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

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## Conclusion

The three Christian films *Jesus* (1979, John Heyman), *La Solution* (1994, David Powers) and *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002, Christine Madeleine Botokou) have become popular in the Commune of Coby in northwestern Benin, especially among Christians. This seems particularly remarkable, since the Coby area is one of Benin's most rural parts and has gained a reputation for its backwardness. In Chapter 1 I try to reconcile these seemingly opposing trends by reassessing the history of the region. I argue that this backwardness was a colonial invention, which affected people's self-esteem and position in the postcolonial state. On the other hand, people inhabiting the Commune of Coby retained their highly mobile and fluid society that clearly predates the arrival of the first whites. Both film and Christianity first came to the area during the colonial period. Their association with an imposing colonialism meant that people in the Commune of Coby greeted them with scepticism as coming from the whites. Especially during the last two decades, however, the younger generation enthusiastically demonstrated an increased openness towards all things modern, welcoming mobile phones, television sets and films that circulate on Video CD and DVD with open arms. In this climate, Christian films have become very popular as well, contributing to a significant shift within Christianity from a religion of the book towards a religion of film, especially in its more Pentecostalist forms.

Film became intertwined with religion from its earliest days at the end of the nineteenth century, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3. Indeed, Jesus was an important character in the early cinema. His visual portrayal followed the conventions that can be traced back to Byzantine Christianity of the sixth century. While the *Jesus Film* is part of the genre of Jesus films, *La Solution* is a dramatic Christian film, a genre that developed from the 1950s onwards and was also used and produced by Americans for global evangelism. *Yatin* continues in the line of dramatic films, but comes out of Nollywood, which has developed its own cinematographic conventions. Thanks to the industry's increasing success, Nigeria has recently been declared the Christian film capital of the world. Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians have been especially keen to use new technologies and media in global

evangelism. One of the most significant results of this development was the release of the *Jesus Film* in 1979. By being promoted globally and shown even in the remoter parts of the world, the film has since been declared the most watched and most translated film in history. For evangelicals and Pentecostals its near canonical status as the Word of God on film is contributing significantly to Christianity moving towards a religion of film.

I found that this global and regional trend was confirmed during my reception research in the Commune of Coby, which I present in Chapter 5. The popularity of the American *Jesus Film* is especially interesting. Many of the Christian viewers thought it foundational to the other two films, since it is about the Gospel on which the other two films build as audiovisual sermons. A few viewers even talked about the *Jesus Film* in a similar way they talk about the Bible, namely that it was in some way willed by God. The *Jesus Film* is thus no longer only the Word of God on film, but becomes God's Film, similar to how the Bible can be called God's Book.

The popularity of the *Jesus Film* in the Coby area is remarkable especially since it has not yet been dubbed into Mbelime, the main local language, something that the promoters of the film consider crucial for its supposed success. The reason for its popularity stems from people watching films by making them relevant to specific situations or to their lives more generally. This means that most of the Christian viewers, together with those who have received a significant amount of Christian teaching, understand the Christian intent of the *Jesus Film*. Those viewers less involved with Christianity usually struggled and even failed to get the intended Christian message, even though they still found the film interesting and stimulating. This means that Christian films are better understood as resources that help people to think through specific issues and problems relevant to their lives. Consequently, they are less suited to evangelism that tries to get a specific message across.

Films, such as the *Jesus Film*, cannot determine their own reading, but rather become what people make of them by relating them to their experience and prior knowledge. While other factors also play a role in how people watch film and what they get out of it, it is Christians themselves who influence these factors by explaining what the films are about and what they are meant to do. This usually

happens before and after showing evangelistic films, while narrators and interpreters help viewers make sense of the pictures during showings. I contend that the discursive framework that surrounds these films is more important to Christianity as a religion of film than their audiovisual narratives. Part of conversion, then, is to learn how to watch Christian films.

Seeing is crucial for Christianity as a religion of film. In Chapter 4 I demonstrate how seeing with their own eyes is important to people in the Commune of Cobby for learning and for taking things seriously. Seeing is not only limited to what is directly accessible to the eyes. People have a keen interest in what I call transvisuality, by which I mean seeing beyond the strictly material. All people are transvisual in the sense that any visible object can be more than mere matter. Seeing a shrine, for example, is not only seeing an inanimate stone, but also a being that is alive, even though this is not directly accessible to the eyes. When people dream they are moving in this less visible part of the world where shrines and witches become more visible. Some people are born with transvisual power that allows them to see transvisually not only when they dream, but all the time, both when awake and when sleeping. When it comes to witches, I characterise their power that anthropologists often call “witchcraft” in terms of transvisuality. Although those who have transvisual power may use it negatively, and are thus feared as witches, it can also be used creatively to design and make, for example, television sets. This transvisual power is thereby not only associated with witches but also with anyone who has outstanding skills.

The viewers further associated transvisual power with how television sets work, since they have the ability to reveal witches and their evil deeds, as for example in the film *Yatin*. A television set, I maintain, is a transvisual technology that provides temporary transvisual power similar to dreams to those who watch by making things that they do not normally see accessible to their eyes. The combination of iconicity and indexicality in semiotic terms renders photographs, film and video particularly powerful. In this way, Christian films have the ability to provide an unprecedented kind of (trans)visuality to its viewers that Christians often experience as a more or less direct access to the spiritual realm. Films thus not only contribute to Christianity as a religion of film, they also come to shape it in significant ways.

In Chapter 2 I develop the main argument that lies at the core of this book. When trying to come to terms with how people in the Commune of Coby understand materiality, I reached the explanatory limits of semiotics. This approach, I realised, cannot sufficiently account for seemingly inanimate things that people think are alive. Indeed, I found that many people consider that everything is alive, even though this life may fluctuate, thereby joining matter and spirit in an inseparable way. Whether these things are knives, shrines, Bibles, television sets, photographs, films or people, they are more than mere matter; they are, as I call it, transmaterial, existing in the both the more and less visible parts of the world. All these transmaterial entities, I argue, not only relate to each other through direct contact, but more importantly through being alive in a world of agentic relationality. In order for this to become possible, people do not represent the world semiotically, but they make everything present within their world, a process I call *presencing*.

I consider *presencing* more foundational than semiotics, since it also covers more experiential forms of meaning making. Watching films, I assert, requires that viewers make their contents present in the world of agentic relationality by drawing at least to some degree on what I call the transmaterial *presencing* principle. More generally, I introduce the notion of *presencing* principles that describe how people engage in *presencing* in different ways. Accordingly, the transmaterial principle accounts for immediate experience (Chapter 2), while the semiotic principle, which includes symbols, icons and indexes, describes *presencing* that results in structured signs. *Presencing* is a complex process that can often be described through these two main *presencing* principles that people often use simultaneously to varying degrees, even if this appears contradictory at times.

Filmic *presencing* not only depends on a specific film's content, but also on various factors that shape people's lives in a world of agentic relationality. These factors include people's prior knowledge and experiences, their specific socio-cultural setting, as well as the materiality and transmateriality of technologies used for showing films. The necessary result of such filmic *presencing* contributes to a continuously reconfiguring interpretive field that is populated by entities and which contains a plurality of meanings. Such interpretive fields also overlap with

the world of agentive relationality. This experience of films in both transvisual and transmaterial terms goes beyond the limits of semiotics and representation.

For my analysis of Christian video films in the Commune of Cibly I found many topics relevant to my analysis. These include most notably semiotics, media, secularism, religion, Pentecostalism, modernity, materiality, film theory and history, Nollywood, witchcraft, dreams, photographs and audience reception. While this fits in well with my interest in broad relations between people and things and media, I am also aware that I neglect, and sometimes fail to address, areas that are interesting and potentially relevant to my study. For example, while experience and embodiment are central to my discussion, I largely take them for granted without dealing with their theoretical backgrounds. When discussing these topics, anthropologists often also draw on the notion of mimesis, a topic I do not address at all. Questions of commodities and economy too, drew the short straw, especially in relation to fetishism that has been an important area in anthropology since Karl Marx.

While I concede that my study could further benefit from addressing these topics in more detail, I would consider it more important to further concentrate on the issues that arise from my main theoretical contribution that demonstrates the need to move beyond semiotics. For example, I present the process of presencing as wider but similar to semiosis, thereby leaving what it may exactly involve – apart from the interplay of presencing principles – rather vague. The next step would be to show how presencing differs from semiosis by analysing it in terms of logic, inference, abduction and conjecture. Maybe cognitive approaches could lead to a deeper understanding of presencing as well. Advances in this area would also help to further elaborate what presencing principles are and how they work in more detail. This, in turn, may lead to the identification of other presencing principles.

I am left with one last loose end, however, that I need to address to conclude this book, namely the overall question of Christianity becoming a religion of film. In the Commune of Cibly, as elsewhere, Christians continue to read or listen to Bible texts. While this practice still appeals to people's imagination, it can also leave room for doubt. *Seeing* the Bible in film, however, has become a powerful, convincing and even tangible way of accessing the Word of God and learning from

it. The *Jesus Film* continues to rely indexically on the Bible and the Word of God, while the book on its own no longer provides the sole basis for the Christian faith. Some Christians even view the *Jesus Film* as ordained by God, similarly to how they accept the Bible as inspired by God. The *Jesus Film*, it seems to me, is no longer only the Word of God on film, rather, it also becomes God's Film, providing Jesus with an unmistakable white face and body that facilitates his recognition and appearance in dreams. This makes him present in the world of agentive relationality as a real being in his own right. Consequently, the *Jesus Film* as God's Film stands central to Christianity as a religion of film, just as the Bible stands central to Christianity as a religion of the book.

While the Bible, and by extension the *Jesus Film*, continue to guide Christians, dramatic video films, such as *La Solution* and *Yatin*, provide supplementary teaching and often take on the form of visual sermons. Again, *seeing* a sermon, rather than hearing it, renders it more experiential. Such films visually demonstrate what it means to lead a successful Christian life and remind people of the spiritual dangers that surround them. Dramatic Christian video films also offer concrete solutions to various problems, which viewers can imitate and directly apply to their lives. Often, it is no longer only what the pastor preaches on Sundays, but what people learn from watching these films that become the standard by which they define their Christian identity.

The result of this trend is that Christianity, especially in its Pentecostalisised forms, is becoming increasingly focused on the visual. In addition to what I have presented in this book, it seems to me that Pentecostal Sunday services, known for their experiential and exuberant character (Robbins 2004b: 126), also take on a performance-like quality as they need to be visually attractive as well, at least to the extent that they still look good when videoed. In the town of Cobly, videoing special occasions, such as weddings and funerals, has become particularly important. Pentecostalisised prayers and sermons, too, no longer solely follow the introspective and contemplative formula of Protestantism, but have become expressive and visual, involving a wider repertoire of verbal expressions and appropriate gestures, which facilitate an immediate experience, notably of the Holy Spirit.

Against this background, Christian films seem to complement Pentecostalisised Christianity almost ideally. This results in Christians becoming dependent on



media technology for the production, circulation and consumption of video films. This technological focus implies that the change from text to moving image is basically a material one. Christianity has always been an intricately material religion incorporating and relying on technological innovations, be it through Byzantine icons, the printed Protestant Bible, or digital Pentecostal videos.

In many parts of contemporary Africa, most notably in Ghana (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; de Witte 2003, 2005; B. Meyer 2004b, 2006a, 2009b, 2011a), Nigeria (Hackett 1998; Lyons and Lyons 1987; R. Marshall 2009; Ukah 2003, 2005) and Kinshasa (Pype 2012), Pentecostalism has become part of the public sphere. This trend usually coincides with an increased Pentecostal presence in media products, whether they are made for radio or television, or distributed on Video CD and DVD (cf. de Vries 2001). Such media are not only important for what they are, but also how they are used, most notably by accompanying them with comments, explanations and teaching. Converting to Pentecostalised forms of Christianity does not only mean that people need to break with the past (B. Meyer 1998a), accept the devil as God's counterpart (J. Merz 2008: 207, 209; B. Meyer 1999b: 110-111), and participate in various processes of semiotification (Chapter 2), it also means they have to learn to presence Christian video films within the limits of what already established Christians accept as part of their preferred reading.

The transnational character of Pentecostalism means that both evangelists and Christian videos from Nigeria and beyond have long been part of life in the remote Commune of Cibly of rural northwestern Benin. Television and video technology, which are central to this development, have become so important that Tchanaté declared: "If television should stop working, our knowledge will end too" (interview, 5 Feb. 2011). Views like this, as well as the arguments presented in this book, compel me to conclude that Christianity, at least as it is presently lived in its Pentecostalised forms in the Commune of Cibly, is indeed becoming a religion of film.

