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

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Curriculum Vitae

Johannes Merz (11 October 1970, Frauenfeld, Switzerland) attended Kantonschule Schaffhausen, Switzerland, from 1986 to 1991, and gained a *Matura* certificate. After a gap-year, he started his studies in cultural anthropology and African linguistics at the University of Zürich, Switzerland, and later Leiden University, from where he received his *doctoraal* degree in African Studies in 1998. His thesis examined witchcraft beliefs among the Bebelibe of northwestern Benin, West Africa, discussing how Christianity and anti-witchcraft shrines have come to provide new solutions to what people consider to be one of the most important problems they face. After starting work as an anthropologist for SIL International in Benin in 2002, he shifted his research focus to communication and media anthropology. This new interest was in response to the increasing production and popularity of video films made in Ghana and Nigeria, often with a Christian theme. This phenomenon, now commonly known as Nollywood, spilled into neighbouring Benin with the release of *Yatin: Lieu de souffrance* (2002), Benin's first feature length video film. At the same time foreign and local evangelists continue to show the American *Jesus Film* (1979) throughout Benin, often dubbed into local languages. The developing and diversifying Christian mediascape in Benin provided the background for Johannes to begin his PhD research as an external candidate at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University, in early 2010. Johannes has published several articles in the journals *Anthropos* and *Missiology: An International Review* and most recently contributed a chapter to a volume entitled *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa* (2014). Johannes continues to work for SIL International as an anthropology advisor and is a visiting lecturer in social anthropology at Redcliffe College, Gloucester, UK.