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

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Chapter 2:
Transmateriality and the Semiotification of Life

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Semiotic Problem of Shrine Entities

In the Commune of Cobly *atɛnwiɛnɛ* (sg. *ditenwɛnde*) or *fétiches*, come in many different shapes and sizes and they can be found in various locations. The most common type of shrine – the one that brought engines to a halt (see Chapter 1) – is called *ditade* (pl. *ataadɛ*), which means "stone" (Huber 1968: 205, 1973: 380-382), but can also be referred to as *fɛsefɛ* (pl. *isiɛ*) "snake" (Kaucley forthcoming 2014), since people often associate pythons with shrines[17]. The word "stone" refers to the "irreducible materiality" (Pietz 1985: 7) of a stone that people consider alive and that is a being in its own right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Presencing Beyond Semiotics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Presencing Principles and Transmateriality

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Animating Force and Identity of Life

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fluctuations of Life in Human–Animal–Thing Relations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A World of Agentive Relationality

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transmaterial Beings and the Need for Bodies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

God's Book as a Transmaterial Being

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many Christians who have received church teaching that has its origin in Euro-American theology claim that the Bible is inspired by God. Pierre, the retired pastor, states: "It's the spirit[19] that has pushed people to write. This spirit hasn't gone away, it's here. The word of God is made of words that come from the spirit. The Bible has God's spirit" (interview in French, 2 Mar. 2011). In this sense the Bible becomes identified with *Uwien' takimɛ*, God's identity or, as Protestants translate it, the Holy Spirit.

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

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[19] Pierre used the French word *esprit*, which Protestants translate as *mtakimɛ*.

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

Innocent, a young Christian literacy teacher, stresses:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ontological Differentiation in Human-Animal-Thing Relations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transmaterial Beings and the Fear of Matter

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Semiotification of Transmaterial Beings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Book and the Word

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Proliferation of Spirits and Words

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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