, ancestors are often identified as idolatrous, while some Christians also spiritualise and demonise them, thereby making them submit to more Pentecostalist forms of Christianity.

The last area of interest of the cultural incongruity of the *Jesus Film* concerns viewers seeing shrine entities. The most striking example comes from Gérôme, a middle-aged farmer who used to attend a local Catholic church: "What I saw yesterday about Jesus, when he wanted to pray he usually went to a *ditade* [stone]" (interview, 15 Mar. 2010). Gérôme made reference to several instances where Jesus climbs up hills to pray. The stones and heaps of stones that are clearly visible on the hills, made him think of shrine entities. Jesus kneeling down in front of a rock on the Mount of Olives while praying before he was arrested (Luke 22: 39-45) further confirmed for him that Jesus was indeed praying to

shrine entities, such as the one shown in Figure 1. Emmanuel, also an ex-Catholic, identified this rock as a potential shrine as well, because it reminded him of a specific shrine he knows well. Contrary to G  r  me, however, he was less sure that the rock of the film was indeed a shrine. According to him,

... it may be difficult to identify *atenwiene* [shrine entities] in the film. Sometimes you may not recognise them because they don't resemble the shrines we have here and you can't recognise them. In this place [on the Mount of Olives], I'm not sure (interview, 17 Jan. 2011).

A few other viewers noticed stones and identified them as shrine entities, "just like the ones we have here in our village" (interview with Julienne, 10 Apr. 2010). H  l  ne, who recently started to attend church, also remembered seeing offerings being made to shrine entities. Although I cannot say for sure, this could have been during the scene of the feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9: 10-17), which takes place on a rocky hill:

Yesterday, I saw where they were sitting down to make an offering to *ditenwende* [a shrine entity]. ... The *ditenwende* was there and other *atenwiene* were planted everywhere. They placed themselves in groups at this place (interview, 10 Apr. 2010).

While the question of the origin of Jesus' power certainly raised many of the viewers' interests, the opposition he faced equally caught some viewer's attention. Accordingly, especially Pentecostally-orientated viewers understood the *Jesus Film* in terms of a battle between God and the devil, which they found visualised in the popular scene of the temptation of Jesus, featuring a confrontation between Jesus and the devil (Luke 4: 1-13). Ultimately, such viewers also held *disenpode* (the devil, see Chapter 2) directly responsible for Jesus' death.

The scene of the temptation of Jesus was also important in other more intricate ways. It starts with a voiceover that talks of the devil tempting Jesus, after which we see a snake slithering along, thereby implying an identification of the devil with the snake. This symbolism does not come from the Gospel of Luke, but rather has its origin in later Jewish and Christian literature, which explicitly identified the snake of Genesis 3 with the devil (D. B. Howell 2007: 13). The makers of the *Jesus Film* assumed that its audiences would be familiar with such Judeo-Christian symbolism. While this may have been true for many of the more

committed Christian viewers, it also opened the possibility for alternative interpretations.

Pythons are often significant to people in the Commune of Cobly and meeting them, as Jesus did in the film, is usually not considered a mere coincidence. Etienne, whose father Moutouama is in charge of a minor shrine entity and who had never been to church, recognised in the snake not *disenpode* (the devil) but a *ditenwende* (shrine entity) that presented itself to Jesus in the form of a snake (interview, 15 Mar. 2010; see also Chapter 2). For Etienne, although shrine entities remain important, they also restrain people from changing and from advancing in life. In this sense, his understanding of snakes and shrine entities fitted the snake in the *Jesus Film*, which tempted Jesus and tried to restrain him.

This interpretation of the snake as a shrine entity, and not as the devil, was particularly marked in the village of Tchokita, where the primary language is Ditammari and where I showed the *Jesus Film* dubbed into Ditammari. The Ditammari Bible (Alliance Biblique du Bénin 2001), which served as a basis for dubbing the *Jesus Film*, uses the word *dibɔ̀* to translate the devil. Its meaning is not totally clear and it does not seem to be an important notion outside the Bible. For Paul Mercier (1968: 128 n.133) *dibɔ̀* is any non-human power, which is ritually respected, while Dominique Sewane (2003: 62 n.61) refers to it as an altar to a hunted animal. In Tchokita, however, people consider *dibɔ̀* to be the equivalent of the Mbelime word *ditenwende* (shrine entity) and therefore also as being linked to snakes. At least in Tchokita, by using the word *dibɔ̀* to translate “devil”, the Ditammari translation of the Bible and the *Jesus Film* support an interpretation that favours people seeing snakes as shrine entities.

When viewers of the scene of the temptation of the *Jesus Film* interpreted the snake as a shrine entity, they also favoured an interpretation that directly opposes Jesus and shrine entities. This antagonism is further based on the missionaries’ anti-material legacy and the semiotification and demonisation of shrine entities that makes them increasingly a focus of spiritual warfare and deliverance, especially in Pentecostalised forms of Christianity. Several Christian viewers, whose prior negative experiences of shrine entities were similar to how the film *La Solution* portrays them (see below), interpreted the conflict Jesus was facing, especially during the scene of the temptation, in these antagonistic terms.

A few viewers in the town of Cibly, who had some experience of watching Nollywood films, identified the Roman soldiers who arrested, maltreated and killed Jesus as *atenwiene yanbe* (shrine entity people). In doing so they drew on their knowledge of Nollywood and other Christian videos (for example *La Solution*, Chapter 3), where the evil “fetish priests” are often clad in red and sometimes wear funny head dresses, in this case Roman helmets. These viewers were not the only ones who blamed the *atenwiene yanbe* for Jesus’ death. Especially those, whose knowledge of Christianity was limited, including new Christians, sometimes made this link. Nearly a month after watching the film, the old man Gnam mou, who had previously shared that Jesus encouraged people not to pay taxes (see above), claimed that Jesus urged people to abandon shrine entities, which then roused the anger of the *atenwiene yanbe* (interview, 8 Apr. 2010). According to the new Christian Elisabeth, the *atenwiene yanbe* incited people to hate Jesus, while Fatima, a woman in her fifties, held them directly responsible for his death, since “they wanted to cut Jesus’ throat and offer his blood to their shrine entity” (interview, 10 Apr. 2010). Fatima based her interpretation on widespread rumours that started in the 1970s that the owners of the then new Nkunde shrines needed to provide their shrine entities with human blood once a year (see Chapter 1).

These newer Tigare and Nkunde shrines that began to appear in the Cibly area as early as the 1950s became the backdrop on which many viewers understood the film *La Solution*.

The Shrines of La Solution

From early on in *La Solution* (*The Solution*, 1994) virtually all viewers identified the presence of shrines that were similar or identical to those they knew as Tigare and Nkunde. This led to a considerably narrower interpretive field as compared to the *Jesus Film*. Most viewers also understood that the shrine owner Nato economically benefitted from Ata and Akoua and did not live up to his promises. Many viewers drew their main moral lessons of *La Solution* from this theme of shrines, which ranged from the insight that one should never trust their owners to being reminded that Christianity is the better solution.

Generally, I found that viewers understood *La Solution* more easily than the *Jesus Film*, undoubtedly because the film's cultural incongruity is considerably less marked. Even though American missionaries made the film in Côte d'Ivoire, its story came from Marcus Minomekpo, a Togolese, who used his own experience as a basis for the plot. Both Tigare and Nkunde shrines are also known throughout Togo (see, e.g., Rosenthal 1998; Zwernemann 1975, 1993) and may have influenced Minomekpo's experience and the resulting story. This may explain why *La Solution* presents a scenario that was familiar to most viewers in the Commune of Cibly, either through experience within their own close families, or through rumours.

Failing Shrines

Nanhonga, an older Catholic woman, was reminded of the following story when she watched *La Solution*:

My son Kouagou had attempted to get the *baccalauréat* already two times. Now he wanted to go for his third time. So far he went to see people who have medicines and shrines [*atenwiene*], but nothing worked for him. I tell you, he had money thanks to a job he had. It's with this money that he went to these people. One day he returned and he said: 'My mother'. I replied: 'Yes, my son'. The men had given him lucky soap, protective rings, amulets and calabashes to wash with. But nothing had worked for him. ... Then, he said: 'This year, if I return to Natitingou [to try the *baccalauréat* for the third time] I will start to pray. I want only God to help me this time.' He continued: 'The way I see it, God should help me, inspite of the medicines and shrines.' What my son experienced is exactly like what they showed in the film yesterday. When I thought about it and compared the man and the woman of yesterday with my son's situation, I saw that it was exactly the same. Later, when my son [had received his *baccalauréat* and] was satisfied with God, he returned home, collected all his things and threw them into the water (interview, 22 Dec. 2010).

This account corresponds with Ata's experiences, who initially turned to shrines to look for a solution to his problems. Such stories indicate that many who are not practicing Christians continue to seek help from *atenwiene* (shrine entities), demonstrating that some people see shrines in a positive light. Among the viewers who watched *La Solution* with me, however, such positive views were underrepre-

sented. One exception was Tandjomè, an old widow whose experience of both films and Christianity is minimal. She seemed to have missed the film's clearly negative and critical portrayal of shrines and their owners:

I liked the whole film. I liked the *atenwiene yanbe* [shrine entity people] and the followers of God [Christians]. ... The *atenwiene yanbe* offered sacrifices, which was very good. My parents and my grandparents were just like this. I saw women in the film and they danced. It was very interesting and I liked it (interview, 11 Mar. 2010).

Other viewers, who also generally perceive shrine entities in a positive light, did not seem to be particularly bothered by the negative portrayal of shrines (cf. McCall 2012: 18). Simon, a young farmer who had only recently acquired a Tigare shrine from Nigeria, recognised that some shrine owners were not serious and that they could have limited powers: "There are people here like this [Nato]. They will tell you that they can help you. You bring them cows and goats, which they will kill to eat. In return they will only laugh at you. It won't work for you" (interview, 15 Jan. 2011). Simon, on the other hand, claimed that he had nothing to do with such people and that his shrine had never failed. Another viewer added that good shrine owners know their limits and refer patients to other practitioners or a local health clinic or hospital when appropriate.

A few viewers, who had experience of Tigare ownership, had come to see them more sceptically. Valentin is the son of one of the first Tigare owners in the Commune of Cibly and, together with his brother Yves and uncle, inherited the responsibility of the shrine after his father's death in 2008. While Yves has been involved with several different churches, Valentin had never attended church. They still felt responsible for maintaining their father's shrine, even though they had also become critical of shrines. Valentin explained:

If you go to a shrine owner, he will ask you for many things, he will make you pay. ... In the beginning, people often went to shrine owners. But today everybody knows what happens there. The shrines have led to quarrels that cause division among people. Anything could happen. If you get involved with the shrines, you will suffer, even you who are the owner of the shrine yourself (interview, 22 Dec. 2010).

Valentin made allusion to problems that also *La Solution* addresses, most notably the economic exploitation and accusations levelled at close family members. These seem to be the main reasons why in some villages owners of Tigare got rid of their shrines, even though they were very popular when they first arrived in the 1950s and 1960s. Some of the older inhabitants of such villages remember the regular public ceremonies that attracted large crowds.

Simon, the owner of a Tigare shrine, further explains that you need to be careful. If an owner cannot control his anger in front of his shrine and asks it to work against his enemies, the shrine entity will get a taste for murder and turn even against those who come to seek help:

Once it has killed, it becomes a habit and it will continue to kill. This is where the shrine turns against you. You will ask yourself who has done this to you. If people come to seek help such as witches, for example, the shrine will kill them (interview, 15 Dec. 2010).

Such a shrine will fail in the long run and become a burden to its owner. A further way for such shrines to fail, as other viewers explained, is that witches have found ways to gain the favour of Tigare shrines, thereby undermining their former power.

Contrary to the Tigare and Nkunde newcomers, stone entities in the Commune of Coby are well established and have long histories. Often they are seen as more important than the new shrines. Indeed, Tigare and Nkunde can only be installed after the stone entities have given permission through their priests. Stone entities, Tigare and Nkunde can all be referred to as *atenwiene* (shrine entities). Despite this, people see a difference between the older stone entities and newer shrines, as stone entities only demand an offering after they have successfully addressed the petition that people bring to them. On the other hand, the owners of Tigare and Nkunde demand payment before they begin their treatment.

While many viewers who watched *La Solution* with me recognised the advantages of the stone entities, including some older Christians, they also had become disillusioned with them, just as they had with Tigare and Nkunde. Many viewers claimed that stone entities do not respond as well as they used to in their parents' time. Some explained this apparent failure through people's behaviour since nobody gives the stone entities respect anymore. People now approach them in

Western clothing and sometimes with their shoes on and they no longer present their offerings in calabashes, but in metal or plastic vessels. Other viewers claimed that in recent times people pushed stone entities to harm others, thereby corrupting their former integrity.

Some ascribed the failure of shrine entities to the *atenwiene* themselves. The old man Moutouama (interview, 26 Mar. 2010), who is responsible for his mother's stone entity, explained that shrine entities sometimes betray people by seeking food for themselves. They abuse their position between people and God by cheating their petitioners, claiming the offering was for God, while they eat themselves.

While many people generally continue to make use of different *atenwiene* (shrine entities), their performance has become the subject of widespread discussions (cf. Geschiere 2013: 82-89). Especially Tigare and Nkunde shrines receive criticism not only due to their high costs and low efficiency, but also because they proved detrimental to relationships within the communities in which they operated. Some of the viewers, who felt that the owners of such shrines had exploited and abused them, turned towards Christianity, just as Nanhonga's son and Ata of *La Solution* did. Their negative experience of shrines then provides a fertile ground for church teaching that condemns and demonises any kind of *atenwiene* (shrine entities).

Christians and Shrines

Taouéma, an older and well-established Christian in one of the villages, drew a bleak picture of Tigare, Nkunde and stone shrines, as is typical among many Christians: “*Ditenwende* is the true devil. This is why *ditenwende* is evil. A shrine owner can go to his shrine and ask for help, but the shrine will kill him. If you followed the path of God, what could kill you?” (interview, 5 Mar. 2010).

Especially well-established Christians commonly dismiss and antagonise shrines by demonising them. “The *fétiche* is a demon”, Salomon laconically confirmed (interview in French, 22 Dec. 2010). This subsumes shrines under the devil's work, which actively opposes God and Christians. Even though *La Solution* does not explicitly demonise shrines, it nonetheless blames them for common social problems, such as economic failure, fraud, alcoholism and domestic vio-

lence. In doing so, the film attributes complex social issues to the work of shrines, which fits the common Christian understanding of their demonic nature. By reinforcing such views, *La Solution* correlates with the Pentecostalisation of Christianity in the Commune of Coby and with an increasing stigmatisation of shrine entities. Indeed, some shrine owners are becoming weary of the hostility they feel coming from Christians, while at least for the moment they remain much more pragmatic in their relationships to Christians themselves.

Some Christian viewers, especially those who have direct experiences of shrines, provided a more nuanced picture by accepting that some shrines really work, especially when owners are serious about their work. This may be the reason why many shrine owners claim to have Christian customers, who come to see them secretly. Some Christians openly admit that they seek help for health problems outside churches and Western medicine, but they are quick to stress that they only visit practitioners of herbal medicines and that they would never frequent the demonic shrines.

More generally, in spite of accusations of failure, shrines also continue to be attractive, as elsewhere in Africa (Geschiere 2013: 83). Many Christian viewers recognised that when people first get involved with them, shrines are novel and show a lot of promise.⁴² A few Christian viewers, however, thought that when shrines seem to be successful this is in fact only due to coincidence. Those who sought help would have found answers even without the shrines' intervention, since it was in their destiny. It was only at a later stage, several claimed, that it would become obvious that shrine owners cannot live up to their promises, thereby finally revealing their deception and fraud.

That *La Solution* is indeed a Christian film was less obvious and only became apparent to most viewers halfway through the film. Six viewers even completely missed that *La Solution* was about Christianity. As their experience of Christianity was not significant, the cultural incongruity of the film was higher as compared to Christian viewers. Those who recognised Christians in the film usually did so by hearing people talking about God and Jesus, something that necessitates a mini-

⁴² This seems to be a wider principle of the local economy. When people use a tailor or seamstress for the first time they are usually pleased. After subsequent visits to the same person, however, customers begin to complain about the quality of their work and begin to look for a new tailor or seamstress.

mal understanding of French. Sometimes, viewers also made comments to help other viewers. The young Christian Innocent remembered when he first watched *La Solution* at his church: “I have watched the film already and other viewers said: ‘Here’s the pastor and his wife.’ This is why this time I recognised the pastor and his wife” (interview, 27 Mar. 2010). It is interesting that while I was not able to identify pastors in the film, virtually all viewers did so. For them, a pastor is somebody who carries and uses a Bible (see Chapter 2) and is more generally associated with people who work for God (cf. Pype 2012: 51). Because of this, Evariste, a young farmer with little experience of Christianity, came to understand that Ata himself was a pastor:

There was a pastor. He went to see the people who have medicines and diviners who talked between themselves. If I understood correctly, his wife wanted to kill him. This is why he threw her out of the house. Then somebody came to talk to him about God’s Word. At the end of the film we saw that he became a good pastor again. ... He announced the Word of God and people listened (interview, 11 Apr. 2010).

The assumption that a pastor has a stable *mtakime* (identity) from his birth led him to understand the film in more Christian terms than the producers could have anticipated, even though his view of what a pastor is and what he does could be queried from the producers’ perspective.

While *La Solution* is clearly meant to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity, for most viewers the film was in fact more about shrines, something that most complained about. Because of this, viewers in the Commune of Coby understood the film mainly in terms of their current discourse on the utility, efficiency and nature of shrines, and only secondarily as an argument for Christianity. It is true that especially the more committed Christian viewers did understand the film as a general condemnation of any form of shrine, but my findings equally show that the film does not necessarily discourage people from engaging with *atenwiene* (shrine entities). Watching *La Solution* largely affirmed what viewers already knew, namely that at least some shrines are not reliable and that at least some shrine owners’ main goal is to exploit.

Finally, most viewers also recognised that Christianity proposes an alternative path that some people choose to follow. *La Solution* comes to a climax when the

new Christian Ata challenges Nato, the shrine owner. At least from the Christian perspective as presented in *La Solution*, confrontation seems not only inevitable, but also essential to demonstrate the power of God, which marks a liminal event that leads to conversion with its promise of health, happiness and the prosperity of a modern life.

The Witches of Yatin

While *La Solution* focuses on the evils of shrines and their owners, the Beninese *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (*Yatin: Place of Suffering*, 2002) mainly addresses the problem of witches. Virtually everybody who watched the film with me knew something about witches and the threat they pose. In the Commune of Cibly, such knowledge is mainly fed by rumours about people who have become victims of witches or are suspected of using their powers in their attempt to harm others.

Most viewers, especially older ones, did not like the film and a few even found it difficult to watch, even though they also recognised it as highly veracious. While *La Solution* presents a problem that people usually bring on themselves, witches pose a more severe threat that could potentially manifest itself in anyone's life at any time. Mathieu, a farmer who attended church for a while, summarised: "I like *La Solution* because it only shows cheating. Nato cheats you, but he won't kill you. In *Yatin*, however, they kill people willy-nilly as if they were just chickens" (interview, 30 Mar. 2010). This gives *Yatin* a much more sinister tone, since it visualises and makes present the general threat of witches. While all viewers were already aware of the potential dangers of witches, many did not appreciate being reminded of it, especially by making it more concrete. On the other hand, many also found the film interesting, since *Yatin* offers an opportunity to learn more about the work of witches, making their usually hidden activities more accessible and understandable without the danger of getting personally involved in it (see also Geschiere 2013: 183-186; Henry and Tall 2008: 23). This mix of criticising films, while showing a keen interest in them at the same time, seems typical of Nollywood audiences (Akpabio 2007; Krings and Okome 2013; Okome 2010; Pype 2013). Films like *Yatin*, after all, are not only about the evils of witches, but also present hope by reminding viewers that there are solutions to

witches and that people can find relief from them. It is this point that makes *Yatin* watchable and interesting.

Yatin, as already discussed in Chapter 3, directly comes out of Nollywood and uses its cinematographic conventions and special effects. While especially younger people are at least somewhat familiar with West African video films, older people often are not. In spite of this, I found that *Yatin* presented the narrowest interpretive field of the three films, which I can explain by the film being the least incongruous, both in cultural and epistemological terms. Accordingly, only one old man, who generally struggled in making sense of all the films, did not pick up that *Yatin* was about Christianity while virtually all viewers identified witches in the film. A few especially older viewers were confused who exactly the witches were. While most thought they included the obviously evil people dressed in black, some interpreted these same people as either shrine people or devils.

In my interviews with two well-educated Christian Coby residents, two important and distinctive points about *Yatin* became apparent. Bernard thought that “*Yatin*... reflects better local realities as compared to *La Solution*”, while François stated that “*Yatin*... doesn’t need to speak in order to convince” (interviews in French, 20 Dec. 2010). François makes reference to *Yatin*’s high level of visualisation, which allows even viewers who have difficulties understanding French to follow the plot sufficiently. It is these two points that I find characteristic of Nollywood as compared to the other two films. This shows that Nollywood’s cinematography is indeed well suited for West African audiences, who can easily exploit the presencing potential of such films and make them relevant to their lives (see also J. Merz 2014). I found in my research that even viewers who generally did not have much experience of films were able to presence *Yatin* noticeably better than the other two films.

Nollywood filmmakers, then, seem to have found an efficient and attractive way to portray topics that are typically difficult to address and visualise in film, most notably things not usually seen, such as witches or the effect of prayer. Accordingly, *Yatin*’s distinctive feature is its portrayal of the spiritual warfare that rages between the pastor and the witches.

The Pastor's War on the Devil

With its distinctly Pentecostal background, *Yatin*'s main narrative is centred on the continuous conflict between God and the devil, which it mainly visualises through the battle between the pastor and the witches. While God proves to be more powerful, which is also a lesson that some viewers gained, the outcome of the film remains uncertain to the very end. This does not only provide suspense for the plot, but also tries to demonstrate that Christians should constantly be on guard against the powers of darkness. Indeed, in order to succeed and prosper in life, *Yatin* can remind Pentecostal Christians that they need to keep their lives pure of any influence of the devil, demons and witches, by engaging in deliverance and spiritual warfare. Sometimes, this demands extraordinary courage, as the hero of the film, Pastor Philippe, demonstrates.

For François, who is an active church member of the *Assemblées de Dieu*, *Yatin* was important since it reminded him “that there are forces in this world” (interview in French, 19 Jan. 2011). David used to be a witch and continued to use his transvisual powers even after conversion and becoming a Pentecostal church leader (J. Merz 2008). With his firsthand knowledge of transvisual power and spiritual battles he upheld that “every night there's a battle. The witches fight against those who are not witches and the angels of Satan fight against the angels of God” (interview in French, 17 Feb. 2012). David recognised that engaging in these battles is not easy and a matter of constant uncertainty:

The pastor didn't believe he would live. No. He doesn't know where his life is, but he constantly confides it to God and his will. That's it. ... And the pastor accepted death with sincerity. He believed that he would die because of the people of Yatin, but God freed him (interview in French, 26 Jan. 2011).

Similarly, Pierre, a retired pastor of the *Assemblées de Dieu* who has some experience of working in difficult places throughout Benin, confirmed:

In [the village of] Yatin, the devil is really tremendous... It is a satanic village, dominated by evil powers. ... The pastor arrived with the power of God. During his encounters I was even afraid when the devil would manifest himself when the pastor did his things. He was not just any pastor, ... he had faith and he had the spirit of God in him. This is why he went to fight these powers and secured victory over the population (interview in French, 15 Dec. 2010).

More generally, virtually all viewers understood from early on in the film that Philippe was indeed a pastor. Like in *La Solution*, Pastor Philippe carries his Bible and uses typical Christian language, especially in his prayers, which contain copious shouts of “Hallelujah!” and “In the name of Jesus!”. Additionally, several viewers pointed out that Philippe also sang songs that they easily identify as typically Christian and that he often waved his arms and used other typically Christian gestures. Through this, as it is common in Nollywood, *Yatin* succeeds noticeably better than *La Solution* to convey the film’s Christian nature.

The war in the village of Yatin manifests itself often directly between witches and Christians. Pastor Philippe and other Christians can be seen praying while stretching out their arms towards their enemies. Thanks to special effects, electric sparks and sometimes fire flow from the palms of the raised hands of the praying Christians to destroy their enemies. While the purpose of these special effects seemed clear to most viewers, they were not always able to explain what the sparks were exactly. For some they stood for some sort of God’s power while others understood them more specifically as *uwien’ takime* (God’s identity, the Holy Spirit), *uwien’ daku* (God’s fire, energy) or *ntakidaku* (spiritual fire, energy). The idea that God sends fire to fight his enemies is common in West African Pentecostalist Christianity and can sometimes be heard in sermons and warfare prayers. Interestingly, Simon (interview, 15 Dec. 2010), the owner of a Tigare shrine, was the only viewer, who drew parallels between what he saw in *Yatin* and a local kind of specialist whom people can approach following a theft. The specialist then provides the victim with a medical substance without identifying the thief. The substance is supposed to cause lightning to strike the culprit (cf. Maurice 1986: 18). More generally, as in other parts of Africa (see, e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1937: 426), people often consider death by lightning as an indication that the victim was a thief. This indicates that the special effects of *Yatin* and other Nollywood films are not totally novel to people in the Commune of Cobly, which undoubtedly makes them more accessible and relevant.

Generally, the prayers of the Pastor and Christians are instantly answered in *Yatin*, demonstrating that their words are agentive and have an effect in the world. Especially during the night while Christians sleep soundly after having prayed, people dressed in white appear to protect them. Such a person covers the

sleepers with a “white cloth”, to use the language of most viewers, which makes them invisible to the witches. Another person in white more actively fights intruding witches. Again many viewers were not totally sure who these people were, although it was clear that God had sent them. Some identified them as *uwien’ takime* (God’s identity, the Holy Spirit) or as *uwien’ bodike* (God’s animating force, the Holy Spirit). For a few others, it was God himself who descended, while one viewer thought that Jesus had come to their defence. Only a few French-speaking Christian viewers in the town of Cobly identified these beings as *anges* (angels), a term that is often interpreted in Mbelime as flying or winged people. Since *Yatin* does not show such winged beings, those viewers that only speak Mbelime did not usually see any “angels”.

Scenes like these made it clear to virtually all the viewers that the power to fight witches comes from *Uwienu* (God). All viewers accepted *Uwienu*’s supremacy and while they know that Christians are typically associated with him, *Uwienu* is not exclusively reserved for them. Viewers like Simon or Valentin and his brother, who have Tigare shrines at home, or Moutouama, who is responsible for a stone entity, equally claimed access to God through their *atenwiene* (shrine entities). Although I do not know this for sure, it is probable that some of the viewers had medicinal substances hidden in their houses, which some people maintain as an effective protection against witches and whose power they would ultimately attribute to God (Huber 1973: 387). One viewer, who had abandoned all shrines and medicinal substances without ever having set foot into a church, did so because he wanted to follow *Uwienu* directly.

These examples show that one does not need to become a Christian in order to follow *Uwienu* (God) and to find protection from witches. Depending on the viewers’ prior experience and knowledge, *Yatin* does not suggest that the only solution to the problem of witches lies in conversion to Christianity, as Christian viewers usually perceived it after watching the film. Rather, *Yatin* suggests to non-Christian viewers that protection comes from *Uwienu*. This includes approaching *Uwienu* through various shrines or the acquisition of medicinal substances that provide protection and can be understood as drawing their power from God. Christianity, too, can become a viable way to follow, especially when people have experienced other paths as ineffective, as I have demonstrated for *La Solution*.

Rather than being an argument for Christianity, then, *Yatin* presents itself to its viewers in the Commune of Cobly as a resource that helps them to think through the problems of witches, an issue that concerns everybody.

The Witches' Evil

Virtually all viewers recognised that witches wreaked havoc in the village of Yatin. The film starts with a lengthy public ceremony that most viewers identified as happening at a Tigare shrine. Central to this ceremony is Sika, an old woman who gets fed from a calabash, an act that turned her into a witch, as most viewers recognised, probably on the basis of what happens later in the film.

People in the Commune of Cobly often say that there are two ways of becoming a witch. While some are born as witches, others are said to actively seek such power, usually with the intent of harming others. Some stories also imply that people can become witches by accident, for example by eating from a pot of a witch without being aware of the danger this poses. This means that the beginning of *Yatin* made sense in local terms, even though people who are seeking to become a witch do not usually go to Tigare shrines. Maybe this was why at least one viewer thought that Sika did not actually want to become a witch, but fell victim to the evil schemes of the shrine owners.

What most viewers specifically commented on was the first meeting of the witches' coven that now included Sika. Alphonse, an older Christian, described this scene that proved to many that they were indeed witches: "They made the tree split in half so that they could come out" (interview, 27 Feb. 2010). The special effect of the splitting tree made a big impression on most viewers. People commonly associate trees with the places where witches meet and most know of evil trees that can harm people when they pass them, especially at night. That a tree could be the house of witches, however, was new to many, especially those who had never seen *Yatin* before. While some viewers seemed to accept that this was indeed how witches operate, several demonstrated a more nuanced perspective. Bertin, a councillor to a village chief, stated: "It's a kind of *uhw̃hu* [trans-visual power] that is different from the one we have here. The witches we have here don't come out of trees, they don't come out of the ground and they don't come down from the sky" (interview, 5 Mar. 2010).

Similarly, many viewers found the witches' visual portrayal convincing, since it confirmed their evil nature. This includes their painted faces and black gowns, the way they talk and laugh and their long fingernails and moving arms that imply their desire to catch the people. "Their gestures, well, it's their style", commented Antonin (interview in French, 18 Dec. 2010), a young film lover. In its portrayal of witches, *Yatin* succeeds even better in exploiting the visual aspect of film than in its depiction of Christains, especially by drawing on conventions that have become characteristic of Nollywood.

The next important event in *Yatin* is Sika's attack of a young woman who had just passed her on a path. Sika turns round and in the witches' style raises her hands and sends two red bolts from her eyes into the woman's lower back. The result was, all viewers acknowledged, fatal. Even though this event takes place during the day when witches do not usually operate, virtually all viewers identified Sika's attack as an act of her evil *uhwɔhu* (transvisual power).

As I discuss in Chapter 4, many people in Commune of Coby consider the eyes of witches to be different, often by being the source of light that they use to detect and catch the *sibosi* (pl. of *kɛbodikɛ*, animating force) of people. It is thus significant that the red bolts come from Sika's eyes, which helped to confirm her as a witch. While not all viewers could name the things that came out of her eyes, some identified them as the witch's light or fire. Especially younger viewers sometimes understood them as bullets that Sika shot from her gun, while Christian viewers tended to see them as the witch's spirit (*uhua takimɛ*) or an evil spirit (*mtakitiɛ*), thereby drawing on the demonised view of transvisual power as is typical of Pentecostalist Christianity (see Chapter 3; J. Merz 2008).

Especially Christian viewers tended to link the witches' powers directly to evil spirits and *disɛnpode* (the devil), the opponent of God. Witches then can become victims of powers beyond their control and are turned into demonic agents who fight against God and his people. Marc, an older man who used to attend church, commented on this issue: "Well, it's those who have read the Bible that say it [*la sorcellerie*, transvisual power] is from the devil. But our parents said that it's from God. You see, there's confusion" (interview in French, 15 Dec. 2010). Marc's observation was confirmed by a significant number of viewers who shared his opinion that witches' power, whether good or evil, always comes from God. The

reason for this stems from the view that God predetermines the identity of people through their *mtakime* and that it is mainly this that decides whether one is a witch or not. While many older people shared this view, it can also be found among the younger generations and some Christians. Accordingly, evil is not played out in some sort of cosmic battle between God and the devil, but it is rooted in everyday life. People have to live with and deal with it to the best of their abilities by drawing on various sources, such as shrines, medicinal substances or prayers. Again, if *Yatin* is viewed from such a perspective, it still makes sense, even though it may miss the main point of the advantages of Christianity that the maker of the film wants to impart.

Whatever the viewers' take on *Yatin* was nobody liked to see the witches go about their evil work. Indeed, the producers of the film endeavour to present witches as the worst manifestation of evil and portray them as being responsible for common problems that people face, such as infertility, alcoholism, epilepsy, suicide and even murder. Despite this, Sanhonga, a middle-aged widow and active Catholic, was the only one to explicate this during the interviews:

What I watched yesterday, I'm not sure, ... but if this is all *uhwuhu* [transvisual power], the lady who urinated on the mat, the man with epilepsy and also the child who escaped school, then it is similar to what we find here. All this exists in our region (interview, 18 Dec. 2010).

Whether *uhwuhu* comes from the devil or is linked to a God-given *mtakime*, Sanhonga implies that "witchcraft" can easily become "the prototype of all evil", as Evans-Pritchard (1937: 56-57) first described it for the Azande. Such negative and moralising views not only came to characterise many anthropological studies, many Christians throughout Africa have adopted them as well. In the Commune of Cibly, this view of evil witches is also becoming more popular. While *Yatin* can certainly support such views, it cannot be held responsible for promoting it. Even people who have never seen the film and who have never been to church can conclude that witches are evil. Bienvenu, for example, a young man, who only watched *La Solution* with me, shared: "The devil is what we call today the witch" (interview, 15 Jan. 2011); a statement that succinctly summarises what *Yatin* is about.

Experiencing Dreams and Films

Especially *Yatin*, and to a lesser degree the *Jesus Film*, visualise parts of the less visible world. In doing so, they make an implicit comparison to dreams, which is the most common way people experience transvisuality or seeing beyond the material world. As I have already established in Chapter 4, dreams and films are similar and have become intermedially linked (Förster 2013). This link became particularly noticeable when I continued to interview viewers about a year after discussing the three films with them. Yantékoua related the following experience:

I saw [Jesus] in my dreams and when I woke up I didn't see him anymore. I noticed that I was lying down on my own. Sometimes I dream of something bad and I call Jesus' name. Then I see that he comes. The one I called, it's him who comes (interview, 24 Jan. 2012).

Marthe, Yantékoua's wife, had a similar dream:

I dreamt after I gave birth to my daughter Pauline. My belly was painful every day and I had to remain lying down. I was asleep when Jesus came to touch my belly. He said: 'It's finished, my daughter, nothing will happen anymore'. The next morning my pain was gone (interview, 26 Jan. 2012).

The Catholic widow Sanhonga also shared one of her dreams with me:

I was asleep and during my dreams I was somewhere and I suffered. Somebody was chasing me. I started to run and I also called the name of God. Immediately I found myself in a church where somebody waited for me. This person had opened the door for me and he wore white clothes. I noticed that he was a man. This is where the dream stopped. I told myself that he was the child of God and that he had saved me (interview, 28 Jan. 2012).

These three accounts of dreams are significant, since they recall scenes of *Yatin*, where people dressed in white came to save those who had prayed or called Jesus' name. The three dreams are further important, since the dreamers were able to recognise Jesus. While only a few of the viewers claimed to have seen Jesus in dreams, these examples indicate a possible link between watching the *Jesus Film* and dreams (cf. Kulick and Willson 1994: 9), as Marie Gillespie (1995a: 363) and Purnima Mankekar (1999: 203) also showed for devotional viewing among Hindus. More generally, David Morgan (2012: 190-191, 238 n.127) argues

that there is usually a link between religious apparitions, visions and dreams and pictures that people have previously seen, even though people do not always recognise such a link. Some viewers, on the other hand, acknowledged that they recognised Jesus in their dreams thanks to his “photo” they knew from the *Jesus Film* and other images (cf. Morgan 2012: 206).

Marguerite, a middle-aged woman who used to attend church, told about seeing Jesus in her dreams: “I usually see Jesus just as I see him in the photos” (interview, 20 Feb. 2011). Catherine, a young Catholic attending secondary school, explained: “I slept and it was as if somebody came from the sky, he descended. ... I have seen photos of Jesus and now I saw that the person [in my dream] was similar to Jesus” (interview in French, 12 Feb. 2012). Correspondingly, Pierre, the retired pastor, regularly sees Jesus in his dreams:

It’s because I saw his photo. Otherwise, I couldn’t know. ... I see Jesus’ photo, I read his word... Now, maybe by thinking of his words, during the night, when I have read the Bible and as he speaks to me, I also succeed in seeing the photo I’d seen [of him] (interview in French, 8 Feb. 2012).

For these people Jesus’ visual presence has become real and his appearance in their dreams has made him directly relevant to their lives. Seeing Jesus in film as part of a public screening is certainly exciting, since it shows what he has done and what he can do, at least potentially. Experiencing him in dreams, on the other hand, renders him more intimate and personal. After all, people see and hear him intervening directly for them, just as they see it happening in *Yatin* for Pastor Philippe and his wife. The people whose dream experiences I present above easily recognise that Jesus healed or protected them, and maybe even saved them from death. As for the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, then: “When Jesus appears to them in visions and dreams, they *see* proof that he exists” (Robbins 2004a: 144, *italics in original*).

People often experience both dreams and Christian films through similar, if not identical, presencing processes that make them part of the world of agentive relationality. Both dreams and films become transvisual technologies that necessitate further presencing of what they show, thereby allowing people to relate to the characters presented in them. Dreams and films not only relate to people, they also adapt to each other since they share similar traits. Different characters, such

as Jesus or witches, for example, are able to move between dreams and films and can appear in both. Dreams and film provide the characters they show with agency and the means to become visible and present to people, something that is not normally possible. The experiential nature of dreams and films, and the characters people meet through them, continually influences and shapes people's lives, similarly to how their interaction with other people and transmaterial beings continuously affects them and their position in the world of agentive relationality.

Most people in the Commune of Coby, however, clearly make a difference between dreams and films. When witches appear in dreams, rather than film, for example, they pose a real and immediate threat and people will usually investigate the situation and seek solutions. Furthermore, people know that dreams are experienced through one's *kebodike* (animating force), while films can be seen with one's own eyes. In spite of this, people see the content of dreams and films in a similar light. While dreams are film-like, especially Christian films adopt a dream-like quality, which is most notable in *Yatin*. This makes films credible and convincing, while seeing them with one's own eyes makes them appear even more veracious than dreams. This combination provides people with the feeling that the transvisual technology of film renders the less-visible part of the world more visible and more concrete. Through watching Christian films people feel that they can become more active in trying to intervene in the less-visible part of the world, and maybe even to gain some control over it, especially through Christian prayers.

Even when Jesus does not appear in dreams, seeing him in film already makes him more familiar and accessible in a relational sense. Watching the *Jesus Film*, then, provides audiences in the Commune of Coby with a different experience as compared to hearing the Gospel of Luke read to them, or reading it for themselves. The young farmer and Christian Innocent explained: "Yesterday I watched the film and I told myself that Jesus is the child of God. I saw this in the film. ... But I have never seen God's child with my own eyes" (interview, 15 Mar. 2010). As Kwon has put it for Mangyan audiences of the *Jesus Film* in the Philippines, "the actor, Brian Deacon, became an icon of Jesus in their religious experience" (Kwon 2010: 192). Elaborating the visual impact of the film, Honoré, a literacy teacher who used to attend church, explained:

I really saw that the Word of God is true. Before that, people just talked from books, but I hadn't seen with my own eyes. Now, I have seen with my eyes that it has happened. This is why I know that the film gave me the true words (interview, 13 Mar. 2010).

Similarly, for *Yatin*, seeing witches at work becomes important for some viewers, since it confirms their existence. Ntanki, an old man, for example, stated: "Our parents told us that *uhɔɔhu* [transvisual power] exists, but it's only today that we see that it really exists" (interview, 6 Jan. 2011). Furthermore, viewers of such films can learn more about secretive activities that could be a threat to their lives. Tchanaté, a middle-aged farmer who has experience of Christianity, stated:

I'm not sure, but I can say we suffer from witches here [in the Commune of Cobly]. There are many of them, but I don't know what exactly they do to eliminate us. I don't know how they do it and I don't know where they meet. But I'm sure that they are here. In the film I saw them catching people and others simply died. We don't know what they do to kill people. Judged by what I saw yesterday in the film, it must be this that destroys us. What I saw yesterday, I'm sure that this is how they operate in the night (interview, 13 Apr. 2010).

Innocent, a younger Christian farmer, shared his view:

The witches you find here, they are around. People usually say that the diviner finds witches who catch people. But yesterday, we saw them falling from the sky and coming out of trees. They placed themselves in a nice line and there were many of them. I've never seen witches arranged in a nice line like this (interview, 30 Mar. 2010).

Such views confirm the importance of the dream-like quality of films that visualise and make present what is usually hidden, thereby making the less visible part of the world accessible to the eye. Through such "documentation[s] of the spiritual realm" (B. Meyer 2006a: 304), people not only find it confirmed that witches are indeed a threat, films also provide very concrete suggestions that people can learn and apply to their lives, both when awake and asleep. Antonin, a young Catholic film lover who attends secondary school, shared what he had learnt from *Yatin*:

You pass an old woman and maybe you continue and she can do something to you. But since I watched this film, when I pass an old woman and I don't like the way

she behaves, I watch my back to see if she continues her path... (interview in French, 18 Dec. 2010).

Laurent, a middle-aged farmer who has some experience of Christianity, applies similar principles to when he is asleep:

TV keeps the witches at bay. When you sleep and a witch approaches you, *kebodike* [animating force] has seen everything in films and now knows how to imitate what it saw. You'll be able to chase them away and you'll be safe (interview, 1 Jan. 2011).

When people suspect being attacked by a witch, they can actively seek a solution to this. Some resort to prayers, as they also see in the films. Antonin made this clear: "In order to avoid [witches], you need to pray to have the power to withstand their attacks. Otherwise, if you want to avoid a witch without praying, you can't" (interview in French, 19 Dec. 2010). More generally, watching films in the Commune of Coby has become an important resource for some to learn about the dangers of life and to find solutions. Tchétékoua, an assistant at an Nkunde shrine who did not actually watch the films with me, summarised this point:

You can walk in the bush and see a danger; you can go somewhere and get into a fight with someone. Either way, you can strike back with your intelligence thanks to what you've learnt from the TV. ... You can strike back thanks to the TV and one day this will save your life (interview, 16 May 2011).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the results of an audience reception study of the three Christian video films *Jesus*, *La Solution* and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* as viewers in the Commune of Coby watched them. I found that the films do not so much convey, propose or even impose a specific message that people either understand or misunderstand, but present a resource, which they seek to exploit to the best of their abilities. In doing so, films and their contents become identified as entities, thereby being ascribed a place in relation to other entities, such as people, shrines, television sets, dreams or photographs. Films gain agency and a life of their own and thus become active players in the world of agentive relationality.

I found that the viewers, regardless of their backgrounds, engaged in watching the three films as an experience by drawing on what I describe as the transma-

terial presencing principle. Even though the three videos are explicitly Christian and all have a strong Christian purpose, people did not necessarily understand them as intended by their makers and distributors. Rather, people watched the films as learning opportunities and as resources to think through issues that are directly relevant to their lives and to their surroundings. The *Jesus Film*, for example, does not need to be watched as a call for conversion to Christianity, but can address the value of following *Uwienu* (God), a topic that virtually all viewers found relevant in one way or another. Similarly, *La Solution* does not necessarily demonstrate the superiority of Christianity as undoubtedly intended, but can engage people to think through the problems and benefits of shrines, which is a current topic in the Commune of Cobly. Lastly, *Yatin* is mainly about the problem of witches and can teach viewers more about how they behave and pursue their evil ends. I also found that viewers were reminded of the importance of finding means to protect oneself against witches, be it prayers as demonstrated in the film or otherwise.

The incongruity of film, by which I understand socio-cultural differences in a wide sense between a film and its receptors, is an important factor that determines the configuration and breadth of the interpretive field. On the other hand, it does not necessarily affect the popularity and veraciousness of films, nor does it hinder people from watching and presencing films. Rather, incongruity allows for filmic interpretations that do not correspond with the expectations and intentions of producers. The example of *Yatin* showed that incongruity was small, thereby resulting in a narrower interpretive field. For the most incongruous film among the three, the *Jesus Film*, the interpretive field was broad, accommodating a plurality of meanings.

Sometimes viewers missed that the films were intended to arouse an increased interest in Christianity. None of the viewers, who have never attended a church, indicated in any way that they understood the films in this way. Several of those viewers, who had explained how they benefited from the Christian message of the films, did not demonstrate any significant change in behaviour during the year following the viewing, such as abandoning shrines or starting to attend a church. This corresponds with Cathy Lee Mansfield's (1984) conclusion who found in Zambia that the *Jesus Film* on its own, does not usually provoke a significant

decision or change of behaviour, and with Kwon's observation for the Mangyan of the Philippines that "the film showing was not persuasive enough to make any religious converts among audiences" (2010: 160; see also Chapter 3).

Christian videos, then, do not live up to the intentions and expectations of their producers and distributors, and sometimes even provoke antagonism towards Christianity. In spite of this, committed Christian viewers continue to believe in the potential and efficiency of showing them with the goal of conversion. Watching such films further affirms their previously held assumptions of the films' evangelistic efficiency. Salomon, for example, confidently stated: "If somebody doesn't believe and he follows this film [*Jesus*], I think that this will lead him to believe in [the Christian] God" (interview in French, 18 Jan. 2011).

This leads me to conclude that especially Christians have developed an ethos of a preferred reading of Christian videos that becomes their accepted and expected standard for watching them. In doing so, I can describe them as having accepted semiotic notions of correct sign interpretation that relies on the semiotic presencing principle. When viewers of Christian films fail to live up to the Christians' expected preferred reading, Christians can put this down either to the viewers' ignorance or to them falling victim to meaning-distorting demonic activity. Especially in Pentecostalist Christianity, that constantly seeks purification from demonic contamination, showing films for the purpose of evangelism is also a spiritual activity and thus becomes part of spiritual warfare. Viewers need to be prayed for and encouraged in their understanding of the films. This necessitates evangelistic film campaigns, which go far beyond only showing films. Christians have learnt that they can increase the communicative potential of their films, at least to some extent, by teaching viewers how the films need to be watched and understood in order to get closer to their preferred meaning of the films.

Christian films themselves, as I show in this chapter, do not necessarily promote conversion to Christianity, but rather provide presencing resources for people. If viewers exploit their presencing potential, films can stimulate them to recognise the existence of agentive filmic entities that claim a presence in the world by interacting with other entities. In this way, films and their contents become entangled with the lives of their viewers and, together with other entities, such as shrines, witches or dreams, constitute and shape the world. Films, then,

mainly help people to think through issues and problems they face and to make better sense of their lives in a world of agentive relationality. Within Christian circles, on the other hand, films become part of the lives of Christians and help to perpetuate and develop their Pentecostalist preferred reading. This contributes to a shift from biblical texts to Christian films as a foundation and expression of their faith. This shift from text to film lends itself to discussing the different strands and arguments presented so far and bringing this book to its conclusion.

Conclusion

The three Christian films *Jesus* (1979, John Heyman), *La Solution* (1994, David Powers) and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002, Christine Madeleine Botokou) have become popular in the Commune of Coby in northwestern Benin, especially among Christians. This seems particularly remarkable, since the Coby area is one of Benin's most rural parts and has gained a reputation for its backwardness. In Chapter 1 I try to reconcile these seemingly opposing trends by reassessing the history of the region. I argue that this backwardness was a colonial invention, which affected people's self-esteem and position in the postcolonial state. On the other hand, people inhabiting the Commune of Coby retained their highly mobile and fluid society that clearly predates the arrival of the first whites. Both film and Christianity first came to the area during the colonial period. Their association with an imposing colonialism meant that people in the Commune of Coby greeted them with scepticism as coming from the whites. Especially during the last two decades, however, the younger generation enthusiastically demonstrated an increased openness towards all things modern, welcoming mobile phones, television sets and films that circulate on Video CD and DVD with open arms. In this climate, Christian films have become very popular as well, contributing to a significant shift within Christianity from a religion of the book towards a religion of film, especially in its more Pentecostalist forms.

Film became intertwined with religion from its earliest days at the end of the nineteenth century, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3. Indeed, Jesus was an important character in the early cinema. His visual portrayal followed the conventions that can be traced back to Byzantine Christianity of the sixth century. While the *Jesus Film* is part of the genre of Jesus films, *La Solution* is a dramatic Christian film, a genre that developed from the 1950s onwards and was also used and produced by Americans for global evangelism. *Yatin* continues in the line of dramatic films, but comes out of Nollywood, which has developed its own cinematographic conventions. Thanks to the industry's increasing success, Nigeria has recently been declared the Christian film capital of the world. Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians have been especially keen to use new technologies and media in global

evangelism. One of the most significant results of this development was the release of the *Jesus Film* in 1979. By being promoted globally and shown even in the remoter parts of the world, the film has since been declared the most watched and most translated film in history. For evangelicals and Pentecostals its near canonical status as the Word of God on film is contributing significantly to Christianity moving towards a religion of film.

I found that this global and regional trend was confirmed during my reception research in the Commune of Coby, which I present in Chapter 5. The popularity of the American *Jesus Film* is especially interesting. Many of the Christian viewers thought it foundational to the other two films, since it is about the Gospel on which the other two films build as audiovisual sermons. A few viewers even talked about the *Jesus Film* in a similar way they talk about the Bible, namely that it was in some way willed by God. The *Jesus Film* is thus no longer only the Word of God on film, but becomes God's Film, similar to how the Bible can be called God's Book.

The popularity of the *Jesus Film* in the Coby area is remarkable especially since it has not yet been dubbed into Mbelime, the main local language, something that the promoters of the film consider crucial for its supposed success. The reason for its popularity stems from people watching films by making them relevant to specific situations or to their lives more generally. This means that most of the Christian viewers, together with those who have received a significant amount of Christian teaching, understand the Christian intent of the *Jesus Film*. Those viewers less involved with Christianity usually struggled and even failed to get the intended Christian message, even though they still found the film interesting and stimulating. This means that Christian films are better understood as resources that help people to think through specific issues and problems relevant to their lives. Consequently, they are less suited to evangelism that tries to get a specific message across.

Films, such as the *Jesus Film*, cannot determine their own reading, but rather become what people make of them by relating them to their experience and prior knowledge. While other factors also play a role in how people watch film and what they get out of it, it is Christians themselves who influence these factors by explaining what the films are about and what they are meant to do. This usually

happens before and after showing evangelistic films, while narrators and interpreters help viewers make sense of the pictures during showings. I contend that the discursive framework that surrounds these films is more important to Christianity as a religion of film than their audiovisual narratives. Part of conversion, then, is to learn how to watch Christian films.

Seeing is crucial for Christianity as a religion of film. In Chapter 4 I demonstrate how seeing with their own eyes is important to people in the Commune of Cobby for learning and for taking things seriously. Seeing is not only limited to what is directly accessible to the eyes. People have a keen interest in what I call transvisuality, by which I mean seeing beyond the strictly material. All people are transvisual in the sense that any visible object can be more than mere matter. Seeing a shrine, for example, is not only seeing an inanimate stone, but also a being that is alive, even though this is not directly accessible to the eyes. When people dream they are moving in this less visible part of the world where shrines and witches become more visible. Some people are born with transvisual power that allows them to see transvisually not only when they dream, but all the time, both when awake and when sleeping. When it comes to witches, I characterise their power that anthropologists often call “witchcraft” in terms of transvisuality. Although those who have transvisual power may use it negatively, and are thus feared as witches, it can also be used creatively to design and make, for example, television sets. This transvisual power is thereby not only associated with witches but also with anyone who has outstanding skills.

The viewers further associated transvisual power with how television sets work, since they have the ability to reveal witches and their evil deeds, as for example in the film *Yatin*. A television set, I maintain, is a transvisual technology that provides temporary transvisual power similar to dreams to those who watch by making things that they do not normally see accessible to their eyes. The combination of iconicity and indexicality in semiotic terms renders photographs, film and video particularly powerful. In this way, Christian films have the ability to provide an unprecedented kind of (trans)visuality to its viewers that Christians often experience as a more or less direct access to the spiritual realm. Films thus not only contribute to Christianity as a religion of film, they also come to shape it in significant ways.

In Chapter 2 I develop the main argument that lies at the core of this book. When trying to come to terms with how people in the Commune of Coby understand materiality, I reached the explanatory limits of semiotics. This approach, I realised, cannot sufficiently account for seemingly inanimate things that people think are alive. Indeed, I found that many people consider that everything is alive, even though this life may fluctuate, thereby joining matter and spirit in an inseparable way. Whether these things are knives, shrines, Bibles, television sets, photographs, films or people, they are more than mere matter; they are, as I call it, transmaterial, existing in the both the more and less visible parts of the world. All these transmaterial entities, I argue, not only relate to each other through direct contact, but more importantly through being alive in a world of agentive relationality. In order for this to become possible, people do not represent the world semiotically, but they make everything present within their world, a process I call presencing.

I consider presencing more foundational than semiotics, since it also covers more experiential forms of meaning making. Watching films, I assert, requires that viewers make their contents present in the world of agentive relationality by drawing at least to some degree on what I call the transmaterial presencing principle. More generally, I introduce the notion of presencing principles that describe how people engage in presencing in different ways. Accordingly, the transmaterial principle accounts for immediate experience (Chapter 2), while the semiotic principle, which includes symbols, icons and indexes, describes presencing that results in structured signs. Presencing is a complex process that can often be described through these two main presencing principles that people often use simultaneously to varying degrees, even if this appears contradictory at times.

Filmic presencing not only depends on a specific film's content, but also on various factors that shape people's lives in a world of agentive relationality. These factors include people's prior knowledge and experiences, their specific socio-cultural setting, as well as the materiality and transmateriality of technologies used for showing films. The necessary result of such filmic presencing contributes to a continuously reconfiguring interpretive field that is populated by entities and which contains a plurality of meanings. Such interpretive fields also overlap with

the world of agentive relationality. This experience of films in both transvisual and transmaterial terms goes beyond the limits of semiotics and representation.

For my analysis of Christian video films in the Commune of Cibly I found many topics relevant to my analysis. These include most notably semiotics, media, secularism, religion, Pentecostalism, modernity, materiality, film theory and history, Nollywood, witchcraft, dreams, photographs and audience reception. While this fits in well with my interest in broad relations between people and things and media, I am also aware that I neglect, and sometimes fail to address, areas that are interesting and potentially relevant to my study. For example, while experience and embodiment are central to my discussion, I largely take them for granted without dealing with their theoretical backgrounds. When discussing these topics, anthropologists often also draw on the notion of mimesis, a topic I do not address at all. Questions of commodities and economy too, drew the short straw, especially in relation to fetishism that has been an important area in anthropology since Karl Marx.

While I concede that my study could further benefit from addressing these topics in more detail, I would consider it more important to further concentrate on the issues that arise from my main theoretical contribution that demonstrates the need to move beyond semiotics. For example, I present the process of presencing as wider but similar to semiosis, thereby leaving what it may exactly involve – apart from the interplay of presencing principles – rather vague. The next step would be to show how presencing differs from semiosis by analysing it in terms of logic, inference, abduction and conjecture. Maybe cognitive approaches could lead to a deeper understanding of presencing as well. Advances in this area would also help to further elaborate what presencing principles are and how they work in more detail. This, in turn, may lead to the identification of other presencing principles.

I am left with one last loose end, however, that I need to address to conclude this book, namely the overall question of Christianity becoming a religion of film. In the Commune of Cibly, as elsewhere, Christians continue to read or listen to Bible texts. While this practice still appeals to people's imagination, it can also leave room for doubt. *Seeing* the Bible in film, however, has become a powerful, convincing and even tangible way of accessing the Word of God and learning from

it. The *Jesus Film* continues to rely indexically on the Bible and the Word of God, while the book on its own no longer provides the sole basis for the Christian faith. Some Christians even view the *Jesus Film* as ordained by God, similarly to how they accept the Bible as inspired by God. The *Jesus Film*, it seems to me, is no longer only the Word of God on film, rather, it also becomes God's Film, providing Jesus with an unmistakable white face and body that facilitates his recognition and appearance in dreams. This makes him present in the world of agentive relationality as a real being in his own right. Consequently, the *Jesus Film* as God's Film stands central to Christianity as a religion of film, just as the Bible stands central to Christianity as a religion of the book.

While the Bible, and by extension the *Jesus Film*, continue to guide Christians, dramatic video films, such as *La Solution* and *Yatin*, provide supplementary teaching and often take on the form of visual sermons. Again, *seeing* a sermon, rather than hearing it, renders it more experiential. Such films visually demonstrate what it means to lead a successful Christian life and remind people of the spiritual dangers that surround them. Dramatic Christian video films also offer concrete solutions to various problems, which viewers can imitate and directly apply to their lives. Often, it is no longer only what the pastor preaches on Sundays, but what people learn from watching these films that become the standard by which they define their Christian identity.

The result of this trend is that Christianity, especially in its Pentecostalisised forms, is becoming increasingly focused on the visual. In addition to what I have presented in this book, it seems to me that Pentecostal Sunday services, known for their experiential and exuberant character (Robbins 2004b: 126), also take on a performance-like quality as they need to be visually attractive as well, at least to the extent that they still look good when videoed. In the town of Cobly, videoing special occasions, such as weddings and funerals, has become particularly important. Pentecostalisised prayers and sermons, too, no longer solely follow the introspective and contemplative formula of Protestantism, but have become expressive and visual, involving a wider repertoire of verbal expressions and appropriate gestures, which facilitate an immediate experience, notably of the Holy Spirit.

Against this background, Christian films seem to complement Pentecostalisised Christianity almost ideally. This results in Christians becoming dependent on

media technology for the production, circulation and consumption of video films. This technological focus implies that the change from text to moving image is basically a material one. Christianity has always been an intricately material religion incorporating and relying on technological innovations, be it through Byzantine icons, the printed Protestant Bible, or digital Pentecostal videos.

In many parts of contemporary Africa, most notably in Ghana (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; de Witte 2003, 2005; B. Meyer 2004b, 2006a, 2009b, 2011a), Nigeria (Hackett 1998; Lyons and Lyons 1987; R. Marshall 2009; Ukah 2003, 2005) and Kinshasa (Pype 2012), Pentecostalism has become part of the public sphere. This trend usually coincides with an increased Pentecostal presence in media products, whether they are made for radio or television, or distributed on Video CD and DVD (cf. de Vries 2001). Such media are not only important for what they are, but also how they are used, most notably by accompanying them with comments, explanations and teaching. Converting to Pentecostalist forms of Christianity does not only mean that people need to break with the past (B. Meyer 1998a), accept the devil as God's counterpart (J. Merz 2008: 207, 209; B. Meyer 1999b: 110-111), and participate in various processes of semiotification (Chapter 2), it also means they have to learn to presence Christian video films within the limits of what already established Christians accept as part of their preferred reading.

The transnational character of Pentecostalism means that both evangelists and Christian videos from Nigeria and beyond have long been part of life in the remote Commune of Coby of rural northwestern Benin. Television and video technology, which are central to this development, have become so important that Tchanaté declared: "If television should stop working, our knowledge will end too" (interview, 5 Feb. 2011). Views like this, as well as the arguments presented in this book, compel me to conclude that Christianity, at least as it is presently lived in its Pentecostalist forms in the Commune of Coby, is indeed becoming a religion of film.

Figures



Figure 1: A community shrine entity on a mountain (Feb. 1996, J. Merz).



Figure 2: Offering to a shrine entity at a homestead (Jan. 1996, J. Merz).



Figure 3: A typical shrine entity of a homestead (Feb. 2012, J. Merz).



Figure 4: Reconciliatory offering to the ancestors (Dec. 1995, J. Merz).



Figure 5: *Siyawesi* bush beings at a diviner's home (Mar. 1996, J. Merz).



Figure 6: Ceremony for the construction of a *dikunpuɔde* for the boy, held in front of a homestead (Jan. 1996, J. Merz).



Figure 7: A photo of the deceased on display during a burial (Dec. 2012, S. Merz, used with permission).



Figure 8: During a burial, the deceased's photo is carried to the grave (Aug. 2013, J. Merz).



Figure 9: The photograph of the deceased in middle background can follow the proceedings (Aug. 2013, J. Merz).



Figure 10: A digitally enhanced photo of the deceased on display during a secondary funeral (May 2013, S. Merz, used with permission).



Figure 11: A digitally enhanced photo of a deceased community priest (Aug. 2013, J. Merz).



Figure 12: Watching *La Solution* with a research group in Tchokita (Apr. 2013, J. Merz).



Figure 13: Watching the *Jesus Film* as part of my research in Cobly (Jan. 2011, J. Merz).

Appendix

The following people participated in my research by being interviewed, usually several times. They all expressed their wish to be acknowledged in my book by name. Twelve of them, both younger and older, did not live to see the end of my project; I have marked their names accordingly (+):

Bernard Marie	Douté Jeanne	Douté Mathieu
Gnammi Jonas	Gnammou Antoine	Gnammou Colette
Gnammou Dominique	Gnammou François	Gnammou Honoré
Gnammou Kombètto ⁺	Gnammou Kombiènou	Gnammou Moutouama
Gnammou Série	Gnammou Toumoudagou	Idani Moïse
Issifou Afoua	Kadanti Moutouama ⁺	Kauclé Boniface ⁺
Kombètto André	Kombètto André	Kombètto Barthélémy
Kombètto Emmanuel	Kombètto Étienne	Kombètto Dieudonné
Kombètto Innocent	Kombètto Julienne	Kombètto Valery
Kombiènou Baké	Kombiènou Hélène	Kombiènou Martine
Kommou Jean	Kossi Baké	M'Boma Sinhonga
Moutouama Alphonse	Moutouama Baké	Moutouama Céline
Moutouama Emmanuel	Moutouama François	Moutouama François
Moutouama Jacob	Moutouama Kossi	Moutouama Kombètto
Moutouama K. Kombètto	Moutouama Laurent	Moutouama Louis
Moutouama Namboni	Moutouama Nanhonga	Moutouama Nicodème
Moutouama Sanhonga	Moutouama Yatté Alphonse	Nambima Marie
Nambima N'Ouérou	Namboni Baké ⁺	Namboni Catherine
Namboni Fatima	Namboni Innocent	Namboni Kombètto ⁺

Namboni Moutouama	Namboni N'Tcha Comlan	Namboni Victorine
Namboni Yénabo	Nékoua David	N'Sermè Daniel
N'Sermè M'Bermè	N'Sermè Sambiénou	N'Sèrme Toumoudagou ⁺
N'Tadé Yvette	N'Oué mou Amina	N'Oué mou Antoine ⁺
N'Oué mou Barthélémy	N'Oué mou Kombètto ⁺	N'Oué mou Moussa
N'Oué mou Moutouama	N'Tadé Raphaël	Ntankou Céline
Sambiénou André	Sambiénou Yves	Sambiénou Pascal
Sambiéni Daniel	Sambiéni Douté	Sambiéni Gnammou
Sambiéni Kombètto	Sambiéni N. Bienvenue	Sambiéni Pauline
Sanhouégoua D. Bernard	Sanhékoua Nambima Emmanuel	Sanhékoua Vincent
Sanhouékoua Antoine	Sanhouékoua Yatté	Sanhongou Robert Yatté
Simkoua Jean	Tabidiéni Moussa	Tagalé Sambiénou ⁺
Tawéma Adiza	Tawéma Benoît	Tawéma Elisabeth
Tawéma Étienne	Tawéma Honorine	Tawéma Kombètto
Tawéma Kombiénou	Tawéma Petit	Tawéma Pierre
Tchanaté Bassi	Tchanaté Dominique	Tchanaté Kossi
Tchanaté Markipo	Tchanaté Mathieu	Tchanaté Viviane
Tché té koua Daniel	Tché té koua Fati	Tché té koua Namboni ⁺
Tché té koua Thomas ⁺	Toumoudagou Albert ⁺	Toumoudagou Idrissou
Toumoudagou Jean	Toumoudagou Julienne	Toumoudagou Marie
Yantékoua Étienne	Yantékoua Joseph	Yarou Fatima
Yebè Daniel	Yebè Tandjomè	Yokoua N. Alphonse
	Ziminri Sanhonga	

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Summary in English

In this thesis I discuss three Christian films that have become popular in the Commune of Coby of today's Republic of Benin, not only as evangelistic tools among missionaries and pastors, but also among Christian audiences and the wider population more generally. Indeed, Christian films have become so important that I raise the question whether Christianity is shifting from a religion of the book towards a religion of film. The films under discussion are the American *Jesus Film* (1979), the American-Ivorian film *La Solution* (1994) and the Beninese video film *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002) that is a direct extension of the Nigerian video film industry now often referred to as Nollywood. I am particularly interested in how people receive and understand these films together with the digital video technology that has facilitated their recent success.

My theoretical starting point is semiotics, a theory that has been foundational not only for film, media and media reception studies, but more recently also for the study of materiality. As my main theoretical contribution I present a critique of semiotics, arguing that this theory, which has been foundational to Western science since Aristotle, is in fact too limiting. I demonstrate that semiotics, even in its Peircean orientation, cannot sufficiently explain how people in the Commune of Coby understand shrines, film and media more generally, both through their material manifestations and interactively in terms of communication. I propose a process that I call presencing, which goes beyond semiotics and can explain better people's understanding of shrines and media.

The thesis is comprised of five chapters. In Chapter 1 I introduce the area of my study, the remote Commune of Coby of northwestern Benin, by reassessing its alleged backwardness from a historical perspective. As the area has always been part of wider regional developments, including trans-Saharan trade that predates the arrival of Europeans on the West African coast and the transatlantic slave trade, Coby has been involved with modernity for a long time. While early explorers of the late nineteenth century sometimes gained a romantic impression of the area, French colonialism with its civilising and modernising aims inverted its prior modernity. This resulted in the people of today's Commune of Coby being

recast as the most backward colonial subjects, who came to occupy one of the remotest parts of the colony. I argue that colonial modernity had a deep impact on people, not only through ethnicisation, territorial reorganisation and increased security, but also on their self-esteem and self-image.

Following the colonial impact, people slowly regained their former dynamism, openness to strangers and high mobility as they adapted to the colonial imposition and the later postcolonial nation state. This process has accelerated, particularly since the 1990s, as Christianity, education and media have not only become more accessible, but are increasingly popular, especially among the younger generations.

I present the main theoretical argument of this thesis in Chapter 2 by focusing on how people in the Commune of Cobly understand the materiality of shrines, the Bible and words. I found that people often do not make a difference between the matter and spirit of things. The stone of a shrine, for example, is not simply a stone, but rather a being in its own right that relies on the coexistence of spirit and matter. In this sense many people consider everything that exists as intrinsically alive, sharing and participating in a world of agentive relationality. While I characterise this view of materiality as “transmaterial”, I find it impossible to account for it in terms of Peircean semiotics. This is why I introduce the process of presencing, which extends semiotic meaning making to include more experiential and transmaterial presencing that stresses action. I thereby go beyond semiotics and its representational stance that is based on structured signs, which I find too limiting to account for the breadth of human experience. People engage in different ways in the complex process of presencing, which I describe through an interplay of two presencing principles. In order to account for transmateriality, I propose that many people in the Commune of Cobly primarily use the transmaterial presencing principle. The semiotic presencing principle, on the other hand, accounts for more semiotic aspects of presencing and both complements and replaces transmaterial presencing to varying degrees; a process I call “semiotification”. The process of presencing results in entities, which can also include structured signs, that occupy the world of agentive relationality and then allow people, animals and things to interact with each other.

Colonial modernity, seen as a bundle of processes, affects the way people think of their world and how they live in it. Most importantly, semiotification results in the categorisation of beings according to their agency, which now becomes centred on humans. Things, on the other hand, are increasingly void of life and agency and become commoditised. I demonstrate that part of this development is that transmaterial beings, such as shrine entities, are both spiritualised and materialised, resulting in independent spirits that can now temporarily occupy the matter of stones or possess people. This view of shrines can be submitted to semiotic analysis through the shrine becoming the symbol in the Peircean sense of its associated spirit, thereby widening and reconfiguring the interplay of the two presencing principles. I end this chapter by showing that semiotification can never be fully achieved, but leads to a dynamic where spirit and matter are identified and detached from each other to varying degrees for different sorts of entities.

In Chapter 3 I shift the discussion to the three Christian films *Jesus*, *La Solution* and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance*, which are all well known in the Commune of Coby where they are often used for evangelism. I analyse the films' content and place their production within the genealogy of different Christian films that go back to the advent of the medium. Jesus films have been among the earliest films made and are now recognised as a genre in their own right. Although the *Jesus Film* (1979) is part of this development, it can be distinguished from other Jesus films by its evangelical background and its prominent use in global evangelism. An important part of the success of the *Jesus Film* is its promotion among American evangelical Christians as the Word of God on film, which necessitates a combination and interplay of both the transmaterial and semiotic presencing principles.

While Christians have always made films, the 1940s saw a shift in American evangelical filmmaking towards more dramatic films, which were also produced for mission and evangelism. *La Solution* (1994) is an example of this filmic tradition, intertwining a modernising narrative with an evangelical one, thereby presenting what I call the aesthetics of colonial modernity.

The third film, the Beninese *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002), comes straight out of the Nigerian Christian film industry, which I trace back to church drama and American dramatic mission films. Contrary to *La Solution*, however, *Yatin*

comes out of Pentecostalisised Christianity with a strong focus on spiritual warfare that is visualised through special effects. More generally, *Yatin* draws on the conventions of Nollywood, which is now often accepted as its own unique form of video filmmaking.

Watching films is only possible through appropriate technology. In Chapter 4 I argue that such technology is never neutral and needs to be studied as part of the experience of film watching. Indeed, watching films makes people forget that the materiality of media also plays an important role. By studying the cultural biography and life of television sets and iconic images, most notably photographs, films and videos, I aim to fill this gap. Technology is further important since it allows people to see images with their own eyes, and learn by watching and imitating them. Consequently, film watching has become a popular and important part of people's lives in the Commune of Coby.

Photographic images gain their power through iconically depicting and indexing people and things. While this can allow for the iconic trait of the semiotic presencing principle to become more prominent, photographs remain more than representations, since they can also make present what they show by providing depicted people and ancestors with material extensions.

Seeing photographs of ancestors and identifying their presence with the photographic image constitutes a kind of "transvisual" seeing. Generally, people have a keen interest in transvisuality, by which I mean seeing beyond the material. Dreams and visions are typical of transvisuality, since they allow people to gain access to the less visible parts of the world. I argue that witchcraft is also a form of transvisual power, because it not only allows people to perpetrate evil deeds in the less visible world, but can also be used to gain knowledge from the less visible world and engage in creative acts, such as making television sets. Some people explain that it is a television's transvisual power that allows it to work. For a significant number of people television sets become powerful or live entities that provide visual access to the less visible parts of the world just as dreams and visions do. Television sets thus provide a transvisual technology that people use to watch videos in order to gain a deeper knowledge of life in the more or less visible parts of the world of agentive relationality, which they inhabit.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I present and analyse the findings of my reception research for the three films. Since most audience studies have been done in Europe or America I find the current theory of film reception insufficient to account for film watching in Africa. Especially the American *Jesus Film* led to a wider variety of interpretations than the other two films made in West Africa, raising the issue of its incongruity, as I call it. Drawing on cultural and epistemological questions of the incongruity between the film and its audiences, I identify different ways that contribute to a broader interpretive field of plural meanings.

I argue that films should not be analysed as trying to convey a specific message. Rather, viewers use films as presencing resources, which they exploit by drawing on their prior knowledge and experience, and by drawing on the interplay of the two presencing principles to guide their presencing. This results in an interpretative field of plural meanings that can also account for why some viewers failed to recognise that the films were even Christian, watching them rather as directly relevant to their specific life situations. When watched by viewers who have no or limited knowledge of Christianity, I found that these films do not promote conversion to Christianity.

Films can only establish a preferred meaning for specific groups of people, who learn to watch the films in a specific way, usually by employing the semiotic presencing principle that accounts for correct sign interpretation. Accordingly, I contend that committed Christians in the Commune of Coby have come to watch Christian films in similar ways. They discuss their preferred meaning among themselves and share this during film screenings through comments and running interpretations. Becoming Christian, then, means to adopt the preferred meaning of such films at least to some extent. The *Jesus Film* has become important to Christians because it is not only the Word of God on film, but actually becomes God's Film for some, similar to how the Bible is God's Book. Dramatic Christian films, on the other hand, work as visual sermons that allow people to learn from them according to their preferred way of visual leaning. It is especially due to the similarity of dreams and films that the latter become an important part of Christian life by gaining a life of their own and by becoming actors in the world of agentive relationality.

I conclude this book by returning to my overarching theme of the shift in Christianity from a religion of the book to a religion of film. I argue that such a shift is indeed happening at least among those who currently live and experience the kind of Pentecostalising Christianity that is found in the Commune of Coby of northwestern Benin.

Sommaire en français

Dans cette thèse j'examine trois films chrétiens qui sont devenus populaires aujourd'hui dans la Commune de Coby, République du Bénin, pas seulement comme outil évangélique parmi les missionnaires et les pasteurs, mais aussi parmi les chrétiens et le public au sens large. En fait, les films chrétiens ont pris une si grande place que je me demande si le christianisme n'est pas en train de devenir une religion du film plutôt qu'une religion du livre. J'examine ici le film américain *Jésus* (1979), le film américano-ivoirien *La Solution* (1994) et le film vidéo béninois *Yatin : lieu de souffrance* (2002) qui est une extension directe de l'industrie du film nigérian, aussi connu sous le nom de « Nollywood ». Je suis particulièrement intéressé de voir comment les gens reçoivent et comprennent ces films, et par la technologie de vidéo numérique qui a facilité ce succès.

Mon point de départ théorique est la sémiotique, une théorie fondamentale pas seulement pour l'étude de film, des médias et de la réception des médias, mais plus récemment aussi pour l'étude de la matérialité. Je présente une critique de la sémiotique, comme ma contribution théorique principale, en argumentant que cette théorie sur laquelle la science occidentale est basée depuis Aristote est en fait trop limitative. Je montre que la sémiotique, même selon C. S. Peirce, ne suffit pas pour expliquer comment les gens de la Commune de Coby comprennent les lieux sacrés, les films et les médias en général, soit par leur manifestation matérielle, soit interactivement en termes de la communication. Je propose un processus que je dénomme « présentification » qui va au delà de la sémiotique et qui pourrait mieux expliquer comment les gens comprennent les lieux sacrés et les médias.

Cette thèse comporte cinq chapitres. Dans le premier, j'introduis la zone de mon étude, la Commune de Coby, lieu reculé au nord-ouest du Bénin, en réexaminant dans une perspective historique son soit-disant sous-développement. Le fait est que Coby fait partie de la modernité depuis longtemps, puisque la zone était englobée dans les développements régionaux, y compris le commerce transsaharien, lesquels prédatent l'arrivée des Européens sur la côte de l'Afrique de l'Ouest et la traite transatlantique des esclaves.

Bien que les premiers explorateurs Européens à la fin du XIX^{ème} siècle aient parfois eu une impression romantique de la zone, le colonialisme français, avec son but civilisateur et modernisant, a renversé la modernité précédente. Le résultat est que les gens de la Commune de Coby ont été remodelés comme les sujets coloniaux les plus rétrogrades occupant désormais la zone la plus reculée de la colonie. Je soutiens que la modernité coloniale affectait les gens de façon profonde, pas seulement par leur ethnification, la réorganisation de leur territoire et une sécurité accrue, mais agissait également sur leur image d'eux-mêmes.

A la suite de l'impact colonial, les gens ont repris lentement leur dynamisme d'autrefois ainsi que leur acceptation des étrangers et la mobilité lorsqu'ils se sont adaptés à l'autorité coloniale et ultérieurement à l'état national postcolonial. Ce processus s'est accéléré depuis les années 1990, quand le christianisme, l'enseignement et les médias sont devenus de plus en plus populaires, particulièrement parmi les jeunes générations.

Je présente mon argument théorique principal dans le deuxième chapitre de ma thèse en discutant comment les gens de la Commune de Coby comprennent la matérialité des lieux sacrés, de la Bible et des mots. J'ai constaté que les gens ne font souvent pas de différence entre la matière et l'esprit d'une chose. La pierre, ou rocher, d'un lieu sacré, par exemple, n'est pas simplement une pierre, mais un être en tant que tel qui dépend de la coexistence de la matière et de l'esprit. Dans ce sens, beaucoup de personnes considèrent toutes choses qui existent comme ayant la vie et comme participant dans un monde d'une relationalité agentive. Lorsque je caractérise cette vue de la matérialité comme « transmatérielle », je trouve impossible de rendre compte de cela par la sémiotique de Peirce. C'est la raison pour laquelle j'introduis le processus de la présentification qui étend la signification sémiotique pour y inclure une signification plus expérientielle et transmatérielle qui souligne des actions. Ceci veut dire que je propose d'aller au delà de la sémiotique puisque je considère son attitude représentative basée sur le signe structuré comme trop étroite pour pouvoir rendre compte de la largeur et de la profondeur de l'expérience humaine. Les gens s'engagent de façon différente dans le processus complexe de la présentification que je décris comme l'interaction de deux principes différents : transmatériel et sémiotique. Pour mieux pouvoir expliquer la transmatérialité je considère que les gens de la Commune de

Cobly emploient surtout un principe de présentification transmatériel. Le principe de présentification sémiotique, quant à lui, explique les aspects plus sémiotiques de la présentification en complétant et remplaçant le principe transmatériel à différents degrés, un processus que je dénomme « la sémiotification ». Les résultats du processus de la présentification sont des entités, qui peuvent comprendre aussi des signes structurés, et qui occupent l'univers de la relationalité agentive en permettant l'interaction des gens, des animaux et des choses.

La modernité coloniale, vue comme un ensemble de processus, affecte la manière dont les gens pensent à leur monde et comment ils y vivent. Le résultat le plus important de la sémiotification est la catégorisation de la vie selon la possibilité d'agir des entités, ce qui se centre de plus en plus sur les humains. Les choses, par contre, sont de plus en plus dépourvues de vie et de la possibilité d'agir, et deviennent commodifiées. Je démontre qu'une partie de ce développement est que les êtres transmatériels, comme les pierres, ou rochers, des lieux sacrés, sont matérialisés et spiritualisés en esprits ou génies indépendants qui peuvent maintenant occuper la matière des pierres ou posséder des gens. Cette perception des pierres des lieux sacrés peut désormais être soumise à l'analyse sémiotique. Les pierres deviennent maintenant – dans le sens de Peirce – des symboles de leurs esprits associés et ainsi élargissent et reconfigurent l'interaction des deux principes de présentification. Je termine ce chapitre en démontrant que la sémiotification ne peut jamais être totalement accomplie. Par contre, elle mène à une dynamique dans laquelle l'esprit et la matière sont identifiés et détachés l'un de l'autre à des degrés divers selon les différentes entités.

Dans le chapitre trois j'examine les trois films chrétiens *Jésus*, *La Solution* et *Yatin : lieu de souffrance* tous bien connus et souvent utilisés pour l'évangélisation dans la Commune de Cobly. J'analyse le contenu des trois films et je place leur production dans l'histoire des films chrétiens qui remonte aux débuts de la cinématographie. Les différents films sur Jésus font partie des premiers films commercialisés et sont maintenant reconnus comme un genre en tant que tel. Le film *Jésus* (1979) fait partie de ce développement et se distingue des autres films sur Jésus par son arrière-plan évangélique et son utilisation éminente dans l'évangélisation mondiale. Un aspect important du succès de ce film est sa promotion comme la Parole de Dieu sur film, surtout parmi les chrétiens évangéliques américains, ce

qui nécessite une combinaison et interaction des principes sémiotique et transmatériel de présentification.

Dans les années 1940, les évangéliques américains ont commencé à produire des films dramatiques plus spécifiquement pour la mission et l'évangélisation. *La Solution* (1994) est un exemple de cette tradition cinématographique plus récente et entrelace un récit modernisant avec une attitude évangélique en produisant ce que j'appelle une esthétique de la modernité coloniale.

Le troisième film tourné au Bénin, *Yatin : lieu de souffrance* (2002), est directement lié à l'industrie du film chrétien nigérian dont les origines se trouvent dans le théâtre de l'église et les films dramatiques américains utilisés pour la mission. Contrairement à *La Solution*, *Yatin* fait partie d'un christianisme pentecôtisant avec une forte préférence pour le combat spirituel qui est visualisé par des effets spéciaux. Plus généralement, *Yatin* utilise les conventions de Nollywood qui sont maintenant souvent acceptées comme une forme de filmage distinct sur vidéo.

Regarder des films est seulement possible grâce à une technologie appropriée. Dans le quatrième chapitre je propose qu'une telle technologie ne soit jamais neutre et qu'elle doive être étudiée ensemble avec l'expérience de visualiser des films. En fait, regarder des films amène à oublier le rôle important de la matérialité des médias. Par l'étude de la biographie culturelle et la vie d'un téléviseur et des images iconiques, notamment les photographies, les films et les vidéos, je vise à remplir cette lacune. En outre, la technologie est importante parce qu'elle permet aux gens de regarder des images avec leurs propres yeux pour apprendre et imiter. Ceci fait grandir la popularité et l'importance des films dans la vie des gens de la Commune de Cibly.

Le pouvoir des images photographiques vient de leur description iconique et leur indexation des gens et des choses. Ceci renforce les traits iconiques du principe de présentification sémiotique, mais les photographies sont plus que des représentations de ce qui est. Elles peuvent aussi rendre présent ce qu'elles montrent, notamment en offrant une extension matérielle aux gens et aux ancêtres qu'elles mettent en image.

Regarder des photographies des ancêtres et identifier leur présence avec l'image photographique constituent une sorte de regard « transvisuel ». En général, les gens s'intéressent beaucoup à la transvisualité, c'est à dire à regarder au

delà du matériel. Les rêves et les visions sont typiques de la transvisualité parce qu'ils donnent accès au monde moins visible. En outre, la sorcellerie est aussi une forme de pouvoir transvisuel parce que non seulement elle permet aux gens de commettre des actes néfastes dans le monde moins visible, mais encore elle peut aussi être utilisée pour connaître le monde moins visible et pour les gens cela va même jusqu'à la créativité, par exemple la fabrication des téléviseurs. Certains expliquent que c'est le pouvoir transvisuel du téléviseur qui lui permet de fonctionner en montrant des films. Pour un nombre significatif de personnes, les téléviseurs sont des entités vivantes et puissantes qui donnent un accès visuel à la partie moins visible du monde, exactement comme le font les rêves et les visions. Ainsi, les téléviseurs offrent une technologie transvisuelle que les gens utilisent pour regarder des films et pour acquérir une connaissance plus profonde de la vie dans le monde plus ou moins visible de la relationalité agentive qu'ils habitent.

Finalement, dans le chapitre cinq, je présente mon analyse des données de l'enquête de réception des trois films. Etant donné que la plupart des études de réception ont été faites en Europe et en Amérique, je constate que la théorie actuelle sur la réception des films est insuffisante pour expliquer comment les gens regardent les films en Afrique occidentale. Le film américain *Jésus*, en particulier, a engendré une variété d'interprétations plus larges par comparaison avec les deux autres films tournés en Afrique, ce qui soulève la question de l'incongruité, comme je la nomme. En utilisant les questions culturelles et épistémologiques de l'incongruité entre un film et ses spectateurs, j'identifie différentes manières qui contribuent à élargir le champ interprétatif des significations plurielles.

Je propose de se démarquer d'une analyse des films qui les considère comme essayant de transmettre un message spécifique. Les spectateurs utilisent plutôt les films comme des ressources qu'ils exploitent en puisant dans leurs connaissances et leurs expériences antérieures, et en utilisant l'interaction des deux principes de présentification comme guides. Ceci résulte en un champ interprétatif des significations plurielles qui peut expliquer pourquoi certains spectateurs n'ont pas été à même de reconnaître que les films étaient chrétiens, puisqu'ils les ont regardés en établissant une relation directe avec leurs situations de vie spécifiques. En particu-

lier, quand les spectateurs avaient peu ou pas de connaissance du christianisme, j'ai constaté que ces films n'incitaient pas à la conversion au christianisme.

Les films peuvent seulement établir une signification privilégiée pour des groupes spécifiques qui apprennent à regarder un film d'une certaine façon, d'habitude en employant le principe de présentification sémiotique qui peut rendre compte d'une interprétation correcte des signes. En conséquence, je soutiens que les chrétiens engagés dans la Commune de Coby en sont arrivés à regarder les films chrétiens d'une manière similaire. Ils discutent leur signification privilégiée entre eux et ils la partagent lors des projections, par exemple en donnant des commentaires ou une interprétation en continu. Devenir chrétien signifie alors adopter la signification privilégiée de tels films au moins jusqu'à un certain niveau. Le film *Jésus* est devenu important parmi les chrétiens non seulement comme la Parole de Dieu sur film, mais plus encore pour certains comme le Film de Dieu, tout comme la Bible est devenue le Livre de Dieu. Par contre, les films dramatiques fonctionnent comme des prédications visuelles qui permettent les gens d'apprendre visuellement selon leur manière préférée. Et c'est particulièrement grâce à la similitude entre rêves et films que les films font maintenant partie de la vie des chrétiens d'une manière tellement importante, puisque les films gagnent une vie indépendante et deviennent des acteurs dans le monde de la relationalité agentive.

Je conclus ce livre en revenant à mon thème central : l'évolution du christianisme depuis une religion du livre vers une religion du film. J'affirme qu'un tel changement est bien à l'œuvre, en tout cas parmi les personnes qui vivent et pratiquent le christianisme pentecôtisant tel qu'on le trouve dans la Commune de Coby au nord-ouest du Bénin.

Samenvatting in het Nederlands

In dit proefschrift behandel ik drie christelijke films die in de *Commune* van Coby van de hedendaagse Republiek van Benin populair zijn geworden, niet alleen bij zendelingen en missionarissen die het als evangelisatiemiddel gebruiken, maar ook bij christelijke kijkers en de brede bevolking in het algemeen. Inderdaad, christelijke films zijn zo belangrijk geworden dat ik de vraag moet stellen of het christendom zich van een godsdienst van het boek naar een godsdienst van de film verschuift. De films die ik behandel zijn de Amerikaanse *Jesus Film* (1979), de Amerikaans-Ivoriaanse film *La Solution* (1994) en de Beninese videofilm *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002) die een directe relatie met de Nigeriaanse videofilmindustrie heeft, die tegenwoordig vaak Nollywood genoemd wordt. Ik ben bijzonder geïnteresseerd in hoe deze films, samen met de digitale technologie die hun succes vergemakkelijkt heeft, door mensen worden ontvangen en begrepen.

Mijn theoretische startpunt is de semiotiek, een theorie die niet alleen voor het bestuderen van films, media en mediaontvangst fundamenteel is, maar ook voor de meer recente studie van materialiteit. Als mijn belangrijkste theoretische bijdrage presenteer ik een kritiek van de semiotiek en beargumenteer dat deze theorie, die sinds Aristoteles fundamenteel is geweest voor de westerse wetenschap, in feite te beperkt is. Ik demonstreer dat de semiotiek, zelfs als die gezien wordt in het licht van Peirce, niet toereikend is om te verklaren hoe mensen in de *Commune* van Coby schrijven, films en media opvatten, zowel door hun materiële manifestaties als ook door interactie en communicatie. Ik stel dat het proces wat ik presentificatie noem, wat verder gaat dan semiotiek, geschikter is om te verklaren hoe mensen schrijven en media opvatten.

Het proefschrift heeft vijf hoofdstukken. In het eerste hoofdstuk stel ik het gebied van mijn studie, de afgelegen *Commune* van Coby in het noordwesten van Benin voor. Dat doe ik door de vermeende achterlijkheid van dit gebied vanuit een historisch perspectief te weerleggen. Doordat het gebied van oudsher onderdeel van de wijde regionale ontwikkeling was, die teruggaat tot de trans-Sahara handel nog voor de komst van Europeanen aan de West-Afrikaanse kust en de trans-Atlantische slavenhandel, is de *Commune* van Coby dus al sinds lange tijd

deel van de moderniteit. Terwijl vroege ontdekkingsreizigers gedurende de late negentiende eeuw weleens een romantische indruk van het gebied hebben gekregen, heeft het Franse kolonialisme met zijn civiliserende en moderniserende intentie de vroegere moderniteit geïnverteerd. Het resultaat was dat de mensen van de hedendaagse *Commune* van Cibly tot de meest achterlijke koloniale subjecten gerekend werden, die één van de meest afgelegen delen van de kolonie bewoonden. Ik beweer dat de koloniale moderniteit een beduidende invloed op de mensen heeft gehad, niet alleen door de bijkomende etnificatie, territoriale reorganisatie en toenemende veiligheid, maar ook op hun zelfwaardering en zelfbeeld.

Na de koloniale invloeden hebben mensen langzaam weer hun oude dynamiek, openheid ten opzichte van vreemdelingen en hun hoge mate van mobiliteit terug gewonnen, zoals ze zich aan de koloniale bezetting en later de postkoloniale staat aangepast hebben. Dit proces is vooral sinds de jaren 1990 bespoedigd, toen het christendom, onderwijs en verschillende media allemaal toegankelijker en populairder zijn geworden, in het bijzonder bij de jongere generaties.

Ik presenteer het belangrijkste theoretische argument van dit proefschrift in het tweede hoofdstuk door te beschrijven hoe mensen in de *Commune* van Cibly de materialiteit van schrijven, de Bijbel en woorden opvatten. Ik heb ontdekt dat mensen vaak geen verschil tussen materie en geest maken. De steen van een schrijven, bijvoorbeeld, is niet slechts een steen, maar een wezen op zich, wat zich verlaat op de co-existentie van geest en materie. Hierbij hebben veel mensen de overtuiging dat alles wat bestaat gezien moet worden als intrinsiek levend en als aandeel nemend en meedoevend in een wereld van agentieve relationaliteit. Terwijl ik deze zienswijze van materialiteit als “transmaterieel” beschreef in mijn proefschrift, kwam ik erachter dat het onmogelijk is deze aan de hand van de semiotiek van Peirce uit te leggen. Daarom voer ik het proces van presentificatie in, wat het semiotisch geven van betekenis uitbreidt om ook de meer experimentele en transmateriële presentificatie te bevatten die het handelen benadrukt. Ik ga dus verder dan semiotiek en de daarbij behorende representatieve houding die gebaseerd is op gestructureerde tekens. Ik vind dat te beperkt om het spectrum van de menselijke beleving te verklaren. Mensen zijn op allerlei verschillende manieren betrokken bij het ingewikkelde proces van presentificatie, een proces wat ik beschrijf aan de hand van een samenspel van twee presentificatie principes. Reke-

ning houdend met transmaterialiteit, stel ik dat veel mensen in de *Commune* van Coby vooral het transmateriële presentificatie principe gebruiken. Het semiotische presentificatie principe, aan de andere kant, houdt rekening met de meer semiotische aanblik van presentificatie en complementeert zowel als vervangt het transmateriële principe op verschillende niveaus. Ik noem dit proces “semiotificatie”. Het resultaat van de presentificatie zijn entiteiten, die ook gestructureerde tekens bevatten en deel van de wereld van agentieve relationaliteit uitmaken en die toestaan dat mensen, dieren en dingen op elkaar kunnen inwerken.

De koloniale moderniteit, gezien als een bundel van processen, beïnvloedt de manier waarop mensen over de wereld denken en hoe ze erin leven. Bovendien, semiotificatie resulteert in nieuwe categorieën van wezens volgens hun agent-schap dat zich nu in mensen concentreert. Dingen, aan de andere kant, worden meer en meer ontdaan van leven en agentschap en worden gecommodificeerd. Als deel van deze ontwikkeling demonstreer ik dat transmateriële wezens, zoals schrijn-entiteiten vergeestelijkt en gematerialiseerd worden en dus onafhankelijke wezens worden die nu tijdelijk bezit van de materie van stenen of mensen kunnen nemen. Deze kijk op schrijven kan nu aan een semiotische analyse onderworpen worden waarbij een schrijn, volgens Peirce, als een materieel symbool voor een immateriële geest gekarakteriseerd kan worden. Daarbij wordt de wisselwerking tussen de twee presentificatie principes hervormd en verbreed. Ik beëindig het hoofdstuk met een demonstratie dat semiotificatie nooit ten volle bereikt kan worden, maar het leidt wel tot een dynamiek waarbij geest en materie geïdentificeerd worden en in bepaalde mate van elkaar gescheiden worden tot verschillende soorten van entiteiten.

In het derde hoofdstuk gaat het om de drie christelijke films *Jesus*, *La Solution* en *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* die allemaal wel bekend zijn in de *Commune* van Coby, waar ze vaak voor evangelisatie doeleinden gebruikt worden. Ik analyseer de films op inhoud en plaats hun productie binnen de genealogie van christelijke films die teruggaat tot het begin van het medium. Jezusfilms behoren tot de eerste films die ooit gemaakt werden en worden nu als een apart genre erkend. De film *Jesus* (1979) is onderdeel van deze ontwikkeling en onderscheidt zich van andere Jezusfilms door de evangelische achtergrond en deze film is bij uitstek gebruikt in de wereldwijde evangelisatiebeweging. Een belangrijke deel van het succes van

Jesus is gelegen in het feit dat deze film door Amerikaanse christenen werd aanbevolen als zijnde het Woord van God op film. Dat is mogelijk dankzij het samenspel van de transmateriële en semiotische presentificatie principes.

Alhoewel christenen altijd films gemaakt hebben, is in de jaren 1940 de productie van Amerikaanse evangelische films verschoven naar drama films, die ook speciaal voor zending en evangelisatie geproduceerd werden. *La Solution* (1994) is een voorbeeld van deze filmtraditie en is een mengeling van een gemoderniseerd en een evangelisch verhaal, en illustreert wat ik de esthetiek van de koloniale moderniteit noem.

De derde film, de Beninese *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002), komt rechtstreeks uit de Nigeriaanse christelijke filmindustrie, die ik herleid tot kerktoneelstukken en de Amerikaanse dramatische zendingsfilms. In tegenstelling tot *La Solution*, komt *Yatin* direct uit de West-Afrikaanse Pinksterbeweging met zijn interesse voor geestelijke oorlogsvoering, die door speciale effecten gevisualiseerd wordt. Over het algemeen maakt *Yatin* gebruik van de conventies van Nollywood, die tegenwoordig vaak als een eigen unieke vorm van filmproductie geaccepteerd wordt.

Filmkijken is alleen mogelijk als er geschikte technologie is. In het vierde hoofdstuk beargumenteer ik dat technologie nooit neutraal is en dat dat dus ook als onderdeel van het beleven van filmkijken bestudeerd moet worden. Inderdaad, filmkijken laat mensen vergeten dat de materialiteit van media ook een rol speelt tijdens het kijken. Ik bestudeer de culturele biografie en het leven van een televisietoestel en van iconische beelden, in het bijzonder in de vorm van foto's, films en video's. Omdat mensen er nu eenmaal van houden om te zien met hun eigen ogen en van te leren door kijken en imiteren, zijn films populair geworden en maken ze nu een belangrijk deel uit van het leven in de *Commune* van Coby.

Foto's verkrijgen hun kracht doordat ze op iconische wijze afbeelden en doordat ze mensen en dingen indexereren. Alhoewel de iconische eigenschap van de semiotische presentificatie principe laat prominent worden, zijn foto's meer dan representaties omdat ze aanwezig maken wat ze tonen en daardoor mensen en voorouders met materiële toestellen voorzien.

Dat mensen foto's van voorouders bekijken en daardoor hun aanwezigheid in het fotografische beeld herkennen maakt van het bekijken een soort "transvisueel" zien. In het algemeen zijn mensen geïnteresseerd in transvisualiteit, waarmee ik

een manier van zien bedoel die verder gaat en boven de limiet van het materiële uitstijgt. Dromen en visioenen zijn typisch voor deze vorm van transvisualiteit, omdat ze mensen toegang geven tot het minder zichtbare deel van de wereld. Ik stel dat hekserij ook een vorm van transvisuele kracht is omdat het mensen niet alleen de mogelijkheid geeft om kwade daden in het minder zichtbare deel van de wereld te begaan, maar het kan ook gebruikt worden om kennis te vergaren vanuit het minder zichtbare deel van de wereld, wat het creatieve handelen bevordert; zoals het maken van televisietoestellen. Sommige mensen beweren ook dat de transvisuele kracht van de televisie het mogelijk maakt dat het toestel werkt. Voor een significant aantal mensen zijn televisietoestellen krachtige of levende entiteiten die toegang geven tot het minder zichtbare deel van de wereld, net zoals dromen en visioenen dat doen. Televisietoestellen bieden dus de technologie aan om video's te bekijken zodat mensen meer kennis van het leven in een meer of minder zichtbare wereld van agentieve relationaliteit kunnen krijgen, in welke ze wonen.

Tenslotte presenteer en analyseer ik in het vijfde hoofdstuk mijn bevindingen uit het onderzoek naar de ontvangst van de drie films. Aangezien het grootste deel van het onderzoek naar kijkers in Europa of Amerika is gedaan, vind ik dat de actuele theorie van filmontvangst ontoereikend is om het filmkijken in Afrika adequaat uit te leggen. Vooral onderzoek naar de Amerikaanse film *Jesus* heeft geleid tot een grotere variëteit van interpretaties dan de twee films die in Afrika zijn gemaakt. Daardoor wordt het probleem van incongruentie, zoals ik het noem, duidelijk groter. Ik ben vooral geïnteresseerd in culturele en epistemologische vragen van incongruentie tussen een film en zijn kijkers en identificeer verschillende manieren die bijdragen aan een breder interpretatief spectrum van plurale betekenissen.

Ik beweer dat films niet geanalyseerd moeten worden op grond van de aanname dat ze een specifieke boodschap trachten over te brengen. Veeleer gebruiken kijkers films als bron voor het proces van presentificatie. Kijkers buiten films uit doordat ze op eerder verworven kennis en ervaring teruggrijpen, en door zich te richten op het samenspel van de twee presentificatie principes die het proces leiding geven. Het resultaat is een interpretatief spectrum van plurale betekenissen wat rekening houdt met de vraag waarom sommige kijkers de films niet eens

als zijnde christelijk opvatten, doordat ze de films als relevant voor hun specifieke leefsituatie hebben opgevat. In het bijzonder voor kijkers die weinig of geen kennis van het christendom hebben, ontdekte ik dat deze films bekering tot het christendom niet bevorderen.

Films kunnen slechts een selectieve betekenis voor specifieke groepen van mensen bevestigen, die films op een bepaalde manier leren te kijken, gewoonlijk door het gebruik van het semiotisch presentificatie principe wat de juiste interpretatie van tekens begunstigt. Ik beweer dus dat toegewijde christenen in de *Commune* van Coby geleerd hebben de films op een bepaalde christelijke manier te bekijken. Ze bespreken de selectieve betekenis met elkaar en delen deze gedurende het kijken van films door middel van commentaren en aanvullende interpretaties. Christen worden betekent dan het aannemen van de selectieve betekenis van deze films, in ieder geval tot op zekere hoogte. De film *Jesus* is voor christenen belangrijk geworden omdat hij niet alleen maar het Woord van God op film is, maar hij is voor sommigen Gods Film geworden, net zoals the Bijbel Gods Boek is. Dramatische christelijke films, aan de andere kant, zijn visuele predicaties die het mogelijk maken dat mensen door hun belangstelling voor visueel leren er van kunnen profiteren. Het is vooral door de overeenkomst tussen dromen en films dat films een belangrijk onderdeel van het christelijke leven worden en dus een eigen leven krijgen wat hen de mogelijkheid geeft deelnemers in de wereld van agentieve relationaliteit te worden.

In dit proefschrift kom ik tot de conclusie dat mijn overkoepelende onderwerp, namelijk een verschuiving binnen het christendom van een godsdienst van het boek tot een godsdienst van film inderdaad plaatsvindt, tenminste voor de mensen die op dit moment in de *Commune* van Coby in het noordwesten van Benin leven, mensen die een soort van Pinksterachtig christendom beleven.

Curriculum Vitae

Johannes Merz (11 October 1970, Frauenfeld, Switzerland) attended Kantonschule Schaffhausen, Switzerland, from 1986 to 1991, and gained a *Matura* certificate. After a gap-year, he started his studies in cultural anthropology and African linguistics at the University of Zürich, Switzerland, and later Leiden University, from where he received his *doctoraal* degree in African Studies in 1998. His thesis examined witchcraft beliefs among the Bebelibe of northwestern Benin, West Africa, discussing how Christianity and anti-witchcraft shrines have come to provide new solutions to what people consider to be one of the most important problems they face. After starting work as an anthropologist for SIL International in Benin in 2002, he shifted his research focus to communication and media anthropology. This new interest was in response to the increasing production and popularity of video films made in Ghana and Nigeria, often with a Christian theme. This phenomenon, now commonly known as Nollywood, spilled into neighbouring Benin with the release of *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002), Benin's first feature length video film. At the same time foreign and local evangelists continue to show the American *Jesus Film* (1979) throughout Benin, often dubbed into local languages. The developing and diversifying Christian mediascape in Benin provided the background for Johannes to begin his PhD research as an external candidate at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University, in early 2010. Johannes has published several articles in the journals *Anthropos* and *Missiology: An International Review* and most recently contributed a chapter to a volume entitled *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa* (2014). Johannes continues to work for SIL International as an anthropology advisor and is a visiting lecturer in social anthropology at Redcliffe College, Gloucester, UK.