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

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Chapter 4:
Iconic Images and Transvisual Technology

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

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

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

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

Entities, however, never determine or fix meaning. They constantly interact with other entities, rubbing off their qualities on each other, as for example Brent Plate (2003a: 6) and Till Förster (2013) have demonstrated for different media through what they call intermediality[30]. As new entities are identified and begin to interact with other entities, the interplay of the transmaterial and semiotic presencing principles needs to be continuously reconfigured and refined, thereby increasing the collective experience of new things. As people engage in this process during their lifetimes, anxiety diminishes and people become increasingly comfortable about accepting and using new things. In this chapter I discuss this process for photographs, television sets and the images they show, by focusing on how people contribute to the cultural biographies of things through presencing processes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Importance of the Eye

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dreams: Seeing Beyond the Material

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transvisuality

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shadows and Images of the Dead

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Emmanuel, the older ex-Catholic, explains further:

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

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

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

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

Shadows and their Photographic Presence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Television Between Thing and Transmaterial Being

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

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

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

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

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

had come from the whites, they called it *kɛpienpasikɛ* (pl. *sipenpasi*), which translates as "the white man's divination". This word is still used today, even though a radio is now also referred to by the French loanword *radio*. The discussion of the radio shows that the device, man-made though it may be, can also be identified with the *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* it contains (cf. Spitulnik 1998: 74-75). According to this view radios provide inanimate bodies to some sort of beings; they become similar to transmaterial beings.

Pierre asserts that especially illiterate farmers would have a parallel understanding of the television set with the radio and the divination gourd as being inhabited by some kind of people, a view sometimes presented in literature (see, e.g., Ba 1999: 21; Woodhead 1987). As with photographs this smells of a simplistic view that Catherine, who attended secondary school, correctly dismisses: "If you broke the TV you won't see any people inside. It is their silhouettes [shadows] that are there and that we follow" (interview in French, 12 Feb. 2012; see also Larkin 2008: 9).

Many people can explain that a television set is made from plastic and a "mirror" or screen. Some younger people also know that there is more to television than meets the eye: There are wires, coils and bits of metal inside, which sometimes break and need to be replaced. Generally, people are aware that some form of electricity is needed, either via a generator when operated in a village, or through a connection to mains, when used in the more urban town of Cobly. People also know that in order to get images you need to put a *cassette* (Video CD or DVD) into a player or connect an antenna or satellite dish to the television.

Some of the more educated people in Cobly know that television sets are made in factories in China or Japan and are then shipped to Africa to be sold as commodities. For them the production of television sets relies on tools and machines and has become a matter of science and technical knowledge (Appadurai 1986). Because of such views, television sets are essentially secular things that are losing their lives, a process that has affected other things, such as knifes, drinking calabashes or plastic containers before them.

Even in their semiotified existence, however, television retains at least some of its transmaterial characteristics due to its ambiguous and complex existence, as Sconce (2000) has shown for America. Although the more educated continue to be

fascinated by television, they often judge television as also having significant disadvantages. They know from experience that a television set is an expensive but fragile device that can break. Getting it repaired is difficult and often costly, as it needs to be taken to a repairman in one of the larger cities. A television also consumes power, which becomes manifest when the monthly electricity bill arrives.

Technical knowledge does not only come through first hand experience of using television sets, but, according to Appadurai (1986: 41), is also linked to the spatial, temporal and social distance between technology's production and consumption sites. This helps to explain why many of the people who attribute life to television sets have a more limited technical knowledge, which is largely influenced by socio-culturally informed stories. This does not hinder people from having a good idea of what television is and what it is good for, nor does it exclude that they remain uncertain how exactly the life of television works. While most content themselves with this, some come up with theories that are based on what people already know about things.

A few people give an explicitly anthropomorphic explanation of the life of television (cf. Guthrie 1993; Spigel 1992: 50). Accordingly, television has *mtakimɛ* and *kɛbodikɛ* and is directly linked to humans. Sambiénou, an old diviner, claims: "They have put a person inside. It's like air that is inside and that works. Some people say it's not a person who's inside, but I say there is a person inside. Everything that exists is like this" (interview, 4 Jan. 2011).

For others a television set is like a man-made thing, such as a knife or a drinking calabash, that receives its *mtakimɛ* from the person who makes or shapes it, who himself has the *mtakimɛ* of the thing he can make (see Chapter 2; Gell 1998). According to this view, the young man Ntcha confirms that a television set can have *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, see also Chapter 2).

Several other people consider television to have *mtakimɛ* and *kɛbodikɛ* on the basis of what they see on it, namely things that are not usually seen with the naked eye (cf. B. Meyer 2004b; Ukah 2003). The film *Yatin*, for example, shows how witches go about their evil work (Chapters 3 and 5). *Yatin* also visualises the

flow of the powers of witchcraft and counter-witchcraft. In the film *Jesus*, during the scene of Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descends onto his shoulders in the form of a white dove. The film ends with Jesus being seen alive again after he had died and the camera floats up while looking down, implying Jesus' ascension. This kind of visualisation of things normally unseen indicates to many that a television set must be alive, at least to some extent, especially since the images it can show on its screen are sometimes transvisual and seemingly alive. What the television set shows, then, stands in a transmaterial relation to the set as an inanimate thing that is nonetheless alive. For these people it is the ability of electronic media technology to make the less seen aspect of the world accessible that makes it appear to be alive and that haunt it (Sconce 2000).

A further and more elaborate explanation is to directly compare parts needed to operate a television set with the different components of life. Vincent, a young man from a village, explains:

> They say that the screen of a TV can't do anything on its own. It can only work because of *kɛbodikɛ*, which is the CD [or DVD] and *mtakimɛ*, which is the loudspeaker. Then, together with a generator *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* will make the TV work. There is nothing that works without *mtakimɛ* (interview, 11 Jan. 2011).

For David, a middle-aged church leader, too, a television set remains ambiguous and is clearly alive, although it is not obvious where this life is located. After reflection David concluded that its life must come from the electricity (cf. Behrend 2005: 204), thereby echoing early American views of electricity as a kind of vital force (Sconce 2000: 7).[31] By switching the set on, it becomes alive and "the electricity then represents the television's spirit [*mtakimɛ*]" (interview in French, 15 Feb. 2011). Others shared the idea that electricity provides a device's *mtakimɛ*, but for David this is not enough to explain the life of electronic devices, as they also need to have *kɛbodikɛ* in order to live. David continues: "If God has not given the soul [*kɛbodikɛ*], the body can't start. The spirit [*mtakimɛ*] can be already inside, but it can't start" (interview in French, 15 Feb. 2011). Drawing on the analogy of

[31] Most people understand electricity as some form of neutral power that can give light, warmth, power a television set, or recharge a mobile phone. In this sense it is not particularly special, just as fire, which together with electricity constitutes the meaning of the Mbelime word *udaku*. In spite of this, electricity has something transmaterial about it, since it remains invisible while relying on a material form.

his motorbike and mobile phone as example devices, David compares the television set's soul (*kɛbodikɛ*) to a battery, which he thinks is needed to start the device. Batteries, as Debra Spitulnik (1998, 2002b) has shown for Zambia, are crucial to the running of electronic devices in rural Africa and receive much attention (see also Larkin 2008: 70-71).

In more general terms, television has sometimes been compared to a kind of shrine (Leal 1990; Lyons and Lyons 1987; J. Merz 2014; Morley 1995). A television set also reminds the Christian woman Baké of "people who have medicines and it's similar to the path of God [Christianity]" (interview, 6 Jan. 2011). She therefore attributes it a clear transmaterial character that removes it from other inanimate things, such as knifes and drinking calabashes. A television set can thus be approximated to other kinds of transmaterial beings, that have autonomy and agency of their own and that engage with other things and beings in the world of agentive relationality. For a few who only have a minimal experience of it, television even lacks the ephemeral character of other material things: they think that a television does not stop working and cannot break unless, maybe, when its owner dies.

In spite of this affinity of television sets with transmaterial beings, especially when it is switched on, its man-made and material character remains ever present and is reinforced through its commoditisation. Even when the set is operating, its exact nature remains quite vague and accordingly I have not found anybody who claims that a television could reincarnate in humans as, for example, a shrine entity can. I thus need to conclude that a television set stands somewhere between a man-made and inanimate thing and a transmaterial being, giving its characteristic ambiguity (cf. McCarthy 2001).

The ambiguity of television sets is further accentuated by being something of *upaanu* (the new times) that is intricately associated with the power and the witchcraft of the whites, a topic that I need to explore further.

How Television Sets are Made

For most people in the Commune of Cobly, electronic media technology remains at least somewhat ambiguous, since nobody knows how to make television sets, nor do people know other people who could produce them. Two thirds of the

research participants who addressed the topic during the interviews confirmed that there was a direct link between producing television sets and transvisuality, while the rest usually accredited it to intelligence and knowledge. Everybody agreed, however, that the whites are necessarily involved in the process of making television sets. This view of the extraordinary powers of the whites goes back to colonial times. Administrators, as well as missionaries and sometimes even researchers, actively exploited their technological supremacy by presenting it as superior (Behrend 2003: 132; Gullestad 2007: 270; Larkin 2008: 39, 93; Strother 2013: 186). Technology thus came to be intricately linked to colonial modernity, the whites, and Christianity, or in local terms, *upaanu* (the new times).

I am not surprised, then, that Paul Mercier came across ideas of white technological power in Betammaribe songs. He concludes: "[T]he white man is characterised by the power of his weapons, by his extraordinary technology… [and] by his magical powers that are symbolised *par excellence* by writing and paper" (Mercier 1968: 475, translation mine; see also Jackson 1975: 389; Maurice 1986: 441).

Today, many people in the Commune of Cobly continue to view the whites in an idealistic light, as Robbins (2004a: 47) also reports it for Papua New Guinea. The notion of whiteness, however, "is no longer a matter of skin colour [only] but of social relations and access to different forms of knowledge and material resources" (Gullestad 2007: 272). People in Cobly often include Beninese politicians, administrators, teachers and pastors, especially when they are literate in French, as being part of the whites (cf. Geschiere 2013: 51).

Many people in the Commune of Cobly see the apparent superiority and goodness of the whites as largely God-given and thus part of their destiny and *mtakimɛ* (identity). Several people expressed that they thought that whites were closer to God, or, in the words of an anonymous Otammari (sg. of Betammaribe): "The whites are similar to God!" (Maurice 1986: 441, translation mine). Gnammou, an old man who returned to his village after having lived in the town of Tanguiéta claims: "The whites have followed God and he has given them what is good. Then, they started to show us what is good. Before that we walked in darkness and we didn't know where to go" (interview, 24 Jan. 2012). For the Christian widow Victorine, "everything that the whites make is just as if it were something that

God himself has made. I don't know what we could make that is as nice as the things the whites make" (interview, 24 Jan. 2012).

Following such views, hardly any of the research participants in the Commune of Cobly dispute that television sets and other items of electronic technology come from the "land of the whites", where the whites make them (cf. Boneh 2008: 73). People often told me that the blacks could only operate and sometimes repair a television set. The village elder Kombètto states: "Nobody can make a TV set. At least we here, we can't. But we see that it comes from the whites" (interview, 4 Jan. 2011). A very few were not even sure if the whites could make a television set. The old man Sanhouekoua expresses his doubts as follows: "I don't know if they make TVs in the water or in the sky. I don't know how they do it and I haven't found out how they make a TV" (interview, 11 Feb. 2011).

Most of the research participants who say that the whites can make television sets, link it in one way or another to their knowledge, which they understand to be more powerful and different from that of the blacks. People's explanations of how the whites have gained such knowledge are interesting. A few usually well-educated people directly linked making television sets to people's secular education. If people study enough, they may attain the ability to design and produce electronic technology themselves.

Other people see a television set similarly to any other man-made thing, such as a knife and thus say that only people who have a television's *mtakimɛ* can produce it. For the moment, only the whites have the *mtakimɛ* of television and this is why blacks cannot make it. Others think that some blacks have the right *mtakimɛ* and, although it is not strong enough to make television sets, it is good enough to operate and repair media technology successfully.

Whether people attribute the ability to produce television sets to learnt technical knowledge or a specific *mtakimɛ* does not exclude the view that those who make them need to be true seers (*bɛnbuo*) in addition. Jonas, a middle-aged man who loves to watch TV, explains this in detail:

> He who is able to make a TV is an intellectual who has studied a lot. The one who invented TV knows many things and God's power is at his side during his work. God helps him further in his work while he sleeps by showing him to take this, to take that, and to stick it on this thing. He's an intellectual. You know, it's when he

> sleeps that he thinks and he dreams. The next day, he gets up and notes it in a notebook and tries to find the meaning of the dream before he begins his work. He has a book of dreams to which he compares his own dreams to find their meaning. … I can say that it's thanks to God's power and his studies. This has made it possible for him to make a TV (interview, 21 Feb. 2011).

People in the Commune of Cobly know that true seers can gain knowledge during their dreams and visions, knowledge that remains inaccessible to normal people. When true seers walk in the bush they sometimes see "things" that they want to take home with them. At times a seer learns about roots that can serve as new medicinal substances and then finds them in the bush. Sometimes, seers encounter transmaterial beings of the wild that tempt them. If the seers succumb to this temptation and pick them up, they run the danger of going mad. At other times, however, they succeed in domesticating these beings and turn them into shrine entities. Some of the community shrines have such an origin (Huber 1973: 380; cf. Sewane 2003: 399).

It is from these accounts of true seers who find and learn things during their dreams and visions, that people get the idea of how the whites would be able to acquire the knowledge needed to produce television sets. This also corresponds to a typical and widespread role of dreams, which people understand as making the less seen aspect of the world more visible and accessible. Different anthropologists have documented weavers, sculptors, photographers and others who dream of creative innovations, which they then put into practice in their work (see, e.g., Ashforth 2005: 54; Brett-Smith 1994: 169-170; Charsley 1992: 161; R. M. Dilley 1992; Glaskin 2005; Sprague 1978: 59).

As already indicated, many people in the Commune of Cobly think of witches (*bɛhɔɔpɛ*) as a kind of seer with a more limited transvisuality. Furthermore, people often consider what witches do and how they operate to be more secretive than the ways of the true seers. Normal people do not see how witches go about their work. This renders them not only more suspicious, but also more ambivalent. Séraphin, a well-educated NGO employee for whom a television set is the product of secular and technical knowledge, explains how the power of witches can nonetheless come to be associated with television:

> If somebody watched a film for the first time, he doesn't know how it [the television set] has been put together, or how films have been made. He will tell himself that to do this, you need to be a witch. In a figurative sense, this can indeed be compared to a witch (interview in French, 11 Feb. 2011).

Research participants who consider witches to be able to produce television sets in more than a figurative sense often accredit this to their *uhɔɔhu*, the special power usually ascribed to witches, as it has been shown for other parts of Africa (see, e.g., Geschiere 1997: 3; Newell 2007: 468; Pype 2012: 147). Boniface, the owner of a video parlour in one of the villages, explains in more detail: "*Uhɔɔhu* [transvisual power] is with the whites who can make things that will really work, such as TVs. They can make everything. The whites are together with God and this is why they can make TVs" (interview, 15 Jun. 2012).

In talking about the whites' *uhɔɔhu*, however, several research participants stress that this kind of *uhɔɔhu* is linked to the work of the true seers, and not so much to that of the malevolent witches who catch people's *kɛbodikɛ*. Furthermore, other people stress that there are different kinds of *uhɔɔhu*. Vincent, a young farmer, summarises this view that anthropologists have documented for other parts of Africa (Ashforth 2005: 76; Falen 2007; Geschiere 1997: 252 n.259; Piot 2010: 125; Pype 2012: 147; R. Shaw 2002: 210): "The whites know how to make good things. We, the blacks, when we say *uhɔɔhu*, it's the one that catches people" (interview, 11 Jan. 2011).

Uhɔɔhu is a notion that people usually translate into French as *la sorcellerie* (cf. Geschiere 2013: xviii), and that I have rendered as "witchcraft" elsewhere (J. Merz 1998, 2008). While E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937) introduced the notion of witchcraft to anthropology, Peter Geschiere (1997) and Peter Pels (1998a: 239-245, 1999) have problematised it by arguing that it belongs to modernity (see also Geschiere 2011, 2013; Pels 2003a; Sanders 2003).

The Ambivalence of Witchcraft

Witchcraft became an important area of anthropological study thanks to Evans-Pritchard (1937) who masterfully presented it as a rational and logically consistent way to organise the Azande's lives. His work opened up the field for further functionalist witchcraft studies that investigated how the phenomenon contri-

buted to the functioning of society. His views became influential and guided most of the studies of African witchcraft and sorcery that used a structural-functionalist paradigm.[32] Such studies reached their heyday by the 1960s (Douglas 1970). At the same time, modernisation theories suggested that witchcraft beliefs would disappear. Consequently, the study of this apparently anachronistic relic slipped into the anthropological background until the late 1980s. By then, however, it had become evident that witchcraft beliefs had not diminished and that people now used it in seemingly new ways to express modernity by dealing with it as part of politics and the economy (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Fisiy and Geschiere 1991; Geschiere 1997; Rowlands and Warnier 1988). Accordingly, anthropologists recognised the need to revisit the study of witchcraft in light of this development, thereby increasingly discussing the shortfalls of the notion of "witchcraft" itself. Additionally, they now often linked witchcraft to the even wider idea of "the occult", a notion that increasingly serves as a catchall for the irrational and non-scientific views that continue to mark "Africa" as distinct from the rest of the world (Fisiy and Geschiere 1991; Geschiere 1997, 2011; Henry and Tall 2008; H. L. Moore and Sanders 2001a; Pels 1998a, 2003a: 12-17; Ranger 2007; Sanders 2008).

As elsewhere in Africa (see, e.g., ter Haar 2007), phenomena related to witchcraft continue to be rampant in the Commune of Cobly. Known under the name of *uhɔɔhu*, these phenomena remain one of the biggest problems that people experience in everyday life (J. Merz 1998: 51). In and around the town of Cobly, gossip and rumours of *uhɔɔhu* continually circulate (cf. Ashforth 2005: 65-69; P. J. Stewart and Strathern 2004), often affecting those closest to suspected practitioners. "Witchcraft", as Geschiere has famously put it, "is the dark side of kinship" (1997: 11; see also Geschiere 2013).

Studies of African witchcraft have typically described it in moralising terms (Geschiere 1997: 12; J. Merz 2008), and more recently, for example, as a "manifestation of evil believed to come from a human source" (ter Haar 2007: 8). In the Commune of Cobly, people particularly fear the work of the witches (*bɛhɔɔpɛ*) who

[32] While Evans-Pritchard (1937) introduced the difference between witchcraft and sorcery, I share Roger Sansi and Luis Nicolau Parés' opinion, who "do not think that an analytical distinction between the terms is tenable" (2011: 6).

allegedly catch and consume people's *sibosi* (pl. of *kɛbodikɛ*, animating force). Such activities, which John Parker (2006: 363) considers similar in their essentials across the savannah region of West Africa, are generally thought to lead to the victim's death (see, e.g., Drucker-Brown 1993; Maurice 1986: 441-442; J. Merz 1998; Parker 2006; Piot 1999: 68; Swanson 1985: 101-105; Tait 1967; Zwernemann 1993).

While I do not want to downplay the negative impact of witchcraft on people's lives, I equally need to stress that I do not understand *uhɔɔhu* as a uniquely evil and destructive force as such (cf. Geschiere 2011: 248). *Uhɔɔhu* can also help witches to protect themselves and their families from the attacks of other witches (see, e.g., Falen 2007; J. Merz 2008: 206; Walker 1979: 130-131), and, "more generally, to succeed in life" (Geschiere 1997: 13). In this sense, witchcraft can be ascribed to people who can do things that normal people cannot, such as producing technology, or succeeding in politics. Some people in Cobly consider past presidents such as Benin's Mathieu Kérékou or Togo's Gnassingbé Eyadéma *sorciers*, indicating their tenacity and ability to hold on to power (cf. Danfulani 1999: 172; S. Ellis 1993: 472). Even Jesus is sometimes called a witch or sorcerer, since otherwise he could not have performed the miracles he did (J. Merz 2008: 212; Musopole 1993; see also Chapter 5).

Uhɔɔhu, then, needs to be understood as an ambivalent power, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere (J. Merz 2008; see also Akrong 2007; Danfulani 1999; Falen 2007; Geschiere 1997, 2011; Henry 2008: 102; Henry and Tall 2008: 23; Newell 2007). Accordingly, people in the Commune of Cobly do not fear it for what it is, but rather judge it by what people do with it, thereby shifting the morality of *uhɔɔhu* to those who use it (cf. Mills 2013: 28-29). This is why *uhɔɔhu* can also become something valuable and good. During recent years, Douglas Falen (2007) has observed a change in people's attitude towards witchcraft in southern Benin, with people increasingly seeing it not only as solely evil, but also as a power that can be used for good purposes. While he wonders whether this was a recent development, I propose that it is merely a resurfacing of precolonial views.

B. Meyer (1999b: 90) found indications for the Ewe of Ghana, that witchcraft used to be an ambivalent power, which then became affected by the demonising efforts of colonial administrators and missionaries (see also Allman and Parker

2005: 135) and in a wider sense by processes of semiotification. More recently Abraham Akrong (2007: 53-54) mentioned the possibility of using witchcraft for good purposes in southern Ghana, just as Falen (2007) analysed it in more detail for southern Benin. Such notions of ambivalence seem to have existed among Betammaribe communities of northwestern Benin already in colonial times (Maurice 1986: 441; Mercier 1968: 475), and I found them to be present since the mid-1990s in the Commune of Cobly. I suspect, then, that the ambivalence of witchcraft is not so much a new phenomenon, but rather a resurfacing of older views that had been moralised and suppressed by colonial modernity. It is equally possible that good usage of witchcraft is sometimes simply overlooked or not seen as relevant in the face of evil manifestations of witchcraft, even by anthropologists.

Whatever the case may be, Geschiere (1997: 13) links the ambivalence of witchcraft directly to its ability to incorporate and adapt to changes easily. In semiotic terms, Sasha Newell calls this phenomenon "the signifier for the unsignifiable" (2007: 468), while B. Meyer acknowledged it as "a floating signifier" (2003a: 203), stating that witchcraft cannot actually be fully captured by semiotics. Their suggestion, however, merely describes the semiotic problem of making sense of witchcraft, rather than presenting a solution to it. Witchcraft, then, just like shrine entities, cannot be sufficiently described through semiotics (R. Marshall 2009: 22-35; Chapter 2). Rather, by going beyond semiotics, witchcraft is better understood as transmaterial, since it experientially and causally identifies the material with the immaterial, leading to its inherent ambivalence and allowing it to make sense creatively of things that cannot otherwise be explained. Witchcraft needs to be placed beyond the dichotomies that have typically characterised colonial modernity (Geschiere 1997: 21; Henry and Tall 2008: 30; Nyamnjoh 2001).

The ambivalence of witchcraft, then, can help people to make sense of things that go beyond their possibilities of understanding in any other way, giving it its characteristic dynamism and plasticity (Sansi and Parés 2011). Geschiere points out that "witchcraft is not seen as a more or less fixed, traditional residue but, rather, as a constantly changing set of notions reflecting and reinterpreting new circumstances" (1997: 222; see also Geschiere 2011, 2013).

Witchcraft Dynamics in the Commune of Cobly

In the Commune of Cobly, the ambivalence and dynamics of witchcraft impact several areas. Generally, I have noticed that *uhɔɔhu* is increasingly linked to parts of life with which it did not have much to do in the past. *Uhɔɔhu* also borrows from the French *la sorcellerie* that has become part of everyday talk in Benin (Geschiere 2013: xviii; Henry 2008: 101) and often features in the public media of newspapers, radio and television (Bastian 1993; Englund 2007; Geschiere 2003: 168, 2011: 235; Henry and Tall 2008: 22-23), as well as in Nollywood video films (Geschiere 2013: 182, 186-191; see also Chapters 3 and 5). I suggest that some areas that people thought part of the domain of the true seer in the past are now more often expressed in terms of *uhɔɔhu*. Rumours of *uhɔɔhu* are becoming more common in local politics too, especially now that people elect their town councils and village chiefs following decentralisation. The increased participation of the general population in politics has resulted in people affirming that politicians who show good governance and leadership have good *uhɔɔhu*, while politicians who misuse funds and are generally corrupt are feared for their bad *uhɔɔhu*. This development has resulted in a slow, but steady, increase in witchcraft rumours that are related to wealth, something that is well developed in many parts of West Africa.

Uhɔɔhu remains a relevant and intriguing topic for everybody. Among Christians, *uhɔɔhu* sometimes retains its ambivalence, but it is often demonised and spiritualised, especially in Pentecostalised forms of Christianity (J. Merz 2008). The result is that witchcraft loses at least some of its earlier impersonal and ambivalent power and, more importantly, becomes associated with the work of the devil (Ashforth 2005: 179-180; Fancello 2008: 470; Geschiere 2013; Henry 2008; J. Merz 2008; B. Meyer 1992, 1999b; Newell 2007; Pype 2012: 15-38; R. van Dijk 2001: 100). As some of the more fervent Christians in the Commune of Cobly increasingly equate *uhɔɔhu* with demons, they disentangle it from its earlier material support in the form of humans. For Salomon, for example, it is clear that "*la sorcellerie* [witchcraft] is an evil spirit" (interview in French, 22 Feb. 2011), while Marie, a middle-aged widow, explains further: "It is *mtakitiɛmɛ* [evil spirit]. *Mtakitiɛmɛ* enters them [the witches]" (interview, 29 Mar. 2010). Since witchcraft, as experienced in Africa, is not directly addressed in the Bible (Debrunner 1961:

145-146), reducing it to a demon makes it easier for Christians to deal with. People can now be delivered from the demon of witchcraft, which has become an exorcisable entity (Henry 2008; J. Merz 2008; B. Meyer 1998a, 1999b). The demonising stance on witchcraft, however, is not able to eradicate it, since, as Geschiere (1997: 43-50, 2003) has shown, witchcraft can conjure up anti-witchcraft (see also Geschiere 2013: 73-82; Kahn 2011). Accordingly, pastors and other Christians, who are often seen as specialists who can fight demons and witchcraft, are sometimes suspected of it themselves (Danfulani 1999: 170-171; Fancello 2008: 178; R. Marshall 2009: 184-185; Marshall-Fratani 2001: 43; B. Meyer 2004a: 460; Piot 2010: 114; ter Haar 2007: 17). Indeed, as Newell shows for Abidjan, "Pentecostal churches are also in themselves a form of witchcraft discourse and practice" (2007: 469).

A further important change in *uhɔɔhu*, as I have already mentioned, is its characterisation and elaboration as a power that especially whites can use for the good, most notably for the production of television sets and other items of electronic technology. Anthropologists have documented a link between technology and witchcraft, mainly by describing how witches make use of it for their own ends. The most widely documented innovation of witches is that they now often employ aeroplanes, thereby rendering their work more efficacious.[33] Other anthropologists explicitly make reference to the witches' alleged power to produce technological goods, whether aeroplanes or electronic media technology.[34]

Most elaborately, Rosalind Shaw (2002: 202) describes an invisible witch-city for the Temne of Sierra Leone, which is the origin of technological innovations. This city is said to have skyscrapers, houses made of gold and diamonds, Mercedes-Benzes, shops selling televisions, VCRs and computers, and airports from which witch-planes depart to destinations all around the world. She links this witch-city to the memory of the Atlantic slave trade, thereby seeing witchcraft as part of a historical process. In other words, Shaw examines the link be-

[33] See, for example, Drucker-Brown (1993: 534), Englund (2007: 301), Geschiere (1997: 3, 59, 2013: 5, 15, 35, 63-64), Jackson (1975: 393), Merz (1998: 69-70), Newell (2007: 466-468), Parish (2003: 24), Piot (1999: 176, 2010: 121-122), Walker (1979: 127), and West (2007: 67).
[34] See, for example, Danfulani (1999: 172, 174), Fancello (2008: 176), Geschiere (1997: 3, 59), B. Meyer (2006b: 440), Newell (2007: 468) and R. van Dijk (2001: 106).

tween technology and witchcraft as part of the history of Europe's entanglement with Africa, similarly to how Pietz (1985) analyses fetishes.

While technology has become a truly transnational commodity, its interpretation remains part of the legacy of colonial modernity. Accordingly, in Europe and America technology is considered the result of science and rationality, whereas in Africa, it remains linked to witchcraft and the occult (Ranger 2007). While it is clear that there are different interpretations of technology in different parts of the world – it could not be otherwise – I object to the dichotomising stance that lingers even in academic discourses. This means that I need to readdress the question of the terminology through which technology is understood.

Witchcraft as Transvisual Power

Technology relies on some form of special knowledge, be it acquired through advanced study, through dreams and visions, or through other means relating to "witchcraft". In the Commune of Cobly a person needs *uhɔɔhu* in order to produce technology and sometimes even to use it. Some people have characterised *uhɔɔhu* as a power that people have to varying degrees and that is supposed to be particularly prevalent among the whites. Some people link the presence of *uhɔɔhu* directly to people's *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force), which they say renders it stronger (J. Merz 2008: 213). A strong *kɛbodikɛ*, as already discussed, allows people to see better in the less visible world, where they can gain knowledge by observing what others do more easily, and where they can even become agentive actors. Having *uhɔɔhu*, then, means to have an enhanced vision and better access to knowledge as compared to those who do not have it. This is why I propose to translate *uhɔɔhu* as "transvisual power", thereby providing it with an ontological basis, which recent anthropological discourses on "witchcraft" could not do. This also means that I can ground the diffuse and slippery notion of "witchcraft" not only in the intimacy of close relationships (Geschiere 2013: 7-13, 20), but also as an integral part of the relationships of everyday life that characterise the world of agentive relationality. People use transvisual power to gain knowledge in order to do extraordinary things that normal people cannot do, whether this means catching other people's *kɛbodikɛ* or the ability to produce television sets and other items of electronic technology.

By understanding *uhɔɔhu* as transvisual power, its existence can no longer simply be brushed aside as being imaginary and implausible, which are crucial traits that characterise the rationality debate that Evans-Pritchard (1937) (in)famously introduced to anthropology (Ashforth 2005: 113-116; Mills 2013). Neither should *uhɔɔhu* be taken as standing for something else, as structural-functionalist studies, and to some extent Jean and John Comaroff (1993) and their followers have done. Although they accept the religious as an important and valid object of research, they exclude it from their analysis in line with secular anthropological theories. Accordingly, they consider witchcraft as an argument *about* modernity, reducing the witch largely to a metaphorical icon of local-global interactions and processes. Such analyses make the religious conform and subject to secular semiotic signification, while forgetting that religious practice is also rooted in everyday life (Ashforth 2005: 114; Rutherford 1999: 91; R. Marshall 2009: 22-25; see also Robbins 2007). These approaches implicitly question the validity of transmateriality through their underlying semiotic framework. In doing so, they invariably recast the transmaterial as material, thereby excluding the religious to the extent of rejecting even the possibility for transmateriality and transvisuality to become valid analytical notions.

Instead, I propose to theorise beyond semiotics and call on pluralist epistemology (Geschiere 2011: 248-250; Jewsiewicki 2001; see also Chapter 2), which allows for both a continued critical analysis and an approach that at least acknowledges *uhɔɔhu* as something in its own right (Geschiere 1997: 281 n.212), especially in transmaterial and transvisual terms. Such an approach, unlike more secular and semiotic ones, does not exclude linking *uhɔɔhu* to other areas of life, such as modernity or the economy, since transmateriality itself is rooted in everyday practice and action. This, then, necessities "take[ing] religious faith seriously" (R. Marshall 2009: 3; see also Introduction), even to the extent of "accepting fully beliefs and phenomena which our system of knowledge often holds preposterous" (Stoller and Olkes 1987: 229; see also Ewing 1994: 572; J. Merz 2004). This is not so much necessary for its own sake, but rather for the purpose of an analysis that can account better for phenomena, such as "witchcraft". Doing otherwise, Martin Mills (2013: 31) has recently suggested, questions the validity of the social sciences and the humanities more broadly.

Furthermore, going beyond semiotics also pushes the phenomena commonly associated with "witchcraft" beyond the usual limits of the African Other (Pels 1998a; Sansi 2011; Sansi and Parés 2011; R. Shaw 2002: 201-224). Geschiere (2003), for example, draws parallels between the "spin doctors" of American politics and Cameroonian "witch doctors", who both work in the background and try to influence how people perceive politicians. More recently, Harry West (2007) has eloquently drawn direct parallels between doing sorcery in Mozambique with doing ethnography. He argues that both activities shape the world through what he calls embedded or living metaphors. West analytically limits sorcery to discourse, thereby mainly drawing on linguistic parallels. An approach that goes beyond semiotics, however, needs to extend West's view to include the material and visual as well. This seems particularly important, since I understand *uhɔɔhu* as transvisual power, by which I assert that people gain knowledge not only by talking about it, but also in a practical and experiential way, including (trans)visual means, such as dreaming.

I have now reached the point where the notions of "witchcraft" and "sorcery" become superfluous to how I understand and analyse *uhɔɔhu*. I have characterised *uhɔɔhu* as transmaterial in the sense that it refuses to differentiate between various dichotomies, such as sign and referent or material and immaterial, thereby implying an enormous and varied presencing potential. This means that *uhɔɔhu* is particularly suited to account for transvisual power that, like transmaterial entities, joins the more and less visible aspects of life and the world of agentive relationality. I therefore understand *uhɔɔhu* as a life-enhancing power that stands both for the ambiguous and the extraordinary. It provides people with the transvisual quality to see beyond the material and thereby the ability to gain knowledge beyond the strictly visible, and to be able to be creative and productive. The old diviner Kombiénou summarises: "When a man makes something, … there is always a little bit of *uhɔɔhu*. How can you make something if you're not a witch?" (interview, 11 Jan. 2011).

Transvisual power, then, enhances the ability to acquire knowledge, to be creative and to put it into practice (Sanders 2008: 111). Indeed, it is a kind of science, as some people in Cobly characterise it (cf. Ashforth 2005; Falen 2007). Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders confirm this view: "Science and the occult

have never been entirely separate" (2001a: 2). While science has tried to distance itself from subjectivity, transvisual power has always touched on questions of morality (R. Shaw 2002: 211), thereby embracing both the subjective and the objective, as well as the rational and the imaginative. Transvisual power cannot be reduced to an occult and mystical force, since it can equally be associated with common sense (Pels 1998a: 202), everyday action (R. Marshall 2009: 22; Mills 2013: 28) and in the intimacy of close relationships (Geschiere 2013). Rather, transvisual power is experiential and works at a transmaterial level, constantly seeking to diffuse the dichotomies of colonial modernity.

Maybe due to its ambivalence and presencing potential, transvisual power has in recent decades increasingly come into the open and part of public debates, be it in radio and newspaper reports, video films or Pentecostal discourse, while it also remains deeply ambiguous. Accordingly, it has gained unprecedented prominence and shapes people's lives, while at the same time their lives can shape it. In a very similar way, television and videos increasingly become part of people's lives.

Having discussed transvisual power at a more general level I now return to the cultural biography of television sets in the Commune of Cobly, namely by exploring the relationship between television and transvisual power in more detail.

The Transvisual Power of Television

Many people in the Commune of Cobly see a direct link in how transvisual power works and how a television set works. It is often younger men who are heavy consumers of television and videos who articulate this connection most elaborately and persuasively. Paul, the young man in charge of a village church, explains: "I think that the way TV functions, you know, the one who is an *unbuo* [true seer] who makes things, he can do things that normal people can't. And TV too, it works in the same way" (interview, 7 Mar. 2012). Pierre, the retired pastor, puts it more succinctly: "Here, true seers have the same power as television" (interview in French, 2 Mar. 2011). From such a perspective, a television set has itself transvisual power, which has been placed inside it by those who make it, themselves possessors of the same power.

The reason to accord a television set transvisual power lies in how it works on two levels. Firstly, a television set needs to obtain images to display, a process

that can easily be understood in terms of the work of a witch. I have already mentioned that a witch first needs to catch the image-shadow of people in order to reach their *kɛbodikɛ*. In a similar way, the image-shadow of people and things needs to be caught in order to show them on a television set. Dieudonné, a farmer with a keen interest in technology, explains this process in more detail:

> Somebody can take your photo, … but we can't see it right then. The next day, you will find yourself on the TV. They will put the image on the TV and it will be there for you to see. It is in this way that a witch works to capture images. A witch has her actions, but she can't catch you in one stroke. She will take your image in the same way that a TV does before she can attack [and kill] somebody (interview, 28 Jan. 2011).

For most people it remains ambiguous how exactly witches and television succeed in catching image-shadows. In spite of this, most people know by now that some sort of camera is needed to take photographs and videos (cf. Wright 2008: 374). In fact, with the increase in mobile phones that include digital cameras, digital technology has been popularised in recent years, and even people in remoter villages know about it.

The more interesting question is how to obtain images of things that are not usually accessible to the naked eye, such as the witches and their work as shown in the film *Yatin*. For most people this area remains ambiguous and they did not feel confident enough to give much detail. A few made it clear that all the images were acted, and the owner of a video parlour added that he thought computers helped in generating such images. Only one research participant, a young village farmer, wondered whether it was not the transvisual power of the camera itself that lets it directly see and record the witches and their work.

A second aspect of the similarity between television and transvisual power lies in how a television set shows and displays its images using light. When people in the Commune of Cobly see a light move around at night, often on top of trees or in other unusual places, they suspect that witches are out and about doing their evil work (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937: 33-35). The association of the activities of witches with nightly light or fire that moves around is widespread in West Africa. Among the Tallensi, this can take on the form of a "light ball" (B. Meyer 1992: 117) or "ball of fire" (Parker 2006: 59), while David Tait (1963: 136, 1967: 156)

speaks for the Konkomba of flashing "sorcerer-fire" that moves through the air at considerable speed. For the Akan, Hans Debrunner (1961: 20-21) describes this "witch-light" in some detail, while Jane Parish (2003: 27) refers to a "bright light" that a witch has on her forehead to guide her flight path. Piot (2010: 121) mentions that Kabre witches are now thought to be able to hide their fire, thereby becoming less conspicuous.

In the Commune of Cobly, people sometimes say that witches use their light, which usually emanates from their eyes, to attract and catch people's *kɛbodikɛ*. Vincent, a young farmer, compares a witch's eyes to the headlights of a car (interview, 28 Feb. 2010), while the older man Gérôme calls this effect "the torch of a witch", which helps her see the *sibosi* [animating forces] of people in the night (interview, 29 Mar. 2010). More generally, some research participants, such as Thomas (interview, 27 Jan. 2012), compare how witches gain their power and how it works for them directly to the way television works. Because of this, Jérémy, who loves to watch television, claims: "A witch doesn't want to watch TV because the light that the TV emits is the same that the witch carries and uses for her hunt" (interview, 25 Jan. 2011). Other people say that when witches see on television what they actually do, especially in films like *Yatin*, they will either leave, or, being shocked by seeing their own actions, decide to abandon their nightly work. More generally, people say that witches do not want to see Christian films and leave.

For a few others, having television at home actually could increase your exposure to witches, as they could come to watch in your house without you knowing. Witches constantly observe what is happening. If they find some sort of problem or issue, they can play it to their advantage and more easily perpetrate their evil deeds. Another person claimed that witches themselves could use television to attract people to come and watch in their house, which again, he claimed, facilitates their evil work.

Whatever people's view of the relationship between witches, transvisual power and television may be, there are also limits in how far the comparison can go. Dieudonné already implied (see above) that there is also a difference in how television and witches catch an image-shadow. Put more explicitly, for Yves, a literacy teacher and son of a Tigare owner:

> I think that a TV catches images to show them. If it catches the images of people, the TV tries to project them afterwards. But a witch works differently. When she catches a *kɛbodikɛ* she wants to kill the person quickly. Witches don't want to show the shadows of people afterwards (interview, 17 Feb. 2011).

While both the witches' and a television's work remains ambiguous, as people find it hard to explain exactly how they operate, the result of a witch's action remains hidden and fatal, while a television's work is open, showing the images it had caught to everyone.

Transvisual and Televisual Presencing

This difference between the work of witches and the work of television is crucial, since electronic media technology has the ability to increase the accessibility to transvisual power for those who use them. The middle-aged widow Marie explains:

> Casettes [Video CDs and DVDs] can show us how *uhɔɔhu* [transvisual power] works. Can we know how *uhɔɔhu* works? It's when TV arrived that we understood how witches work. We saw how people transform themselves into witches and where they catch people to tie them up. Usually, we hear people talk about witches, but we can't identify them like in the film and we don't know who they are. We don't know how they catch people (interview, 25 Jan. 2011).

In this sense, watching videos can show people things that are normally only accessible to an *unbuo* (true seer). Many of the research participants recognise that watching videos cannot actually turn a person into *unbuo*, since being a true seer is God-given and cannot be acquired. In spite of this, virtually all research participants thought that watching television is beneficial and can at the very least help people become more intelligent. Seeing (*ya*), after all, is also understanding. Maybe I can go as far as claiming that the transvisual power of television, that shows what is not normally seen with the eyes, makes it no longer necessary for people to have transvisual power themselves, since television provides it for them when they watch. Gérôme, for example, claims: "A seer sees in the same way as a TV works" (interview, 10 Mar. 2012).

Indeed, people commonly compare watching television to some form of seeing *tidɔɔsite* (dreams or visions). Most research participants made a direct connection

between dreaming and watching television and videos.[35] Yantékoua, the older leader of a village church, stated as several others did, "Television has things in common with *tidɔɔsite* [dreams]" (interview, 13 Jan. 2011). Such a connection between dreams and television or videos has, to my knowledge, only been mentioned in passing, most notably by Shaw (2002: 99) for Temne diviners of Sierra Leone, by Katrien Pype (2011) for Kinshasa and by Lohmann (2000: 83, 2010: 244) for the Asabano of Papua New Guinea, but it may actually be more widespread.

The reasons why people equate television with dreams are various. First of all, some claim that both dreams and films are organised in scenarios or sequences of images with different events following each other. When people wake up, or when the power that aliments a television set is cut, people stop seeing these images. Often, people feel more like passive observers than participants when dreaming and watching television, with images appearing from beyond their normal consciousness.

Maybe more importantly, what people see in television and videos can strongly resemble what they also see in dreams. Yantékoua, the village church leader, explains: "When I watched the film [*Yatin*], there were some parts that were like dreams" (interview, 27 Feb. 2010; see also Chapter 4). For television-lover Jérémy, too, "the cassette [Video CD] *Yatin* is similar to a dream" (interview, 25 Jan. 2011). Indeed, the makers and scriptwriters of Christian video films often claim divine inspiration or revelation of their films, similar to how Bill Bright claimed to have had a vision for the *Jesus Film* (see Chapter 3). Sometimes, West African filmmakers even maintain that they saw their films in visions and then set out to make them (Behrend 2005: 208; B. Meyer 2003b: 18; Ukah 2005: 297). Thanks to such claims it does not matter that humans make films and that some of the images are digitally enhanced through computer-generated special effects. In both videos and dreams people can see how witches try to catch people at night, and often they also see how people escape from being caught. Sometimes

[35] Comparing watching films with dreaming has also been part of psychoanalytic approaches in film theory. Such views, however, focus on illusion and myth and do not help to advance my discussion of dreams and films (see, e.g., Lyden 2003: 50-51).

people see their ancestors in dreams and, if video recordings exist of them from when they were alive, people can see them on television as well.

Dreams are also linked to travelling (Lohmann 2003a). Some people dream of going to Europe – to Paris, for instance – and see how wonderful it is there. Similarly, as Lynn Spigel has noted for America, television gives people "the chance to travel imaginatively into the outside world while remaining in the comforts of the home" (1992: 182). In Cobly, people often see images of Europe and Paris on television and in videos without ever having been there. Sometimes people dream of weird things they do not know or recognise and similar unfamiliar things can also be seen on television.

Furthermore, some people see a direct link between *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force), watching television and dreaming, as *kɛbodikɛ* follows what happens on television. Sometimes *kɛbodikɛ* remembers what it has seen on television and then, during the night, people see in their dreams what they already saw on television. This, people claim, often happens when the television shows something that is frightening. Sometimes people dream of doing themselves what they have seen other people doing on television. Due to its transvisual capacity, Catherine, a secondary school student, explains that "television enters your sleep" (interview in French, 17 Feb. 2011), while Pierre, the retired pastor shared that "dreams are a television that God has made" (interview in French, 2 Mar. 2011). Charles, another Christian who attended secondary school, adds: "If you really believe in God, he will show you things in your dreams. This happens through television" (interview in French, 6 Jun. 2011).

Whether dreams or television, the images that appear to people are clearly different from what they usually see with their own eyes when awake, since both are transvisual by having the potential to make present what is hidden. This is also the reason why both African and film studies have recently rejected earlier views that suggested that audiences watched films as a direct kind of reality (Larkin 2008: 115-116; Lyden 2003: 51-53; B. Meyer 2003a: 206; R. O. Moore 2000). Rather, I suggest that people interpret dreams and television in a way that makes the visual present in a veracious way (Oha 2002: 128; Pype 2012: 101; Werner 2012: 107-108). Jenkeri Okwori (2003: 11-22) and B. Meyer (2003b: 26-27) have commented on the truthfulness that film has for Nigerian and Ghanaian audi-

ences, while some films can also be critiqued as being unrealistic or too artificial. Furthermore, Ghanaian audiences often accept films depicting the less visible parts of the world as accurate documentations of the spiritual realm. The presencing capacity of film permits audiences to understand better how evil forces work and how potential attacks can be prevented and defused (B. Meyer 2005: 286-287, 2006a: 304; see also Okuyade 2011: 6; Ukah 2005: 311).

Dreams, visions and films, then, are transvisual in nature, making present both the more and less visible, which together constitute the world of agentive relationality. Television and videos, more specifically, provide people with a transvisual technology that enhances their vision and allows them to see things beyond the material (B. Meyer 2003a: 219, 2003b: 27-28, 2004b: 105). Such technology facilitates them to see the less visible and hidden not only in dreams or through the transvisual power they may have, but with their own eyes. This provides audiences of videos and television with a powerful televisual experience that makes present what is hidden in a transvisual way.

Conclusion

In the Commune of Cobly, iconic images – whether portrait photographs, videos or films – have become popular and important expressions of what people call *upaanu* (the new times). After a brief period of anxiety caused by the introduction of new media, people started to appropriate them progressively and experientially on their own terms. While discussions and negotiations about their exact nature continue, photographs and videos have already found their place in the world of agentive relationality, in which they come to live and interact with people, as do other things and transmaterial beings. This substantiates my point of departure for this chapter, namely that photographs and films, even if they give the impression of unmediated communication, need to be studied for what they are both in material and visual terms, and how they become part of people's lives.

Especially television sets and what they show constitute a complex presencing resource that provides a multisensory and bodily experience (Marks 2000; Sobchack 2004). People apprehend television sets through transmaterial presencing and transvisual power. Transvisuality, as I characterise it, is the ambivalent ability and power that facilitates the visual interchange between the more visible part of

the world of people with its less visible part of transmaterial beings, such as ancestors, shrine entities and witches. While for some people, transvisual power is essential for making television sets, others consider the way a television set works analogous to how transvisual power operates, for example for witches. The strongest connection between television sets and transvisuality, however, lies in most people's view of a television set being a powerful or live entity that provides visual access to the lesser-seen parts of the world just as dreams and visions do. On this basis, people use transvisual technology to watch videos and films not only for what they show in an iconic way, but, more importantly, because they make the less visible part of the world accessible, providing the possibility for a deeper knowledge of life in the more or less visible part of the world of agentive relationality, which they inhabit. Vision and revelation are not only important to Ghanaian Pentecostalism, as B. Meyer (2004b, 2005, 2006a) shows, but also enjoy popularity on a much wider scale.

What is distinctive about videos and films, as well as their associated transvisual technology, is their association with the whites and with God, ascribing them a distinctly modern and Christian quality, which is only reinforced by what they show (see Chapter 3). Christians, who usually distance themselves from becoming entangled with various forms of transvisual power, often by demonising it, find in films a suitable means to stimulate their transvisual interest. Similarly, photographs can now show the dead iconically, which allows for the identification of individuals that makes them present. Through photographs, Christians can remember their dead without the need to become materially involved with them, as would be the case for ancestor shrines that they are encouraged to abandon. Photographic images, then, add a visual component to the already keen interest in the material. I can account for this shift through a further differentiation of the more specifically iconic characteristics of the semiotic presencing principle that joins the transmaterial one.

Watching animated photographic images, mainly in the form of videos, becomes fundamental for at least some of the Christians in the Commune of Cobly. "The TV also shows us the work of God. If TV didn't exist, how could you see what God has done in the past?" (interview with Marguerite, 20 Feb. 2011). The nature of film makes the less visible aspect of the world, as well as the past, acces-

sible in visible terms. This, together with the interest in visual and experiential learning as well as the content of films make television and videos "a potent catalyst for the transmission and reception of religious cultural information" (Lohmann 2000: 83).

The way people have come to understand, appreciate and use transvisual technology, I suggest, lies at the heart of the phenomenal popularity and success of video films in West Africa (see also J. Merz 2014). Especially Christian and Pentecostal videos have contributed to the significant shift from text to film. It may seem ironic that this move happens particularly in Pentecostalised forms of Christianity, which are themselves usually based on a Protestant heritage with a strong iconoclastic position. This suggests that the iconoclastic and semiotifying stance of Christianity has mainly been directed against transmateriality that identifies spirit with matter. The basis of Protestant iconoclasm, then, is a differentiation between the visual and the material. While the latter is largely condemned, the former is sometimes rhetorically reduced to text, thereby making it easier for Protestant Christians to accept (Chapter 3). Similarly, as I have shown in Chapter 2, Protestant Christians try to detach the Word of God from the materiality of the book that contains it.

Transvisual technology, in which I include photographs, videos and film, cannot keep the visual separated from the material, just as people never completely succeed in separating the spiritual from the material (see Chapter 2). Entities, whether textual, visual or material, always relate to, and interfere with, other entities, thereby entangling the visual with the material. During the making of West African videos, there is the constant threat that fake shrines could actually become associated with spirits and actors sometimes become affected by the spirits or gods they play or with which their characters are associated (Barber 2000: 261; R. Marshall 2009: 158; B. Meyer 2004b: 104, 2005: 296-297, 2006a: 306-307; Müller 2005; Pype 2012: 135). Accordingly, there is the constant tendency to resist the effects of semiotification. Photographic images, then, not only iconically depict and index people and things, they can also become identical with them to the extent that they make present what they show. This is why I can conclude that iconic images, whether photographs, film or video, constitute trans-

visual technology with its characteristic nature of providing visual access to the lesser-seen aspects of the world.

The transmaterial characteristics of transvisual technology "have a profound impact on the way images are 'read', as different material forms both signal and determine different expectations and use patterns" (Edwards and Hart 2004: 2-3). In the following and final chapter I discuss what audiences in the Commune of Cobly make of the three films *Jesus*, *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* and *La Solution* and what they understand when watching them. In doing so I build on this chapter by paying attention to both the visual and material, while also adding more textual aspects.