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

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Chapter 1:
Modern Frictions in the Commune of Cobly

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 Cobly 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 Cobly, 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly. 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 Cobly 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 Cobly, 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 ethnicisation along linguistic lines. It also reorganised space and repositioned the Commune of Cobly 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 precolonial 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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; Koussey 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 Cobly 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 Boukoumbé. 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 km^2 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 Anufɔ 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, Cobly has never had a government minister appointed by the head of state, whereas all its surrounding Communes have. The town of Cobly – 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 Cobly, since they are claimed to be "savages who live like animals"[4] (cf. Sewane 2003: 36).

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[4] According to a conversation of southerners in a taxi on their way back to Cobly 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 Cobly, 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 Cobly to establish their respective denominations, usually have this same attitude. As a result, some have concluded that Cobly 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 Cobly. 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 Cobly

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 Cobly. 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 Cobly mountains that are part of today's Commune of Cobly, passing through today's Korontière and Datori. They encountered extensive 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, 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.

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

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.

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[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 Cobly area and is spoken as a second language by most Kuntemba, some Betammaribe and Gangamba. Outside the Cobly 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 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).

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[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 Cobly 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).

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

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[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.

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 multidirectional 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 matrilateral 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 matrilateral 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 matrilateral 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 matrilateral 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 communities 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly, 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 Cobly had become more important than its more southern counterpart (d'Almeida Topor 1995b: 282). What people in Cobly remember better, although usually with shame, is that their ancestors burnt Cobly *Zongo* and subsequently assassinated and expulsed 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 Cobly 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 Cobly. Since colonial times, Muslims from the wider region slowly started to move again to the town of Cobly, 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 Cobly *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 Cobly mountains. Even in their new locations people were not safe from outside aggressions. Occasional raids from the north and the east continued and raiders from Kouandé and other places in the Borgou region east of the Atacora mountains sometimes ventured to Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly accepted Tchokossi domination. As a result they were free to move to the more fertile plains west of Cobly, where the population appeared much more subdued by early explorers (Plé 1903: 24; Preil 1909: 141-142).

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

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

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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly (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 Cobly mountains. This is corroborated by Maurice (1986: 127) who mentions that the French army moved towards Cobly, where they met with little resistance.

Colonial sources also refer to "the existence of fortified hideouts in the Makéri [Matéri] and Kobli [Cobly] 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 "perfectly 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 Cobly 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), Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 to 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, Boukoumbé 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 precolonial 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly, 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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, especially 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 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.

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[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).

During the 1970s a new form of shrine called Nkunde or Belekundi, was introduced to the Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly, 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, 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.

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[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).

People in the Commune of Cobly 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 Cobly 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-Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly. In recent years, the provision of better roads, clean water and energy has been central and has promoted the rapid urbanisation of Cobly. 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 Cobly, 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 Cobly 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 Conference (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 Cobly and spread to new villages where they build chapels and churches. A new and larger Catholic church was inaugurated in the town of Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly area are usually from Benin's south and find their evangelistic work difficult.

Since the 2000s, Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Etienne[15], 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 Cobly. 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 Cobly 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 afford them. The first opened in Cobly 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.

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[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).

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

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[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).

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 Cobly 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 Cobly.

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 Cobly (Adjovi 2001: 12-13; Dioh 2009: 43; Silla and Bend 2008). A survey of satellite dishes and antennas showed that the town of Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly, 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 Cobly 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 Cobly. 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 became 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 Cobly, 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 Cobly. 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly in March 2007 and a second network soon followed. Both providers further expanded to cover most of the area of the Commune of Cobly. 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, Cobly still does not have a cybercafé.

The current proliferation of various electronic media is significant, since it allows people in the Commune of Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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 Cobly 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.