"Crocodiles are the Souls of the Community"
An Analysis of Human-Animal Relations in Northwestern Benin and its Ontological Implications

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Signature: …………………………………………………………

Abstract

In this thesis I explore human-animal relations amongst the Bebelibe of the Commune of Cobly, in the northwest of the Republic of Benin, West Africa, with a focus on how they relate to their *tikedimɔmɔnte* (true totem(s), literally "interdict(s)-true"). I start with an historical review of totemism, the debates it generated and how these contributed to the recent ontological turn in anthropology. I then explore the theoretical ideas I use for my analysis, which include "presencing" and the "ontological penumbra" (J. Merz 2017b; J. Merz and S. Merz 2017). Presencing builds on semiotics by explaining how people make meaning present through their engagement in and with the world around them, whilst ontological penumbras are the shadowy spaces of limbo that affect our whole being and that people need to negotiate as part of making sense of their engagement with the world. As part of these theoretical frameworks, I examine the "onton", as introduced by Johannes Merz (2017b). Ontons are experiential, agentive and relational entities that are the result of presencing processes. Ontons, however, cannot be divided into representations (signifiers) and represented (signified) as signs can. An engagement in the world between different entities in an ontonic and thus nonrepresentational sense necessitates my introducing further notions including shared "ontonity" (instead of shared humanity) and "ontonhood" (rather than personhood). I demonstrate how these theoretical ideas work with reference to human-animal relations primarily amongst the Bebelibe in the Commune of Cobly. In order to do this, I provide an in-depth, "thick description" (Geertz 1973) ethnography that explores how people perceive and relate to animals through hunting, domestication, attitudes to eating meat, animal commodification, reincarnation, shapeshifting and totemism. As part of my analysis I also examine the impact of Christianity on human-animal relations by exploring several incidents involving Christians and their *tikedimɔmɔnte*.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the friendship and collaboration of the following people who agreed to be interviewed or provided information in other ways. Sadly, several of them have died[†] in the meantime.

Arekpa Abibe
Biga Abdoulaye Issiaka
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Gnammou Dominique
Gnammou Moutouama
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Kombetto Denise
Kombetto Emmanuel
Kombetto Martine
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Komou Jean

Komou Taouéma Kokou
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Tchétékoua Kombetto
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Ziminri Etienne

It is important for the majority of those who collaborated in my research that they are properly acknowledged (see *Phase One*, Chapter Two). I have used pseudonyms in the main text, however, to help safeguard the identity of those who feature in my thesis. I have maintained the nature of their first name (French or local), but this is not indicative of their religious orientation.

Maps

Map 1: The Republic of Benin and Surrounding Areas

J. Merz, 2017. Used with permission.
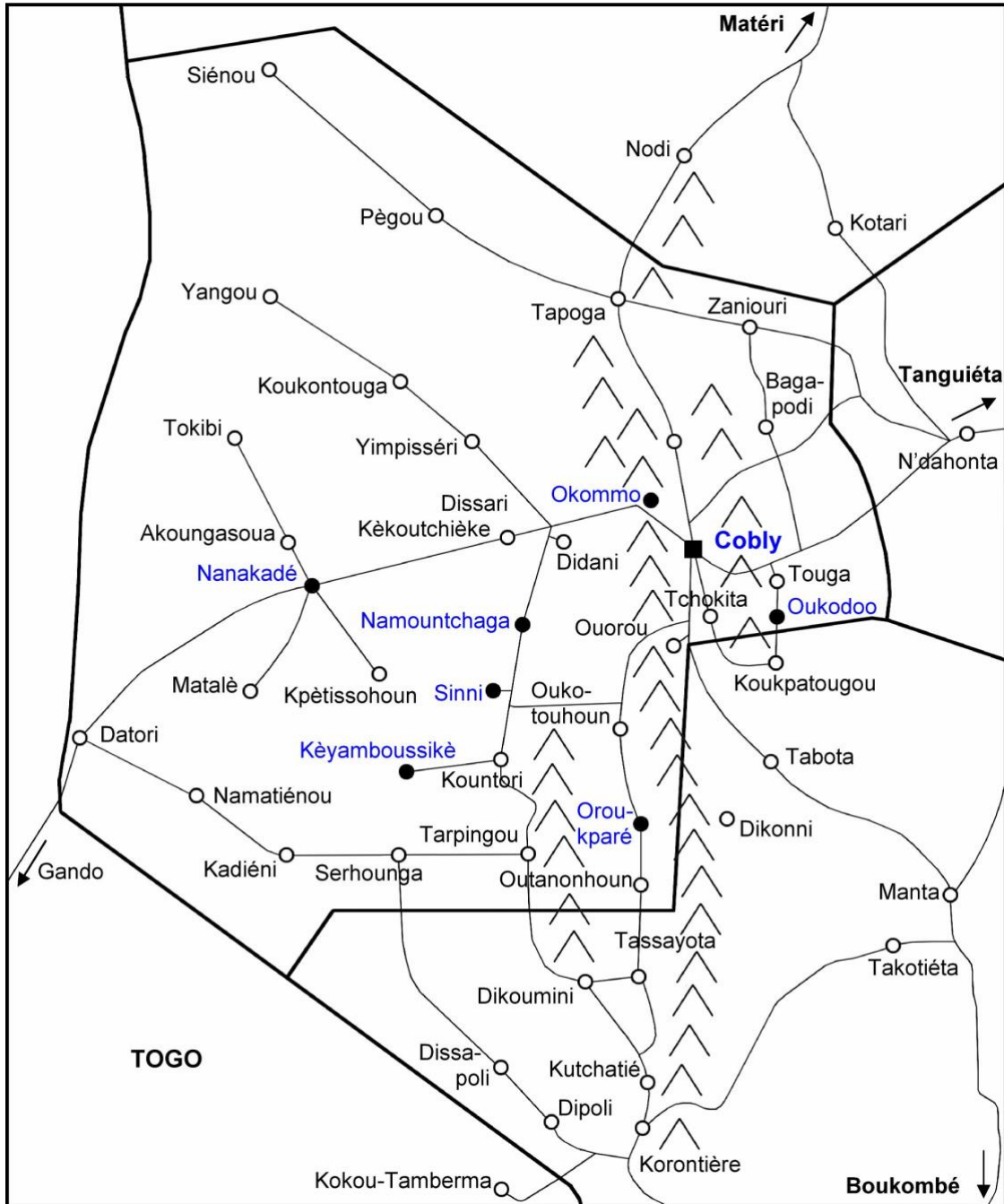
Map 2: The Commune of Cobly and Surrounding Areas

J. Merz, 2018. Used with permission.

■ **Cobly**, the main administrative town for the Commune.

● Other villages visited during my research.
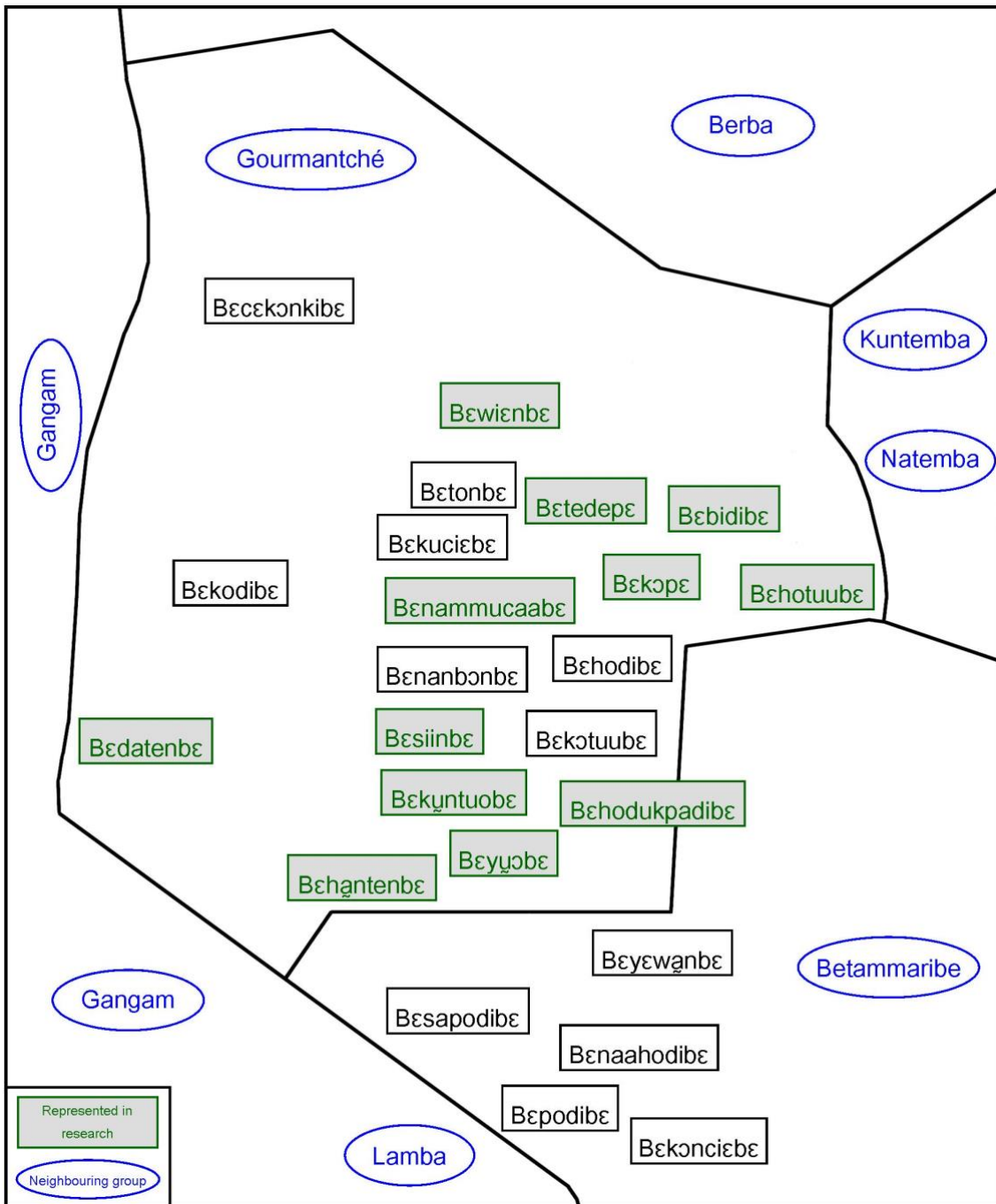
Map 3: Bebelibe Communities and Neighbouring Groups

J. & S. Merz, 2018.

Linguistic Note

Mbelime (formerly known as Niendé or Nyende) is a Gur or Voltaic language (Simons and Fennig 2017) spoken by the Bebelibe (sg. Ubielo), the auto-ethnonym of those who speak Mbelime. For the purpose of this thesis, with the exception of the words "Mbelime", "Bebelibe" and "Ubielo",[1] I have spelt vernacular terms according to the Mbelime orthography (J. Merz *et al.* 2017). Although Mbelime is a tonal language, I have not marked tone, as this would be meaningless to most readers.

One of the more challenging aspects of spoken Mbelime, as well as other related languages in the region, is that people use the phones [l], [r] and [ɖ] in free variation. Following French convention (French being Benin's national language), /ɛ/ should be written as "è", but is often written as "e" or even "é"; whilst /u/ is written as "ou" or sometimes "u" and /ɔ/ is often written as "ô". Consequently Mbelime, Bebelibe and Ubielo have been spelt in a variety of ways in literature (Mbèlimè, Mbélimé, Mbèdimè, Mbèrme; Bèbèlibè, Bèbèdibè; Bèbèrbè; Oubièlô, Oubièrô, Oubièdô, for example). Further variations of Mbelime, Bebelibe and Ubielo result when people mix different conventions.

Mbelime vowels are pronounced as follows in English:

/a/ as [ɑ:] as in "daft"

/e/ as [eɪ] as in "hey"

/ɛ/ as [ɛ] as in "bed"

/i/ as [iː] as in "pea"

/o/ as [əʊ] "go"

/ɔ/ as [ɒ] in "hot"

/u/ as [uː] as in "blue"

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[1] When writing in Mbelime, these words are written as *Mbɛlimɛ*, *Bɛbɛlibɛ* and *Ubiɛlɔ*. The correct French spelling for these words is: mbèlimè, Bèbèlibè and Oubièlo. Otherwise, when writing Mbelime words with nominal class markers, the phoneme /d/ is used for the three phones [l], [r] and [ɖ]. The phonemes /l/ and /r/ are used for loan words that have them.

Each vowel is articulated, including word-final vowels, so */Bɛbɛlibɛ/* is pronounced as [bɛ-bɛ-li-bɛ], for example.

Some Mbelime vowels can be nasal. Nasalisation is marked with a tilde (~) under the vowel concerned: *a̰*, *ɛ̰*, *ḭ*, *ɔ̰* and *ṵ*.

The Mbelime orthography has sixteen consonants (b, c, d, f, h, k, kp, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, w, y). Most are pronounced the same as in English, though */s/* is always voiceless as in "sap", */c/* is used for [tʃ] as is "chat" and people either pronounce the "k" and "p" of */kp/* simultaneously or as "kw". When a word starts with /m/ (as in *Mbɛlimɛ*), the /m/ is clearly articulated [m-bɛ-li-mɛ]. See also the glossary for a full list of the Mbelime terms that I employ.

Introduction

It was 21 June 2013 and my husband and I were in Cotonou, the economic capital of the Republic of Benin, West Africa, when the phone call came through to inform us that Emile, who was in his late-thirties, had died the day before. Emile was the local baker and café owner in the town of Cobly, northwest Benin, where we have lived and worked since 2002. The news of his death came as a shock. We had seen him only a few days before and nothing was apparently wrong. He was a long-standing friend and well respected in the community; or so we thought. Back in Cobly we learnt that he had died from a burst aneurism in the brain. Nobody disputed the physiological cause of his death, but this did not necessarily explain *why* he died[2]: Emile had ordered a crocodile (*Crocodylus suchus*)[3] killed in April. As we were in England at the time, we only learnt about this several weeks after Emile's death:

> Roland was over this evening and […] related a recent event involving Emile. A crocodile that lived in the small reservoir near Emile's café decided to go for a walk. Emile spotted it in the drainage channel in front of his café. He wanted to kill the crocodile so he sent for [a friend] who has a rifle. Meanwhile, a teenage lad from the Bɛbidibɛ community was extremely upset that Emile wanted to kill the crocodile, so he ran into town to try and find some people to help him rescue it. When the lad returned, [the rifleman] had already arrived and shot the crocodile. The lad was so distraught he burst into tears. Roland said that Emile should have known better, especially as the crocodile is one of Emile's wife's totems[4] (Journal entry, 5 September 2013).

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[2] Similar to the Azande of South Sudan, death amongst the Bebelibe has two causes, referred to as the "ultimate" and "secondary" cause by Evans-Pritchard (1937:71; see also V. Turner 1977:191). The ultimate cause explains *why* a person died, whilst the secondary cause explains *how* the person died. As I have noted elsewhere (2014:99-101), Bebelibe burial ceremonies include interrogating the corpse and consulting diviners to establish the ultimate cause of death.

[3] The West African or Desert crocodile.

[4] Emile's wife is from the Bɛkɔpɛ community, which has an alliance with the Bɛbidibɛ community (see below). Out of respect for the alliance, crocodiles are one of the Bɛkɔpɛ's *tikete* (totems or, more precisely, "interdicts"). They also have their own *tikedimɔmɔnte* (true totems, literally "interdicts-true"), see below, Chapter Seven and *Bebelibe Communities* in the Appendices.

We learnt more details about what happened a couple of days later from Robert, an NGO worker in his late-thirties, who explained that it had been a huge scandal at the time. The Bɛbidibɛ community wanted Emile to provide them with a dog for sacrifice, so that the crocodile would not take revenge. Emile refused saying that he could not do such a thing as a Christian. Robert explained that the crocodile had probably decided to go and visit his family (the Bɛbidibɛ) and, as far as Robert was aware, did not threaten Emile in any way. We also learnt that the rifleman's son had died shortly afterwards and that his death too is thought to be a direct consequence of his father shooting the crocodile.

> Fortes, speaking about the Tallensi of northern Ghana, explained that
>
> [w]e have seen that killing certain game animals is construed as murder. It is more heinously so if the victim is a totem animal; for the totem animals are assimilated to a quasi-human status. In Voltaic culture, this is equivalent to a quasi-kinship relationship – a sort of kinship symbiosis – with the lineages to which they appertain (1966:15).

Fortes' observations about the Tallensi resonate strongly with what I have observed in the Commune of Cobly, where the predominant language is Mbelime. Mbelime speakers are collectively known as the Bebelibe (sg. Ubielo), and are related linguistically to the Tallensi.[5]

In this thesis I explore human-animal relations amongst the Bebelibe with a focus on how they relate to their *tikedimɔmɔnte* (true totem(s), literally "interdict(s)-true"). I start with an historical review of totemism, the debates it generated and how these contributed to the recent ontological turn. I then explore the theoretical ideas I use for my analysis, which include "presencing" and the "ontological penumbra" (see also J. Merz 2017b; J. Merz and S. Merz 2017). Presencing builds on Peircean semiotics and explains how people make meaning present through their engagement in and with the world around them.

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[5] The Tallensi speak Farefare, which is also a Gur or Voltaic language (Simons and Fennig 2017, see linguistic note above).

Ontological penumbras, meanwhile, are the shadowy spaces where people find themselves in limbo, which they need to negotiate as part of making sense of their engagement with the world. I also examine the "onton", as introduced by J. Merz (2017b), which is core to these theoretical frameworks. Ontons are experiential, agentive and relational entities that are the result of presencing processes. Ontons, however, cannot be divided into representations (signifiers) and represented (signified) as signs can. An engagement in the world between different entities in an ontonic and thus nonrepresentational sense necessitates my introducing further notions including shared "ontonity" (instead of shared humanity) and "ontonhood" (rather than personhood). I demonstrate how these theoretical ideas work with reference to human-animal relations primarily amongst the Bebelibe, and more broadly by drawing on examples from the wider region and beyond.

Emile's story, together with several other incidents involving Christians and their *tikedimɔmɔnte*, illustrates how violating a society's moral norms can reveal the moral character of its institutions (C. Smith 2003:25). Thus, with this in mind, I also examine Christianity's impact on human-animal and totemic relations in Bebelibe society.

Background

There are 24 Mbelime-speaking communities (*abuotɛ*, sg. *dibotide*) in the Communes of Cobly and Boukombé, Atacora Department, in the northwest of the Republic of Benin (see Maps 1-3). Locally, people often refer to these communities as *les ethnies* (ethnic groups) in French. Some of my French-speaking interviewees explained that this is because many of the Bebelibe communities have their origins elsewhere. This means that the Bebelibe do not share a common ancestor and each community has its own set of origin stories, totems and founding ancestors. Neither do I consider communities to be clans,

as several unrelated families or lineages can comprise one community. Consequently, a community can also have more than one origin story, totem entity and founding ancestor. This community assimilation is a result of historical movements, as different groups and families either sought refuge in the mountainous area of today's Atacora region as they fled oppressors or slave traders, for example, or because they were the protagonists of family disputes. Those who left their original communities and integrated into Bebelibe ones then took on the totem entities of their adoptive community, whilst also maintaining their own totem entities.[6]

Many Bebelibe live in loose-knit villages mostly in the Commune of Cobly, with additional villages in the neighbouring Commune of Boukombé and across the border in Togo. Their neighbouring groups (see Map 3) are the Gourmantché (northwest), Berba (northeast), Natemba and Kuntemba (east), Betammaribe (southeast), Lamba (southwest) and the Gangam (west). There is a complex relational network between these neighbouring groups and the different Bebelibe communities and families, as several have their ancestral roots with the groups concerned and there are numerous alliances – such as marriage, land and defence – between the different groups (see Carte 3, J. Merz 2017a:14).

Before colonisation, the Bebelibe had a non-centralised social structure, which some early colonial observers characterized as "anarchic" (Cornevin 1981:36; Grätz 2000:682; Koussey 1977:10; N'Tia 1993:107, 113 & 116). N'Tia, however, considered them to be "eminently democratic" (1993:117, translation mine) as the social structure was founded on respect towards community elders and priests. These men discuss and decide how best to resolve community

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[6] For more details see Huber (1969:260), J. Merz (2017a:10-15), S. Merz (2014:3-6), E.N.K. Sambiéni (1999:44-45), and N.B. Sambiéni and R. Sambiéni (2016). See also Mercier's (1968) and Sewane's (2002:211-213) observations for the Betammaribe and their *kubwoti*, the Betammaribe equivalent of *dibotide*, and Evans-Pritchard (1961), who reported a similar situation for the Zande of Sudan, who describe their clans as conglomerates.

issues. Before reaching a decision, they seek advice as needed from diviners and the different parties involved, including those of the less-visible parts of the world such as the *bɛhidibɛ* (ancestors, literally "the dead", sg. *uhiidɔ*)[7] and certain stones and rocks (*ataadɛ*, sg. *ditade*) who are shrine entities[8].

In the 1910s the French seized the Atacora region and started to integrate it into the colony of Dahomey. In 1913, for example, French administrators decreed that each village should have a chief (Mercier 1968:434). Dahomey gained independence in 1960 and was subsequently renamed as the *République du Dahomey*, then the *République Populaire du Bénin* during the Marxist-Leninist regime of president Mathieu Kérékou. Today, each village elects its own chief as a representative of the democratic nation state and liaison between the village community and local authorities. Despite changes in the political structure, the underlying non-centralised social structure still prevails. An egalitarian ethos is an important social principle, though there is some hierarchy resulting from respect for elders (see also Morris 1998:26-27). Accordingly, community elders and priests are still responsible for ritual matters and minor questions of jurisdiction and more general decision-making continues to be discussion-based. Women have their say, and are listened to, even if the society is patriarchal.

All of the Bebelibe I know testify that *Uwienu* (God) is the Supreme Being and creator of all, regardless of their religious orientation. Those who speak French employ the word *Dieu* (God) when referring to *Uwienu*, whom they consider male. The majority of the population continue to follow the path of their ancestors, and paying homage to *Uwienu* via his intermediaries is an integral part of life for many people. Despite this, there is a significant Christian minority, even though Christianity only became established in the area in recent

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[7] *Bɛhidibɛ* is also the term for corpses. People normally refer to the shrine in the plural and the corpse in the singular in order to distinguish the two.
[8] The general term for shrines and shrine entities is *atenwiɛnɛ* (sg. *ditenwɛnde*).

decades. The first Catholic missionaries arrived in the Commune in the late 1940s, whereas the first Assemblies of God missionaries arrived in the early 1950s (Akibo 1998; Cornevin 1981:436, 440-441, 453–454), whilst other evangelical and Pentecostal missionaries started to establish their respective denominations from the 1990s onwards. Although Ogouby (2008:54-55) claims that Christianity has increased from 10.6% in 1992 to 24% in 2002 in the Atacora and Donga regions, my observations suggest that regular church attendance in the Commune of Cobly is lower. Although there are signs that Islam is gaining ground in the Commune, and new mosques are being built, it remains marginal.

People distinguish two eras: *ubaayɔ* (pre-colonial times, literally "ancestor-past") and *upaanu* (colonial and post-colonial times to the present day). *Upaanu* (literally "newness") is translated as *la modernité* (modernity) in French and is also used when referring to all things new. Accordingly, new institutions – such as churches, Western-style healthcare and education system – are strongly associated with becoming modern. Since my arrival in 2002, I have witnessed the introduction of a number of new things including motorbikes, mobile phones, electricity and tractors, all of which have impacted husbandry practices (see *Ploughing-Cattle*, Chapter Four and *Commodification*, Chapter Five).

With a local population of around 72,000[9], the Bebelibe are largely rural and many rely on subsistence farming and cotton growing for their livelihood. The staple foods are white yams (*Dioscorea rotundata*), rice (*Oryza* spp.[10]), maize (*Zea mays* spp.), pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*) and sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*). Maize, millet and sorghum flour is used to prepare stiff cornmeal porridge, called *pâte* in French. People break off pieces of the porridge, which

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[9] Estimated figure for 2017, assuming an average annual growth rate of 3.42% based on the census data between 2002 and 2013 and other data (Tchegnon and Guidibi 2006a:15; 2006b:15, 17; Gblem-Poidi and Kantchoa 2012:259; INSAE 2015:13). Figure does not include diaspora.
[10] Exact species not known.

they manipulate into balls and dip into an accompanying sauce. The most important beverage is sorghum beer, which women brew for family and community celebrations, ceremonies and work parties[11], and to sell at the local markets, in taverns and during special events.

Other crops include black-eyed beans (*Vigna unguiculata unguiculata*), soya beans (*Glycine max*), bambara groundnuts (*Vigna subterranea*) and cotton (*Gossypium* spp.), which people grow as a cash crop. Besides cotton, people also sell their surplus crops at the local markets. More recently, soya beans have become especially important because health centres, development agencies and schools have been promoting their health benefits and teaching different ways of using them, including soya milk and cheese production. Women started to produce and market soya cheese in Cobly in 2004. Called *soya naabesikankan̯de*[12] or *fromage de soja* in French, soya cheese is made from curdled soya milk and is proving extremely popular, especially as it is cheap at only 200-250 CFA francs (approximately 30p)[13] a cheese. The equivalent amount of meat would cost around 2,000-2,500 CFA francs. People now readily eat it as a meat substitute (see *Commodification*, Chapter Five).

People also have *diseede wante* (family animals). *Diseede* (pl. *asie*) has the double meaning of "family" and "homestead"[14], as the buildings constitute the material presence of the family unit, which includes the *bɛhidibɛ* (the dead). The Bebelibe are patrilineal and largely patrilocal. Normally, when the elder sons marry, they construct their *diseede* in the vicinity of their parents, whilst the youngest son inherits his father's *diseede* (see S. Merz 2014:6-7, 17-18, for

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[11] Called *invitations* in French, this is when someone invites others to form a work party to accomplish labour-intensive activities such as ploughing by hand, hoeing, harvesting and threshing.

[12] Cheese, literally "cow-milk-curdle".

[13] All pound sterling amounts here and below based on exchange rate at the time of writing.

[14] In Africa a homestead is the group of buildings occupied by a single family. In West Africa, this is often called a compound in English (in Ghana, for example) or a *concession* in French.

more details). These homesteads are collectively called the *diseduɔde* (literally "family-big"). Most homesteads have a round vestibule hut next to the entrance in the west-facing wall that encloses the courtyard (see *Homestead Sketches* in the Appendices). The father's *diseede* vestibule is called *ukoohụ*[15] (literally "lineage") and houses the *bɛhidibɛ* (the dead). Other entities – such as the *siyawesi* bush beings (see S. Merz 2017a) – reside in this room as well. This is also where people keep their ritual items and hunters put the horns and skulls of the animals they have killed (see *Hunting*, Chapter Four). Finally, this is where women keep their beer-brewing equipment. They also mash their sorghum beer here during the rainy season, otherwise they do this outside in other seasons. They then ferment and store it in the vestibule.

People also call the vestibule *dinaacuude* (cow room). As the vestibule is too small for cows, this is probably a euphemistic term. Nevertheless, the vestibule does serve as a shelter for other *diseede wante* (family animals). *Diseede wante* typically include shorthorn cattle (*Bos brachyceros*), sheep (*Ovis* spp.), West African dwarf or pygmy goats (*Capra aegagrus hircus*), dogs (*Canis* spp.), chickens (*Gallus gallus domesticus*) and helmeted guineafowl (*Numida meleagris*), all of which can be sacrificed. People also have cats (*Felis* spp.), pigs (*Scrufus* spp.) and domestic Muscovy ducks (*Cairina moschata domestica*). Pigs and ducks have been introduced more recently (in people's living memory). Some people have started to keep donkeys (*Equus africanus asinus*) since 2010.

People used to keep horses (*Equus ferus caballus* spp.) in pre-colonial times. As raiders also had horses it was not always evident if approaching horsemen were friends or foes. People then decided to stop keeping and using them. That way, if someone came on horseback they knew he was a stranger and to be on the alert in case he had bad intentions. They also solicited the help

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[15] Also called *ukoyaahụ* (lineage-male), especially by the younger generation.

of the *ataadɛ* shrine entities by asking them to make sure that horses no longer bred successfully. This request has never been reversed, which is why horses are rarely seen today in the Commune of Cobly (see J. Merz 2017a:17).

A few people have ventured into commercial farming by intentionally breeding poultry, goats and pigs for marketing as meat (see *Commodification*, Chapter Five). As yet there is no mechanised or industrialised farming as found in more industrialised nations.

Totem animals are also considered family members. Those whose totem animal is the African rock python (*Python sebae*), for example, distinguish *diseede sɛfɛ*[16] (family python) or *diseede wɛfɛ* (family python-that's-mine)[17] from *fɛsɛfɛ* (pl. *isiɛ*, snake/python), their wild counterpart. Those whose totem animal is the crocodile, meanwhile, distinguish between *imuɔhį* (sg. *fɛmuɔfɛ*, wild crocodiles) and *ibodimuɔhį* (sg. *fɛbodimuɔfɛ*,[18] animating force-crocodiles). "Crocodiles," Benjamin, a churchgoing university graduate in his late-twenties, told me, "are the souls[19] of the community" (see Chapters Six and Seven).

Each community has its myths about how the relationship between their founding ancestor(s) and totem animals was established (see Chapter Seven). Although I was aware of these myths and totems, it was only after Emile died that I realised how seriously people take their relationships with their totems. Emile's story is not an isolated incident. Other events, which I explore further below, include an ongoing dispute between two allied communities and how they view and exploit their relationship with crocodiles, and a scandal from the 1960s when newly-converted Christians started killing their community's crocodiles. Such events further demonstrate how important totemic relationships are and the resulting consequences when they are challenged.

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[16] *Fɛsɛfɛ* is also the general term for "snake", but refers to pythons in this context.
[17] Literally "family mine-snake". Compound noun of *wɛnnɛ* (mine) and *fɛsɛfɛ* (snake).
[18] Compound noun of *fɛmuɔfɛ* (crocodile) and *kɛbodikɛ* (pl. *sibosi*, animating force).
[19] Interview in French. Benjamin regularly translates *kɛbodikɛ* as *soul*(s).

Totemism

Despite Lévi-Strauss's (1964 [1962]) attempt to deconstruct and invalidate totemism – or maybe because of it – scholars continue to examine, debate and employ totemism in their writing and analysis, whether this is on an ontological, cosmological, philosophical or more general level (for example, Borneman 1988; Fortes 1966; Forth 2009; Hiatt 1969; Jones 2005; Morphy 1990; Morton 1987; Pedersen 2001; Rosa 2003; Sapir 1977; T. Turner 1985; von Brandenstein 1972; Willerslev and Ulturgasheva 2012; Willis 1990). Thus, totemism lives on in both academic thought and popular thought in Benin and the wider region. Lévi-Strauss's maxim – that natural species are not only good to eat but also "good to think" with (1964 [1962]:89) – was further added to by Fortes who stated that animals are also "good to forbid" (or, according to Tambiah (1969:423), "good to prohibit") as "they lend themselves to moral constraint" given that they *are* "good to eat" and are therefore also "good to kill" (Fortes 1966:18). According to Kirksey and Helmreich animals are "entities, and agents, 'to live with'" (2010:552). If these maxims are taken to their limit, it could be said that totemism itself continues to be good to think with. Alluding to relationships between totem entities, living kin, ancestors and the death cycle, which are needed to ensure social continuity, Morton, for example, suggests that "[t]otemism represents nature as an externalisation, even unto death, of man's[20] inner being" (1987:467). Borneman (1988), meanwhile, analyses ethnicity, race and identity by applying what he calls "reverse totemism". He starts with the premise that totemic groups draw on their understanding and imagery of the totem entities they engage with in order to represent, classify and explicate their identity and social structure. Borneman then reverses this by

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[20] As language use and attitudes often reflect scholars' thinking and background at the time of writing, I do not add [sic] after vocabulary that would now be considered inappropriate and even offensive (see Chapter One).

demonstrating that people of the horseracing world use human imagery in order to represent, explain and classify horse breeds and how people relate to them. Dupire (1991) and Forth (2009) then illustrate the dynamic nature of totemism by demonstrating how history, politics and social change can impact how a given group defines and engages with totemic beings. As Forth states, "there are still new things to be learned about totemistic symbolism" (2009:263).

The development of sub-disciplines, such as anthrozoology and multispecies ethnography, have their roots in classic anthropological studies in totemism, taboo and classification (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010:550; Hurn 2017:2-4). Many anthropologists (both past and present) base their analysis of totemism, and other related -isms such as animism and perspectivism, on semiotics and thus interpret the resulting human-animal relationships in terms of what they represent for those concerned. Mullin, for example, notes that recent studies assert "the importance of exploring the linkages between semiotic and economic aspects of human-animal relationships" (2002:390; see also Hornborg 2006; Kohn 2007; 2013). Hurn points out, however, that if academic engagements with totemism are limited to a symbolic interpretation, they fail to "take into account the complexity of human interactions with, and perceptions of, nonhuman 'persons', and, more importantly, undermine[s] the views of the people themselves" (2012:76). She continues by suggesting that such an approach is "a form of anthropomorphic ethnocentrism" (2012:76). I thereby question whether semiotics adequately addresses totemism amongst the Bebelibe and human-animal relations more generally, or explain, as Kohn suggests, "transspecies intersubjectivity" (2007).

Overview

Tapper points out that anthropologists should seek to understand "where different societies locate their humanity" (1988:49). Along the same line, Vilaça states that "humanity is not restricted to what we conceive as human beings: animals and spirits may also be human, which means that *humanity is above all a position to be continually defined*" (2005:448, emphasis mine; see also Morris 2000:6-8). Kirksey and Helmreich (2010:565) point out that humans have never been only human. Humanity is embedded in multispecies relationships (Morris 2000:8). Morris adds that "both humanity and personhood can only be understood in terms of a dialectical relationship with animals" (2000:42). By re-examining totemism in light of the ontological turn, I explore and question the notions of personhood and humanity and propose that multispecies relationships can be better understood in terms of what I call "ontonhood" and "ontonity" (see Chapters Two, Three and Eight). I do this by taking two examples from Bebelibe totemism – the West African or Desert crocodile (*fɛmuɔfɛ*, pl. *imuɔhɨ̪*) and the African rock python (*usɔkpɛnhɨ̪*, pl. *tisɔkpɛnte*[21]) – and investigating how people relate to these animals. I also present and draw on four case studies (see Chapters Seven and Eight). The first concerns how two allied Bebelibe communities, the Bɛbidibɛ and the Bɛkɔpɛ, view and exploit their relationships with crocodiles. These two communities are currently engaged in a dispute over which of them are the original inhabitants of Cobly and therefore have more authority in the Commune. The crocodile – which is the totem for the Bɛbidibɛ – forms part of the dispute (see Chapter Seven). The second case study presents in detail what happened with Emile the baker. The third case is about Arthur who killed and ate several of his community's totem

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[21] Also called *fɛsɔkpɛnfɛ* (pl. *isɔkpiɛni*), *fɛtɛnponfɛ*, (pl. *itɛnpuoni*) and more generally *fɛsɛfɛ* (pl. *isiɛ*, snake).

crocodiles when he became a Christian. Finally, in the fourth case study, I examine how Robert relates to his totem python and how this has changed since he became a Christian. I thereby examine how Christianity in particular influences individuals' subjectivity and their interactions with animals and the world around them more generally.

Apart from their totemic relations, crocodiles and pythons illustrate how multispecies relationships are important more generally. The crocodile and the python are the commonest totemic animals in the area and are consequently highly regarded by virtually all Bebelibe, even by those who do not have either one as their totem. Some of the Bebelibe shrine entities, such as the community guardian shrines (*ataadɛ*, sg. *ditade*) and fertility shrines (*anitokitaadɛ*, sg. *dinitokitade*), manifest themselves as pythons, for example, when they want to engage with someone. They may do this following the death of the community shrine priest (*uyuɔsɔ kpiɛmɔ*[22]), in order to alert the person whom they have chosen as the new priest. Meanwhile, crocodiles like to attend parties, go to market and pose as ferrymen, for example, and will shapeshift[23] to humans so that they can pursue these activities. Shapeshifting is not limited to crocodiles though. Several Mbelime-speaking communities are renowned for their ability to shapeshift between their human and totem animal form.

Finally, interest in totemism, and human-animal relations in general, diminished for several decades in anthropology as "many cultural anthropologists worked to denaturalize intrahuman differences" (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010:550). Morris too critiqued postmodern anthropologists' "mistaken impression" that "animals are just not worth bothering about as they

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[22] Literally "person-who-fixes big". Other names for the community shrine priests are *usɔbaanɔ* (python guard), *usɔcudɔ* (person who throws sorghum paste at the python) and *usɔha̲dɔ* (person who sits on the python). See *Glossary*.

[23] My findings indicate that "body-shifting" better describes what actually happens. For the time being I have maintained the word "shapeshifting" (and derivatives). I examine this phenomenon in Chapter Six.

are a 'topic of marginal interest' (as one scholar put it) to anthropologists" (2000:1). Viveiros de Castro's seminal work on perspectivism (1998), coupled with his ontological stance, which culminated in the ontological turn (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), has been crucial to reviving the study of human-animal relationships, as various scholars such as Candea (2013), Hornborg (2006), Hurn (2012), Kohn (2007; 2013), Russell (2010), Viveiros de Castro (2004) and Vilaça (2005), seek to understand how different people perceive their existence and relationships with the world around them.

In order to understand these complex issues, I apply the idea of "presencing" initially developed by my husband, Johannes Merz (2014; 2017b). Presencing, in a nutshell, goes beyond the semiotic process of meaning making by accounting for how individuals "make present" and engage in and with the world around them (see Chapter Three). Presencing necessitates the introduction of the "onton". Ontons are experiential, agentive and relational entities that cannot be divided into representations (signifiers) and represented (signified) as signs can (J. Merz 2017b). My aim is to apply and test the notions of presencing and the onton to human-animal relations and therefore verify their validity and applicability more generally, whilst further refining their theoretical implications (see Chapters Two, Three and Eight). In order to do this, I also provide an in-depth, "thick description" (Geertz 1973) ethnography that explores human-animal relations in the Commune of Cobly. I present my insights into how people perceive and relate to animals through hunting, domestication, attitudes to eating meat, animal commodification, reincarnation, shapeshifting and totemism (Chapters Four to Seven). As far as I know, no other work of this kind currently exists for the region. The closest works of a similar nature are Brian Morris' books *The Power of Animals* (1998) and *Animals and Ancestors* (2000), which explore human-animal relations in Malawi, and Schott's

(1973/1974) comprehensive article on wild and domestic animals for the Bulsa of northern Ghana.

As an anthropologist working amongst the Bebelibe, my engagement with the community sometimes involves negotiating spaces of cultural limbo that affect my whole being, which J. Merz and I (2017) call ontological penumbras. I apply and further refine our theoretical concept of ontological penumbras in Chapter Two, where I also present my research from a reflexive stance. Before doing so, I start by giving an historical review of totemism, the debates it generated and how these contributed to the ontological turn.

An Historical Review of Totemism

> The word 'totem' comes from the word 'ototeman', meaning 'he is of my family', in Ojibwa […], and it was first used by J. Lang [sic] in 1791 to *describe the relationship existing in a society between a set of animals* (or plants) *and a human group* (Gaillard 2004:17, emphasis mine; see also Frazer 1887:1-2; Hodge 1910:787-788).

According to Frazer (1887:1), John Long was the first to write about totems (spelt "totam").[24] In *Voyages and Travels of an Indian Interpreter and Trader*, Long noted:

> One part of the religious superstition of the Savages, consists in each of them having his *totam*, or favourite spirit, which he believes watches over him. This *totam* they conceive assumes the shape of some beast or other, and therefore they never kill, hunt, or eat the animal whose form they think this *totam* bears (1791:86).

Long (1791:86-87) then recounted how a Chippeway (Ojibwa) dreamt about where to go hunting. He set off for the place and found the large herd of animals, as seen in the dream. The Chippeway – whose totem was a bear – fired into the herd and killed a bear by accident. Another bear then attacked him as he returned to Long's house. He had to seek the bear's pardon, who instructed him what to do to gain forgiveness. The Chippeway then lamented to Long that he would never hunt again. Long then referred to the Chippeway's lament about his destiny never to hunt again as "totamism" (1791:87).

In this chapter I summarise the rise, fall and re-emergence of totemism – at least as far as anthropology is concerned – given that totemic relationships, as defined by Gaillard (2004:17) have never actually disappeared. I review some of the key literature about totemism, starting with totemism's anthropological origins and working through to contemporary ideas, the theoretical frameworks

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[24] See Bleakley (2000:130), who affirms that it was Long who introduced the word into the English language. Lescarbot, however, introduced it into the French language already in 1609.

involved, questions arising from this diverse scholarship and how these contributed to the recent ontological turn in anthropology.

Herbert Spencer, a philosopher, is generally recognised as the founder of social evolution or "Social Darwinism" (Eriksen 2001:84), which, simply put, posited that societies evolved along a continuum from primitive to modern via animism, polytheism, monotheism, atheism and secularism (see, for example, Ellis 1965 [1890]:13-30). Spencer's ideas about evolution were adopted by many academic disciplines including anthropology. Accordingly, many of the early anthropologists and scholars who engaged in the totemism debate, analysed their data and hypothesised in evolutionary terms. In his introduction to *L'âge d'or du totémisme*, Frederico Rosa points out that it is inevitable that society and ideology influence scholarly discourse. He adds that

> the fact that Edwardians were Edwardians is not sufficient reason to minimise the internal coherence of their anthropological theory and system due to their external influences. To not take [these scholars] seriously because their ideas were the fruit of a revolutionary age is probably the most pernicious power game between presentism and historicism (2003:5, translation mine; see also Jones 2005:1-7; Stringer 1999).

Not surprisingly, these scholars' language and attitudes also reflected their evolutionary thinking and the historical context of their time. Consequently, in today's climate, they come over as racist, sexist and offensive, and their vocabulary derogatory. With hindsight, it is easy to critique their ideas and vocabulary, and I acknowledge – together with other scholars – that the theories stemming from social evolution are problematic. This does not mean that these early scholars' rationales should be totally dismissed, however. Referring to Victorian anthropology and its postcolonial critique, Robert Alun Jones notes:

> But if I am thus abundantly aware that there are many things that are 'problematic' in the works of these writers, I have been less concerned to point out why they were wrong than to describe why they thought

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they were right. […] as a historian, I've tried to see these writers as answering their own questions rather than ours and to see their beliefs as reasonable in a way that we might now consider irrational (2005:6-7).

In a similar vein to Jones, and like Rosa (2003:5), I intend to present a general outline of the debate. I do so by focusing on the aspects that are relevant for the totemic situation in the Commune of Cobly.

Evolutionism and Early Views: From Lubbock to Durkheim

In 1867 John Lubbock, a banker and scholar, proposed an evolutionary trajectory of religion that started with belief in mysterious beings, then passed through various stages to culminate in higher forms of religion (Jones 2005:42-43). In 1870 Lubbock further defended his position and further refined and defined these stages by suggesting that the first stage is *atheism*, which he understood as an "absence of any definite ideas" about a "Deity" (1870:119). This was followed by *fetishism* where "man supposes he can force the Deity to comply with his desires" (1870:119); *totemism*, the worship of natural objects; *shamanism*, where deities are distant, different from and more powerful than humans, so only shamans can access them; *idolatry* and anthropomorphism, where deities become more human-like, as they retain their power, but are open to persuasion. With idolatry, the deities are "part of nature, and not creators. They are represented by images or idols" (1870:119). In the final stages of religious evolution, which Lubbock does not name, "the Deity is regarded as the author, not merely a part of nature. He becomes for the first time a really supernatural being [and] morality is associated with religion" (1870:119).

It is generally acknowledged, however, that it was John Ferguson McLennan (see 1869a; b; 1870), a Scottish solicitor who was keenly interested in anthropology, who first wrote about totemism as an early form of religion (Durkheim 1915:88; van Gennep 1917a:295; Rosa 2003:11). According to

Jones, McLennan "provided the first genuinely evolutionary theory of social organization and laid the foundation for the first evolutionary theory of totemism […]" (2005:7).

Although McLennan did not posit totemism as such in his book, *Primitive Marriage* (1865), totemic relationships helped to inform his analysis and resulting hypothesis about endogamy and exogamy (Rivière 1970:37-38; Jones 2005). McLennan's one-time use of the word "totem" in this work came from a letter he received from Lewis Henry Morgan (1865:22, see also footnote, 22-24). According to Rivière, "McLennan first saw the potential importance of totemism as a stage through which all societies have passed in their evolution" (1970:xvii; see also Jones 2005:45) in his article *Kinship in Ancient Greece*, originally published in 1866. Here, McLennan asked:

> Is it at all possible that, most anciently, there were among the Greeks tribes with *totems*, – Bull, Boar, and Lion tribes; Snake, Ant, and Dragon tribes? […] It might be worth the while of some one with leisure to see how the facts bearing on this question would look when collected and marshalled. There are dozens of existing races, some of them comparatively advanced, whose tribes are thus named. Why may it not have been so among the ancient Greeks? (1886:227-228, fn 1).

McLennan then wrote about totems for the first edition of *Chamber's Encyclopaedia* in 1868 (Rivière 1970:xvii), before developing his ideas in more detail in a series of three articles on *The Worship of Animals and Plants* in the *Fortnightly review* (1869a; b; 1870). McLennan proposed that

> [f]etichism thus resembles Totemism; which, indeed, is Fetichism *plus* certain peculiarities. These peculiarities are, (1) the appropriation of a special Fetich to the tribe, (2) its hereditary transmission through mothers, and (3) its connection with the *jus connubii* [in this case, exogamy]. Our own belief is that the accompaniments of Fetichism have not been well observed, and that it will yet be found that in many cases the Fetich is the Totem (1869a:422-423, emphasis in original).

McLennan concluded:

> We have found in numerous cases what seems good evidence that from the earliest times animals were worshipped by tribes of men who

were named after them, and believed to be of their breed. We have seen in several cases the oldest anthropomorphic gods having titles derived from the animals, or believed to be of their breed, or to have been fostered by them; and the conclusion seems to be forced upon us that these gods were preceded by the animals as Totems […] (1870:214).

[And that] since the whole of the facts we have been surveying demonstrate a progress in religious speculation from savage fetichism; and since among the lowest races of men we find no such gods figuring as Zeus and his companions, we seem already, at this stage of the argument, to be justified in arriving at the conclusion that the ancient nations came through the Totem stage, and that Totemism was the foundation of their mythologies (1870:216).

Thus, the anthropological notion of totemism as an early form of religion was born. Others then applied and developed further McLennan's ideas.

In his 1880 essay *Animal Worship and Animal Tribes among the Arabs and in the Old Testament*, followed by *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, originally published in 1885, William Robertson Smith, a Scottish theologian and good friend and disciple of McLennan (Rivière 1970:xlii; Jones 2005:67), was one of the first to take up the theme of totemism (W.R. Smith 1912 [1880]:455-483; 1907 [1885]:215-281; Jones 2005:73). He affirmed that McLennan was the creator of totemism (1907 [1885]:217) and that

[t]he advantage of J. F. McLennan's totem hypothesis over all previous theories of primitive heathenism is that it does justice to the intimate relation between religion and the fundamental structure of society which is so characteristic of the ancient world, and that the truth of the hypothesis can be tested by observation of the social organisation as well as the religious beliefs and practices of early races (1907 [1885]:258-259).

Smith (1912 [1880]:455-483; 1907 [1885]:217-251) rearticulated, applied and developed McLennan's ideas, before presenting his analysis, which he believed demonstrated the historical existence of totemism in early Arabia and amongst the ancient Israelites. Smith's treatment of totemism was such that Rivière

proposed that he "served to make many of McLennan's ideas respectable" (1970:xlii; see also Rosa 2003:68-73; Jones 2005:73-81).

According to Rosa (2003:323), it was because Smith raised totemism's profile that James George Frazer decided to investigate the phenomenon. Jones (2005:82-83) adds that it was Smith who commissioned Frazer in 1887 to write about totemism for the next volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. His contribution, however, grew to such proportions that it was published instead as the book *Totemism*, where Frazer further promoted totemism's place in a socio-religious evolutionary trajectory. He also noted:

> Since the late J. F. McLennan first pointed out the importance of Totemism for the early history of society, various writers have treated of the subject and added to his materials, but no one, I believe, has tried to collect and classify all the main facts, so far as they are at present known (1887:vi).

Frazer then endeavoured to do this by presenting an extremely detailed treatise of totems and totemism by making a statement, then providing a catalogue of examples, as he documented information he had gathered from various people all around the world.

Unlike McLennan, Frazer distinguished totems from fetishes, given that "a totem is never an isolated individual, but always a class of objects, generally a species of animals or of plants" (1887:2). Rosa (2003:11-36), however, suggests that Frazer, amongst others, misunderstood McLennan's notion of fetishism and Tylor's theory of animism (see below) more generally. Rosa postulates that McLennan employed the term "fetishism" to "describe the animation of natural objects, representing a tradition that dates back to the 18th century" (2003:29, translation mine). He (2003:29-30) adds that this use of fetishism was then superseded by animism following Tylor. For McLennan, therefore, "totemism constituted a stage of animism, a type of cult of animals and plants based on matrilineal and exogamic clan organisation" (2003:30,

translation mine). Rosa (2003:33-35) then proposes that it was the separation of totemism from animism, which culminated in Frazer's book *Totemism*, which really initiated the totemism debate.

Wondering about how totemism originated, Frazer speculated that the religious and social aspects

> were originally inseparable […] the farther we go back, the more we should find that the clansman regards himself and his totem as beings of the same species, and the less he distinguishes between conduct towards his totem and towards his fellow-clansmen. For the sake of exposition, however, it is convenient to separate the two (1887:3).

Even "for the sake of exposition", it is not evident why Frazer thought it "convenient" or even necessary to separate totemism into these two aspects. By doing so, he reduces totemic relationships to a form of proto-religious worship, rather than recognising the respect and behaviour that results from the social norms of relating to fellow kin. Grounded in the Spencerian thinking of his time, Frazer (1887:2-49, 57-81) then differentiated how people related to their totem entities versus how they related to each other by claiming that the former was religious in nature, whereas the latter was social. Frazer then analysed how totemic relationships changed as descent groups divided (1887:87-90), before proposing that when

> one individual of the totem species is, as elder brother, guardian spirit, or what not, raised to a position of superiority over all the rest, totemism is practically given up, and religion, like society, is advancing to the monarchical stage (1887:90).

He added that as a society's social structure changed "totemism as a religion tends to pass into the worship first of animal gods and next of anthropomorphic gods with animal attributes" (1887:90).

Others too tried to account for both the social and religious aspects of totemism. This is not to deny that some groups considered the ceremonial features of their totemic practices extremely important, as Walter Baldwin

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Spencer and Francis James Gillen (2003 [1899]) demonstrated with the *Intichiuma* ceremony of the Arunta of Central Australia, for example. To what extent, however, should such ceremonies be separated from the social life of the people concerned, and are they evidence of religious evolution? Spencer and Gillen postulated for the Arunta that it is "quite possible that the original aspect of the totem is simply a religious or magical one, and that the social aspect has been, as it were, tacked on at a later period" (1899:276).

Strongly influenced by Spencer and Gillen's findings (Rosa 2003:134-142; Jones 2005:150-157), Frazer decided that "magical" would, in fact, better define what he previously referred to as the religious aspects of totemism (Frazer 1910 [1899]; 1910 [1905]; Spencer and Gillen 1899:275; see also Marett 1900). Magic, he submitted, preceded religion in the evolutionary trajectory, as "propitiation or conciliation of the higher powers seems to be nearly unknown [amongst the 'aborigines']. Roughly speaking, all men in Australia are magicians, but not one is a priest […]" (1910 [1905]:141). Frazer then suggested that some of the aboriginal beliefs and practices with time "might have grown into a regular religion, if their development had not been cut short by European intervention" (1910 [1905]:142).

Five years on, and with more data at hand, Frazer (1910d:3-6) modified his thinking once again. Having produced an even more detailed, four-volume exposition of the subject (Frazer 1910a; b; c; d), Frazer proposed a new definition of totemism, the essence of which he summed up as "an identification of a man with his totem, whether his totem be an animal, a plant or what not" (1910d:5), and decided that totemism in its purest form was entirely social in nature as totem entities were neither considered gods nor worshipped. "The system is thoroughly democratic", he explained, "it is simply an imaginary brotherhood established on a footing of perfect equality between a group of

people on the one side and a group of things (generally a species of animals and plants) on the other side" (1910d:5).

Alexander Goldenweiser (1910:274-276) independently arrived at a similar conclusion. He proposed that totemism should not be considered a condition or something static, but rather a "*dynamic phenomenon*" (1910:275, emphasis in original), which resulted in totemic complexes and accounted for both the similarities – the association of a social unit with specific objects, which have emotional value, and in turn become socialised – and variation found in totemism.

Arnold van Gennep (1911) found the results of Frazer's 1910 four-volume treatise a paradox, especially as it culminated in such a vague definition of totemism and divorced it from religion, and was a complete turnaround from Frazer's first writings about totemism. Goldenweiser's definition of totemism, as "a specific socialization of emotional values" was also critiqued as too vague (Goldenweiser 1918:280; Washburn Hopkins 1918:146).

Frazer then apologised for misleading people with his earlier ideas about the religious aspects of totemism (1910d:6). Despite this, he maintained his overall evolutionary religious trajectory and rearticulated that totemism could

> develop into a worship of animals or plants, of the sun or the moon, of the sea or the rivers, or whatever the particular totem may have been; but such worship is never found amongst the lowest savages, who have totemism in its purest form; it occurs only among peoples who have made a considerable advance in culture, and accordingly we are justified in considering it as a later phase of religious evolution, as a product of the disruption and decay of totemism proper (1910d:5-6).

Frazer then clarified that such a trajectory was probably not universal, given that he felt there was no clear evidence of totemism amongst the Aryans, Semites and Turanians (1910d:12-14). Thus, "totemism is an institution peculiar to the dark-complexioned and least civilised races" (1910d:14) and "[p]rimitive society advances simultaneously from democracy and magic towards despotism and

religion" (1910d:28). Finally, its democratic and social nature meant that totemism probably "serve[d] the cause of civilisation" (1910d:38) as it promoted values such as cooperation, trust and subordination, and unity.

In *An Introduction to the History of Religion*, Frank Byron Jevons (1896), who was a scholar with many interests, discussed an evolutionary religious trajectory that also took the biblical account of Genesis into consideration. As he endeavoured to balance Christian beliefs with a scientific approach, he suggested that humanity might have started out as monotheistic, then some societies degenerated – which he notes is also an evolutionary process – before starting on a new religious trajectory (1896:1-10)[25]. His proposed trajectory can be summed up as follows: All things are animate; people seek relationships with supernatural beings and create taboos; people ascribe personality to natural objects, especially animals, as people recognise kinship parallels with them. This leads to blood covenants and alliances between humans and animals (totemism); people start worshipping animals; with time animal-like gods appear. Thus, a given society becomes a religious community (Jevons 1896:108-109; see also Jones 2005:132-135). Jevons (1896:11-14) posited that people initially seek help from supernatural powers, which includes those not recognised by the wider community, with the risk of punishment (fetishism) and family gods and guardian spirits that are publicly worshiped by the community at large. Ancestor worship then develops as a form of private worship within the more immediate family, whilst public worship starts with plants and animals, and some are adopted as totems. Animal and plant worship results in their domestication, a more sedentary lifestyle and alliances with neighbouring groups. This leads to the fusion of ideas, resulting in syncretism and polytheism, which in turn generates myths and the need for priests to govern beliefs and practices. People also need to account for what happens

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[25] See also Rosa (2003:144-146), writing about Lang who proposed a similar idea in 1898.

with death. Initially people thought that either life would continue as was, but in less favourable conditions, or that their souls transmigrated[26], often to their totem animals. Dissatisfied with both of these, with time people realise that their future wellbeing depends on a sacramental communion with a god. Jevons (1896) then examined the different aspects of this trajectory in the rest of his book.

Edward Burnett Tylor considered totemism as one of several forms of animal cults, where the animal is venerated as a family member and ancestor (Rosa 2003:17). Rosa (2003:30) suggests that for Tylor totemism was one of many potential manifestations of animism; a concept he introduced to anthropology in *Primitive Culture*, originally published in 1871.[27] Tylor admitted that he was hesitant to enter the totemism debate due to its "bewildering complexity" (1899:138), and did so initially in his article *Remarks on Totemism, with Especial Reference to Some Modern Theories Respecting It*. Although Tylor was a proponent of social and religious evolution, he was not convinced that totemism was a necessary evolutionary stage. Neither was he persuaded by either McLennan's hypothesis or Frazer's ideas about totem animals becoming deities. Tylor (1899:142-143) acknowledged that there were societies with special relationships with totem animals, and other societies with animal deities, but it did not follow that there was a direct correlation between the two. Tylor then protested against

> the manner in which totems have been placed almost at the foundation of religion. Totemism […] has been exaggerated out of proportion to its real theological magnitude. The importance belonging to totem-animals as friends or enemies of man is insignificant in comparison with that of ghosts or demons, to so say nothing of higher deities. The rise and growth of ideas of deity, a branch of knowledge requiring the largest range of information and the greatest care in inference, cannot, I hold,

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[26] Other scholars (see below) also wrote in terms of soul transmigration rather than reincarnation, so I have maintained their terminology. As I have argued elsewhere (2013:9-10), I consider the two to be synonymous.

[27] Tylor added a brief description of totemism in the fourth edition (1903:234-237).

be judged on the basis of a section of theology of secondary importance, namely, animal-worship, much less of a special section of that, namely, the association of a species of animals with a clan of men which results in totemism. A theoretical structure has been raised quite too wide and high for such a foundation (1899:144).

Tylor continued by critiquing Smith and Jevons, amongst others, for being unduly influenced by McLennan's tentative hypothesis, together with Frazer's initial ideas, of totemism as an early stage of religious evolution. He inferred that Frazer, at least, manipulated his analysis to fit with McLennan's notion of totemism (1899:142; see also Washburn Hopkins 1918). Neither, Tylor pointed out, should exogamy be equated with totemism, as it "can and does exist without totemism" (1899:148).

In his article *The Place of Totemism in the Evolution of Religion*, Jevons (1899), responded to those who claimed that he asserted that *all* deities started out as totems:

It is one thing to say, as I have said, that the first plants and animals to be worshipped were totems; it is a different thing to say that all the plants and animals which came to be worshipped subsequently in post-totem times were totems, and I have not said it. And so long as the Australian blackman, with his totem-clans, is regarded by anthropologists as occupying the lowest place in the evolution of society, so long will it be a plausible theory that his totem-plants and animals occupy the lowest place in the evolution of religion (1899:370).

Jevons then called upon social and economic evolution more generally in his defence. He suggested that those fortunate enough to have had totem animals that could be domesticated would, with time, evolve beyond those whose totem animals could not be tamed: "In a word, the economic revolution produced by domestication would entail a social revolution also, and lead to the destruction of the totemistic form of social organisation" (1899:375; see also Frazer 1910d:19-25). He went on to point out that as there were no domesticable animals in North America and Australia, "totemism prevailed until the coming of European man" (1899:376), and it is also there, Jevons suggested, that one

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must look in order to "understand the condition of man in the pre-pastoral period" (1899:376). After some further discussion, he concluded that "[i]t is no longer necessary to argue that totemism *must* have been a stage in the evolution of religion, it is an established fact that it was" (1899:380, emphasis in original). In his earlier publication (1896:120-121), Jevons posited that as people abandoned their nomadic lifestyle, totemism would perish as people "advance from savagery to civilisation" (1896:121).

Another aspect of the totemism and religious evolution debate concerned the possible role of soul transmigration between people and their totem animals and whether this could explain totemism's origin (Tylor 1899; Frazer 1910d:45-47; Durkheim 1915:168-171; van Gennep 1917b:293-295). Tylor (1899:147) also noted that George Alexander Wilken saw transmigration as evidence of a link between totemism and ancestor worship. Then, during his 1901 presidential address to the Folklore Society, Edwin Sidney Hartland (1901a:35-37) postulated that, based on data from South Africa, the transformation of chiefs into powerful animals when they die clearly demonstrated this evolutionary transition: "I venture to suggest that this was the link, now snapped asunder, between totemism and ancestor-worship in South Africa" (1901a:36). Northcote Whitridge Thomas agreed that "totemism in South Africa, as we know it at present, is, I submit, a form of ancestor-worship" (1901:342), but queried whether this is the case elsewhere. Hartland (1901b) briefly defended his position by responding that he never intended his example to be applied more broadly. Tylor (1899:147) too expressed caution about generalising findings about totemism and transmigration, given the variety of ideas and practices between different groups (see also Spencer and Gillen 2003 [1899]:94, 235; 1899:279-280; Hartland 1911:363-364).

Part of the challenge of the totemism debate was the lack of clear parameters about what exactly people were investigating, and their background

and approach to the subject were sometimes questionable (van Gennep 1908; 1911; 1917a; b; 1919a; b; c; Washburn Hopkins 1918; Linton 1924; Firth 1930:291-292; Majumdar 1930:221-223; Lévi-Strauss 1964 [1962]; 1966 [1962]; Rosa 2003). There were varied opinions about what exactly could count as a totem; whether totems were always clan or kin-based or whether people could have individual totems or gender-specific totems; how it related to marriage practices; what the "religious" parameters were and whether totems were worshipped and/or implicated in other ceremonies such as rites during times of transition; and how totems were transmitted: via matrilineal or patrilineal descent, or if people received them when initiated into secret societies, for example.

Several of those at the forefront of the debate – such as McLennan, Smith, Frazer and Jevons – worked exclusively with information they received from others. Nicknamed "armchair" anthropologists, they employed a comparative method, which assumed that similarities in beliefs and practices between so-called primitive societies – both past and present, despite other sociocultural and geographical differences – could be directly compared (Boas 1896; Radcliffe-Brown 1951; Jones 2005:18-19, 295). Emile Durkheim commented:

> Everything we know about totemism amounts to information that is fragmentary, scattered and borrowed from very different societies, that one can hardly link together except by construction. One has never directly observed a whole totemic system. This serious omission has been filled by Messrs Spencer and Gillen in their book about the central tribes of Australia (1900-1901:81, translation mine).

In their comprehensive ethnography *Native Tribes of Central Australia*, Spencer and Gillen (2003 [1899]) presented their own observations from time spent with aboriginal Australians. Their findings, especially amongst the Arunta – whose totemic practices did not fit the generally assumed parameters of totemism – significantly impacted the anthropological community, and further fuelled the

totemism debate. Different individuals drew on Spencer and Gillen's findings to defend their position in the debate (Hartland 1900:57-58; see also Durkheim 1900-1901; Frazer 1910a; Lang 1910; Rosa 2003:119-174; Jones 2005:205-212), despite Spencer and Gillen's warning that the variations between the different aboriginal totemic systems are such that it is not possible to describe their findings and consider them "typical of Australian natives generally" (2003 [1899]:85). They did, however, identify "one essential feature common to all totemic systems, and that is the intimate association between the individual and the material object, the name of which he bears" (2003 [1899]:94).

Many others collated data in their endeavour to establish the general parameters of totemism (see, for example, Marillier 1897a; Anon 1901; Willoughby 1905; Harper *et al.* 1906; Brun 1910; Frazer 1910a; b; c; d; 1937; Goldenweiser 1910; Hodge 1910; Durkheim 1915; Radcliffe-Brown 1952 [1929]). Whilst some of the resulting publications are largely ethnographic, others are more analytical and question the veracity of some of the earlier hypotheses, such as the assumed relationship between totemism and exogamy (Spencer and Gillen 2003 [1899]; 1899; Brun 1910:850-851, 864; Frazer 1910d; Goldenweiser 1910; Hodge 1910:788; Hartland 1911; Washburn Hopkins 1918; Lévi-Strauss 1966 [1962]), the matrilineal transmission of totems (Spencer and Gillen 2003 [1899]:27, 53, 86-87; Brun 1910:864; Durkheim 1915:106-107; Washburn Hopkins 1918), and where – if at all – totemism fitted into a given society's evolutionary trajectory (Hose and McDougall 1901; Frazer 1910d; Washburn Hopkins 1918). Léon Marillier (1897a; see also 1897b; 1898a; b), a philosopher and historian, critically analysed the evolutionary trajectories put forward by his contemporaries, including Smith (1912 [1880]; 1907 [1885]), Frazer (1887; 1910 [1899]; 1910 [1905]) and Jevons (1896). He concluded that the idea that totemism was a stage that all religions passed through during their evolution was difficult to sustain (1897a:246) and that, in fact, for those groups

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who were totemic, totemism was not their religious starting point, but rather the finishing point of a perfected religious form (1897b:369; see also Marillier 1898a:211). With reference to totemism amongst several ethnic groups in Francophone West African, Joseph Brun, a Catholic missionary, stated:

> Nowhere have we encountered totemism as a stage of religious phenomenon, nor even as the prevailing form of the Blacks' religion. As it is, it appears to be a set of beliefs, mixed with other beliefs of differing importance. This is evident for the Islamised ethnic groups, and is the same for the pagans (1910:846, translation mine).

Brun went on to present a body of data before concluding that "[t]otemism does not appear as a precise stage of religious evolution exclusive of all other belief. It is simply an element of beliefs" (1910:863, translation mine). Likewise, Goldenweiser boldly stated, "totemism as a necessary stage in the development of religion becomes an absurdity, and the concept itself, of totemism as a specific form of religion, ought to be abandoned" (1910:264) and that "[e]xogamy, taboo, religious regard, totemic names, descent from the totem, – all fail as invariable characteristics of totemism" (1910:266).

Durkheim (1915), however, upheld an evolutionary approach and maintained that totemism was not only a religion, but its most primitive form, whilst at the same time emphasising its social nature (Rosa 2003:91-103, 159-174; Jones 2005:220-224). On occasions, his argument seems somewhat circular and contradictory. For example, for people who have animals as totems, he stressed that totemism is not animal worship, nor should it be considered a cult; the animal is rather a friend or a member of the family (1915:139-140). He then stated: "If totemism is to be considered as a religion comparable to the others, it too should offer us a conception of the universe. As a matter of fact, it does satisfy this condition" (1915:141) and then justified this, given that

> [f]or the Australian, things themselves, everything which is in the universe, are a part of the tribe; they are constituent elements of it and,

so to speak, regular members of it; just like men, they have a determined place in the general scheme of organization of the society (1915:141).

Durkheim then explained that all beings were sacred, and where such beings relate to each other, their relationship was therefore religious: "[Humans], too, are sacred, and the classifications which locate them in relation to the other things of the universe, by that very act give them a place in the religious world" (1915:150). Consequently, totem entities "fulfil exactly the same functions that will later fall upon the divine personalities" (1915:154). He then concluded that the "totemic religion is a complex system" resulting from the union of totemic clan cults (1915:156, 167-168). Durkheim (1915:168-239) then moved on to discuss the origin of such beliefs.

Commenting on Durkheim's analysis of the religious versus social nature of totemism, Alan Bleakley notes that it "reverses the early views of totemism as describing solidarity with nature, for now the solidarity is with the reified social, and has a completely anthropocentric and secular focus" (2000:133; see also Jones 2005:232; Willerslev 2013:46). Rosa, meanwhile, likens Durkheim's analysis to a game of mirrors: "the clan's sacred character was the reflection of the totem species sacred character, which in turn was the unconscious reflection of the religious force emanating from the first" (2003:171, translation mine).

Like Durkheim, those engaged in the totemism debate were also preoccupied with how totemism originated (see, for example, Marillier 1897a; van Gennep 1908:64-67; Frazer 1910d:40-71; Goldenweiser 1910:276-288; 1912; Boas 1916; Rosa 2003:6). Already in 1870, McLennan (1870:213) pointed out that his hypothesis was not intended to explicate the origin of totemism, for which he did not account. Frazer initially favoured Wilken's idea that soul transmigration between people and their totem animals could explain

how totemism originated (Tylor 1899:146). Frazer later refuted this idea given that there was no evidence of a link between totemism and transmigration amongst the North American First Nations Indians and aboriginal Australians (1910d:45-47).

Spencer and Gillen (1899:278) and Frazer then proposed similar theories about totemism's origin (see also Jones 2005:155-157), which Frazer summed up as

> an organised and co-operative system of magic devised to secure for the members of the community on the one hand a plentiful supply of all the natural commodities of which they stood in need, and, on the other hand, immunity from all the perils and dangers to which man is exposed in his struggle with nature (1899:282; see also Malinowski 1948:44-47).

Frazer (1910d:55-57) later rejected this theory, believing that it simply was not practical, overly rational and the social organisation required too complex for people he perceived as "primitives".

In 1905 Frazer had also suggested an alternative idea: "If we may hypothetically assume, as the first stage in the evolution of totemism, a system […] based on a primitive theory of conception the whole history of totemism becomes intelligible" (1910 [1905]:161)[28], given that aboriginal Australians believed that children were conceived by the entities that later became their totems. This hypothesis, he admitted, did not account for the rules of exogamy many associated with totemism. For Frazer, however, this was not an issue, as

> exogamy forms no part of true totemism. It is a great social reform of a much later date, which, in many communities, has accidentally modified the totemic system, while in others it has left that system entirely unaffected (1910 [1905]:162).

Frazer (1910d:60-71) later reaffirmed his "conceptional theory" (1910d:60), especially in light of further data from the Banks' Island, where people also

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[28] For an in-depth treatment of Frazer's conceptional theory, see Rosa (2003:242-251) and Jones (2005:168-171).

believed that women were impregnated by their totem entities. He concluded that "the ultimate source of totemism is a savage ignorance of the physical process by which men and animals reproduce their kinds" (1910d:61) and that "totemism may be described as a creation of feminine rather than of masculine mind. It is well known that the minds of women are in an abnormal state during pregnancy […]" (1910d:64; see also Durkheim 1915:180-183). Andrew Lang referred to Frazer's conceptional theory as an "ingenious but erroneous psycho-physiological hypothesis" (1910:1100). For Lang totemism and exogamy could not be separated, and that the case of the Arunta clearly demonstrated that "conceptional totemism is not primary but very late; totemic exogamy is not late but early" (1910:1103). For Lang (1913)[29], exogamy clearly preceded totemism (see also Rosa 2003:105-115). For exogamic groups "[t]here must have been dim beginnings of the belief (so surprising to us) that each human group had some intimate connection with this, that, or the other natural species, plants, or animals" (1913:160), he explained. Local groups then distinguished themselves by adopting the name of the natural species in question and totemism slowly grew out of this given that "animals and sets of men having the same name are, in savage opinion, mystically connected with each other. That is now the universal totemic belief […]" (1913:161; see also Durkheim 1915:134) and that "the mere idea of a mystic connection between themselves and their name-giving animals set the groups upon certain superstitious acts and abstentions in regard to these animals" (1913:164). Durkheim (1915:184-186), however, saw little difference between Frazer's conceptional theory and Lang's hypothesis about name giving. With regard to the place of exogamy, Franz Boas shared Lang's opinion, given that exogamy

> is a universal phenomenon. Totemism is not. It is admissible to judge the antiquity of an ethnic phenomenon by its universality. […] On this basis it is justifiable to assume that exogamy also is very old. […] We

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[29] Published posthumously; Lang died in 1912.

may, therefore, consider exogamy as the condition on which totemism arose (1916:323-324).

Goldenweiser (1912) expressed concern about the many different theories that people proposed, and the resulting fight this generated. "Many of the theories advanced were good, in the sense that they indicated a plausible starting point for the totemic process; all the theories were bad in so far as they pretended to have revealed the one and only starting-point [sic] of totemism" (1912:600), he commented. The only positive Goldenweiser saw from such a preoccupation was that it stimulated further research into totemism, otherwise he felt that ongoing hypothesising about totemism's origins was "foolhardy" (1912:602; see also Radcliffe-Brown 1952 [1929]:122). Moving away from the idea of one common starting point, Goldenweiser then proposed his own "pattern theory" (1912:606) based on the idea of totemic complexes that developed slowly over time as clans adopted different totemic features that diffused from one clan to another. Although van Gennep (1919a:14-17, 26-27) agreed with Goldenweiser's basic theoretical principles, he added that the same could be said about Christianity and that the theory did not help resolve the question of how totemism actually arose in the first place.

Drawing on data from Robert Henry Codrington about the Melanesians and *mana*, together with ideas put forward by Smith (Jones 2005:95-99, 131-132, 214-215), Durkheim (1915), meanwhile, hypothesised that totemism – and the religious dimension of social life in general – was due to an underlying force that permeated and connected everything. People drew on this force, initially subconsciously, and with time consciously. Social occasions, which resulted in exultation, served to bring this force to the fore, and thus

> it is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born […] but we must still demand how it happens that these forces are thought of under the form of totems, that is to say, in the shape of an animal or plant.

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It is because this animal or plant has given its name to the clan and serves it as emblem. In fact, it is a well-known law that the sentiments aroused in us by something spontaneously attach themselves to the symbol which represents them. […] This transference of sentiments comes simply from the fact that the idea of a thing and the idea of its symbol are closely united in our minds; the result is that the emotions provoked by the one extend contagiously to the other (1915:218-219).

Durkheim (1915:222) added that people's emotional response and perception of force attached to the emblem intensified when extended to the actual totem entity. Although van Gennep (1917a:327) found Durkheim's social approach interesting, he concluded that Durkheim's analysis did not really answer issues concerning totemism's origin, evolution, content and function. The problem, according to van Gennep (1917a:335), stemmed from Durkheim's working with other people's data and analysis, which even they were reluctant to admit were accurate. Van Gennep (1911:101-102) originally suggested that there was no such thing as totemism, but rather totemisms[30] and that each form of totemism or pseudo-totemism should be assigned a specific name. Van Gennep (1917a) did not advance an alternative theory to Durkheim's, but reiterated that – for him – the belief in kinship relations was a fundamental psychological element of totemism, but not necessarily the defining character as Durkheim would have it. For van Gennep, totemism was composed of a number of distinctive characters, which he called principles (1917a:335). By 1919 van Gennep (263-264) had refined his ideas about kinship by stating that totemism was characterised by a combination of physiological, social and classificatory kinship together with a well-defined territory for the group in question; a factor that others had overlooked (Peterson 1972; Morton 1987; Rosa 2003:239-242).

Edward Washburn Hopkins (1918:151-159), a Sanskrit scholar, also took the different theories on totemism's origins to task. He concluded:

If then we have regard to the fact that, with all its divergencies in detail, totemism in its original habitat (i.e. where the name arose) is in the main

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[30] Lévi-Strauss (1964 [1962]:45), attributed this to A. P. Elkin.

a recognition of a peculiar bond subsisting between a group of human and a group of animal or vegetable beings, that this bond is not an individual or sex matter, but that in the great majority of cases it is connected with dietary restrictions, we have the basis of what may reasonably be called totemism (1918:158).

Washburn Hopkins added that "the word totemism is American, and in America, until the sociologists began to play with it, it had a pretty definite meaning" (1918:159). Others too started to scrutinise the terminology itself. Some questioned whether totemism should be considered a genuine, independent phenomenon (Goldenweiser 1918). Van Gennep (1908:57) cautioned against using the words "totem" and "totemism" except where one could be certain that they corresponded exactly with totemic phenomena. Goldenweiser, who had conducted some research amongst the Iroquois, suggested that "if we continue to use the term 'totemism,' we may no longer apply it to any concrete ethnic content; for, while almost anything may be included, no feature is necessary or characteristic" (1910:267). Frederick Webb Hodge, meanwhile, made the pertinent observation that "'[t]otemism' is a purely philosophical term which modern anthropologic literature has burdened with a great mass of needless controversial speculation and opinion" (1910:789), whilst Alfred Radcliffe-Brown questioned whether the term had "outlived its usefulness" (Radcliffe-Brown 1952 [1929]:117). Goldenweiser, however, felt that totemism "while not presenting in its make-up any new principle not found in other cultural phenomena, is nevertheless a specific institution, deserving as such a separate concept and term" (1918:284). Accordingly, he thought that totemism should be maintained as a unique phenomenon. Goldenweiser justified this by proposing that there was something distinctive about "the association of the totemic content with a clan system" (1918:284) and that it was the psycho-sociological interaction and emotional engagement between the members of a given social

unit and their totem that created totemic complexes (1918:290-295). Washburn Hopkins shared a similar opinion:

> Thus totemism is not a homogeneous institution. Under the appearance of uniformity it conceals a heterogeneous collection of social and religious conditions as vague and unsystematic as are those of taboo and fetishism. It consists, if it means anything specific, in clan-respect for a class of plants or animals and usually in a regard for ancestors […] (1918:151).

Goldenweiser[31] (1918) maintained his position that totemism should not be considered an evolutionary stage of religion, and as he justified his analysis, he repeatedly used the word "function", indicating a move towards a functionalist analysis of totemism.

As indicated above, others too questioned totemism's evolutionary position. "Twenty years ago", Hartland stated, "anthropologists were inclined to presume totemism as a necessary stage in the evolution of human culture. Today the pendulum has swung in an opposite direction. Perhaps it has swung too far" (1911:374).

Boas (1896; 1916) and Radcliffe-Brown (1951) also questioned the comparative method that armchair anthropologists used to demonstrate their evolutionary theories. With changes in methodology, and more people engaging in ethnographic research and gathering additional data (Jones 2005:295), it was inevitable that the idea of totemism as the preliminary stage of religious evolution had to fall. Like Goldenweiser, others increasingly turned towards trying to understand how totemism shaped society in terms of function. They also challenged the notion that "uncivilized" people were inferior:

> Many modern anthropologists discount the supposed differences in the mental processes of civilized and uncivilized peoples and hold that the psychological factors which have controlled the growth of the so-called primitive cultures are still at work in modern society (Linton 1924:296; see also Hambly 1931:31; Lévi-Strauss 1964 [1962]:1-3; 1966 [1962]).

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[31] For an in-depth treatment of Goldenweiser's contribution to the totemism debate, see Shapiro (1991), Rosa (2003:207-227) and Jones (2005:290-295).

Ralph Linton, who served with the US 42nd Rainbow Division during World War I, wrote about the Division's relationship with the rainbow. He explained that, with time, most of the division members would say "I'm a rainbow" (1924:297). Linton then demonstrated that the members' behaviour and ready identification with the rainbow as their emblem, to the point of reverence, promoted social cohesion and unity in the Division (1924:298-300). He noted that "[a]lmost any investigator who found such a condition existing among an uncivilized people would class these associated beliefs and practices as a totemic complex" (1924:299). For Linton, this was no longer a question of evolution, as both the army's and "primitive" totemic complexes resulted from the "same social and supernaturalistic tendencies" (1924:299).

Functionalism and Structuralism: Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss and Others

Radcliffe-Brown first suggested studying totemism in terms of function in 1929, in order to discover "why in certain societies a ritual attitude towards a certain species of natural object is imposed upon the members of a particular social group" (1952 [1929]:124; see also Lévi-Strauss 1964 [1962]:11-13, 60-61). He too saw parallels between the emblematic role of totems and other objects, such as flags, that promote and maintain patriotism, and concluded that "the function of the ritual attitude towards the totem is to express and so to maintain in existence the solidarity of the social group" (1952 [1929]:125). Radcliffe-Brown (1952 [1929]:126-129) then suggested that the majority of societies – whether totemic or non-totemic – from around the world initially favoured animals and plants as "sacra" over other objects due to hunting and gathering. When some of these larger societies divided into smaller clan units, each unit needed to maintain its solidarity and individuality. Thus, "[t]otemism does more than express the unity of the clan; it also expresses the unity of totemic society

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as a whole in the relations of the clans to one another within that wider unity" (1952 [1929]:129). He then admitted that this still did not explain why "primitive peoples adopt in their custom and myth a ritual attitude towards animals and other natural species" (1952 [1929]:129). Radcliffe-Brown then suggested that "[f]or primitive man the universe as a whole is a moral or social order governed not by what we call natural law but rather by what we must call moral or ritual law" (1952 [1929]:130). Another outcome of this was that totemism also promoted social solidarity between people and nature (1952 [1929]:131).

The change in theoretical focus from evolution to functionalism, however, did not resolve how to define totemism. On the contrary, as demonstrated by Linton above, discussions about what could count as totemism broadened (see, for example, Hiatt 1969). Accordingly, Ralph Piddington (1950:203-206) critiqued Goldenweiser's vague definition (see above), as it could be applied to any emblem – such as badges, flags and national symbols – to which a community, society in its broadest sense or nation could develop an emotional attachment (see also Bleakley 2000:134). Along similar lines to Radcliffe-Brown, Piddington proposed that totemism should be limited to social groupings that had a special relationship with their natural environment, which created a "single system, where human groups are classified in terms of natural species, and where the significance of natural species is to a large extent interpreted in terms of their relationship to human groups" (1950:204).

Writing about the Azande, Edward Evans-Pritchard (1961) provided a counter example. Historical movements due to "war, migration, domination and the displacement and fractionization of clans" (1961:116) had resulted in "conglomerate clans" (1961:117), which were extremely complex with members from diverse origins. The resulting totemic system was equally complex and consequently of little worth, as "it is difficult to see how clan totemism can have

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much meaning where there is so much mobility" (1961:119). Evans-Pritchard concluded that the

> [a]bsence of cult, absence of marks of respect, etc., may, however, be regarded as signs, rather than as causes, of the lack of significance which totems have for Azande. The cause is undoubtedly that clans are not in any degree localized and have no corporate functions […] clans as such are so amorphous that they mean little to Azande (1961:119).

Radcliffe-Brown (1951), meanwhile, refined his thinking by proposing that, especially for Australia, marriage between two social units was often a "union of opposites" (1951:20). He arrived at this conclusion by analysing the totemic tales of intermarrying social units, which were about two animal opponents. Thus, the animals were chosen as they represented relationships of opposition and the stories "interpret the resemblances and differences of animal species in terms of social relationships of friendship and antagonism as they are known in the social life of human beings" (1951:18). Radcliffe-Brown (1951:22) pointed out, however, that his analysis still did not resolve the problem of how such structures and choices originated. As a proponent of structuralism who stressed the need to discover minimal structural units based on opposing or contrasting dyads, Claude Lévi-Strauss approved of Radcliffe-Brown's approach:

> It brings about a reintegration of content with form, and thus opens the way to a genuine structural analysis. […] For it is indeed a structural analysis which Radcliffe-Brown undertakes, consolidating institutions with representations on the one hand, and interpreting in conjunction all the variants of the same myth on the other (1964 [1962]:86).

He continued by adding that Radcliffe-Brown's analysis demonstrated that

> animals in totemism cease to be solely or principally creatures which are feared, admired, or envied: their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations. We can understand, too, that natural species are chosen not because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think' (1964 [1962]:89).

As scholars realised that totemism could not be explained in evolutionary terms, their enthusiasm – or "hysteria" (Lévi-Strauss 1964 [1962]:1) – for the subject also diminished (Jones 2005:9). In *Totemism*, Lévi-Strauss (1964 [1962]:3-4) started by presenting totemism's downfall. He pointed out that "[t]he supposed totemism eludes all effort at absolute definition" (1964 [1962]:5) and that totemism was an illusion. Consequently, he suggested, when he employed the word totemism, the reader should imagine it in quotation marks (1964 [1962]:15). Lévi-Strauss then reviewed the different theories put forward on the subject.

Seemingly inspired by Radcliffe-Brown's analysis (Shapiro 1991:599, 605-606), together with the works of Bergson (1958) and Rousseau (1776; see Lévi-Strauss 1964 [1962]:92-105, 108; Bleakley 2000:136-138), Lévi-Strauss (1966 [1962]) wrote *The Savage Mind* as a counterpoint to *Totemism*, in order to "explore totemism's positive side" (1966 [1962]:xi). Despite this, Lévi-Strauss's overall aim was to demonstrate that totemism, as such, did not exist. He then provided a detailed, highly structuralist and semiotic analysis of myths, the different ways that people classify the natural world, marriage, naming conventions, sacrifice and philosophical outlook. He regularly identified and diagrammed underlying dyads, then illustrated how these interacted at different levels – or planes – and along various axes to produce a variety of classificatory systems. The resulting combinations thus accounted for divergent social structures. Ultimately, Lévi-Strauss claimed, "the universe is represented as a continuum made up of successive oppositions" (1966 [1962]:139). Lévi-Strauss (1966 [1962]) concluded that so-called totemism was just one of several classificatory systems and should not be considered an "autonomous institution", but rather a "*modus operandi*" (1966 [1962]:129). For Lévi-Strauss, the "upholders of totemism" made the mistake of arbitrarily isolating "one level of classification, namely that constituted by reference to natural species" (1966

[1962]:135). He later added that totemism was the "most famous example" of "a total system, which ethnologists in vain tried to pull to pieces in order to fashion them into distinct institutions […] (1966 [1962]:218). He did recognise, however, that as a classificatory system, totemism was unique:

> Unlike other systems of classification, which are primarily *conceived* (like myths) or *acted* (like rites), totemism is always *lived*, that is to say, it attaches to concrete groups and concrete individuals because it is an *hereditary system of classification*. […] In totemism, therefore, function inevitably triumphs over structure (1966 [1962]:232, emphasis in original).

Ironically, having praised Radcliffe-Brown for coming around to a structuralist analysis of totemism, Lévi-Strauss ended on a functionalist note. Rather than putting the subject to rest, however, it seems that his books initiated a renewed interest in totemism. Lévi-Strauss recognised this potential eventuality but was prepared to take the risk:

> Perhaps it would be wiser to let obsolete theories fall into oblivion, and not to awake the dead. But, […] history does not produce useless events. If great minds were fascinated for years by a problem which today seems unreal, it is because they vaguely perceived that certain phenomena, arbitrarily grouped and ill analyzed though they may have been, were nevertheless worthy of interest (1964 [1962]:15).

One direct outcome of Lévi-Strauss's work was that members of the Association of Social Anthropologists organised a symposium, which was held in 1964 to discuss Lévi-Strauss's works. This resulted in the publication of *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* edited by Edmund Leach, who convened the seminar (E. Leach 1967:vii-viii).

Meyer Fortes (1966) also responded to Lévi-Strauss with reference to the Tallensi of northern Ghana, for whom it was not possible to identify an underlying totemic structure based on classificatory dyads – either mythically or between Tallensi kinship groups – as postulated by Lévi-Strauss:

> If there is any principle of classification or selection here at work it defies ascertainment; for […] these species do not constitute a single

type or class either to the Tallensi or objectively. The Tallensi themselves (like other Voltaic peoples and the Dinka) are not interested in the question. The association of a clan or lineage with a species is for them the result of a unique, accidental even quasi-miraculous, historical event. […]

The emphasis is primarily on the internal meaning of the observance for the actor, not its external reference. The covenant that is its basis binds the descendants of the lineage founder by virtue of the internal unity and corporate continuity of the lineage that perpetuates him, not by reason of their differentiation from other lineages (1966:14).

Fortes went on to explain that the Tallensi's ontological understanding "presupposes a notion of continuity between man and animal species, and this fits in with the assumption that animal species have a potentiality for quasi-human personality" (1966:15). He later added that "totem animals are assimilated to a quasi-human status […] equivalent to a quasi-kinship relationship – a sort of kinship symbiosis – with the lineages to which they appertain" (1966:15). In sum, Fortes (1966) demonstrated that the relationships and taboo observances between individuals and their totem animals were such that they constituted a moral code, which was core to both the individual's and the society's identity. The quasi-kinship symbiotic relationship was such that the so-called opposition between nature and culture – another one of Lévi-Strauss's classificatory dyads – and totemism's symbolic role in mediating this opposition was also brought into question. Robin Fox, for example, stated that "for Lévi-Strauss [totemism] sets man over against Nature because it involves the *use* of Nature for social classification" (1967:161, emphasis in original; see also Tambiah 1969:453-457; Morton 1987:465; Bird-David 1999:S70). According to Fox, Lévi-Strauss was a "psychological reductionist" for whom nature provides "a source of metaphors for social thinking" and totemism "involves a relation between human thought-processes and the natural world" (1967:162; see also Bleakley 2000:139-141). Fox did conclude, however, that "'totemism' has withered away" (1967:176).

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Lester Richard Hiatt (1969) too expressed concern about Lévi-Strauss's reductionist approach and his attempt to dismiss totemism. Hiatt found Lévi-Strauss's dismissal oxymoronic, especially as Lévi-Strauss then explored the "fundamental features" of what he claimed to be a "null category" (1969:84). For Hiatt totemism lived on and he set out to reaffirm the reality of this phenomenon and seek its reprieve (1969:93). Like others before him, Hiatt defined totemism in broad terms as "a type of classification in which social groups are signified by natural species" (1969:86). He added that "[a]ll instances legitimately denoted by the term […] are united by virtue of possessing a special type of relationship that distinguishes them from other classifications" (1969:86-87).

Carl Georg von Brandenstein, a linguist, then likened totemism to a phoenix back from the ashes "with a new life essence" (1972:586). Von Brandenstein conducted linguistic research in Australia and discovered additional classificatory dyads about hot- versus cold-bloodedness, which included the temperament of the social group concerned and whether their engagement with different entities and groups that they, in turn, perceived as hot or cold-blooded was active or passive. Like Lévi-Strauss, von Brandenstein applied a linguistic, structuralist framework based on axes and dyads, and thus affirmed Lévi-Strauss's theoretical approach (1972:586-587). Von Brandenstein then proposed that "[t]otemism, in the new concept, embraces theory and social practice. Theory here is early man's device, and practice is the application of the device to the social life of the group […]" (1972:587). For von Brandenstein:

> The practical manipulation of totemism in the different regions where it occurs, must have resulted in a great variation of forms. […] The purity of the original idea could be expected to suffer when its rules were transacted in the social sphere of community life (1972:588).

Despite his findings, von Brandenstein recognised the challenge of understanding the "original concept" (1972:593) of totemism before it was transformed by actual practice, and its resulting historical development.

Von Brandenstein was not alone in applying Lévi-Strauss's structural approach to their data, which resulted in further ethnographic studies on totemism. David Sapir (1977), for example, applied a Lévi-Straussian analysis to his data for the Kujamaat Diola of Senegal, some of whom have faecal animal totems, as "it may happen that sometime in his life an Ajamaat Diola will defecate a live animal" (1977:1). Sapir referred to these animals as "totemic doubles":

> A double because, as we shall see, it is a discontinuous objectification of some essential part of the self. A totem also, because, following Lévi-Strauss (1962), it is a natural object (an animal) associated with a social category (an individual) that is subject to analogic extension where animal, is to animal, as individual, is to individual. Although here the extension takes on a complicating twist in that it is based on complementarity rather than homology, the more common form of totemism (1977:1).

Finally, Marguerite Dupire (1991) initially thought that totemism did not exist amongst the Sereer Ndut of Senegal, until she attended a funeral and saw some beef hanging in a tree. Querying this, she was informed that it was for the vultures, "who are the parents of the Lebtaan matriclan" (1991:37, translation mine). She then conducted further research, applied a Lévi-Straussian analysis, and wrote *Totems sereer et contrôle rituel de l'environnement*.

Totemism, it seems, cannot be quashed and – as Dupire discovered – may have a presence and an importance not yet discovered or properly recognised for other societies in West Africa and beyond; as I found out for the Bebelibe. Whether people like it or not, totemism is now an established part of anthropology that cannot be dismissed or ignored. As will become even more apparent in the following chapters, how societies and individuals relate to totemic entities is integral to their identity. This means that – like the early anthropologists I have presented above – current anthropologists also need to take totemism seriously.

The totemism debate so far has been convoluted, sometimes turning full circle. It has also contributed to the ontological turn, which I need to unpack in order to understand the implications for totemism more generally, for my findings and analysis, and how these – in turn – further contribute to the debate.

Prevailing Semiotics and the Ontological Turn

Moving away from a structuralist approach, whilst continuing to work within a semiotic framework, Victor Turner noted:

> One of the principal effects of the structuralist conception of totemism in particular, and the relation of nature to culture in general, as one of direct metaphorical correspondence at a purely formal level has been to define the fetishistic aspect of such phenomena out of existence. My argument, on the contrary, is that animals are so heavily used as symbols, not merely because of their formal appropriateness as metaphors for aspects of social structure which they accurately represent, but because, as natural beings with humanlike properties, they are the most suitable symbolic vehicles for the alienation of human (social) consciousness of the social nature of social phenomena through the *mis*representation of those phenomena as 'natural' (1985:51, emphasis in original; see also Kuper 1973).

Although he did not write about totemism per se, his approach signalled a shift in anthropological theory and practice. Scholars increasingly interpreted and used totemism analogously to understand social structures and human-animal relations more generally. Roy Willis too noted that a direct consequence of Lévi-Strauss's contributions was that "the whole 'totemic debate' was raised to a new level of generality, from the level of 'primitive' society and culture to that of universal human thought processes" (1990:4).

Rather than limiting themselves to one school of thinking, anthropologists started to broaden their theoretical approach by increasingly demonstrating eclectic pragmatism and profiting from cross-disciplinary ideas. They also acknowledged the relative and subjective nature of anthropology (Willis 1990). Despite this, semiotics continues to undergird their overall analysis. Willis again

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attributes this to Lévi-Strauss, and that "even those hostile to [his] philosophical position" treated social phenomena semantically "as elements in total systems of signs" (1990:4-5).

John Comaroff (1987), for example, examines ethnicity in Africa by utilising five propositions whose "theoretical significance lies more in the systematic relations among them than in the substance of each in its own right" (1987:302). Totemism provides the common thread through the five themes, and he draws on this to illustrate more generally how ethnicity could be understood given that:

> [e]thnic consciousness also entails the formulation of collective identities and their symbolic embodiment in markers of contrast between social groupings. For ethnicity, like totemism, exists above all else as a set of relations. In this respect, they are formally similar (1987:304).

John Borneman (1988) too uses totemism analogously to examine how people classify light-horse breeds in America according to "'stock' (consanguinity), […] use (function), [… and] morphological characteristics (conformation)" (1988:26). He proposes that this is a "striking instance in which the animal world is classified according to the categories used for persons, a case of 'reverse totemism' (1988:25-26). In fact, he later adds,

> all totemism is initially a kind of reverse totemism. The animal and plant world does not order itself in a way that is immediately recognizable from a pan-cultural or universal-human perspective. The ordering that humans perceive to exist in the animal world is not initially an inference, it is a projection (1988:28).

Borneman (1988) also demonstrates how America's history has been instrumental in shaping people's treatment of light-horse breeds. Borneman's study – like Comaroff's – resulted in an analysis of American ethnicity as people's attitudes toward light-horse breeds reflect their views about race and national identity more generally.

Willis, meanwhile, wryly notes:

Lévi-Strauss's intention was not to *understand* totemism, but to abolish it as a possible topic of anthropological discourse […]. However, this effect, which should have been a logical consequence of the argument of *Le totémisme aujourd'hui* and *La pensée sauvage*, has patently not come about. Though officially pronounced dead nearly 30 years ago, totemism obstinately refuses to 'lie down'. Indeed, it presently exhibits a vitality recalling the great days of Frazer and Durkheim (1990:5, emphasis in original; see also Shapiro 1991:599; Adler 1998).

Willis (1990:5-6) provides two reasons for totemism's comeback. The first could be traced back to Tambiah's (1969) article, *Animals Are Good to Think and Good to Prohibit*, where Tambiah illustrated how complex human-animal relations could be, and the tensions this created. Secondly, "the academic debate about humanity's relation with the natural world has, in a sense, been overtaken by a remarkable upsurge in social concern with what is generally called ecology" (Willis 1990:6). Consequently, scholars started to question Western assumptions about human superiority – which, in turn, was shaped by Judaeo-Christian teaching – by looking at how "small-scale, 'tribal' societies" engage with the natural world (Willis 1990:6).

Philippe Descola's *Societies of Nature and the Nature of Society* (1992), where he contrasts totemism with animism, or – as he prefers – totemic and animic systems, proved to be a seminal work. In a similar vein to Lévi-Strauss, Descola regards totemism as a classificatory system, whereas animism seems to be the experiential outcome of such a system, and can thus be considered totemism's "symmetrical inversion":

Plants and animals offer natural stimuli to the taxonomic imagination. Their ethological and morphological discontinuities manifest contrasting qualities. Accordingly, they become signs which are particularly apt for expressing, in metaphoric terms, the internal differences which inform the social order. This interpretation contradicts psychological, evolutionist, and utilitarian explanations of totemism, but it nevertheless leaves us with a considerable analytical residue, which might be termed, for the time being, 'animism'. [… which can] be considered as a kind of social objectification of nature. […] In that sense, what I shall now term animic systems are a *symmetrical inversion* of totemic classifications […]. Animic systems do not treat plants and animals as

mere signs or as privileged operators of taxonomic thought; they treat them as proper persons, as irreducible categories. The relation of plants and animals to humans is not metaphorical, as in totemism, but at the most, and then only in certain cases, metonymic (1992:114-115, emphasis in original).

He adds that the two systems are not mutually exclusive, however, but could be combined and result in "complex configuration[s]" (1992:115). Descola (1996:87-89) briefly reiterates these ideas in *Constructing Natures: Symbolic Ecology and Social Practice*, and adds naturalism as a third system, prevalent in Western societies. He also seems to change his position about the metaphorical nature of totemism, stating that "symbolic or totemic classifications are based on a metonymic scheme" (1996:92).

Not only did Descola's observations help stimulate the totemism debate, they also broadened the discussions to consider ontology more generally, which ultimately culminated in the ontological turn (Kohn 2015). It was Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, however, who explicitly brought ontological issues to the fore (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), and according to Holbraad and Pedersen, is the "father of anthropology's ontological turn" (2017:157). In a review article about Amazonian anthropology, Viveiros de Castro initially seemed positive towards Descola's

> model of "symbolic ecology," which attempts to de-reify the nature/culture opposition by differentiating it into distinct practical-cognitive modes [namely naturalistic, totemic and animic…]. The notion of an animic mode might illuminate some traditional ethnologic problems […] though it remains to be more thoroughly tested in certain contexts where the totemic rendering of the nature/culture opposition seems to be quite powerful (1996:190-191).

Two years later, Viveiros de Castro (1998) examines a number of -isms, including Amerindian perspectivism, which should help Westerners to "gain a perspective on our own contrasts, contrasting them with the distinctions actually operating in Amerindian perspectivist cosmologies" (1998:470), where animals

"see themselves as persons" and their "manifest form […] is a mere envelope (a 'clothing') which conceals an internal human form [… especially] those species which perform a key symbolic and practical role" (1998:470-471). He adds that for Amerindians

> [t]he differentiation between 'culture' and 'nature', which Lévi-Strauss showed to be the central theme of Amerindian mythology, is not a process of differentiating the human from the animal, as in our own evolutionist mythology. The original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but rather humanity (1998:471-472).

Viveiros de Castro expresses reservations about Descola's idea that totemism and animism can co-exist and combine, especially as Descola's definition of totemism is "primarily classificatory rather than cosmological: it is not a system of *relations* between nature and culture as is the case [with animistic and naturalistic] modes, but rather of purely logical and differential *correlations*" (1998:473, emphasis in original). He then voices his doubts about animism and finishes by asking: "Are we dealing with just another 'totemic illusion', if not with an ingenuous projection of our Western dualism?" (1998:474).

Viveiros de Castro (1998:475) then briefly examines an essay by Lévi-Strauss where he purportedly demonstrated that Amerindians also dichotomised nature and culture, considered themselves true humans and were therefore ethnocentric. If this is the case, however, it puts them on an equal footing with the rest of humanity; they too have souls and can no longer be considered savages. "Now everything has changed", Viveiros de Castro continues:

> The savages are no longer ethnocentric but rather cosmocentric; instead of having to prove that they are humans because they distinguish themselves from animals, we now have to recognize how *in*human *we* are for opposing humans to animals in a way they never did: for them nature and culture are part of the same sociocosmic field (1998:475, emphasis in original).

For Viveiros de Castro, these different characterisations of Amerindian thought create

> [t]wo antinomies […]: either Amerindians are ethnocentrically 'stingy' in the extension of their concept of humanity and they 'totemically' oppose nature and culture; or they are cosmocentric and 'animic' and do not profess to such a distinction, being models of relativist tolerance, postulating a multiplicity of points of view on the world (1998:475).

He then details how Amerindians perceive and understand bodies, and surmises: "As bundles of affects and sites of perspective, rather than material organisms, bodies 'are' souls, just, incidentally, as souls and spirits 'are' bodies" (1998:481). For Viveiros de Castro, then, perspectivism helps resolve these antimonies (1998:469).

Unlike Descola (1992; 1996), for whom totemism is a classificatory system, Tim Ingold (2000:111-131, originally published 1998) understands totemism in terms of relationships. He draws on ethnographic data from aboriginal Australian societies for whom totemism is "a corollary of a more fundamental set of linkages between people, land and ancestral beings" (2000:112). His ethnographic data for animism comes from the circumpolar North. Ingold points out that he uses the nouns "totemism" and "animism" as "labels of convenience" and that neither should be understood as "doctrinal systems" but "rather orientations that are deeply embedded in everyday practice" (2000:112). Like Descola (1992; 1996), Ingold then switches from -isms to the adjectives totemic and animic to provide an ontological analysis of the data. For Ingold, it is the source and flow of "vital force" that differentiates the two ontologies:

> With a totemic ontology, the forms life takes are already given, congealed in perpetuity in the features, textures and contours of the land. And it is the land that harbours the vital forces which animate the plants, animals and people it engenders. With an animic ontology, to the contrary, life is itself generative of form. Vital force, far from being petrified in a solid medium, is free-flowing like the wind, and it is on its uninterrupted circulation that the continuity of the living world depends (2000:112).

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Ingold then elaborates the two ontologies in more detail (2000:112-115), before going on to demonstrate how they determine how the societies concerned depict animals.

Morten Pedersen (2001) applies Descola's and Viveiros de Castro's "new theories of animism" (2001:411) to analyse the ontological situation in North Asia. He identifies two broad societal groups: those of Northern North Asia (NNA) and those of Southern North Asia (SNA). In line with Descola (1992), Pedersen also thinks that a society can have both animistic and totemistic traits, although either animism or totemism will inevitably dominate. He proposes that NNA societies tend to be animistic, whilst SNA ones are totemistic. He explains that such tendencies are determined by the societies' structure. Thus, animism is associated with those that have a horizontal egalitarian structure, whereas totemism is associated with those that have a vertical hierarchical structure. Commenting on Viveiros de Castro's Amerindian perspectivism, Pedersen claims that it

> is a stronger version of animism. It seems to me that the conceptualization of nonhumans as persons (animism) must be a prerequisite for the notion that nonhumans may see themselves as human subjects as well as see humans as nonhuman objects (perspectivism) (2001:421).

Consequently, perspectivism as described by Viveiros de Castro, is only evident for NNA societies where the animist principle predominates. He proposes, however, that

> a transformed version of perspectivism seems to thrive in SNA namely *inter*-human perspectivism (humans becoming other humans) as opposed to *extra*-human perspectivism (humans becoming nonhumans and vice versa) found in both NNA and the Amazon […], as the totemist principle takes over from the animist principle (2001:421).

Pedersen's analysis is based on shamanistic metamorphosis, and whether the spirits involved are primarily nonhuman or human (2001:423).

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Descola (2013a) further modifies his ideas about totemism in *Beyond Nature and Culture*, originally published in French in 2005, by advancing an ontological approach that rectifies his earlier proposition that animism is totemism's classificatory symmetrical inversion. He also admits that his initial analysis was flawed:

> I had fallen into the pitfall of a dichotomy through sticking too closely to Lévi-Strauss's theory of totemism. That is why my first definition of animism and Lévi-Strauss's definition of totemic classifications could not serve as a starting point from which to characterize modes of identification […] (2013a:124).

Descola now proposes four ontological schemas, namely animism, totemism, naturalism and analogism. He explains that one ontological universal trait of humankind is to acknowledge that all humans have two attributes: *interiority*, which roughly corresponds with the Western notion of mind, soul and consciousness and can include other "immaterial principles" and other abstract notions; and *physicality*, a human being's external, visible and tangible form (2013a:115-117). He then explicates:

> Faced with some other entity, human or nonhuman, I can assume either that it possesses elements of physicality and interiority identical to my own [totemism], that both its interiority and physicality are distinct from mine [analogism], that we have similar interiorities and different physicalities [animism], or, finally, that our interiorities are different and our physicalities are analogous [naturalism] (2013a:121).

Having established the parameters of the four ontologies, and wanting to dispel his initial definition of symmetrical inversion, Descola clarifies that "animism and totemism, along with naturalism and analogism, become elementary components of a kind of syntax for the composition of the world, from which the various institutional regimes of human existence all stem" (2013a:125). He later adds that the four schema – or "modes of identification" – are not exclusive and can "coexist potentially in all human beings", though one mode will dominate (2013a:233).

Descola has not abandoned the idea of metaphor and metonym, however. He suggests that totemism, which is typified in Australia, is perfectly symmetrical, and is both metaphoric and metonymic, which is why anthropologists have struggled to define it, whereas animism is metonymic, naturalism is metaphoric and analogism looks for analogies and differences between the two (2013a:237-239).

Finally, although he does not acknowledge this, I find that Descola's definition of totemism now parallels Ingold's totemic ontology, as it is the dreamtime beings who are the source of both Descola's interiority and Ingold's vital force and who are responsible for the existence of all the different entities (Descola 2013a:147-148, 294-295; Ingold 2000:112-113).

Although Descola, Ingold and Pedersen acknowledge that it is possible for a society to have a mix of totemic and animic typologies, Rane Willerslev and Olga Ulturgasheva (2012:50) critique these three authors for not providing examples and for their oversimplified ontological models that are

> constructed around a number of inter-related dichotomies. Thus, the dichotomy between animism and totemism has […] been arranged next to those between relations versus sign, extra-human versus inter-human perspectivism, egalitarianism versus hierarchy, homologous relations versus analogous relations, and, above all, horizontal versus vertical social relationships (2012:50).

Willerslev and Ulturgasheva then take the ontological debate one step further by proposing that "the combination of animistic and totemic features appears to be the rule rather than the exception" for the Eveny and Chukchi of Siberia, who "are marked by an essentially crossbred or composed ontology that takes on features of both animism and totemism" (2012:50). They then suggest that totemism and animism are interdependent before going on to illustrate this for the Eveny and Chukchi. Totemism and animism's "respective presence

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depends on who is looking and from where" (2012:65), they conclude, before suggesting that

> the terms totemism and animisms rather than being seen as to two [sic] opposed, coherent and explicitly articulated doctrinal ontologies, as implied by their '-isms', are rather to be understood as orientations towards the spirit world, which are so deeply co-implicated that one cannot really exist without the other (2012:66).

Their conclusion brings the debate full circle back to Tylor, for whom totemism was one of many potential manifestations of animism (Rosa 2003:30).

Gregory Forth (2009) does not comment on the ontological debate. His interest is in ongoing ethnographic research and what can be learnt about "totemistic symbolism" (2009:263) and its implications, rather than treating totemism "as a general or definitive category of cross-cultural analysis" (2009:264). Forth (2009) then presents a case study of the Nage (Tamarind) people of the central region of the Indonesian island of Flores. Nage (Tamarind) is both the collective name for the people and their totem. What makes this case interesting is that Forth describes the tamarind is a "modern totem" (2009:273). Forth then explicates that the name

> 'Nage' does not refer to a clan, nor is there any evidence that it ever did. More importantly, the use of 'Nage' for a political or territorial entity larger than a single village is relatively recent, being a creation of the colonial period effectively beginning around 1910 (2009:274).

Forth (2009) provides a lot of ethnographic detail about the different clans that comprise the Nage people. Many clans are named after their totem, some of which are plants, usually trees. Common to all these clans is the taboo to burn the plant in question. Although there is no original Nage – or tamarind – clan, members of the Deu clan who were former rulers of the Nage colonial district, "assert that all Nage people should refrain from burning Nage (Tamarind) wood" (2009:267). Others contest this, however, especially those who come from other parts of the region (2009:267). Forth concludes:

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The evidence thus points toward the Tamarind taboo as a recent political invention modelled on existing clan tree totems […]. Contrary to outmoded notions of totemism as a survival of an especially primitive or ancient form of social and conceptual order, the example of the Tamarind shows how a totem can emerge in a colonial context or in similar conditions of radical social change. […] the taboo itself can be understood as part of a larger appropriation of symbols by the Deu leadership and their efforts, during most of the twentieth century, to consolidate their authority within the Nage region and to justify the position bestowed upon them by the Dutch (2009:276).

Forth's example, together with Linton's (1924) case study of the 42nd Rainbow Division, demonstrate how people employ totemistic coping strategies in different social contexts when their lifestyle is disrupted. It is also possible that "totemism", however one chooses to define it, has been overlooked by many anthropologists, as they were not expecting to find it, as was the case with Dupire (1991).

Tylor (1899:139-141; see also van Gennep 1908:56-57; Hodge 1910:789; Rosa 2003:13) thought that Long's use of the word *totam* – which he apparently took from the Ojibwa term *ototeman*[32] – confused several ideas: that Ojibwa clan names were often derived from animals, that the Ojibwa had rules about killing and eating these animals, and that the Ojibwa had individual guardian spirits, which could take animal form, and watched over them. McLennan then further developed the idea of totemism as a religion, after which there was no return (van Gennep 1908:57).

Despite Long's apparent misinterpretation – and McLennan's further elaboration of totemism – the original sense of *ototeman*, "he is of my family" or "kinship" more generally, seems not to be totally incorrect. Frazer (1887:1), for example, noted several variant spellings and that *otem* could be interpreted as "family" or "tribe". Descola (2013a:168-169) adds that the word's verbal root in North Algonquian languages always demonstrates "a social link" semantically,

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[32] In fact, Long (1791) does not mention *ototeman* (or variants), nor does he specify if his use of "totam" is derived from another Ojibwa term.

which can include kinship, totemic and individual animal spirit connections. He also notes that, despite Long's decontextualising "the term *totam* by turning it into a noun, he is nevertheless not mistaken when he reports the use of this polysemic term in an apparently unusual context" (2013a:169).

One common theme, therefore, that runs through the whole totemism debate is the idea of social identity and belonging, which is defined in some manner by a relationship with a non-human entity. Thus, Gaillard's definition of "totem" as describing the "*relationship existing in a society between a set of animals* (or plants) *and a human group*" (2004:17, emphasis mine), seems to be valid.

For me, it is not a question of whether totem entities exist or not. Neither is totemism a question of semiotic abstraction (should totems be understood metaphorically or metonymically?) or ontological typology, but rather one of how the members of the given society concerned make their totem entities present at any given moment of time. This, in turn, makes a relationship between them possible and determines how people experience and understand the relationship they have with their totem entities. Before examining the nature of this relationship as understood by my Bebelibe interviewees (Chapters Six and Seven) and their relationship with animals more generally (Chapters Four and Five), I give an overview of my research by exploring some of the research challenges I have had to deal with, which I refer to as ontological penumbras (*Negotiating the Ontological Penumbra*, Chapter Two). I then outline and discuss the fieldwork I undertook (*Research Conducted*, Chapter Two). This is followed by a detailed exposé of "presencing" (Chapter Three).

Research-Shadows and Rocks

Negotiating the Ontological Penumbra

> One cannot really become a Zande or a Nuer or a Bedouin Arab, and
> the best compliment one can pay them is to remain apart from them in
> essentials. In any case one always remains oneself, inwardly a member
> of one's own society and a sojourner in a strange land. Perhaps it would
> be better to say that one lives in two different worlds of thought at the
> same time, in categories and concepts and values which often cannot
> easily be reconciled. One becomes, at least temporarily, a sort of
> double marginal man, alienated from both worlds (Evans-Pritchard
> 1976:243).

Referring to this quote, Hutchinson states that Evans-Pritchard "capture[s]
beautifully the sense of cultural limbo that anthropologists so often have"
(1996:45) when conducting fieldwork. Other anthropologists have referred to
this place of cultural limbo – or the space where they encounter "the other" (J.
Merz and S. Merz 2017:8) – as "being in between" (Bielo 2013:5), the "space of
ethnography" (Harding 2000:58), even an "epistemological abyss" (Ewing
1994:571). As it is a space that affects our whole being, I propose with J. Merz
that it should be called the "ontological penumbra" (J. Merz and S. Merz
2017)[33]. We explain:

> Anthropologists occupy the penumbra by the means of a common
> humanity in order to expose themselves both ethnographically and
> experientially to difference and change. The penumbra is first of all an
> area where the self and the other, belief and disbelief, ignorance and
> certainty, possibility and impossibility, as well as the secular and the
> religious, meet, overlap and intertwine, sometimes to the extent of
> conflation […]. As a space of encounter and dialogue, as well as
> reflexivity and creativity, the penumbra has a strong epistemological
> component, since it is where ethnographic knowledge takes shape as a
> basis for anthropology as an academic discipline (2017:9).

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[33] We first presented this idea during the ASA 2015 conference, University of Exeter. See
J. Merz and S. Merz (2015).

We further elaborate:

> The ontological penumbra is a challenging position to occupy since it is in constant flux and subject to plurality and ambiguity. It is also potentially productive, as it provides the opportunity to engage fully with our counterparts. In order to occupy the ontological penumbra, we reflexively need to put our views, backgrounds and whole beings into question, at least to the same extent as we question our counterparts. We may feel that we lose parts of ourselves as the ethnographic encounter affects and changes us, but we should equally deepen our ontological knowledge and expertise, which provides the basis for our anthropological productivity in return. This process of ontological engagement is riddled with mystery, uncertainty, skepticism, doubt, incredulity, contradiction, paradoxes, tension, and constant negotiation, occasionally presenting itself even as threatening, sometimes leading to acute anxiety. At the same time, the ontological penumbra is full of wonder, excitement, joy, hilarity, fulfillment, and revelation, as we experience and explore with our very being what it is to be human in its full diversity, experience and expression, not only epistemologically, but also ontologically and thus existentially. This is why anthropologists should claim the ontological penumbra as the prime locus of their discipline and seek to occupy it consciously and reflexively.

> In occupying the ontological penumbra, anthropologists need to open themselves to their various counterparts' epistemological and ontological ideas, including their secular and religious perspectives. While this necessitates relinquishing the former privileged position of secular and Western epistemology, it opens up the discipline to a potentially unprecedented ethnographic productivity that is epistemologically and ontologically innovative […] (2017:11).

Vigh and Sausdal (2014; see also Bessire and Bond 2014; Harris and Robb 2012; Kohn 2015) express concern that one outcome of Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism and the subsequent ontological turn is a return to radical alterity. Furthermore, following Viveiros de Castro's statement "One culture, multiple natures – one epistemology, multiple ontologies" (2004:474), some proponents of the ontological turn propose moving away from a humanist perspective that assumes a shared humanity with multiple cultures to a post-humanist position that recognises multiple natures and realities. For Vigh and Sausdal (2014:52) this results in many worlds with ontologies that have no common ground. If others occupy another ontological realm, then multispecies relationships – or

rather what I refer to as "inter-ontonic" engagement and understanding (see Chapter Three) – is rendered almost impossible (Vigh and Sausdal 2014:57). This being the case, Vigh and Sausdal ask, "with what *register* can we anthropologically perceive and describe such difference when we have rejected any notions of commonality?" (2014:57). "Fieldwork," they point out

> builds precisely upon the idea that we *can* approach each other, communicate our differences and understand them (more or less successfully) in a way that enable [sic] us to meaningfully comprehend Otherness – thus, that we at the end of the road *do* share a communicative register or empathic nexus of some kind by which we are able to connect (2014:58, emphasis in original).

This concurs with our observation that it is via our common humanity that we enter and negotiate the ontological penumbra (J. Merz and S. Merz 2017:9). Vigh and Sausdal (2014:58) add that for Viveiros de Castro these difficulties can be surmounted with the anthropologist taking on a shamanic role by moving between, mediating and translating the different ontologies and perspectives they encounter. Vigh and Sausdal find this proposition both flattering and preposterous, as there needs to be "an underlying idea of similitude rather than incommensurability" (2014:58) in order for this to work.

Vigh and Sausdal (2014:63-64; see also Bessire and Bond 2014:444-445; Hurn 2012:25-26) then point out the potential political ramifications of the ontological turn and its radicalisation of alterity, as this continues to provide grounds for people to justify colonialism and racism, for example, or according to Bessire and Bond, could result in "new regimes of inequality or create the conditions for hypermarginality" (2014:445).

I too share Vigh and Sausdal's and Bessire and Bond's concerns. Despite this, I think that the ontological turn was an inevitable and necessary outcome of various developments. Anthropologists became increasingly reflexive as they dealt with the postmodern crisis of representation (Salzman 2002). They also

started questioning various dichotomies and how best to do justice to other people's ontological experiences, which culminated in the ontological turn (see, for example, Henare *et al.* 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Scholars also began to question certain concepts such as what it is to be human. This resulted in a further sequence of turns (such as the animal, material, species and posthuman turns) and -ism derivatives (see, for example, Snowdon 1991; Coole and Frost 2010; Ryder 2010; Wolfe 2010).

Vigh and Sausdal (2014:67) call for a return to an epistemological focus that builds on our shared heterogeneity. Despite the differences in our "ways of being," they continue, "[w]e are basically all creators of culture, all thoughtful human beings" and our "*shared being* [is] central to lived life" (2014:67, emphasis in original).

If anthropologists rely on a shared humanity to negotiate successfully the ontological penumbra, however, how do we deal with encounters with nonhuman entities? As noted in Chapter One, Viveiros de Castro (1998; 2004) explains that, following Amerindian thought, animals started as humans, and thus we do share a common humanity and culture. He (1998:476) further justifies this argument linguistically by explaining that the Amerindian terms for "human being" refer to "personhood", whilst "people" refers to "person", but in the sense of the pronouns "us" and "we". Therefore, when other nonhuman entities think collectively as "us" and "we", they too are persons. The difference between different entities is rather physical, given that "animals have a human, sociocultural inner aspect that is 'disguised' by an ostensibly bestial bodily form" (2004:465), hence Viveiros de Castro's multinaturalism that results in different perspectives and – for some – entirely different ontologies.[34] This, in turn, results in the oxymoron that Vigh and Sausdal (2014) have issue with. Several

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[34] According to Holbraad and Pedersen (2017:175-177), despite Viveiros de Castro's statement about multiple ontologies (2004:474, see above), he never intended his ideas about perspectivism and multiculturalism to be interpreted this way.

other authors, however, also emphasise our shared humanity and that how we define ourselves results from intersubjectivity as we engage in multispecies relationships (Abram 2004:154; Hurn 2012:125-138; Kohn 2013; 2015:313; Milton 2005; Morris 2000:6-8, 42; Vilaça 2005, for example). Nevertheless, I struggle to overcome the semantic restrictions of the word "humanity", which inevitably maintains a humanist perspective (see also Tuckett 2015).

Guthrie (1993:89-90, 197-199) suggests that our capacity for language and symbolism, combined with our predisposition to anthropomorphise, means that human engagement with the world is semiotic. Accordingly, we subconsciously and constantly search for symbols, metaphors and messages in our endeavour to make our encounters with other entities meaningful. Guthrie concludes that "[o]ur search for signs and symbols is so characteristic, so central to our being, that *Homo sapiens* would be better called *Homo semioticus*" (1993:198). This means that anthropologists too analyse their findings semiotically (see, for example, Descola 2013a; b; Galaty 2014; Hornborg 2006; Keane 2003; Kockelman 2011; Kohn 2007; 2013; 2015; Orr 2016; Willerslev 2007:17-19). "Others" – whether human or nonhuman – together with their ontological experiences, are thus interpreted in terms of what they signify for the "self" as symbols, icons or indexes (see also Henare *et al.* 2007; Scott 2013).

Bekoff, an ethologist, also recognises that "anthropomorphism is inevitable" (2001:641) and not necessarily a bad thing:

> We are humans, and we have by necessity a human view of the world. By engaging in anthropomorphism […] we are making other animals' worlds accessible to ourselves. […] Using anthropomorphic language does not have to discount the animals' point of view. Anthropomorphism allows other animals' behavior and emotions to be accessible to us. Thus, I maintain that we can be *biocentrically anthropomorphic* and do rigorous science (2001:641, emphasis in the original).

Milton endeavours to move beyond anthropomorphism by proposing that

personal experience, rather than human-ness, is the basis for understanding others, and that understanding is achieved by *perceiving* characteristics *in* things rather than, as anthropomorphism implies, *attributing* characteristics *to* things (2005:260, emphasis in original).

She suggests that "egomorphism" could be the way forward as this "implies that I understand my cat, or a humpback whale, or my human friends, on the basis of my perception that they are 'like me' rather than 'human-like' (2005:261; see also Tuckett 2015:24). Milton's intersubjective approach opens up the possibility of a "communicative register or empathic nexus" (Vigh and Sausdal 2014:58; see also Bekoff 2007:122-131; Hurn 2012:129) not only with other humans but with nonhuman entities as well.

> In their chapter *Thinking Through Things*, Henare *et al*. note:

> Rather than accepting that meanings are fundamentally separate from their material manifestations (signifier v. signified, word v. referent, etc.), the aim is to explore the consequences of an apparently counter-intuitive possibility: *that things might be treated as* sui generis *meanings*. […] meanings are not 'carried' by things but just are identical to them (2007:3-4, emphasis in original).

Having identified the same issue in Cobly with regard to how people relate to stones, J. Merz (2017b) suggests that the limitations resulting from a Peircean semiotic framework can be overcome by introducing a new entity called the "onton". He explains that it

> extends and complements existing signs. The onton is not a sign as such, but an indivisible and non-representational entity that cannot be broken down into different components as signs typically can. Such ontonic entities are more than meaningful; they are made present in the world when other entities relate to them through the process of presencing that shifts the focus from meaning to action (2017b:146).

J. Merz (2017b; see also 2014; J. Leach 2015; Staples 2008) argues that our understanding of life should not be limited by current semiotic thinking that continues to determine anthropological analysis, but needs to be extended to include ontonicity. Our experiences and relationships with other entities are thus

not only semiotic but also ontonic. This being the case, ontonicity is a feature of life for both human and nonhuman entities. Therefore, rather than sharing a common humanity, I suggest that we share a common *ontony*. I thereby reaffirm that all entities – whether human or nonhuman – exist within the *same* ontological world, which is nevertheless made up of multiple perspectives. These perspectives overlap and intermingle and our shared ontony allows us to move between them, admittedly with varying degrees of success depending on how we presence other entities (see Chapters Three and Eight). Thus, when the encounter between two entities is more ontonic than semiotic, they meet each other as ontons. This allows us to move beyond the impasse resulting from a combination of current semiotic analysis, together with the challenges that a multiple ontological stance creates (see also Pickering 2017).

By accessing the ontological penumbra through our shared ontony, it is possible to negotiate it productively and creatively to the benefit of both myself – the human anthropologist – and hopefully the human and nonhuman entities I engage with. Not only does the notion of ontons and a common ontony embrace ideas about intersubjectivity and Milton's (2005) egomorphism, but they also allow for empathetic relationships, a subject I return to in Chapters Four and Eight.

Some level of alterity between "self" and "other", however, is inevitable and even necessary epistemologically (Tsuda 2015; see also Willerslev 2007:22-26). After all, part of the anthropological endeavour is to seek out differences in order to understand others: "Taking alterity seriously is at the heart of what anthropologists do" Harris and Robb point out, yet "understanding, not alterity" should be our central aim (2012:676). Tsuda (2015:16; see also Marchesini 2010) adds that difference is not only productive for the anthropologist, but also for interviewees, as it allows both parties to reflect about what makes them different. I too encountered this during my research. Several of my interviewees

thanked me at the end of an interview, as my questions stimulated them to think about their sociocultural background in ways they had not considered before (see also Miller 2013:145). At this juncture, I need to add that negotiating the ontological penumbra entails dealing with two areas of alterity: firstly that which exists between me, the anthropologist and the other entities I encounter; and secondly how I deal with my research data, which challenge what I consider to be true (Holbraad 2009, see below). Remaining with the former for the moment, one further way to diminish radical alterity is to think of the "other" as one's "counterpart" instead (Marcus 2008:7).

In his essay *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture* (1973:3-30), Geertz notes:

> Although one starts any effort at thick description, beyond the obvious and superficial, from a state of general bewilderment as to what the devil is going on – trying to find one's feet – one does not start (or ought not to) intellectually empty-handed. Theoretical ideas are not created wholly anew in each study (1973:27).

Geertz recognises that one's engagement in the field is never empty or neutral. We always engage in ethnographic encounters with some pre-conceived ideas. Although Geertz is referring here to theoretical ideas that anthropologists may benefit from and build upon from other studies, their exposure to ideas and resulting inspiration are not limited to these. Anthropologists' counterparts should include not only their subjects with whom they engage whilst conducting research, but also others who are implicated in the act of generating anthropological theory and ethnographies[35]. According to Salzman, this is a necessary part of the ethnographic endeavour so that "the perspectives and insights of each researcher can be challenged and tested by the others" (2002:812; see also Lichterman 2017) in order to offset over-introspection by

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[35] See, for example, Weiner (1988), who uses excerpts from her daughter's diary. Weiner acknowledges that her daughter's "presence and the diary she kept provided me with stimulation and insights" (1988:xi). See also Tsing (2015:viii-x).

individual anthropologists and validate their findings. In sum, the debate about the ontological turn is a good example of scholars engaging with their counterparts and negotiating the ontological penumbra (see, for example, Scott 2013; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro 2014). For me, one such counterpart is my Swiss husband, Johannes Merz.

Johannes, my Counterpart

Johannes and I both work as sociocultural anthropologists for a faith-based non-governmental organisation called SIL International[36], which specialises in language development. Johannes first developed the idea of presencing during his doctoral studies, and – quite correctly – the limelight is his. I cannot help feeling that I am in his umbra, as I helped him refine his ideas and came up with some of the vocabulary he introduces and uses ("transvisuality", "onton" and "presencing practices", for example). In other instances, ideas, such as the "ontological penumbra" and the example of how presencing accounts for different interpretations of Holy Communion (see Chapter Three) developed in dialogue for which neither of us can take individual credit. Conversely, when I expressed my concern about the limitations of "humanity" and my desire to come up with an alternative, all-embracing term, we discussed a number of possibilities. Working with the idea of "ontons", I then suggested ontontity. Johannes advised that it should rather be ontonity.

We thus work as a team, despite having different fields of specialisation and separate research projects. Our different interests, together with our ideas and findings often complement each other as we seek to understand the local sociocultural milieu, the ontological and epistemological ramifications of our research and if and how our findings can be applied more broadly. Sometimes one of us struggles with a notion and – as we discuss it together – inspiration

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[36] Today the acronym is the organisation's name. SIL was formerly known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

comes and together we work at refining our ideas and analysis. We are like two stones that rub together and hone each other, but sometimes one stone eclipses the other. Our collaborative relationship means that we draw on each other's work in writing too. This also forms part of the ontological penumbra as we negotiate the fine line between giving credit where credit is due, whilst not appearing to promote one another's work unduly.

When we first arrived in Cobly in 2002 we did not have a specific research agenda. This meant we could spend time just being, as Henare *et al.* (2007) suggest, which allowed our encounters with people and other entities to be heuristic. Ironically, it helped that the Togo-Benin branch of SIL International did not know what to do with us. The branch's administration was delighted to have two anthropologists assigned to it, but largely left us to our own devices as we found our feet and slowly established our roles, initially as anthropology researchers and advisors, and later as recognised consultants for SIL International. Our autonomy in SIL Togo-Benin gave us the freedom to openly engage with the community around us, which helped us increasingly to question modernistic and Western ways of analysing our encounters. Of course questions arose as our notion of what people, animals and things are was challenged. As Henare *et al*. propose, "anthropological analysis has little to do with trying to determine how other people think about the world. It has to do with how *we* must think in order to conceive a world the way they do" (2007:15, emphasis in original). It was only several years later, once we started our respective study programmes and embarked on specific research projects, that we realised that our way of thinking had changed and that we had begun to perceive the world more as the Bebelibe do. For example, Huber (1973:387) wrote about diviners being "possessed" by *siyawesi* bush-beings. With time, rather than accepting his analysis, I came to disagree with it. Cohen's (2008) article on spirit possession further helped refine my unease with Huber's

analysis. Cohen proposes that there are two forms of possession: pathogenic and executive, with the latter corresponding to a spiritual being taking over and controlling the host, which is what Huber's analysis suggests. My experience and research indicated that diviners did not experience executive possession, although it could appear this way to those not familiar with the underlying ontological notions common to many Bebelibe. If the encounter is to be analysed in terms of possession, it is rather pathogenic given that the individuals concerned appear to be crazy, but their identities are not displaced by a spiritual being (Cohen 2008:109; see also S. Merz 2017a). As my knowledge of local ontological understanding further deepened, I realised that the idea of possession (whether executive or pathogenic) is – in fact – misleading, as the *siyawesi* are not spiritual beings, but bush-beings who primarily exist in the less-visible parts of the world. Those the *siyawesi* then choose to reveal themselves to thereby have an encounter with a physical being. The *siyawesi* remain invisible, however, to the majority of people witnessing such encounters. Consequently, the person appears to be behaving irrationally (see also *Ontological Overview*, Chapter Three).

My reaction to Huber's work was a natural outcome of my immersion in Ubielo society and heuristic encounters over a number of years. This exemplifies the other issue of alterity arising from the ontological penumbra: namely how I deal with my data and my need to address and deconstruct some dichotomous ideas I initially arrived with. Holbraad suggests that

> the most interesting anthropological data are those that cannot be captured by the analyst's default concepts. Alterity, in this sense, implies that we must always begin analysis in the dark, mired in misunderstanding [...] we have here the makings of a method that may allow us to approximate an understanding of native concepts and the strange statements that define them – a method I call 'ontography' (2009:90).

For Holbraad (2009) alterity is an ontological rather than epistemological issue that arises exactly because – in the endeavour to understand their counterparts – anthropologists are dealing with data that "resist collection" given that the underlying concepts they draw on may not allow them to adequately describe their findings, at least initially. He shares that something can appear to be "'alter' just because it negates what I assume to be true when writing anthropologically" (2009:84). He goes on to explain that

> the fact that 'alter' ethnographic data present themselves initially as negations of what we commonsensically take to be true is a result of the fact that our commonsense assumptions are conceptually inadequate to describe this data. We are getting the 'wrong' answers because we have been asking the wrong questions (2009:85; see also H. Hill 1996:334).

Although Holbraad emphasises the ontological nature of alterity, this should not result in epistemology being abandoned or negated in favour of ontology. On the contrary:

> As a space of encounter and dialogue, as well as reflexivity and creativity, the penumbra has a strong epistemological component, since it is where ethnographic knowledge takes shape as a basis for anthropology as an academic discipline (J. Merz and S. Merz 2017:9; see also Kenyon 2013).

Holbraad, together with Pedersen, later acknowledges that ontology and epistemology need to go hand-in-hand, and that this is a "central concern of the ontological turn" which is "about creating the conditions under which one can 'see' things in one's ethnographic material that one would not otherwise have been able to see" (2017:4). For Holbraad and Pedersen, the ontological turn is thereby

> a methodological project that poses ontological questions to solve epistemological problems. […] The epistemological problem of *how one sees things* is turned into the ontological question of *what there is to be seen* in the first place (2017:5, emphasis in original. See also pp. 173-174).

It was only as my understanding of Bebelibe ontology *and* epistemology developed that I started to question my own, and consequently Huber's underlying and often dichotomous assumptions. Two such dichotomies that I needed to deconstruct and reappraise were spirit versus matter and what constitutes truth versus fiction. I examine these in detail in Chapters Three and Eight, and *The Role of Myths*, Chapter Seven, as they are pivotal for understanding human-animal relationships amongst the Bebelibe.

Insider or Outsider?

My reaction to Huber also illustrates another conundrum that I needed to negotiate in the ontological penumbra: am I an insider or outsider? This is not only an issue when I am in Cobly, but also when I am back in Europe. As I move between the different ontological and epistemological perspectives that I experience and encounter in Benin, the UK and Switzerland, I experience a sense of limbo, as I neither feel fully insider nor fully outsider in any of these countries. "Indeed, some argue that there is no such thing as a true 'insider,' either cultural or gendered, because multiple and overlapping traits both draw people together and push them apart", Falen (2008:166) points out as he reflects on his research amongst women in Benin, whilst Narayan proposes to

> more profitably view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux (1993:671).

She later suggests that non-native anthropologists who have a long-term engagement with the communities they work with should be considered bicultural and that we should rather focus on how well we, as anthropologists, are "situated in relation to the people we study" (1993:671; see also Aston *et al.* 2015; Bryant 2015; Tsuda 2015) rather than whether we are native (insiders) or non-native (outsiders). My bicultural status was brought home to me during a

community event in December 2016 that Johannes and I attended. The purpose of the event was to launch some new materials that had been produced in Mbelime and generally to promote the language. Invitees included the local authorities and other stakeholders from elsewhere in Benin and Togo. We were somewhat bemused by the speeches given by those representing the local community. They all lauded our contribution to developing the language and stressed that we were Beninese, Bebelibe or their children. We realised the speech givers were informing people coming from elsewhere that they were the outsiders, not us. Despite this, Tsuda correctly points out that "regardless of what type of anthropologist we are (native, non-native, semi-native), the distance and differences between researcher and researched always persist and can never be completely eliminated" (2015:15). Hammersley and Atkinson (2007:88-91) also discuss the insider-outsider tensions that the ethnographer faces. In discussing both the challenges and advantages of these tensions, they allude to the ontological penumbra:

> [T]he researcher can also generate creative insight out of this marginal position of being simultaneous insider-outsider. The ethnographer needs to be intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness; and, in overt participant observation, socially he or she will usually be poised between stranger and friend […] (2007:89).

> There is a sense of split personality that the disengaged/engaged ethnographer may suffer. But this feeling, and equivalent feelings, should be managed for what they are. Such feelings are not necessarily something to be avoided, or to be replaced by more congenial sensations of comfort. The comfortable sense of being 'at home' is a danger signal. […] There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual 'distance'. For it is in the space created by this distance that the analytic work of the ethnographer gets done (2007:90).

The fuzzy insider-outsider boundaries become especially apparent when I need to communicate my findings to others. I find it a lot easier to write when I am in Cobly. Does this mean that I have become too much at home here? I recognise

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that my immersion in local understandings means I have taken on some of these for myself, especially those that better explain my experiences than Western alternatives I am exposed to. Local explanations about how beings are composed (see *Ontological Overview*, Chapter Three), for example, make more sense to me now than ideas about the body, and the vague – sometimes confusing – notions about mind, soul and spirit that I grew up with. Despite the fact that Cobly has become home for me, however, I will never be truly Ubielo. This becomes especially apparent when certain principles I have been brought up with – such as those related to managing time and money – assert themselves. I also visit Europe regularly and these times of distance and detachment further help me to analyse my findings.

When I relate my findings and experiences to people in Europe, however, they often sound nonsensical and many people's reactions affirm this. In response, I tailor what I say depending on the situation and people I engage with. According to Bowie, this is inevitable, given that anthropologists are "translator[s] of culture" (2006:10) who address multiple audiences simultaneously (2006:12). Despite this, my efforts to explain the sociocultural situation in northwestern Benin as sensitively as possible in order to diminish alterity and heighten understanding can at times have the opposite effect. Consequently, I sometimes decide that it is better to say nothing and side-step questions about what it is I do. West identifies similar tensions when writing about Muedan sorcery in Mozambique, and likens the act of ethnographic writing as a form of sorcery:

> I have made of Mueda and Muedans something that they themselves have not; I have remade them in accordance with my own vision. If so doing constitutes a form of sorcery, I am left to wonder […] what kind of sorcerer I am. To what ends have I engaged with the Muedan life-world? What *have* I *made* of it […]? Have I harmed or have I healed? If, as Andras Sandor has told us, the power of metaphor depends upon reflection, have I fortified Muedans by facilitating reflection upon how they have made their world through imaginative flights of reference to

the invisible realm of sorcery? Or have I – like Evans-Pritchard plucking charcoal from the witch doctor Bögwözu's poultice to expose him as a 'fraud' ([1937] 1976: 103) – *dis*empowered Muedans by calling attention to the made-ness of the world and/or exposing *how* it has been made?" (2007:83, emphasis in original; see also Hastrup 1992).

On other occasions I find myself questioning something from what could be considered an Ubielo perspective. I then reflect about how I used to react to the same thing previous to living in Cobly. For example, biblical passages that refer to God as a rock, or more generally rocks as altars,[37] never held much significance for me in the past. When I read such passages now, I wonder how they are understood locally given that certain stones and rocks (*ataadɛ*, sg. *ditade*) are shrine entities and act as intermediaries between *Uwienu* (God) and people (see *Ontological Overview*, Chapter Three). This ongoing reflexive process highlights the different ways people experience and continually (re)construct reality, together with its plasticity and how different understandings of the world affect and infect one another (See also Bernard 2017; Bowie 2006:9; Hastrup 1987; Hurn 2012:12, 78).

Being an Anthropologist and a Christian

This brings me to another issue: the challenge of being an anthropologist and a Christian. As we have explained elsewhere:

> As secularly trained professional anthropologists working for an international faith-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) we often find ourselves caught between the proverbial rock of religious theology and the hard place of secular anthropology. Together with other anthropologists who have spiritual interests, we sometimes face skepticism and animosity from various colleagues of both secular and religious perspectives and disciplines, including anthropology and theology.

> Some anthropologists have questioned our suitability and ability to engage in anthropology. Coming from British Baptist and Swiss Reformed backgrounds our 'Christian' bias is sometimes seen by

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[37] Judges 6:17-24, 2 Samuel 22, Psalm 28:1-2, for example.

default as imposing, prescriptive and intolerant, especially due to its perceived genealogical links with the modern project of Western Christendom and its colonial past. Several of our colleagues who are anthropologists with religious or spiritual interests, most notably American Christians, have either had to keep quiet about their religious life, certainly in writing, or face opposition to the extent that some feel part of 'a persecuted minority within the discipline' ([Arnold 2006], p. 268; see also [Fountain 2013], pp. 12–13; [Taylor 2007], p. 262). We have been involved in debates where some colleagues have argued that it is not possible to be a Christian and an anthropologist. Such a position inevitably leads to secular anthropologists doubting our ability to conduct research, engage in appropriate analysis and come to valid conclusions.

On the other hand, anthropologists with spiritual interests have also been accused from within the religious camp as being either heretics or having succumbed to secularism ([Evans-Pritchard 1962], pp. 37–38). Christian friends, including theologians and missionaries, sometimes struggle with our findings and writings as being too secular and critical to the extent that we feel they question our spiritual identity and sincerity. On one occasion a missionary friend shared his concern with us that we had been seen by other Christians attending sacrifices. He was worried about our exposure to demonic activities and our personal integrity as Christians, how our actions would appear to the Christian community in general, and how this would reflect on the NGO we work with.

Such confrontations may not always be pleasant, but they have pushed us to reflect on our backgrounds and secular and religious identities as we attempt to explain and justify our perspective to both camps. Consequently, we have gained first-hand experience of the inherently problematic nature of anthropology – and of theology to a lesser degree – as academic disciplines and of their practitioners' different perspectives in terms of both the secular and the religious. While we find ourselves in a challenging and sometimes uncomfortable position, it is also exciting and enriching. Drawing on this experience and various aspects of current anthropology, we seek to overcome the religious/secular dichotomy that has plagued anthropology as a discipline and has significantly contributed towards its 'awkward relationship' [Robbins 2006] with theology. In order to achieve this, we propose that as anthropologists we consciously occupy what we call the ontological penumbra where we engage with various counterparts, both human and nonhuman, as part of the ethnographic encounter (J. Merz and S. Merz 2017:1-2).[38]

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[38] See also Bekoff (2001) who makes some similar observations from an ethologist's perspective.

We then go on to examine and deconstruct the religious versus secular dichotomy and propose the need for a postsecular stance within the discipline. We conclude by suggesting that

> a possible solution lies in the postsecular turn, to which anthropologists have not yet given much attention. Postsecularism rejects secularization theories as invalid and recognizes that the religious and the spiritual are still very much with us and continue to exist alongside the secular. The religious and the secular, then, need to be recognized as interdependent and coexisting to varying degrees. This means that anthropology can no longer escape or ignore the religious, even in its midst, but should rather seek to bring it back actively as part of the secular and religious dynamics of postsecularism (J. Merz and S. Merz 2017:14; see also Ingold 2013a).

Being an anthropologist with spiritual interests further blurs insider-outsider boundaries and can help reduce the distance between my counterparts and myself. As we have noted elsewhere (J. Merz and S. Merz 2015:10-11), the people we work with in northwestern Benin often assume that we are Christians, and would be sceptical if we were to claim an agnostic, atheistic or anti-religious position (see also Bryant 2015:39-40; Hutchinson 1996:326-327). Generally, we have found that our faith commitment has proved to be a methodological advantage. It facilitates relationships not only with the local population, but also with officials and religious leaders more generally, as they too often have a faith commitment and believe in God.

> Bowie notes:

> Sundkler goes on to reflect on the inevitable bias in all anthropological investigations, whether the fieldworker is a Christian believer or an atheist, noting that: 'Obviously the writer's valuations and ideals enter into the investigation – from the collecting of the material itself, which is the fundamental stage, to the final presentation with its balancing of one viewpoint against another' (Sundkler, 1961, p. 16). The notion of disinterested social science is a myth (2006:7).

Not surprisingly then, as an anthropologist who is also a Christian, I am particularly interested in the local forms of Christianity that I encounter in Cobly,

which aspects of church teaching people readily appropriate or not and the impact of Christianity more generally. At times I struggle with what people are being taught in church, the resulting corporate actions and the expectations placed upon them. Some of the churches, for example, promote a prosperity gospel and people are expected to regularly demonstrate their material success. Many individuals I know have got into debt as a consequence, by regularly spending their money on new outfits for church, and other material goods and services that demonstrate success, rather than on those I would consider essential (see the example of Victor in *Relational Complexities and Becoming*, Chapter Eight). What I perceive as an overemphasis on material wealth and individual success clashes with the values promoted by the churches I attend in the UK and Switzerland, which challenge materialistic and individualistic "it's all about me" lifestyles (see, for example, Lindstrom 2011) and promote engagement with the wider society.

Meanwhile, the relatively recent arrival of Christianity presents me with an ideal opportunity to explore the impact of church teaching on human-animal relationships. Accordingly, many of my interviewees were churchgoers (see *Research Conducted* below). Besides interviews, participating in the life of the community has been an important part of my research.

Participating in the Community

Henare *et al*.'s (2007:4-7) recommendations about the importance of experiencing things heuristically does not seem to be that much different from participant observation, especially when the anthropologist has no specific research agenda and thus has the liberty to simply participate, observe and develop relationships. The difference lies in anthropologists' attitudes to the activities they participate in. By collapsing the "experience/analysis divide," Henare *et al*. suggest that "the experience of things in the field is already an

encounter, *simpliciter*, with meanings" (2007:4, emphasis in original). Since 2002, I have had many opportunities for such encounters as I participate in the life of the communities I engage with in the Commune of Cobly. During the past fifteen years, I have regularly attended various community and family events. These have included celebrations and ceremonies linked to birth, initiation, marriage, agriculture, installation of key community figures and death. I also generally take part in the day-to-day life of the neighbourhood where we live.

We live in a simple house that is not too ostentatious, but affords us a level of privacy, whilst not isolating us completely from our neighbours. Times of general socialising have been especially important for deepening friendships and engaging in informal, yet in-depth discussions and conversations. Like Hutchinson, I have found these occasions and friendships allow me to "express my uncertainties, curiosities, and experiences of 'culture shock' openly with others and to take the conversation from there […]. Fieldwork", she goes on to say, is "'perfecting the art of conversation.' And for a rewarding conversation, one needs thoughts and opinions for other people to engage with" (1996:45; see also Gibbal 1988:216).

It is not unusual for people to express curiosity about my curiosity and ask me questions in return. Again, like Hutchinson (1996:45), I think it is important to give open and honest answers. As mentioned above, this is part of the ongoing process that allows anthropologists and their counterparts to deal with alterity and come to a better understanding of each other.

These times of informal discussion with friends have often provided me with important lines of enquiry to follow up that I might not have thought of otherwise. It was when I was green-lighting ideas about what I could research for my PhD with Roland, a trained pastor in his mid-forties, that he told me about Emile the baker who had ordered the crocodile killed. This story then provided the foundation on which to build my research project.

I grew up surrounded by animals and have always been interested in how others interact with animals and their attitudes about meat. Two experiences in particular heightened my interest: dealing with the shock of being fed horse burgers by my host family during a French exchange when I was twelve, and my mixed reactions of appal, yet fascinating appeal, when offered whole-mouse kebabs by roadside sellers in Malawi during an undergraduate fieldtrip. Since coming to Benin, I have observed how people interact with different entities, including things and animals, and have, in turn been observed. Our *diseede wante* (family animals) include Fuggles the dog, Galaxy the cat, chickens and ducks. We have had other dogs, cats and a sheep in the past. Our *diseede wante* have acted as "social catalysts" (Hurn 2012:102) and gatekeepers (Acton 2014), which has been beneficial for my integration into the community, understanding the local environment and my research. Several interviewees, for example, referred to our animals during their interview, commenting – with approval – about our keeping poultry or referring to one of our dogs to exemplify a point they wanted to make. More generally, people with whom I may not otherwise socialise, regularly engage Fuggles and me in conversation when I take him for a walk (see also Lane 2015; K. Swanson 2008). They ask after him when he is not with me, and tell me to greet him for them once I am home. People also express consternation that I take him out on a lead, as they see this as a violation of his autonomy (see *What is an Animal?* and *Property or Sentient Beings?*, Chapter Four).

Such occurrences have allowed me to experience first-hand the joys and challenges of being responsible for animals in a situation very different from the UK. Not only are veterinary services in the Commune of Cobly minimal[39], but I

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[39] Locally there are no veterinary surgeons, but rather *techniciens des services vétérinaires* (*TSVs*) who have some basic veterinary knowledge, offer important vaccines (such as rabies) and can perform simple procedures. The regional capital, Natitingou (50 miles from Cobly, see Map 1), now has a private veterinary practice since 2014.

have also been confronted with local knowledge and ideas very different from those I grew up with, such as people's reactions to my using a lead with Fuggles, and ideas about animal autonomy and husbandry more generally.

Another early example of note took place in February 2004. Johannes and I had gone to a neighbouring town with a group of Bebelibe musicians for an ethnomusicology workshop. When we arrived a young American woman sought my advice. A horse had kicked a young mule (*Equus mulus*) and shattered its off hind leg, could anything be done to save it? The leg was a mess; the bone had broken through the skin and the rest of the leg was dangling by some muscle and sinews. There was no way it could be saved, but neither was there a vet[40] who could come and put it down. Finding someone who would be willing to kill it proved to be almost impossible, although I knew that most of the men present would have an idea how to kill it. Yet, when I asked if someone could put the mule out of its misery, everybody refused. Yes, they agreed that the mule was suffering, but they evidently were uncomfortable with the suggestion that it should be killed. I realised that they were afraid. I later learnt that members of the *Equidae* family are considered extremely powerful and are accorded quasi-human status. Consequently, to kill an *Equidae* family member without just cause[41] is tantamount to murder and there is the danger that the animal concerned will avenge its death (see Chapter Six). Those present thought it better to let the mule die naturally than to be implicated in its death. Eventually a Fulani[42] agreed to do the deed.

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[40] *TSVs* do not have the means – and are often unwilling – to put animals down. When an animal needs to be destroyed (locally, people employ the French verb *achever*) one needs to find a local person who knows how to kill the animal in question.

[41] This includes killing animals that are very sick or severely injured (see *Sickness, Danger and Animals Behaving Badly*, Chapter Five).

[42] The Fulani (or *Peuhl* in French) are cattle herders present throughout West Africa. They are largely nomadic, though there are some who have settled in the area.

Research Conducted

Negotiating my own and other people's views about and interactions with animals has been an enriching experience and one of the main motivating factors behind my choosing to conduct this research. My experiences have provided me with important insights about people's relationships with animals and the issues arising from these. This, in turn, has been invaluable in thinking through what questions to ask during interviews. These insights also allowed me to understand better what people told me and to interpret and analyse the resulting data. Conducting formal interviews has been important for affirming – or otherwise – my observations and informal conversations to date. Such research provides me with points of orientation when negotiating the ontological penumbras I encounter. It also provides me with further data that will hopefully allow me to make a valid epistemological contribution to the field of anthropology. I now detail the actual research I conducted.

Phase One

During the first phase of my research, which I conducted in 2015, as part of my general participant observation, I spent a day with a dog butcher, an afternoon with a group of young men as they butchered a pig and goat for a celebration, and visited two commercial animal farms. I also interviewed 50 people (see details below) from 12 of the 24 Mbelime-speaking communities (see Map 3 and *Bebelibe Communities* in the Appendices). Most interviews took place during the months of February to May, which is the hot season. People usually finish harvesting their crops by February and agricultural activities are minimal as people wait for the rains to start. I also interviewed a retired pastor whose first appointment was to a village in the Commune of Cobly where he had to deal with a scandal about Christians killing crocodiles in the 1960s (see *Vignette Two*, Chapter Seven), and asked the gendarmerie commander if he

would be willing to provide information about official complaints and crimes involving animals. In this instance, we established that it would be better for me to provide a simple questionnaire, for which he solicited the help of the other gendarmes, then provided me with written answers.

Bienvenue Sambiéni conducted two butcher surveys in June 2015 and December 2017 for the town of Cobly to establish how many butchers and meat sellers there are and if they are increasing. The surveys include information about where in town they are located, when they started, what animals they butcher and what problems they encounter. Bienvenue has assisted me with research since 2004. Johannes and I initially employed him as a night guard in 2002. Some months after taking him on, he asked if he could borrow our French dictionary. Curiosity finally got the better of us and we asked him what he was using it for. We learnt that he was spending his nights translating the dictionary into Mbelime. Bienvenue is passionate about his language and culture. Although he never finished his secondary school education, he has a good level of French and an excellent command of the Mbelime orthography. He is a natural networker and is well liked and respected. Having observed these qualities, we took him on as a fulltime research assistant and general helper. He has since become the driving force behind the Mbelime-French dictionary (N.B. Sambiéni *et al.* 2016).

Claire N'Tadé, my second research assistant and general helper since 2006, also started working for us in 2002 as a part-time cleaner. She too loves her language and culture and is in good standing with the community. She has been trained as a literacy teacher and also has a good level of French, despite not finishing her secondary school education.

In order to understand the more complex nature of totemic relationships and other phenomena such as shapeshifting and reincarnation, I needed to establish how people relate to animals more generally. I also wanted to

ascertain if, how and why people's attitudes toward animals might be changing, so I asked the 50 interviewees questions about:

- Human-animal relations (human-animal ontology; communicating with animals; shapeshifting and reincarnation);
- Killing animals (when; why; the dangers involved) and meat eating (likes and dislikes; interdictions; frequency and trends);
- Animal husbandry (tethering and confinement; breeding and castration practices);
- Using draught animals (perceptions and dangers involved).

As this part of my research focused on people's ideas about and attitudes towards animals, I conducted semi-structured – also known as guided (J. Bell 2002:138) or reflexive (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:117) – interviews. I started each interview with the same two questions: "Do animals have *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force)?" and "Do they also have *mtakimɛ* (identity)?" I then asked further questions pertaining to the subjects under discussion, but did not strictly follow my questionnaire, as I preferred to allow the conversation to develop and flow as naturally as possible. If the interview had been overly structured, it could come over as an oral questionnaire with the risk of being too limiting and impersonal. Conversely, having no structure at all could result in the conversation going in unexpected directions. Although the information might prove to be interesting, it might not necessarily be relevant (J. Bell 2002:138; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:118). This scenario is not necessarily disadvantageous, however, and can arise with semi-structured interviewing too. Early on in my interviews, questions about shapeshifting quickly revealed information about an animal that interviewees referred to as *kɛmunnaakɛ*[43] (pl. *simunnaasi*) in Mbelime or *l'âne sauvage* in French. The French is ambiguous

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[43] Literally "donkey-who-flattens" as they like to roll in the dirt, therefore flattening the ground.

as it could refer to the wild ass (*Equus africanus*) or feral donkeys (*Equus africanus asinus*). This opened up an avenue to explore further, as wild asses do not occur in the region and evidence suggests that they have never existed in Sub-Saharan Africa (Blench 2004:22).

Working in a milieu where relationships and reciprocity are central features of the society means that good relationships are crucial, especially given that social research necessitates actively engaging with people and should never be treated simply as a means of collecting data (Banks 2001:179; see also Narayan 1993:677); "Ethnography, whatever else it might be, is a relational endeavour" (Bielo 2013:5; see also Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:70, 109; J. Merz and S. Merz 2017:10). Thus, it is important that there is already an established relationship with interviewees, so that they feel at ease enough to share deeply and honestly about their knowledge and experiences. Establishing new relationships in the Commune of Cobly, especially with the older generation, can involve several visits and exchanging gifts. Accordingly, I mainly chose people I already knew and had worked with before, several of whom I consider friends (see also Tillmann-Healy 2003). The nature of my research meant that I needed to choose some new people too (two butchers, a meat-seller and two community shrine priests) to ensure that I represented all the different roles people have that involve animals in the Commune of Cobly. As there are a number of butchers and meat-sellers present in the town of Cobly, I sought advice from Bienvenue and Claire about potential interviewees. Their good standing in the Commune of Cobly, extensive relational networks and knowledge of the wider community meant that they could advise me about those who would be genuinely interested in helping. Bienvenue or Claire already had a good relationship with the new people I subsequently interviewed. Thus, they mediated on my behalf to arrange an initial meeting. This, in turn, ensured a level of mutual trust and understanding that might have

been lacking had I tried to initiate direct contact with the people concerned. Interviewees readily told me when they did not know something or when I had misunderstood them. This reassured me that they were not concocting information to please me.

Interviewees included people living in the town of Cobly and the villages of Namountchaga, Oukodoo, Oroukparé and Sinni, all within the Commune of Cobly (see Map 2). They had an age range of 21 to 70 amongst the women and 22 to 90 for the men. Local social structures mean that nearly everyone is related one way or another through sanguine or affinal relations. This meant that interviewees were often from the same immediate or extended family, and I had several instances where I interviewed fathers and sons, aunts and nephews, husbands and wives, or siblings, for example. All the interviews during Phase One, however, were between the individual and me, together with either Bienvenue or Claire when I needed an interpreter (see below).

Interviewees had varying degrees of formal education from none at all to university graduates and those who have completed apprenticeships. Of the 50 interviewees, all except six (one of whom is Muslim) had attended church (protestant and catholic) at some time or other and 26 were regular churchgoers when interviewed. Although this high ratio of churchgoers – both past and ongoing – is partly due to my interest in researching the impact of church teaching on human-animal relationships, it is also indicative of the more general situation. Church attendance in the town of Cobly is relatively high and people's general curiosity and Christianity's association with modernity means that many people try church and thus have a basic knowledge of Christianity (Erny 2001:19; Horton 1971:86; J. Merz 2008:209; 2014:255-256; Meyer 1998; 1999). Accordingly, there are not many people who have never attended church at some point in their lives. Local forms of Christianity are not without their problems. Consequently, many become disillusioned and leave again. As I

have noted elsewhere (S. Merz 2017b:123), their disillusionment is often with the institutional nature of the church rather than with Christianity as a faith. Many ex-churchgoers still consider themselves Christian and appropriate ideas from the teaching they received or from reading the Bible in French if literate, especially when these ideas help them to understand better the world around them.

Key community figures whom I interviewed included: the king, a village chief and two village deputy chiefs, two community shrine priests, a diviner, a retired pastor, a church leader, three butchers, a businessman and commercial farmer[44], a pig farmer[45], a meat seller, an animal trader and a soya cheese maker.

Of the 50 interviewees, only 11 were women, five of whom were widows. This imbalance is partly due to education, as those who have successfully completed their *baccalauréat* or received a higher education were all male. This is representative of the schooling situation in general, as – until recently – boys were prioritised over girls. Writing about the Commune of Cobly in 1988, Heywood (1991:11) estimated that 95% of women were illiterate, whilst only 10% of secondary school students were girls. More girls started going to school following a local campaign by *Aide et Action* in 2001 and 2002. *Aide et Action* put up large posters in town with a picture of cheerful girls in school uniforms and the slogan "*Toutes les filles à l'école*" [All girls to school]. Today, most people accept that all children should go to school.

Men also represent the public face of the family. This, together with the positions they may hold and the schooling opportunities they have had, means that men are generally more open to participating in research. This discrepancy

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[44] Over the years Isaac has raised poultry, rabbits, pigs and goats explicitly for commercial purposes, as opposed to the majority of the population who have *diseede wante* (family animals). See Introduction, Chapters Four and Five.
[45] Like Isaac, Bernadette raises pigs commercially.

is not unique to the Commune of Cobly. When conducting research in Internet cafés in urban settings in southern Benin, Moratti (2009:82) noted that the girls she approached were reluctant to participate in her research. The high ratio of widows amongst my female interviewees also typifies the sociocultural situation. Despite ongoing levirate practices (S. Merz 2014:15-17), widows often have to take on duties usually executed by men and subsequently become more forthright and generally more willing to participate in research.

Finally, 15 of the male interviewees have roles that are considered male-only roles (the king, village chiefs and deputies, pastors and church leaders, for example) or that only men can fulfil (community shrine priests and butchers), as women should not kill animals. The Mbelime term for woman is *unitipuohʒ* (pl. *bɛnitipuobɛ*), literally "person-who-kills". Women have the power to either create or destroy (see also Sewane 2002:11; Falen 2008:170; Vialles 1994:106-108) and are called "persons-who-kill" out of respect. Women should not abuse this power, however. If they kill animals, the animals could seek revenge by reincarnating their next child, for example. On occasion, however, a diviner will indicate that someone's paternal aunt should perform a sacrifice (S. Merz 2014:38, 52, 61). In this instance, there is no danger of revenge. Women are therefore less ceremonially involved with animals than men. In terms of general knowledge, attitudes towards and opinions expressed about animals, I found that gender did not seem to make a difference.

17 of the interviews were in French only, whilst two were predominantly in French with some Mbelime, and the rest were in French and Mbelime. Bienvenue and Claire were my interpreters given that my spoken Mbelime is not adequate for in-depth interviewing. When choosing whether Bienvenue or Claire should be my interpreter, the relational aspect rather than their gender was the deciding factor, given that I found relationships are often more

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important than gender amongst the Bebelibe due to their egalitarian ethos (see Introduction).

Neither did my being a woman seem to limit my access to men or their willingness to share. Although this may be partly due to the fact that relationships rather than gender seem to be more important, Falen, writing about his research amongst women in southern Benin, encountered a number of problems and notes that

> similar obstacles are generally *not* recorded for women doing research among men (cf Marshall 1970, 181). Scholars have commented on this widely-held assumption that female researchers are more flexible, or possibly more androgynous, than men, making women ethnographers more likely to accomplish cross-gender research […] (2008:166, emphasis in original).

Before starting formal research, I visited key community figures and gatekeepers (the king, village chiefs and local authorities such as the gendarmerie commander, for example) in the locations where I intended to conduct research. I explained what I would like to do and asked for their permission to conduct interviews with people who fall under their jurisdiction. I then approached people on an individual basis, explained the nature of my research and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed. We then arranged a place and time to meet again.

Many of my interviewees were illiterate or semi-literate. Besides issues of literacy, many of the participants would not have viewed the use of a consent form positively. People associate paperwork that requires personal details and their signature (or thumb print) with politics and the government. Consequently, using a signed a consent form would be ethically questionable (ASA 2011:2; K. Bell 2014:512; Miller 2013:143-146). I therefore relied on verbal consent, which I recorded at the start of the actual interview. I asked if interviewees:

- Were happy for me to record the interview;

- Were willing to participate in my research;

- Would allow me to quote or refer to what they shared with me in my thesis write-up and other resulting publications. For those with whom I had worked with in the past, I also asked if I could use information from our previous interviews;

- Wanted to be named in the acknowledgements (having explained that I would use pseudonyms in the main text of the thesis).

Having asked the questions above, Antoine, a farmer in his mid-fifties, asked rhetorically, "Would I be here if I didn't want to be?" He then laughed. Despite this, there was a slight edge of frustration, as Antoine has participated in several of my research projects and thought these questions unnecessary. Most interviewees simply replied, "yes" to all the questions. Like Antoine, however, several others with whom I have worked over the years, also gave speeches, seemingly for the benefit of the University:

> I am completely at your disposal and I think I'll accompany you right to the very end. When you have a need, let me know. I am available at any moment. […] If I didn't want [to help you] I wouldn't have come. I accepted, I agreed, there's no problem (Adrien, a churchgoing NGO worker in his late-twenties).

Most of the interviewees wanted their name to be acknowledged, whilst some others said I could decide. Several were not keen on my using pseudonyms as having their name appear in print is important to them: "Yes!" Henri, a carpenter in his late-thirties, categorically stated, "no problem, yes, me, I will be proud [laughs]. One is born to do something. Yes, when God puts you in the world it's to help, to do something for him." Van der Geest notes a similar situation in Ghana:

> [Research participants] said they did not like my 'confidentiality'. They wanted to see their names on paper. Their main worry was that after death they would sink into oblivion. My writing about them would help them to be remembered (2011:148; see also 2003; Tillmann-Healy 2003:742).

Despite this I want to diminish potential repercussions for my interviewees resulting from what I write. I therefore decided to maintain pseudonyms, especially as several interviewees did disclose sensitive information at times, such as illegal hunting expeditions to the local national parks. Their stories also made me rethink my understanding of poaching, which – in principle – I am against. Discovering that some of my friends, however, were technically poachers, whilst learning that hunting is integral to their way of life has clouded the issue. I realised that I needed to review my ideals about poaching. Morris notes a similar situation:

> What is of interest about [Adams and McShane's] account – quite unique among conservationists and wildlife officers – is that they sympathise with the hunters' predicament and acknowledge the crucial importance of subsistence hunting in the local economy, and to the very livelihood of men like Nyirenda. The 'poacher' is no longer depicted as the 'villain' […] (2009:243; see also Milner-Gulland 2002).

Interviewees also explained that bushmeat used to be the family's main source of meat and bemoaned the decrease in bush animals today in the Commune of Cobly. This, in turn, impacts their relationship with their *diseede wante* (family animals), which they increasingly eat instead (see Chapters Four and Five). What is not clear is to what extent their subsistence hunting contributes to the decline of bushmeat, and how much is due to general pressure on the land through population growth and increasing agricultural activities.

Despite my using pseudonyms, anyone familiar with the dispute between the Bɛbidibɛ and Bɛkɔrɛ, the 1960s crocodile killings and Emile the baker's death would be able to identify some of the interviewees that I give voice to. I have taken care not to share anything that is not already public knowledge, however, that could potentially compromise the people concerned.

When quoting interviewees, I have endeavoured to express what they shared in clear, natural English, whilst maintaining as far as possible the original

meaning. Linguistically, I have had to negotiate three languages: Mbelime (the main language of the Commune of Cobly), French (the language of wider communication) and English. Thinking through my interview questions necessitated that I tried to think with Mbelime logic before translating them into French so that the interviewees would correctly understand them. Bienvenue and Claire were my first interviewees. Following their interviews, I reviewed my questions with them to ensure that they understood my research objectives. After the first few interviews we conducted together, we re-evaluated the questions and refined them as needed. For example, one of the more challenging questions concerned shapeshifting. When talking about shapeshifting in Mbelime, people use the verb *kɔnta* (to become). This verb, however, is not limited to shapeshifting and is employed to describe other situations where a being's identity changes either temporarily or permanently. This can include becoming rich, becoming a doctor, or reincarnating, for example. This meant that when we tried to elicit information about shapeshifting, some interviewees initially talked about reincarnation until we clarified the question by asking about a human who could *temporarily* become an animal, and then change back again (and vice versa). Similarly, when interviews were in French, people employed the verb *transformer* (to transform) when discussing shapeshifting and reincarnation.

Having first gained permission from interviewees, I digitally recorded our conversation. This enabled me to concentrate on the discussion, whilst allowing it to develop and proceed as naturally as possible. Having a recording also facilitated further analysis of the interview afterwards, especially as the meaning of words can change when they cross linguistic or sociocultural boundaries (Meyer 1999:55, 80-82) and the vocabulary people employ can help to understand how they perceive and engage with the world around them (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:145). For example, I was perplexed why those

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I interviewed in French regularly stated that people hunt in the forest. For me, this conjured up images of extensive woodlands. Yet, I knew that most of the animals that people hunt live in the savannah. Bienvenue and Claire also interpreted the Mbelime term *dikpaade* as "*forêt*". After an in-depth discussion, we established that, although *dikpaade* can be a forest and wooded areas, it refers to *any uninhabited wilderness*, which includes savannah bush and grasslands. I later learnt that there is a specific Mbelime term (*dibuode*) for forest.

Having the interviews recorded also meant that I could clarify potential ambiguities between Bienvenue and Claire's French interpretations with what interviewees actually said in Mbelime. For example, Bienvenue regularly interpreted interviewees' descriptions of shapeshifting as changing shirts. When I read the interview transcripts, however, there was no mention of shirts in Mbelime. The interviewees concerned talked about putting on or taking off different bodies. When I queried this, Bienvenue explained that people only use these verbs when talking about changing clothes (see *Ontological Overview*, Chapter Three and *Socialising Crocodiles and Mischievous Monkeys*, Chapter Six). This assured me that Bienvenue and Claire were doing a good job, as they explicated information that would otherwise be implicit.

Besides formal times of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, since arriving in Cobly in 2002 I have kept a field journal, which includes observations and anecdotes that conceptualise Bebelibe understandings of human-animal interactions. Bienvenue and I have also been collecting myths. One immediate outcome is a vernacular booklet on the Bebelibe communities and their totems (N.B. Sambiéni and R. Sambiéni 2016). Although I have not authored the book, people acknowledge that it is directly linked to my research. The book is extremely popular, especially as it helps preserve the communities' cultural heritage.

Phase Two

During phase two of my research in 2016, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with people whose totem animal is the crocodile or python. Most of the interviews took place during the months of February, May and June. I asked:

- If they knew the reason why the crocodile/python was their totem;
- What could happen if they harm, kill and/or eat their totem animals; what they would do if they came across someone else mistreating their totem animals; the scandal of Christians killing crocodiles in the 1960s and of Emile the baker having a crocodile killed in 2013;
- What it meant if they encountered their totem animals (alive, dead and in dreams);
- Totem animals' kinship status, reincarnation and shapeshifting;
- Some more general questions to further clarify what differentiates humans from animals.

Interviewees included people living in the town of Cobly and the villages of Namountchaga, Nanakadé, Okommo, Oukodoo and Oroukparé, all within the Commune of Cobly (see Map 2). In all, I interviewed 39 people, 11 of whom were women. In order to try and address the imbalance of men and women, I sought out seven more women with the help of Bienvenue and Claire. In two instances, other male members of the women's families joined in the conversation – resulting in three more men – so that they became group interviews, sometimes with lively discussions. The men tended to dominate, which somewhat defied my objective of offsetting the male-female imbalance. Nevertheless, one of the discussions elicited important information about the scandal with Emile the baker that I may not have gained otherwise. In another instance, however, Louis' wife was present during the first half of the interview. At times she dominated the discussion, especially when talking about Emile.

Despite being from the south, her discontent about what happened was evident (see *Vignette One*, Chapter Seven).

I also interviewed a third community shrine priest whose totem is the crocodile. As four of the men and seven of the women had not participated in the first research phase, I also asked them some foundational ontological questions about human and animal composition before discussing totem animals more specifically. This brought the total number of interviewees for both phases to 63 (44 men, 19 women).

During 2017 I conducted some further follow-up research. This included a group discussion about shapeshifting in the village of Kèyamboussikè (see Map 2), documenting how soya cheese is made and further interviews with Robert, the NGO worker in his late-thirties, about his relationship with his python. Finally, I made a trip to the Pendjari National Park to get animal video footage. So far I have shown the video to five people who have seen a *kɛmunnaakɛ* (pl. *simunnaasi*, *l'âne sauvage*) in order to establish if this is actually an antelope rather than a wild ass or feral donkey. Results to date are ambiguous and will necessitate further research. Two people indicated that it is the female waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus defassa*). The other three did not see any *simunnaasi* in the video (which does not include donkeys). Thus, the exact status of *kɛmunnaakɛ* remains in the shadowy realms of the ontological penumbra.

Whilst navigating the ontological penumbra and thinking through its methodological and analytical ramifications, I also realised that negotiating penumbral issues has broader implications that go beyond methodology. In the coming chapters, I further explore these implications, together with the notion of presencing, in order to understand better human-animal relationships amongst the Bebelibe more generally before explicating the more complex nature of shapeshifting and totemic relationships.

Presencing and the Onton

> It was six men of Indostan
> To learning much inclined,
> Who went to see the Elephant
> (Though all of them were blind),
> That each by observation
> Might satisfy his mind (Saxe 1873:259)

Saxe (1873:259-260) goes on in verse and depicts how each man drew a different conclusion depending on which part of the elephant he felt. The elephant was respectively a: wall (side), spear (tusk), snake (trunk), tree (knee), fan (ear) and rope (tail). He concludes:

> And so these men of Indostan
> Disputed loud and long,
> Each in his own opinion
> Exceeding stiff and strong,
> Though each was partly in the right,
> And all were in the wrong!
>
> So, oft in theologic wars
> The disputants, I ween,
> Rail on in utter ignorance
> Of what each other mean,
> *And prate about an Elephant*
> *Not one of them has seen!* (1873:260-261, emphasis in original)

"Each was partly in the right, And all were in the wrong!" (Saxe 1873:260) Or were they? Each blind man engaged with the elephant and found meaning in what he discerned. Or – to put it another way – each blind man presenced the elephant differently so that what he perceived made sense to him. Now someone who *sees* the elephant has a different perception of it and may presence it in an entirely different way. Different people using different senses; different perceptions resulting in different conclusions, but everyone engaged with the *same* matter. Presencing – as explained by J. Merz (2017b) and as I

stated in the Introduction – accounts for how individuals "make present" and engage in and with the world around them.

In Chapter Two, I introduced the onton following J. Merz (2017b), who explains that ontons are any living, relational entities that cannot be divided into representations (signifier) and represented (signified) as signs can. J. Merz (2017b) further elaborates that an onton is neither a structured nor an abstract sign, a material thing nor any other manifestation that signifies something else. The onton is rather an experiential, agentive and relational entity, which "interacts with other entities that populate and constitute the world" (2017b:149). This does not mean that ontons do not – or cannot – have multiple parts; they may have several. These parts, however, operate together as a single, inseparable and indistinguishable, non-representational entity, which is identical with its meaning (J. Merz 2017b). I then reaffirmed that all entities exist within the same ontological world and I proposed that when the encounter between two entities is more ontonic than semiotic, they meet each other as ontons. This means that multispecies – or to be more precise inter-ontonic relationships – are possible because of our shared ontonity. Ontonity results from our underlying ontonic nature, which includes the ability to engage ontonically in the world and with other entities. Ontonity not only enables us to encounter other entities as fellow beings, but also means that these encounters can be intersubjective and empathetic.

How different individuals or groups manifest – or "presence" – ontonity at different times results in multiple ontological explanations and understandings of the world. People then move between or entertain different ontological explanations and understandings depending on the situation at the time. Presencing, then, could provide the means to move away from reductionist tendencies to classify societies as totemistic, animistic, naturalist, et cetera. Rather than starting out by seeing how a society best fits a given classification,

presencing starts with the premise that there are no classifications as such. Presencing thus shifts the focus to the process that people employ in order to make sense of the world as they engage in and with it. In order to demonstrate this and how ontonity can be understood in Bebelibe terms, I first need to explicate the underlying ontological notions common to many Bebelibe, as explained by the majority of my interviewees. This, in turn, forms the basis for appreciating how people relate to the other beings who populate their world, including animals, and how these different relationships are experienced through hunting, animal husbandry, ritual, shapeshifting and totemic engagement. These experiences and relationships then inform attitudes towards hunting, domestication, killing animals and consuming meat, and the commodification animals, which I explore in Chapters Four and Five, and how people perceive and relate to their totem animals, which I explore in Chapters Six and Seven.

Ontological Overview

As noted in the Introduction, people generally acknowledge *Uwienu* as the Supreme Being and creator of all. For those who follow the path of their ancestors and would not call themselves Christian, *Uwienu* usually remains distant[46] and can only be approached via intermediaries. These include the *ataadɛ* (stones and rocks, which are shrine entities, sg. *ditade*) and *atenwiɛnɛ* (shrine entities more generally, sg. *ditenwɛnde*), *bɛhidibɛ* (the dead, sg. *uhiidɔ*) and *siyawesi* (bush-beings, sg. *kɛyawedikɛ*) (see also Huber 1973; S. Merz 2017a).

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[46] Sometimes *Uwienu* takes on human form to visit people (see below). See also Huber (1979:78), who recounts some myths that tell why *Uwienu* distanced himself from humans.

All beings have *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force, pl. *sibosi*), *mtakimɛ* (identity) and either *ukuɔnu* (body-skin, pl. *tikɔnte*[47]) or *uhedihy̨* (pelt and plumage, pl. *tihedite*[48]), which accounts for their material presence in the more-visible parts of the world. What really constitutes an individual being is its *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* as its *ukuɔnu* is transient, and some beings – such as the *siyawesi* bush-beings and *ataadɛ* stone shrine entities – can have several *tikɔnte* simultaneously in the more- and less-visible parts of the world (see below). Using the analogy of a clothed body Joël, a thirty-year-old farmer, summarised how he understood the relationship between peoples' *tikɔnte*, *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ*. He explained that when you see people walking, you see them dressed in shirts and trousers. Their bodies are hidden under these clothes. The clothes that you see are the people's *tikɔnte*, which they can change, whereas the body underneath the clothes are *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ*, which cannot be separated. People – and other beings – can "change bodies" temporarily when they shapeshift and permanently following death, when they reincarnate (see below). *Kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ*, however, do not occupy the body as such but infuse it. Thus, beings are simultaneously and inseparably material and immaterial; they are "transmaterial" (J. Merz 2014:79-135).[49]

Kɛbodikɛ (animating force) animates a being's *ukuɔnu* by providing it with the force needed to live. Some people associate it with the movements of the circulatory system and breathing, whilst others say that it is located in the

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[47] Often, when interpreting into French, people say that *ukuɔnu* is the body, and *tikɔnte* is the skin. *Tikɔnte*, however, is the plural form of *ukuɔnu* (skin).

[48] When talking about animals that have fur or feathers, people rather say *uhedihy̨* instead of *ukuɔnu*. Several interviewees explained that this distinguishes birds and furry animals from humans. They also recognise, however, that when the feathers or fur are removed, these animals also have *ukuɔnu*.

[49] See also Willerslev (2011:515-516), who notes the same idea for the Chukchi (Siberia). He also observes that "when taking a hasty glance through the enormous ethnographic literature on soul conceptions, it is hard to find any examples whatsoever of an altogether immaterial soul" (2011:514-515). Also Howell, writing about the Chewong of Malaysia, notes that "the ingredients of their embodied knowledge" include the body, *ruwai* ("soul"), eyes, odour and liver (seat of emotions), which cannot be separated "into unconnected parts or qualities" even though they are "differentiated and named" (1996:132-133). They also refer to the body as a "cloak".

being's torso together with *mtakimɛ* (identity). *Mtakimɛ* comprises several other parts including *upinsihʉ* (pl. *tipinsite*, destiny), *diyammaade*[50] (pl. *ayammaadɛ*, the ability to think, reason and make decisions) and *tipaninpaate* (behaviour). In short, it is *mtakimɛ* that defines a given being's character, makes individuals unique and enables them to relate to others, and thus provides them with their identity. *Mtakimɛ* also protects and strengthens *kɛbodikɛ*, and provides guidance and orientation through a sense of right and wrong, discernment and seeing. *Kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* are interdependent[51] and when the two work together in harmony, the being concerned is well balanced emotionally, mentally and physically. When this balance is lacking, the being's behaviour, character, mental and physical wellbeing are affected. When this occurs, people say that the being has bad *mtakimɛ* (*mtakitiɛmɛ*). If the being concerned is human, for example, ceremonies may be needed to restore order (S. Merz 2013:20-21; J. Merz 2014:91), whilst animals may need to be killed (see *Sickness, Danger and Animals Behaving Badly*, Chapter Five).

The *ukuɔnu* (body-skin) dies when its *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force) and *mtakimɛ* (identity) leave it definitively, though it is only once the *ukuɔnu* has decomposed, disappeared or been consumed that their bond with it is completely severed. *Kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* return to *Uwienu* (God) and negotiate a new *upinsihʉ* (destiny) with him. This includes their material form, which family they will return to, their ability to have healthy offspring, when they expect to return to *Uwienu* and their vocation in life (see also Fortes 1987:149; R.A. Swanson 1980; 1985:178). Thus, someone may be said to have hunter, cultivator or animal *upinsihʉ* or *mtakimɛ* (see Chapter Four), or shapeshifting *upinsihʉ* or *mtakimɛ* (see Chapter Six), for example. Once their new *upinsihʉ*

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[50] Besides different *tikɔnte* (body-skins) or *tihedite* (pelts and plumage), for several interviewees it is the *diyammaade* that distinguishes humans from other animals (see *What is an Animal?*, Chapter Four).
[51] Consequently, interviewees often used one term or the other – usually *kɛbodikɛ* – when talking about both.

has been negotiated, and with *Uwienu*'s authorisation, *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* then take on their new *ukuɔnu* (pl. *tikɔnte*) by reincarnating (*siihɩ̣*[52]) one, or several, new being(s) who will normally comprise the same material presence in the more-visible parts of the world, that is to say human to human, bush-being to bush-being, shrine entity to shrine entity, dog to dog, and so on.

Those who have died a good death[53] also continue to exist as *bɛhidibɛ* (the dead). As previously noted, the *bɛhidibɛ* act as intermediaries between the living and *Uwienu* (God). They too occupy a new *ukuɔnu* – also called *bɛhidibɛ* – that allows them to have a material presence in the more-visible parts of the world. These are mud mounds in the *ukoohɥ* (vestibule, literally "lineage") that provide a point of contact between them and the living (S. Merz 2014:7; see also 2013:37-38 and Figure 1).

In the case of multiple reincarnations, *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* divide and each *kɛbodikɛ-mtakimɛ* pair chooses its own distinct destiny. This means that individuality is maintained and each individual is considered unique. Despite this, the respective *kɛbodikɛ-mtakimɛ* pairs remain linked as they share the same reincarnating ancestor's *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ*. This has some ramifications as humans who share the same reincarnating ancestor risk dying together. To avoid this danger, when one dies, the others are forbidden from attending the person's burial and subsequent death celebrations (see S. Merz 2013:24-25, 36, for more details).

Kɛbodikɛ and *mtakimɛ* may sometimes reincarnate a new being who has a different material presence. Such a change results when the beings concerned suffered during their previous life, as they hope for a better life the next time round. When this occurs, rather than talking about *siihɩ̣* (to reincarnate), people

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[52] As noted in Chapter Two, people also employ the Mbelime verb *kɔnta* (to become) and *transformer* (to transform) in French, when talking about reincarnation.
[53] Those who die a bad death do not have this privilege, though they do reincarnate. Bad deaths include accidents, suicide and murder, which result in people returning to *Uwienu* before their designated time (S. Merz 2013:23).

employ the verb *dedi* (to come out), which accounts for humans who reincarnate animals, trees or termite mounds; or animals, bush-beings or shrine entities who reincarnate humans, for example. There is no sense of hierarchical progression or karma, however, where certain material forms are considered better or superior to others; nor is such a change related to how the being died.

Finally, two beings with a different material presence may also share the same *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ*. This happens with totemic reincarnation, where the community's founding ancestor *and* founding totem entity (or another human-animal pair previously reincarnated by them) simultaneously reincarnate a human and a totem animal. The two beings are thus intimately paired, will die together and go on to reincarnate together (see Chapters Six and Seven).

During pregnancy, fathers-to-be normally consult diviners to find out who the reincarnating ancestors are. Diviners may also learn that the unborn children's *mtakimɛ* and *tipinsite* (destinies) need to be strengthened. This is more likely to be the case when they have been reincarnated by an animal or share their *mtakimɛ* with a totem entity, as their *mtakimɛ* are part animal. Diviners thus instruct the fathers-to-be to construct *akụnpe* (*mtakimɛ* shrines, sg. *dikụnpuode*) for the children once they are born, though sometimes they need to be constructed immediately. In the case of totemic reincarnation, the *dikụnpuode* also strengthens the *mtakimɛ* of the animal with whom the child is paired.[54]

Hence there is a continual flow of life through the death and decomposition, disappearance[55] or consumption of a being's *ukuɔnu* (body-skin) and rebirth of *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ*, which is governed by *Uwienu* (God). The relational and transmaterial nature of *mtakimɛ*, which stretches both backwards and forwards

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[54] Conical in shape, the *akụnpe* are located just outside the homestead, next to the vestibule (see *Homestead Sketches* and Figure 2). See also Huber (1973:384-386), J. Merz (2014:102-104) and S. Merz (2014:52).

[55] When the stone, tree or earth mound of a given *ditenwɛnde* disappears, for example.

to encompass past, present and future generations, and different entities, means that not only is there a continual flow of life, but also of relationships, intersubjectivity and agency. Yet, each being is also an individual in its own right (see also Erny 2007:115; Howell 1996:140; Morris 2000:36, 45-49).[56]

When a being dreams, its *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force, pl. *sibosi*) leaves its *ukuɔnu* (body-skin) in order to circulate in the less-visible parts of the world where it can encounter and communicate with other beings. *Mtakimɛ* (identity), meanwhile, enables individuals to make sense of the inter-ontonic encounters their *sibosi* have whilst dreaming once they wake up. When dreaming, the *mtakimɛ* stays with the *ukuɔnu*, whilst also maintaining a link with *kɛbodikɛ* and thus keeps the *ukuɔnu* alive. Ingold describes a similar situation for the Ojibwa:

> [I]n dreams, the vital essence of the person – the self – is afforded a degree of mobility, not only in space but also in time, normally denied in waking life. While the body of the sleeper is readily visible at some fixed location, the self may be roaming far afield (2000:100; see also Hallowell 1960:40-43).

> Both Western and Ojibwa people might agree that in a certain sense, dreaming liberates the mind from its bodily housing. But whereas in the Western conception, this amounts to taking leave of reality, for the Ojibwa it allows complete freedom of movement *within* the earthly and cosmic space of ordinary life (2000:101, emphasis in original).

For virtually all Bebelibe, should something happen in the less-visible parts of the world that prevents *kɛbodikɛ* from returning – if caught by a witch, for example – the being's *ukuɔnu* will eventually die (J. Merz 2014:216-229).

As mentioned above, some beings – such as the *siyawesi* bush-beings and *ataadɛ* (stones, sg. *ditade*) – can have more than one *ukuɔnu* that share the same *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ*. Some of these *tikɔnte* exist primarily in the less-visible parts of the world and are only apparent to those who can see in these

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[56] See S. Merz (2013; 2017b), where I treat human death and reincarnation in more detail. One of my findings was that, despite exposure to church teaching, most of the people I conducted research with did not reject reincarnation but rather redefined their understanding of how and why it happens.

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parts of the world whilst being awake, such as diviners (*bɛpasibɛ*, sg. *upaasɔ*) or seers (*bɛhonhuonbɛ*, sg. *uhonhuɔnɔ*). J. Merz describes this ability to see "beyond the strictly material" as "transvisuality" (2014:289). The *siyawesi* bush-beings, for example, resemble humans, though they are a lot shorter and have long, thick hair. They primarily exist in the less-visible parts of the world and act as intermediaries between *Uwienu* (God) and diviners. Diviners have clay statues[57] of their *siyawesi*. These statues, however, do not represent the *siyawesi*; they *are* their material presence or *ukuɔnu* in the more-visible parts of the world. They provide the diviner with a point of contact and help orientate the relationship, thus allowing for better communication. This means that the *siyawesi* can be simultaneously present in both the more- and less-visible parts of the world. Diviners activate their transvisual powers when they pick up their divining staff and summon the *siyawesi*. This then allows them to see the *siyawesi* in the less-visible parts of the world and speak directly with them. The statues are also important for those who are not diviners (and therefore do not have transvisual powers), as the statues allow them to acknowledge the *siyawesi*'s presence, whilst also revealing the existence of a relationship.

As with the *siyawesi* statues, *ataadɛ* (stones, sg. *ditade*) do not represent shrine entities; they too *are* their material presence or *ukuɔnu* (body-skin) in the more-visible parts of the world.[58] This does not mean that every stone is a shrine/shrine entity, though, but each stone has the potential of becoming one,[59] as J. Merz explains:

> People's understanding of materiality already implies that stones are alive in a general sense and have the potential to become beings in their own right. Through contagion with an existing shrine entity a stone realises its potential for life and becomes a specific being with a name

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[57] See Figure 3.
[58] See Figure 4. See also Ishii (2012), writing about shrines in Ghana.
[59] See also Howell (1996:135-136) and Hallowell's discussion about when the Ojibwa consider stones to be animate (1960:24-26). He notes that "the Ojibwa do not perceive stones, in general, as animate, any more than we do. The crucial test is experience" (1960:25).

that can now fulfil its purpose as a link between people and *Uwienu* (God) (2014:83).

Ataadɛ shrine entities can also manifest themselves as humans and pythons. Each community also has a *ditade* for its totem animal, in which case the *ditade* manifests itself as that animal. It is exactly because of the fuzzy boundaries surrounding a being's material presence (or transmateriality) in more- or less-visible forms that I prefer to talk in terms of the more- and less-visible parts of the world. Morris makes a similar observation for rural Malawians who

> like Aristotle – do not make a radical distinction between the spiritual (unseen) and the material aspects of life, and that the natural world, specifically plants and animals, are seen as real entities, not simply pegs for symbolic forms or hierophanies of the spirit, and that they are thus believed to have inherent powers and causal agency (2009:253; see also McLennan 1869a:414).

As those Bebelibe who have transvisual powers *can* see in the less-visible parts of the world (what Morris refers to as the "spiritual […] aspects of life") and given that other beings also circulate in this dimension when dreaming, I – together with J. Merz – prefer not to talk in terms of the "seen" and "unseen". J. Merz adds that the more- and less-visible parts of the world are "interdependent and overlap, thereby affecting and infecting each other" (2014:192). West, writing about the Muedans of Mozambique, explains that – although they do talk in terms of visible and invisible realms as separate domains – the two domains substantiate each other "through the visible effects of invisible forces" (2007:48). Amongst the Bebelibe, for instance, events experienced during a dream, followed by events in the more-visible parts of the world, regularly substantiate each other (see the example of Luc's dream and the events that followed in *Tiyɔsite*, Chapter Five).

Another phenomenon involving multiple *tikɔnte* (body-skins, sg. *ukuɔnu*) is shapeshifting, which takes place in the more-visible parts of the world. This differs from the *siyawesi* and *ataadɛ* shrine entities, however, as *kɛbodikɛ* and

mtakimɛ leave their primary *ukuɔnu* and shift to another *ukuɔnu*. From the way people describe shapeshifting, the primary *ukuɔnu*'s life is suspended temporarily as its *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* are elsewhere. Several interviewees describe shapeshifting as people or animals changing their tops (*tisusukite*, shirts and other clothes worn on the torso). Given that the person or animal's *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* move between different *tikɔnte* and that their material presence – their primary *ukuɔnu* – does *not* change shape, I propose that they are actually "body-shifting" rather than shapeshifting. Reincarnation too can be considered a form of body-shifting, given that a being's *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* move to one or several new *tikɔnte*. In this instance, though, the shift results from the loss of the being's primary *ukuɔnu*, and is consequently unidirectional and longer term. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the verb used to describe shapeshifting – or rather body-shifting – in Mbelime is *kɔnta* (to become). I examine this phenomenon in more detail in Chapter Six.

Thus – in the Bebelibe setting – the conditions that allow for shared ontonity, and therefore inter-ontonic engagement, are three-fold: all beings have a material presence – *ukuɔnu* – that allows for physical encounters and movement within the more-visible parts of the world; *kɛbodikɛ* which not only animates each entity, but allows for encounters and movement within the less-visible parts of the world; and *mtakimɛ*, which is unique to each individual entity (thus providing it with its identity), but also relational and therefore enables agentive and intersubjective encounters that are meaningful.

For others, the shared condition of ontonity may diminish depending on their underlying ontological ideas of how beings are composed and operate in the world. Thus, how individuals determine ontonity is also dependant on their presencing practices.

Presencing Practices

> The capacity to find orientation by understanding signs *remains an achievement of empathy* and intellect. Interpretation is called for, an adaptive attempt at integration with experience past and present to foresee eventual consequences. The human psyche excels in this ability to create sense. This is not merely self-reflective nor arbitrary bricolage; the process requires keeping in contact with external reality and being conscious of this connection (Burkert 1996:157, emphasis mine).

Burkert's analysis hints at the idea of shared ontonity, but still puts the emphasis on the human intellect and the interpretation of signs. As suggested in Chapter Two, ontonity – together with presencing – provides the means to go beyond the impasse that often results from a semiotic analysis of other people's ontological engagements with the world around them, given that the onton is more than a sign. Whether signs take a dualistic structure of signifier and signified following the semiology of de Saussure (1974 [1916]), or a triadic one of sign, object and interpretant, as in Peirce's semiotics (1940), they all have representations. Even when an onton comprises several material and/or immaterial parts, its transmaterial nature means that these are inseparable. Thus, ontons cannot be analysed semiotically as they have no – and are not – representations.

Peirce (1940) proposed three primary signs types, namely symbols, icons and indexes. J. Merz (2017b) is not suggesting that semiotics be abandoned in favour of presencing, but that presencing builds on semiotics, with icons, symbols, indexes *and* ontons forming its basis. By icon, I understand this to be a sign that resembles the entity it signifies (a photograph being an icon of the person it shows, for instance), whereas a symbol is an arbitrary sign that does not resemble the entity it signifies (words, for example). Finally, an index is a trace left by the entity that signifies the entity's existence by its absence (such as a footprint). The interplay between symbols, icons, indexes and ontons as

people draw on them in various ways results in diverse presencing practices, which could be primarily ontonic, symbolic or scientific, for example. People then employ different presencing practices depending on given situations and circumstances at a given time. This, in turn, produces multiple ontological understandings and ways of engaging in and with the world around them. This diversity of presencing practices not only accounts for ontological differences between people, but helps explain why an individual can maintain or entertain apparently contradictory ideas by moving between different ontological understandings depending on the way they make present and engage with other entities at a given moment (see also Harris and Robb 2012). Candea, for example, observes that not only do

> people have different kinds of beliefs but also that they actively reflect on this and seek to cultivate certain attitudes toward their own beliefs, and by those means to cultivate some beliefs – and ways of believing – rather than others […]. Similarly, the image of a passive, situational 'ontological flip-flop' that emerges, for instance, from Descola's characterization, fails to attend to people's agentive attempts to keep in view multiple ontological possibilities at once, without committing to any (2013:432).

Candea (2013; see also 2010) questions Descola's and Viveiros de Castro's "Euroamericans' putative 'naturalist ontology'" (2013:424), and effectively demonstrates how scientists working with animals can move between different ontological perspectives. Candea concludes:

> If these scientists were not quite settled 'naturalists,' neither did they inhabit the opposite certainties of 'animism.' […] The point that people may entertain two mutually incompatible ontological perspectives in quick succession is certainly an important caveat to overly schematic accounts of naturalist ontology (2013:431).

The scientists' ability to entertain two differing ontological perspectives was possible as they were able to engage with their animal subjects both as "objective units" – thus drawing primarily on semiotic presencing practices – and as "intentional, minded, known individuals" or ontons, at which point an ontonic

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presencing practice prevails (Candea 2013:428; see also Bekoff 2007:114-116; Phillips 1994).

Law and Lien (2012) provide another example in their exploration of encounters between humans and salmon on a fish farm in West Norway. They suggest that the salmons' ontology changes depending on the nature of the encounter. They conclude that

> Human–salmon practices generate an unknowable and elusive penumbra of slippery salmon-possibilities (2012:372).

> Our argument is thus that it is time to attend not just to ontologies enacted, but also to their shadowland of alterities; it is time to attend to the textures on the margins (2012:373).

In their article there are examples of salmon as icons depending on how they conform to salmon norms or not for the people concerned (2012:369); indexical encounters when the fish remain at the margins of visibility in the murky water (2012:371) and the juxtaposition of salmon as relational beings – or ontons – versus symbolic knowledge provided by textbooks (2012:366). Thus, those working on the salmon farm presenced the salmon differently according to the situation and resulting encounter. This being the case, I suggest that it is not the salmons' ontology that changes, but rather the way people presenced them at any given moment.

Like Candea, Morris too points out the danger of trying to categorise people ontologically, given that people can derive a diversity of meanings depending on their encounters with animals:

> Although there is a tendency these days, especially among writers on ecological issues, and even some anthropologists, to identify whole cultures or historical periods by a single ontological motif (anthropocentric, biocentric, mechanistic, holistic), the relationship of Malawians to the animal world (like that of all cultures) is diverse and complex and embodies several contrasting attitudes towards animals – pragmatic, intellectual, aesthetic, symbolic, sacramental – that cannot be captured by monolithic labels (1998:151-152).

This should not come as a surprise. Just thinking through the complex and diverse nature of my relationship with Johannes, already results in a multiplicity of attitudes and meaning, depending on how I presence him at a given moment. The circumstances of that moment determine which presencing practice(s) I draw on. For example, if Johannes has travelled, his presence around me is still evident: the emails he sends me (symbols); the dent in his pillow or his shirt that smells of him (indexes); his picture on Skype (icon). In these instances I presence him by drawing on Peircean semiotic representations, thereby employing primarily symbolic, iconic or indexical presencing practices. But when Johannes is materially present, I engage with him holistically as a living entity, as an onton. The being I see in front of me and interact with *is* Johannes, I thereby presence him by drawing on a primarily ontonic practice. Should Johannes be sick and visit the doctor, however, the doctor may presence him differently again. If the doctor engages with Johannes principally in Cartesian terms as a physical being, thereby analysing what is wrong with him in largely mechanical and physiological terms, then Johannes is no longer an onton; his body is a material object that needs to be fixed. In this instance, the doctor draws on a primarily scientific practice.[60]

One final example can be drawn from church practices and understandings of Holy Communion. In Catholicism, the bread and wine *become* the flesh and blood of Jesus, therefore the two elements are presenced as ontons. Protestantism, however, teaches that the bread and wine symbolise Jesus' flesh and blood (see, for example, Yates-Doerr 2015:317-318). In this instance, a Catholic primarily draws on an ontonic presencing practice, whilst a Protestant primarily draws on a symbolic one.

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[60] See also Harris and Robb (2012) and Mol (2002), who examine the different ontological understandings people can have of the body.

Thus, the interplay between ontons, symbols, icons and indexes and how individuals prioritise them results in the different presencing practices they employ and move between depending on the situation at the time. The presencing practice that predominates in a given instance comes to the fore and determines how something becomes present and meaningful for the individual. Certain presencing practices may also predominate at a given time within a society. When this differs significantly from another society – one that is predominantly ontonic versus one that is predominantly scientific for example – it can appear as if they occupy different ontological worlds, rather than the same one but with differing ontological perspectives of that world. Drawing on different presencing practices also means that people construct and experience life in different ways, which further adds to the potential illusion of multiple ontological worlds (see also Lloyd 2011). Furthermore, a presencing practice that may predominate in a given society can also change over time, which results in further diversity. Harris and Robb observe that

> the distinction between the multiple ontologies versus multiple modes of ontologies (one-of-many vs. one-in-many) is a product of Western intellectual histories, and in particular the demand for emergent unimodality and logical consistency that began in the medieval period with Christian theology and was transformed into scientific hegemony in the 19th and 20th centuries (2012:671).

Referring to various examples over the course of time, Harris and Rob (2012:671-676) illustrate the interplay between different "modes", such as religious, scientific, social and magical, and that "one can see all these modalities of belief interchanging with each other" (2012:671). They then point out that people's ability to entertain and move between different ontological modes means that there are grounds for mutual understanding. Despite, this Harris and Rob (2012:671-676) also demonstrate how one notion of the body may predominate then change over the course of history. When interpreted in

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terms of presencing, a transition from predominantly ontonic practices to more scientific ones is evident, as people increasingly perceived the body in mechanical terms. Even if one presencing practice predominates at a given time in history, this does not mean that people are not simultaneously drawing on other presencing practices. Harris and Rob point out:

> As science has developed over the last several centuries, we have not become less multimodal; multimodality is an ongoing condition of embodiment.

> We continue to live, today, in a multimodal body world – in other words, there is more than one ontology of the body in our society (2012:674).

They conclude:

> The manner in which specific and multiple modes of the body can be so clearly identified from the medieval period onward, therefore, does not relate to a dramatic transformation in the nature of human bodies themselves but, rather, to the way in which an emergent and dominant modality comes to define the boundaries between different concepts (2012:675; see also Coole and Frost 2010).

Harris and Rob (2012:672-676) also note that the interplay between different ontological modes can result in tensions, for example between religious and scientific modes of thinking. They suggest that this was not an issue for "ordinary people" but rather "long-standing specialists advocating particular views, such as clergy" (2012:675) as they struggled to process new scientific information, for example. Such tensions further demonstrate that negotiating ontological penumbras is not limited to the research endeavours of anthropologists or to other epistemologically inclined specialists. As Chua points out, "anthropologists are not the only ones to think with and through heuristic devices: so too do the people with whom we work" (2015:356). As my interviewees – many of whom could be considered "ordinary people" – talked about eating meat, domestication and the commodification of animals, for example, it became evident that they too struggled with tensions and resulting

penumbras generated by the interplay of different presencing principles and practices, as I illustrate in the coming chapters.

Hunting and Domestication

In the next two chapters, I present and discuss the general nature of human-animal relationships in the Commune of Cobly and how these shape understandings of hunting, domestication and eating meat. I also examine if, how and why these relationships and understandings may be changing. I start by briefly describing how people classify humans (*bɛnitibɛ*, sg. *uniitɔ*) and animals (*tiwante*, sg. *kɛwankɛ*).

What Is an Animal?

There is no Mbelime term for "creature" that encompasses all the beings that *Uwienu* (God) created. *Kɛwankɛ* (animal, pl. *tiwante*) is the broadest term and can be used in a general sense to refer to all of *Uwienu*'s created beings – except humans – that have blood and that exist primarily in the more-visible parts of the world. More specifically, *tiwante* also refers to animals (mammals, reptiles, amphibians and snails) that have four feet or no feet and can live or move on land. *Tinɔɔte* (sg. *unɔdihy*), meanwhile, only have two feet and fly (birds and bats), *sipaasi* (sg. *kɛpaakɛ*) only live in water (fish, whales and manatees) and *tibɛbite* (sg. *ubɛbihy*) are the creepy-crawlies (insects, arachnids, crustacea and worms).

One thing that became apparent during the course of my interviews is that animals and humans are beings of equal worth, especially in the eyes of *Uwienu*. All beings have a certain level of autonomy, whilst also being part of a relational web. Takida, a septuagenarian farmer, summed it up as follows:

> Animals have blood and so do we. Where's the difference? If there is one it's what we eat: we eat cornmeal porridge and they graze the grass; that's where there's a difference.

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Joël, the thirty-year-old farmer, and Louis, an octogenarian with an important position in the Commune, gave similar explanations:

> People and animals have the same *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force), but our way of life means that we are different. Here I am sitting and thinking about how to maintain my home, whilst an animal is thinking about how to live in the bush. Don't you see that this is where the difference is?

> Everything must have *kɛbodikɛ*, animals must have *kɛbodikɛ* like humans. *Kɛbodikɛ* does many things for us. If you don't have it you can't have fear. If you don't have *kɛbodikɛ* you can't reflect. If you don't have *kɛbodikɛ* you can't think about things and animals possess this the same as us. We're almost the same except that we can't understand each other. God divided us giving us each our way to live on this earth and each our own language so that we could dialogue with our own kind.

These explanations, together with what other interviewees shared, demonstrate that animals and people are not very different. Even though definitions of personhood vary, there is consensus that: "a 'person' is an individual, animate, self-conscious being who becomes a person in a social context in which their individuality and intentionality is recognized and acknowledged by another" (Hurn 2012:30; see also 51; Henare *et al.* 2007:19-20; Hurn 2016a:4). Hurn later adds that "all persons have a shared essence which unites them, […] but it is their external, physical form which differs and effects their being in (and therefore perception of) the world" (2012:76), which is borne out by Joël's and Louis' observations. In light of these explanations, animals can be considered persons or – more precisely – ontons with whom people have an intersubjective engagement.

"They are equal. One isn't more capable than the other. One doesn't surpass the other. Humans and animals are equal." Basaadi, a nonagenarian diviner explained. If one creature excels in one area, this does not necessarily make it superior to another. Many interviewees pointed out that humans are physically weaker than their fellow animals. The success of a predator is not

necessarily due to its inherent superiority over another creature, but because *Uwienu* has allowed it to overpower its prey. Several interviewees explained that, in the case of humans, *Uwienu* has given us intelligence (*mceyɔmmɛ*) and that our *diyammaade* (ability to think and reason) permits us to surmount our physical weakness and outsmart animals who are more powerful than us in other ways. Thus, besides physical differences in our *tikɔnte* (body-skins), for several interviewees it is our *diyammaade* that differentiates us. Four interviewees stated that animals do not have *diyammaade*, whilst five others qualified that most animals have *diyammaade*, but some do not, such as pigs (see *Tiyɔsite*, Chapter Five). For another five interviewees, we can all reason and think but our different *diyammaade* mean that we do not share a common language. Despite this, there is still a certain level of mutual comprehension. Finally, four interviewees explained that human *diyammaade* is stronger.

Interviewees also explained that animals accept their death when the reason for it is legitimate. Otherwise, they can seek vengeance when killed inappropriately, either by "overcoming" (*die*) the person concerned or by pleading their case before *Uwienu*, who then intervenes as he sees fit.

Morris notes a similar situation amongst Malawians who do not make a "*radical* distinction between humans and animals, but rather conceive of humans and animals as sharing many attributes" (2000:37, emphasis in original). He continues by pointing out that this does not mean that people deny that there are distinctions, but they do not result in a "radical dualism" but rather a "socially engaged attitude [that] recognizes the fundamental *affinities* between humans and mammals as living beings who share a common world and are often in *competition*" (2000:37, emphasis mine).

The interplay between affinity and competition was especially apparent when I asked what could be the consequences of killing an animal without just cause. Several interviewees where shocked by this question: "The animal

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hasn't done anything and you don't need it for a ceremony? How can you kill an animal like that? You can't kill an animal like that!" exclaimed Ntanki, an octogenarian community shrine priest. Other interviewees declared that to kill an animal without just cause was *mtiɛmu* (badness).[61] Some interviewees initially struggled to answer the question, as the very idea seemed absurd – at least in abstract form – which meant I often had to provide a concrete scenario[62]. Our discussions revealed that there are many parallels between the Bebelibe and societies such as the Runa of Ecuador (Kohn 2007), the Nayaka of southern India (Bird-David 2006) and the Ojibwa of Canada (Ingold 2000:89-110), who primarily subsist on hunting and gathering. Serpell observes that many hunter-gatherer societies across the world share analogous ideas about animals, which include

> the notion that animals are fully rational, sentient, and intelligent beings in no way inferior to humans, and the bodies of animals, like those of people, are animated by non-corporeal spirits or 'souls' that survive the body after death (1999:40).

Hurn adds that "'hunter-gatherer ontology' is such that it promotes an equality of sorts between humans and other animals, recognizing 'personhood' beyond the human species" (2012:43). Based on these comparisons it would be easy to assume that the Bebelibe too subsist on hunting. Although this may have been the case in the past, the Bebelibe are now established agriculturalists. Their transition from hunting to husbandry is explained by a local myth that tells of a hunter's (*ucaatɔ*, pl. *bɛcatibɛ*) encounter with the *siyawesi* bush-beings and how they instructed him in cultivation, sorghum beer brewing and animal husbandry. The *siyawesi* then gave him different gifts so that he could settle down and start farming (S. Merz 2017a; Huber 1979:40-48). Despite this, hunting continues to

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[61] Writing about the Moba of northern Togo, Koabike (2003:84) also notes that it is forbidden to kill domestic animals without just cause.

[62] Someone sees an animal eating his maize, for example, and kills it out of frustration or anger. See Alma's response below, page 156.

be important. Maurice (1986:101; see also Mercier 1968:224) briefly describes a similar situation for the Betammaribe, southeastern neighbours of the Bebelibe, who are also agriculturalists and whose customs demonstrate that, until recently, hunting was essential to their way of life. Morris, writing about agricultural societies in Malawi, also notes the continuing importance of hunting and

> that the advent of agriculture does not entail a fundamental break with regard to the close and intimate relationship that humans have with animals. For hunting still retains its sacramental dimension; indeed hunting in Malawi […] is in many ways more highly ritualized than among hunter-gathering societies, and has a social and cultural significance that goes well beyond its economic role in subsistence (2000:22-23).

The same can be said for the Bebelibe, as I explore below, though hunting is becoming more difficult as many of the animals that people hunt are now largely confined to the national parks (see also Maurice 1986:101). Today, the national parks correspond with *dikpaade* (the wilderness). *Dikpaade* includes dense, impenetrable forests, woodland, savannah bush and grasslands. *Timuɔte* (the bush) includes essentially the same vegetation and landscapes as *dikpaade*, but is also the general term for all that is outside an inhabited area (*ditendokide*, pl. *atendokɛ*). Although *timuɔte* (the bush) is uninhabited, it includes farmland and where people go to search for firewood and collect water, for example, whereas there is minimal human presence in *dikpaade* (the wilderness), except for hunting (and now tourism). Thus, human activity and presence differentiates the two. As hunting continues to be important, I address this first before exploring Bebelibe understandings of domestication.

Hunting

When asked if there was a time when humans and animals lived and conversed together, four interviewees recounted versions of the myth below, whilst another four referred to it. Not only does it explain why humans and animals no longer live and speak openly with one another, but also how hunting began and why:

In the beginning, *Uwienu* (God) created animals and humans and they all lived together. One day an old man died – the first being to die – so they discussed what rites they would need and what each of them should contribute. Man was the weakest and poorest of all the beings, so the lion and leopard schemed to catch him and give him as their contribution. The man overheard their scheming and thought it better to run away and die under the sun than to be killed and given as meat.

Whilst he was lying under the sun, an eagle soaring high saw him and thought he was dead. The eagle swooped down to take him and give him as his contribution for the burial rites. As the eagle put his talons out, the man grabbed him. The man then said that he would take the eagle as his contribution. The eagle proposed that if the man would let him go, he would go and fetch something to help the man. The eagle gave the man a cord and told him to tie his talons together so that he would be obliged to return. The eagle then went and got a quiver of arrows, a bow and a knife. He brought them back for the man and explained how to shoot and kill animals with the bow and arrows. The eagle would soar above and indicate to the man where the game fell after being shot. He then told the man he could use the knife to cut up the meat.

The man followed the eagle's instructions and killed a duiker. He cut a portion of meat, hid his quiver, bow and knife in a hole of a baobab, and returned home with the meat, where he announced that this was his contribution for the old man's burial. All the animals were surprised, how did this weak man succeed in catching and cutting up the duiker? He had nothing that would allow him to do this! The next day, the man went out again, caught another duiker and presented the meat to the other animals.

The animals were getting worried, so the monkey announced that he would follow the man to see how he was getting the meat. When the man set off the next day, the monkey surreptitiously followed behind. He saw the man getting the quiver, bow and knife from the baobab. The monkey then climbed a tall tree to observe what happened next. He saw the man reach behind his back, then do something with his hands and **bam** the duiker fell dead. He ran back and explained to the other

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animals how the man reached behind his back, made something fly and the duiker dropped dead. He warned them that they were all in danger! The man then came back with more meat.

The fourth day, the same thing happened again. The monkey followed, then reported back. As the man approached home some flies started to buzz around his face and shoulders, so he tried to swat them away. The animals saw the man's hand go over his shoulder as he swatted at the flies. They thought that he was reaching behind his back for the strange weapon the monkey had described so they all fled in terror. The dog fled too, but along the way he changed his mind and returned to the man.

The dog then warned him that the leopard and lion were dangerous animals and may come back to kill him. The dog offered to stay with the man and at night, when the man slept, the dog would keep watch. If someone came, the dog would bark and the man should come with his bow and arrows and help the dog chase the intruder away.

With time the lion came and the plan worked. The dog barked, the man came and shot the lion and the lion dropped dead. The other animals then realised how true the monkey's words were. To this day, the dog stays with the man and warns him when strangers arrive.[63]

In this version of the story, the eagle equipped the man with the weapons and knowledge needed to kill animals. In Kodaani's version of the story, it was *Uwienu* who did this. Kodaani, who is in his sixties, finishes by explaining that the man was able to catch some of the animals before they all escaped. These animals became the *diseede wante* (family animals), whilst those that escaped became the *timuɔte wante* (bush animals). Writing about the Gourmantché (northeastern neighbours of the Bebelibe), Swanson (1985:12-13) shares a similar story. In this account, however, the first man and woman lived in the bush with other meat-eating animals that provided them with meat. Fed-up with this situation, the animals then asked the man to provide his share. The story then unfolds in a similar manner to Neeka's account above, except that it is *Tienu* (God) who provides the man with the necessary weapons. Finally, whilst sheltering with the other meat-eating animals under a baobab during a storm,

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[63] Recounted by Neeka, a septuagenarian village elder, June 2013.

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the man swats at a mosquito causing all the animals to flee. The man and his wife then left the bush and the other meat-eaters and started to live in homes.

Contrary to the Western construct, which is based on scientific and archaeological evidence, that all animals started out wild and then some were domesticated (Diamond 2005 [1997]; 2002; Gifford-Gonzalez and Hanotte 2011, for example), local mythology teaches the opposite. A life of apparent harmony was disrupted by the first death of one of *Uwienu*'s created beings and the ritual need for meat. This resulted in man learning to hunt, with the consequence that many animals then sought refuge in the wilderness.

Responding to the same question (Was there a time when humans and animals lived and conversed together?), a significant number of interviewees referred to the Bible, several of whom talked explicitly about the Genesis accounts of creation and the fall. In the different versions of the local myth above and the biblical myth, the human ability to overpower and kill animals, and the authority to do so, were not innate but were accorded to humans by the eagle or by *Uwienu* (or *Tienu* for the Gourmantché). Thus, the myths are a reminder that humans and animals are beings of equal worth. This was further borne out during the interviews, as many interviewees stated "we are equal but…" and went on to explicate that it was *Uwienu* who: created humans this way; gave humans the authority to kill and eat animals; or appointed humans as his guardians over the animals. Several interviewees added that, despite our apparent superiority over animals, this does not make us more important. Gaston, a farmer in his early-forties, stated that:

> Humans and animals are equal. *Uwienu* created humans to look after everything, that's where there's a difference and why we are more capable than animals. But we are equal. *Uwienu* put us ahead of the animals so that we would know that it was *Uwienu* who created all beings to be like him.

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Further discussions with the interviewees revealed that even though humans are in an apparent position of superiority over animals in the one sense, when we abuse this authority or lack respect towards an animal, the animal is in a position to overcome (*die*) us or plead its case before *Uwienu*, as mentioned above. For example, Yves, a farmer in his late-forties, explained that:

> You need to know that it's the animals that support us. It's thanks to them that I know that we all come from *Uwienu* and this is why we need to respect[64] them and treat them well [or suffer the consequences].

Idaani, a church elder in his late-fifties, shared that:

> When you consider the animals and humans, there is no being alive who created itself; it's *Uwienu* who created us all. It's *Uwienu* who created everything and he loves us all. He commanded us all to reproduce. When you cause an animal to suffer, *Uwienu* who created the animals and who created you, won't be happy with what you do.

This need for respect becomes especially apparent in the rituals that surround hunting. Serpell briefly discusses the inherent dangers of hunting and that a successful hunt cannot be attributed solely to the hunter's competence given that animals can seek "posthumous restitution" (1999:40) if not treated respectfully. He adds that this can lead to "considerable anxiety [which is] relieved through the performance of strict and elaborate hunting rules and rituals" (1999:41; see also Aftandilian 2011; Hurn 2012:47-48; Morris 1998:68).

Amongst the Bebelibe, some of my interviewees explained, only men could be hunters and that "true" hunters are born this way, as they have hunter's *upinsihu̯* (destiny; part of the *mtakimɛ*). *Upinsihu̯* guides them so that hunters know which animals they can legitimately kill. Michel, a farmer in his fifties, added that those with hunter destiny are drawn to the bush and do not need the same level of protection as other hunters. Before going on a hunt, most hunters ask the *bɛhidibɛ* (the dead) and *atenwiɛnɛ* (shrine entities) for their help and

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[64] Yves employed the verb *sɛdi* (to respect). The notion of fear or awe is implicit as there will be consequences if your respect is lacking.

protection, prepare special medicines and further purify themselves by observing certain prohibitions such as refraining from sex (see also Maurice 1986:107-108; Morris 1998:104).

"Animals, as they too have *mtakimɛ*, know when hunters come and try to avoid them. So the hunters need to prepare and have medicines that draw the animals to them. They also have medicines that help them escape should wild animals or park rangers come after them," Roland, the trained pastor in his mid-forties, explained. In addition to his preparations and medicines, the hunter often takes special power objects with him such as a medicine-bracelet (*kɛyạkibeekɛ*, pl. *siyạkibeesi*) or medicine-axe (*kɛyạkiyadikɛ, siyạkiyasi*). The bracelet helps protect the hunter when he confronts a dangerous animal (lion[65] or leopard[66], for example) or a park ranger. The hunter pronounces a short incantation to activate the medicine-bracelet and the animal or ranger falls immobile to the ground, thus allowing the hunter to escape. Hunters use the medicine-axes to traverse dangerous areas such as crocodile infested rivers or plains populated by lions. As with the bracelets, the axe renders the animals powerless so that hunters can safely cross the terrain concerned.

Depending on the animal killed, further medicines and rites may be needed before the hunter can touch the animal or eat the meat; sometimes he is even prohibited from eating it. Didier, a village chief in his sixties who used to go hunting with his father, described the ceremony needed to separate the animal from the hunter (*mɔnta*)[67] so that it cannot seek revenge (*huoni*):

> [Once back] everyone else can eat the meat, but you [the hunter] need the head [of the animal] to perform the ceremony. You take the head to the *bɛhidibɛ* (the dead). My father would perform the ceremony, as he was the eldest male. He would take the head of each animal that I killed to the *bɛhidibɛ*. He would say, '*n mɔnta* [separate from the hunter]'.

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[65] *Panthera leo.*
[66] *Panthera pardus.*
[67] Maurice (1986:117-118; see also Mercier 1968:226) briefly describes a similar ceremony for the Betammaribe.

When you say that, it means the animal is dangerous, but if you perform the ceremony, the animal can no longer act against the person who killed it. When you say '*mɔnta*', you take the head and place it before the *bɛhidibɛ* and say:

'Hey you, beast, animal, if you want to seek vengeance, it's *Uwienu* who made man and he made you too. But you are in the bush. *Uwienu* said that you should adapt and that man needs to eat meat. It's *Uwienu* who made the rifle, who made the arrow, who made the club. It's *Uwienu* who made all these things, not man, so that man could kill and eat. Rifle, it's *Uwienu* who made the gunpowder and the cartridge. *Uwienu* made these things and man follows. Now if you want to seek vengeance, you should go and see with him who made the gunpowder, the rifle. Go and ask *Uwienu*. *Uwienu* will tell you that we have the right to kill and eat' […]

Then my father would pour water mixed with sorghum flour on the animals' heads. He would make me get down on my knees and elbows and I would drink the flour-water mix like an animal [Didier gets down on his elbows and knees and pretends to lap from a bowl]. Then you say, 'I have drunk you; you too have drunk [received the libation], now here's the rest for you to finish'. And that's it; the fight is over.

Joël, the thirty-year-old farmer, also goes hunting regularly. He explained that he does not do anything special before going on a hunt. When he sees an animal, however, he prays to *Uwienu* for success and informs the animal why he is killing it. He does this internally rather than aloud. If successful, depending on the animal killed, *mɔnta* may be needed, during which he would say to the animal:

Ah, I went looking for sauce and I've found my sauce. But I haven't killed you because I hate you. I wanted to eat and I saw you, so I killed you. When I got up to go hunting, the hunter can take all that he finds. All things enter the hunter's sack. What he finds, that's what he takes. When I saw you lying there, should I leave you? Should I not take you? But by putting you in my sack, I'm not challenging you; I'm simply looking to eat. The hour has come; if you want to go and eat, go and eat [If you want to seek vengeance, go and see with *Uwienu*].

Bush animals that people consider especially powerful and dangerous include buffalo (*fɛkpanaafɛ*, sg. *ikpanaahį* [*Syncerus caffer brachyceros*]), bushbuck (*fɛtɔɔdifɛ*, pl. *itɔɔdi* [*Tragelaphus scriptus scriptus*]), red-flanked duiker

(*kɛhodimɔnkɛ*, pl. *sihodimɔnsi* [*Cephalophus rufilatus*]), leopards (*ikpiihi̱*, sg. *fɛkpiifɛ*) and *l'âne sauvage* (*kɛmunnaakɛ*, pl. *simunnaasi*, wild ass or feral donkey), which people fear the most.

As described above, depending on the animal killed, hunters may be prohibited from eating the meat or the animal needs to be separated from the hunters before they can eat it safely. Other people, however, can eat the meat immediately. This suggests that it is acceptable if people hunt animals for the benefit of others but not if it is for personal gain; the killing has to be legitimate. Ingold makes a similar observation for the Cree, northern Canada:

> Above all, animals are offended by *unnecessary* killing: that is, by killing as an end in itself rather than to satisfy genuine consumption needs. They are offended, too, if the meat is not properly shared around all those in the community who need it (1994:9, emphasis in original; see also Aftandilian 2011:200; Morris 1998:67).

The issue of unnecessary killing was further exemplified by a number of my interviewees, some of whom explained that each hunter may only legitimately hunt certain species, whilst others stated that there is a limit to how many animals a hunter can kill during his lifetime (see also Morris 1998:107). Should he kill an animal he is not authorised to kill or exceed his total of animals, then the animals will avenge their deaths. Revenge can take several forms including leprosy, other skin complaints such as eruptions of boils and abscesses, death or madness either of the hunter or someone in his family, the hunter's wife could miscarry if pregnant at the time, give birth to an abnormal baby or the animal could reincarnate as the wife's next baby. Luc, a church leader in his thirties, explained that it was because Esau exceeded the limit of animals he could legitimately kill that his father, Isaac, blessed Esau's brother, Jacob, instead (Genesis 27)[68]. These forms of revenge are typical, not only amongst

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[68] This is an interesting example of applying local understanding when interpreting stories and events from elsewhere. When I read the Genesis account, there is nothing to indicate that this was the reason Isaac blessed Jacob instead.

the Bebelibe, but also elsewhere in Africa and beyond. Serpell notes that in Siberia, Amazonia and the Kalahari:

> Types of spiritual retribution that may result from disrespectful behavior include infliction of illness, injury, madness, or death on the hunter or other members of his family or clan, or loss of success in future hunting (1999:40; see also Aftandilian 2011:198-199).

Morris notes similar consequences and goes on to say that killing certain larger mammals, such as bushbucks and buffaloes, is "akin to homicide" (1998:73, 105-107) in rural Malawi. Commenting on hunting in general, Morris (2009:281-285) adds that it should not be considered as violent, aggressive or sadistic, and most certainly is not a sport, as may be the case in post-domestic societies.[69] Finally, Maurice (1986:118), who was an ethnographically inclined colonial administrator in Benin, concludes that for the Betammaribe hunting is much more than a purely material activity needed for food given that animals have souls, supernatural powers and considerable influence over the lives of humans. Consequently, Maurice thinks that hunting also tests the hunter's "strength, courage and audacity" (1986:119, translation mine; see also Nadasdy 2007).

Although none of my interviewees talked about homicide in relation to hunting, some of the interviewees commented that the ceremony needed to separate the animal from the hunter (*mɔnta*) is very similar to *yạnta*, which is performed for people who have killed another human either intentionally or by accident. As with *mɔnta*, the purpose of *yạnta* is to separate the perpetrator from the victim. *Yạnta* literally means "to make [the person] drink". Similar to *mɔnta*, it is the act of drinking – in this case a special medicine – that separates

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[69] See, however, Cahoone (2009) who effectively argues that hunting can be morally justified in post-domestic societies. He concludes that "Contemporary hunting is not a sport; it is a neo-traditional cultural practice in which contemporaries re-enter an archaic pursuit of meat" (2009:84). See also Marvin (2010) and Hurn (2016b).

the two.[70] If not separated, human victims (like animal victims) seek posthumous revenge by inflicting sickness, which ultimately results in death. There is no notion, however, that victims pollute their killers by passing on some of their blood into the body of their slayers as they die, as Hutchinson (1996:106-107) notes for the Nuer of South Sudan. Thus, neither *mɔnta* nor *yạnta* involve bloodletting.

Several interviewees compared killing certain animals such as donkeys (*simunsi*, sg. *kɛmunkɛ*), horses (*sisạnsi*, sg. *kɛsạnkɛ*), cattle (*inaahị*, sg. *fɛnaafɛ*) and cats (*sinɔntisi*, sg. *kɛnɔntikɛ*) to killing humans. Consequently similar ceremonies may be needed when *diseede wante* (family animals) are killed to "take care of" (*sɔnni*) the relationship (see *Tiyɔsite*, Chapter Five).

In order to keep track of the larger bush animals he has killed, a hunter either displays their skulls by hanging them on the outside wall of the homestead's vestibule (*ukoohụ*, literally "lineage") or keeps them inside. Not only does this show his prowess as a hunter, but it is also a reminder to the whole family of what and how many animals he has killed. Should a hunter exceed his limit, the risk of revenge remains even after he has died, potentially affecting his descendants (see also Englebert 1973:116, writing about the Betammaribe). Animals may return as small game – a hare, wild duck or dove, for example – and tempt one of the deceased hunter's family members to kill it. This, in turn, can result in the person's death.

Robert, the NGO worker in his late-thirties, shared about how his father succumbed to such a temptation by throwing his hoe at a pair of white-faced whistling ducks (*Dendrocygna viduata*) that landed close to him when he was working in his rice field. One of the ducks dropped dead, despite the hoe going wide. Delighted, his father took the duck home and put it to smoke. His father

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[70] The ceremony is performed with powerful medicine horns. These are antelope horns stuffed with leaves and roots. The person officiating takes some of the leaves and roots from one of the horns and mixes them with water.

was puzzled, however, that no flies came to the meat. He went to see a diviner, who explained that it was not a real duck, but rather a hartebeest (*fɛsefɛ*, pl. *isie* [*Alcelaphus busalaphus major*]) that one of his ancestors had killed when he should not have; he had exceeded the limit of how many hartebeests he was allowed to kill. Even though Robert's father did not hit the duck, the fact that he *tried* to kill the duck provoked its death. If his father had eaten the duck, he would have died. Since that day, Robert's family never eat any bushmeat the same day that they kill it. They always examine the animal to check that it was genuinely killed, watch to see if flies come to the meat and then wait several days before eating it.

Swanson, writing about the Gourmantché, also notes some of the inherent dangers of killing certain animals as they have

> bad *cicilimu* 'guiding spirits'. A hunter must, if he is to be unharmed by these 'spirits', prepare special medicine over their bodies. Otherwise, the 'guiding spirit' of such an animal may follow the person home and bring death to him or a member of his household (1985:177).

For almost all of my interviewees, the most notorious animal of all is the *kɛmunnaakɛ* (pl. *simunnaasi*) or *âne sauvage* (wild ass or feral donkey) who can temporarily become (*kɔnta*) human posthumously. Rather than follow the hunter home, however, *kɛmunnaakɛ* goes ahead of him in order to visit and test the hunter's wife. Should she fail the test, the hunter or someone in the family will die (see Chapter Six for more details).

During the course of my interviews, I learnt that, until relatively recently, bushmeat was the main source of family meat, and quite a few interviewees lamented the lack of meat today as bush animals become scarcer. For example, Esther, a septuagenarian widow, explained that her father would go hunting during the dry season and her mother would conserve some of the meat by smoking it, so that the family would have meat for the rainy season. She remembers when smaller animals and game birds, such as wild helmeted

guineafowl (*Numida meleagris*) and double-spurred francolins (*Francolinus bicalcaratus*), were plentiful.

Fish is also important and provides a further source of family meat. As with bushmeat, people smoke the surplus fish they either catch during rainy season or dig up[71] during dry season. Fish too are getting scarcer. As bigger wild animals are now largely confined to the national parks and with fish, smaller game birds and animals becoming scarcer, people are more likely to eat meat from *diseede wante* (family animals) instead.

People did not keep and intentionally breed *diseede wante* for meat; they did not practice animal husbandry as such until relatively recently. As noted in the Introduction, *diseede* means both family and homestead, with the buildings constituting the material presence or *ukuɔnu* (body-skin) of the family unit, which includes the *bɛhidibɛ* (the dead) and *diseede wante*. Thus, as with the *atenwiɛnɛ* (shrines and shrine entities), and the *siyawesi* bush-beings (both their humanoid presence in the less-visible parts of the world and their statued presence in the more-visible parts of the world), the homestead can also be considered a living being. The primary function of *diseede wante* is to help and support the human family members, as Yves, the farmer in his late-forties, mentioned above. People consider *diseede wante* essential for the wellbeing of the family and several interviewees explained that the *diseede* (family) is incomplete without them. Consequently, until recently people rarely sold their *diseede wante* and only killed them for special occasions (see Chapter Five). It is only more recently that some people have started to intentionally breed and raise animals for commercial reasons. This brings me to the subject of domestication.

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[71] West African lungfish (*kɛbakɔnkɛ*, pl. *sibakɔnsi* [*Protopterus annectens*]).

Domestication

> That evening, as the man returned to the *diseede*, some small bees[72] started to bother him so he tried to swipe them away. When the other animals saw him reach behind his back, they fled and disappeared into the bush. The man was able to catch some of the animals before they all escaped. Today, these are the *diseede wante* (family animals), whilst those who escaped are the *timuɔte wante* (bush animals). This is why many *diseede wante* look like their counterparts who live in the bush such as *fɛkpanaafɛ*[73] (buffalo) who resemble *fɛnaafɛ* (cattle), *fɛtadihạnfɛ*[74] (wild helmeted guineafowl) who resemble *fɛhạnfɛ* (domestic helmeted guineafowl) and *kɛtadikodikɛ*[75] (stone partridge) who resemble *sikosi* (chickens, sg. *kɛkodikɛ*).[76]

Besides reminding the listener that humans and animals are beings of equal worth, in this version of the myth from above, Kodaani elucidates where the *diseede wante* (family animals) came from. Given that it was *Uwienu* (or the eagle), who provided humans with the authority and ability to overpower animals in the first place, another possible outcome of such myths is that *Uwienu* also gave humans the responsibility of becoming good guardians of the animals that stayed behind. With the exception of helmeted guineafowl, however, all the other domesticated species now found in Cobly originated from outside the subcontinent (Gifford-Gonzalez and Hanotte 2011). Many of the domestic animals, such as different subspecies of sheep and cows, are so well established in the region that Blench refers to them as "indigenous" or "anciently established breeds" (1999:7). Other animals – notably Muscovy ducks, pigs and donkeys – have only arrived in Cobly more recently. Some of my older interviewees can recall when they first saw pigs in the Commune, whilst people only started to keep donkeys in Cobly since 2010.

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[72] Mopane bee or fly (*Plebeina hildebrandti*), which is black, stingless and makes honey.

[73] Literally "wilderness-cattle".

[74] Literally "mountain-guineafowl"*.*

[75] Literally "mountain-chicken", *Ptilopachus petrosus*.

[76] Originally recounted in December 2010 by Kodaani, who is now in his sixties. He retold a shorter version of the story when I interviewed him in 2015.

Diamond asks, "is the abundance of large wild mammals the reason why no mammal species was ever domesticated in subequatorial Africa, making domestication superfluous for Africans?" (2002:702). He (2002:702; see also Clark 2007:55; Gifford-Gonzalez and Hanotte 2011:3-4) goes on to suggest that Africans' ready acceptance of domestic animals, the majority of which originated in Eurasia, indicates that the main reason African wild animals were not domesticated was not for lack of trying; these animals could not be domesticated. Given that, until relatively recently, bushmeat continued to be the main source of meat for many Bebelibe, the introduction of domestic animals might not have resulted in a drastic change of day-to-day meat-eating habits as such. It might have had a significant impact on the family in other ways, however, such as ceremonially, as *diseede wante* (family animals) came to represent *utedu* (non-monetary abundance, see below). I realise that this is speculative, given that there is no written record of what happened locally, and given that the communities that form the Bebelibe today would not have existed as such when many of the domestic animals were first introduced. In considering what has happened in the wider region though, it is likely that the arrival of domestic animals led to rapid social change. In order to help deal with this, it is possible that people created and told variations of the above myth, together with other myths, to help maintain social cohesion, a subject I explore further in *The Role of Myths*, Chapter Seven.

Morris asserts that "it has to be recognized that the advent of farming has had a profound effect on the way humans relate to the natural world, and specifically towards animal life" (2009:217). Despite this, Morris points out that it does not necessarily result in a radical break – as some authors claim – as people transition from hunter-gatherer to agriculturalist (2009:217). He then states:

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What is of interest about the Malawian context is that these two attitudes towards the natural world and specifically towards mammals, one – the sacramental egalitarian – associated with hunter-gatherers, the other – implying an ethic of opposition and control – associated with agriculturalists, do in fact co-exist (2009:218-219).

In order to explain better my findings for the Commune of Cobly, which are in line with Morris' statement above, certain classic features that are associated with Western domestication practices need to be set aside. Clutton-Brock defined a domestic animal as "one that has been bred in captivity for purposes of economic profit to a human community that maintains complete mastery over its breeding, organization of territory, and food supply" (1989:7). Elsewhere, she added that "only humans benefit" from associating with domestic animals (1994:27) and that domestic animals are often "treated as property rather than as sentient beings with their own interests" (1994:31). Serpell and Paul add that domestic animals need to be "controlled and confined […] to prevent them from wandering or reverting to the wild" (1994:132). Serpell later states that "[m]ost domestic animals are utterly dependent for survival on their human owners and custodians. They have no free will as such" (2005:14). Few of these classic features, however, typify how the majority of Bebelibe I know relate to their *diseede wante* (family animals). Ideas about domestication continue to change, however, both amongst the Bebelibe and in post-domestic societies, which I discuss in Chapter Five (see *Commodification*). In this section I present the pre-domestication position where trust and domination coexist, which is typical of the majority of Bebelibe households that have *diseede wante*, by exploring each of the classic features of domestication noted above.

Property or Sentient Beings?

In the ancient world, people lived very close to their livestock, often even sharing the same house with them, and however cruel they may have been at times, they treated their animals as individuals who could suffer like themselves (Clutton-Brock 1994:33).

Clutton-Brock's statement seems to presume that such relationships no longer exist, though she does go on to clarify that animals only lose their individual identity when dealt with in large numbers, as is the case with industrial farming (1994:34; see also Vialles 1994). Ingold makes a similar observation about the changing nature of social relations between people and reindeer that results from transitioning from hunting to pastoralism:

> The reproductive increase of the nucleus of domestic stock to substitute for the wild herds as a subsistence resource simultaneously reproduces the property relations of pastoralism, but not the original bonds of taming that gave rise to them (1980:94).

As previously mentioned, for many people in the Commune of Cobly, animals are their own agents and beings of equal worth. To claim that people own the *diseede wante* (family animals) that stay with them immediately creates a subject-object dichotomy. Writing generally about relationships between hunters, pastoralists and the animals they engage with, Ingold distinguishes domination as "a form of social control exercised over subject-persons" from domestication, which is "a form of mechanical control exercised over object-things" (1994:17). Based on this distinction, the relationship between the Bebelibe and their *diseede wante* is largely one of domination rather than domestication.

Ingold (1994:14-16) argues that hunters are in relationships of trust with the animals they hunt, whilst pastoralists dominate their animals. Armstrong Oma (2010:176-177; see also Brightman *et al.* 2012:18; Nadasdy 2007; Willerslev *et al.* 2015) challenges Ingold's analysis of trust and domination and questions if relationships of trust can truly exist between hunters and individual animals, given that hunters kill their prey. Following Armstrong Oma this means that the hunter's relationship with a particular animal is short-lived and does not allow for

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reciprocity.[77] Conversely, relationships between humans and domestic animals are reciprocal and rely on trust. Armstrong Oma's observations resonate with my findings, which affirm the importance of trust between people and their *diseede wante* (family animals) in the Commune of Cobly. As beings whose autonomy is respected, *diseede wante* choose to stay with their human guardians and allow them to make decisions on their behalf. They entrust their human guardians with a level of authority that allows them to dominate when appropriate. Should people try to dominate their *diseede wante* in an inappropriate manner, however, by abusing the authority an animal has entrusted them with, the animal can seek revenge (see below). Thus, the interplay of trust and domination is multidirectional between humans and animals (see also Nadasdy 2007).

> Humans can't live without animals and animals can't live without humans. Thus, the two complement[78] each other. That's my personal conviction and I say this because, whether it concerns ceremonies, hunting or other things, people use animals and animals can't live without people. That's why I've found that the two are complementary. You can say that people are more powerful than animals because they raise animals and kill them when they want, but also people cannot live without animals.

In his late-twenties and working for an NGO, Adrien's view, whilst acknowledging human domination over animals, still recognises animals as "subject-persons". His use of the verb *se compléter* (to complement) affirms the idea that humans and animals are in a reciprocal relationship.

In her critique of Ingold's analysis of trust and domination, Armstrong Oma (2010; see also Palmer 1997) suggests that relationships between humans and domestic animals should rather be understood as social contracts, which

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[77] See, however, Nadasdy (2007), who effectively argues that the relationship between hunters and animals is also reciprocal. See also Hill (2013:125-127).
[78] Interview in French. Adrien stated that: "*Ils se complètent*".

encompass trust and reciprocity. She acknowledges, however, that the relationship may be asymmetrical in nature (2010:179). She explicates:

> As participants in the social contract, animals are given multiple roles and can simultaneously participate in different arenas. As such, the social contract is a tool to examine the animals in a community where they have a variety of roles and obligations, rather than seeing them as segregated, for example, as either calorific value or cosmological vehicles. […] The idea of a social contract acknowledges that the relationship between living animals and humans is multi-layered and beyond a one-way communication. I hold that animals are agents by way of their ability to act upon the world as living, sentient beings (2010:179).

Vialles (1994:118-124) also discusses different "traditional domestication" contracts and alludes to their asymmetrical nature:

> Take the individual contract first, the one between man and animal. Feeding and looking after an animal gives a man a right to its flesh. The eater thus legitimises his eating of meat by virtue of the care and attention he has bestowed on the animal, in slaughtering which he is, as it were, realising his investment (1994:118).

Palmer (1997:419-421) questions the validity of such social contracts on the grounds that a social contract should be a win-win situation between equal partners. I too have my reservations about the term "contract" as this suggests a formalised, legal agreement made between two parties. It does recognise, however, that animals have a certain level of autonomy and are able to communicate, reciprocate and enter into relationships of trust (Larrère and Larrère 2000). Maybe the word "understanding" would be more appropriate as this can be tacit and not necessarily formalised. Palmer (1997:417-418) too expresses similar reservations and suggests that "tacit consent" could be a better alternative, although she goes on to question whether such consent is ongoing:

> Even if […] historically in some sense animals 'chose' or gave 'tacit consent' to domestication, this is no longer a possible 'choice' for current generations of animals. The nature of the 'animal contract' is such that once in, it is impossible to get out. This makes a mockery of

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the idea of either tacit or hypothetical consent, since if there are no alternatives consent is meaningless (1997:421).

Although Palmer's objections seem justified for a post-domestic setting, the idea of a "social contract" based on tacit understanding does resonate with my findings in Cobly. Amongst the Bebelibe, such understandings are especially apparent between *diseede wante* (family animals) and individuals who have animal *mtakimɛ* (identity), which includes animal *upinsihy̨* (destiny). Several interviewees referred to these individuals as empathetic. The implicit trust and resulting empathy that exists between such individuals and their *diseede wante* is due to a level of communication and ontonic engagement that prevails between their *mtakimɛ*. "Understanding" therefore embraces not only the idea of an agreement between the parties concerned, but also sympathetic awareness, the combination of which results in empathy[79]. I explore this further in Chapters Seven (see *The role of Myths*) and Eight (see *Relational Complexities and Becoming*). Conversely, there are those who, despite all their efforts to keep *diseede wante*, never succeed. Benjamin, the churchgoing university graduate in his late-twenties, explained as follows:

> [For those who don't succeed with their *diseede wante*] it's because of their *mtakimɛ*, their spirits[80], that's why it doesn't work, their spirits and the animals' spirits don't marry. They don't have animal *upinsihy̨*, which is part of *mtakimɛ*. So, when talking about keeping animals, for those that don't have animal destinies, they don't glue together; their spirits can't grab hold of the animals' spirits and that's why it doesn't work for them.
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> You're born with this; it's not something you can learn. You can have children and, even whilst they're babies you don't need to say, 'These animals are for you,' it just works and you say, 'Ah, those children there, they have animal destiny.' […]
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> You can say that it's God who gives this, but the person also negotiates this with God. So, in a way it's not necessarily God who decides as the person has asked for it. What I mean is that, before I come into the

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[79] See also Hurn (2016a), writing about the relationship between human and animal members of the Skanda Vale ashram community in West Wales.

[80] Interview in French. Benjamin regularly translates *mtakimɛ* as *esprit*(s).

world, I tell God, 'I want to raise animals.' And if I have asked for this, God will give me this destiny so that I will succeed.

Grégoire, a teacher in his twenties, also identified the importance of inter-*mtakimɛ* relations:

> I've already said that animals have spirits[81] just like humans do. Sometimes the animal's spirit doesn't get along with a person's spirit. This is the simple reason why some people succeed in keeping [animals], whilst others don't, because their spirits talk to each other, they communicate, and when they don't get along, it doesn't work, it won't succeed.

"These animals are at the same time his children," commented Joseph, who is in his twenties and studying for his *baccalauréat*, an idea affirmed by several other interviewees for those who have animal *mtakimɛ*. Robert, the NGO worker in his late-thirties, observed that they even sleep in the same room as their animals. The natural affinity that exists between such individuals and their *diseede wante* means that the animals never wander far, and return of their own volition at night.

More generally, relationships of trust and inter-ontonic engagement between individuals and their *diseede wante* (family animals) have been challenged by *upaanu* (new times). Literally "newness", people also employ the term *upaanu* when referring to anything that is new, and translate *upaanu* as *la modernité* (modernity) in French. One example of *upaanu*, which typifies the interplay of trust and domination, and the resulting ontological penumbras that people have had to deal with, is the introduction of cattle as draught animals.

Ploughing-Cattle

Many interviewees can remember when they saw ploughing-cattle (*inaahaaki*, literally "cattle-that-are-ploughing"[82], sg. *fɛnaahaakifɛ*) used in their village for

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[81] Interview in French. Grégoire too translates *mtakimɛ* as *esprit*(s).
[82] Compound noun of "cattle" (*inaahi̧*, sg. *fɛnaafɛ*) and "are ploughing" (*haa*). Both bulls and oxen are used for ploughing.

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the first time. Based on their recollections, the first ploughing-cattle were used in the late 1960s, and slowly spread throughout the Commune of Cobly during the years that followed. It was obvious that seeing ploughing-cattle used in this way for the first time made a big impression on people. Many were captivated and amazed by the sight, "I saw how vast the field was and the oxen went back and forth and the field was finished! It was good and, at first, we were happy," Antoine, the farmer in his mid-fifties, stated. Using cattle in this way, however, was also extremely controversial. Antoine continued:

> But then we started to have problems. Sickness came and people said, 'kɛnaatɔɔkɛ, kɛnaatɔɔkɛ [anthrax], it's because our fathers [tɔɔ denbɛ][83] didn't know better. Just like that, they started to trap and use cattle to plough.' Do you understand? At that time, that's how it happened. They had to ask the cattle to forgive [sɔnni] them. It's the truth.

"My father refused to use cattle to plough until he died. He would say, 'how can you take cattle and make them suffer, beat them so they plough a furrow, then you sow your cereals and eat afterwards?'" commented Alma who is in her sixties. Several other interviewees mentioned the same concern; that it was not right to exploit animals in this way so that you could eat. Takida, the septuagenarian farmer, went as far as saying that you make the animal a slave, whilst Yves, the farmer in his late-forties shared:

> [When I first saw cattle ploughing] I wasn't happy and said to myself, 'How can we take the cattle we use for sacrifices, that give us life, and use them to plough?' We suffered. One year there was no rain and people said, 'It's the cattle who are grumbling. They're saying, "Ah, it's not possible! You, who sacrifice us, now you want to make us plough?"'

Sinbonko, a community shrine priest in his sixties, explained that by making ploughing-cattle do the work of men, their status changes to that of a human. As humans are not sacrificed and eaten, ploughing-cattle should not be either. Sinbonko elaborated that by making cattle plough for humans, not only do they

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[83] Includes fathers and forefathers. *Denbɛ* is a plural marker for words that do not have nominal class markers.

become human, they become their children. Marc, an ex-church farmer in his mid-forties also stated that by making cattle plough you accord them human status. He then explained that the *atenwiɛnɛ* (shrine entities) were also upset when people first used cattle in this way. He added that the *atenwiɛnɛ* want food and drink that people have produced by their own labour. The *atenwiɛnɛ* were so upset to be offered food that was produced by ploughing-cattle that they caused a drought. Marc concluded that the *atenwiɛnɛ* are now weak, as they have no choice but to accept produce that has not resulted from human effort. Timothée, a septuagenarian retired pastor, added that some people were so unhappy that they asked the *atenwiɛnɛ* to intervene by killing the ploughing-cattle. After some time, however, the same people realised that ploughing-cattle were good, so they asked the *atenwiɛnɛ* for forgiveness. Now even the community shrine priests use ploughing-cattle.

Some of my interviewees, however, were amongst the first who were willing to try ploughing with cattle. Yooka, a septuagenarian farmer, was one such person: "People said we were thieves and that we didn't want to work; that's why we said that cattle could plough to give us food. But now, they use [ploughing-cattle]," he shared. Many people still do not like the idea of using ploughing-cattle, especially when they see ploughing-cattle abused by ploughmen so that they plough faster or more than is reasonable in a given day. Most interviewees affirmed that if someone were responsible for the death of ploughing-cattle through abuse, the cattle would seek vengeance. Despite this, most people have accepted the necessity of using ploughing-cattle. With increasing population pressure, and more people growing cotton, ploughing by traction is necessary if enough land is to be cultivated during the relatively short rainy season. "It's really difficult", explicated Isabelle, who is in her late-thirties, "if it wasn't because we need to plough our fields to have food, [I don't like that] first of all you take the ploughing-cattle, you put wood on their necks, then the

plough behind, and when they refuse to walk, you hit them." Basaadi, the nonagenarian diviner stated, "ploughing-cattle are now our sons, they are everything to us," whilst Anne, a churchgoing widow in her late-forties, explained this relationship further by drawing a parallel between a father giving his son a *daba*[84] and giving an ox a plough: "Now he has made the ox his own son by giving him a *daba* to plough. He's his son now. As your son holds the *daba*, so does the ox; would you kill your own child to eat? [If you do] he [the ox] will seek vengeance."

Blench, writing about sub-Saharan Africa, notes that "[t]he most notable example of an implement that failed to spread is the plough" (2015:5). He explains that ploughs where first introduced by missionaries and colonialists. People, however, were reluctant to adopt ploughs unless the right social, environmental and agricultural conditions were met, usually as a result of "human population pressures [which] necessitate short fallow periods" (2015:5). Blench (2015:9) refers to Togo (Benin's western neighbour), where attempts by German colonialists in 1900 to introduce animal traction had little success. Despite further attempts to introduce ploughs in the 1950s, less than 1000 ploughs were in use by 1960 when Togo became independent. Blench concludes that "In most villages in Africa, animal-drawn ploughs were introduced in living memory" (2015:15). The social conditions that Blench mentions do not include how people relate to the animals concerned. In addition to other factors that Blench does note, I suspect that one major reason behind people's reluctance to adopt ploughs is because of their perceived abuse of the animals affected. Sewane (2002:40) substantiates this for the Betammaribe. With the desire to promote development, the American Peace Corp imported some cows who had been trained to the yoke. They hoped that the Betammaribe would abandon their hoes and use cattle to plough instead. Under

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[84] A large-bladed hoe with a short handle used for ploughing by hand.

the heavy sun, young Americans demonstrated the cows' ploughing abilities. Those who watched thought that the cows' docility was abnormal. Nothing in the world would make them subject their own cows to such a traumatic experience. In the same way, the Betammaribe forbid sending their daughters away to work as domestics.

Today, in the Commune of Cobly, most people now accept using ploughing-cattle – or maybe it is the ploughing-cattle who have accepted their fate (or both) – as cattle are no longer held responsible for problems such as anthrax and drought. This mutual acceptance may be because people have found a way of maintaining a subject-person relationship with their cattle by according them human status as their children. Perceptions also change with time and circumstances. The younger generation, for example, has grown up with ploughing-cattle:

> It's a good thing. If it weren't good, if people abandoned them [ploughing-cattle], what would they do? Men yoked them so that we could use them. *Uwienu* thought about it and saw that people should profit from [ploughing-cattle] and that they should also profit from us (Juliette, who is in her early-twenties and recently married).

Didier, the village chief in his sixties, explained:

> [Using ploughing-cattle] is good, yes, well each thing has its time. When cattle were first used people said it was because of the cattle; we were maltreating them in the fields and that's why we had a big drought. Now that we've become accustomed to using cattle, we cannot [abandon them] today.

> Now people have brought us tractors; they've come from Ghana,[85] and are used throughout the area for ploughing. So people are saying it's because the tractors ploughed too close to the shrine entities that the rains were late. Do you see? Each thing has its consequence. It's because of new things that these things happen, especially late rains. It was only the 16th August [2014] that the rains arrived and people exclaimed that it's because of the tractors, which make too much noise

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[85] Although some people in the Commune of Cobly now own tractors, the majority come from Ghana. With the start of each rainy season, Ghanaians drive over in their tractors and hire their services to the local population.

for the shrine entities, that's why the rains were late. Well, what can you do?

Grégoire, the teacher in his twenties, also shared about tractors and how they are implicated in the increase of beef:

> Today, ploughing-cattle are becoming less useful and are now destined for meat because of the arrival of tractors that can plough an extensive acreage. Cattle continue to increase, but machines now do the work that they were meant for. Therefore, the only thing to do is to kill them. That's why there's often beef available.

These incidents typify how people deal with *upaanu* (new times) and the introduction of new things, which often results in friction between different entities (J. Merz 2014:29-77; see also Bernard 2003), at least initially. Despite this, tractors are catching on more readily than ploughing-cattle did. This is probably due to people having less ontonic engagement with tractors than ploughing-cattle, especially as the majority of those who own the tractors and actually plough the fields are Ghanaians; thus foreigners. With more land being cultivated, however, there are other consequences.

Territorial Control and Breeding

> In the past there was plenty of land and our fields were far away. When we were children, the sheep and goats could wander freely. People didn't prepare the land next to their houses, so they could wander freely. Now we are numerous and people plough next to [their homesteads]. What do you do? When you see the sorghum [growing], you need to tie them up. We didn't used to tie them up (Duuté, an octogenarian farmer).

There is little control of breeding, and the majority of people let their *diseede wante* (family animals) wander freely, mixing and mating with other animals as they desire. This is possible as there is only partial territorial control, which people undertake once the crops have started to grow (June/July) until they are ready for harvest (November). People attach pigs to trees and tether goats and sheep out in the open, or children shepherd them, together with cattle, during

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the day. They then round the *diseede wante* up for the night. This is both for the animals' and the crops' protection and is paramount when crops are grown in the immediate vicinity of the homestead. The village chief has the right to take possession of any animals that are not tethered or shepherded and are causing damage. If nobody claims the animal in question after several weeks, the chief can eat or sell the animal. Otherwise, people need to pay a fine of 2,000 CFA francs (approximately £2.70) per day when they go to claim back the animal in question. They also have to pay compensation to those whose fields have been damaged. The other risk is that the animal will be stolen or even killed by those whose fields are being destroyed. Consequently, incentives are high to make sure that animals are tethered or shepherded. Those whose fields suffer damage from wandering animals are also careful not to act too quickly against the animals in question. They should first speak with the animal's guardian and the village chief before taking action against the animal. Should they kill the animal out of frustration or anger not only will the animal's guardian be upset, but the animal can avenge its death, as Alma, who is in her sixties, explained:

> Ah, that's bad. Animals can't sow, animals can't plough, and then you kill the animal [out of anger]. *Uwienu* has authorised the animal to eat vegetation. The animal sees the cereals and thinks they're vegetation. The animal doesn't know that you sowed them and that you like them. By killing the animal, it's you who have sinned. […] One day something bad will happen to you and you won't [immediately] realise that it's the animal's revenge.

If a wandering animal's exact identity is in doubt, however, no one will intervene for fear that the animal in question is another entity who has body-shifted. In such instances, the animal may cause extensive damage. I examine such a scenario involving seven donkeys (*simunsi*, sg. *kɛmunkɛ*) in Chapter Six. As previously mentioned, people consider *Equidae* family members powerful animals and respect them accordingly. Normally the only person who has any authority over a donkey is its guardian; others who try to intervene in a donkey's

life are intruding on the donkey's rights. The donkey will then set about destroying such people and their families.

People sow around their homestead first, sometimes using fast-growing varieties of millet and maize, before sowing slower-growing varieties in their fields away from home. This allows them to liberate their *diseede wante* (family animals) sooner rather than later. Interviewees generally acknowledged that it is only the fields that are in the immediate vicinity of a homestead that are at risk and that, in past times, when people did not farm close to home, they neither tethered nor shepherd their *diseede wante*.

At the height of dry season, when most natural sources of water have dried up and vegetation is scarce, some Bebelibe provide their *diseede wante* with food and water. As previously mentioned, many people acknowledge that animals have a certain level of autonomy. Accordingly, they largely leave their *diseede wante* to fend for themselves, which can appear as indifference or neglect, especially to expatriates. As Serpell and Paul (1994:132) suppose, some animals do wander off, may revert to a semi-wild state, and are never seen again. A recent development is to entrust the care of some livestock, especially cows, to Fulani who have settled in the area. Several interviewees explained that another solution is to castrate[86] the males so they do not wander far from home. A more recent development, and the other main reason interviewees gave for castrating animals, is to increase their meat-yield. People are well aware that a male can no longer reproduce once castrated, but they do not necessarily castrate their animals in order to control breeding. Two interviewees explained that too many males who compete to mate could be distressing for the females. In this instance, it is better to castrate most of the males in order to maximise reproduction. Several interviewees added that you

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[86] People crush the testicles (*wɛpu* or *wɛbita*), of cattle, goats and sheep, for example, and properly castrate (*dota*) dogs and pigs by removing their testicles.

only castrate a male *after* it has had the chance to mate at least once. Otherwise, most interviewees thought the idea of limiting or controlling breeding absurd, "Oh! People would never accept doing that!" declared Idaani, the church elder in his late-fifties. "No, no, no, you can't do that, you can't do that. You leave them [to breed freely]," exclaimed Nicole, who is in her twenties and studying for her *baccalauréat*, whilst Charles, a farmer in his late-thirties stated that only modern people[87] use birth control and went on to explain that for animals:

> There is no limit to their multiplication, unless they set their own limit. An animal, you know, when he goes wandering he eats what he wants. He chooses and eats what he likes. But when he's tied up, what he has to eat isn't the same. He doesn't have the same choice and he's obliged to eat what's there. You can't provide for him in the same way as when he wanders freely. Now it's the same thing with reproduction [if you try to control it], the animal will produce but it won't be the same as when he wanders freely [and can choose for himself].

Idaani, Nicole and Charles' responses were typical and illustrate that many people do not accept the idea of "seriously curtail[ing] an animal's ability to act as 'it' chooses" (Hurn 2012:58). The general sentiment was that it is good and important to let animals breed freely. Following Blench, such sentiments about reproduction and castration are typical for the region:

> Throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa, ruminant livestock are allowed to mate freely, and thus the only control exercised over the quality of sires is the fertility of individuals. Castration is practised in sub-Saharan Africa but it is neither common nor carried out with the primary goal of improving genetic quality (1999:47-48).

Only two people affirmed that, yes, you should control breeding: Bernadette, a churchgoer who breeds pigs commercially, and Isaac, a churchgoing businessman and commercial farmer, as they seek to maximise production and meat-yield for *tikpate* (monetary wealth). Although keeping and breeding animals for economic gain is a more recent development, it is one that is

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[87] *Bɛpanbɛ* (literally "people-new", sg. *upaanɔ*).

beginning to gain in popularity (see *Commodification*, Chapter Five). Bernadette and Isaac are amongst a small handful of commercial animal farmers currently active in the Commune, and Thérèse, a churchgoing meat-seller in her fifties, will start breeding pigs commercially once her pigsties are built. Meanwhile, other interviewees continue to leave breeding in the "hands" of their *diseede wante* (family animals), not only out of respect for their autonomy, but to have as many animals as possible. They too talked about the wealth that their *diseede wante* represent, but this is of another kind: *utedu* (non-monetary abundance):

> Sharon: Do you think that humans have the right to control or limit the breeding of domestic animals?
>
> Roland (the trained pastor in his mid-forties): Humans have the right to?
>
> Sharon: To try and limit or control breeding…
>
> Roland: …of animals?
>
> Sharon: M hmm.
>
> Roland: That, that's not at all normal! You should leave animals to reproduce because a man's wealth[88] [*utedu*] is measured by the amount of land and the number of wives, children and animals he has. These are the things that indicate wealth [*utedu*].

Animal *utedu* is important for sacrifices and for developing and maintaining relationships through reciprocal giving and eating together. In order for these things to happen, however, the animal concerned often needs to be killed and consumed. If people recognise that animals are beings of equal worth and therefore have a certain level of autonomy, how can they justify killing and eating them? I explore this issue in the next chapter.

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[88] Interview in French. Roland used the word *richesse*.

Killing and Consumption

Interviewees regularly expressed their high regard for animals. They also testified that they enjoy eating meat (*tininte*). This apparent paradox has been noted by others such as Ingold (1986:247), Lindquist (2000:178-179), Serpell (2005), Serpell and Paul (1994:131-132) and Willis (1990:7-8, 13). Morris dispels this paradox by explaining that

> in many clan-based societies [in Malawi], particularly hunter-gatherers, meat eating coexists with a close spiritual relationship between people and their natural environment […]. Meat eating may reflect, therefore, not power over animals but rather identification with them (2009:186).

Morris further clarifies that eating meat should not be interpreted as an act that opposes or controls nature, but rather one of incorporating and "harnessing" natural powers that are crucial for individual and social wellbeing (1998:186-187; 2009:187). He also notes that people enjoy and even crave meat (1998:191; 2009:190).

When I asked Anne, the churchgoing widow in her late-forties, if she would eat meat every day if she could, she responded with a laugh, "I would love to, I truly would! Just show me where you keep your meat and watch me!" Takida, the septuagenarian farmer, and Idaani the church elder in his late-fifties both exclaimed that meat "takes the throat"; only meat can satisfy your craving. Many interviewees were down-to-earth in their views; for them – as for Malawians – there was no apparent paradox between their respect for animals as beings of equal worth and eating them. "Yes, we kill animals to eat, and they eat us," Franck, a pork butcher in his mid-thirties, stated pragmatically. Paul, a village deputy chief in his late-forties, and Henri, the carpenter in his late-thirties, also mentioned that there are human-eating animals. "God created animals so that

we could have meat", added Henri, "as humans don't eat humans." Other interviewees pointed out that some animals are carnivores. Writing generally about animals and moral behaviour, Bekoff notes that "[s]ocial morality does not mean other animals are behaving unfairly when they kill for food, for example, for they have evolved to do this" (2006:468).

Not all Bebelibe, however, are happy about killing animals for meat. Many interviewees affirmed that those with animal *mtakimɛ* and who succeed best with their *diseede wante* (family animals) could not kill them. Roland, the trained pastor in his mid-forties, explained that it would be as if they are sacrificing a part of themselves. Such people are often more reticent about eating meat too. Esther, the septuagenarian widow, is widely recognised for her rapport and success with *diseede wante*. She told me that she did not like eating meat and that it made her feel sick. What she shared was later borne out by her actions. We both attended a party in July 2015. Everybody was served meat. Although Esther accepted the meat (to not do so would have been inappropriate), this did not mean she was obliged to eat it. Knowing that Esther did not actually eat meat, Sarah, a widow in her mid-forties, provided her with a container to take the meat home. Esther then gave it to her grandchildren. Others, especially those reincarnated by an animal, may need to observe special interdictions such as not eating four-footed animals. To do so could result in their death. More generally, most interviewees explained that they could not eat their totem animal, a subject I examine in Chapter Seven. If there is a paradox, then, it is that animals are simultaneously good to eat whilst providing moral constraints, as posited by Fortes (1966:18). Following Serpell, such constraints result from the human

> capacity to use introspection or 'reflexive consciousness' […]. But because we are animals and share many of our feelings, needs and motivations with other animals, it can also be applied to the task of penetrating and exploring the mental states of nonhumans […] (2005:10).

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Serpell elucidates that one consequence of such thinking is that it results in "moral inhibitions about killing and eating [animals]" (2005:10) and "generates feelings of anxiety, guilt, and the fear of retribution when the [hunted] animal is eventually killed" (2005:13). He later adds that some pastoral societies fear retribution if livestock are killed "simply to satisfy the desire for meat" (2005:15-16). Similarly, as with hunting and killing bush animals, there is a limit to how many *diseede wante* (family animals) an individual Ubielo should kill, and the *diseede wante* can seek revenge if the reason for their death cannot be justified.

Anne, the churchgoing widow in her late-forties, explicated that all animals and humans are equal in the eyes of *Uwienu* (God), as he created us all. Thus, for *Uwienu*, to kill an animal without just cause is the same as killing a human. He does not accept this and he will see that the animal is avenged. Yaaté, a farmer in his early-fifties, lamented:

> Oh, suffering will come. You've despicably killed an animal who was with you. The animal will go to *Uwienu*, who created us all. *Uwienu* will judge by asking the animal, 'what did you do?' And he says, 'I didn't do anything.' *Uwienu* then asks your *mtakimɛ*, 'what did you do?' And your *mtakimɛ* says, 'I committed a despicable act.' […] The animal then returns and will make you suffer. You committed a despicable act against the animal, so its *mtakimɛ* will do something despicable to you.

Yaaté added that the animal could seek vengeance by seeing that you would no longer succeed with your *diseede wante*, or that your crops would fail. He surmised that animals are more powerful than humans, as a person's *utedu* (non-monetary abundance) depends on animals. Many interviewees affirmed that failing with *diseede wante* was the most common form of reprisal, which *Uwienu* (God) either metes out directly or authorises the aggrieved animal to dispense. As *diseede wante* are integral members of the *diseede* (family) and essential for a family's wellbeing, to deprive a family of animals is to deprive

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them of *utedu*. As mentioned in Chapter Four, the *diseede* is incomplete without animals.

Thus, killing an animal should be legitimised at the mundane as well as authorised at a sacred level. It is not so much a question of whether one should kill animals, but rather when and why.

> Morris notes:

> In rural areas, domestic animals and poultry are rarely killed for food, unless there is a good reason, such as a feast for a wedding or funeral or to honor an important visitor with good ndiwo [meat sauce]. The suggestion of many vegetarians that people would not eat animals if they had to kill them themselves gets no support at all from the Malawian context. People who kill animals invariably eat them (2009:192)[89].

I have observed the same situation in the Commune of Cobly. Butchering, and seeing animals being butchered, does not deter people from eating meat. I watched the butchering of a sow and a female goat[90] in July 2015 ready for the party mentioned above. Victor, an animal trader in his early-forties, provided the animals. Three young men and Victor then butchered the animals in front of Sarah's homestead. Bystanders included several other men, some children, Sarah who oversaw the butchering, and later the cooking, and the family dog.

Sébastien (early-twenties) quickly and efficiently slaughtered the two animals, so their suffering was minimal. Edouard (late-teens) assisted him. Sébastien first killed the sow by delivering a quick, hard blow from behind to the top of her head with a large wooden pestle normally used for pounding yam. He then slit her throat with a machete and drained the blood. Sébastien and

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[89] Writing about abattoirs in France, Vialles (1994:31-32, 118-119) intimates that squeamishness over bloodshed and slaughter increases with distance. She also observes that new, humane slaughter methods actually makes slaughtering worse for the abattoir workers:
> By treating animals 'humanely', man is in fact humanising them, and by the same token the feeling of unease increases in proportion to the taxonomical ambiguity created by dissolving the frontiers between humanity and animality (1994:123).

[90] Ideally, only male family animals should be killed for meat, though this is changing with the commercialisation of animals.

Edouard then burnt the hair off, scraped the skin clean of charred matter and washed the carcass. Edouard and Pascal (mid-twenties) butchered the carcass into manageable chunks ready to give to Sarah. Sébastien then trussed up the goat and – whilst Edouard held her – slit her throat with a sharp knife and drained the blood. Sébastien then used boiling water to scald the skin so that he could easily scrape the fur off. He also used fire to burn the fur off the extremities. As with the sow, the two then washed the carcass. Victor then arrived and helped Edouard complete the butchering. The whole process took a little over two hours. There was one distressing moment when Pascal opened up the sow and Sarah thought she was pregnant[91]. Sarah's fears were quickly alleviated though; the sow had evidently had a hearty meal before being slaughtered so her intestines were distended. Otherwise, those present chatted and socialised in a relaxed manner, talked positively about the meat-yield and were obviously looking forward to the party meal.

Despite their evident pleasure at the prospect of eating meat and although some interviewees – such as Anne, Takida and Idaani – openly expressed their desire for meat, most of the interviewees voiced concern (including Takida) about eating too much meat, which many considered unhealthy.

> There are several reasons for killing *diseede wante* (family animals). I will kill one for a stranger or if I need to perform a sacrifice. Otherwise, [if I want to eat meat] I'll take my bow or my rifle one morning to go hunting and say, 'today, as I'm looking for meat, I can kill' (Michel, the farmer in his fifties).

As mentioned in Chapter Four (see *Hunting*), until relatively recently, bushmeat was the main source of family meat and *diseede wante* were rarely killed just so that a family could eat meat. As bush animals become scarcer, however, people are increasingly eating *diseede wante*, especially in the town of Cobly (see

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[91] Sarah was not too happy that female animals were slaughtered. The thought that the sow might be pregnant upset her further, as the piglets represented potential *tikpate* (monetary wealth) that was lost.

Commodification below). Otherwise – as Morris notes for Malawi – my interviewees were unanimous that *diseede wante* should only be killed for social consumption, or if they are antisocial or dangerous.

Social Consumption

> 'Why is it so important to offer meat to strangers?' I asked Robert. He explained that it's out of respect and consideration. It's important to offer something good, especially as you never know if the visitor is really who he or she appears to be! Sometimes the visitor is *Uwienu* [God] or a *ditade* [stone/shrine entity, pl. *ataadɛ*] who has taken on human form. *Uwienu* and *ataadɛ* can visit as a child or an old person of your acquaintance, or as a complete stranger. If you don't welcome the person correctly, it could be you're showing disrespect towards *Uwienu* himself or a *ditade* [… and] you could die.
>
> [Robert went on to explain that if] someone is stingy and lacks respect towards others, then *Uwienu* isn't happy either. He can come in human form to see how you'll behave towards him. If you don't welcome him properly, he'll take action against you (Journal entry, 6 February 2015).

Duuté, the octogenarian farmer, explained that animals too sometimes become (*kɔnta*) humans in order to visit people: "The animal comes to visit you and says, 'Give me this, give me that.' If you don't give to him, he will kill you." Writing about the Tallensi of Ghana, Fortes also notes that "Beings of the Wild", "evil trees" and "stones" can transform themselves "into human shape to test and tempt one. To refuse hospitality […] lays one open to the mystical attack that might result in madness" (1975:232; see also Candea and da Col 2012).

When I asked interviewees when someone could kill an animal, the first reason given by nearly everyone was to welcome a stranger. The word for "stranger" in Mbelime is *usaanɔ* (pl. *bɛsanbɛ*) and includes not only unfamiliar visitors, but also newborn babies, new wives and returning family members or friends who have been absent for several months or more. In sum, strangers include visitors "whose immediate experiences and possible motives remain hazy or unknown" (J. Merz 2014:43; see also Piot 1999:77-78; Fortes

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1975:230). Given that one cannot be entirely sure if a stranger is normally human, but could be another entity who might be testing you for some reason, welcoming strangers properly is crucial (see also S. Merz 2014:45-46). "It brings home the importance of hospitality and is a necessity," Alexis, the churchgoing student in his late-twenties expounded, as he shared about the importance of welcoming *ataadɛ* shrine entities who may come and visit you in person:

> Therefore, as we don't have the means to properly identify who is who, you need to have a spirit of hospitality, you need to be hospitable and see that everyone is welcomed – invited and strangers alike – you mustn't discriminate and try to know who's who before welcoming them.

If circumstances mean that there is no time to prepare a meal, however, hosts should give their visitors a gift such as a chicken, guineafowl, some yams or maize to take away with them. In this instance, the stranger in question is not obliged to actually consume the gift and can choose to keep it or pass it on to someone else. It is necessary that the host has demonstrated hospitality, and that the visitor has accepted it.

Other social occasions when people should offer meat include work parties and celebrations. Consuming meat socially is important for forming, maintaining and sometimes restoring relationships, as well as demonstrating respect towards and appreciation of others. Eating meat together symbolises union, trust and identity (see also Hurn 2013; Staples 2008:43; Vilaça 2005:454). Several times now, people have told Johannes and me, "we're the same now, you're truly Bebelibe," after sharing a meal with them. Hutchinson (1992:494) suggests that sharing food together in such circumstances is the equivalent of establishing a blood bond between the people concerned, thus recognising them as kin (see also Candea and da Col 2012:S9-S10; Carsten 1995; Piot 1991:413-414; Yates-Doerr 2015:313-316).

Robert, the NGO worker in his late-thirties also explained that *diseede wante* (family animals) should normally be killed by the *akųnpe* (individuals'

mtakimɛ shrines)[92] or in the vestibule (*ukoohy̨*) where the *bɛhidibɛ* (dead) reside. The person who kills the animal sprinkles some blood onto the shrines and tells the *bɛhidibɛ* why he has killed the animal. Robert explained that the *bɛhidibɛ* look after the *diseede wante*, therefore they expect to be informed when and why they are killed. If the host gives a fowl to the visitor to take away, he should first pluck some feathers and deposit them on the *bɛhidibɛ* or the place where the fowl slept. Robert then bemoaned the fact that many do not bother to keep the *bɛhidibɛ* informed anymore as they consider themselves modern and think that this is no longer necessary. Then they wonder why their chickens disappear or their animals get sick! He added that *diseede wante* who are not normally sacrificed (such as pigs), could simply be killed without informing the *bɛhidibɛ*.

Although there is no formal ceremony as such, I propose that killing *diseede wante* for social consumption is a form of mundane sacrifice, especially as its primary purpose is to establish and maintain good relationships, not only between hosts and guests, but also with the *bɛhidibɛ*. Writing about sacrifice more generally, Evans-Pritchard (1954:31), Detienne (1979:9-11), Vernant (1979:43-45), Bloch (1992:36-43) and Burkert (1996:149-152), for example, all discuss the role of social consumption during formal sacrifices. Little has been written about the idea that social consumption in its own right could be analysed sacrificially, although Hurn's (2013; see also 2016b) analysis of the commensal role of sharing a meal together could be a comparative example. Writing about a Welsh farming community and foxhunting, she notes that "[p]artaking in a communal meal at the end of a day's hunting further served to reaffirm hunt followers' shared values and interests" (2013:222). Hurn then demonstrates that

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[92] Sprinkling blood and speaking over the *aky̨npe* is another way of informing the *bɛhidibɛ* of something, given that their shrines are only present in the vestibule of the most senior male of the family (see Introduction). If the *aky̨npe* and *bɛhidibɛ* shrines are present in a homestead, then blood can be sprinkled on all of them.

the hunt, followed by the meal, which always includes a bowl of lamb stew, can be analysed sacrificially. She points out that the farming community's foxhunting "lack[s] much of the pomp and ceremony associated with mounted foxhunting in other parts of the United Kingdom" (2013:220), and that it "is an inherently secular sacrifice which lacks any of the reverence or ritual of the foxhunt [elsewhere]" (2013:224). What Hurn does not make explicit is whether those who partake in the hunt and subsequent meal are conscious of the sacrificial nature of their acts.

> Vernant recalls that
>
> for us sacrifice and butchering belong to two different semantic zones, [Casabona] noted that among the Greeks matters were completely different. The same vocabulary encompasses the two domains, from Homer to the end of the classical age. Ancient Greek has no other terms to convey the idea of slaughtering an animal to butcher it than those referring to sacrifice or killing for the gods (1989:25).

Despite this, the sacrificial aspect of butchering seems to have predominated in ancient Greece as Vernant also states that "[n]ormally, meat cannot be eaten except on the occasion of a sacrifice and by following its rules" (1989:25).

As with the other societies analysed by the authors above, Bebelibe sacrifices also serve as social occasions when meat is consumed, as their main purpose is to maintain and restore relationships, both intra-human and between humans and other entities, as well as to safeguard the different individuals' wellbeing. In fact, there is no Mbelime word for "sacrifice". People employ the verb *yuɔsi* (to fix, resolve, repair, restore order), which they also use for other activities such as tidying the house and repairing a bicycle. The person who performs the sacrifice is *uyuɔsɔ* (person-who-fixes), whilst *tiyɔsite* (restoration) refers to ceremonies, sacrifices and other occasions when *uyuɔsɔ* fixes or restores something.

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Tiyɔsite (restoration)

> 'It's the end of the world!' lamented Sarah [the churchgoing widow, then in her late-thirties]. This morning we woke up to silence, as there was no crowing competition between the neighbourhood cockerels now that most of the poultry has been culled (Journal entry, 16 July 2007).

In July 2007 there was a bird-flu scare. The government banned all trade and movement of poultry. The gendarmerie and government meat inspectors[93] established several control points where they confiscated, killed and burnt poultry and smashed eggs. Miscreants had to pay a fine and pay for the paraffin used to burn the poultry. Rumour had it that all poultry would need to be culled.[94] Many decided to go ahead and kill their poultry and eat the meat. Sarah's reaction might appear to be overdramatic, but given that chickens are part of a family's *utedu* (non-monetary abundance) and that nearly all ceremonial events require a chicken[95] – whether it is sacrificed or not[96] – maybe her reaction was not so extraordinary after all. Huber (1973), for example, documented a number of ceremonies that he witnessed in the village of Sinni, all of which required chickens.

The African domestic chicken is descended from the red junglefowl (*Gallus gallus*). Establishing when and how chickens first arrived in West Africa from Asia continues to be a challenge (Mwacharo *et al.* 2013), but evidence shows that they were definitely present from 850 AD onwards, probably as early as 450 AD, if not earlier (MacDonald 1992). In terms of their current-day

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[93] These are usually *techniciens des services vétérinaires*. See fn. 39, p. 93.

[94] See also Haraway's (2007:270-271) comment about the 2006 bird-flu outbreak in northern Nigeria.

[95] Exceptions include *dikụntide* (female initiation ceremony). An initiated woman should no longer eat chicken meat or eggs, as the *dikụntide* shrine entity forbids them. Consequently, if a woman needs further ceremonies, guineafowls are used instead. Should an initiated woman eat chicken meat or eggs, she can no longer visit the *dikụntide* shrine entity, otherwise she runs the risk of falling sick and dying. Sewane (2002:18, 21) notes the same situation for the Betammaribe.

[96] Often an initial offering only requires some blood, in which case the person performing the ceremony cuts off the last digit of a chicken's toe and drips blood onto the shrine.

importance, however, a few hundred years makes little difference. They are so integral to many people's lives, not just in the Commune of Cobly but also across the region, that they have become almost indispensable. In a small survey amongst the Mamprusi of northern Ghana, for example, van Veluw (1987:13) reported that 35% of chickens are used for sacrifices, 28% are sold for cash, 15% are consumed, 13% are given away and 10% of chickens are kept for breeding. Kondombo *et al*. (2003:566, 568; see also Guèye 1998:74-75; Zoungrana and Slenders 1992), who conducted research amongst farmers in two villages in Burkina Faso, also noted that chickens are used for sacrifice, to honour guests, given as gifts, exchanged, essential for funeral ceremonies, sold to generate income and used to feed work parties. Consequently, chickens are present in every homestead.

For the Luluwà, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), chickens are so important that they "arrange every problem in life" (Kantshama and Luboya 1986:127, translation mine) through rituals that help resolve social issues and maintain relationships between the living and the dead. Meanwhile the "fowl figures so much in Ibo sacrifices that one would not be wrong to say that the majority of fowls in Iboland [Nigeria] in the past lost their precarious lives in honour of the higher powers" (Arinze, cited in V. Turner 1977:204), whilst Sewane (2002:37, fn. 1), notes that the Betammaribe (southeastern neighbours of the Bebelibe) think that the chicken is the oldest of all animals and that to sacrifice a chick, or better still an egg, replaces all other sacrifices. Thus, there are multiple reasons why people consider chickens important, but neither should the role of other *diseede wante* (family animals) be downplayed.

Besides chickens (and guineafowls), many Bebelibe regularly sacrifice sheep, dogs, cows and goats (see also *Sacrifice* in the Appendices for a summary of what animals can be sacrificed when). People consult diviners to find out if and what other animal(s) are needed for the ceremony in question. As

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mentioned above, sacrifices are important for maintaining relationships between different entities. By doing so, an individual's wellbeing is also maintained. In his article *The Meaning of Sacrifice among the Nuer*, Evans-Pritchard distinguishes between two types of sacrifice "confirmatory" and "piacular" (1954:21). Whereas confirmatory sacrifices are more concerned with social relations, piacular sacrifices rather deal with individuals' moral and physical wellbeing, though Evans-Pritchard does point out that the two overlap. Although it would be possible to class the different Bebelibe sacrifices according to these definitions, I am hesitant to do so as both aspects are apparent in all ceremonies, although one may be more predominant than another depending on the ceremony concerned. Evans-Pritchard also warns against analysing sacrifices in terms of "communion" or "gift" theory:

> As a sacrifice may be a gift or a communion or it may be both, and these meanings may be combined with yet others; and the emphasis varies from rite to rite and even in the same rite. We should rather be seeking for the core, the basic mechanism, of all sacrificial acts (1954:24; see also V. Turner 1977:189-190).

Bloch too discusses the different theories that have been put forward about sacrifice and concludes that "sacrifice cannot be defined cross-culturally and that the word is nothing more than a pointer to a cluster of phenomena which are contained within a wider family of rituals" (1992:42).

For Turner (1977), the principle aim of many rituals is communitas. He proposes, for example, that for the Ndembu of Zambia the Chihamba ceremony "is a matter of transforming the group as a whole, and its main individual members, from a social state of mutual antagonism to a social state of communitas" (1977:196) and that "sacrifices aimed at restoring true fellowship or communitas, human relationship without formal structure, the ideas of gift, expiation, and communion all find expression" (1977:197). Burkert favours commensality and suggests that in ancient Greece sacrifice was a celebration

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of this "[i]n the presence of the sacred" (1996:150) and that the "integration of gods into the common meal serves the purpose of consolidating the group by establishing a superior authority, and ensuring continuity in the precarious transfer of life" (1996:151).

In a similar vein, in his analysis of sacrifice amongst the Kuranko of Sierra Leone, Jackson proposes that "sacrifice demands a dialogue" and that

> [m]ost Kuranko sacrifices are made in order to establish a form of enduring reciprocity between man and spirit (sacralization) rather than to separate the two categories (desacralization). […] Sacrifice is thus an attempt to extend social communication across the boundaries of actual space and time (1977:125-126).

Thus, restoring and maintaining communitas or good relationships between different entities – both human and nonhuman – necessitates good communication, which is optimised by some sort of sacrificial act. The Bebelibe have various rites of passage that accompany first pregnancy, birth, marriage, initiation and death, which ensure that all the parties concerned – including the extended family, the *bɛhidibɛ* (dead) and *ataadɛ* (community guardian shrine entities) – are officially informed about the occasion and those involved. Such rites also assure their participation and endorsement of the person's transition from one stage of life to another (see also S. Merz 2014; Mendonsa 1976:55). Once the animal has been sacrificed, a meal is prepared with the meat, which is then shared by those participating in the ceremony. In terms of *tiyɔsite* (restoration), the ceremonies also ensure that people successfully transition from one stage of life to another, thus establishing them in their new position and restoring social order.

These rites of passage include a purely festive aspect where, in addition to animals sacrificed, the hosts butcher other animals for celebratory meals. This allows those who have not been involved in the actual ceremonies to celebrate a person's successful transition from one stage of life to another. The hosts also

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send portions of meat to family members and friends who are unable to attend the celebrations (see also Jackson 1977:133). Today, the most popular meat for such occasions is pork. Basaadi, the nonagenarian diviner, recalls when he saw pigs for the first time:

> It was the year that people were re-housed [1960][97], that's the year that pigs arrived here. I went into someone's home and there was a pig standing there. I wondered what it was and they said it was a pig. 'Ah, a pig?' Then we saw them grow in popularity.

Interviewees explained that pigs are popular because of their high meat yield compared with other animals, which means pork works out to be cheaper. People are also easily satisfied with a small portion, which usually contains a lot of pork fat and skin. Furthermore, pigs are easier and faster to breed, and are harder to steal than other animals because they squeal.[98] Consequently, many people now keep pigs.

Writing about pig-keeping in Africa, Blench notes that "the degree of ritual embedding in a culture can be taken as evidence of relative antiquity" (2000:356). The pigs' lack of ritual embedding for the Bebelibe further affirms their recent arrival in the Commune of Cobly and explains their inferior status when compared with other *diseede wante* (family animals). This was borne out by several interviewees who added that anyone can eat pork[99] and that pigs have no ceremonial significance, which also facilitates their commodification (see below): "It's not an animal that we sacrifice, but it is there principally to allow us to have a good time. When there's a working party or a celebration, anyone can take a pig and kill it as no sacrifices are needed before doing so," Benjamin, the churchgoing university graduate in his late-twenties expounded. Meanwhile Timothée, the septuagenarian retired pastor, lamented that some

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[97] See Hartveld *et al*. (1992:7) and Huber (1969:260; 1973:378).

[98] Though Alma explained that you can stop a pig squealing by putting soap in its mouth.

[99] The common warthog (*kɛdodikɛ*, pl. *sidosi* [*Phacochoerus africanus*]) is the totem animal for the Bɛcɛkɔnkibɛ community. As pigs are from the same family, members of this community should not eat pork. Some Bɛcɛkɔnkibɛ, however, have started eating pork and raising pigs.

people no longer perform funeral rites, and as pigs are not sacrificed, this is the meat that people now expect. He added that funerals (*dihuude*)[100] have simply become celebrations and an occasion for families to impress their maternal uncles with lots of pork (see S. Merz 2017b:130).

Furthermore, several interviewees explained that pigs are the least intelligent of the *diseede wante*, as – unlike other animals – they do not have *diyammaade* (ability to think, reason and make decisions). This, in turn, is due to their perceived lack of *myammɛ* (gallbladder), which is where one's *diyammaade* and emotions are located.

Finally, people simply like pork, and especially in the town of Cobly, many people now eat pork as part of their regular diet. Consequently, pork is now the most popular meat and pigs are the most commodified of all the *diseede wante* in the Commune. In sum, it is probable that the different factors affecting people's perception of – and relationship with – pigs mean that people can satisfy their craving for meat with fewer qualms. Despite this, several interviewees explained that pigs too can seek revenge should an individual kill too many (see *Commodification* below).

The Bebelibe's relationship with pigs contrasts with that noted for other societies. The Tsembaga of Papua New Guinea, for example, sacrifice pigs in order to maintain relationships between both "the nonhuman components of their immediate environments and the human components of their less immediate environments" (Rappaport 1967:17). Rappaport then explained that they

> almost never kill domestic pigs outside of ritual contexts. In ordinary times, when there is no pig festival in progress, these rituals are almost always associated with misfortunes or emergencies, notably warfare, illness, injury, or death. Rules state not only the contexts in which pigs

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[100] Today, people also use the word *dihuude* more generally when referring to any celebration.

are to be ritually slaughtered, but also who may partake of the flesh of the sacrificial animals (1967:22).

Writing more generally about Melanesian societies, Dwyer and Minnegal note that

> pigs commonly play a crucial role in ceremonial and spiritual life: in bride wealth and affinal exchanges, initiation, curing and mortuary rites, in establishing prestige, and in major regional exchange networks […] of the New Guinea Highlands (2005:37-38; see also Josephides 1983).

Pigs aside, amongst the Bebelibe, people also sacrifice *diseede wante* (family animals) to thank entities such as the *bɛhidibɛ* (dead) and *ataadɛ* (community guardian shrine entities) who have helped them in some way, following a successful hunt, for example (see *Hunting*, Chapter Four). Besides hunting, people may also solicit help from these or other entities to intercede on their behalf in times of trouble. As previously noted, for those who would not call themselves Christian, *Uwienu* is distant so they approach him via intermediaries such as the *atenwiɛnɛ* (shrine entities) and the *bɛhidibɛ* (dead). A woman who is having trouble getting pregnant, for example, may solicit the help of a *dinitokitade* (family fertility shrine). During the initial ceremony, the person responsible for the shrine cuts off the last digit of a chicken's toe and drips blood onto the shrine. The woman then tells the entity what she will give in return should her request be fulfilled (see S. Merz 2014:91).

Finally, *diseede wante* may need to die to reconcile relationships between two entities. As mentioned in Chapter Four, these ceremonies may serve to "separate" the entities concerned, such as *mɔnta* (to separate hunters from their prey) and *yãnta* (to separate human killers from their human victims). On other occasions, entities who feel they have been neglected may need to be appeased if, for example, the woman fails to thank the *dinitokitade* who has fulfilled her request for a child, or a hunter fails to thank the *bɛhidibɛ* (the dead) and *atenwiɛnɛ* (shrine entities) for their help and protection (see also Mendonsa

1976:56, 64-67; Jackson 1977:130, 132; V. Turner 1977:206-207; Burkert 1996:152-153). Although these entities mediate between humans and *Uwienu*, and are not worshiped as such, they can still take offense when their intervention is not appreciated. Writing about the Sisala of northern Ghana, Mendonsa notes that "[a]ncestors are merely dematerialized human beings" (1976:58). Despite this

> [t]hey retain their protective responsibility toward the living and the duty to protect the moral order. […] Just as a father has the right to punish his child, the ancestors punish the living when the moral order is violated. […] The ancestors are also individuals. As jural abstractions they are the defenders of the moral order, but as individuals they are thought to be interested in their own fate (1976:64; see also Kröger 2003:259-260).

Failure to appease an offended party can have dire consequences, as the example of Emile in the Introduction illustrates. People speculate that Emile's refusal to provide a dog to propitiate the crocodile he was responsible for killing resulted in his death (see also *Vignette One*, Chapter Seven). When the two entities concerned are both human, and a relationship breaks down to the extent that one curses the other, *myạkitimε* (ceremony to remove words spoken in anger) may need to be performed to lift the curse, during which a goat should be sacrificed (see S. Merz 2014:28-29). As with other ceremonies, *myạkitimε* ends with a meal that everybody shares. Food and drink items needed for the ceremony and the meal are set out before the *bεhidibε* (the dead) in the vestibule (*ukoohụ*). This includes fermented and non-fermented sorghum beer, condiments for the sauce, sorghum flour and water.

Whoever is in charge of the ceremony can only sacrifice the goat, however, once it has indicated that it is satisfied that the two people concerned sincerely desire to be reconciled. The person who started the dispute brings the goat into the vestibule, who then indicates its acceptance to be sacrificed by sampling each of the items and jumping onto the *bεhidibε*. *Myạkitimε* cannot take place

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should the goat fail to do this. Allowing the goat to demonstrate its willingness to be sacrificed is the exception rather than the norm, however, as *diseede wante* usually have no say in their fate for the other sacrificial occasions.

More generally, *diseede wante* (family animals) should not learn about their impending death, whether for sacrifice or other occasions of social consumption. Consequently, people should catch and tether the animals concerned well before the event, and should not discuss the animals' fate in front of them, as the level of mutual comprehension means that they can understand some of the things people say. It is also important to water and feed the animals, as this demonstrates respect for them and helps ensure that they do not seek vengeance posthumously.

Writing about sacrificial rituals amongst ancient civilisations, Serpell notes that

> some of [the] features of animal sacrifice were apparently designed to dilute individual responsibility for the animal's death so that its meat could be eaten with a clear conscience. First, the animal bore some responsibility for appearing to give its assent, then the knife was blamed as the instrument of slaughter, the priests then acknowledged culpability as the actual agents of death, but ultimately the Gods were held responsible for 'demanding' the sacrifice in the first place (2005:17; see also Vialles 1994:45-46).

As noted in Chapter Four, shifting the blame from the hunter to the instrument of death to *Uwienu* occurs during the *mɔnta* ceremony so that the hunter's prey does not seek revenge. A similar practice of shifting the blame exists when killing cattle. As previously mentioned, killing certain *diseede wante* – such as cattle – can be compared to killing humans. Accordingly, ceremonies are needed to "take care of" (*sɔnni*) the relationship so that they do not seek vengeance when killed. Each community has a designated person who can safely kill cattle. During a similar ceremony to *mɔnta*, the person shifts the blame to the knife, then to *Uwienu*:

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He takes the head [of the cow] and the knife he used and deposits them next to the *bɛhidibɛ*. Then he takes a morsel of cornmeal porridge and he puts it on the knife and says, 'If you want to overcome [avenge] someone, take your dispute to the person who made the knife and take it up with *Uwienu*. It's *Uwienu* who said to kill you. And it's the person who made the knife who said to kill you.' That's it. Then he takes and throws [the cornmeal porridge on the *bɛhidibɛ*] (Basaadi, the nonagenarian diviner).[101]

Many of the interviewees indicated that sacrifice is one of the things that distinguish humans from animals, and that *Uwienu* authorised this. Some churchgoers went on to explain the origin of sacrifice, with obvious parallels with the biblical account of Abraham and Isaac:

There was a man who had two wives, but one of them was barren. With time she had a child and she loved *Uwienu* and *Uwienu* loved her. *Uwienu* had told her, 'You will have a child in your old age. If you have a child, you must give him to me; you must kill him for me.' The woman truly accepted this. The husband accepted this too and said, 'Ah, I truly accept. I will kill the child to give you.'

With time, the woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She said, 'Ah, as I accepted *Uwienu*'s word and he gave me [a child], I will follow and see *Uwienu*.' So she took her son, she climbed the mountain, she took a knife and went to cut his throat to return [the child] to *Uwienu*. *Uwienu* said, 'No!' He came down to tell her not to do it. 'I know now that you are a person of truth. Don't slit the throat of your child! Look behind you.' So she looked behind her and saw a ram tied up and *Uwienu* said, 'Take that and use it instead for the sacrifice.'

This is why animals and humans are not the same. *Uwienu* doesn't like it if someone kills a human. *Uwienu* created animals so that we could kill them and eat them (Anne, the widow in her late-forties).

Anne later added that *Uwienu* created humans first, then the animals. Colette, a seamstress in her late-thirties, also explained that *Uwienu* first created man.[102] The man wanted to thank *Uwienu* and lamented that he had nothing to give. He then took one of his children to sacrifice, but *Uwienu* refused this. Therefore,

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[101] See Figure 5.

[102] More generally, 12 interviewees said *Uwienu* created humans first; 11 that he created the animals first; two that he created all his creatures the same day. The rest did not specify who *Uwienu* created first.

Uwienu created animals, gave the man a sheep, and told him to go and offer it to *ditade* (stone/community guardian shrine). Both Anne and Colette affirmed that they had learnt about the origin of sacrifice at church, though Colette added that it is a story that non-churchgoers recount too.

Even though *Uwienu* has authorised humans to sacrifice animals, this does not mean that *Uwienu* considers animals less important. Robert, the NGO worker in his late-thirties, explained that sometimes *Uwienu* judges it better for an animal to die rather than a person, as this will result in less suffering in the long run. Evans-Pritchard also notes the same notion for the Nuer for whom the "general idea underlying [piacular] sacrifices is that of substitution, the life of a beast being taken by God in the place of the life of a man, or the life of a beast being given in exchange for the life of a man" (1954:25). Amongst the Bebelibe, this idea is not limited to formal sacrifices, however, as *diseede wante* may die instead of a person without human intervention.

In December 2007 our dog, Gaspode, who was in good health, stopped eating. He had no other symptoms and, despite all our efforts to encourage him to eat, he died several days later. In January 2008 Luc, the church leader in his thirties, came to visit us. Gaspode liked Luc and would try to climb into his lap when he came to visit. We had not seen Luc for a while and soon learnt why. Gaspode had died whilst Luc was in hospital fighting for his life. Luc then told us that several weeks earlier he had dreamt that he was on his way to visit us with his wife and children. As they approached our house, three huge dogs tried to attack his wife and children. "The dogs closed in on my wife and children and it was getting dangerous," he explained. Luc decided that it would be better for him to die than his wife and children, so he placed himself in their way. He told himself, "If I have to die, then I will do everything to kill the dogs too." By the time he had successfully fought off the dogs, his left arm was ripped and bloody, with the bones and sinews showing. In the morning, Luc told his wife

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about his dream and that he was sure that he would either get sick, have an accident or be bitten by a snake. Shortly afterwards, Luc had a motorbike accident. He spent about a month in hospital and needed three operations. Luc explained that the dream had warned him that he was under spiritual attack and that his enemies were out to kill him. Evidently thankful that he was still alive, Luc was upset to learn that Gaspode had died. Luc concluded that God had spared him by allowing Gaspode to die in his place.

Antoine, the farmer in his mid-fifties, reiterated how important it is to have animals:

> You should not say that you want to limit your *diseede wante* because […] animals replace things [death] for us. It's to do with *mtakimɛ*; animals save us. I cannot emphasise this enough, if you have lots of animals and something out of the ordinary happens, for example someone decides to take [kill] a family member – maybe your child or your brother – but *Uwienu* or the *bɛhidibɛ* (dead) refuse and an exchange is made and one of your animals is taken instead. You go outside and see that your animal is dead. What if that animal didn't exist? You found your animal dead [as] it replaced someone else's death. If it didn't exist, maybe you would be burying your child instead.

"A true Ubielo cannot live in his house without an animal," Roland, the trained pastor in his mid-forties, emphasised, "our *mtakimɛ* communicate with each other. If misfortune comes, our spirits [*mtakimɛ*] deviate the misfortune so that it falls on the animal instead. This is why an Ubielo should always have animals in the house." Thus, when an animal that was healthy suddenly dies for no apparent reason, it may be that the *mtakimɛ*, *Uwienu* or the *bɛhidibɛ* have intervened directly to save someone who was in danger. It is only after such a sudden death that people may question why the animal died and who might have died otherwise or – in the case of Luc – have it confirmed that he was meant to die (see also Willerslev *et al.* 2015:17, who mention similar ideas amongst the Eveny of Siberia).

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Sickness, Danger and Animals Behaving Badly

> Before we didn't kill animals [that were sick]. It's only now that all is commercialised that people kill [sick animals]. Before, when an animal was sick, you would try to take care of it, but if this didn't work you'd let it die then get rid of the body. Sometimes the animal takes the place of a person. If the animal is suffering and should die in your place and you kill it, it means you don't care about yourself. If you realise it won't recover, you should rather let it die, then consult a diviner to find out why it needed to die (Grégoire, the teacher in his twenties).

Diviners will also advise what follow-up ceremonies may be needed. If those concerned learn that the problem is resolved, they should express their gratitude to the entities who intervened on their behalf – *Uwienu* and the *bɛhidibɛ*, for example – through libation with sorghum beer. Depending on the nature of the problem, however, further sacrifices may be required. If, for instance, a witch was trying to attack the person, having failed the first time, the witch may try again. Churchgoers such as Luc, however, express their gratitude to *Uwienu* through prayers of thanksgiving – both private and corporate – and may ask their church congregation to intercede prayerfully for them if they suspect that the problem that provoked the animal's death is not resolved.

Grégoire went on to say that those who kill sick animals usually eat or sell the meat. It is only more recently that people have started to kill sick or severely injured animals, as they do not want to lose the meat or monetary benefit that the animals' meat potential represents. Many of the interviewees affirmed that they would kill – or have killed – animals who are seriously sick or injured and would either eat the meat themselves or pass it on to someone else. Other interviewees, however, expressed caution about eating the meat of sick animals and concern that more and more people now try to sell their animals when they realise they are sick:

> People no longer know when meat is good. An animal can get sick in the village and the owner says, 'Hello' [calls a butcher] as he wants money. So the butcher goes [to the village]. When he arrives the animal is already dead, so the butcher takes a knife and slits its throat anyway,

then takes it to sell [in town]. And you don't know how the animal died. […] This is why there is so much sickness (Anne, the churchgoing widow in her late-forties).

Like Anne, other interviewees lamented that butchers willingly sell meat from sick or already dead animals and that government meat inspectors are easily bribed. Cattle are especially problematic, since there is the possibility that they have anthrax[103]:

> Hmm, I love beef, but since my childhood, my papa said that we should not eat beef because of the vets, because cattle have anthrax. It dies and the butcher doesn't want to throw [the meat] away. [When cattle are sick] you call the butcher, he comes and buys. The [vet] examines it and it has anthrax. You should destroy it, but [the butcher] doesn't agree [and bribes the vet] as he must sell. So he sells infected meat, people eat it and they get anthrax. So my father said, 'No more beef.' (Roland, the trained pastor in his mid-forties).

Henri, the carpenter in his late-thirties, explained:

> There are those who kill [sick animals] and those who leave them to die and throw them away. For example, my older brother has many cows, too many to count! When one gets sick he'll try and treat it. If he sees that it's not working sometimes he'll let it die, then throws it away. Or he offers it to someone and says, 'If you want, take it, I'll give it to you. If you want you can kill it.' But [my brother] won't kill it.

> Sharon: And if someone kills the animal, will he eat it?

> Henri: Oh! Here people eat, people eat and it's not good because it was sick; you eat and you can also get sick. Those who know this won't eat, but others will and say, 'There's no need to worry.' They take [the meat] and eat, and that's why there's so much sickness. Even the butchers will kill [sick] cattle to sell the meat. Many people now refuse to buy beef because of this, because butchers buy sick cattle extremely cheaply, then kill and sell the meat. The butcher, he wants his money. […] If you want to live healthily, you need to avoid certain meats.

Although people now cull sick animals when highly contagious illnesses such as Newcastle's disease sweep through the region, they rarely take other measures to curb the spread of such diseases. Victor, the churchgoing animal trader in his

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[103] In September 2016, I learnt that there was an anthrax outbreak in the neighbouring Commune. I asked the veterinary surgeon in Natitingou about this. He confirmed the outbreak and that you could not always trust the butchers. He advised me not to eat beef.

early-forties, lamented that many people take their poultry to market to sell, knowing that they are contaminated.

Knowing whether an animal is sick or misbehaving, however, is not always evident:

> Just after our arrival in Oukodoo a dog was killed[104] at Michel's compound. It was suspected to have rabies. They then made a fire and burnt off the fur. The meat was then divided out to be shared and eaten later (Journal entry, 28 February 2003).

People often suspect that dogs who behave abnormally or in a threatening way are rabid and will kill them. Some people eat the meat, though others are more circumspect, as they are not always sure if it actually had rabies. Sarah, the widow in her mid-forties, shared about an instance when people killed a dog that had bitten someone. The person later died of rabies. Meanwhile, those who ate the dog did not get sick. Thus, the other occasions when people justify the killing of *diseede wante* (family animals) are when they misbehave or are dangerous, as their comportment indicates that they have bad *mtakimɛ* (*mtakitiɛmɛ*, see also Koabike 2003:84). Interviewees shared several examples such as chickens that eat their eggs or pigs that eat young chicks. Michel, the farmer in his fifties, explained that those who kill misbehaving animals should not eat the meat, but rather give it to others, otherwise the animals could accuse them of being motivated by their desire for meat. Other interviewees expressed similar ideas. Timothée, the septuagenarian retired pastor, added that animals whose actions result in their defilement, such as dogs that dig up graves and eat the remains or who jump over *yan̰ta* medicine horns during a man's burial and subsequent funeral,[105] also need to be killed but must not be

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[104] Normally, a dog is first tied up before it is killed. A man then clubs it on the head with a bludgeon. Rabid dogs are chased and cornered, then clubbed by a group of men.

[105] See fn. 70, p. 140. During the burial and subsequent funeral of a man who has died a good death, men who have undergone *yan̰ta* dance with and play the medicine horns by scraping along their length with a ron palm (*Borassus aethiopum*) nut shell. The men place the horns tip down in the ground when they are not playing them (see Figure 6).

eaten. Some interviewees stressed that it is important to explain to animals why they need to be killed, especially if they are sick or injured and have not done anything explicit to justify their death. This also demonstrates respect for the animal. Otherwise, the animal would be within its rights to complain to *Uwienu*. When Antoine, the farmer in his mid-fifties, had to kill a dog with a prolapsed uterus and no hope of recovery, he told her:

> We are together and you have worked well,
> It hurts me to see you like this,
> I don't have a choice, though, and it's difficult for me to kill you,
> Today, seeing you in such a state truly hurts me,
> But I'm obliged to do this, I don't want to see you suffer,
> It's an illness that others often have too,
> I'm not at ease with having to kill you, but what else can be done?
> You were at my side every day, it hurts me (Journal entry, 31 August 2015).

Antoine then killed and ate the dog, as he did not want to see the meat go to waste.

In sum, most Bebelibe continue to raise *diseede wante* for *utedu* (non-monetary abundance) whilst knowing that they also have worth as *tikpate* (monetary wealth)[106]. Pigs are the exception, with several commercial pig farmers and many families now raising pigs specifically for their worth as *tikpate*, although there are now some individuals who have started to rear poultry and goats commercially. Most of the interviewees – including those who are directly involved in commercial activities with animals – shared about the impact and consequences of the commercialisation of meat, and the resulting domestication and commodification of *diseede wante*.

Commodification

> Sharon: Why do you think people are eating more meat today than before?

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[106] When people sell *diseede wante* for money, their choice is primarily governed by the animals' behaviour, followed by their form, as people more willingly sell animals with bad *mtakimɛ*. This is especially the case with dogs.

Roland (the trained pastor in his mid-forties): Well, what can I say? It's modernisation. Before, in early Ubielo society, you killed [animals] for special occasions such as marriages, ceremonies, celebrations. When you kill [an animal], it's divided up and you know how it should be shared between the families. But the town has grown, outsiders have come and they expect meat and that's how the custom of killing animals every day also came. There are also Bebelibe who left and went elsewhere. They saw how others prepared meat to sell. So, they saw that meat is commercialised. Then they returned [to Cobly] and started to commercialise it, that's how it is.

"Now money is attractive to us in all domains," Sinbonko, the community shrine priest in his sixties, remarked, whilst Yaaté, the farmer in his early fifties bemoaned that "money gathers us together and carries us along like water does with rubbish. It will be our end." The Bebelibe live in an increasingly commodified world where more and more market forces come into play and people need to pay for most goods and services – including health care, education and mobile phones[107] – with money. Consequently, as more people start to assess their *diseede wante*'s worth in terms of *tikpate*, the number of *diseede wante* being sold has also grown since I first came to Cobly. This trend has been facilitated not only by the growing demand for meat locally, but also in the wider region with animal traders coming from the south to find cheap pork, for example (see below). When I arrived in Cobly in 2002, meat was not readily available. Cobly town had one non-Ubielo Muslim butcher, who slaughtered a cow every Wednesday, which is market day, and sometimes on a Saturday. There was also an Ubielo pork butcher, who started to slaughter a pig a week for market day in 2001.

In June 2015, Cobly town had twelve established butchers and meat sellers offering both raw and cooked meat, if not daily, then several times a week. This included the original Muslim beef butcher and Ubielo pork butcher, who also started to slaughter donkeys in 2015. One of the new butchers was a Muslim

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[107] These have become an essential commodity, not only for communication, but for monetary services, such as money transfers and payments.

from Nigeria who sold goat and chicken kebabs. The other new butchers were all Bebelibe. One of them offered dog meat, another dog and pork, and the others pork only. In addition, there were several other non-Bebelibe Muslims in the Commune who regularly bought cattle to slaughter. There were no Bebelibe beef butchers.

In December 2017, there were ten rather than twelve butchers and meat sellers, which indicates that the local demand for meat has stabilised and even diminished slightly. The Nigerian Muslim has left Cobly, the dog butcher and one of the pork butchers have since ceased their activities, and the original pork and donkey butcher died on the 28 December 2017. Some attribute his death to his becoming a donkey butcher. Meanwhile, Sébastien has become a dog butcher and there is a new pork butcher. Reasons for this stabilisation are threefold: the growth of the soya cheese market (see below); people can now buy frozen fish, which is readily available every day;[108] and there are fewer *diseede wante* (family animals), as southerners come and buy them (see below). Thus, it is possible that with viable alternatives to eating *diseede wante*, people are less inclined to buy meat. Despite this, the market for meat continues to be steady.

Ingold defined domestication as "a form of mechanical control exercised over object-things" (1994:17), whilst Clutton-Brock stated that domestic animals are often "treated as property rather than as sentient beings with their own interests" (1994:31). Following these older ideas about domestication, there seems to be a direct correlation between the classic features of domestication, as defined by Clutton-Brock (1989:7) and outlined in Chapter Four, and the commodification of animals. Once people start to think in terms of ownership

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[108] People can also buy smoked fish on market days (Wednesday in Cobly). A kilo of frozen fish costs 1,400 CFA francs (approximately £2) versus 1,200 CFA francs (approximately £1.60) for a kilo of pork "meat", which includes the fat and skin layers. Sarah explained that people are willing to pay more for fish, as they consider it healthier than pork.

(which changes the nature of the relationship from subject-subject to subject-object), and when people take charge of animals' territory, food and breeding primarily for economic gain, then animals become commodities. Thus, domestication could be defined as the commodification and exploitation of animals for commercial gain. Leach too observes that when domestication is defined as training or adapting animals or plants "to live in a human environment and be of use to humans [... they] become commodities and artifacts, to the extent that today their genes can be patented, the ultimate affirmation of property rights" (2007:72).

"Our fathers [*tɔɔ denbɛ*] didn't castrate their animals [...]. Now it's all about money. We want the animals to gain weight so we castrate them," elucidated Yooka, the septuagenarian farmer. Other signs that people in the Commune of Cobly increasingly perceive animals as commodities include ideas about economic profit and ownership (see below). Despite this, the interdependent nature of human-animal relationships helps to offset the commodifying process so that it is unlikely that it will be ever fully achieved. Even in post-domestic societies, such as Europe and North America – despite factory farming and "an imposition of 'efficiency' that seeks to exclude links in the food chain that come between human consumers and those living things they wish to consume" (Clark 2007:50) – domestication has not resulted in the full commodification of animals. Hurn (2012:63-64; see also Cassidy and Mullin 2007) points out that scholars now recognise that the "'control' model" (2012:63) of domestication advanced by Clutton-Brock and others, which dominated anthropological debates about domestication, has come under scrutiny (Simon 2015). Hurn asserts that domestication should rather be "viewed as the outcome of a series of complex relationships between humans and other animals in different places at different times," thus debates about domestication might be "best thought of in terms of 'symbiosis'" (2012:64; see also Hurn 2016a:10). Other scholars are

less comfortable with the idea of symbiosis. Armstrong Oma (2010:179), for example, prefers the idea of social contracts (see Chapter Four) as these go beyond symbiosis by catering for the complexity of different relationships that can exist between people and animals. Willerslev *et al.,* (2015) writing about the Eveny of Siberia and their *kujjai* (consecrated reindeer), demonstrate that, sometimes, it is the animal that initiates such a contract:

> The *kujjai* is hyper-domesticated, to a point which makes it hard to call this a domination. The primal reindeer that sought domestication were offering humans a social contract, so that one could almost say it was the reindeer who domesticated us. The trust between a herder and his *kujjai* is more sure [sic] than that between a hunter and his prey. Rather than from trust to domination, the progression is from unpredictability to reliability, and from evasiveness to trust (2015:19).

Thus, the need to go beyond symbiosis becomes especially apparent where the understanding between people and animals is such that their relationships are empathetic. This seems to be the case for the Eveny and their *kujjai*, as well as for Bebelibe individuals with animal *mtakimɛ* and their *diseede wante* (family animals) mentioned above. Although Bebelibe totem animals are usually bush animals (except for dogs), they too are an example of animals initiating and entering into a relationship with humans. The respective animal and community's founding ancestor made a pact, which established their totemic relationship. These relationships encompass ideas of social contracts, understanding, empathy and kinship, thus taking human-animal relations to an even higher level of complexity, as I demonstrate in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Exploring the concept of domestication more generally in anthropology and archaeology, Russell too questions whether it should be understood as a form of symbiosis or rather "a change in social relations" (2007:28). She goes on to suggest that animal domestication could be analysed "as a form of kinship" (2007:28). This idea is borne out by Sinbonko's, Anne's and Basaadi's

examples in Chapter Four of ploughing-cattle becoming sons. Timothée, the septuagenarian retired pastor, remarked:

> It's man who changed the system, and we know why he changed this system, mmm? [For our gain.] God didn't say that we should yoke animals to cultivate for us. So when you take and yoke [stutters…] it's your son who ploughs for you, you take the ox and he becomes your son. You need to understand this and the things that animals do for you.

There is some resonance here with ancient Greek thinking:

> [T]he ox slain and carved by Prometheus at the first sacrifice is the domestic animal closest to man, the animal best integrated into his sphere of existence, especially when it is harnessed to the plow to open the furrows of the earth (Vernant 1989:37).

As demonstrated in Chapter Four, people already accorded cattle quasi-human status before they started ploughing, which was why harnessing them was so controversial. In order to come to terms with the controversy that ploughing created, many now justify using cattle in this way by recognising their human status in terms of kinship. Thus, even with changing ideas about animals in the Commune of Cobly, primarily resulting from their commodification, all my interviewees expressed notions that continue to demonstrate the interdependent nature of human-animal relationships and that *diseede wante* (family animals) have maintained their personhood, at least whilst they remain members of the *diseede*. It also became apparent during my interviews that the introduction of ploughing-cattle was the pivotal event, as Timothée's comment above indicates, that led to the partial objectification of animals, and their subsequent commodification.

Clutton-Brock drew a parallel "between the husbanding of livestock and the keeping of slaves" (1994:31; see also Ingold 1994:17). This resonates with Takida's observation that ploughing-cattle are slaves, whilst Luc, the church

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leader in his thirties, specifically pinpointed a change in attitudes towards animals to the introduction of ploughing-cattle:

> We thought it was good in the beginning, but with time we've noticed that life has completely changed. Regarding animals, life has completely changed. Animals started to die and theft started. There was never a problem with theft before. It was when they [cattle] started to plough that these two things started.

He went on to explain that cattle did not want to plough so they were mistreated and even died, and that this has resulted in suffering all round. It has also led to family disputes and individualism. Whereas cattle used to belong to the family and resources were shared, today individuals claim ownership and keep the money they make from cattle for themselves (see also Hutchinson 1996:50-51). Paul, the village deputy chief in his late-forties, is of the same opinion:

> When people realised that animals should work, it was at that moment that people started to use animals and it was their end. Now there is sickness and thieves take the rest. It's because of thieves that animals are becoming scarce.

Having noted that domestication does not result in the full commodification of animals, it also becomes apparent that commodification is not a linear process. Appadurai (1986), Kopytoff (1986) and Gosden and Marshall (1999), for example, all demonstrate the complex nature of commodification and the importance of examining the social life or biography of things. Using the example of human slavery, for example, Kopytoff concludes that

> the slave was unambiguously a commodity only during the relatively short period between capture or first sale and the acquisition of the new social identity; and the slave becomes less of a commodity and more of a singular individual in the process of gradual incorporation into the host society. This biographical consideration of enslavement as a process suggests that the commoditization of other things may usefully be seen in a similar light, namely, as part of the cultural shaping of biographies (1986:65).

Kopytoff later points out that controversies about commodification result from conflicts over the "precise location of the line that divides persons from things

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and the point at which 'personhood' begins" (1986:84). Thus, it is not surprising that those in Cobly who acknowledge their *diseede wante*'s personhood, struggle with their commodification. In order to survive in an environment where essential goods and services now need to be paid for with money, however, people often have no choice but to sell their animals, thus converting them from *utedu* (non-monetary abundance) to *tikpate* (monetary wealth). When I first interviewed Juliette, she was still single and at school. She has since married and was around seven months' pregnant with her first baby in August 2016. As Juliette was not sleeping well and had lower abdominal pains, she wanted to go to the maternity hospital for a check-up, but did not have the necessary finances. Her husband asked me if I would be interested in buying two of her hens. I agreed, and then sold them on to a friend. Juliette was able to have her check-up and treatment needed. Following Kopytoff (1986:69), Juliette's hens were temporarily commoditised when I bought them for money, then decommoditised once integrated into my friend's homestead or, as Appadurai explains it, "things can move in *and* out of the commodity state" (1986:13, emphasis in original. See also 16-18). In this instance, the hens' worth went from *utedu* to *tikpate* back to *utedu* again (see also Cartry 1976:161-164; Hutchinson 1996:72-73, 98-99; and the example of Shambo the bull in Hurn 2016a). Under other circumstances, Juliette's husband might have visited a diviner instead, in which case the same chickens might have been used ceremonially. Although they would not have been commoditised, they might no longer be alive. Thus, in order to understand the complex dynamics of commodification, it is necessary to examine both the cultural biography of things, whilst seeking to understand the overall social and political trends and the history of the items or entities concerned (Appadurai 1986:34-36; Gosden and Marshall 1999:173-174; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1990; Kantshama and Luboya 1986:128). Besides the introduction of and today's general

acceptance of ploughing-cattle in Cobly, several interviewees pointed out the role that technological change has played in promoting commodification. When I asked Anne, the churchgoing widow in her late-forties, for example, why there are more butchers today compared to when I first arrived in Cobly in 2002, she explained:

> They're looking for money. In the past our fathers [tɔɔ denbɛ] didn't know about what we now call *udekitiwaabu*[109] (commerce). […] It's money that drives all our activities […]. Maybe someone in Tokibi wants to sell a cow. He'll call the butcher with his mobile. The butcher then comes on his motorbike to buy the cow, lashes it to the motorbike [rack], and then returns with it [to town].

The arrival of electricity has also been important. Isaac, the churchgoing businessman and commercial farmer, not only sells the animals he raises to traders, but has them butchered and sells frozen meat from his chest freezers. Besides butchers, Cobly now has several shops that sell imported frozen fish and chicken.

Neither is the commodification process straightforward for the humans involved. Whilst discussing the cultural biography of objects, Gosden and Marshall point out that "[t]he central idea is that, as people and objects gather time, movement and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other" (1999:169) thus "[t]here is a mutual process of value creation between people and things" (1999:170). This constant process of transformation of people, objects and values became especially apparent when I asked interviewees in 2015 about the increase in butchers and meat-sellers, especially in the town of Cobly.

> There are several [legitimate] reasons why you kill domestic animals. For work parties, for celebrations, for your in-laws and for ceremonies […]. It's always for meat, but I don't include butchers who kill and sell meat. I don't count them, I don't count them (Louis, the octogenarian with an important position in the Commune).

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[109] Literally "money-search".

Louis, went on to elucidate that domestic animals are gentle and do not normally seek revenge when killed for legitimate reasons. Butchers, however, are at risk. Louis continued:

> Those who take animals for commercial reasons, those who kill for commercial reasons are at risk. The animals will rise against him because he kills them, they will rise against him. If I said that humans are superior to animals, this isn't the case with their *mtakimɛ* and *kɛbodikɛ*.

Basaadi, the nonagenarian diviner further explained:

> Butchers are often sickly and die quickly. It's because the animals overcome [avenge] them. What has the cow that he slaughtered done? […] Later, it will ask you [the butcher], 'Why didn't you sacrifice me? You didn't have a work party and you didn't have strangers [visiting], yet you killed me just like that, what did I do to you?'

As previously noted, there is a limit to how many animals a person should kill. Swanson notes the same for the Gourmantché who

> believe it is wrong to kill too many animals. They recount how this is true for those who slaughter animals for the market. When such a person is dying, he will be heard crying out in fear; it is the *cicilimu* 'guiding spirits' of the animals he has butchered who are killing him (1985:177).

Most of the interviewees, including the three butchers and meat-seller I questioned, shared about the potential consequences of being responsible for the death of so many animals.

David, who is in his late-thirties, was the first dog butcher in Cobly. He would roast the meat to sell and explained why he chose dogs over other animals:

> When you want to start a business, it's good to look around and ask, 'What business could I do that will work? What do people like? What do they like to eat? What do they like buying? What do people find pleasing? That's what I should do.' For example, here [in Cobly] people like dog meat. Men, all the men who eat dogs, when they see well prepared dog meat, they like to eat it, it attracts them, you know, it's better than all the other meats, you know, such as pork, mutton, goat,

beef. It's the best, it's appetising, you know, that's how it is. It's because of this I said, 'Well, let's give it a go and corner the market.'

David has since stopped selling dog meat, as it did not generate enough income for him and his family to live on. He has moved out of town to be closer to his fields and concentrate on farming. Before he stopped, he would butcher about four dogs a week. People told him that if he continually killed dogs he would not succeed, as the dogs' misfortune[110] would be passed on to him. He chuckled at the idea that the dogs he killed might pursue him and explained that as he was not killing dogs daily and has now stopped, he has not suffered any consequences. Neither is he overly concerned should he start again:

> If you followed what people say, what would you eat? You wouldn't eat! You need to do the work that your spirit tells you to do. […] God will also protect you, God said you need to make an effort to eat and not fold your arms and say, 'God, give me.' How can you expect God to give you food if you stay in your room with your arms crossed? No, you need to make an effort and God will give you, bless you too, that's how it is.

Despite this, David told me that he would pray before killing a dog, and explain to it that he needed to do this in order to eat; that he was not killing it out of malice (see also Hurn 2013:231).

Georges is also a dog butcher in his late-thirties. He roasts the meat in a wood-fired oven made from a metal barrel.[111] People can either eat the meat on the spot or take it away. He admitted that being a dog butcher was not something he would have chosen if he had other means to make money. He needed to escape being poor and he knew that people like dog meat and that there were not many dog butchers in town.

Georges knows that people talk about him and ask what could have happened that he chose this job. He acknowledged that being a butcher has its

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[110] People do not breed and market dogs commercially. The dogs people sell for meat are usually those who they think have bad *mtakimɛ* (see above). The dog's *mtakimɛ* can then cause trouble for the butcher.
[111] See Figure 7.

dangers and that he would probably get sick and might die early, but it is better to work than to sit and do nothing, or to steal. "Those who sit around and do nothing, don't they also get sick and don't they also die?" He asked rhetorically. "There isn't any job that one can do without suffering. Each job has its [share of] suffering."

Georges does not pray or do anything special before killing a dog; he simply kills it. Dog meat is popular and sells very quickly. He prepares several dogs a week and he could sell more, but dogs are not readily available.

Franck, who is in his mid-thirties, was the second person in Cobly to become a pork butcher. He sells his meat raw and is renowned for good quality meat cuts, with buyers coming from all over the wider region. Franck initially trained as a builder, but poor health meant he had to give up his work. Rather than sit at home with his arms crossed, or become a thief, he weighed up the different options available to him. Franck concluded that he should try being a butcher, despite the fact that he does not like killing animals. He managed to save enough money to buy a pig, which he killed. He sold the meat and saw that it worked.

Franck agrees that being a butcher is a dangerous job and that the animals will eventually seek revenge. He puts this danger to the back of his mind in order to survive. Before he kills a pig, he explains to it that it is not his fault, that he needs to eat, and that to kill an animal to meet one's needs is authorised by *Uwienu*:

> We do this [kill animals] according to *Uwienu*. When we do this, we want the animal to know that you have killed it according to *Uwienu*'s rules. If you think to yourself, 'I'm killing them,' they will kill me; you won't survive two days.

Thérèse, the churchgoer in her fifties, mainly sells pork that she roasts in a wood-burning brick oven and sells in her small restaurant, though people can also buy to take away. As she is a woman, she does not kill the pigs but has a

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man do it for her (see *Phase One*, Chapter Two). She agreed that killing animals without just cause has its consequences, but for her killing to sell meat is justified. Despite this, Thérèse acknowledged that she is at risk given that she has so many animals killed, but she needs to live; she needs to make money somehow. She cannot just sit there and do nothing. She concluded, "Therefore, if something happens, it's you who sought it as you want to eat. You haven't killed the animal saying that you're against it, you are not against it." She also plans to breed pigs commercially once her pigsties are built.

Hurn points out that "individuals involved in meat production are not immune to feelings of guilt, shame and crises of conscience when it comes to making a living from the deaths of other animals. Many find ways of asserting their moral agency" (2013:232). David, Georges, Franck and Thérèse all found ways of doing this by justifying the marketing of meat with their need to survive. For Geneviève, a soya cheese maker in her late-thirties, it was clear that butchers are troubled by guilt:

> Something will happen to them. They shouldn't kill animals every day; to always have the knife on the animals' backs like that. When he sleeps, when he goes to bed, his *kɛbodikɛ* doesn't know where to go, as he constantly slaughters animals to sell. He'll kill one animal too many and he'll go mad. […] His *mtakimɛ* doesn't know where to go and his *diyammaade* [thoughts] are focussed on killing animals. The way he kills, he'll never be blessed. He won't be blessed with *utedu* (non-monetary abundance) by killing animals every day to sell. He won't be blessed. When he starts [butchering], he thinks he'll become rich, but later he'll realise he has nothing. You won't know *utedu* [despite the money you make].

Théophile, a farmer in his early-thirties, had a different perspective and explained that butchers choose this path before they are born; that they have *tiwanpoote takimɛ* (animal-killing identity/destiny), so there was no real danger for them. Nevertheless, he expressed concern about the general commodification of animals and that people are killing too many animals for their *tikpate* (monetary worth), including wild animals. The problem lies,

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however, as much with those who sell animals for their *tikpate*, as with the butchers and meat sellers, not to mention their customers. Many interviewees initially blamed the commodification of animals on the butchers and meat sellers. I would then suggest that the successful marketing of meat relied on consumer demand and ask why more people were buying meat, especially in the town of Cobly. Interviewees gave a variety of reasons including: population growth; modernisation and external influences (see Roland above, for example); education and the need to include more protein in the diet; the cosmopolitan nature of urban life; eating meat is a sign of wealth and success; and that urban-dwellers do not always have space to keep their own animals, so they need to buy meat instead:

> In town, you don't have chickens to slaughter, you don't have any animal to slaughter. So you must go and buy meat to prepare and eat. That's why, when you arrive in town, you see that meat sellers are numerous. [In the village] you kill [your own] animals to eat together with the family. Why would you need to look for meat [to buy]?

> They [town-dwellers] eat more. […] Why do I say this? They must have meat in the morning, they must have meat at midday, and meat in the evening. And we [villagers], if we find it, it's in bigger quantities and we eat it all at once. Then we may go without meat for several weeks. But they don't miss a day without eating meat (Gaston, the village farmer in his early-forties).

Although Gaston may have an exaggerated view of town-dwellers' meat-eating habits, his observations are somewhat justified, as those that can afford it do eat more meat. "There's not a day that goes by that I don't eat meat," Roland, the trained pastor in his mid-forties, readily admitted. Other town-dwelling interviewees, such as Victor, the churchgoing animal trader in his early-forties, initially explained that he does not eat meat every day because he does not fancy it, but he later added that only the rich could eat meat daily:

> Now, if you have money in your hands, you've already got meat. You can be sitting in your house or somewhere and they will bring the meat to you. Some people want to show they have money so they must eat

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meat. […] As you eat and you haven't got money, you pretend that it [meat] is something that doesn't interest you. Once you have money, that means you've already bought [meat] because you have money and you like it, so you buy it.

Victor started trading animals several years ago to generate an income. He has a mix of local and regional customers, with some coming from the south to buy animals. Whilst there have always been outsiders who came to buy goats, trade in pigs is more recent. Now there are southerners who come and trade directly with the locals. They arrive with trucks and fill them with pigs to sell in Cotonou. This has forced the price up. Sometimes people refuse to sell their pigs to Victor, as they know they can get a better price when the southerners come.

Victor went on to explain that the general demand for animals continues to grow, but that there is also a decline in the number of animals available. Consequently, some of his local colleagues have stopped trading. Although the decline in availability is largely due to southerners buying the animals, other reasons include an increase in sickness and theft.

Isaac, the churchgoing businessman and commercial farmer, is not keen on meat and rarely eats it. He has always been interested in raising animals and often succeeds in his endeavours. This is partly due to his having animal *mtakimɛ* (identity/destiny suited to succeeding with animals), but he also researches how to care for each animal and invests the money needed to do so. He started with poultry, and then added beekeeping, raising rabbits and pigs in 2009. He first got the idea from watching programmes on TV5[112], and then did some further research. He quickly stopped keeping rabbits as he found them too demanding.

When I visited Isaac's farm in 2015, he explained that he would also stop breeding pigs due to growing competition and lack of profit. His main customers were southerners, who would pay 75,000 CFA francs (approximately £98) for a

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[112] An international francophone satellite channel.

large pig. They would then resell it in Cotonou for double the price. Local people do not want to buy his pigs claiming that they are too expensive, despite the lean and high meat-yield. They prefer to buy other locally raised pigs that are smaller and fattier, but cheaper. He thinks it is important to diversify, so he would rather focus on his bees, wonders about venturing into pisciculture, and wants to try cross-breeding pedigree[113] and pygmy goats, which should be more resistant to disease and give a high meat-yield.

Bernadette started breeding pigs commercially in 2013. She told me how she got going:

> I'm a development agent, working with the communities especially about nutrition for children. I realised that one day this work will come to an end and, rather than do nothing, hey, raising animals is a simple thing to do and as no-one else was doing it at that time, there must be a market. You can sell [pigs] at any moment to make money, whether small or big, you can always sell. So I said, 'I'll try it to see if I'll succeed.' So I went and had some training, I saved enough money to take out a small loan. With the loan, I built [a barn] and went to Parakou to buy three piglets, and so I started and I saw that it worked. Besides, I really like pigs, even if they're dirty, well me, I go inside [the barn], I clean, I feed them, it doesn't bother me.

Her customers include southerners who come with their trucks, local butchers and individuals who want pork for special occasions such as weddings, funerals and baptisms. She recently sold a large pig for 80,000 CFA francs (approximately £105) locally for a celebration. People also buy her piglets so that they can raise them:

> There's too much demand, too much demand. I can't satisfy the orders I receive. I tell people they need to wait until it [the sow] gives birth. When it gives birth, I take and fulfil my list by order of who came first.

She has a barn with six pens in the grounds of her town house. With time, she wants to expand and have a pig farm. One reason for Bernadette's success, compared to Isaac, is that she does most of the work herself. As Isaac has a

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[113] Actual breed not known.

number of enterprises, he needs to employ several people to look after the animals for him.

Although Bernadette did not make an explicit link between her child nutrition work and breeding pigs, a number of interviewees mentioned that the personnel at the local health centre and Tanguiéta hospital, development agencies and schools all promote meat as part of a protein-rich diet, especially for children. They also promote other protein-rich sources of food, however, such as soya. This has resulted in another trend that may be helping to counter meat consumption, namely the production and marketing of soya cheese:

> I started making soya cheese[114] because of poverty. There was nothing in the house and I haven't learnt any profession to earn money for housekeeping. That's how I got started. I had to take my son, Frédéric, to Tanguiéta [hospital] as he was anaemic. He was always anaemic. We went at least three times in the month. Money was a problem for the family. And [at hospital] they said, 'Grind and roast some soya to feed him.' […] You see, that's when I started to grind [soya] and I went out [to buy soya] and people saw me and said I should buy soya cheese to give him to eat. So I went and bought to feed him. And a lady said to me, 'If you can make it yourself, you can feed him regularly. You need to give it to him whilst it's warm.' Do you see how I got started? I started [to make cheese] and now I have money and things are better. I find my housekeeping money, and so I continue (Geneviève, the soya cheese maker in her late-thirties).

Geneviève's testimony is typical. As noted in the Introduction, soya cheese is proving extremely popular, especially as it is cheap. Many interviewees also equated it with meat: "They took it [soya] and it's become (kɔnta) meat," Charles, the farmer in his late-thirties explained, whilst Joël, also a thirty-year-old farmer, went one step further and stated, "Now that we don't have animals anymore, [soya cheese] has become (kɔnta) the animals." Others referred to it as the poor man's meat and explained that people can now offer soya cheese to visitors or during work parties (see also Yates-Doerr 2015:311-313, writing about soya as meat for the people of Xela, Guatamala). Other special

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[114] See Figure 8.

occasions still necessitate meat, however, and the *bɛhidibɛ* (dead) and other shrine entities usually require meat, though they do sometimes ask for cow cheese.

One final preoccupation is theft. Together with the testimonies above, many other interviewees expressed concern that this is contributing to a rapid decline in *diseede wante* (family animals). Appadurai notes that "[t]heft, condemned in most human societies, is the humblest form of diversion of commodities from preordained paths" (1986:26). Although I generally agree with this, I do not think it applies when animal theft is motivated by commodification, which seems to be the case in the Commune of Cobly. In September 2015, I asked the gendarmerie commander about complaints and crimes involving animals. He identified theft as the primary problem, which had been rising steadily during the past three years. He explained that the main causes of theft are poverty, demographic explosion and youth delinquency. Although thieves sometimes steal poultry to eat, they usually steal animals to sell to animal traders who come from the wider region and butchers, both locally and further afield.

Kantshama and Luboya (1986:128) note that chickens have not yet lost their traditional role for Luluwà society (DRC), neither have they been reduced to "simple 'sellable' or edible animals" (1986:128, translation mine), despite social change resulting from globalisation and cultural adaptation. They warn, however, that it would be wrong to think that the role of chickens remains static. They suggest that, with time, some of their roles could disappear due to the influence of Christianity, economic pressure and as people's way of thinking changes.

Similarly, it is hard to judge to what degree *diseede wante*'s roles are changing – especially in terms of *utedu* (non-monetary abundance) – amongst the Bebelibe. As described above, both the animals and people concerned are undergoing a complex process of non-linear transformation, as they negotiate

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trends and institutions resulting from *upaanu* (new times). Saunders concludes that "[a]ll cultures create and express a meaningful order but the status of meaning and the logic of connections are constantly open to change and elaboration as a result of human, nonhuman and environmental interaction" (1990:174), whilst Kopytoff suggests that "[c]ommoditization […] is best looked upon as a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-none state of being" (1986:73). Before I further examine such processes of transformation and becoming resulting from the need for meaning, I first look at body-shifting, which is also a phenomenon of transformation and becoming.

Body-shifting

In August 2015, there were seven donkeys wandering loose through our neighbourhood in Cobly, trampling through the fields between the houses and eating the crops. Jules, one of our neighbours dropped by to greet one evening, and during the course of our conversation, he complained about the donkeys as they were destroying his maize field. He went on to explain that nobody was willing to intervene for fear of retribution from the donkeys. As nobody knew where the donkeys came from, some questioned if they were ordinary donkeys or if they had been reincarnated by other animals in order to tempt people to catch them.[115] In December we had another visit from Jules:

> Jules came by this morning to greet us and to give us some maize to thank us for helping his sick daughter. I asked how his harvest had been. 'Okay', he replied, 'but those donkeys destroyed a lot.' I asked him what happened to the donkeys. He explained that the village chief did eventually intervene and had them tied up in his yard for a while. As nobody knew who the donkeys' guardian was, though, the chief eventually let them go again. 'It would've been too dangerous for him to eat them', Jules explained, 'without the guardian's permission he would've died.' […]
>
> 'The donkey has a wild counterpart that lives in the bush, oh, how is it called?' Jules wondered.
>
> '*Kɛmunnaakɛ*?' I queried.
>
> 'Yes, that's it! Humph, *kɛmunnaakɛ* is also very dangerous. If someone kills one, it will visit the family and ask, "did you know that so-and-so killed a *kɛmunnaakɛ*?" The family has to answer, "Oh yes, that's what we do," and then they'll be okay,' Jules explained, before reiterating that it's a very dangerous animal (Journal entry, 12 December 2015).

As noted in Chapter Four (see *Hunting*), people consider *kɛmunnaakɛ* (pl. *simunnaasi*) or *l'âne sauvage* (wild ass or feral donkey) as the most notorious

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[115] See incident of the white-faced whistling ducks, in *Hunting*, Chapter Four.

animal of all. Many interviewees shared about the potential consequences of killing *kɛmunnaakɛ*, either when discussing hunting or body-shifting. Although Joël, the thirty-year-old farmer and hunter, has never killed *kɛmunnaakɛ* – he is too young to attempt such an act – he has seen them and his brother has killed one. Joël explained how to prepare for the eventuality of killing *kɛmunnaakɛ*:

> When you're ready to leave, you take some [sorghum] flour and leave it with your wife, which she puts to one side. She mustn't touch this, even if she needs more flour during your absence. Now, as we're sitting here, maybe you [the hunter] will kill the animal [*kɛmunnaakɛ*] in the bush. Whilst in the bush, it becomes (*kɔnta*) a man and comes to your house. When he arrives, he greets and she [your wife] responds. He then asks, 'Where is your husband?' She says, 'My husband has gone hunting.' He says, 'Oh, he's gone hunting?' And she says, 'Yes.' He says, 'I learnt that he killed an animal in the bush.' When he says the husband killed an animal, your wife should say, 'If he killed that animal, that's what our family eats.' She then goes into her room; she takes the flour, mixes it with water and gives it to him. Once the animal [*kɛmunnaakɛ* in human form] drinks it, that's the end. He leaves and he can't do anything.
>
> If, however, he says, 'Oh, did you hear that your husband has killed an animal?' And she says, 'Ooh! Are we going to live?' That's the end. When you [the hunter] return, your children, your wife, your family will die and he [*kɛmunnaakɛ*] has left.

Many interviewees gave similar accounts, though most said that it is the hunter who will die should the wife not give the correct response. *Kɛmunnaakɛ*, in human form, may visit either as a stranger or someone the family knows. The general consensus is that should the wife show pity or deny that her husband has done such a thing, then *kɛmunnaakɛ* is free to avenge itself. If the wife affirms that, yes, her husband is capable of such an act, the danger of revenge is averted. Once the visit is over, *kɛmunnaakɛ* returns to *Uwienu* (God) in order to reincarnate normally as another *kɛmunnaakɛ*.

As previously noted, people employ the verb *kɔnta* (to become) to describe situations where a being's identity changes either temporarily or permanently, such as changes in status as well as different forms of body-shifting. This

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includes reincarnation, which I suggest is a more permanent or long-term form of body-shifting, versus more transient forms such as the example of *kɛmunnaakɛ* above. A being does not need to die, however, in order to body-shift. Members of the Bɛwiɛnbɛ, Bɛyu̯ɔbɛ and Bɛkodibɛ communities, for example, and certain animals – such as crocodiles, buffaloes and pythons – and are renowned for their ability to body-shift.

Socialising Crocodiles and Mischievous Monkeys

> Crocodiles become (*kɔnta*) [human] so that they can go to markets and funeral celebrations. Crocodiles become humans, they become and they even smoke cigarettes. You're in the market together and you won't know that the human is a transformed crocodile. They circulate in the market and buy things to eat, but they're crocodiles.

> There are two bodies. When a crocodile wants to go [to market], he takes his [crocodile] body off (*sukita*[116]) and buries it, then he puts his human body on (*suki*[117], Basaadi, the nonagenarian diviner).

> A crocodile becomes (*kɔnta*) human and he takes his [crocodile] body and puts it in his hole by the river. He puts his human body on (*suki*) and becomes so that he can go to market. As we're sitting here, he could arrive and we could be talking and you'll be wondering where he's come from. You'll see people you don't know in the market. Some will say they're from over there [indicates one direction], others will say from over there [indicates another direction], when they've actually come from the river that flows past your house. Buffaloes too become (*kɔnta*) [humans] and may pass in front of your house on the way to market and you go to the market together (Joël, the thirty-year-old farmer).

Several others also stated that such animals become human so that they can go to market and funeral celebrations. They also become human in order to: visit people and ask for things; pose either as ferrymen or as passengers, then drown and eat you in the middle of the river; attend wrestling matches; go to town to seduce girls[118]; and seek vengeance (see *Vignette One*, Chapter Seven).

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[116] Literally "to take your shirt off".
[117] Literally "to put your shirt on".
[118] See myth about the headstrong girl in Chapter Seven.

Duuté, the octogenarian farmer, for example, shared about a python who visited him:

It was midnight and I was sleeping under the mango tree. I was still young and didn't have any children. It was a time of hunger and he came and greeted and I wondered who comes to greet at this time of night? So I got up to greet him and asked, 'What's the matter?' He told me he was hungry. So my wife got some food and wanted to put it in a calabash for him to eat when he said, 'No, I have a bowl.' She put it in his bowl and he left. He wouldn't accept to stay here to eat; he took it and left. We watched him go and a few seconds later he disappeared. What could we do, could we follow him in the night?

I thought he was one of my relations. Sometime later, when I saw him I asked, 'Did you come to my house the other night?' He said, 'What day?' I replied, 'That day there.' He responded, 'No, I didn't set foot in your home.'

The animals that people most commonly body-shift to are patas monkeys[119], buffaloes, crocodiles, pythons and warthogs. Although many interviewees talked in general terms about what they had heard from others, several shared personal accounts about body-shifters. David, the dog butcher in his late-thirties, for example, will ask his friend who can become a monkey to guard his fields. David then recompenses him for his help:

You can give him – if it's maize – a basin of maize or – if it's cotton – some cotton money. You say, 'Here's something [for your help].' When it's like this, he enters your field and he signals. If monkeys come and see his signal, they know that, 'Ah, that field there, it's our brother's field.'

Conversely, many interviewees – such as Louis and Juliette – shared that should you upset those who can body-shift to monkeys, they will come and destroy your crops:

There are many who can transform into monkeys, hmmm? Here's a personal example. One day, I had maize all around the house. I joked with someone who can transform into a monkey. I said, 'Our maize is in the town, you eat maize that's out of town so you can't eat mine!' I said it like this, to have fun you know. He didn't respond. He kept quiet. That

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[119] *Diwanmɔnde* (pl. *awanmuɔnɛ*), literally "monkey-red" (*Cercopithecus* [*Erythrocebus*] *patas*).

evening it was drizzling and there was nobody at the house. It was drizzling. I went to spend some time with a friend. When I came home, I found that monkeys had destroyed it all. There was not one cob they hadn't broken, then thrown into the courtyard. That's how it was, I was there, I know. It was the person whom I'd teased, he did it all. Well now, what can you do? (Louis, the octogenarian with an important position in the Commune).

I had just started primary school. One day, as I was returning home from school, some people were following me, and to my great surprise, I looked behind and saw that they were monkeys. They [people-cum-monkeys] insult you as you walk by, or they become (*kɔnta*) [monkeys] and enter your field to destroy your maize. You can plant sweet potatoes, and they'll come and dig them all up (Juliette, who is in her early-twenties).

Didier, the village chief in his sixties, meanwhile, shared about the time his father shot a buffalo:

My father shot a buffalo with an arrow, when in fact it was a person he had shot. [The buffalo] transformed back into a person and returned home and said, 'It was Nenboni who shot me.' The next day he died.

His friends armed themselves [and came]. I arrived home, my father had gone out; he wasn't in his room. 'We've learnt that Nenboni is here.' Mum said, 'He's gone hunting.' 'Where?' they asked. 'He took his rifle and left, I don't know where he's gone.' Fully armed, they left.

After their departure, my father arrived and the lads said, 'Hey, some people came here fully armed, you need to leave!' So my father packed his bags and left around 4 pm. The [deceased man's] friends returned. 'Why have you come looking for him?' we asked, 'He's left.' 'He shot one of our men, our friend, saying he was a buffalo. [Our friend] returned and said that it was old man Nenboni who injured him and now he's dead.'

Whilst Esther, the septuagenarian widow, described the antagonistic relationship her maternal uncles – who are Bɛcɛkɔnkibɛ – had with a Bɛyʊɔbɛ family when she was young:

My maternal uncles don't eat warthog and when they see [the Bɛyʊɔbɛ] who become (*kɔnta*) monkeys, they hunt them. And if the Bɛyʊɔbɛ see a warthog, they'll hunt him, he'll suffer and they hunt him to kill him. […] The two families would make each other suffer. The Bɛyʊɔbɛ would be outside drinking sorghum beer and would see a warthog running past. They would take their horses, chase after it, but they would never find

where he went, so they'd return home. The next day, the person would go to see them and say, 'Yesterday, did you try and kill a warthog that you were chasing? You dogs, you meat eaters!'

The following day, my uncles would be sitting outside and a monkey would go by and they hunted it too. They thought it was a normal monkey. They hunted it until it disappeared. The next day, the person would go to see them and say, 'Yesterday, did you kill a monkey and eat its meat? You dogs, it's you who want monkey meat.'

In all the cases above, the animals – monkeys, buffaloes and warthogs – whom the individuals became were their totem entities. Interviewees generally affirmed that when people body-shift it is into their totem animal. Yanteka, an octogenarian farmer, for example, explained that individuals become (*kɔnta*) the animal that is their communities' *tikedimɔmɔnte* (true totem). Not everyone can body-shift, however, only those who share their *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force) and *mtakimɛ* (identity) with their *tikedimɔmɔnte*. This happens when the community's founding ancestor *and* the founding *tikedimɔmɔnte* reincarnate (or another human-animal pair previously reincarnated by them) both the person and the animal in question, thus their respective *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* come from both founders. Such individuals and their corresponding totem animals thereby form a pair. I explore this pairing further in Chapter Seven, where I propose that the person and animal are in an "ani-mate" relationship. Neither can all ani-mates body-shift. For this they need body-shifting *upinsihy* (destiny; part of the *mtakimɛ*).[120]

Besides those who have ani-mate relationships and body-shifting *upinsihy* resulting from totemic reincarnation, there are some animals and humans who can also body-shift depending on who has reincarnated them. This can happen when *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* reincarnate new beings who have a different material presence – a person who reincarnates a crocodile, for example – as they were unhappy with their previous lot in life (see *Ontological Overview*,

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[120] See also Frazer (1937:468, 473-474), who documented similar ideas for Northern and Central Nigeria.

Chapter Three). As with totemic reincarnation, people say that the animal has human *mtakimɛ*, and the human has animal *mtakimɛ*, which enables them to body-shift.

Recognising reincarnation as an act of body-shifting also suggests that the notion of body-shifting is not in itself exceptional. On the contrary, it is necessary for life to continue. Morris too observes that

> [t]he key religious idea in Malawi is not that of 'reincarnation' or metempsychosis, which implies a dualistic metaphysic, a radical demarcation between the material and spiritual worlds, but that of 'transformation', or metamorphosis. This implies a change of *form* expressed by the verb *ku-sanduka* – to change, or turn into something else […] (2000:221-222, emphasis in original).

The way most of my Bebelibe interviewees talked about body-shifting more generally further demonstrated that they considered it quite normal, as those concerned have body-shifting *upinsihu* (destiny). Accordingly, people consider it an innate gifting with which certain animals and individuals are born. Several interviewees explicated that body-shifters often start becoming animals even before they are born. As mentioned in Chapter Three, diviners may instruct fathers-to-be to construct *akunpe* (*mtakimɛ* shrines, sg. *dikunpuode*) for their children once they are born. This happens when diviners learn that the children's *mtakimɛ* and destinies need to be strengthened. This is often the case for those who have ani-mate relationships resulting from totemic reincarnation, whether they body-shift or not, and other children with destiny-related gifts that may need reinforcing. The children also receive what I call an *mtakimɛ*-band, which is a bracelet[121], armlet or necklace depending on which community they come from. The ceremonies surrounding the *dikunpuode*'s construction and the fabrication and presentation of the *mtakimɛ*-band mean that they are infused with – and therefore share – the child's *mtakimɛ*, thus

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[121] See also Huber (1973:385, 399, 435).

creating a network of *mtakimɛ*-bonded entities. In the case of those who are ani-mates, this network includes the child, the totem animal, the *dikʉnpuode* and the *mtakimɛ*-band. There is also an additional ceremony at the totem animal's *ditade* for children who have an ani-mate relationship.

As with other shrines – who are simultaneously the shrine and the shrine entity – the *dikʉnpuode* not only harbours and strengthens the child's *mtakimɛ*, it *is* the child's *mtakimɛ*. Likewise, the *mtakimɛ*-band harbours and strengthens the child's *mtakimɛ*. It also maintains the bond between the child and the *dikʉnpuode* and symbolises this bond to others. With the exception of the diviner, father and some community elders, however, people do not know who the reincarnating ancestor is, the exact nature of the child's *mtakimɛ* and destiny and why they needed strengthening (see also Chapter Seven and *Robert's Story*, Chapter Eight). Children should wear or keep their *mtakimɛ*-bands close at hand for the rest of their lives. Once old enough – usually when preparing to be initiated into adulthood – fathers inform their children why they wear the *mtakimɛ*-band.

In the case of body-shifters, their strengthened *mtakimɛ* means they are more difficult to hunt, injure and kill when they become animals. Should the *mtakimɛ*-band break or be lost, the individual's *mtakimɛ*'s vulnerability increases, and a replacement *mtakimɛ*-band and accompanying ceremonies are needed. Although the *mtakimɛ*-band protects and strengthens an individual's *mtakimɛ*, it is not the power source that enables individuals to body-shift; accordingly, it is not a power object.

Neither did interviewees consider the ability to body-shift inherently good or bad; it is what the individuals decide to do with their ability to body-shift that determines its moral nature, as the examples above illustrate. There is some evidence, however, that some churchgoers start to demonise body-shifting. Six interviewees, for example, wondered if body-shifting might be something

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diabolical. Three of them added that witches could body-shift or even shapeshift (where the body itself changes form) into animals in order to trap their victims. This is a more recent phenomenon and is probably linked to watching Nigerian and Beninese produced films. The Christian video-film *Yatin, Lieu de Souffrance* (*Yatin: Place of Suffering*, a 2002 Beninese production), for example, has had quite an influence on the Christian community of Cobly (see J. Merz 2014). During the video-film, the audience sees two different witches shapeshifting into a barn owl (*Tyto alba*) and a python respectively. Benoît, a churchgoer studying for his BEPC[122], for example, shared that he had seen humans becoming pythons on television. Although he did not specify in which film(s) he had seen this, he has watched *Yatin*.

From the way people describe body-shifting, the primary *ukuɔnu* (body-skin) is in a comatose state; it is still breathing and blood continues to circulate, but its life is suspended temporarily. Here's how Idaani, the church elder in his late-fifties, described it:

> His *mtakimɛ* and *kɛbodikɛ* are together [when he body-shifts]. If one was there, and the other wasn't, how would it work? It's like when we die; is *kɛbodikɛ* still there? If it were, we'd still be alive. [When someone body-shifts] *kɛbodikɛ* leaves the body lying dead.

"The way the person sleeps [when body-shifting] is the same as when someone dies. […] Once the person sleeps, his body is like a corpse," added Franck, the pork butcher in his mid-thirties, whilst Yanteka, the octogenarian farmer, explained that when people become (*kɔnta*) their totem animal, they "leave their bones [bodies] lying there and are breathing. Whilst they're out and about you mustn't touch them to wake them up." Grégoire, the teacher in his twenties, shared about a boy he taught who was a body-shifter from the Bɛyu̧ɔbɛ community:

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[122] The French equivalent of GCSEs.

When I noticed him sleeping in my class, I would try to wake him all the time. I told him to stand up, I would make him do sports to wake up. His father came to see me one day. He told me that when the child sleeps to not wake him up because his spirit [*mtakimɛ*][123] had transformed and left, he had transformed into a monkey and was out and about. 'If you force him to wake up and open his eyes he will die.' He explained everything to me, that the child was born this way and his spirit regularly becomes a monkey. […] When I tried to wake him up, he would always keep his eyes closed. He would stand with his eyes closed. He wouldn't open them until his spirit returned.

All those who described how body-shifting happens talked about the comatose state of body-shifters and the danger of trying to wake them up. The fact that the body is in a comatose state suggests that both *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* leave, as Idaani states above. To complicate matters further, people often talked about either *kɛbodikɛ* or *mtakimɛ* when they meant both, and several interviewees switched between the two as they described the process of body-shifting. Unlike dreaming – when an entity's *kɛbodikɛ* leaves *ukuɔnu* (body-skin) in order to circulate in the less-visible parts of the world to encounter and communicate with other beings, whilst the *mtakimɛ* remains behind – many interviewees attributed the act of body-shifting to *mtakimɛ*. It also became apparent that *kɛbodikɛ* is implicated in the process of body-shifting, given that the alternative *ukuɔnu* that the body-shifter becomes is clearly animated and active in the more-visible parts of the world. Furthermore, the body-shifter's alternative *ukuɔnu* can also be injured and even killed. When this happens, the body-shifter's primary *ukuɔnu* also sustains the same injury and can die as a result of it, as illustrated by the incident with Nenboni and the buffalo. Thérèse, the meat-seller in her fifties, also shared about her grandmother who died from injuries to her side that she sustained whilst being a buffalo.

Killing body-shifters' alternative *tikɔnte* (body-skins) also kills their *tikɔnte*:

Hunters put out traps. If those who become (*kɔnta*) animals have the misfortune [to be caught in one], the hunters club and kill them. If those

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[123] Interview in French. Grégoire translates *mtakimɛ* as *esprit*(s).

who become animals die, as their *sibosi* (animating force, sg. *kɛbodikɛ*) are also with them, if they die, they also die at home. You see? In other words, it's really a person out in the bush as an animal. *Uwienu* created them like this and they are animals. You need to understand that they are animals when it happens (Franck, the pork butcher in his mid-thirties).

For Yaaté, the farmer in his early-fifties, it is the body-shifter's *mtakimɛ* that becomes the animal, whilst *kɛbodikɛ* stays behind with the primary *ukuɔnu* (body-skin). When I asked if he could explain how the injury appears on the body-shifter's primary *ukuɔnu*, he likened it to electricity: if the *mtakimɛ* is injured whilst being an animal, the pain is transmitted to the *kɛbodikɛ* like current flowing along a cable. These examples further exemplify the transmaterial nature of the different components involved, as both the material and immaterial parts of the body-shifter's alternative *ukuɔnu* are injured. The immaterial part(s) then transfers these injuries to the entity's primary *ukuɔnu*.

When I tried to clarify where the second *ukuɔnu* comes from that an entity body-shifts to, interviewees often referred to it as *mnannammɛ* (something extraordinary or miraculous). It was not that interviewees found the act of body-shifting itself miraculous. Rather, they were unable to explain how the *mtakimɛ* materialises a second *ukuɔnu* that allows the human or animal who body-shifts to be present and act in the more-visible parts of the world. I suspect that it is something that many take for granted and had never thought about until I asked them. Several interviewees likened it to body-shifters having two sets of clothes, which they change between. When describing how crocodiles change their bodies, for example, Basaadi and Joël (see above) used the verb *suki*, which means "to put your shirt on". Basaadi also used the verb *sukita* "to take your shirt off". Others too used these two verbs when describing body-shifting.

I never managed to interview a known body-shifter to clarify further where the second *ukuɔnu* comes from. I suspect, however, that some of my interviewees are body-shifters. Bienvenue and Claire – my research assistants

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– affirmed my impressions and indicated several other neighbourhood acquaintances who they think are body-shifters.[124] They also made some discreet enquiries on my behalf to see if someone would be willing to talk more openly with me, but to no avail. They then explained that most body-shifters are reluctant to talk openly about their gifting, as this could increase their vulnerability (someone with bad intentions could wake them up whilst body-shifting, for example, and thus kill them). Neither should they reveal how it really happens for fear of forfeiting their ability to body-shift. Nevertheless, interviewees made it clear that body-shifting is not an act of possession where *kɛbodikɛ* and/or *mtakimɛ* enter the body of an existing entity, which is the case for Naga leopard and tiger-men of the Indo-Burmese borderlands (Heneise 2017; see also Hutton 1920). Despite this, there are several similarities: tiger-men share a "common kinship" (2017:94) with the animal and have an ani-mate relationship (2017:94-95); it is part of the tiger-men's destiny; they inherit the ability to body-shift, or "soul-transfer" as Heneise describes it, as their souls leave their human bodies whilst in a "deep dream state" and enter the bodies of tigers or leopards (2017:95); finally, tiger-men suffer the same injuries as their tigers or leopards (2017:95).

Nor is it a case of alternating ani-mates for the Bebelibe, that is to say that whilst one ani-mate is awake and active, the other is dormant. On the contrary, Anne explained that body-shifting Bɛnammucaabɛ sometimes become crocodiles in order to go and visit their crocodile ani-mates, and vice versa. Thus, in this instance, there are three distinct material beings: the person, who is in a comatose state, the crocodile that the person has become and the crocodile who is the person's ani-mate.

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[124] See also West (2005:61-71), who describes a similar scenario when he was conducting research in Mozambique.

Neither do Bebelibe body-shifters use medicines, power objects, hallucinogens, or draw on power from other sources (such as innate witchcraft or acquired sorcery powers) in order to become (*kɔnta*), change form or identify with other entities[125], which is often the case elsewhere. Morris, for example, notes that in Malawi humans only change into animals under "special circumstances, in rituals, and by the possession and knowledge of powerful medicines" (2000:222; see also Attala 2017; Hallowell 1960; Hurn 2012:77; West 2005; 2007).

Finally, Bebelibe body-shifting is not a case of mimesis, as described by Willerslev (2004) for the Yukaghirs of northeastern Siberia. Their mimetic success allows the Yukaghirs to identify with the animals and "take on the bodies of animals when they go hunting" (2004:630), which increases the probability of a successful hunt. The mimetic process involves adopting the animals' movements, smells and sounds, but they do not actually "become" (*kɔnta*) the animal in the question. On the contrary, the Yukaghirs take care that their imitation and identification does not go too far for fear of truly becoming the animal in question, as such a transformation could be permanent:

> Therefore, what Yukaghirs strive for when transforming their bodies into the image of prey is not to take on its perspective in any absolute sense, which would mean literally becoming the animal. Rather, they attempt to assume the point of view of the animal, while in some profound sense remaining the same. Mimetic practice, I argue, provides this ability to be like, yet also different from, the animal impersonated; it grants the hunter a 'double perspective' whereby he can assume the animal's point of view but still remain a human hunter who chases and kills the prey (2004:630).

Big Cats and Elephants

The Wè panther-men of Côte d'Ivoire use a combination of mimesis and medicines. As with the Yukaghirs, there is no physical transformation. The

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[125] See, for example, Kohn (2007), writing about the Runa of Amazonia and how they use hallucinogens to communicate with their dogs.

panther-men's mimesis and medicines, however, result in the panther's spirit possessing them (Guiblehon 2007). Although Pratten (2007) focuses on the Annang leopard-men of southern Nigeria, he documents further cases of leopard-men in West and Central Africa, whose shape-shifting abilities were due to mimesis and medicines, or – in the case of the lion-men of Tanganyika – witchcraft (2007:8-17). Both Guiblehon's and Pratten's accounts involve secret societies, initiation and violence. Pratten notes that all the different big cat men cases share the following common features: "ritual", "resistance" and "social cleavages of gender and generation" (2007:19). He adds that "common to all the human leopard accounts are apparently indeterminate links between murders and historical moments of social tension" (2007:19-20), none of which apply for the Bebelibe. Writing about the Annang, Pratten (2007:41-42) then clarifies that each person has a "bodily soul" and a "bush soul" [*ukpöñ*]. According to early mid-nineteenth century records, the latter is associated with

> [a]n animal, with the existence of which the life of the individual is bound up. It may be a leopard, a fish, a crocodile, any animal whatever… If the *ukpöñ* gets sick or dies, so does the individual whose *ukpöñ* it is, and the *ukpöñ* is correspondingly affected by the individual. Many individuals, it is believed, have the power of metamorphosing themselves into their *ukpöñ* (2007:42).

Pratten adds that early twentieth century accounts described that some, more powerful individuals could "enter or project their bush soul[s]" (2007:43). In order to do this, however, they would take medicines, and their intent was usually assumed to be malevolent (2007:43).

Jackson's (1990) description of shapeshifting amongst the Kuranko of Sierra Leone more closely resembles my findings for Cobly. Jackson notes, for example, that shapeshifters: are not witches; can take on animal form and destroy the crops of those they resent (1990:59); are born this way and their ability to shapeshift is a "God-given endowment" (1990:60) or "inner faculty"

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(1990:62); public knowledge further heightens the shapeshifter's vulnerability; and the human body sustains the same injuries and death if the person is wounded or killed whilst in animal form (1990:60). Much of what Jackson initially learnt about shapeshifting was based on ancestral myths, more recent accounts that circulate in the community and other anecdotes that the Kuranko learnt about from Mohammed who could shapeshift into an elephant (1990:60-61). "[I]t was more a matter of luck than ethnographical diligence," Jackson explains, that eventually brought him into contact with Mohammed (1990:61). Whilst such direct accounts serve to affirm the veracity of shapeshifting amongst the Kuranko, Jackson remained sceptical. He then outlines what Mohammed, the shapeshifter, shared with him, together with his reaction:

> I could not accept his ontologizing of the experience. Sincerity or depth of experience are not proofs that the phenomenon experienced actually exists. I argued with Mohammed that his experiences were open to other interpretations, by which – on reflection – I guess I meant that they could be interpreted my way (1990:63).

Mohammed did not appreciate Jackson's argument. With some distance, time and reading Foucault, Jackson modified his analysis:

> Rather than think about shape-shifing [sic] in terms of such antinomies as true/false, real/illusory, objective/subjective, rational/irrational, I began to explore the grounds for the possibility of the belief – the conditions under which the notion of shape-shifting could be entertained as reasonable and made intelligible, and, most important, *realized*, as in Mohammed's case, as a *sensible truth* (1990:63, emphasis in original).

Jackson then proposes that Kuranko ontological understanding that underlies their ideas about shapeshifting are based on *morgoye*, which he interprets as "personhood". *Morgoye*, in turn is "a quality of being realized in social praxis rather than in personal style or appearance" (1990:63-64). Furthermore, *morgoye* is not limited to human beings; all beings have it. *Morgoye* thus allows people to be in relation not only with each other but also other entities such as "ancestors, fetishes, bush spirits, a divine creator, and totemic animals"

(1990:64). He surmises that "in Kuranko clan myths it is the totemic animal's relationship with the clan ancestor which expresses in exemplary form the moral ideal of personhood" (1990:64). The similarities between Kuranko and Bebelibe ontological understandings of shapeshifting and totemism are such that I quote some of Jackson's observations at length:

> [T]he bond of kinship (*nakelinyorgoye*) said to exist between clansperson and clan totem becomes more than a metaphor, a rhetorical image; it implies a real moral and physical identification. If one eats the meat of one's totemic animal one's body takes on the superficial features of the animal. Eating one's totem is tantamount 'to eating oneself.' And, in the view of some Kuranko, the prohibition against killing or eating one's totem is prompted by the perennial possibility that the animal one eats may be an actual kinsman in animal form, i.e. a shape-shifter from one's own clan.
>
> From an intellectualistic point of view we would say that the totem is a *symbol* of the clan, but if we are faithful to the more holistic reasoning of the Kuranko we would have to acknowledge that the totem *is* the clan. Mind and body are one. The *moral* bond between clansperson and clan totem is thus construed as an actual *physical* identification and *may be experienced as such* (1990:65, emphasis in original).

Jackson then proposes the "need to elucidate the place of beliefs in the context of actual existence – how they are experienced and employed, not what they may be said to register or represent" (1990:69). Despite this, as far as he is concerned, shapeshifting as such does not really happen:

> Thus, while I was inclined to see Mohammed's shape-shifting as an altered state of consciousness – an intrapsychic event – Kuranko tend to ontologize the experience and see it as a change in objective reality. […] Perhaps the Kuranko are more pragmatic than most anthropologists: if illusions have real and useful consequences, then they are truths (1990:73).

Jackson's analysis and thoughts demonstrate the ontological penumbra that he endeavours to negotiate as he strives to understand Kuranko ontological ideas that differ from his own. In terms of presencing practices, Jackson's account demonstrates that the Kuranko's engagement with the entities around them is

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ontonic, as their encounters are with real, transmaterial beings, rather than signs. Therefore, the Kuranko presence these entities as ontons. Despite Jackson acknowledging the reality of such experiences for the Kuranko, and how this then shapes their engagement with the world around them, he continues to draw on more modernistic and scientific presencing practices, which mean that – for him – shapeshifting together with totemic relations more generally exist primarily at a psychological and symbolic level.

In a similar vein, West (2005; 2007) explores the ontological penumbra that he finds himself in as he thinks through what he learns about Muedan individuals in Mozambique who either transform themselves into lions or can bring lions into existence through material manipulation. West – locally known as Andiliki – suggests that these sorcery lions "not only symbolized both dangerous predator and regal protector but also symbolized a deep ambivalence about the workings of power in the social world" (2007:4). His ideas provoked the following response from Lazaro:

'Andiliki, I think you misunderstood.'

'How so?' I asked, trying to hide my anxiety.

'These lions that you talk about…' He paused, looking at me with what seemed a mixture of embarrassment and amusement. He then proceeded once more, cautiously but confidently, 'they aren't symbols – they're real' (2007:5).

In a parallel scenario, when West (2007:24-25) suggests that sorcery lions are metaphors, Lazaro responds, "Andiliki, metaphors don't kill the neighbors, lion-people do!" (2007:25).

In *Kupilikula*, his 2005 publication, West relates other similar conversations with Muedan collaborators, as they thought through how they understood such lion encounters. In one location, for example, villagers had accused someone of making the lions who were visiting their village. Whilst talking about this with

Marcos (his research collaborator), West (2005:xii-xxviii) reasons that they must have been bush lions and that the locals "*took advantage* of the lions to get rid of this guy" (2005:xxviii, emphasis in original). Marcos seems to initially affirm West by agreeing that such events should be "studied *scientifically*" (2005:xxviii, emphasis in original; see also West 2007:12-18) before adding that sorcerers do take advantage of natural phenomena. After some silent contemplation, the conversation continued:

> I remembered that I did not really know what Marcos meant when he suggested – as he often did – the need to study sorcery 'scientifically.'
>
> 'Maybe they were just bush lions,' I suggested, sensing my interpretative triumph slipping away.
>
> '*Mano* [brother],' Marcos said, with a hint of exasperation. 'They took clothes off the clothesline. They left the pig's feet. *Someone* made those lions!' (2005:xxviii, emphasis in original).

West (2007) further elaborates about an individual who regularly became a lion and threatened his neighbours:

> Imbwambwe – and, more importantly, the lion that he became – inhabited the same domain as Imbwambwe's neighbors. As Lazaro Mmala reminded me, the lion, Imbwambwe, bared teeth and claws with which he drew blood and tore the flesh of his victims. His 'reality' to them – his copresence in their ontological domain – was a matter of life and death, for he left in his wake mauled bodies and terrorized witnesses. When neighbors saw Imbwambwe, the lion, in the village, they took refuge inside their homes (2007:36-37).

West also asks, "So what *does* the anthropologist *make of it* when told that people *make*, or *make themselves into*, lions?" (2007:20, emphasis in original; see also Henare *et al.* 2007:1-3). Presencing, I propose provides us with the means to negotiate the ontological penumbras we encounter. Thus, like the Kuranko of Sierra Leone, the Muedan engage with sorcery lions as transmaterial beings or ontons, whilst West – like Jackson – analyses them in terms of symbols and metaphors, thus drawing on scientific presencing

practices that remain largely alien to those he seeks to understand. Marcos regularly reminded him about this and West readily acknowledges that, by suggesting that sorcery lions operate as metaphors, he has remade the Muedans according to his own vision (2007:83).

My preoccupation with where a body-shifter's second *ukuɔnu* comes from also illustrates that I too am negotiating an ontological penumbra as I strive to come to terms with body-shifting from a scientific perspective, whilst also recognising that this simply was not an issue for my Bebelibe interviewees. Body-shifting blurs boundaries and can be considered a transmaterial process, as *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* transition between two *tikɔnte* (body-skins). Leaving their primary *ukuɔnu* (body-skin) in a comatose state – shedding one shirt for another – the primary *ukuɔnu* can now be considered a material shell. It thus becomes an icon that represents the body-shifter, whilst the second *ukuɔnu* becomes the entity's transmaterial presence in the more visible parts of the world, with which others engage ontonically. Trying to actively engage with a body-shifter's primary *ukuɔnu* is even dangerous; people learn not to do so as they realise that the body-shifter is actually elsewhere. Ontonic engagement is further exemplified by people's relationships with their totem entities, as I explore in the next chapter.

Totem Crocodiles and Pythons

Mbelime does not have a word as such for totem; people rather talk in terms of taboos or interdicts. The general term for interdict(s) is *tikete*, which people employ when talking about things – such as food, drinks, actions or relationships – that are forbidden for them. People also refer to totemic entities – both their own and those whom they respect due to alliances with other communities – as *tikete*. Each community also has its *tikedimɔmɔnte* (true totem(s), literally "interdict(s)-true"), which explicitly refer to the communities' totemic entities and cannot be used in any other context. In this chapter I examine the relationships between four Bebelibe communities of the Commune of Cobly and their *tikedimɔmɔnte*: The Bɛbidibɛ (sg. Ubiidɔ) and Bɛnammucaabɛ (sg. Unammucaanɔ) communities whose *tikedimɔmɔnte* include the crocodile and the Bɛhotuubɛ (sg. Uhotuunɔ) and Bɛhodukpadibɛ (sg. Uhodukpaadɔ) whose *tikedimɔmɔnte* include the python.[126]

Each community has its myths about how the relationship between their founding ancestor and each totem entity was established, and the ancestor's decree that the entity concerned should never be eaten or harmed in any way.[127] These myths recount one of the three following scenarios:

- How the totem entity helped or saved the founding ancestor;
- Why the totem animal was hunted and killed. Its meat was then shared out, and the ancestor discovered that his portion was actually human flesh;

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[126] Each community has at least one animal *tikedimɔmɔnte* (see *Bebelibe Communities* in the Appendices). Some have multiple *tikedimɔmɔnte*, including plants and trees.

[127] See also: Frazer (1937:455-490) who documented similar myths from Nigeria and Ghana; Agalic (1978:272) for the Bulsa, Ghana; Jackson (1990:64) for the Kuranko, Sierra Leone; Koabike (2003:88-89) for the Moba, Togo; and Maurice (1986:194-215) for the Betammaribe, southeastern neighbours of the Bebelibe.

- That the ancestors *were* the totem animals and how they became fully human.

How the Crocodile Saved an Unammucaanɔ

It was a time of war and our ancestor fled. He came across a crocodile in its hole, so he entered the hole and the crocodile sealed him in. After the crocodile had sealed him [in the hole], his enemies arrived and searched and searched without finding him. Once the war was over, the crocodile opened the hole and our ancestor came out (Basaadi, the nonagenarian diviner).

There are those who say that the crocodile helped an Unammucaanɔ warrior cross the river. It was a time of war and when he arrived at the river, he didn't know how he would get across. He then climbed onto the back of the crocodile and got across. He then said, 'As for me, I can no longer eat [crocodile].' Others say that the crocodile saved a child by hiding him in a hole, and that's why we don't eat crocodile. Personally, I'm not sure which version is correct, but you could say that the origin is the same [the crocodile saved us] (Benjamin, the university graduate in his late-twenties).

There was a man who fell into the water. Thinking he was dead, people set out to find his body only to see him sitting on the back of a crocodile. The man should've died, but the crocodile had taken him and placed him on its back. The crocodile opened its mouth, and those who knew how to swim entered [the water] and took the man. That's why people say that the Bɛnammucaabɛ must not eat crocodile (Lucie, a churchgoing widow in her fifties).

People were in their fields when there was a huge downpour that filled the stream. A lady and her child wanted to return home and didn't know how to cross the stream, which was known to be dangerous. A crocodile emerged and told the lady to sit on its back. She sat on its back and it carried them across the stream. Since that day we have been united. The crocodile was a family sibling; it was a deceased [sibling] who became (*kɔnta*) a crocodile and helped the lady cross. Since that day we don't eat crocodile (Colette, the churchgoing seamstress in her late-thirties).

As the examples above illustrate, myths can vary significantly, neither are they universally known. With the exception of two female interviewees who shared that their fathers never told them, the other Bɛnammucaabɛ interviewees related variations of one of the above scenarios. The situation was similar

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amongst Bɛhotuubɛ and Bɛhodukpadibɛ interviewees, with all but two – who simply said it was something ancestral – narrating or referring to differing versions of the following myth:

The Headstrong Girl and the Python

There was once a headstrong girl who refused all the men her parents found for her or who propositioned her. She would say that she hadn't yet found the one she loved. One day a python became (*kɔnta*) a man and sought out the girl. When he arrived, the girl welcomed him. She was happy and said, 'This is my man!' She prepared a meal, which they ate. Once they had finished eating, she followed the python-cum-man. Whilst they were en route, she asked her man where his house was. He responded, 'There where the cockerels crow and where the goats bleat.' They continued walking into the bush and, eventually, the man showed her a termite mound and said, 'This is my home,' and they stayed there.

After a while, the girl became pregnant and had a baby. She returned to her parents and fetched her young sister to help look after the baby. Each time the girl went to the stream to fetch water her husband would turn back to a python and play with her young sister by swallowing her and then regurgitating her. One day, the python was playing with the sister and swallowed her, but when he tried to regurgitate her, it didn't work! When the girl returned from the stream she asked her husband where her sister was. He replied, 'I was playing with her and I swallowed her.' (Until now, the girl didn't know that her husband was also a python.) The girl responded, 'What am I going to tell my parents?' The python reassured her, 'I will send the ostrich with the body,' and this is what he did. The ostrich took the young sister's bones to the girl's parents, singing as he went. When the ostrich was a few metres from the house, the parents heard his song. The ladies quickly cleaned the courtyard so that they could welcome the visitor. Once in the courtyard, the ostrich deposited the bones and explained what had happened to the parents: 'Your son-in-law, the python, sent me with these bones. He liked to play with his sister-in-law by swallowing and regurgitating her. Then, the other day, whilst his wife was out, he was playing this game and when he wanted to regurgitate the sister it didn't work.'

The girl's parents then trapped the ostrich and shut him in the vestibule. The parents summoned and informed the whole population what had happened and said that they wanted to avenge the death of their younger daughter. Everyone took up arms and set off for the python's house. A dove saw the people coming along the path and started to sing an alert to the python, but the python wouldn't listen to her.

Suddenly the crowd was upon him, and to his surprise, surrounded him. He managed to escape to the stream and started to enter the water. The people caught up with him and cut off his body that wasn't yet submerged. They then shared out his meat and returned home.

Some people prepared and ate their portion of meat straight away, but others waited to eat it the next day. Those that waited then saw that it was human meat! This is why some people eat python, but others do not (Robert, the NGO worker in his late-thirties).

Robert added that this myth not only accounts for why the Bɛhotuubɛ and Bɛhodukpadibɛ refuse to eat python, but also comes as a warning to girls to be careful! It is better to let the family choose a husband for her than to go after the man of her choice (see also Agalic 1978:263). He then explained more generally that animals became members of the communities' founding ancestors' families when the ancestors decreed never to eat or harm them again. Each ancestor and animal made a pact. The animal gave a chain to the founding ancestor, the links of which are bracelets of various forms and colours.[128] These chains harbour the animals' *mtakimɛ* and are the animals' equivalent of people's *akṵnpe* (*mtakimɛ* shrines, sg. *dikṵnpuode*, see Chapters Three and Six). The totem animals also instructed the ancestors to install specific *ataadɛ* (stones, sg. *ditade*) for them. By making this pact, the founding ancestor and animal became one. They then died together and went on to reincarnate together.[129]

When I asked Bɛbidibɛ interviewees how the crocodile became their totem animal, all but Roland (see below) said they did not know. Some added that it was something ancestral, but their fathers never told them exactly what. Overall, I got the impression that they were evading the question (see Georges

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[128] Bracelets given to children when their *akṵnpe* are constructed are modelled on one of the chain links (see Chapter Six). The diviner instructs the father which link should be copied.

[129] See also Fortes (1966:14-15), writing about the Tallensi (northern Ghana), and the covenants established between each lineage founder and an animal species. He then suggests that "[i]n Voltaic culture, this is equivalent to a quasi-kinship relationship – a sort of kinship symbiosis – with the lineages to which [the totem animals] appertain" (1966:15).

below). The following myth may account for the general reticence I encountered amongst my Bɛbidibɛ interviewees:

How Our Ancestor Became Fully Human

In the beginning our ancestor lived in a hole[130] at Kèkoutchièke [in the plains near Cobly town]. He then left the hole and came to live in Birihoun [in Cobly]. He was a seer (*uhonhuonɔ*) and could become (*kɔnta*) a crocodile, which allowed him to live in harmony with nature. During the night, he would change back into a man, sneak into people's homesteads and eat their leftovers. The local inhabitants didn't know who was doing this.

One day, an Uhotuunɔ [Bɛhotuubɛ community] went to visit his older brother who was Ukɔɔnɔ [Bɛkɔpɛ community]. The Uhotuunɔ was also a seer and he discovered that our ancestor could body-shift between a crocodile and a man [and that he was the one eating people's leftovers]. He told his older [Ukɔɔnɔ] brother and they went to find our ancestor. Now, you need to know that, even when he was a man, he always had a crocodile tail. When the other two men found him, they cut off his tail, and consequently our ancestor became a normal human[131]. He then constructed a house on sand, hence our name Bɛbidibɛ [sand-people][132]. Since that time, he refused to eat crocodile meat, otherwise it would be as if he was eating his own flesh, and this is why we have the crocodile as our totem.[133]

It seems that the idea that their ancestor may have been part crocodile, who then became fully human due to the radical intervention of another, is shameful for many Bɛbidibɛ. Georges, the butcher in his late-thirties, was one of the Ubiidɔ interviewees who initially responded that he did not know why the crocodile was his totem. When I asked him if he had heard this myth and what he thought about it, he responded as follows:

It's true, but the way people speak, it's not true, they lie. The Bɛkɔpɛ are our slaves, it wasn't an Ukɔɔnɔ [who cut off the tail]. It's a story that dates back to olden days, before we were born, so we have only heard about it. It's a story about men of old. If someone saw this with their

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[130] When people state that their ancestor came out of a hole, this indicates that they consider themselves autochthonous, i.e. the original inhabitants.

[131] When his tail was cut off, he also lost his seeing powers and could no longer become (*kɔnta*) a crocodile.

[132] The word for sand is *mbidimu*. So Bɛbidibɛ literally means "sand-people".

[133] Recounted by Nèntaakè, who is Ubiidɔ, June 2009.

own eyes, if it's true or not, we don't know. Our parents don't say, we learnt about the story from other people. Our elders say that if you have a wound, you don't walk around saying, 'I have a wound.' Only you know, so you hide it [as you are ashamed] but another person may see it [and spread rumours].

"Take the example of the Bɛbidibɛ and the Bɛkɔpɛ," Grégoire, the teacher in his twenties who is Uhotuunɔ, shared, "It's a well-known story […] the Bɛkɔpɛ befriended the Bɛdibibɛ, persuaded them to leave their cave, cut off their tails […] and domesticated them."

Having come out of a hole, and as "sand-people", the Bɛbidibɛ claim that they are the original inhabitants of Cobly. It is generally acknowledged both by those who are Bɛkɔpɛ and those of other communities, that the Bɛkɔpɛ[134] ancestor fled his Betammaribe homeland, as his brothers could no longer tolerate his violent nature and plotted to kill him. Duly saved by his dog[135] – who became his totem – he eventually settled in the flood plains just east of the stream that borders the town of Cobly. As the original inhabitants of Cobly, the Bɛbidibɛ claim that they have jurisdiction over the area. The Bɛkɔpɛ refute this claim; if they had not cut off the Ubiidɔ's crocodile tail, he never would have become fully human, thus – according to the Bɛkɔpɛ – *they* are the first real human inhabitants of Cobly and should therefore be accorded judicial authority in the Commune.

Sometimes, when disputes arise, the Bɛkɔpɛ may remind the Bɛbidibɛ that they know where they buried the crocodile's tail and threaten to go and tap it (a euphemism for cursing):

Sarah shared the other day that there was a brawl in one of the [sorghum beer] taverns. A young man, who is Ubiidɔ, was drunk and insulted an old man who is Ukɔɔnɔ. The older man got upset and reminded the younger man that it is only because of the Bɛkɔpɛ cutting off their tails that the Bɛbidibɛ are humans today. He told the young

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[134] From the Ditammari verb *kɔ* "to kill", with the noun class markers that denote "people", Bɛkɔpɛ literally means "killing-people". Ditammari is spoken by the Betammaribe, southeastern neighbours of the Bebelibe.

[135] See *How the Dog Saved Ukɔɔnɔ* (Appendices) for the full story.

man that he knew where the tails had been buried and threatened to go and tap on the place so that all the Bɛbidibɛ would die. Infuriated, the younger man then went and got his older brother. The older brother told the old man off. Yes, he knew that his brother was a drunkard and difficult, but to threaten him in this way is not appropriate (Journal entry, 18 June 2013).

Roland, the trained pastor in his forties, was the only Ubiidɔ interviewee to narrate a myth, which was also about a crocodile that helped his ancestor escape his enemies. When I asked about the myth above and the incident in the tavern, he explained that:

It's a way to insult an Ubiidɔ, to say that without [the Bɛkɔpɛ], an Ubiidɔ wouldn't be who he is [today]. Ubiidɔ occupies Cobly territory, it's Ubiidɔ who is Cobly's earth priest[136].

Ukɔɔnɔ had a problem with his brother [… and] was also a hunter […]. Ukɔɔnɔ and Ubiidɔ met several times, hunted together and shared the meat. When Ukɔɔnɔ would leave, Ubiidɔ would smoke his portion of meat to take back for his family. One day, the Ukɔɔnɔ told the Ubiidɔ that he was ready to go home. He left, then turned around and followed [Ubiidɔ]. He followed until he saw a huge homestead! It was almost a town. When Ubiidɔ arrived, women and children came running to welcome him and take the meat. Ukɔɔnɔ then arrived and said, 'Oh my friend, is this how it is? You told me you didn't have a home, so what's this? What's before my eyes, are these not people?' Ubiidɔ said, 'Yes, they're people. I didn't know who you were or where you came from. You always appeared from behind the mountain and I didn't want to bring you [here].' And Ukɔɔnɔ said, 'The truth is, this is the problem that I have. I live in a cave in the mountains. I would like to settle.' Ubiidɔ said, 'If that's the case, you can come and settle here, but on the other side of the stream. The stream will be the border between us.'

Now Ukɔɔnɔ had not told Ubiidɔ that he had brought his fetish[137] with him. So he descended from the mountain, together with his fetish, which he deposited on the other side of the stream. As he hadn't alerted Ubiidɔ, [Ubiidɔ's] fetish[138] made the night fall on the other side of the stream, to demonstrate its occult powers. It was night for three days; there wasn't any light, there was no daytime over there. Even the fire went out. So Ukɔɔnɔ said, 'Okay, I'll go, I'll cross the stream to see my friend and ask for fire.' He crossed the stream and he saw that it was daytime on the other side. So he went to his friend and said, 'For three

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[136] The earth priest (*utenyiɛnɔ*) is ritually responsible for the land that his community occupies.

[137] *Difɔnde* initiation shrine entity.

[138] *Ditade* stone shrine entity.

days now, since I arrived and settled, it has been night.' And the other said, 'Ah, you've settled in, how have you settled in?' Ukɔɔnɔ said, 'Ah, I forgot to tell you that I have something. This thing, it's my fetish, but it's not a bad fetish, it's a fetish that gives health and fertility to women and virility to adults, to juveniles. I would like to perform a ceremony for my fetish.' Ubiidɔ said, 'Now that you've told me, return and you'll see that all is normal.' So Ukɔɔnɔ took the fire, thanked him, took his leave and found that it was day.

Now he needed to perform the fetish [initiation] ceremony, but he was worried that if Ubiidɔ wasn't with him, something else could go wrong. So he went and insisted that one of Ubiidɔ's children should be with him for the ceremony. And so they performed *difɔnde* [male initiation rites] and toured all the fetishes. [And still today,] an Ubiidɔ child initially leads the way […].

You may have noticed that the Bɛbidibɛ outnumber the Bɛkɔpɛ today, and there are more Bɛbidibɛ who have executive jobs. So now they say that we are who we are today because they introduced their fetish and had us do *difɔnde*. But instead of saying this outright, they say, 'You were crocodiles and it's thanks to us that you are men today. You were half crocodile, half man, and if the Bɛkɔpɛ hadn't arrived and cut off your tails…' It's their way of alluding to what really happened [that it's because of their initiation rites that we become adults]. It's because they uphold the initiation ceremony, but they can't do the initiation ceremony if we don't authorise it. An Ubiidɔ who knows this history, can respond to Ukɔɔnɔ [should he threaten to tap the tails], 'If the tails are buried on your territory, go ahead and tap them! If you know where they are buried, go and exhume them.' That will make him [Ukɔɔnɔ] shut up. It's his way of talking, to see if you know your origins. Normally, you would never threaten people with their totem.

Until relatively recently, the Bɛbidibɛ and Bɛkɔpɛ had a good relationship based on several alliances founded on shared initiation practices and marriage. Today's animosity over which community has official jurisdiction in Cobly seems to date back to 2002. In an attempt to officially recognise and re-establish the worth of customary roles such as kings and chiefs, the government contacted each commune to find out who was the officially recognised traditional leader[139]. As noted in the Introduction, the Bebelibe did not have chiefs before colonial times. The closest customary leadership role is the *utenyiɛnɔ* (earth

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[139] See Tall (2016) who explains the historical and political circumstances behind the initial demise of such roles, and how they were re-instigated.

priest), who would normally be an Ubiidɔ for Cobly, as Roland points out. In 2002, when the governmental request arrived, there was no *utenyiɛnɔ* (earth priest), as the Ubiidɔ community had let the role lapse when Mustafa, the last *utenyiɛnɔ*, died in 1992. So when the mayor (an Uhotuunɔ) was asked who Cobly's traditional leader was, he informed the government that it was his father-in-law's brother (an Ukɔɔnɔ) who was the *uyuɔsɔ kpiɛmɔ* (community shrine priest) for Cobly and responsible for the *difɔndɛ* initiation shrine at the time. When the Bɛbidibɛ community learnt of this, they promptly appointed a new Ubiidɔ *utenyiɛnɔ* and had two installation ceremonies in quick succession: the official earth priest installation, followed by a public "kingly" installation according to southern Beninese conventions, on the 9 November 2002, which I attended. People then started calling the newly installed *utenyiɛnɔ* the King of Cobly.

To complicate matters further, Mustafa – the *utenyiɛnɔ* (earth priest) who died in 1992 – was not Ubiidɔ, as his genitor was Ukɔɔnɔ. Mustafa's mother was pregnant with him when his father died. Following levirate customs, Isèdimè, who was Ubiidɔ and the *utenyiɛnɔ* at the time, inherited Mustafa's mother. When Isèdimè died, his other sons declined the role of *utenyiɛnɔ*, so Mustafa – Isèdimè's inherited son – was installed as the new *utenyiɛnɔ*. Although Mustafa grew up in an Ubiidɔ family, he remained Ukɔɔnɔ. This, together with the circumstances surrounding the appointment of the current *utenyiɛnɔ*, and his resulting title of King, has contributed to the judicial dispute, which has been further politicised by different family members from both communities.

If anything, Nèntaakè recounted the myth about an Ubiidɔ crocodile ancestor who had his tail cut off with pride, yet its apparent manipulation by the Bɛkɔpɛ means that many Bɛbidibɛ now find it shameful. Despite the fact that this myth is now contested, the recent incident of the old Ukɔɔnɔ threatening the

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young Ubiidɔ with his totem was not appreciated by my Bɛbidibɛ interviewees. All my interviewees from all four communities were vehement that one should never threaten individuals with their totem animals. Should someone do so, the animal concerned could intervene to protect the person under threat and may even attack the aggressor. Several interviewees added that such an act is so serious that they would have the right to defend themselves: "I would injure the person", Thérèse, the meat seller in her fifties, shared, "or I would have them summoned [to the gendarmerie], since I don't know why they should do such a thing. It could make my *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force) flee." Georges, the butcher in his late-thirties, rhetorically asked, "If someone did that? What does the gun do? I would shoot the person," whilst Yooka, the septuagenarian farmer categorically stated, "If someone provoked me with a python I would kill him. If he held it and provoked me, I would kill him."

Even joking around with someone's totem animal can be dangerous:

When my aunt was doing *tikɔnte* [initiation], one of her jokers[140] killed a python and provoked her with it. A rash broke out all over her body and stayed with her just until she grew old and died (Idaani, the church elder in his late-fifties).

Like Thérèse, several other interviewees mentioned that threatening or teasing people with their totem animals could result in their *sibosi* (sg. *kɛbodikɛ*, animating force) fleeing the body. The person would then fall sick and could die if the *kɛbodikɛ* does not return. Idibiènu, a widow in her fifties who is Uhotuunɔ, explained, "If someone knows that I don't eat python, he shouldn't use it to threaten me. The python is my *kɛbodikɛ*." Interviewees who were Bɛhotuubɛ or Bɛhodukpadibɛ distinguished between a *diseede sɛfɛ* (family python) or *diseede wɛfɛ* (family python-that's-mine) versus a wild *fɛsɛfɛ* (snake/python), whilst Bɛnammucaabɛ and Bɛbidibɛ interviewees contrasted *fɛbodimuɔfɛ* (animating

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[140] An affine with whom an individual has a joking relationship. See S. Merz (2014:47-49) for more details.

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force-crocodile) with a wild *fɛmuɔfɛ* (crocodile). Interviewees differentiated between community members who are direct descendants of their communities' founding ancestors and those who are not. In this instance, direct descendants are those who have been reincarnated by the founding ancestor *and* the founding *tikedimɔmɔnte* (true totem) or another human-animal pair previously reincarnated by them. Such people and their totem animals thus share the same *sibosi* (sg. *kɛbodikɛ*, animating force):

Sharon: I've heard that one can say *fɛbodimuɔfɛ*, which seems to be a compound noun of…

Benjamin: …yes, soul[141] and…

Sharon: …soul and crocodile…

Benjamin: …yes, that's it, it's the crocodile of the soul. These crocodiles are the souls of the community. They're the souls of the community, which is why they are sacred.

Sharon: Does that mean that there's a link between these crocodiles and people's *sibosi*?

Benjamin: Exactly, when one says *fɛbodimuɔfɛ*, this supposes that Bebelibe souls can reincarnate crocodiles. One can have reincarnation.

Sharon: Of Bɛnammucaabɛ?

Benjamin: Bɛnammucaabɛ and exactly that's why there are certain [people], if their souls are incarnated by a crocodile, if they even see crocodile remains they'll start to have sores all over.

Sharon: Does that mean that you can have a person and a crocodile who share the…

Benjamin: …soul…

Sharon: …*kɛbodikɛ…*

Benjamin: …same soul…

Sharon: …same soul. Does that mean that with regard to reincarnation, the two are reincarnated…

Benjamin: …incarnated by the same person.

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[141] Interview in French. Benjamin regularly translates *kɛbodikɛ* as *âme*(s).

Sharon: Ah ha, I've also heard it said that when the person dies the crocodile will also die…

Benjamin: …also dies.

Sharon: And if a crocodile dies…

Benjamin: …the person will also die. They have the same soul. But it's not everyone, it's only some individuals, those who are reincarnated. In the community you can have several people who are like that and if they should touch something that's crocodile [remains] they can have problems. When a child is born, one performs sacrifices to find out what sort of reincarnation it has, so that one knows if it shares its soul with a crocodile and the precautions it should take.

Given that others, like Benjamin (the churchgoing university graduate in his late-twenties), interpret *kɛbodikɛ* as soul, it could be said that the totem animal is a person's soul mate. I propose that the term "ani-mate" would be more appropriate, thereby expressing the idea that the two are simultaneously animated by the same force and could be considered mates as they are intimately bound together. Such individuals and their corresponding totem animals thus form a pair, though individuals do not necessarily know their corresponding crocodile or python. As noted in Chapters Three and Six, they also share their *mtakimɛ*, which enables some of them to body-shift.

Ani-mates

Early ethnographic data indicates that such relationships were not unique to the Bebelibe (see, for example, Marillier 1897a:227-229; Frazer 1910b:551-552, 559-560; 1937:455-472; Hambly 1931). Tylor speculated that it was such notions of reincarnation that provided Frazer

> with a theory of the origin of totemism. He argues that the man's relation to the totem is derived from his soul (or one of his souls) residing for security in one of the totem-creatures, whence his worship of them and his objection to killing and eating them, and their reciprocal kindness to and protection of him, and the general conception that the

man and his totem guardian are kinsfolk by descent (1899:146; see also Frazer 1887:3-49; Frazer 1910b:593-600).[142]

Writing about northern Ghana, Cardinal noted:

> Everyone has some animal which is a species or *alter ego* – not to be slain or eaten, an animal which is recognised as one's friend, one's brother. Most noteworthy of these animals is the crocodile, which is called by the Paga [Kassena] people their soul. The life of a man or woman is identical with that of his crocodile, *alter ego*. When he is born, the crocodile is born; they are ill at the same time: they die at the same time ([1920]:39; see also Frazer 1937:457-458; Journet-Diallo 1998:203-204).

As I have explained elsewhere, individuals do not know who their reincarnating ancestors are, as this is considered dangerous:

> [A]nnouncing the names of reincarnating ancestors can kill the individuals concerned.[143] It seems that the ancestor's power is invested in his [or her] anonymity. If the reincarnating ancestor's identity becomes public knowledge, the ancestor feels vulnerable and can no longer protect the person as his [or her] *mtakimɛ* [identity] is compromised and *kɛbodikɛ* [animating force] is left open to attack. Consequently, the ancestor leaves and the person dies (S. Merz 2013:36, see also 22-23).

Those who do know an individual's reincarnating ancestor include the diviner, several community elders known for their discretion and the individual's father. Fathers and community elders also make sure that people know the interdicts they should observe. Some of these might be specific to the individual, whilst the whole community respects others, such as interdicts about totem entities. As people do not know who their reincarnating ancestors are, and given that totem interdicts are observed by the whole community, individuals do not

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[142] Frazer (1910d:45-47) later speculated that totemism in its purest form was not religious in nature (see Chapter One and below). He also surmised that reincarnation (or metempsychosis and transmigration of the soul) developed separately from totemism, and that the relationship between reincarnation and the worship of animals was a later religious development. Frazer (1910d:54-55) then concluded that reincarnation could not account for the origin of totemism.

[143] Robert mentioned that the same danger exists for those reincarnated by animals should someone call them by the animal's name.

always know if they share their *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force) and *mtakimɛ* (identity) with their totem animal or not, unless something happens to verify this:

In 1996, Robert would've been about twenty, a python started to visit him in his room every day. He would see it hanging from the beams of the thatched roof, or find it in his bag; everywhere he looked he would see it. Robert had noticed that each day he encountered the python it was bigger. The first day it was thin like a biro, then it got thicker, and thicker until it was as thick as his thigh.

One evening, around 9 pm when he had finished eating, he decided to go to bed. He was relaxed and tired so he didn't bother shining the torch around his room before lying down. That year he had a pullover that he used as a pillow and when he lay down, he thought he was placing his head on his pullover. He nestled his head in the pillow, then a little later, when he moved his head he realised something wasn't right – it was cold! But that was okay… then, when he moved his head, the pullover started to move! Several times the same thing happened, so he felt it with his hands and realised it wasn't his pullover! He jumped up and cried out! The family came running, 'What is it?!' He couldn't speak. His father took a torch and entered the room, 'Oh ho, it's him.' Robert's father then took some sorghum flour, mixed it in water, and sprinkled it on the python and it disappeared.

Robert refused to go back into the room and spent the rest of the night in his father's room. The next day his father went to see the diviner. His father already knew the python, and knew that it came regularly to visit the family. His father tried to reassure him not to be scared, that it was the family python and that it had taken a shine to Robert, which is why it came to visit him. But should Robert ever eat snake he will die (Journal entry, 14 August 2015).

Robert, who is Uhodupkaadɔ, later explained to me during one of our interviews: "According to our fathers some people can eat [python] but others must not. For example, those who are reincarnated by our ancestor, if they eat they'll have problems… others will die and others will suffer."

Valentine and Juliette, who are Bɛnammucaabɛ and in their twenties shared what happened to them:

I've never eaten crocodile; it's forbidden. Have you seen my foot? Don't you see? [She shows me some scars.] That's it! I was drawing water one day from the stream to drink and I didn't know. I don't know if when I drew water if there were [crocodile] bodily secretions in it. I don't know. I drew water, went home and drank some and my two feet swelled up

and liquid poured out. They went and got medicine to give me. [The crocodile] was in the hole where we drew [water]. I can't even eat a little. If I eat I will die (Valentine).

If I pass close to crocodile bones I get sick. You'll see that my legs become swollen. One day, when I was still at school, we were having fun as we crossed the river. We didn't know that someone had killed a crocodile and thrown the bones [in the river]. So we crossed the river and I didn't know that there were crocodile bones. It was only afterwards that they said that a crocodile had been killed there. We went home and I fell sick.

On another occasion [someone] prepared [crocodile meat] and threw out the bones. I arrived at her house. I saw the bones and stepped over them, but I didn't know they were crocodile bones. By the time I got home my feet were swollen. My grandma told them to clear the bones away, so they took the bones and hid them. Grandma knew what to do. She prepared a lotion that I applied and it was over. My father also knew what to do and gave me medicine and it was over (Juliette).

Other interviewees affirmed that those who share their *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* with their totem animal, and thus have an ani-mate relationship, are highly sensitive to any adverse contact with the animal in question. This includes stepping on shed snakeskin for those whose totem is the python, or even smelling or seeing the totem animal's meat as it is prepared and cooked, or brushing up against someone who has just eaten the meat. Besides swelling feet, other effects include coughing, vomiting, rashes and open sores. Finally, for those who have an ani-mate relationship death is certain should they eat their totem animal's meat, though interviewees also explained that it is almost impossible for such individuals to do so, even accidentally:

If it's your true totem you can't eat it. Something will prevent you from eating. Or it alerts you not to eat or it tells you you're not hungry. Or when you take a ball [of stiff cornmeal porridge to dip in the sauce] it falls, and when you take it again it falls and you leave [it] (Colette, the churchgoing seamstress in her late-thirties).

Interviewees generally acknowledged that those who do not have an ani-mate relationship could eat the meat without dying, though they may still get sick. Several interviewees added that there is a medicine that can be administered to

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help the person recover. Alexis, a churchgoer in his late-twenties studying for his *maîtrise*[144], summed up as follows:

> Sharon: If someone who is [Uhodukpaadɔ] eats python, what could happen?
>
> Alexis: The thing is I don't know anyone who has ever tried, I've never seen anyone try to infringe that law to see the consequence, but what I do know is that if one eats, something could happen. There could be consequences that follow afterwards such as malformations. You could give birth to a child that is malformed because it was affected whilst it was still a foetus. Or other intermediary consequences; the person who ate that meat might get sick. We're even forbidden from stepping over snake meat or a snake's skeleton. Even if you inadvertently step over it, after a few days you'll notice sores and people will say, 'Ah! They must have stepped over the skeleton or meat of a dead snake somewhere in the bush.' So, if that can happen simply from stepping over the meat or skeleton, and now you eat? It has to be worse! Therefore, supposing that it's really your true totem, it [death] comes.
>
> Sharon: The person could die?
>
> Alexis: Absolutely! Once the person falls sick [chuckles], it's true, death could come, that's absolutely how it is. The person could die… now if the person has eaten by accident, it's similar to if you accidently step over a snake's skeleton. Something could happen to them. One will try and find out what's happening, what is the origin of that sickness… and there are symptoms that prove that they have eaten their totem… and when one concludes this, there is a remedy. There are some roots that one prepares for them and if they take [the medicine], if the sickness, if you catch it early enough, you might be able to save them. But if it's too complicated or too advanced, then it's impossible to cure.
>
> Sharon: M hmm, you mentioned symptoms?
>
> Alexis: Yes, concerning symptoms, what I know is that first of all the stomach bloats or the feet swell, they could also have sores that break out all over. Those are the symptoms that I know. Or you could see that their cheeks start to swell or there's itching all over.

As most individuals do not know the status of their relationship with their totem animal, they generally respect the interdict not to eat them; not only could their

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[144] Post-graduate diploma, which follows the *licence* (French equivalent of a Bachelor's degree).

lives be in danger, but it could be an act of cannibalism[145], as Christophe (a village deputy chief in his forties) and Henri (the carpenter in his late-thirties) intimate:

> Sharon: Is the python a family member?
>
> Christophe: Our *sibosi* (animating force) become (*kɔnta*) pythons. That's why I think it's forbidden for us [to eat]. This means it's one of our children; it's one of our sisters. That's why we forbid [eating it] because we could be eating someone one day.
>
> Sharon: Does the crocodile have the same status as a human?
>
> Henri: It's the same status because it's an animal who, who is like a human for you. Before saying you don't eat something, it's sure that there is a little something that links you, which forms a link between you and that animal. So when you eat it, it's as if you've eaten a human.

As Benjamin mentioned above, ani-mates also die together. Many interviewees shared about this, including Juliette: "If you're out walking and you see a dead crocodile, that means that someone in the family has died. For example, my father's older brother, when he was ready to die, the crocodile also died. They went and buried it before burying him." Sophie, a mother in her early-thirties, elaborated that

> the *kɛbodikɛ* is a person's soul[146] that can also be a crocodile in our family. Now if you kill the crocodile that means you've killed the person without knowing. Or [for others], if it's the python there that you've killed, you've killed the person without knowing. You could see a dead python. So you go home and often you go to consult [a diviner], and you learn that this or that could happen. Upon your return you'll find a dead body at the house.

Sophie went on to explain that in the past, when people died, the family would verify if they had an ani-mate by looking for a dead crocodile or python. If they found one, they would bury it before burying the person. Due to population

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[145] Jackson notes that for the Kuranko of Sierra Leone, "Eating one's totem is tantamount 'to eating oneself.' […] the prohibition against killing or eating one's totem is prompted by the perennial possibility that the animal one eats may be an actual kinsman in animal form […]" (1990:65).

[146] Interview in French. Sophie regularly translates *kɛbodikɛ* as *âme*(s).

growth, however, this is no longer practical. Like Sophie, many of my interviewees justified the strict interdicts not to kill their totem animals, as to do so is not only disrespectful but could result in the death of another, or even yourself should you kill your ani-mate. Paul, the village deputy chief in his late-forties, shared about how his daughter, whose ani-mate was a python, died:

> I was in Nigeria and my eldest daughter died. I was hoeing and I saw a python. Others, who eat snakes, saw it and said they wanted to kill it. I told them not to. I went to the other side of the field and carried on hoeing; the others also continued to hoe and they said they wanted to kill it. I told them not to. I then returned [home] and they tracked it down to kill it. The child died.

The interdict to not kill or eat applies to all crocodiles and pythons, as it is not always apparent if they are wild or not.[147] Despite this, several interviewees explained that if a python or crocodile attacks you or your *diseede wante* (family animals), it is obviously wild. As its behaviour is not acceptable it can be killed, but never eaten (see discussion about misbehaving animals, Chapter Five).[148] Interviewees pointed out some other behavioural and physiological differences that can help distinguish *diseede siɛ* (family pythons) and *ibodimuɔhi̧* (animating force-crocodiles) from their wild counterparts: *diseede siɛ* and *ibodimuɔhi̧* are friendly, gentle, can be played with, stay within the general vicinity of the homestead and do not flee when people approach them; *ibodimuɔhi̧* have five rather than four digits per foot[149], whilst *diseede siɛ* can make themselves invisible to those who are not Bɛhodukpadibɛ or Bɛhotuubɛ, are generally smaller, but and change size as needed if they feel threatened[150]:

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[147] The Bɛhotuubɛ and Bɛhodukpadibɛ also refuse to eat other snake species out of general respect, but they kill dangerous snakes such as cobras and vipers.

[148] Fortes noted that the Tallensi would slay totem pythons and crocodiles that deliberately killed livestock, given that "they are capable of moral conduct" (1966:15) and should know better.

[149] Which raises the question whether it is possible to really distinguish them physiologically, given that *Crocodilians'* front feet have five digits. Their back feet are webbed with four full digits and a fifth rudimentary one (Kelly 2007). Unless one gets really close, it often appears that they only have four digits per foot, as they tuck their thumbs in as they walk.

[150] One interviewee mentioned that *ibodimuɔhi̧* do this too.

Alexis (the churchgoer in his late-twenties studying for his *maîtrise*): Sometimes people try to kill [a python] and finally it gets big; they hit it, it grows, hit, it grows, hit it grows and finally they notice it growing and growing [so they stop]. But sometimes there are children at the house and they don't know. When they see [a python] they throw themselves at it and start to hit it, and it grows, and then they learn, 'Be careful, it's a house python.' [...]

Sharon: Have you ever seen this, a python who…

Alexis: …yes, I saw it once, it wasn't in our house but another homestead and that's why I talked about hitting it and it getting bigger. Yes, I arrived and the children were throwing themselves at it and hitting it, but they didn't intend to kill it. It was when some adults intervened and said, 'No, don't hit it,' a few minutes later it left, we couldn't find it. It was just a few minutes and we realised it was no longer there [it disappeared].

Nearly all my Bɛhodukpadibɛ and Bɛhotuubɛ interviewees mentioned *diseede siɛ*'s (family pythons) ability to defend themselves in this way. As with body-shifting, the way interviewees talked about *diseede siɛ*'s ability to change size at will or become invisible, indicated that they consider these normal phenomena. Those who have an ani-mate relationship with pythons often see them around the homestead, whilst they remain invisible to others. This further illustrates the transient nature of the material realm.

Whether individuals have an ani-mate relationship with their totem animals or not, all but three of the interviewees attested that *diseede siɛ* and *ibodimuɔhį* are part of the family.

Family Status

The snake is a family member. Why do we say that it's a family member? The snake is in *ditade* (stone, shrine entity), and *ditade* is with the family. Our whole life, all our sacrifices are there. That's why I say that the snake is with us in the family […]. When you say *ditade*, you say at the same time *Uwienu* (God). You need to know that our snake and *Uwienu* are like this [together]. I know that *Uwienu* is the snake's father. When you speak with the snake, he goes to his father and he will bring and give you [*Uwienu*'s answer] (Gaston, the farmer in his early-forties).

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As previously mentioned, a *ditade* (pl. *ataadɛ*) is simultaneously the community guardian shrine and the shrine entity, whose material presence in the more-visible parts of the world is a stone and also a python or the totem animal of a given community. Like Gaston, several other interviewees explained their totem animals' family position in terms of their role as family guardians such as *ataadɛ*, elders, fathers, and most commonly, ancestors. Benjamin (see above) summed it up when he stated, "Crocodiles are the souls of the community… which is why they are sacred." Although Benjamin and other interviewees (see *Vignette One* below) employed terms such as "sacred", the general consensus amongst interviewees was that they do not venerate their totem animals. "It's the python that asks *Uwienu* to give to us," Sinbonko, the community shrine priest emphasised, "When we perform a sacrifice, [the snake] takes it and goes and gives it to *Uwienu*. What you do [during the ceremony], he then takes [to *Uwienu*]." Interviewees thus consider their totem animals primarily as guardians and intermediaries, who – in turn – perform protective and oracular roles. Henri, the churchgoing carpenter in his late-thirties, for example, shared:

A crocodile came to my house the week before last. A young crocodile like this [shows length, about 50 cm]. My son went outside, shone the torch around and saw it. He came and cried, 'Papa, it has come, I saw it lying down.' I told him to leave it, and it would leave again… *Fɛbodimuɔfɛ* (animating force-crocodile) is the fetish [*ditade*] crocodile and it doesn't kill. *Fɛmuɔfɛ* (wild crocodile) though is merciless. If it sees you in the stream, it will kill you.

Sharon: Even if you're Ubiidɔ?

Henri: Ah ha, even if you're Ubiidɔ, you should never mess with it in the water. But *fɛbodimuɔfɛ*, you can see it lying, as I said, it came to the house. It can walk and come to the house, lie down, then leave again… it's not merciless, it won't harm you… and should it encounter a vicious crocodile, when the stream is full, if they meet and you're asleep in the night and you wake up, you'll hear them fighting, oh how they fight! They don't like meeting.

Sharon: Does that mean that *fɛbodimuɔfɛ* tries to protect, it doesn't want the wild crocodile to enter the town?

Henri: That's it exactly. When a wild crocodile comes, [fɛbodimuɔfɛ] goes after it and they fight.

Sophie, the mother in her early-thirties, recounted:

One day my mum told me [about a wild] crocodile[151] that came to Disadi and there were [animating force] crocodiles [in the stream]. And the [wild] crocodile came, there was lots of noise [in the night] and people heard, they heard, so the elders got up really early and before their arrival the [animating force] crocodiles had killed the wild crocodile because it wanted to harm, it wanted to kill children and others because it wanted to eat. There were no standpipes or water pumps at the time, so people got water from holes they dug next to the stream, which fill with clean water. If you're not careful, it will take you… [animating force-crocodiles] start to fight, to defend themselves, because they're, they're human so they fight so no harm comes to their territory…

Sharon: And if you see a living *fɛbodimuɔfɛ*, if it arrives, for example, in your house or surroundings, does that mean something?

Sophie: Yes, that means something; it could mean that someone important has died. Or something else is about to happen or something has happened elsewhere and its soul has come to the house to alert you that something has happened.

"Sometimes, when a woman wants to get pregnant, you'll see [a python]. When a woman wants to get pregnant, you'll see it and you'll know that a stranger [baby] will arrive in your family. It shows us," Yammu, a farmer in his sixties, explained, "[And] when a child sleeps and the mother is absent, it comes and encircles the child to protect it. It leaves when the mother returns." Several other interviewees also shared about how pythons protect babies and suckle them with their tongue or tails[152]:

My dad was [working] in Tanguiéta, I think it was in 1966. A python came into the house… Mum had put [my baby sister] on a mat, covered her with a cloth as usual and then left to draw water… when she had drawn water, she returned and she found, there where she had left the child, a python was there and it had taken its tail and put it into the child's mouth! And the child suckled! The child sucked the tail. She returned, when she saw, hey! She wanted to shout! She shouted,

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[151] Interview in French. Sophie referred to wild crocodiles as *crocodiles* and animating force-crocodiles as *caïmans*.

[152] See also Malian myth recounted by Brun (1910:857-858).

'Snake, snake, snake!' Dad came, and he looked and said, 'No, leave it, it's a visitor who has left my family to come [here].' So he called some people from the neighbourhood, some elders who were there and they came and put some flour on it and it left (Roland, the trained pastor in his mid-forties).

For others, such as Anne, the churchgoing widow in her late-forties, seeing totem animals in dreams is also significant:

If you dream and see a crocodile that means the crocodile is your *baakɛ* (*tibaakite* kin, see below) and has come to greet you. Also, if something is about to happen you may see [a crocodile]. If a person is about to get sick and die you may see it.

Several interviewees (such as Christophe above) also explained that totem animals have more immediate kinship roles such as brothers, sisters or children if an individual's brother, sister or child should have the animal in question as their ani-mate. Others – like Anne – stated that totem animals were their *baakɛ* (*tibaakite* kin). As I explain elsewhere (2014:51), reincarnation can occur matrilaterally when children are reincarnated by ancestors from their fathers' or grandfathers' maternal family. When this happens a ceremony called *tibaakite* needs to be performed to reintegrate the children concerned into their reincarnating ancestors' original lineage. These children thus become fictive kin members of the maternal family. The maternal uncles who perform the *tibaakite* ceremony become second fathers to the children and are called *baakɛ* (*tibaakite* kin). The term *baakɛ* thereby exemplifies the kinship relationship resulting from reincarnation and the fatherly role that the totem animal has.

Then and Now: Re-animating the Totemism Debate

Believing himself to be descended from, and therefore akin to, his totem, the savage naturally treats it with respect. If it is an animal he will not, as a rule, kill nor eat it. In the Mount Gambier tribe (South Australia)… the identification of the man with his totem is carried very far; it is of the same flesh with him, and to injure any one of the species is physically to injure the man whose totem it is (Frazer 1887:7).

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As I noted in Chapter One, Frazer emphasised that totemic societies consider their animals as kin and having human status. He summarised the "essence of totemism" as "an identification of a man with his totem, whether his totem be an animal, a plant, or what not" (1910d:5). "In pure totemism," he continued, "the totem is never a god and is never worshipped" (1910d:5). "In short," Frazer later added:

> pure totemism is essentially democratic; it is, so to say, a treaty of alliance and friendship concluded on equal terms between a clan and a species of animals or things; the allies respect but do not adore each other. Accordingly the institution flourishes best in democratic communities, where the attitude of men to their totems reflects that of men to their fellows (1910d:28; see also Goldenweiser 1910:261).

Durkheim (1915:139-140) also emphasised the democratic and familial nature of the relationship between people and their totem animals, and that these animals are not worshiped. In some instances, Durkheim suggested, "the animal seems to occupy a slightly more elevated place in the hierarchy of sacred things [which is why] it is sometimes called the father or the grandfather […]" (1915:139). Frazer's and Durkheim's observations resonate with my findings in northwestern Benin, as outlined above. They further fit with the democratic nature of Bebelibe social structure, which I outlined in the Introduction, and the autonomy and morality that people accord animals more generally, which I outlined in Chapters Four and Five.

Besides ideas about familial and ani-mate relationships, there are other similarities between what interviewees shared with me and some of the early ethnographic data that sparked the totemism debate in the first place. Frazer (1887:16-19; 1910b:609-610), for example, listed the consequences of eating a totem animal, which included giving birth to the animal, various skin diseases and sickness resulting in death. Finally, he mentioned that "the totem gives his clansmen important information by means of omens" (1887:23). Frazer

(1910b:543-630; 1937:455-498) also documented examples of totemism for West Africa, including southern Benin (1910b:576-584). Totemic relationships in the south, however, differ significantly from northwestern Benin, as the animals have divine status there. Thus – according to Frazer – these relationships do not qualify as "pure totemism" (1910d:5). Despite this, the data Frazer presents demonstrates the importance and prevalence of such relations more generally both in Benin and the wider region (see also Adler 1998).

Although many of the theoretical ideas that helped fuel the original debate were flawed (see Chapter One), this does not mean that the ethnographic observations and data from which they were extrapolated should be dismissed (see also Willerslev 2011:210). They still have validity as historical data, which demonstrate that – amongst the Bebelibe at least – totemic ideas and practices appear not to have changed much in the intervening years, nor has their significance diminished. As the totemism debate developed, scholars focussed on the theoretical issues, which has resulted in a paucity of ethnographic data. Nevertheless, there are some more recent accounts that include case studies and corroborate the ongoing importance of totemic entities for many societies, including some for West Africa.

Sapir discussed what he called "complementary totemism" (1977) given that some Kujamaat Diola[153] of Senegal may, at some point in their lives, defecate live animals, which Sapir called totemic doubles (see *Functionalism and Structuralism*, Chapter One). There are some clear differences between how totemism is understood amongst the Bebelibe and Sapir's complementary totemism. For example, for the Kujamaat Diola the defecated animal is an individual totem rather than a community one, reincarnation is not involved, individuals and their doubles remain in constant communication, and when individuals die their animal doubles do not (1977:2). If, however, an animal

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[153] Officially the Jola-Fonyi (Simons and Fennig 2017).

double is killed, the corresponding individual may also die (1977:2), unless the *kajupen* ritual is performed in time to transfer the animal double's soul to the individual concerned (1977:3). Like Bebelibe totem animals, Kujamaat Diola and their animal doubles have an ani-mate relationship, the animals can be distinguished from their wild counterparts, as they too prefer to be within the vicinity of their people, do not flee when approached, and can be differentiated physiologically. Despite this, they are still considered natural animals (1977:2-3).

Journet-Diallo (1998) also writes about different Diola speakers, including the Felup[154] of Guinea-Bissau, who can have multiple animal doubles. One of these can be a lineage totem (1998:216), where the bond between animal doubles and their individuals results from reincarnation (1998:224-226). Like the Bebelibe, individuals do not necessarily know their totem doubles and may only learn about them as a result of some disorder, injury or sickness (1998:217).

Three examples from closer to home demonstrate further totemic similarities with the Bebelibe. Maurice (1986:194-215), writing about the Betammaribe – southeastern neighbours of the Bebelibe – catalogues the animals that the different Betammaribe clans should not eat, sometimes together with the myths behind the interdict. The myths either recount how the animal saved an ancestor or how the ancestor suffered as a consequence of eating the animal. The ancestor then decreed that his descendants should not eat the animal henceforth. Swanson (1985:175-176), writing about the Gourmantché – northeastern neighbours of the Bebelibe – also notes that many clans have animals that they are forbidden to eat. Killing and eating such animals is equated with killing a subclan member as it "is the spirit of a particular clan's animal 'ancestor' (or totem) that is represented by the *ciciliga* 'guiding spirit' in every person" (1985:175). Swanson continues:

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[154] Officially the Jola-Felupe (Simons and Fennig 2017).

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Today, various birds, snakes, fish and other creatures represent the specific taboo of certain clans. Such relationships can always be traced back to some vital role these animals' ancestors played in preserving or maintaining the life of some human ancestor. Such help and guidance continues to the present day within every person in the form of the 'spirit' being known as the *ciciliga* 'guiding spirit'.

We may, therefore, state that the *ciciliga* 'guiding spirit' is some *koali* 'taboo' animal, recognized as a kinsman, which *Tienu* 'God' assigns to each person as a guide throughout his life. Seen as a kinsman, though not a human kinsman (which the *ŋaali* 'ancestor form' is), it is understandable that it could be offended at times, that, even like the 'ancestor form', it has the right to make demands upon the individual. To kill and eat a *koali* 'taboo' animal is to ask for certain death within the family (1985:176).

The Moba of northern Togo also have totem animals resulting from alliances between the animals concerned and the founding ancestors (Koabike 2003:87-89). Koabike (2003:89) mentions that the ancestors punish those who eat their totem animals. The punishment is such that nobody dared to violate the interdict until more recently when some people read in the Bible (1 Timothy 4:3) that those who are faithful and know the truth could eat everything that God created as food. Likewise, some Bebelibe churchgoers have intentionally killed and eaten either their own or other people's totem animals, sometimes with tragic consequences. Two incidents in particular came to light during my research that I present in the following vignettes, which are a compilation of what several interviewees told me. Although they read like group conversations, interviews were with individuals, except for Louis and Diane.

Vignette One: Emile the Baker

Even if you are not Ubiidɔ, "you shouldn't kill crocodiles [in Cobly]. If someone sees you, it's a problem," explained Henri, who is Ubiidɔ and goes to the same church that Emile went to. Henri continued:

I had a [Christian] brother who ran the café opposite the market. The crocodile came by. I'm sure you heard about the problem, when the crocodile came by in the drainage ditch next to Emile's. I don't know

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exactly what they did – I think they shot it – but it created a big problem! So big that it went to the King. Oh, he was in serious trouble and afterwards the [rifleman's] child, who was playing football for his team, died! Emile saw the crocodile first.

They called Emile and told him to buy things for the ceremony, but as he prays he refused to give for the ceremony. People say this is why Emile died, but as we're not God, we can't really know.

The King wasn't happy, but I think [the rifleman] finally gave the things needed for the ceremony.

Had I been there, I wouldn't have let them kill it. It could've been me who saw it first. I'd gone to Emile's and I'd drunk some tea. I was manoeuvring my motorbike so that I could return home and I heard a noise in the drainage ditch; something walking, 'boi, boi, boi', and I said, 'Hmm, whatever is walking there is a big animal, if it's not a crocodile, it's something else big.' I didn't have a torch to see what it was, so I said, 'Okay, as I don't have a torch, I'm not going to go looking for something that could be bad in the night without a torch.' So I left on my motorbike. The next day I learnt that they'd spotted the crocodile and [the rifleman] came and killed it. I said, 'Ah, that's what I heard, the noise that I heard, it was him walking.' He was in the drainage ditch. He had left the pond and followed the ditch. He was walking and I heard the noise, but I didn't have my torch to check so I left, then they saw the crocodile. It was night already, maybe 8 or 9pm.

"The crocodile was hot," Diane, Louis' wife, explained, "So he went out to get some air."

"It was the evening, in the night, about 8pm. It wasn't daytime; crocodiles wouldn't go walking around in the day. It was already dark," Louis clarified.

Diane continued:

Emile called a security guard to come and kill the crocodile. They killed him and the King heard about it. The King said, 'You are Ubielo, you know that it's our totem, why did you kill it? You did it on purpose? You need to pay this and that so that we can arrange things.' Emile said that he prays and is a believer so he wouldn't pay anything. They were two, Emile and the one with the gun; his son was at military school and he died. He wasn't even sick, he just died like that and was brought back here. Emile, who gave the order, said he was a believer and couldn't pay for the ceremonies needed.

"The ceremonies on the shrines there," Louis added, "And now he's gone [dead]. Emile refused the ceremonies that were needed, though the other one accepted. If you accept, once you've accepted, you can be saved."

"Once you've accepted, you can be saved. You're told what to provide," Diane reiterated, before continuing:

> But Emile refused as he worked with the Bible, so he wouldn't and you couldn't force him. He's gone, therefore err… these sorts of things; if you don't respect their totems, they have their punishments that they give: 'I protected you and now you, you no longer respect me. You wanted to eat me, can I leave you like that?'

"Was the crocodile Emile's totem?" I asked.

"No, it wasn't his totem," Diane explicated:

> But he knew that it was the crocodile who protects the town, because Cobly is Ubiidɔ, hey! Therefore, it's their totem, and protects the whole town and he was in Cobly. Where you live, you should follow the place's totem. You shouldn't disrespect it just because it's not your totem; it protects the town! That's it, and now Emile's gone. Just in a day. He didn't even get sick and everyone was shocked and cried. The other one paid [for the ceremony] and is still alive.

"Though his son is dead… he agreed to pay [for the ceremony]," Louis added.

"He accepted to give his part," Diane intervened:

> But Emile who gave the command refused and said he was a believer, he didn't want to give his money, so I asked him, 'We all adore God, is it written in the Bible that someone should destroy what another person adores? Show me the verse, the page in the Bible.' He said, 'No.' And I said, 'You did it, you were told to arrange things. You can arrange for someone to give the money for you. You've refused and neglected to do so, you don't know how important it is.'

Louis continued:

> If only he'd accepted to arrange things," Louis continued, "but he refused, that's why it happened [Emile died]. Me, I'd forgiven him. I explained to him, but he didn't understand. He told me that he had already explained what had happened to the authorities and that he didn't need to do anything more. He said he was a Christian who goes to church. He came here twice. He sat there [points to chair].

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There were some teenage Bɛbidibɛ present, and they saw them kill the crocodile. The teenagers took the crocodile to bury him. They dug and buried him.

"Did they bury him like a human?" I asked.

"No, they simply buried him," Louis responded, "The ceremonies came after the burial, for both of them [Emile and the security guard] who killed the crocodile. We shouldn't distinguish between the two."

"It was done for both of them", Diane repeated, "so it means that the shrine didn't agree…"

"…Because Emile didn't participate," Louis explicated:

He didn't do his part, that's not good. And the security guard's son died. They're both from villages here and they knew. They killed the crocodile on purpose therefore everyone was affected. If the security guard hadn't paid, he would've died too.

"There are families who eat crocodile, and they would've taken him to eat," Diane elucidated.

"Yes!" Louis continued, "Emile wanted to eat him. He said he didn't care, he would eat, he wanted the meat."

"Would he really have had the courage?" Diane asked.

"Ah ha! If you're brave enough to kill, what is left?" Louis demanded rhetorically.

"You said that totems protect people, so they're important and everyone who lives in Cobly is under their protection?" I asked.

"They protect both locals and strangers; they're all protected," Diane responded. "We questioned both of them. The one who killed the crocodile said, 'Ah, I was on guard in front of the shop in town, and he came and told me to kill…'"

"…That he killed the crocodile who came [into town]," Louis interjected.

"He said he forgot," Diane resumed:

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He forgot and reacted because he thought the other one was frightened, so he shot and killed [the crocodile]. That truly when he did it, he didn't know and to tell him what he needed to do and he would do it. We told him what to do and he agreed to do it as soon as he could get the money. We then asked Emile and he affirmed that he had ordered the other one to kill, but he wouldn't give anything as he was a believer and went to the protestant church. He even said he'd been to the mayor, but the mayor isn't Ubiidɔ, he isn't Ubiidɔ. The old mayor, that is. Emile said if we threatened him, he would go back to the mayor and have us arrested. [Louis chuckles.] So we told him to go. As the mayor is also from Cobly, and he'd already told him [what happened], that's the end. Go.

"The [old] mayor's Ukɔɔnɔ though," I stated.

"Ukɔɔnɔ," Louis affirmed.

"When Emile had the crocodile killed, didn't anyone try to stop him?" I asked Roland.

"There was [an Ubiidɔ] youngster," Roland answered:

When [Emile and the others] saw the crocodile, he had come out of a hole by the pond, followed the stream, entered the drainage ditch, and he was stuck when they saw him. They were preparing to kill him and had sent someone to get a weapon and the youngster came and said, 'Be careful! Leave him, don't touch, leave, don't touch!' Whilst he went to get some adults, the family elders, the others shot and killed [the crocodile]. When the youngster returned he found that the crocodile had been killed and he started to cry.

"People say that Emile killed a crocodile", Idibiènu, the widow in her fifties recounted,

and the crocodile became (*kɔnta*) a man, then came to Emile's to eat. When he had finished eating, he gave Emile some money, Emile went to get change and that's when it happened. Something pricked his stomach and he went, 'nnn'. Since that day, nobody has seen the man who came and ate. People say that he was the crocodile and that's what killed him. The crocodile came to take him. You see, Emile killed [the crocodile] and his second came to take vengeance.

"The day of his death, a few minutes before his death, Emile received a banknote from a Fulani," Grégoire, the teacher in his twenties explained:

He went inside to get change and never came out. That banknote certainly had a spiritual problem and that's what killed him. It was a banknote of 10,000 [CFA francs].

He was implicated in the death of a crocodile. When they saw the crocodile, it was Emile who gave the order to kill it. And people said, 'Watch out, it might be a sacred crocodile. If he's not sacred, he wouldn't come here.' Emile said that he was a believer and he knew there was nothing sacred here. So he authorised to kill it and usually when you kill a sacred animal, there must necessarily be consequences, maybe sickness or death. So if it's true and he really ordered them to kill the crocodile, and it was truly sacred, then it was surely responsible for his death.

Yaaté, the farmer in his early-fifties who is Uhodukpaadɔ, opined:

Emile killed the territory's *mtakimɛ* (identity). We have snakes as totems, and the others have crocodiles. The crocodile that Emile killed was the *mtakimɛ* of the territory where Emile lived. He lived there and he knew the [Bɛbidibɛ] laws. *Disɛnpode* (the devil) seduced him and he killed the crocodile.

"The *fɛbodimuɔfɛ* (animating force-crocodile) is the *ditade* (community guardian shrine)," Hortense added, "It's the ancestor's *ditade*, the *fɛbodimuɔfɛ*. You don't kill that."

"I did *tibaakite*[155] with Emile's community so the crocodile was his totem. According to me", Christophe, the village deputy chief in his forties expounded,

the crocodile kept his *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force). By killing [his] *fɛbodimuɔfɛ*, he killed himself. If you have something as your totem, and it's with you, that's where your *kɛbodikɛ* is found. You should love it. You shouldn't try to kill it. If it dies, you must die too. But once Emile started going to church, he thought that nothing could harm him. If he'd respected the things of his parents, knowing that it was his totem, he wouldn't have accepted that they kill the crocodile.[156]

"Those who are evangelical Christians[157], they don't respect such things," Georges, the butcher in his late-thirties added, "If you pray and you're an evangelical Christian, they say that you should eat your totem."

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[155] As noted above, *tibaakite* reintegrates children who have been reincarnated matrilaterally into the reincarnating maternal ancestor's community.

[156] Thus, according to Christophe, Emile killed his ani-mate.

[157] Georges referred to evangelical Christians as *les pasteurs* (pastors).

Emile's wife informed me:

> Emile became a Christian when he was a child. The crab[158] is his [true] totem, not crocodile, but he ate crabmeat too, as well as crocodile and all other meat. My totem animals are dog and python, but I regularly prepared dog meat for him too. I don't have a problem with eating totem animals. Things only happen once you start to entertain the idea that eating your totem animal is dangerous.

"Nobody killed him, his hour had come," Sophie, the mother in her early-thirties, contended:

> There's no link [between his killing the crocodile and his death] because when the problem arose, people told Emile and the rifleman that they must pay for the things. And the rifleman paid. If the rifleman paid, then surely it was Emile who told him to pay or what? Given that the rifleman paid, death wouldn't come and take Emile! They paid, they gave what was needed for the sacrifices and the [Bɛbidibɛ] performed the sacrifices. Emile, his hour had come, I cannot condemn Emile.

"I used to look after Emile. Even his death, I was looking after him on the way to Tanguiéta [hospital] and he died in my arms. He was my son. All that happened, I don't understand," Thérèse, the churchgoing meat seller, told me:

> Emile's mother was my husband's father's sister, and I looked after him when he was a child. [The day he died] I'd gone to my field. When I returned, I saw lots of people and motorbikes. It was a Sunday, or was it a Saturday? I'd just come back and I asked, 'What's up?' And people told me what had happened. I went to [Cobly] hospital, entered the vehicle together with Emile's wife, and left for Tanguiéta [hospital]. He died in Tayacou[159].

Churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike respected Emile. He was thoughtful and sensitive towards others. Even though he and his wife no longer paid heed to their own totem animals, it seems out of character that Emile would have had the crocodile deliberately killed if he knew it would provoke local outrage. Emile was a Christian of longstanding and had nothing to prove by killing the

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[158] Emile was from the Bɛyʊɔbɛ community, which is made up of four families, each with different totems (see *Bebelibe Communities* in the Appendices). Although his *tikedimɔmɔnte* (totem-true) was the crab, other Bɛyʊɔbɛ do have the crocodile as their *tikedimɔmɔnte*.

[159] Six miles from Tanguiéta.

crocodile, although – having had it killed – he then had to stand by his principles with regard to the ceremonial demands that he was then asked to fulfil.

Arthur, the protagonist in the next vignette, however, deliberately killed his totem animal to demonstrate his newfound faith in *Uwienu*.

Vignette Two: 1960s Crocodile Killings

"Earlier you shared that some people eat [totem animals] without problems as they're not direct descendants [of the founding ancestor]," I reiterated.

"There are those who eat without problems, and there are those who have suffered the consequences!" Timothée, the septuagenarian retired pastor answered.

"And is it always death, or are there other consequences?" I asked.

"Okay, consequences, it's not only death, but also, I will explain for you something that I saw. I don't speak of things I haven't seen. You know Arthur, Lucie's father?"

"Ah ha," I affirmed.

Timothée expounded:

He, he ate, he ate lots of crocodile, hey. [Chuckles.] When he killed one, he brought it [home]. Others brought them, and he ate just until his wife got pregnant, hey. Pregnant… she gave birth to two crocodiles! The day of her delivery… [whispers] little crocodiles came out, and since then she didn't have more children. I was a pastor at the time. We prayed and prayed for her and by God's grace she – truly these things, things were awful – she suffered and she was troubled. We prayed for her and asked God, truly, to save her… she survived and finally died in her old age. The husband is now dead too.

"Did you see the babies?" I asked.

"I saw them, ah ha, I saw. The ears have heard, the eyes have seen," he responded.

"And you were pastor here or elsewhere?"

"I was pastor [elsewhere]."

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"And did he stop eating [crocodile] after what happened to his wife? Did he acknowledge what had happened and stop eating afterwards?" I enquired.

"Did he even [know], when they took [the baby crocodiles], hey?" Timothée recounted:

> The crocodiles that came out, they buried them without telling him. They didn't even tell him she'd given birth to crocodiles. The old women who were present told us not to tell the husband. Because the husband, he didn't know anything! It was afterwards, when people started to sing and he learnt from the songs. People sang about him eating crocodile and his wife giving birth to crocodiles. And he always said, 'No, it's false.' And he continued to eat crocodile. He continued to eat because he was stubborn.

"So that means he wasn't a direct descendant of the [founding] ancestor..."

"…If he was truly direct, he himself would have suffered the consequences," Timothée concluded.

"I learnt about a man who said he prayed and that it's not true [that you shouldn't eat your totem]; that they're stories, that it's only talk," Colette, the churchgoing seamstress in her late-thirties elucidated:

> That he followed *Uwienu*'s word and no longer had a totem; that people say that you must have an animal totem, but it's *Uwienu* who created animals and said we should eat them. So [the man] ate, he killed and ate and his wife was pregnant and gave birth to small crocodiles, she didn't give birth to people. I learnt and saw. People pointed him out to me when he was still alive. Having seen this, how can I eat crocodile? His wife gave birth to crocodiles. Now I've heard about it, I could never eat crocodile. People sang songs about it. They sang about him by calling his name and saying that he prayed and that he no longer had a totem, so he went and killed a crocodile to eat and his wife gave birth to small crocodiles. That's what I heard. So I asked my mothers and they said it was true, that his wife gave birth to small crocodiles and that they had seen the crocodiles before the parents made them disappear.

"Arthur's family became Christian and someone reminded them that the crocodile was their totem," explicated Benjamin, the churchgoing university graduate in his late-twenties:

> They said, 'No, we've become Christian, we'll eat and see!' And they ate and that's how it happened. In fact, they never should've eaten it

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just because they became Christian. Even if you become Christian, it's your totem! You shouldn't say, 'I will eat and see,' but if someone gives you crocodile meat and doesn't say, and you eat, then nothing will happen. But it's as if they tempted [God] by saying, 'We'll test God and see!' And then they were troubled and women started to give birth to little crocodiles. It's a true story, it wasn't invented. Take me for example, I became a Christian, but even so, if someone gave me crocodile meat, I couldn't eat it. It's as if they're testing me, 'Ah that, you don't eat it? I want to see.' But my conscience won't allow it.

"What can happen if you eat [your totem animal]?" I asked Lucie, Arthur's daughter, who is now in her fifties. She explained:

It's as if we've eaten a human, something could happen. In our fathers' time, if you ate and you weren't a Christian, your stomach would swell and you would suffer and die. It's true. Me, I've eaten [crocodile] in *Uwienu*'s name together with my family, we ate and nothing happened. When you kill and take the crocodile home, you'll see that it's not human meat. It's an animal that *Uwienu* created, and he said you could eat, so you eat. Our fathers know that the crocodile was a human and you shouldn't eat humans, and that it saved us. We now know that it's *Uwienu* who saves us. People know that we ate [crocodile]. We did so to set an example. We became Christians and the Bible tells us that humans shouldn't have things that *Uwienu* created as totems, and that we can eat. That's why we set an example by eating [crocodile] so that people would know that *Uwienu* exists.

"So other Bɛnammucaabɛ, those who are not Christians, they knew that your family ate crocodile?" I clarified. Lucie verified:

They knew, they even sang songs. Don't you know about this? They sang about Arthur, who ate the crocodile when he shouldn't; that he ate because he prayed. He said he prayed to *Uwienu* and he ate crocodile. And my father responded by saying, 'It wasn't because I needed the meat; I ate to show that *Uwienu* exists. You need to know this so that you can follow *Uwienu* too.' They weren't happy. They thought we would die and they wouldn't come to our homestead. Then they saw that we were still alive and many started going to church because of this.

"So nothing happened when you ate crocodile?" I asked.

"Nothing at all," Lucie responded.

"Others told me that one of the things that can happen if you eat crocodile is that you could give birth to crocodiles," I queried. Lucie expounded:

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Okay, that doesn't exist. People say that my mother gave birth to little crocodiles. But she didn't have crocodiles. When my father ate [crocodile], they said she had twin [crocodiles]. I was no longer a small child. They weren't crocodiles, they were human, but they died. One died straightaway and the other a month later. People can't give birth to crocodiles. Those who said these things didn't even see them. They knew my father had eaten [crocodile] and they weren't happy and they didn't want him eating [crocodile]. So they told this story that he had eaten and then gave birth [to crocodiles]. He didn't respect the laws and gave birth to crocodiles. They didn't see, they only talked.

"So it was one way to try and discourage the family from eating?"

"Mmm," Lucie affirmed.

"And because the twins died, that reinforced the rumours?"

"One died the next day, but *Uwienu* intervened so the other lived for about a month and many people saw him." Lucie continued, "They saw that he was a person, not a crocodile. They were witnesses. But others had already lied and the story [that they were crocodiles] was out."

The next day, I mentioned to another interviewee that Lucie had helped care for the twins and was adamant that they were not crocodiles. "Well of course she'd say that!" the person exclaimed.

Gilbert, another septuagenarian retired pastor, explained that his first pastoral appointment was to Namountchaga in 1965. He was sent there to replace the pastor who had suddenly left due to problems in the church. Some members of the congregation had started killing and eating crocodile, the Bɛnammucaabɛ community totem. Gilbert filled in some of the details surrounding the events. Arthur and his two brothers had become Christians. Arthur's elder brother first had the idea that they should kill and eat their totem animal to demonstrate their newfound faith:

It's a crazy story, which we need to accept because people know and emphasise that totems are essential. Well, when people become Christians, they learn that there's nothing that they cannot eat so they eat everything. They say that this is what the Bible says; to eat all that you find. So, that's why [the brothers] said they would eat crocodile to prove that they were truly Christian.

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Gilbert added that the brothers were also selling the skins, which were much in demand at that time for making belts, wallets and other accessories. Not only did they kill crocodiles in general; they also killed the shrine crocodile, then cooked and ate it publicly. People fled so that they would not smell the meat cooking. They were also worried; the shrine crocodile assured that the streams would flow and oversaw the community's general wellbeing. Not only this, but certain crocodiles are directly linked to individuals and if a crocodile dies, the person dies too. Therefore, men from the village came after the brothers with guns, but the older brother defied them; surely, the shrine could protect itself? Did they need to kill him? The men backed down.

Gilbert explained that people tried to find other ways to stop the brothers – and others – from killing and eating their totem animals. That is why they said that Arthur's wife gave birth to crocodiles. She did not really give birth to crocodiles, though, but the twins were abnormal:

> In order to discourage the brothers, to stop them killing crocodiles, people sang, 'These babies here, Arthur and his wife ate crocodile, they gave birth to crocodiles, they gave birth to small crocodiles.' And it became a popular story that spread through the whole region. It emphasised the serious nature of the problem, as [the brothers] had not only abandoned their totem, but had eaten it, and that's why they gave birth to crocodiles. All this happened before my arrival, but the brothers continued killing crocodiles [after I came] to sell the skins and eat the meat. Their thoughts turned to money and they were making a profit.

Gilbert confirmed that Arthur's wife did not have more children after that. Despite the songs, Arthur and his wife did not abandon their faith and finally died of old age. Rumours spread that other Christian women also gave birth to crocodiles, but Arthur's wife was the only one to have abnormal babies. Whatever their abnormality, people opine that it was the shrine crocodile avenging its death. Gilbert thinks that this is highly likely, though the community ancestors could also be responsible: "If you have faith, that doesn't mean you should betray your customs just because they're your customs. It's ancestral

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history; it's in the family," Gilbert explained. "It's one thing to destroy your own idols, but it's not good to destroy non-believers' idols. It's injurious and provocative."

Meanwhile, Arthur's eldest brother and his three wives moved to Tanguiéta. Shortly after their arrival, a freak wind brought down the roof on one of his wives and broke her hip. She subsequently died childless. People said that this too was the shrine crocodile's vengeance. The brother, realising that his killing the shrine crocodile would always be held against him, then went to Ghana with his two remaining wives and children.

Arthur's eldest brother and his family eventually moved back to Tanguiéta. The brother died in January 2016. The youngest brother is still alive. During the funeral service, he testified about his older brother's faith and how he killed and ate Namountchaga's shrine crocodile.

According to Lucie, the babies were normal and the people who circulated the stories never saw the babies. Does this mean that Timothée, the retired pastor who declared, "I saw them, ah ha, I saw. The ears have heard, the eyes have seen," and Colette, who was not even born when these events took place yet stated, "I learnt and saw," were lying? Other interviewees were equally convinced that Lucie's mother gave birth to crocodiles and affirmed that they too had "seen" them. The Mbelime verb *ya* means "to see" and "to know". What is certain is that Lucie's family's actions challenged societal norms and the events have become mythologised. Singing about what happened promotes the truth of the events as, amongst the Bebelibe, singing reinforces the importance and veracity of the message. The events surrounding Emile's death and the resulting stories are further examples of myths in the making.

The Role of Myths

Holbraad (2009) addresses what constitutes truth in his analysis of Cuban divination and resulting oracles. Rather than thinking in terms of a "functional definition" of truth as "a matter of producing statements that get things right by accurately reflecting phenomena" (2009:87), Holbraad suggests that truth should also be analysed in terms of "inventive definitions" (2009:87). He elaborates:

> Thus, since inventive definitions are defined as inaugurations – as inventions of (new) meanings – it follows that, unlike truth-functional definitions, inventive definitions are not predicative truth claims.

> My suggestion, then, is that oracles pronounce inventive definitions in just this sense. Take the common verdict 'you are bewitched' as an example. Treating this as an inventive definition implies that being bewitched is not a predicate that 'holds true' of me. Rather, it is a meaning that is being related to me so as to redefine me. The oracle transforms me from a person who stands in no particular relation to witchcraft into a person who is being bewitched. To ask whether such a shift is true or false is fundamentally to misunderstand the ontological character of the transformation by confusing it with the epistemological question of how the shift may be ascertained (2009:88).

In a similar vein, it is the ontological character of myths that I consider important. It is not a question of whether the myths are factually true or not, but how they inventively help people to define and understand the relationships they have with others. Kirby, for example, proposes that people create new myths and taboos to help deal with social change and that these are "strategies for living" (1987:59). Writing about the Anufo of northern Ghana and Togo, Kirby (1987) analyses a local myth that explains why they stopped eating frogs. This myth is relatively recent as many Anufo remember when they could eat frogs. The myth recounts how women took the initiative to prepare a sauce with toads they collected from the bathroom, as the men had returned late and empty-handed from their hunt. Toads, however, have always been considered repulsive. When the men learnt what they had eaten, they began to vomit, and

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an old man declared that they would never eat frog again. Kirby then demonstrates that the real reason for the taboo is not because women cannot tell the difference between toads and frogs – as suggested by the myth – but that by providing meat for the sauce, the women took on roles and responsibilities that were originally limited to men. He suggests that the influx of new goods, a growing capitalistic economy and changing notions of ownership led to rapid social change, which in turn impacted Anufo social structure and gender roles. In this instance, the myth appears to be completely symbolic; there was no meal as such. Despite this, the Anufo stopped eating frogs.

In other instances – such as the two vignettes above – the myths elaborate the actual events that challenged social norms. In terms of presencing, myths demonstrate the "presencing potential" (J. Merz 2014:186) of a given situation as they allow people to generate multiple meanings, and increase the "inventive definitions" of truth (Holbraad 2009). Myths can thus be considered veracious, as they help provide people with the means to deal with ambiguity, and thereby negotiate the ontological penumbras they encounter (see also Attala 2017; Heneise 2017).

Gottlieb, for example, explores the "contradictory space" (1986:477) that dogs occupy for the Beng of the Ivory Coast. According to one Beng myth, the dog is responsible for introducing death to humans, whilst another myth shows how the dog protects and identifies with humans. Gottlieb then demonstrates how these contradictory positions shape how the Beng treat their dogs. She finishes by suggesting that the "path between myth and contemporary society must be an open one with conceptual travel possible in both directions [as] [a]nimals are creatures that can resonate symbolically in both realms, society and art" (1986:485).

In his article *Myth, Totemism and the Creation of Clans*, Morphy (1990) alludes to the presencing potential of myths and their veracity for those

concerned. In his analysis of creation and inheritance myths amongst the Yolngu of northern Australia, Morphy explores the dynamic nature of these myths and their role in maintaining clan identity and ensuring continuity (see also Drummond 1981). He concludes that

> we are not dealing with sets of animal species as labels for human groups, but with animals, objects and ancestral beings that have a context and a meaning through their incorporation in myths; totemism is a system of relations and a set of stories of sequences of events (1990:326-327).

Myths thus help protect and maintain important sociocultural parameters and cohesion.

Finally, myths such as the Bebelibe totem myths above reveal the agreements reached between two parties (the ancestor and the totem animal, for example) and may be understood as social contracts. In Chapter Four I expressed reservations about the idea of social contracts between humans and domestic animals, as this suggests a formalised, legal agreement between the two parties. I proposed that "understanding" would be more appropriate as this can be tacit and not necessarily formalised. Many Bebelibe animal myths recount how understandings were reached between different entities. Sometimes these understandings are implicit, such as in the myth about how hunting began (Chapter Four). At other times they explicate the pact that the entities established, such as the totem myths above. The veracious nature of myths helps reaffirm the implicit understandings and explicit agreements that were reached. People's experiences and encounters with totem entities – and other entities more generally – not only contribute to validating the myths, but also create the potential for myths to be modified and new myths to be generated, as demonstrated above.

I also noted that one of the problems that some academics have with the idea of social contracts is that they are biased in favour of humans. This seems

to be less of an issue with the pacts that Bebelibe myths present, as the underlying sociocultural moral norms mean that all the entities concerned have the right to seek revenge when the relationship is abused. Thus – in certain circumstances – people can and do kill animals when they behave badly, including their wild totem entities (see Chapter Five and above), whilst animals also have the right to avenge their deaths when not justified (see Chapters Four and Five).

Other recent accounts corroborate the ongoing importance of totemic relationships more generally. Morton (1987), for example, re-examines increase rituals practised by the Aranda of central Australia, whilst Willerslev and Ulturgasheva (2012) demonstrate the interplay between totemic and animistic features for the Eveny and Chukchi of northeastern Siberia. There are certain analogies between these examples and the case of the Bebelibe. For instance, all deal with how these societies relate to their ancestors and think about reincarnation and the role that animals play in this, in order to ensure continuity of the family and other important entities. They also demonstrate the different ways that totemic relationships can be explained ontologically, which results in different notions and practices. This being the case, the outworking nature of totemism can vary significantly from one society to another. The Aranda, for example, eat their totem animals during their increase rituals (Morton 1987). Each Eveny individual, meanwhile, has a domestic guardian reindeer that can be considered a totemic entity with which the individual is paired. Reindeers per se, however, are not totem animals, so they can also be eaten. Moreover, the domestic reindeer with which an individual is paired may allow itself to be sacrificed in order to protect the individual concerned (Willerslev and Ulturgasheva 2012:51-55). Finally, the Chukchi have a totemic relationship with their ancestors. This relationship, however, is dangerous and can result in madness and death. Like the Eveny, the Chukchi have a special relationship

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with their domestic reindeer. These are also sacrificed to counteract the dangers generated by the Chukchi's totemic relationships (Willerslev and Ulturgasheva 2012:61-65). In all three accounts, the sacrificial death of the animals concerned ensure the perpetuation of life.

It is these discussions about what exactly constitutes the ontological nature of totemism that the debate continues, despite Lévi-Strauss's (1964 [1962]; 1966 [1962]) attempts to invalidate it (see Chapter One). Current semiotic interpretations of these discourses, however, constrain the full width and breadth of what could be happening ontologically. I have attempted to go beyond this constraint by examining further how we engage in and with the world through presencing and navigate the ontological penumbras we encounter. In Chapter Two I presented the idea of the ontological penumbra from a methodological perspective. I then proposed that navigating ontological penumbras goes beyond methodology, as they are not limited to the anthropological epistemological endeavour. I then demonstrated this by drawing on my research into human-animal relations amongst the Bebelibe in the chapters that followed. My findings indicate that presencing and how people negotiate ontological penumbras have important implications and applications beyond the Bebelibe setting. I explore these further in the next and final chapter where I start by providing a synopsis of my findings and analysis so far, before discussing further their relevance more generally.

Human-Animal Relations and Their Ontological Implications

In Chapter Three I explained that all beings have *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force), *mtakimɛ* (identity) and *ukuɔnu* (body-skin). *Ukuɔnu* dies when its *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* leave it definitively. Having negotiated a new *upinsihy* (destiny) with *Uwienu* (God), *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* then return to the more-visible parts of the world and take on their new *ukuɔnu* (pl. *tikɔnte*) by reincarnating (*siihy*) one, or several, new being(s). Thus, what really constitutes an individual being is its *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ*, which are transmaterial. I further illustrated the transmaterial nature of *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* when discussing body-shifting.

Following Ingold's (2000:112-115) and Descola's (2013a:115-125; see also 2013b) analytical paradigms, Bebelibe ontology appears to be animic rather than totemic. In short, for both Ingold and Descola, it is the relationship between a person's vital force (Ingold 2000:112-115) or interiority (Descola 2013a:115-125; 232-244; 2013b) and the material environment that determines a given society's predominating ontological stance. Ingold briefly summarises the difference between totemism and animism as follows:

> At the most fundamental level, the contrast is about the relative priority of form and process. With a totemic ontology, the forms life takes are already given, congealed in perpetuity in the features, textures and contours of the land. And it is the land that harbours the vital forces which animate the plants, animals and people it engenders. With an animic ontology, to the contrary, life is itself generative of form. Vital force, far from being petrified in a solid medium, is free-flowing like the wind, and it is on its uninterrupted circulation that the continuity of the living world depends (2000:112).

For Descola, totemism is "an ontology that stresses the continuity between humans and nonhumans both on the physicality axis (common substances) and

on the interiority one (common essences)" (2013b:38; see also 2013a:122; 233). With animism, though, entities share "similar interiorities (continuity of souls)" whilst having "dissimilar physicalities (discontinuity of forms […])" (Descola 2013a:233), or – putting it another way – "nonhumans are endowed with the same interiority as humans, but every class of beings is differentiated by the body they inhabit" (2013b:38).[160] Both Ingold and Descola state, however, that their paradigms should be understood as "orientations" (Ingold 2000:112) or "modes of identification" (Descola 2013a:233) and both clarify that their take on totemism is typified in Australia. This being the case, how can so-called "totemism" be accounted for amongst the Bebelibe and in Benin and the wider region more generally? As noted in Chapter One, Willerslev and Ulturgasheva (2012) identify the same issue for the Eveny and Chukchi of Siberia, namely that – following Ingold and Descola's paradigms – the Eveny and Chukchi are animists. Yet, they too exhibit totemic features. Willerslev and Ulturgasheva propose that totemism and animism are interdependent and that their "respective presence depends on who is looking and from where" (2012:65). Thus, even though the Bebelibe may initially appear to be animists, like the Eveny and Chukchi, there are several ontological orientations at play, with one coming to the fore depending on the presencing practices employed. These could be totemic, ontonic or animic, for example, as I now demonstrate.

In Chapter One, I established that the common theme that runs through the whole totemism debate is the idea of social identity and belonging, which is defined by a relationship with a non-human entity. I also proposed that totemism should not be a question of semiotic abstraction or ontological typology and the need to go beyond the constraints that these approaches

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[160] As noted in Chapter One, Descola defines two other ontologies: naturalism and analogism. He then proposes that analogism is the predominant ontology in West Africa, where "discontinuities are assumed on both [the interiority and physicality] axes, with the recognition that there exist microdifferences between the components of the world at an infra-individual level" (2013b:38).

create. By focusing on the Bebelibe, together with examples from some other societies who identify animals as totems, I further demonstrated in Chapters Six and Seven that these animals play a role in how these societies relate to their ancestors and think about reincarnation, and thus ensure family continuity.

Depending on the situation at the time, members of the given society concerned draw on different presencing practices as they interact with their totem entities. These practices determine the meanings that people attribute to their relationship, which, in turn, govern how people understand and experience their totem entities. More generally, presencing not only accounts for how people relate to totem entities, but to animals and other entities more generally. In Chapter Three I explained that it is the interplay between ontons, symbols, icons and indexes and how individuals prioritise them that results in the different presencing practices people employ and move between depending on the circumstances at the time. Luc, the church leader in his thirties, for example, presenced *mtakimɛ* (identity) and how it relates to animals in two different ways during our interview. When I initially asked if animals have *mtakimɛ*, he categorically answered, "No." But later on, when we were discussing destiny, he talked about animal *mtakimɛ*. Now I was confused. He then explained that there is *Uwien' takimɛ* (God's *mtakimɛ*, which, for Luc, is the Holy Spirit) and birth *mtakimɛ*. When I first asked if animals have *mtakimɛ*, he thought I was asking if they could have *Uwien' takimɛ*. In this instance animals represent physical beings that cannot be filled with the Holy Spirit, thus Luc primarily draws on Pentecostal and scientific presencing practices by separating matter and spirit, and thinking of animals in largely material terms. In the second instance, though, animals have birth *mtakimɛ* and he made it clear that they could not exist without it. He thus engages with them as ontons and primarily draws on transmaterial notions and an ontonic understanding of animals as he presences them.

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Luc is not the only churchgoer who has started to separate matter and spirit. With exposure to teaching about souls and spirits, some people now spiritualise and thus dematerialise *mtakimɛ* and *kɛbodikɛ*. Their understanding of how *mtakimɛ* and *kɛbodikɛ* relate to the entity's *ukuɔnu* (body-skin) has shifted from being transmaterial and ontonic to animic. Consequently, rather than being integrated *with* the *ukuɔnu*, for some people *mtakimɛ* and *kɛbodikɛ* now exist as separate entities who reside in it; *ukuɔnu* then takes on a semiotic stance as it becomes an icon or symbol for *mtakimɛ* and *kɛbodikɛ* (see also J. Merz 2014:150-154; 2017b:152-153). Such a shift in understanding about their relationship with the *ukuɔnu* means that following death there is a quick and complete separation of *mtakimɛ* and *kɛbodikɛ* from *ukuɔnu* (S. Merz 2017b:134).

Another consequence is that some Bebelibe now talk about executive possession (when a spiritual being takes over and controls a person, see Cohen 2008). Thus, *ukuɔnu*, *mtakimɛ* and *kɛbodikɛ* now directly correspond with Ingold's "three essential components [of] the ordinary living person: the physical body, the body-soul and the free-soul" (1986:246), which he identifies for the circumboreal peoples of Eurasia and North America. Ingold then suggests that a human's body "is but a 'placing' for a vital entity that can just as well be placed elsewhere" (1986:248) or a "container [which] is conceived as a kind of vehicle" (2000:100) for what really constitutes an individual, therefore allowing individuals "to extend the spatiotemporal range of [their] movement, influence and experience" (2000:100). Consequently – when individuals think of *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* as occupying and animating a container – their presencing practice is now primarily animic rather than ontonic.

Willerslev queries how to deal with

the coexistence of two seemingly contradictory sets of animist beliefs about the nature of the soul. On the one hand, the soul is seen as a common spiritual essence distinct from the body, which is conceived of

as a form of clothing and through which alterity is apprehended as such. On the other hand, no clear division exists between body and soul or appearance and essence, and each pair can be mutually reversed. Can these two apparently opposed conceptions of the soul be understood in a coherent way? (2011:516).

Willerslev's concern about how exactly the soul relates to the body is thereby resolved when these "contradictory sets of animist beliefs" are analysed as primarily animic and ontonic presencing practices respectively. Presencing therefore accounts for the multiple ways that individuals engage with the world ontologically. Thinking about different presencing practices as primarily ontonic, animic, totemic, and so on, thereby provides the means to move away from reductionist tendencies to classify societies as totemistic, animistic, naturalist, and so on, which – in turn – can result in stereotyping and othering (see also Fabian 1983:152; Hurn 2012:78).

Another example of multiple engagement, which can result in apparently conflicting ideas, concerns the status of *diseede wante* (family animals), who can change from *utedu* (non-monetary abundance) to *tikpate* (monetary wealth) and back again, depending on the circumstances (see *Commodification*, Chapter Five). People associate the animals with some sort of wealth in both instances. With *tikpate* the animals symbolise wealth and can be converted into cash, thus the symbolic worth of animals predominates and people's ontonic engagement diminishes. Whereas with *utedu* people primarily draw on ontonic presencing practices, as they consider their animals family members who *are* the family's wellbeing. Naveh and Bird-David (2014) make a similar observation for the Nayaka of India:

> When they hunt an animal for sale – that is, for the animal to serve as a means for getting something else, and maybe to be consumed by remote unknown people – the animal begins its way to incrementally 'come into being' as a thing, within a utilitarian framing. When, however, they hunt animals for their own immediate consumption, by their own immediate relatives, it still figures predominantly as a subject-person

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before, while, and in some cases after the hunt takes place […] (2014:84).

Writing about human-animal relations more generally, Mullin also notes that

[i]ncreasingly, animals serve all at once as commodities, family members, food, and the embodiment of 'nature'; it is therefore no wonder that they should be the focus of conflict (1999:215).

Although Mullin is writing about conflict between people with differing views of animals, her quote could equally apply to the inner conflict and ontological penumbras that people experience as their moral ideals are confronted by the demands of everyday life. This was especially apparent amongst my interviewees who are directly involved in animal commerce, many of whom shared that they felt they had little choice in what they did, as they needed to find the means to live (see *Commodification*, Chapter Five). Consequently, people's ontonic engagement with their *diseede wante* (family animals) clashes with economic and lifestyle changes more generally, which are increasingly driven by *tikpate* (monetary and material wealth). Primary education, for example, is now compulsory. Although there are no school fees as such for state primary schools, people still have to pay for school uniforms, sports kits, books, stationery, et cetera. Budgetary shortfalls mean that head teachers regularly demand parental contributions towards salaries and the construction of new classrooms. Children are suspended from school until these costs are met.

People's ideals are further challenged when they encounter others with different sociocultural backgrounds and ideologies. Living in a globalised world with increasingly heterogeneous societies means that individuals no longer need to travel to have such encounters. Neither is there (nor has there ever been) a bounded and static sociocultural norm for one society in the region (see, for example, Morris 2000:14-19; Piot 1999; 2001; Werbner 1979). As noted elsewhere (S. Merz 2017b:122-123), Bebelibe communities have always

been socially engaged in the wider region and exposed to other cultures and ideas. Despite this, people in the Commune of Cobly distinguish two eras: *ubaayɔ* (pre-colonial times) and *upaanu* (colonial and post-colonial times to the present day; translated as *la modernité* (modernity) in French. Many associate the transition from *ubaayɔ* to *upaanu* as a time of rupture, as people struggled to assimilate the multiple changes they were introduced to in quick succession (see J. Merz 2017a, for a detailed account). *Upaanu* continues to be a time of rapid sociocultural change, which contributes to the ontological penumbras that people have to negotiate. People then draw on a variety of presencing practices to make sense of ambiguities resulting from their sociocultural ideals being challenged, which can lead to a variety of reactions including othering, ethnocentrism and culture shock, even within one's own country. Over the years I have witnessed many Beninese struggle with culture shock as they move around the country. This includes people from the south who come to work and live in Cobly, and Bebelibe students going to university in the south. Alexis, who is studying for his *maîtrise*, for example, explained that he needed to learn Fon – the main language spoken in Cotonou – in order to be accepted as Beninese and not be treated as a foreigner. He also started to eat meat every day, as he relied on buying street food. He explained that in Cobly you could buy a meal without meat, but not in Cotonou. If you ask for rice and sauce without meat, the sellers will look at you strangely. "If you don't want meat, they won't give you sauce, just plain rice," he explained, "So you're obliged to buy meat, it's become the rule […] if you don't ask for meat, it's as if, well, they'll say you're a villager." Alexis' first year in the south was extremely difficult as he negotiated the sociocultural differences he encountered there and the resulting ambiguities they created. Such times of ambiguity can be thought of as ontological penumbras. As areas "where the self and the other, belief and disbelief, ignorance and certainty, possibility and impossibility, as well as the secular and

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the religious, meet, overlap and intermingle" (J. Merz and S. Merz 2017:9), the degree of ambiguity that people experience as they negotiate ontological penumbras is further heightened when foundational sociocultural norms are challenged. A good example of this is the controversy that the introduction of coffins in the 1990s created (S. Merz 2017b). People feared – and many still do – that coffins would trap their *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* and prevent them from reincarnating, as *ukuɔnu* (body-skin) needs to decompose before *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* are fully liberated to move on (see Chapter Three). Those who now spiritualise and thus dematerialise *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* no longer fear this, as their understanding of the relationship between *kɛbodikɛ*, *mtakimɛ* and *ukuɔnu* is now primarily animic rather than transmaterial and ontonic (see above). Accordingly, when *ukuɔnu* dies, *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* leave immediately and cannot be trapped. Differing ideas about *kɛbodikɛ*, *mtakimɛ* and *ukuɔnu*'s relationship sometimes result in family disputes about how someone should be buried.

The relationship that Bebelibe communities have with their *tikedimɔmɔnte* (true totem(s), literally "interdict(s)-true") further epitomises the moral fabric of Ubielo society. I base my understanding of the word "moral" on Smith's definition as

> an orientation toward understandings about what is right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, just and unjust, that are not established by our own actual desires, decisions, or preferences but instead believed to exist apart from them, providing standards by which our desires, decisions, and preferences can themselves be judged (2003:8).

"One of the best ways to reveal the moral character of social institutions," Smith then observes, "is to violate moral norms and observe the reactions" (2003:25). The arrival of Christianity in the Commune of Cobly and some of the church teaching exemplifies this. I acknowledge that Jesus intentionally challenged,

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and sometimes defied, several of the sociocultural norms of his time, especially when he saw that these norms were unjust. The challenge is to know when, who and what should be confronted. The two vignettes in Chapter Seven demonstrate that both churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike generally do not approve of those who kill totem animals, especially if their goal is to violate the community's totemic norms. In *Vignette Two*, for example, Colette and Benjamin, both churchgoers, shared that they could not eat their totem animal. Benjamin then expressed concern that the church pushes Christians to do so.

Out of all my churchgoing interviewees, only two have deliberately eaten their totem animals: Lucie, Arthur's daughter (see *Vignette Two*), and Adrien, the churchgoing NGO worker in his late-twenties, who felt he was left with little choice when he took a course in the south. Adrien's totem is the crab, which was served with every meal. Initially he refused to eat it, but eventually capitulated by drawing on the assurance that nothing untoward would happen as he is a Christian. Lucie, meanwhile, clarified that she would never eat *fɛbodimuɔfɛ* (animating force-crocodile):

> We ate *fɛmuɔfɛ* [wild crocodile] to show [we are Christians], whether it was *fɛbodimuɔfɛ* or not, I didn't ask. You shouldn't even think about eating *fɛbodimuɔfɛ*. If you do, something will happen in your *myammɛ* (gallbladder).[161] You shouldn't even think or say that you will eat it. No one would eat *fɛbodimuɔfɛ*. If you do, you will die.

Benoît, the churchgoing young man studying for his BEPC, has never eaten python but revealed that he would if the opportunity presented itself:

> Now with modernisation, in other words the church, there's nothing I won't eat. […] I haven't yet eaten [python] but if I found, by the name of Jesus, I would eat, if possible because God said, 'Don't be fearful, all that is in the world I authorise you, don't be fearful, eat.' Therefore, I treat the snake like any other animal that you can eat, such as dog.

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[161] Where one's emotions and *diyammaade* (ability to think, reason and make decisions) are located. Your decision-making will be affected and the things you do will no longer succeed.

Benoît added, however, that although he would openly eat python, he would not go around announcing what he had done.

Besides Colette and Benjamin, other churchgoing interviewees also testified that they could not eat their totem animals, despite church teaching to the contrary. Henri, the churchgoing carpenter in his late-thirties, for example, explained that he was brought up with the idea that he must not eat his totem, so he fears doing so. If he ate and then got sick, he would start thinking, "'Ah, as they said that you shouldn't eat, and I ate, maybe this is why I'm sick,' and your heart [kɛbodikɛ] leaves, and you could die." Whilst Henri acknowledges that God created all the animals and he theoretically could eat crocodile, he never will. He then shared about when he was training as a carpenter and lived in Natitingou with a Christian family who went to the same church as him:

> I told them that I don't eat crocodile. The father said, 'But when you become a Christian you must eat everything. You should not have a totem anymore. Eat it.' I said, 'Since my childhood until now I have never eaten it and it wouldn't please me to do so. Even if I saw it, I would vomit. It has no appeal.' But one day, they did everything they could to try and make me eat. They prepared it, I'm not sure exactly who – the wife or husband or the children – I don't know. They gave me the sauce, but without the actual meat. I took some cornmeal porridge, I wanted to eat, but then I smelt the sauce. I could smell meat. And I noticed some fat floating on the top. I said, 'This sauce had meat in it.' And as I knew that the family killed crocodiles, I said I didn't want to eat. I washed my hands and only ate the cornmeal porridge. I gave them back the sauce, and they knew that I knew [what they had tried to do].

Idaani, Charles and Timothée also testified that as Christians they too could theoretically eat their totem animals, but they are not willing to do so. "When I see python meat, I have no desire to eat, it's as if it isn't meat," Idaani shared. "The Bible says that God created the animals. He told the man to eat all, eat all that you find, all the animals that you see, kill and eat," Timothée explained. Despite this, Timothée will not eat crocodile meat. He explicated that he is a direct descendant of his community's founding ancestor, which means the

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crocodile is his ani-mate. He then recounted how he almost unwittingly ate crocodile when visiting a friend in Tanguiéta. When he went to dip his pounded yam in the sauce, it fell from his fingers. "Madame, what have you prepared?" Timothée demanded his friend's wife. "Crocodile," she replied. "'Ooh, that's my totem!' I lie not, I left the room and was sick. The smell had entered me and I vomited, vomited, vomited as if I had swallowed it."

Robert's story further exemplifies the ontological penumbras that can result from becoming a Christian and the "relational complexities" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) that this can generate. I now examine Holbraad and Pedersen's analysis of relational complexities following Christian conversion in light of Robert's story. By doing so, I demonstrate where their analysis is lacking and how to address this in terms of Bebelibe relational engagements with totem entities and other entities more generally.

Robert's Story

"Now I feel as if I'm in the middle and don't know who I am anymore – I'm neither a non-Christian nor a true Christian," Robert confided in me. As outlined in Chapter Seven, Robert has an ani-mate relationship with a python. His father had a *dikᵤnpuode* constructed to strengthen Robert's *mtakimɛ* when he was a baby (see *Socialising Crocodiles and Mischievous Monkeys*, Chapter Six). Robert wore the *mtakimɛ*-band – in this case a bracelet – that he received until he became a Christian:

> Even after what happened to him in 1996, when his father assured him that the python came as a friend and not to be afraid, Robert still did not know why he wore his bracelet. His python visited him regularly and he was no longer afraid. The python never did anything bad and often appeared when he needed protecting and to indicate that something was about to happen. […]
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> Robert became a Christian in 2001. He still did not know why he had to wear the bracelet. None of his brothers wore one and they too queried why he wore it. He'd never liked having to wear it as it was on the heavy

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side and sometimes he would hit himself with it when turning over in bed, or it got in the way more generally, and could even be dangerous when wrestling. So, having become a Christian, he decided to remove it. He was also encouraged to do so by his *camarades* (friends and classificatory brothers) from his neighbourhood who were Christians and went to the AD church[162] in [the neighbouring village]. They told him not to be afraid, to burn his bracelet and that he could eat all meat safely.

Meanwhile his father had noticed that Robert had removed his bracelet, so he took it for safekeeping, so it didn't get burnt. It was only once he'd taken the bracelet off that his father explained to him why he had it and that removing it put his life in danger – he would surely fall sick and could die. Robert did, in fact, get very sick. His church, MJB[163], prayed for him but to no avail. His father and another classificatory father did all they could to make him wear it again, but he refused. During the discussions he also learnt that he was destined to become the community shrine priest, and that refusing this vocation meant he could get sick, go mad, or even die. He still refused. In the end his classificatory father advised his father to let things be; if he were to die, then so be it. His father then performed the necessary ceremonies on Robert's behalf and the MJB church continued to pray for him. He got better.

Serge, a fervent evangelist, was the pastor of the AD church in [the neighbouring village]. Robert described him as *sauvage* and that his aggressive stance had eventually resulted in the church leadership disciplining him. […] Robert's AD Christian *camarades* together with Serge, the pastor, told Robert that he wasn't a true Christian and that his python was satanic. […] When they told him that his relationship with the python was something diabolical, Robert's fear of pythons returned. 'Now I feel as if I'm in the middle and don't know who I am anymore – I'm neither a non-Christian nor a true Christian'. On the one hand, Robert's father had assured him the python meant him no harm and Robert's pre-Christian relationship (once he'd got over his initial fear) bore this out; on the other hand, he was being told that the python was evil. What should he do? As a young Christian he was full of zeal from his newfound faith and he couldn't return to his pre-Christian days, yet the python was still present in his life.[164] He no longer knows how he should relate to his python, especially as it recently started visiting him again […] (Journal entry, 21 September 2017).

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[162] *Eglise Evangélique des Assemblées de Dieu* (Assemblies of God Evangelical Church).
[163] *Ministère de Jésus au Bénin* (Ministry of Jesus in Benin).
[164] See also J. Merz's (2008) account of David, a witch who became a Christian but whose witchcraft powers remained. He finally came to terms with his situation by deciding that he was now a "witch in the Holy Spirit".

Robert now lives in the town of Cobly because of his work. MJB does not have a church in the town and Robert refuses to go to the AD church. Nevertheless, his Christian commitment to *Uwienu* continues.

Relational Complexities and Becoming

Holbraad and Pedersen (2017:242-281) examine Christian conversion and its relational implications in light of the ontological turn. They critique an anthropological tendency to analyse Christian conversion and the ensuing relational implications as reductionist, given that becoming a Christian entails entering a personal relationship with God, whilst severing other relationships with both human and nonhuman members of the community. Consequently, several anthropologists have concluded that people who become Christians become "autonomous individuals" who are no longer "embedded" members of their society (2017:251; see also Brison 2017; Chua 2015). In a case study of Undraa, an upwardly mobile Mongolian business woman, Holbraad and Pedersen (2017:253-264) endeavour to demonstrate that Christian conversion results in relational change rather than loss. Undraa explains that her conversion was motivated by her desire to have a personal relationship with a loving God, coupled with her need to sever relations with some male acquaintances, family members and spiritual beings who make negative and excessive demands of her. Holbraad and Pedersen then question what actually happens to the relations that Undraa wants to escape from; do they simply cease to exist? They suggest that these relations become internalised as Undraa dialogues with God, is filled with his Holy Spirit who nurtures her faith, and renounces the unwanted attentions of those she seeks to distance herself from on a daily basis (see also Zetterström-Sharp 2017). They argue that

> Christian conversion […] may thus be theorized as an enfolding or involution of human and non-human relations that keeps relational complexity intact, but displaces this complexity from an exterior realm

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we tend to think of as 'social' to an interior domain we here shall call 'existential' (2017:256-257).

"[T]he point is not that there are necessarily fewer social relations than before, or that social relations cease to matter," Holbraad and Pedersen continue, rather they are now "modelled on and measured against the internal self-relations" (2017:259). They conclude that

> the converted self emerges as individual and relational, at one and the same time. Christian conversion keeps relational complexity intact, but it changes relationality itself by causing interior self-self connections to proliferate at the expense of exterior social connections with human and non-human others (2017:263).

Holbraad and Pedersen (2017:245) recognise that their analysis of Christian conversion is partial. One aspect that I think they do not adequately address is Undraa's relationship with God *before* she became a Christian. They state that Undraa "found God" (2017:255) and that she eventually told her parents that she believed in God (2017:257). They do not, however, explicate what her exact notions of God – or gods and other less-visible entities – were beforehand, except that she "perceived […] omnipresent spirits" (2017:254). Robert was already a monotheist and did not question the existence of *Uwienu* (God) and his role as Supreme Being and creator of all before he became a Christian. Robert's conversion, then, moved him into a relationship that brought him closer to *Uwienu*, whom he could now approach directly rather than through intermediaries. Robert's conversion did not result in his displacing his prior relationship with *Uwienu* – albeit distant and via intermediaries – from an exterior to in interior realm though. Robert and *Uwienu* now relate to each other ontonically. Like Undraa, Robert's dialogues with *Uwienu* can be internal during personal times of prayer. This is possible, as their *sibosi* and *mtakimɛ* engage with each other ontonically. Thus, it could be said that part of their relationship is internal or – to be more precise – transmaterial. Such an ontonic engagement

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creates the possibility for Robert to *kɔnta* (become; be transformed) by his personal encounters with *Uwienu*. Despite this, *Uwienu* also remains part of the external network of social relations recognised by the Bebelibe more generally. Neither do Robert and other Bebelibe Christians think that their relationship with *Uwienu* (and other less-visible entities commensurate with Undraa's troublesome spirits) changes from self-other to self-self. By suggesting that such relations become self-self, Holbraad and Pedersen appear to deny the possibility that they could actually exist for the people concerned, which seems to counter what they hope to achieve with their book. Whether the relations remain externalised or become internalised – or a mix of both – the individuals concerned remain part of a social network. Rather than thinking in terms of self-self versus self-other, Chua suggests that Christian conversation results in "vertical" relationships with "God, Jesus and others" which are "dyadic and closed off to 'horizontal' scrutiny or compulsion rather than simply hierarchical" as "what transpires between them and the Divine is ultimately a private matter" (2015:348).

Leaving the self-self part of Holbraad and Pedersen's analysis to one side for the moment, I put forward that their overall explanation of Christian conversion can be applied more broadly to any form of religious – and therefore relational – conversion, including the move from an overtly religious position to an areligious one, such as atheism, for example. In order to disengage means one was engaged. Thus, such a move also entails the severing of relationships. By moving from a relational position that recognised God's existence to one that denies it acknowledges the potential that he could exist. As I illustrated in *The Role of Myths* (Chapter Seven), presencing potential opens up the possibility for people to generate multiple meanings and relational engagements (or disengagements) that they consider veracious. Like Undraa, who needs to renounce daily the spirits who plague her (2017:257), atheism too seems to

require acts of renouncement, whether the atheists concerned have moved from an overt belief in some sort of Supreme Being (or beings) to one that denies their existence, or whether they grew up as atheists.

In other words, the meanings that people accord to relationships have the potential to be *embellished* or *impoverished* as people negotiate the complex interplay between different relational connections. Elsewhere I explain that

> people's underlying understanding of death is embellished by the introduction of new things and ideas. This process of 'embellishment' not only helps to provide continuity, but can also result in new understandings, which people build on and which may modify their practices or how they interpret them accordingly. At times people's understandings and practices can also appear to be contradictory, as they incorporate and negotiate the changes that embellishment provokes. Thus, in order to make sense of change, people draw on what they already know, and so starts a process of negotiation – whether this is conscious or not – as they try to make sense of new things, ideas, and associated practices that not only challenge, but sometimes result in rupture (2017b:144; see also Howell 1996:137).

Rupture, then, can also be understood in terms of impoverishment as people seek to abandon certain relationships and the underlying moral norms, ideas and practices that accompanied them.

There are two more relational aspects that Holbraad and Pedersen do not examine but need to be accounted for, as they further heighten the "relational complexity" resulting from Christian conversion: the additional relations – or change in relational nature – that result from becoming a member of the Christian community and the biblical command to not only love God but to love others as yourself:

> One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: 'Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?'

> Jesus replied, 'What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?'

> The man answered, '"You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"

'Right!' Jesus told him. 'Do this and you will live!' (Luke 10: 25-28)[165]

Jesus then tells the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37) who showed compassion for a Jew – his enemy – who had been mugged and left for dead. According to my interpretation of this passage, Jesus upholds the importance of actively working towards good societal relations, rather than severing or distancing oneself from those that some may consider undesirable. Despite this, the Bible also counsels that there are times when unhealthy (usually spiritual) relations do need to be terminated, especially when they threaten to compromise people's relationship with God (see also Chua 2015:349-350).

Christian conversion also results in new relations as individuals integrate with the Christian community (see also Brison 2017), or existing relations being modified such as between Robert and his *camarades* who were already Christians when he converted.[166] Robert and the other interviewees cited above shared openly about the challenge of dealing with churchgoers who exhort them to sever their relationship with those whom they did not necessarily see the need to escape, such as their totem entities. Not only does killing and eating their totem animals antagonise their relationship with the animals concerned, but also with their families and the wider community; relationships that are not perceived as negative or evil, and that do not necessarily dishonour *Uwienu* nor overtly violate of the biblical message. Furthermore, killing and eating their totem animals contradicts the biblical command to love others.

Thus, relationships *within* the Christian community are not always straightforward either, and can further add to the ontological penumbra and relational complexities that Christians need to negotiate. Another example

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[165] New Living Translation, Anglicised version.
[166] As above, this aspect of relational complexity is also equally applicable to *any* sort of "religious" conversion as well as becoming members of *any* new community, such as joining a club, going to university, and so on.

comes from Victor, the churchgoing animal trader in his early-forties. In September 2017, Victor preferred to go into debt rather than suffer the shame of sending his children to the state primary school. As mentioned above, primary education is now compulsory. Many consider state primary schools to be inferior to private, often church-run schools. Meanwhile, those attending churches that run their own schools often feel obliged to send their children to their churches' schools even when they cannot afford it. Victor has three primary school aged children who attend his church's school. In September 2017, he needed to pay 50,000 CFA francs (approximately £68) for their uniforms and school materials. Despite the superior reputation of privately run schools, Victor's children were not excelling as expected. The fees for the church school came to 75,000 CFA francs (approximately £102), which Victor could not afford. He had no animals to trade at the time, so he decided to send his children to the state school instead. His pastor then took him aside and intimated that such an act would be disloyal towards the church. On this occasion it was more important for Victor to maintain his relations within the external social network of the church, rather than meet his personal family needs.

Christian conversion in the West, meanwhile, often does result in a move from self-self to self-other, with a transformation from autonomous individualism to community members, where self-other relations proliferate. Thus, Holbraad and Pedersen's analysis provides a good example of othering and alterity. This is exemplified by their statement that "the [Christian] converted self emerges as individual and relational, at one and the same time" (2017:263). This statement is not wrong as such, but is applicable beyond Christian conversion. In the Introduction I explained that Ubielo society has an egalitarian ethos that is founded on a non-centralised social structure. I also demonstrated in Chapters Four and Five that all beings (whether human or nonhuman) have a certain

level of autonomy, whilst also being part of a relational web. This being the case, all members of Ubielo society – if not all societies – are "individual and relational, at one and the same time" (2017:263). Chua makes a similar observation for Bidayuh persons of Malaysian Borneo, who "could be viewed as both autonomous and relational: as constantly juggling two different but not incommensurate sets of values or ideals (individualism and communalism) in day-to-day sociality" (2015:343; see also Brison 2017:660-661; Fortes 1966:10; Morris 2000:41-68). Accordingly, everybody to differing degrees at different times experiences relational change as their social connections with both human and nonhuman entities either increase or decrease, whether these connections happen to be interior or exterior (or vertical and horizontal). Thus, more broadly speaking, it seems to me that Holbraad and Pedersen's overall conclusions apply even when there is *no* explicit conversion experience as such.

To put it another way, the different presencing practices we draw on either heighten or diminish the ontonicity of the other beings we engage with at any given moment, which in turn affect the nature of these relationships and the potential for ontological penumbras. The general unhappiness that both Christian and non-Christian interviewees expressed when people defy their totem entities, together with Bebelibe notions of totemism more generally presented in Chapter Seven, thus reveal some of the underlying moral norms that constitute what many people consider the ideals of Ubielo society. These include notions about kinship, empathy and personhood, all of which can be understood further by analysing them in terms of shared ontonity and presencing.

When Robert encounters his python ani-mate, Robert engages with him holistically as a living entity, as a fellow onton. The being Robert sees in front of him and interacts with *is* a python; a living, relational entity rather than a sign.

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Robert's totemic relationship cannot be reduced to a metaphor. Their shared ontonity goes beyond that of many other individuals as they have the same reincarnating ancestor, and therefore the same *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ*. Robert thus primarily draws on an ontonic presencing practice, just as I do when I engage with Johannes when he is materially present. Should Robert body-shift, he could further enhance his ontonic experience by encountering his python as a fellow python. Robert's becoming a Christian, however, added another layer of complexity to his ani-mate relationship, as his fear of pythons not only returned but also was heightened because he started to associate them with evil. Robert explained to me that his previous fear was one of respect as his parents had counselled him and his siblings to take care in the bush, as wild snakes can be dangerous. They taught about venomous snakes, such as vipers, as well as wild, human-eating pythons. He thus experiences conflicting emotions depending on how he presences his python and snakes more generally (see also Attala 2017). This not only adds to the ontological penumbra he needs to negotiate, but means that he sometimes contradicts himself when talking about pythons.

The different interviewees' accounts above further demonstrate that people generally presence – and thus consider – their totem entities as fellow ontons and kin even when they do not have an ani-mate relationship. It is not surprising, then, that the majority of interviewees expressed strong emotions when we discussed behaviour that endangers their totem animals. But what about other interviewees – such as Lucie, Adrien and Benoît – who have eaten, or are willing to eat, their totem animals? Or people's engagement with animals more generally, and how they justify when it is acceptable to kill and eat them? Even our shared humanity with other humans does not make us immune to killing each other, assuming that we do actually see – or presence – other *Homo sapiens* as humans (see, for example, Guthrie 1993:79; Kohn 2013:215-

216; Lévi-Strauss 1966 [1962]:166; Praet 2013). How we presence other humans and entities more generally, then, also determines our behaviour towards them. When we draw on predominantly ontonic presencing practices and engage with other beings as fellow ontons, we are less able to harm, kill or eat each other. Should we do so, we find ways to justify our actions. Conversely, by drawing on presencing practices that are predominantly representational or scientific, for example, we can justify such actions more readily (see, for example, Joy 2011). Such presencing practices, then, allow us to detach and distance ourselves, and as our ontonic engagement diminishes, alterity and othering increase. Lucie's example is illustrative, as she continues to presence *ibodimuɔhị* (animating force-crocodiles) primarily ontonically and thus stated that nobody should eat *fɛbodimuɔfɛ* (see above). She also explained that *ibodimuɔhị* are not crocodiles but persons, as they are her *baakɛ*. As I noted in Chapter Seven (see Family Status), *baakɛ* exemplifies the kinship relationship resulting from reincarnation and the totem animal's fatherly role. Lucie explicated that – for her – *baakɛ* means "we are together; we are related". Meanwhile, she is happy to eat *imuɔhị* (wild crocodiles), as they now represent a source of meat that *Uwienu* has authorised her to eat, and doing so demonstrates her faith in Him. Lucie's differentiating between *ibodimuɔhị* and *imuɔhị* further demonstrates that the degree to which people presence and engage with other entities ontonically also determines the personhood that they accord them.[167] Hurn also alludes to this:

> Personhood follows from embodied interactions, and the ways in which individual humans experience individual 'others' will inform whether or not they perceive in those 'others' the requisite characteristics of personhood (2012:32).

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[167] See also Naveh and Bird-David (2014), who explain how the Nayakas' perception and treatment of forest and domestic animals change depending on the "immediacy" of the relationship.

As with the word "humanity", I also find the word "personhood" semantically restrictive as it too maintains a humanistic perspective. Russell notes that "while 'person' is typically considered as equivalent to 'human being,' this is not universally the case" (2010:16). She points out that

> some cultures define persons much more inclusively, encompassing animals and often what we would consider inanimate and supernatural beings; moreover, the boundaries among these kinds of persons may be quite fluid (2010:16; see also Hallowell 1960:19-52).

Despite this, it seems to me that people's understandings of personhood rather express the way they presence other entities. I realise that my discomfort with the term largely comes from my linguistic Western perspective and is a question of translation. I do not deny the experiential engagements that individuals have with other entities and that their terminology, which more-or-less equates to "person" and "personhood" when translated from the source language into English, does encompass other beings besides humans as demonstrated by those who write about perspectivism. As Heneise points out "[n]otions of personhood […] are developed by human and nonhuman beings through shared, embodied interactions and necessarily maintained in relation to each other" (2017:97). Thus, I acknowledge that many people readily presence, experience and understand other entities as persons. This is not universal or constant, however. Amongst the Bebelibe, for example, although people do accord human status to certain entities – such as totem animals – and consider them persons, many of my interviewees rather affirmed that humans and nonhuman entities alike are beings of equal worth, but not that they are all persons. Conversely, how can we as humans be sure that nonhuman entities really presence themselves as persons, or know for sure how they presence us? Again, this understanding may be based on how we presence their presencing of us. Could it be that they rather presence themselves and us according to their ontonic self? Kohn's (2007) article about perspectivism in

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relation to the Runa of Amazonia and how they relate to their dogs is a good example of this. He notes that for the Runa "all beings, and not just humans, engage with the world and with each other as selves" (2007:4; see also Kohn 2013). Kohn (2007; 2013) then examines Runa relationships from a semiotic perspective that he suggests "goes beyond the human" (2007:5). He (2013) further justifies the need for anthropology to go beyond the human, given that our human engagement with other selves further defines who we are. Kohn (2007; 2013) also recognises the need to take seriously how other selves – such as dogs – represent the world. Thinking in terms of ontons and presencing further enriches Kohn's analysis, as this provides the means to not only go beyond the human, but also semiotics.

Having proposed that we share a common ontonity, I put forward that it is rather the degree of people's ontonic engagement – and therefore how they presence the other – that determines the "ontonhood" they accord other entities, whether human or nonhuman. Thus, entities – such as humans – may well presence other entities as persons and understand ontonhood in terms of personhood. Nonhuman entities, however, could equally presence and understand themselves and others in terms of lionhood, for example:

> The challenge is to fend off one's own anthropomorphism so as to recognize an otherness that does not know it is other. Against the frank projections of human affairs onto beasts that prevail with domesticated animals, fairy tales, and totemism, Ludwig Wittgenstein teaches a harder doctrine: If a lion could speak, we couldn't understand him. […] We would need to live in a lion's body and experience the lion's form of life to understand the lion's speech (Peters 1999:244).

Viveiros de Castro (2004) may well argue that perspectivism counters Peters' and Wittgenstein's view as Amazonian shamans "cross ontological boundaries deliberately and adopt the perspective of nonhuman subjectivities in order to administer the relations between humans and nonhumans" (2004:468). He later states that "[o]nly shamans, who are so to speak species-androgynous, can

make perspectives communicate, and then only under special, controlled conditions" (2004:471). It is not totally evident, however, if shamans actually *konta* (become) animals. Despite this, the shamans do enter into some sort of ontonic engagement with other entities. Once they have returned to their human state, however, they then mediate and relate their experiences as humans to humans. Even Bebelibe body-shifters, who *konta* the animal in question, inevitably interpret and relate their experiences to other Bebelibe from a human perspective, should they choose to do so (see Chapter Six).

The issue is not whether shamans or body-shifters engage as animals with animals, but that they then have to rely on human language and its semantic limitations when relating these experiences to others. Peters correctly points out that "[t]he absence of 'communication' has never prevented humans and animals from entering into community with each other" (1999:244-245). My point is that – as neutral terms that do not privilege one entity over another – shared ontony (instead of shared humanity) and ontonhood (instead of personhood) level the playing field, thereby allowing for shared community. Our shared ontony results in a connectedness with other beings with whom we can have a deep rapport that anthropomorphism and egomorphism cannot explain. In Chapter Two I acknowledged that anthropomorphism is unavoidable, and is part of being human. I also demonstrated that Milton's (2005) egomorphism better accounts for human-nonhuman intersubjectivity, as she recognises that it is our experiential engagement with others that determines how we perceive them and the meaning we gain from our interactions. Or – in other words – how we make present and engage in and with the world around us. Egomorphism also acknowledges a self-centredness, which is inevitable, as presencing starts with the self and builds on what we think we already know. For example, how I interpret my dog's behaviour in certain situations starts as an extrapolation of how I might – or might not – behave and react in that situation, and further

builds on how I presence him and experience his reactions. As Milton points out, I think of him as "'like me' rather than 'human-like'" (2005:261). Furthermore, I can never say for certain how others make meaning present; how Johannes or my dog presence me for example. Even if two entities share the same experience, how they make these experiences meaningful will be different. Despite this, we can and do connect with others ontonically.

Both anthropomorphism and egomorphism seem to be unidirectional (my interpretation of others) and do not readily explain how my interaction with others can also morph or transform both my understanding of them and of myself.[168] Thus, my engagement with others not only impacts how I presence them but how I presence myself (see also Ingold 2006:10). Or, to put it in Mbelime terms, shared ontonity further enables the entities concerned to *kɔnta* (become; be transformed). Thinking in terms of ontonhood and shared ontonity allows for relational engagements that are more fundamental and multidirectional. Thus, ontonhood and our shared ontonity account for complex relational networks, intersubjectivity and empathy between humans and nonhumans alike. They also account for our interdependence and connectedness as fellow creatures, whether this is a result of a Supreme Being's acts of creation or our evolving together (see also Ingold 2013b:6-9).

Noske too lamented the unidirectional limitations of, in this case, anthropocentrism:

> To point out to [anthropologists] that in addition to a *human-animal* relationship there also exists something like an *animal-human* relationship, and that totally ignoring the latter will lead to a one-sided subject-object approach is a waste of time (1993:186, emphasis in original).

Also commenting on Noske, Nadasdy adds that

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[168] See also Hurn's (2012:125-138; 2016a) discussion of intersubjectivity, empathy and symbiotic coexistence.

what is notably absent from both ecological and symbolic analyses of human-animal relations […] is any consideration of animals as intelligent beings with agency of their own who might be active participants in their relationships with humans (2007:30).

Bleakley (2000) also discusses the limitations and problematic nature of anthropocentrism and mediating the natural world through language and culture and suggests that it is

because of psychological or linguistic representation, self-presentation of animal life is never known directly. The danger of this is that the world of the real becomes detached rather than mediated; unhinged, forcing us to focus in an introspective manner, and we forget that we are embedded in a world that intends us, just as we intend it (2000:xiii).

Bleakley thus proposes "three realms" of "animal presences": "the biological (literal); the psychological (imaginal), and the conceptual (semiotic, symbolic, textual)" (2000:xii). Bleakley's psychological and conceptual animal presences thus draw on a variety of presencing practices, as suggested by the qualifying adjectives he employs. His biological animal presence, meanwhile, seemingly corresponds with predominantly ontonic presencing practices. Bleakley then asks "in what sense might the world of animals construct us in its image, or educate our attention(s) to its presence(s)?" (2000:xiii).

The multidirectional self-other transformations that result from our shared ontonity and ontonhood help to address these concerns. Furthermore, I propose that entities rather "ontomorphise" by attributing their ontonity and ontonhood to others. For humans, this may be expressed anthropomorphically or egomorphically, for felines felinomorphically, and so on.

Our shared ontonity, ontonhood and ability to ontomorphise thus allow for multi-directional experiential engagements with other entities and for intersubjective and empathetic relationships. Willerslev, for example, demonstrates how Yukaghir hunters of northeastern Siberia exploit the relationships they establish with their prey through acts of "mimetic empathy" in

order to seduce and kill them (2004:646). As noted in Chapter Six (see *Socialising Crocodiles and Mischievous Monkeys*), this is not without risk. Willerslev (2004:648) then explains that the empathy hunters establish is more than just mimicry and allows them imaginatively to take on other entities' perspectives. Consequently, a hunter runs the risk of "falling in love with his prey. Consumed by this love, he cannot think about anything else, stops eating, and after a short time dies" (2004:647). The deceased hunter then reincarnates as an animal and goes to live with the prey in question. Willerslev recognises that hunters can never fully understand the animals' viewpoint. Despite this, he considers "it plausible that, when using their own bodily experiences to achieve a vicarious understanding of an animal experience, they can, at least roughly, form a conception of what it is like to be that animal" (2004:468). In other words, through mimetic empathy, Yukaghir hunters seek to engage with their prey as fellow ontons and take advantage of their shared ontonhood by seducing them. In doing so, however, the hunters run the risk of themselves being seduced, as their empathetic mimicry creates opportunities for multidirectional ontonic engagement. Through their shared ontonity, the hunter and the hunted ontomorphise one another and thus create a dual susceptibility.

Our shared ontonity, ontonhood and ability to ontomorphise thus account for relational exchanges that allow us to be touched by others and *kɔnta* (become; be transformed). Such relational exchanges also increase presencing potential and can exacerbate the ontological penumbras we need to negotiate, as I have demonstrated above by sharing how my Bebelibe interviewees understand their relationship with totem entities and animals more generally. Presencing thereby helps us understand better how people create, express *and* live meaning as they engage in and with the world around them and deal with the ambiguities they experience.

Conclusion

> […] in Kuranko clan myths it is the totemic animal's relationship with the clan ancestor which expresses in exemplary form the moral ideal of personhood (Jackson 1990:64).

Like the Kuranko of Sierra Leone, the relationship that the Bebelibe communities have with their *tikedimɔmɔnte* (true totem(s), literally "interdict(s)-true") also exemplifies their moral ideals of "personhood" and of the underlying moral fabric of Ubielo society more generally. Each community has its myths about how the relationship between their founding ancestors and totem animals was established, and the ancestors' decree that the animals concerned should never be eaten or harmed in any way. Each founding ancestor and totem animal then established a pact in recognition of the events that resulted in their being brought together. By making this pact, the founding ancestor and animal became one through an inter-ontonic engagement. They then died together and went on to reincarnate together.

Smith (2003:25) points out that violating a society's moral norms reveals the moral character of its institutions. The theme for my thesis resulted from such a violation when Emile, a Christian baker, had a crocodile killed in the town of Cobly. The crocodile is the *tikedimɔmɔnte* for the Bibidibɛ community who inhabit the town. Emile's actions, together with his refusal to make amends created a huge scandal at the time. Emile then died from a burst aneurism in the brain, which many say was a direct consequence of his behaviour. Although I knew about the different communities' myths and *tikedimɔmɔnte*, it was only after Emile died that I realised how important totemic relationships are for the Bebelibe. Emile's story is not an isolated incident. Other events – such as the dispute between the Bɛbidibɛ and the Bɛkɔpɛ, and the 1960s crocodile-killing scandal – also highlighted the significance of these relationships and the profound consequences that can result when they are challenged.

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In the preceding chapters I have explored human-animal relations amongst the Bebelibe of northwestern Benin with a focus on how they relate to their *tikedimɔmɔnte* (true totems). I started with an historical review of totemism, the debates it generated and how these contributed to the ontological turn in anthropology. The debates took many twists and turns. Scholars initially questioned totemism's origins, its relationship with other -isms such as animism and its place in religious and social evolution. Moving away from an evolutionary trajectory, scholars then defined totemism, animism and other -isms as ontological typologies, which they then used to classify different societies. The debates and analyses relied heavily – and continue to do so – on semiotics as an underlying principle and thus what totems *represent* for the people concerned.

I then proposed that the importance of social identity and belonging, which are determined by relationships with totemic entities, formed a common theme that runs through the debates. I put forward that we need to go beyond semiotic abstraction and ontological classification in order to understand these totemic relationships properly. I then presented the theoretical ideas of "presencing" and the "ontological penumbra" (J. Merz 2017b; J. Merz and S. Merz 2017), which I used for my analysis. The "onton", initially introduced by J. Merz (2017b), is foundational to presencing. Ontons are experiential, agentive and relational entities that cannot be divided into representations (signifiers) and represented (signified) as signs can. Even when an onton comprises several material and/or immaterial parts, its transmaterial nature means that these are inseparable. Thus, ontons cannot be analysed semiotically as they have no – and are not – representations.

The semiotician Peirce (1940) distinguished three primary signs types, namely symbols, icons and indexes. J. Merz (2017b) builds on semiotics by proposing the addition of the onton to Peirce's three sign types. The interplay

between symbols, icons, indexes and ontons, as people draw on them in various ways, results in diverse presencing practices, which could be primarily ontonic, symbolic or scientific, for example. People then employ different presencing practices depending on given situations and circumstances at a given time. This, in turn, produces multiple ontological understandings and ways of engaging with the world around them. This diversity of presencing practices not only accounts for ontological differences between people, but helps explain why an individual can maintain or entertain apparently contradictory ideas by moving between different ontological understandings depending on the way they make present and engage with other entities at a given moment.

Ontological penumbras, meanwhile, are the shadowy spaces of limbo that people need to negotiate as part of making sense of their engagement with the world. I initially explored the methodological role of ontological penumbras for anthropologists as they seek to understand the societies they encounter, which necessitates reflecting on their own sociocultural background. Ontological penumbras are where self and other, belief and disbelief, the secular and the religious, and so on, meet, overlap and intermingle. Ontological penumbras are in constant flux and subject to paradoxes, ambiguity, uncertainty, tension and negotiation. They can sometimes seem threatening and lead to acute anxiety. Consequently, anthropologists need to consciously occupy ontological penumbras and engage with them reflexively, emotionally and analytically. Such engagement, in turn, leads to productivity and creativity and is important epistemologically.

As a result of the ontological penumbras that I have had to negotiate during my time amongst the Bebelibe, together with what I learnt from them about the inner conflicts they experience when their moral ideals are confronted, I realised that negotiating penumbral issues has broader implications that go beyond methodology. Various inner conflicts and ontological penumbras came to light

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as we discussed issues related to hunting, meat eating, domestication and animal commodification, reincarnation, body-shifting and – above all – totemism. These ontological penumbras have been exacerbated by what people refer to as *upaanu* (new times or modernity, literally "newness") and the resulting rapid sociocultural change that results from this. For example, people shared about the inner turmoil and conflicts that resulted from using their cattle for ploughing. Several interviewees indicated that the introduction of ploughing-cattle was the pivotal event that led to the partial objectification and subsequent commodification of their *diseede wante* (family animals). People directly involved in the commodification of *diseede wante*, (butchers, meat sellers, animal traders and commercial farmers) further testified about the dilemmas they have to deal with. More generally, people talked about the dangers of animal vengeance when human-animal relational norms are not respected. The risk of revenge results in further penumbras that people need to deal with as they negotiate the demands of modernity whilst seeking to maintain good relations with their animals.

New institutions – such as churches, Western-style healthcare and education systems – are also strongly associated with *upaanu* (new times or modernity). As part of my analysis I examined the impact of Christianity on human-animal relations by exploring several incidents involving Christians and their *tikedimɔmɔnte* (true totems). These included the incident with Emile, the Christian baker who had the crocodile killed; Arthur and his wife who apparently gave birth to crocodiles after they ate and killed their totem crocodile; and Robert's testimony about his relationship with his totem python before and after becoming a Christian. Robert exemplified the ontological penumbras that Christians may encounter, when he shared that he no longer knew who he was anymore, as he considered himself neither a non-Christian nor a true Christian.

He explained how he felt torn down the middle as a result of other Christians challenging the relationship he has with his totem python.

Even though ontological penumbras can be uncomfortable, our ability to negotiate them results from our encounters with one another as ontons. As all entities exist within the same ontological world, multispecies – or rather inter-ontonic relationships – become possible because of our shared ontonity (as opposed to shared humanity). Our mutual underlying ontonic nature or ontonity not only enables us to encounter other entities as fellow beings, but also means that these encounters can be intersubjective and empathetic. Amongst the Bebelibe, such encounters are exemplified by individuals who have animal *mtakimɛ* (identity) and *upinsihɣ* (destiny). The implicit trust and resulting empathy that exists between such individuals and their *diseede wante* (family animals) is due to a level of communication and ontonic engagement that prevails between their *mtakimɛ*. Totemic engagement amongst the Bebelibe further epitomises such inter-ontonic relationships, which resulted from the pacts established between the founding ancestors and their totem animals.

Today, people and totem animals who are direct descendants of their founders continue to form an inter-ontonic pair. These direct descendants are those who have been reincarnated by the founding ancestor and the totem animal, who – having become one – continue to die and reincarnate together. These descendants have an "ani-mate" relationship, as the two entities – the person and the totem animal – are animated by the same *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force) and could be considered mates as they are intimately bound together. Furthermore, some of these descendants can *kɔnta* (become) their totem animal, and their totem animal can *kɔnta* (become) human. This happens when the person or animal's *kɛbodikɛ* and *mtakimɛ* (identity) leave their primary *ukuonɔ* (body-skin) and *suki* (put on the shirt) of their alternative *ukuɔnu*. The alternative *ukuɔnu* that the body-shifter becomes is clearly animated and active

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in the more-visible parts of the world. Furthermore, the body-shifter's alternative *ukuɔnu* can also be injured and even killed. When this happens, the body-shifter's primary *ukuɔnu* also sustains the same injury and can die as a result of it. The two entities who are in an ani-mate relationship sometimes body-shift in order to visit one another. Thus, when a person who has an ani-mate relationship with a crocodile body-shifts in order to visit the crocodile, for example, at that moment there are three distinct material beings: the person, who is in a comatose state, the crocodile that the person has become and the crocodile who is the person's ani-mate. All three beings are simultaneously present. Whilst the person's primary *ukuɔnu* is in a comatose state, the two crocodiles engage with each other as ontons.

An engagement in the world between different entities in an ontonic and thus nonrepresentational sense necessitated my introducing further notions including shared ontonity (instead of shared humanity), and ontonhood (rather than personhood) and ontomorphism (as opposed to anthropomorphism). I justified these terms as they de-emphasise the human and do not privilege one entity over another. I demonstrated that our shared ontonity can result in a connectedness with other beings with whom we can have a deep rapport that anthropomorphism and egomorphism cannot explain. Thinking in terms of ontonhood and shared ontonity thus allows for relational engagements that are more fundamental and multidirectional. Accordingly, entities ontomorphise when they attribute their ontonity and ontonhood to others.

There are several areas I would have liked to develop further, but proved to be beyond the scope of this thesis. For example, I had hoped to explore the impact that modern institutions (such as the education system, which is based on the French system, and Western-style health care) have on human-animal relations.

I had also planned to address further people's understanding and engagement with members of the *Equidae* family, all of whom are considered extremely powerful and are accorded quasi-human status (see *Participating in the Community*, Chapter Two; *Hunting*, Chapter Four and Chapter Six). Consequently, to kill a donkey, for example, without just cause is tantamount to murder and people fear that the animal concerned will avenge its death. Besides horses, mules and domestic donkeys, many of my interviewees talked about the *kɛmunnaakɛ* (pl. *simunnaasi*) or *l'âne sauvage* in French. People identified the *kɛmunnaakɛ* as the most powerful and dangerous bush animal of all. The French is ambiguous as it could refer to the wild ass (*Equus africanus*) or feral donkeys (*Equus africanus asinus*). Wild asses, however, have never existed in the region and domestic donkeys are recent arrivals. More research is needed to clarify the exact status of these animals and establish if they are genuine cryptids or if *kɛmunnaakɛ* is an alternative name for one of the local antelopes.

One final area that would benefit from further research concerns people's perception of pigs, whom they consider the least intelligent of all the animals, as they do not have *diyammaade* (ability to think, reason and to make decisions). Their lack of status means that their meat has no ritual significance. Therefore, people now favour pork over other meats (see Chapter Five).

The need for further research shows that I still have more to learn about the Bebelibe of the Commune of Cobly and how they engage in and with the world around them. More generally, such research is best achieved by seeking to understand how people presence and relate to the different animals and entities who populate their world.

Appendices

How the Dog Saved Ukɔɔnɔ

You need to know that our Ukɔɔnɔ ancestor was known for his murderous acts. It was after a series of murders that his younger brother, who was Uwuodɔ, decided to leave as he was fed up with his brother's behaviour. He hid far away so he no longer had to witness his brother's acts.

When our Ukɔɔnɔ ancestor realised his younger brother was gone, he went in search of him. Tired and thirsty, he arrived at a homestead, where there were several people sitting outside. He left his bow and arrows at the entrance with the dog who was accompanying him. He then entered the homestead, greeted the owner and asked for water to quench his thirst. The people who were sitting outside recognised him for the murderer and enemy that he was, as he had killed one of their family members too. They decided to take their revenge and plotted to kill him. The dog heard what they were planning, so when the man left the homestead the dog grabbed his bow and arrows and ran off into the bush. Our ancestor chased after the dog. In the middle of the bush, the dog stopped and he said to our ancestor, 'Do you know why I took your bow and arrows? When you entered the homestead, the people outside started plotting to kill you. This is why I took your things and ran off so that you would follow me and I could explain what had happened.' Our ancestor, together with the dog, then escaped his enemies who were pursuing him. Our ancestor then swore that he would never eat dog meat again as he considered, from that moment on, the dog to be like a man as he was capable of saving others.

Bebelibe Communities
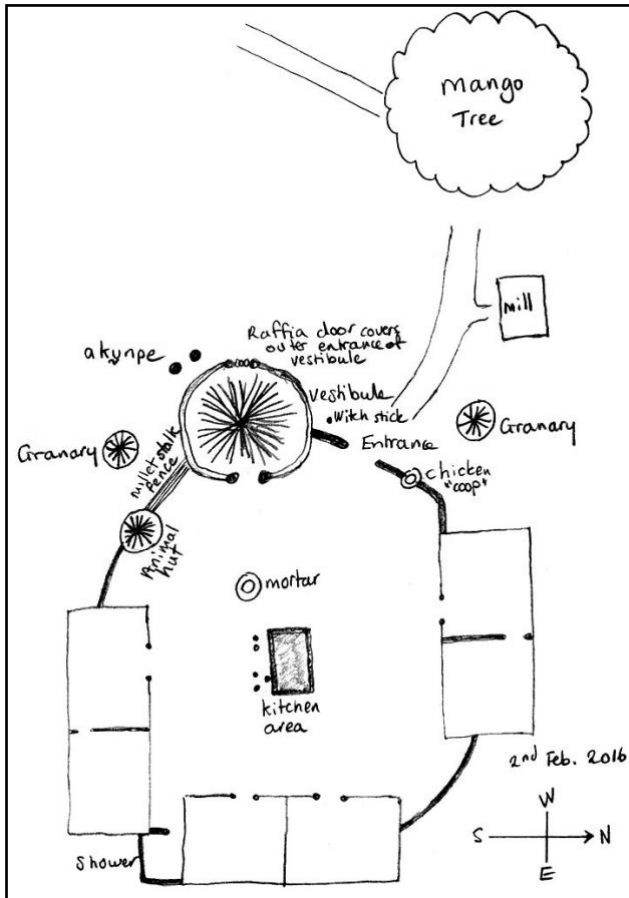
Communities Represented by Interviewees

The communities are listed alphabetically according to the singular form of their name, which is followed by the plural form. Each community's animal *tikedimɔmɔnte* (true totem(s)) is in **bold**, followed by other *tikete* (interdicts) that are respected by extension to other related animals (e.g. those who do not eat Rock Python, do not eat other snakes either), or due to a community or family alliance.

Community's Name	Principal Villages & Neighbourhoods	Animal Totems
Ubiidɔ, Bɛbidibɛ	Birihoun (Cobly)	**Crocodile**, **Bushbuck**, **Rock Python** (snakes in general)
Udatienɔ, Bɛdatenbɛ	Oudatiénou (Datori)	**Jackal**, Leopard, Genet, Crocodile
Uha̧ntienɔ, Bɛha̧ntenbɛ	Serhounga & Tassayota	**Namaqua Dove** (doves in general), Civet, Monitor Lizard, Bushbuck, Dog
Uhodukpaadɔ, Bɛhodukpadibɛ	Oroukparé	**Rock Python** (snakes in general)
Uhotuunɔ, Bɛhotuubɛ	Oukodoo & Touga	**Rock Python** (snakes in general)
Ukɔɔnɔ, Bɛkɔpɛ	Cobly & Ouorou	**Dog**, Rock Python (snakes in general), Crocodile, Bushbuck
Uku̧ntuonɔ, Bɛku̧ntuobɛ	Kountori	**Civet**
Unammucaanɔ, Bɛnammucaabɛ	Namountchaga	**Crocodile**, Striped Ground Squirrel
Usiinɔ, Bɛsiinbɛ	Sinni	**Civet**
Utedebinɔ, Bɛtedepɛ	Didani, Nanakadé & Outanonhoun	**Genet**
Uwiɛnɔ, Bɛwiɛnbɛ	Okommo, Yimpisséri	**Monkey**, **Crocodile**, **Weidholz's Banana Frog**, **Tortoise**, **Dove**
Uyu̧ɔnɔ, Bɛyu̧ɔbɛ	Ouyon (Tarpingou)	**Monkey**, **Crocodile**, **Dog**, **Crab**

Other Mbelime-speaking Communities

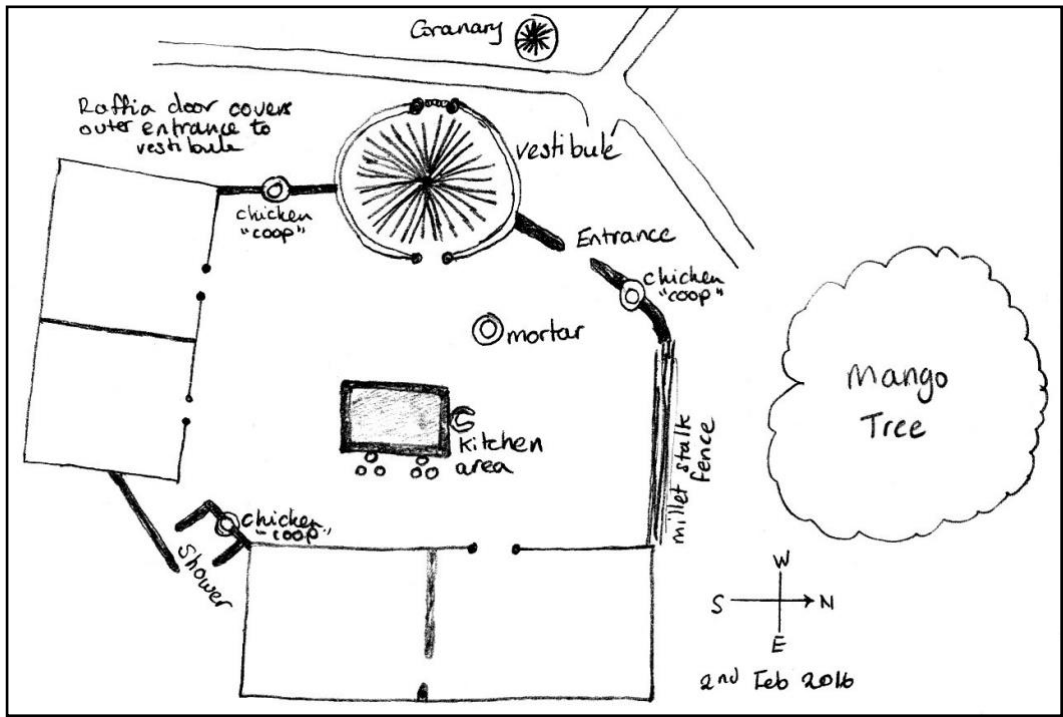| Community's Name	Principal Villages & Neighbourhoods	Animal Totems
Ucɛkɔnkɔ, Bɛcɛkɔnkibɛ	Yangou	**Warthog** (pigs in general)
Ukɔnciɛnɔ, Bɛkɔnciɛbɛ	Korontière	**Striped Ground Squirrel**
Ukuciɛnɔ, Bɛkuciɛbɛ	Kèkoutchièke	**Civet**
Ukuodɔ, Bɛkodibɛ	Nanakadé & Dissibili	**Elephant-snout Fish**, **Buffalo**, **Dog**
Ukpɛtuunɔ, Bɛkɔtuubɛ	Oukotouhoun	**Bushbuck**, Red-flanked Duiker
Unaahuodɔ, Bɛnaahodibɛ	Ounahodihoun (Kutchatié)	**Crocodile**, Striped Ground Squirrel, Rock Python (snakes in general), Namaqua Dove (doves in general)
Unanbuɔnɔ, Bɛnanbɔnbɛ	Dinanbonni (Sinni)	**Dove**, **Civet**
Upuodɔ, Bɛpodibɛ	Dipoli	**Civet**
Usapuodɔ, Bɛsapodibɛ	Dissapoli	**Leopard** (& other cats, inc. Genet), **Toad**
Utuonɔ, Bɛtonbɛ	Dissari	**Dog**
Uwuodɔ, Bɛhodibɛ	Ouorou	**Rock Python** (snakes in general), Bushbuck, Crocodile, Dog
Uyɔwḁanɔ, Bɛyɛwḁnbɛ	Diyowande (Tassayota)	**Baboon** & **Monkey**, Namaqua Dove (doves in general), Civet

Homestead Sketches
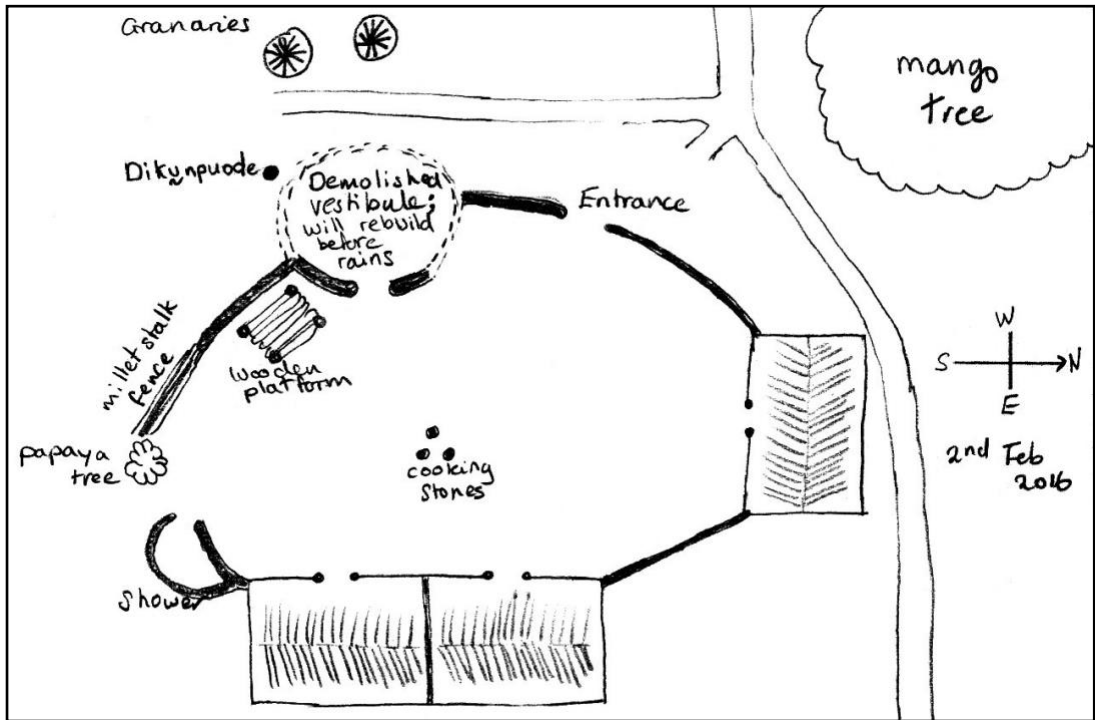

Homestead Sketch 1

S. Merz, Oukodoo,

February 2016

(Sketch 1 labels: Mango Tree; Mill; akynpe; Raffia door covers outer entrance of vestibule; Vestibule with stick; Granary; Granary; Entrance; millet-stalk fence; chicken "coop"; Animal hut; mortar; kitchen area; Shower; 2nd Feb. 2016; W N S E compass)
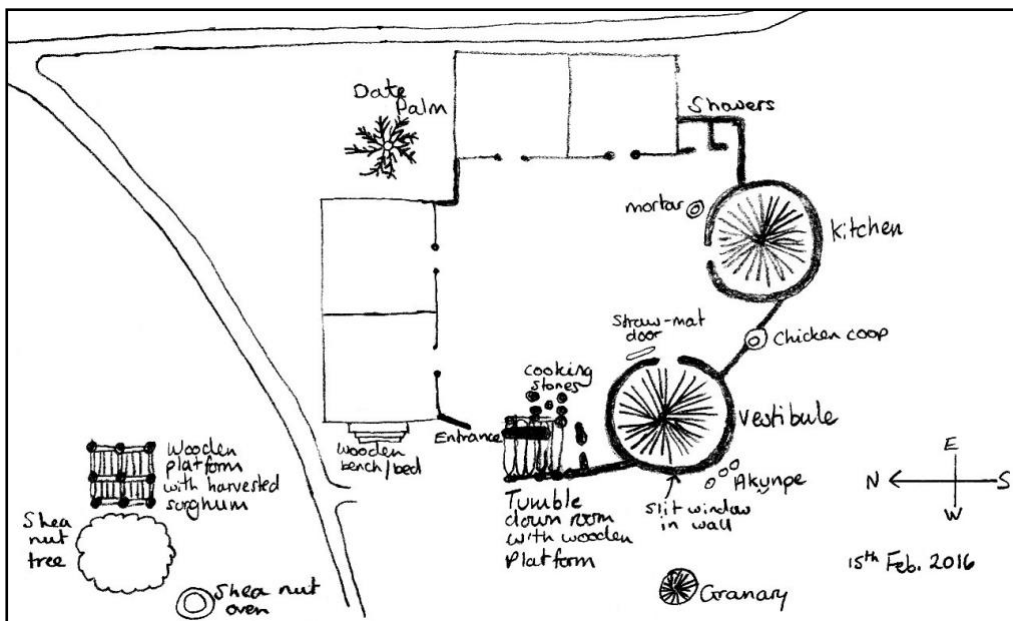
Homestead Sketch 2

S. Merz, Oroukparé, February 2016

(Sketch 2 labels: Date Palm; Showers; mortar; Kitchen; Straw-mat door; Chicken coop; cooking stones; Vestibule; Entrance; Wooden bench/bed; Akynpe; slit window in wall; Wooden platform with harvested sorghum; Tumble down room with wooden platform; Shea nut tree; Shea nut oven; Granary; 15th Feb. 2016; E N S W compass)

Homestead Sketch 3

S. Merz, Oukodoo, February 2016

Homestead Sketch 4

S. Merz, Oukodoo, February 2016

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Figures

Figure 1: Two female and one male *bɛhidibɛ*

J. Merz, Oukodoo, 1995. Used with permission.

Figure 2: *Aky̱npe* **and sorghum beer**

Photo mine, Sinni, 2013.

Figure 3: One of Basaadi's *kɛyawedikɛ*

Photo mine, Namountchaga, 2015.

Figure 4: *Ditade* at base of baobab tree

A *ditade* shrine entity (flat stone in centre) surrounded by other *ataadɛ*.

J. Merz, Oukodoo, 2011. Used with permission.

Figure 5: Cow head with knife, meat morsels and cornmeal porridge

J. Merz, Oukodoo, 1996. Used with permission.

Figure 6: *Yąnta* **medicine horns**

Photo mine, Sinni, 2013.

Figure 7: Dog roast

Photo mine, Cobly, 2015.

Figure 8: Soya cheese made by Geneviève and her family

Photo mine, Cobly, 2016.

Sacrifices

Summary of which animals can be sacrificed when:

	Chicken	Sheep	Dog	Cow	Goat	Guineafowl
Shrine/entity:						
Ataadɛ	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Bɛhidibɛ	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (♀ only)
Dikṵnpuode	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (♀ only)
Event:						
1st Pregancy	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Unborn child	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
After birth	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Tibaakite	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes (♀ only)
Diviner & siyawesi installation[169]	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Marriage	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Myḛakitimɛ ceremony	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Death	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes (♀ only)
Initiations:						
Tikɔnte (♂&♀)	Yes (♂&♀)	No	No	No	No	Yes (♀ only)
Difɔnde (♂)	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Ditentide (♂)	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Dikṵntide (♀)	No	No	No	No	No	Yes

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[169] The animals for a diviner's and *siyawesi* installation all need to be black. See S. Merz (2017a) for more details.

Glossary

General Terms

Terms are listed alphabetically. Nouns are ordered according to their singular form. The plural form (when there is one) follows the singular in parentheses. NB specific animal names are listed separately below.

baakɛ	*Tibaakite* kin: Maternal uncles who perform the *tibaakite* ceremony (see below) and become second fathers to the individuals concerned, who then call their uncles *baakɛ*.
dedi	To come out (return; to reincarnate): used for cross-species reincarnation. When a being was not happy in its current life, or wants to seek posthumous revenge, it reincarnates as another being: human-animal, human-tree, animal-human, dog-cat, *siyawesi*-human, etc.
dibakide	Medicine and armlet that protects men from their enemies. Sometimes used by hunters.
dibotide (abuotɛ)	Community: group of related people who share a common identity but who do not need to be consanguineous.
dibuode	Forest/extensive woodland found in the wilderness.
die	To overcome (avenge), literally "to mount" the entity who is being avenged, i.e. when an animal or human who has been killed inappropriately succeeds in "overcoming" their killer.
difɔnde	Male initiation ceremony. See also S. Merz (2014:92-99).
dihuude (awi)	Death celebration: this is the second funeral that follows burial several months or years later. Today, the word *dihuude* is also used more generally to refer to any celebration.
dikpaade	Wilderness: includes dense, impenetrable woodland, more open savannah bush land and grassy plains. Where there is no human presence/activity (except for hunting) and where the larger wild animals live (antelopes, elephants, lions, etc.).

dikųnpuode (*akųnpe*)	*Mtakimɛ* shrine: conical in form, this is located outside the homestead next to the *ukoohų* (vestibule, literally "lineage"). This shrine is constructed for individuals (and sometimes a couple) to reinforce and restore balance to the person's *mtakimɛ*. See also S. Merz (2014:53 & 61) and Figure 2.
dinaacuude (*anaaciipɛ*)	The vestibule, literally "cow-room". In fact, it is far too small for cows, though it does serve as a shelter for the other family animals.
dinitokitade (*anitokitaadɛ*)	Family fertility shrine.
diseduɔde (*asedɛɛ*)	The extended family, literally "family-big".
diseede (asie)	This term is used for both the family and the homestead.
diseede sɛfɛ; *diseede wɛfɛ*	Family snake (specifically a python); My family snake, literally "family my-snake". Compound noun of *wɛnnɛ* (mine) and *fɛsɛfɛ* (snake).
diseede wankɛ (*diseede wante*)	Domestic animal, literally "family animal".
disɛnpode (*asɛnpuodɛ*)	A malevolent bush-being, now commonly equated with the devil.
ditade (ataadɛ)	Stone, this word is used for both the community guardian shrine and the shrine entity. See Figure 4.
ditendokide (*atendokɛ*)	Inhabited area (hamlets, villages and towns).
ditenwɛnde (*atenwiɛnɛ*)	General term for shrine and its shrine entity.
diyammaade (*ayammaadɛ*)	Ability to think, reason and to make decisions.
dota	To remove (castrate, pigs and dogs).
fɛbodimuɔfɛ (*ibodimuɔhį*)	Literally "animating force-crocodile". Compound noun of *kɛbodikɛ* (animating force) and *fɛmuɔfɛ* (crocodile)
haa	"Is ploughing", from the infinitive *hɛɛ* (to plough)

huoni	To avenge. Can also mean to quarrel, to dispute or to fight, depending on the context.
kɛbodikɛ (sibosi)	Animating force.
kɛnaatɔɔkɛ	Anthrax.
kɛninkɛ (tininte)	General term for "meat" but includes everything that can be used in cooking: muscle, skin, fat, cartilage, bone, etc. The singular form, *kɛninkɛ*, is used for a morsel of meat. The plural form for several morsels is *sininsi*.
kɛpaakɛ (sipaasi)	Animals that only live in water (fish, whales and manatees).
kɛwankɛ (tiwante)	General term for "animal"; also more specific term for generally larger animals with four feet or no feet and that can live or move on land (mammals, reptiles, amphibians and snails).
kɛyawedikɛ (siyawesi)	Bush-being who mediates between diviners and *Uwienu*. See also S. Merz (2017a) and Figure 3.
kɛya̰kibeekɛ (siya̰kibeesi)	Medicine-bracelet often carried by hunters. Compound noun of *uya̰nku* (medicine) and *kɛbeekɛ* (bracelet).
kɛya̰kiyadikɛ (siya̰kiyasi)	Medicine-axe often carried by hunters. Compound noun of *uya̰nku* (medicine) and *kɛyadikɛ* (axe).
kɔnta	To become: to change your identity in some way or another. This could be through circumstances (e.g. to inherit money and become rich); further training (to become a doctor, policeman, etc.) or through body-shifting (to become a monkey).
mbɛlimɛ	Mbelime, the language spoken by the Bebelibe.
mbidimu	Sand.
mceyɔmmɛ	Intelligence: used for someone who is ingenious, astute, perspicacious and/or cunning.
mnannammɛ	Something extraordinary or miraculous.
mɔnta	To separate a human killer (hunter, for example) from the wild animal that has been killed.
mtakimɛ	Identity: includes an entity's destiny, relational abilities and character, thus making each individual unique.

mtakitiɛmɛ	Bad *mtakimɛ*, literally "*mtakimɛ*-bad". This accounts for abnormalities such as bad or strange behaviour, character, etc. of a person, animal and other beings.
mtiɛmu	Badness. Christians use this word for "sin".
myammɛ	Gallbladder or bile. This is where a being's *diyammaade* (ability to think, reason and make decisions) and emotions are located.
myạkitimɛ	Reconciliation ceremony to remove words spoken in anger.
po	To kill.
sɛdi	To respect: the notion of fear or awe is implicit as there will be consequences if your respect is lacking.
siihị	To reincarnate.
soya naabesikankạnde (naabesikankạanɛ)	Soya cheese (*fromage de soja* in French). The word for cheese is literally "cow-milk-curdle", which is a compound noun of *fɛnaafɛ* (general term for cattle), *mbesimɛ* (milk) and *kạnta* (to curdle). See Figure 8.
sɔnni	To take care of (ask forgiveness). Verb can be employed in several ways: - For living family animals: to take good care of the animals (provide shelter, food, water, etc.) - When someone kills family animals: to take good care of the animal ceremonially, so it cannot seek vengeance, i.e. "ask forgiveness". - When two people need to be reconciled; to take care of/ restore the relationship.
suki	To put your shirt on; also used to describe act of changing bodies when body-shifting.
sukita	To take your shirt off; also used to describe act of changing bodies when body-shifting.
tibaakite	Ceremony performed for children reincarnated by a maternal ancestor of their father or grandfather. The ceremony integrates children into the maternal ancestor's community so that their *mtakimɛ* will be at ease. Once

	integrated children are considered members of the community and need to respect the community's totems.
tikete	Taboo, interdict. General term for something forbidden (food, drink, actions, relationships, etc.). People also use this when talking about totems (both their own and those that are respected due to an alliance with another community).
tikedimɔmɔnte	Totem: literally "taboo/interdict-true". More specific term used for a person's actual totem(s). Not used in any other context.
tikpate	Wealth/affluence: rich with money and possessions. Used specifically when discussing economic, commercial and material wealth. Also used for political power.
timuɔte	The bush: general term for land that is not inhabited; all that is outside village/town boundaries. Can also be used more specifically to refer to land where there is still human activity such as farming.
timuɔte wankɛ (*timuɔte wante)*	Bush (wild) animal.
tipaninpaate	Behaviour.
tisusukite	Tops: clothes only worn on main torso, such as shirts, jumpers, jackets, etc.
tiwanpoote takimɛ	Butcher *mtakimɛ*, literally "animals-kill" *mtakimɛ*. *Tiwanpoote* is a compound noun of *tiwante* (animals) and *po* (to kill).
tiyɔsite	Restoration; also word used for sacrifices and ceremonies that are performed to maintain and restore relationships between humans and other entities.
tɔɔ denbɛ	Fathers. Often used when referring to fathers and forefathers and translated as *les parents* in French. *Denbɛ* is a plural marker for words that do not have nominal class markers.
Ubiɛlɔ (Bɛbɛlibɛ)	Ubielo (Bebelibe), the auto-ethnonym of those who speak Mbelime.

ubɛbihy̨ (tibɛbite)	Creepy-crawly(ies); animals that have more than four feet or no feet (insects, arachnids, crustacea and worms).
ubaayɔ	Ancestral times, literally "ancestor-past", before the whites arrived. Term used when referring to pre-colonial times. Also pronounced *ubɔɔyɔ*.
ucaatɔ (bɛcatibɛ)	Hunter(s).
udekitiwaabu	Commerce, literally "money-search". Compound noun of *fɛdekitifɛ* (money) and *waani* (to search).
uhedihy̨ (tihedite)	Pelt: when talking about an animal that has fur or feathers, people use the word *uhedihy̨* (fur/feathers) rather than *ukuɔnu* (body-skin) and explain that this is what distinguishes them from humans.
uhiidɔ (bɛhidibɛ)	The dead: this can be the body of a deceased person or the ancestor shrine. People normally refer to the shrine in the plural form, however, to distinguish it from a corpse. Several *bɛhidibɛ* can also be present in one shrine. The shrines are located in the vestibule (*ukoohy̨*). See Figure 1.
uhonhuonɔ (bɛhonhuonbɛ)	Seer(s): derived from the verbal phrase *u n buo* "he who sees" (*bɛ n buo* "they who see").
ukoohy̨ (tikoote)	The vestibule, literally "lineage". Some people – especially the younger generation – call it *ukoyaahy̨ (tikoyaate)*, literally "lineage-male". The *bɛhidibɛ* (dead) reside in the vestibule of the homestead of the most senior man of the family. Other entities – such as the *siyawesi* bush beings – also reside in this room. This is where various ritual items are also kept, and where hunters put the horns and skulls of the animals they have killed. As noted above, it also serves as a shelter for family animals and is sometimes referred to as the cow room (*dinaacuude*).
ukuɔnu (tikɔnte)	Body-skin: the two words are conflated in Mbelime as no distinction is made between the body and the skin. The influence of French and schooling means that many people now say that *ukuɔnu* is the body, whilst *tikɔnte* is the skin.

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uniitɔ (bɛnitibɛ)	Human(s).
unitipuohɔ̰ *(bɛnitipuobɛ)*	Woman, literally "person-who-kills". Compound noun of *po* (to kill) and *uniitɔ* (human). The word for "wife" is *upuohɔ̰* (*bɛpuobɛ*) "she-who-kills". Women have the power to either create or destroy and are called "persons-who-kill" out of respect.
unɔdihṵ (tinɔɔte); *kɛnɔdikɛ (sinɔsi)*	Animals with two feet and that fly (birds and bats).
upaanɔ (bɛpanbɛ)	Modern person, literally "person-new".
upaanu	New times, literally "newness", since the whites arrived. Term used for colonial and post-colonial times, as well as all things new. Translated as *la modernité* in French.
upaasɔ (bɛpasibɛ)	Diviner(s). Their divination is guided by the *siyawesi*, who mediate between the diviner and *Uwienu*. See also S. Merz (2014; 2017a).
upinsihṵ (tipinsite)	Destiny; also the fontanel and the crown of the head, and linked with respiration.
usaanɔ (bɛsanbɛ)	Stranger: this includes newborn babies, new wives, family or friends that you have not seen for a while and people who you have never met before.
usɔbaanɔ *(bɛsɔbaabɛ)*	Community shrine priest, literally "person of the python who guards it". Compound noun of *usɔkpɛnhṵ* (African Rock Python) and *baani* (to guard), with "person" noun class markers.
usɔcudɔ *(bɛsɔcudibɛ)*	Community shrine priest, literally "person of the python who throws sorghum paste at it". Compound noun of *usɔkpɛnhṵ* (African Rock Python) and *cudi* (to throw sorghum paste), with "person" noun class markers. The sorghum paste is made by mixing sorghum flour and sorghum beer together.
usɔhḁdɔ *(bɛsɔhḁdibɛ)*	Community shrine priest, literally "person of the python who sits on it" (i.e. who governs it). Compound noun of usɔkpɛnhṵ (African Rock Python) and *hḁdi* (to sit), with "person" noun class markers.

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utedu	Wealth/abundance: used for someone who has lots of children or animals or a good harvest, for example, but not used for material richness or money.
utenyiɛnɔ *(bɛtenyanbɛ)*	Earth priest, literally "earth-owner". Compound noun of *utenhu̯* (earth) and *uyiɛnɔ* (owner) with "person" noun class markers. The earth priest is ritually responsible for the land that his community occupies. See also S. Merz (2014).
uyuɔsɔ (bɛyuɔsibɛ)	Shrine priest, literally "person-who-fixes". Usually a male who the diviner designates for more day-to-day sacrifices, though sometimes a paternal aunt may be chosen. See also S. Merz (2014).
uyuɔsɔ kpiɛmɔ *(bɛyuɔsibɛ kpɛnbɛ)*	Community shrine priest, literally "person-who-fixes big". The community shrine priest is responsible for the community's *ataadɛ*, and performs the more important ceremonies and sacrifices needed for the community's wellbeing. See also S. Merz (2014).
Uwienu	God, Supreme Being, creator of all; also the sun. Today, the two are often separated, with the sun being described as "*uwienu* that gives light". Some people, though, still say that the sun is *Uwienu's ukuɔnu* (body/skin), so it is probable that the two were not differentiated in the past. Today, a growing number of people materially identify *Uwienu* with the Bible (J. Merz 2014:119).
uyiɛnɔ (yanbɛ)	Owner, lord. Someone who is responsible for or the head of something. Often used in compound nouns to indicate the person's exact responsibility, for example the head of the household is *useyiɛnɔ*, literally "family/homestead-owner". Compound noun of *diseede* (family) and *uyiɛnɔ* (owner) with "person" noun class markers.
wɛpu or *wɛbita*	To crush the testicles (cattle, goats, sheep).
ya	To see and to know.
yan̯ta	Literally "To make [person] drink". Ceremony to separate a human killer from the human victim, whether the death was intentional or not. During the ceremony, the person is administered a medicine that separates him or her from the

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victim. Anyone who was somehow involved in the victim's death and burial should perform *yạnta*, including those who witnessed the victim's death. The ceremony is performed with powerful medicine horns. These are antelope horns stuffed with roots and leaves. The person officiating prepares the medicine that the perpetrator will drink by taking some of the leaves and roots from one of the horns, placing them in a calabash and mixing them with water. The perpetrator places his (left) foot or her (right) foot on the horn and confesses his or her crime, or tells what he or she witnessed. The officiator then holds the calabash to the person's mouth and flicks the medicine into his or her mouth with stiff grass stalks.

Men who have undergone *yạnta* dance with and play the medicine horns by scraping along their length with a ron palm (*Borassus aethiopum*) nutshell during the burial and subsequent funeral of a man who has died a good death. The men place the horns tip down in the ground when they are not playing them (see Figure 6).

yuɔsi	To fix, resolve, repair, restore order, etc. Often interpreted as "to sacrifice" in French, when discussing ceremonies. Also used in other contexts such as tidying the house and repairing a bicycle.

Animals

Below is a list of the Bebelibe animals who feature in this thesis.

difạnkide (afạnkɛ)	Pig (*Scrufus* spp.).
dipikide (apikɛ)	Olive baboon (*Papio anubis*).
diwanmɔnde (awanmuɔnɛ)	Patas monkey (*Cercopithecus* [*Erythrocebus*] *patas*), literally "monkey-red".
fɛconfɛ (icuoni)	Elephant-snout fish (*Mormyrinae mormyrus*).
fɛdodifɛ (iduodi)	General term for genet. Two species present locally: common & blotched genet (*Genetta genetta senegalensis* & *Genetta maculata*).
fɛhạnfɛ (ihạani)	Helmeted guineafowl (*Numida meleagris*).

fɛhefɛ (ihie)	Domestic (Muscovy) duck (*Cairina moschata domestica*).
fɛmatɛdifɛ (imatiɛdi)	Weidholz's banana or leaf-folding frog (*Afrixalus weidholzi*).
fɛmuɔfɛ (imuɔhi̧)	West African or desert crocodile (*Crocodylus suchus*). Also known as *uwuonu yiɛnɔ* (stream owner/master).
fɛnaafɛ (inaahi̧)	General term for cattle, including males (castrated or not), females, young, etc. Usually shorthorns (*Bos brachyceros*).
fɛnaahaakifɛ (inaahaaki)	Ox/bull used for ploughing, literally "the cattle-that-are-ploughing".
fɛkpanaafɛ (ikpanaahi̧)	Western African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer brachyceros*), literally "wilderness-cattle".
fɛkpiifɛ (ikpiihi̧)	Leopard (*Panthera pardus*).
fɛponfɛ (ipuoni)	African civet (*Civettictis civetta*).
fɛsefɛ (isie)	Kanki or western hartebeest (*Alcelaphus busalaphus major*).
fɛsɛfɛ (isiɛ)	General term for all snakes; also used for pythons and guardian entities.
fɛsɔfɛ (isua)	Sheep (*Ovis* spp.).
fɛtadiḩanfɛ (itadiḩaani)	Helmeted guineafowl (*Numida meleagris*), literally "mountain-guineafowl".
fɛtɔɔdifɛ (itɔɔdi)	Bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus scriptus*).
fɛwanfɛ (iwaani)	General term for monkey.
fɛyɔfɛ (iyua)	West Africa Nile monitor lizard (*Varanus stellatus*).
kɛbakɔnkɛ (sibakɔnsi)	West African lungfish (*Protopterus annectens*).
kɛbuokɛ (sibuosi)	Goat. People typically have West African dwarf or pygmy goats (*Capra aegagrus hircus*).
kɛbuɔkɛ (sibuɔsi)	Dog (*Canis* spp.).
kɛdodikɛ (sidosi)	Common warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus*).
kɛhodikɛ (sihosi)	General term for duiker (*Cephalophini*).

kɛhodimɔnkɛ (sihodimɔnsi) dihodimɔnde (ahodimuɔnɛ)	Red-flanked duiker (*Cephalophus rufilatus*).
kɛhudikɛ (sihusi)	General term for tortoise.
kɛkodikɛ (sikosi)	General term for chicken (*Gallus gallus domesticus*).
kɛkɔɔkɛ (sikɔɔsi)	Striped ground squirrel (*Euxerus erythropus*).
kɛku̱ndankɛ (sisu̱ndansi)	Namaqua dove (*Oena capensis*).
kɛku̱nhedikɛ (sisu̱nhedisi)	General term for dove.
kɛmunkɛ (simunsi)	Donkey (*Equus africanus asinus*).
kɛmunnaakɛ (simunnaasi) umunnaahu̱ (timunnaate)	Literally "donkey-who-flattens", as they like to roll in the dirt, therefore flattening the ground. People call this *l'âne sauvage* in French. The French is ambiguous as it could refer to the wild ass (*Equus africanus*) or feral donkeys (*Equus africanus asinus*). It may also be the female waterbuck (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus defassa*). As yet there is no consensus about the Mbelime term for waterbuck.
kɛnɔntikɛ (sinɔntisi)	Cat (*Felis* spp.).
kɛsa̱nkɛ (sisa̱nsi); sa̱nminte (sa̱nminte denbɛ)	Horse (*Equus ferus caballus* spp.).
kɛsu̱ɔkɛ (sisu̱ɔsi)	General term for fly.
kɛtadikodikɛ (sitadikosi)	Stone partridge (*Ptilopachus petrosus*), literally "mountain-chicken".
kɛtubuɔkɛ (situbuɔsi)	General term for jackal, literally "termite-dog". Two species present locally: common & side-striped jackal (*Canis aureus* & *Canis adustus*).
kɛyu̱ɔkɛ (siyu̱ɔsi)	Double-spurred francolin (*Francolinus bicalcaratus*).
kɛyu̱ɔnkɛ (siyu̱ɔnsi)	General term for crab.
Ukunaahu̱ (tikunaate)	Ostrich (*Struthio camelus*).
umuntunhu̱ (timuntunte)	Lion (*Panthero leo*).
unɔnbidihu̱ (tinɔnbite)	Mopane bee or fly (*Plebeina hildebrandti*), which is black, stingless and makes honey. Also known as

the sweat bee or fly.

usɔkpɛnhʉ (tisɔkpɛnte)   African rock python (*Python sebae*).
fɛsɔkpɛnfɛ (isɔkpiɛni)
fɛtɛnponfɛ (itɛnpuoni)

utɛdihʉ (titɛte)   General term for toad.

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