

**Mortality and Regeneration:
Bebelibe Understandings of Life after Death**

‘A dissertation submitted to the University of Wales
Trinity Saint David in fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in Death Studies’

2013

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Declaration Form



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3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

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Abstract

The Bebelibe of northwestern Benin are experiencing rapid socio-cultural change following the arrival of modern institutions. People's views about what happens following death are based on the cyclic flow of *kebodike* (vital force) and *mtakime* (agentive purpose). Death occurs when *kebodike* and *mtakime* leave the physical body. Despite this, their bond with it is not completely severed. Only once the flesh has decomposed, leaving just the bones, can they go on to reincarnate. Consequently, the Bebelibe have two funerals: *mhuumu* (burial, literally 'death') and *dihuude* (celebration), which should follow several months to a year later. Part of the *dihuude* celebration includes a ritual that allows *kebodike* and *mtakime* to 'breathe'.

The introduction and proliferation of coffins during the past twenty years has proved controversial as many think they slow down and complicate reincarnation. For others, *kebodike* and *mtakime* have been dematerialised and spiritualised, primarily through the influence of Christianity. One outcome of this transformation is the quick separation of *kebodike* and *mtakime* from the physical body. For those who accept this development, coffins no longer pose a threat and the focus of *dihuude* changes from ritual to symbolic. Reincarnation aside, many are worried about the escalating costs associated with both *mhuumu* and *dihuude* and the increasing social pressure to use coffins.

As many have embraced aspects of Christianity, even if they do not convert, its impact and the importance it has gained in the area cannot be ignored. Especially younger people are attracted to Christianity as it is associated with being modern. Despite this, many churchgoers still accept reincarnation, although their understanding of it may be modified as people appropriate the parts of Christianity they find attractive on their own terms.

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Although I have used pseudonyms in the main text of the dissertation to help safeguard the identity of the interviewees I cite, I know that they would be disappointed if their names did not appear at all (Tillmann-Healy 2003: 742; van de Geest 2003; van der Geest 2011a: 146-149).

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Linguistic Note

Mbelime (formerly known as Niendé or Nyende) is a Gur language spoken by the Bebelibe, the auto-ethnonym of those who speak Mbelime. For the purpose of this dissertation, with the exception of the words ‘Mbelime’, ‘Bebelibe’ and ‘Ubielo’, I have based the spelling of vernacular terms on the Mbelime orthography (Merz *et al.* 2013).

One of the more challenging aspects of representing Mbelime, as well as some of the other languages in the region, is that it uses one phoneme for the three phones [l], [r] and [d]. In the vernacular, ‘Mbelime’ and ‘Bebelibe’ are written as *Mbedime* and *Bebedibe* respectively. Following French convention (French being Benin’s national language), /ɛ/ is written as ‘è’. Consequently there is a wide variety of spelling in literature. For example Mbelime can be written as Mbèlimè, Mbèdimè or Mbèrme, whilst Bebelibe can be written as Bèbèlibè, Bèbèdibè or Bèbèrbè. Ubielo (*Ubiɛdɔ*), the singular of Bebelibe, creates further confusion as the /u/ is written as ‘ou’ in French, whilst /ɔ/ is written as ‘ô’, giving rise to variations such as Ubielô, Ubierô, Ubiedô, Oubielô, Oubierô, Oubiedô.

Mbelime vowels are pronounced as follows in English:

/a/ as [ɑ:] as in ‘daft’

/e/ as [eɪ] as in ‘hey’

/ɛ/ as [e] as in ‘bed’

/i/ as [i:] as in ‘pea’

/o/ as [ou] ‘go’

/ɔ/ as [ɒ] in ‘hot’

/u/ as [u:] as in ‘blue’

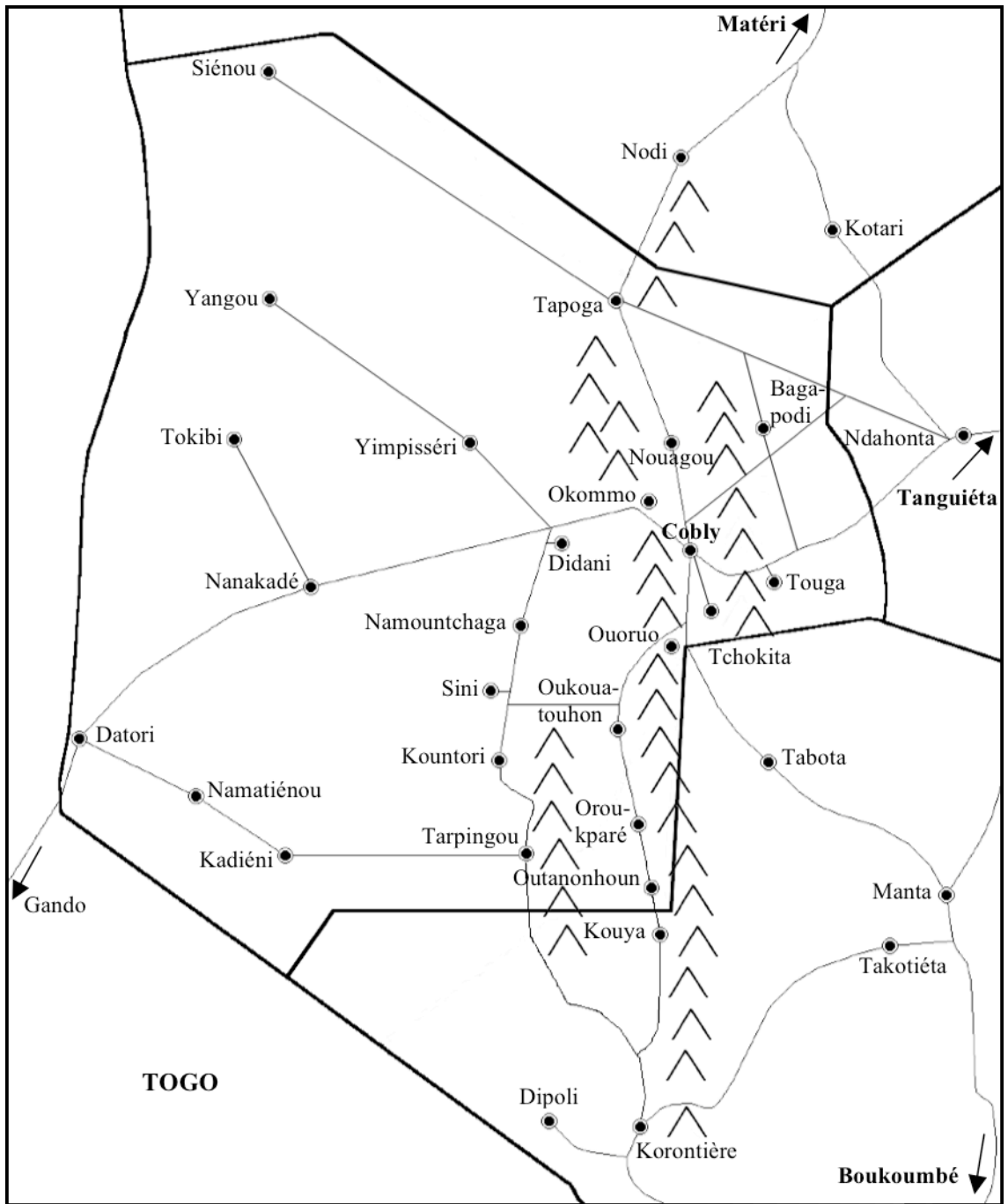
Word-final vowels are always pronounced.

Finally, Mbelime is a tonal language and includes nasalised vowels. I have not marked tone or nasalisation when employing vernacular terminology in the main text, as this would be largely meaningless to the reader. I have maintained the full Mbelime orthography for interviewee citations in the appendices. A glossary of the vernacular terms I employ in the main text is also included in the appendices.

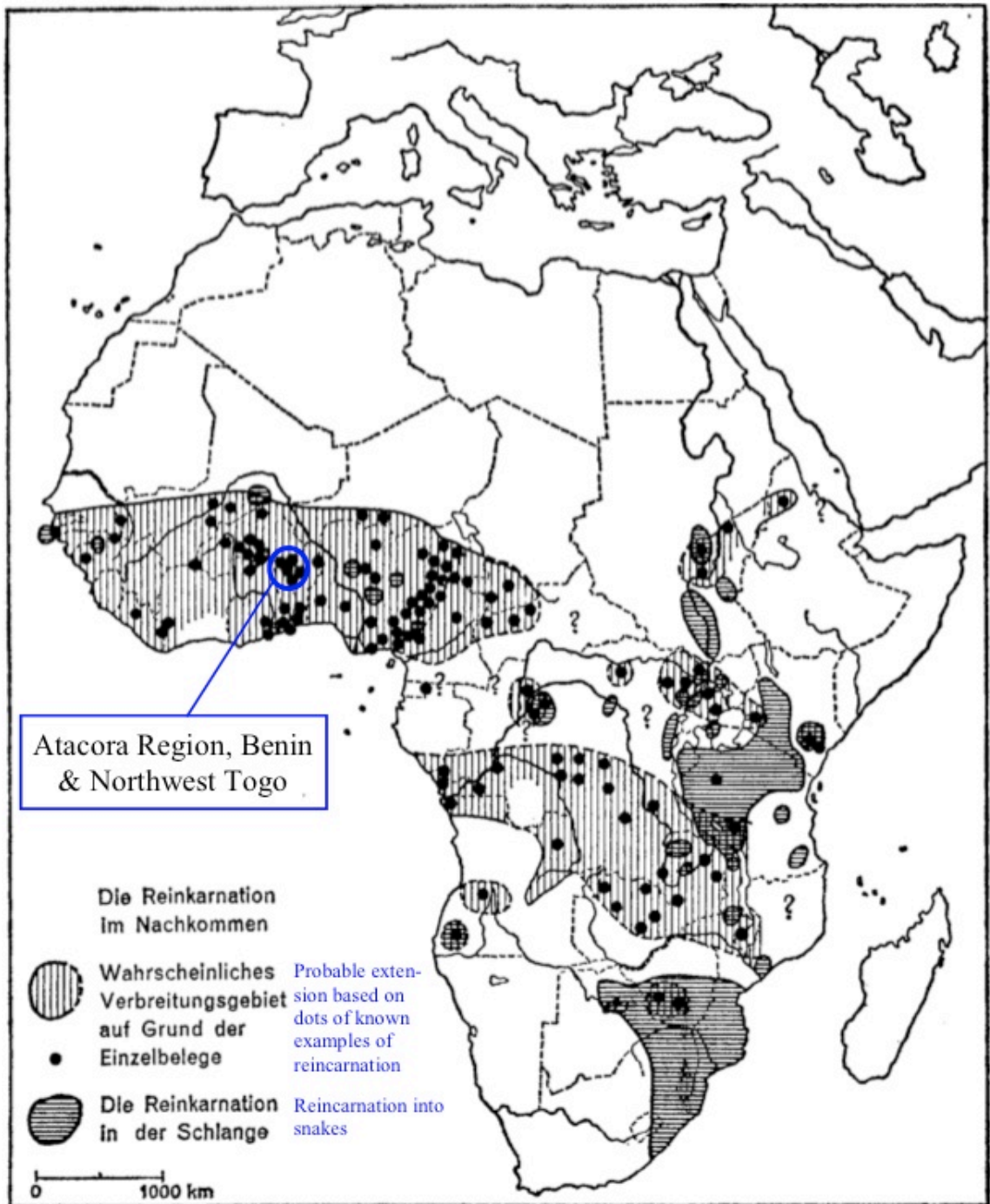


Map 1: Administrative map of the Republic of Benin¹

¹ Source: University of Texas Libraries, http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/africa/benin_admin_2007.jpg



Map 2: Commune of Cobly



Map 3: Distribution of Reincarnation in Africa according to Baumann (1965: 32)

INTRODUCTION

Background

One day when we went to Coby market, a Nigerian evangelist who was exhorting the crowds caught my attention: “Believe in Jesus and you will gain eternal life,” he shouted. Having lived amongst the Bebelibe for several years, this message struck me for several reasons. First of all, it was in English, so largely fell on deaf ears. Secondly, for those who may have understood him, I wondered what sense it made given that the Bebelibe’s underlying ontology is based on the cyclic – and therefore endless – flow of vital force, which in turn is understood in terms of reincarnation. Even though the evangelist’s message may have been largely lost that day, I could not dismiss the implications given that a number of churches are present and growing in Coby. How do people understand and rationalise Christian teaching about life after death that maintains the idea of eternity on the one hand but is not cyclical on the other?

Situated in the mountainous area of the Atacora, the Bebelibe are largely rural and live in loose-knit villages. With a population of around 57,000², most of the Bebelibe live in the Commune of Coby, with some additional villages located in the neighbouring Commune of Boukoumbé, of the Atacora department, in the northwest of the Republic of Benin (see maps). Other groups present in these Communes – with whom the Bebelibe are closely associated, often through marriage – include the Betammaribe³, Goumantché, Kuntamba, Bialiba and Gangamba. There is also a significant Bebelibe diaspora in the town of Tanguiéta and in the cities of Natitingou, Parakou and Cotonou, as well as in Togo, Ghana and Nigeria. It is common for young men to travel to other countries or regions of Benin to find work and earn money to buy goods such as mobile phones, motorbikes and media electronics, before returning home.

Before colonisation, the Bebelibe had a non-centralised social structure, which was characterised as anarchic by early colonial observers (Koussey 1977: 10; Cornevin 1981: 36; N’tia 1993: 107, 113 & 116; Grätz 2000: 682). Their social structure was founded on respect towards each community’s elders and priests who would meet to discuss and decide how best to resolve community issues, often with help from diviners,

² Estimation by the author based on figures from Tchegnon & Guidibi (2006a: 15; 2006b: 15, 17) and an annual growth rate of 2.8%. Figure does not include diaspora populations.

³ Here I refer to the different groups that speak Ditammari: the Betammaribe, the Betiabe and the Besuribe. The Betammaribe are also known as the Tamberma in Togo.

through mediation between the different parties involved (including those of the invisible world) and sacrifice when necessary. During French colonisation, colonial administrators decreed that each village should have a chief (Mercier 1968: 434). Today, local and national government bodies dominate the political system, and each village now elects its own chief. Village chiefs are responsible for good liaison between the village communities and the local authorities, whilst the elders and priests remain responsible for ritual matters and minor questions of jurisdiction.

It has only been in recent years that Christianity became established in the area. The first Catholic missionaries arrived in the Commune in the late 1940s, whilst the first Assemblies of God missionaries arrived in the early 1950s (Akibo 1998; Cornevin 1981: 436, 440-441, 453-454). Other evangelical and Pentecostal missionaries started to establish their respective denominations from the 1990s onwards. Today, an estimated 10% of the population regularly attend a church, whilst Islam remains marginal. The majority of the population continue to follow the path of their ancestors, and all of the Bebelibe I know testify that *Uwienu* is the Supreme Being and creator of all.

My husband and I moved to Coby in 2002 to work as anthropology researchers for SIL⁴ Togo-Benin, a faith-based NGO that specialises in the development of minority languages. Consequently, the incident with the Nigerian evangelist further piqued my curiosity given that I am a Christian and an anthropologist. I discuss this further below.

Why the Bebelibe?

Neighbouring groups, such as the Betammaribe and the Gourmantché, have received considerably more attention from anthropologists, whilst the Bebelibe have been largely ignored or subsumed under the ‘Somba’, an early colonial name for the people of the Atacora region (Grätz 2000: 681-683). Some authors, such as Maurice (1986) and Mercier (1968) include passing references to the Bebelibe as part of their larger work.

Other groups generally look down on the Bebelibe, who were split from the Somba during colonial times. The Bebelibe regrouped what was perceived to be the leftover communities that did not fit elsewhere, as they were seen as lacking distinctive cultural traits and ethnic authenticity. Maurice (1986: 4) suggests that they resulted from ethnic mixing of other Somba groups in the region. However, these Bebelibe communities did have a shared language – now known as Mbelime – which, according

⁴ Formerly known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

to Sambiéni, ‘serves as cement for the people’⁵ (1999: 36). Initially referred to as ‘Nyende’ (literally “I said”), a local committee decided on the names ‘Mbelime’ and ‘Bebelibe’ in 1975. The negative perception of the Bebelibe was revealed and further compounded by Huchet’s (1955 [1950]) children’s book that portrayed them as preferring human meat over dog meat (18), sneaky thieves (46) and fools (50). This stigma continues. Surrounding groups often blame the Bebelibe for crimes committed in the region, whilst others still refer to them as “savages who live like animals”⁶. Many of our Bebelibe friends have expressed their discontent about this situation. Our presence has been welcomed and those we work with have professed their surprise and gratitude that we have chosen to live amongst them and learn from them, whilst non-Bebelibe are shocked at our choice of milieu. Conversely, we feel privileged to live amongst the Bebelibe who have welcomed and adopted us. I can testify that the negative claims made about them are unfounded.

The aim of this dissertation is to present a sample of how fifty Bebelibe understand life after death, especially in terms of reincarnation. I examine if, and how, their perceptions have been altered as a result of exposure to teaching and ideas that can be considered modern and I explain the dynamics that have brought about these changes.

The Arrival of Modern Institutions

The Bebelibe generally distinguish two eras: *ubɔɔyɔ* (old times) and *upaanu* (new times). *Upaanu* is employed in a variety of ways and includes all that is new: things, ideas, institutions, techniques and practices. *Upaanu* is often translated into French as *la modernité* (modernity) and is used to demarcate pre-colonial times with colonisation and post-colonial times. Geschiere *et al.* warn against dichotomising modernity and tradition as this is ‘an ideological product of modernity itself’ (2008: 3). They point out that such a dichotomy necessitates a ‘consciousness of temporal rupture... of there being two different, radically separated times – ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ – of which one is more advanced’ (2008: 3), and Comaroff and Comaroff suggest that ‘such binary contrasts... reduce complex continuities and contradictions to the aesthetics of nice oppositions’ (1993: xii). The employment and understanding of *ubɔɔyɔ* and *upaanu* by many of the Bebelibe we work with indicates that, for them, there *has* been a temporal

⁵ See French & Vernacular Quotes in the appendices for the original wording. All translations from French are mine.

⁶ December 2012, two southerners travelling in a bush taxi to Cobyly were discussing the Bebelibe in Fon. They did not realise that one of the Bebelibe passengers, a friend of ours, also spoke Fon.

rupture. Even if this rupture is itself a product of modernity, all my interviewees talked about it to varying degrees.

Comaroff and Comaroff point out that the word ‘modernity’ has become an almost universal metaphor for ‘new means and ends, new materialities and meanings’ (1993: xiii). Amongst those I interviewed, the introduction of new things, ideas and institutions that have resulted in accelerated socio-cultural change, continue to be strongly associated with *sipiensi* (the whites), despite the end of colonialism. The introduction of coffins exemplifies this, as I discuss below. As regards institutions in the Commune of Cobly, the first Catholic school and mission station was established in 1947; Assemblies of God mission station in 1950-51 and school in 1960; the first state primary school in 1959, state secondary school in 1985 and 6th Form in 2009.

Many people are attracted to Christianity as it allows them to move along a trajectory that offers an immediate association with modernity, which often results in a transition towards individualism, promotion of the nuclear family, increase in ownership rights and commerce (Bayart 2008 [1998]: 92-93; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 200-201; Erny 2001: 19; Horton 1971: 86; Manning 1998: 101; J. Merz 2008: 209; Meyer 1998; 1999). This is evident amongst Bebelibe Christians who are often the most economically active and reject many of the local customs. There are many, however, who have attended church, become disillusioned by it and have left again. This disillusionment seems to be with the institutional nature of the church rather than with Christianity as a faith. Thus, they may still consider themselves Christian and are happy to appropriate ideas from the teaching they received, especially if the ideas help them to better understand the world around them. Consequently, I prefer to talk in terms of churchgoers and non-churchgoers rather than Christians and non-Christians. In the same way, there are those who have never been to church but are also open to appropriating ideas that they learn from others – often their children – who attend church. The way that *disenpode* (a bush being) has been readily accepted as the devil by churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike is a good illustration of this. J. Merz (2008: 208) explains that the relatively recent adoption of *disenpode* as the devil helps people make sense of evil, which usually manifests itself through the disruption of normality. He points out that the Bebelibe ‘did not accept the whole belief system presented by the missionaries. Rather, they appropriated the parts of it they found attractive on their own terms’ (2008: 208).

The relatively recent arrival of Christianity presents me with an ideal opportunity to examine its impact on non-Christian notions of life and death and vice versa. I

propose that there is a two-way dynamic process at work, which results in vernacular or localised forms of Christianity (Erny 2001: 18-19; Jindra 2011: 122; Meyer 1999: 268; Moore 2004: 71-72; van der Geest 2011b), whilst those who do not embrace Christianity per se are open to adapting and assimilating certain ideas. As there is evidence that many have already embraced aspects of Christian teaching, even if they do not participate in church activities, the impact of Christianity and the importance it has gained in the area cannot be ignored. Meyer exhorts the importance of establishing ‘a link between the hitherto more or less separate fields of research on African “traditional religion” on the one hand, and Christianity on the other’ (1999: 205). She points out that ‘[p]eople’s continuing concern with the boundary between “heathendom” and Christianity’ (1999: 205) requires a closer examination.

Other institutions associated with *upaanu* (new times) include Western-style health care and an education system modelled on the French one, which is steadily growing in both the number of schools and attendance. Although the school curriculum has now been adapted to include Beninese history, geography and African literature, early French colonial policy focussed on teaching French language and culture. Some colonialists went as far as saying that the Beninese needed to be given French culture and be taught that they were of French descent (Garcia 1971; cf. Manning 1998: 166). Philosophy, which includes Cartesian thinking, remains an important subject. Onyango-Ouma, who conducted research into how schools are perceived in rural Kenya, notes that:

Modernity is the dominant discourse in the production of educated persons in the study schools. An educated person is also a modern person distinct from others in the community... In constructing their sense of a schooled identity children distance themselves from an image of backwardness (2006: 399).

During research conducted by my husband, interviewees often shared that becoming educated means that the person becomes white.

Despite Western-style health care, which is usually coupled with intercession for the sick through Christian prayer and/or consulting *Uwienu* (God) via a diviner, inevitably the moment comes when each person dies. For the Bebelibe, it is only the physical body that dies. The other components that constitute the person, however, do not die but move on.

The Cycle of Life and Death

A major factor differentiating *benitibe* (people) from *tiwante* (animals) is their ability to communicate directly. For an animal to communicate with a human, and vice versa, one

or the other needs to transform itself. Such transformations happen whilst sleeping. A dream is the living-out of one's *kebodike*'s (vital force) nocturnal activities (Ingold 2000: 100-101; Erny 2007: 37-39).

The ontology of both the *benitibe* and *tiwante* is identical. Each being has a physical form (*ukuɔnu* 'body'), *kebodike* (vital force) and *mtakime* (a component that gives agency and purpose to the being). *Mtakime*'s character means that engagement with the world is inter-subjective or relational (Bird-David 2006: 44; Hornborg 2006: 29; Kohn 2007: 4), thereby creating a shared community (Bird-David 2006: 47-48). Ikenga-Metuh refers to this as '[e]xistence-in-relation' (1987: 263). According to Willis (1990: 6), such a shared community is characteristic of small-scale, non-hierarchical societies. Bebelibe ontology corresponds with what Ingold describes as 'animic' (2000: 112), which he sums up with the following statement: '[v]ital force... is free-flowing like the wind, and it is in its uninterrupted circulation that the continuity of the living world depends' (2000: 112). The physical body, *mtakime* and *kebodike* correspond with Ingold's 'three essential components... the physical body, the body-soul and the free-soul' (1986: 246) respectively. Ingold (1986: 248; 2000: 91-92) describes the body as the 'container' or 'vehicle' for what really constitutes an individual, therefore allowing individuals 'to extend the spatiotemporal range of [their] movement, influence and experience' (Ingold 2000: 100; cf. Swanson 1985: 31, 38). *Kebodike* and *mtakime* do not die with the physical body but rather go on to reincarnate. Hence there is a continual recycling of life through the decomposition of the physical body and rebirth (Ingold 1986: 250-251).

Huber (1973: 428-429, 433-436), a Swiss anthropologist who conducted research amongst the Bebelibe in 1966/67, makes several observations about reincarnation and the *mtakime*, which he describes as the person's destiny. He suggests that understanding the notion of *mtakime* is complicated by reincarnation and that the two are 'intimately linked'ⁱⁱ (1973: 434). He adds that reincarnation usually follows the patriline but can be matrilineal. Huber expresses surprise at how seriously the Bebelibe take reincarnation:

Every man born in this world, it is believed, is a returned ancestor (*ossiho*)⁷ to this world... when asking about the true content of this belief, one learns that it is not a simple metaphor, nor a simple observation about the ancestor in question. It appears, rather, according to majority thinking, that it is actually the soul of the ancestor that will return... thus a well respected informant talked with reverence about his granddaughters

⁷ *Usiio* 'the reincarnated', plural *besihibe*.

because their *mtakime* have come from maternal ancestors... he thinks that it is really his mother who has been reborn in his eldest granddaughter...ⁱⁱⁱ (1973: 434-435).

Huber (1973: 435) speculates that the Bebelibe have combined two theories: the idea of predetermined destiny (as represented by *mtakime*), which is either chosen by the person or designated by God, and that of the reappearance of ancestors in their descendents. He adds that neighbouring groups keep the two theories apart and that the idea of returning ancestors is especially widespread amongst the Bebelibe.

Finally, Huber mentions that it seems possible for some people to share the same *mtakime* (1973: 435). He (1973: 423) includes two brief descriptions of a ceremony needed to separate the living from the dead. This scenario can result when two people receive their *mtakime* from the same ancestor, then one of them dies. In an earlier article on marriage, Huber (1969: 262, 274) explains that the potential risk of two people who share the same *mtakime* getting married is the major principle behind exogamous marriage. He (1973: 436) notes that some also believe that humans and animals can share their *mtakime*.

Swanson (1985: 31, 38), writing about the Gourmantché, explains that the flesh is only one minor component of the person, who is also comprised of a soul, ancestor form, destiny, guiding spirit and God consciousness. He then provides a detailed description of the *ɲaali* or 'ancestor form' (1985: 109-161). In sum, the *ɲaali* is a part of the reincarnated ancestor's soul, which can divide and provide up to twenty *ɲaali*; one for each finger and toe of the deceased. The *ɲaali* is present in the woman during intercourse and provides a mould for the new person's soul. Consequently, Swanson points out that it would 'be false to say that an individual is the reincarnation of an ancestor. He is much more' (1985: 114, underlining in original). However, the presence of the *ɲaali* explains why the reincarnated individual has similar physical features and skills as the reincarnating ancestor. The *ɲaali* is superior to a person's soul, meaning that it can make demands of the person and can influence the person's destiny. Swanson adds that reincarnation is usually patrilineal and always same-sex. God oversees the creation of new souls and their union with the *ɲaali*. Conversely, when the person dies, the two components separate and return to God. The *ɲaali* then rejoins the soul of the original person. Swanson (1985: 158) concludes that as reincarnation does not involve all of the non-material components, life is directional rather than cyclical.

Based on Swanson's description and from accounts I had heard from individuals about people who share the same ancestor, I speculated whether something similar

could be happening; that an ancestor reincarnates several people simultaneously through the division of his or her *kebodike*, which then joins the new person's *mtakime* as an additional component. I wondered whether *disihide* (reincarnation) could be the equivalent of *ɲaali* 'ancestor form'. I had learnt about people who would not attend *mhuumu* (burial) and *dihuude* (funeral celebrations, usually several months to several years later) of someone with whom they shared the same ancestor as they could die. Thus part of my research was to establish what exactly *disihide* is and its relationship with *mtakime*. I also needed to determine how reincarnation works, not only non-physically, but also physically. For example, does the corpse need to decompose first and are the bones of the deceased important? What is the relationship between reincarnation and the conception, development and birth of the new child?

Sewane (2003: 183, 228-229, 322-325), writing about the Betammaribe, mentions that when the flesh of the deceased has decomposed, leaving just the bones, the *diyuni* (breath) separates from the shadow, which in turn is linked to the flesh, and goes to form new children. Ideally, the deceased forms at least two children, preferably more, and can potentially form as many children as he or she has joints. Sewane (2003: 85) explains that those who share the same *diyuni* also suffer together; if one has a headache, the others will too. When one of them dies, the others may collapse, even though individuals who share the same *diyuni* may not know each other or live in different villages. As with the Gourmantché, it seems that reincarnation is partial.

Generally, reincarnation is more commonly associated with Asia than Africa, despite Parrinder's observation that reincarnation is 'deeply rooted' and widespread in Africa (1957: 264). Consequently, whilst other topics relating to death, such as the role of ancestors, have been thoroughly addressed, reincarnation has received comparatively little attention. This does not mean that it is not widely acknowledged and authors regularly refer to notions of reincarnation within a wider setting (for example, Bako 2009; Blier 1983: 379-380; Duru 1983: 3-4; Ephirim-Donkor 1997; Erny 1988: 38-42; Gottlieb 2004b; Guigbile 2001: 210-213; Kalis 1997; Lemaire 1995: 62-67; Muller 1976; Nabofa 1983: 311-312; Okwu 1979: 20-21; Padenou and Barrué-Pastor 2006: 180-185; van der Geest 2002: 18-19; 2004: 907).

One area where reincarnation is frequently discussed concerns 'babies-born-to-die'^{iv} (Lainé 1990: 87). These are babies that die before they have formally entered the world of the living, usually by means of naming or 'coming out' ceremonies. Families that suffer the loss of several babies, may consider them to be the same individuals who come and go, either because they prefer the life in the parallel world from which they

came or because of a pact made in that world before their birth (cf. Appiah-Kubi 1983: 260; Bonnet 1994: 100-102; Lemaire 1995: 67-68; Stevenson 1985: 20ff.; Erny 2007).

Bastide (1965b: 1) noted that for Africa reincarnation is rarely addressed in its own right despite its known importance. One early exception is an article by Ratray and Buxton (1925) who suggest that reincarnation amongst the Ashanti is a determining factor that favours cross-cousin marriages. As Map 3 above illustrates, varieties of reincarnation are widespread throughout sub-Saharan Africa and especially in West Africa. Bastide (1965b: 1) hoped that the 1963 colloquium – with reincarnation in Africa as the main theme – would result in more ethnographic research in this area with in-depth studies of specific ethnic groups. Since then, several authors have addressed the topic, thus going some way to meet Bastide's hope.

Writings about reincarnation can be divided into two broad categories: those that present a study of a particular group (for example, Dieterlen 1965; Dupire 1982; Gottlieb 2004a; Pernet 1986; Stevenson 1986; Zahan 1965), and those that present an overview of reincarnation (for example, Bonnet 1981; Erny 2007; Heijke 1993; Majeed 2012; Parrinder 1957; Sundermeier 1998; Szatkowski 2007; Zahan 1986).

Many of the authors who write about reincarnation – whether as the focus of their writing or as part of a larger work – discuss how reincarnation should be defined. Keller (1986) briefly describes the notion of reincarnation versus transmigration versus metempsychosis (1986: 13). Having defined these terms, he then interchanges them: 'a "vital core"... transmigrates by reincarnating successively into different material bodies...' (1986: 15) for example.

Bonnet (1981: 140), writing about the Mossi of Burkina Faso, suggests that ancestors transmigrate rather than reincarnate given that they can change sex. In a later publication, Bonnet reaffirms her doubt about reincarnation – a 'term that appears improper to me'^v (1994: 102) – given that reincarnation is partial. She reiterates that ancestors transmigrate (1994: 103).

Writing about the Betammaribe, Blier explains that each person has a close affiliation with two ancestors who 'are said to form each baby in the womb' (1983: 379-380). She then refers to the reincarnating ancestors as the child's 'sponsors' and 'protectors' and disputes the use of the term 'reincarnation' in a footnote:

This is not reincarnation in the familiar sense of the word, since each ancestral sponsor puts only a small part of himself in the child. However, the ancestors and the child are close enough so that the child is said to become bothered if either ancestor is in some way troubled (1983: 380, note 27).

Blier's explanation loses the idea that the ancestor is still – even if partially – incarnated into the person and essential to their personhood.

Generally, works that focus on defining 'reincarnation', rather than examining the importance of returning ancestors for the societies concerned, are inadequate. Not only do some of the terms suggested instead of 'reincarnation' appear to be largely synonymous (cf. Erny 2007: 13-14), the argument that the term 'reincarnation' is inappropriate for some groups because its modality differs from other groups is weak. This touches on a much larger anthropological problem, namely that many of the terms anthropologists employ (such as witchcraft, clan, shrine) do not neatly correspond with ethnographic realities. Rather than squeezing ethnographic realities into predetermined terms, we need to broaden the anthropological concepts we use. Discussing the notion of partial reincarnation, Ikenga-Mehu expresses a similar opinion:

With due respect to the eminent scholars who propounded this view... To deny or explain away an aspect of a people's belief in order to make it look more reasonable is not an interpretation but a distortion (1987: 269).

Even should reincarnation prove to be partial, *something* incarnates and shapes the new person, who is intricately linked with the ancestor concerned. Erny (2007: 13, 110-111) adds that this alone justifies the use of the term 'reincarnation'. When reincarnation is not partial, the new person is still distinguished from their incarnation by their individuality. I return to this issue below.

Zahan (1986: 62) too acknowledges the futility of defining reincarnation for the African setting. He rightly suggests that each African culture has its own manner of understanding reincarnation and that it is pointless to try and come up with one model that encompasses them all. Friedli (1986: 59) also points out that reincarnation cannot be summarised by one all-encompassing definition. Notions of reincarnation rather embrace the cultural and religious richness specific to each culture, whether Western, African or Asian, which in turn reflects their particular values. Thus, each culture's understanding of reincarnation is coherent.

Some of the authors, in their attempt to provide an overview of reincarnation in Africa, tend to over generalise. Szatkowski (2007: 78-81), for example, having presented different forms of reincarnation in West Africa, then states that:

...reincarnation is *always* within the same clan and only concerns the recently dead. In addition, it stops once the name of the deceased is forgotten. Indeed, *these two conditions are indispensable for reincarnation to happen*^{vi} (2007: 81, emphasis mine).

These conditions do not apply to the Bebelibe. As will become apparent, reincarnation is not restricted to the clan, neither does it stop when the name of the deceased is forgotten. I discuss this further below.

Szatkowski's article is largely a presentation and summary of what others, such as Sundermeier (1998) and Gravrand (1982), have written. Sundermeier (1998: 15) admits that he was originally sceptical about reincarnation in Africa and argued against it in the past. Although he includes some overgeneralisations, Sundermeier makes several pertinent observations. For example, he laments the fact that the significance of reincarnation

for the reincarnated himself, can be deduced only indirectly, as the existing literature has hardly paid any attention to this question, nor to the problem of reincarnation in general. In addition, this question is orientated to Western, individualistic thinking and is influenced by the Indian reincarnation teachings, that are known to emphasize the singularization of the human being through doing and karma (1998: 18).

Having recognised that reincarnation can manifest itself in different ways, Sundermeier (1998: 21) acknowledges that regardless of how it functions in a given society, the benefits are the same. He concludes that '[r]eincarnation creates confidence in life, here and in the future. Thus, belief in reincarnation in Africa refers to the continuity and renewability of life and combines its social and transcendent dimensions' (1998: 23). Sundermeier (1998: 24-25; cf. Erny 2007: 103) demonstrates that there is no justification for dismissing reincarnation in Africa – or trying to rename it as something else – simply because it does not fit the Asian model. He then proposes that two parallel models, which are independent of each other, should be considered. Whilst reincarnation in India emphasises individuality and redemption, reincarnation in Africa emphasises social orientation and reconciliation. Ikenga-Mehu suggests that most world religions are 'world-denying', whilst 'African religion is world-affirming' (1987: 274). He adds that '[t]his is the better side of the world than the after-life and the dead are only too happy to come back to it' (1987: 274). I return to this below.

Noret notes that funerals and social change are often treated separately, with the focus of the former on 'the permanence of "traditional rites"' and the latter 'on the forms adopted by "modernity"' (2011: 156) and that they need to be brought together. Although this is now being addressed (for example, Arhin 1994; Gable 2006; Jindra 2005; Jindra and Noret 2011; Monga 1995; Noret 2004; 2010; van der Geest 2000; 2002; 2006), literature that investigates the impact of socio-cultural change on reincarnation is lacking. Gottlieb (2004b: 80) mentions that the Beng of Côte d'Ivoire

perceive *wrugbe* (where ancestors reside before reincarnating) as neighbourhoods in African and European cities. She states that this demonstrates ‘a creative effort to incorporate modernity into the framework of tradition and an effort to distance the other world as dramatically as possible’ (2004b: 80). Stevenson (1985: 18) notes that the Igbo of Nigeria think that using birth control thwarts those wanting to reincarnate. Messenger, discussing the middle-aged Anang of southeastern Nigeria, stated that ‘the missionaries have met their strongest resistance in trying to alter Anang beliefs in reincarnation...’ (1959: 292). Although they readily adopted ideas about Satan and reformulated how they perceived the afterlife in terms of heaven and hell, ‘[r]eincarnation eventually occurs... [as] those in heaven must rejoin their patrilineages below’ (1959: 292). Whilst Dupire (1982: 17), writing about the Serer Ndout of Senegal, shares that some of the old folk hoped for a modern profession in their next life. Finally, Erny recognises that most of the materials he cites represents a “‘traditional” Africa, that no longer exists as such’^{vii} (2007: 22), and that, today, beliefs are challenged by Christianity, Islam, science and modernity. He (2007: 22) adds that this presents an important area of research, which he barely touches on.

This study is important as it bridges the topics of reincarnation and modernity, a subject that is markedly underrepresented in literature. The Bebelibe offer an interesting case, since Huber suggested that their notions about reincarnation differ from those of neighbouring groups. Their situation is of further interest with the expansion of Christianity and rapid socio-cultural change. Before presenting the results of my research, however, I first discuss my methodology.

METHODOLOGY

As my research focuses on people's understanding of life and death I concluded that semi-structured or 'reflexive' (Bell 2002: 136; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 117) interviews would be best. Structured interviews would be too limiting and impersonal, coming over as an oral questionnaire, whereas unstructured interviews could prove to be too open and go in unexpected directions. Interesting though the conversation may be, it may not yield the information sought (Bell 2002: 138; Fontana and Frey 1998: 52 & 56).

I conducted all the interviews during the first quarter of 2012. Thirteen of the interviews were in French only, whilst the rest were in French and Mbelime, which Bienvenue, my assistant, helped interpret. After some refinement (see below), I started each interview with the same question, "what does *kebodike* do?" I followed this with questions about *mtakime* and other invisible components and how they relate to *kebodike*, *mtakime* and the physical body. I then explored what happens to these components when someone dies, modifying my questions as necessary depending on how the person responded. If, for example, someone stated that they had rejected reincarnation, then I did not explore the subject further and focused on what they thought happened instead. As I was preparing for my research, I learnt that, for some, reincarnation is affected by the use of coffins. I therefore incorporated questions that dealt with how burial and funeral practices have been changed or modified during the person's lifetime and the perceived impact of these changes.

In addition to questions relating to ontology and reincarnation, I asked other questions about death to help build a general picture of the overall understanding of life and death.⁸ In the same vein, I attended burials (*mhuumu*) and funeral celebrations (*dihuude*) when possible and participated as appropriate. These are important social events for the Bebelibe and are often attended by several hundred people – both those who are directly related to or associated with the deceased and those who come to greet the family and join the celebrations. No invitation is needed; the more who come the better honoured the deceased. Although my skin colour marks me out, the sheer number of people means that my presence is not a big distraction to the overall proceedings. It also means that I can gain access to parts of the ceremonies I may otherwise miss as

⁸ See Interview Questions in the appendices for the questions I used to guide the interviews.

people are generally keen that I witness and document the different rites, social interactions, artefacts and their manipulation during *mhuumu* or *dihuude*.

Understanding *mhuumu* and *dihuude* practices, rituals and symbolism is important as they directly concern the sending-off of the deceased person and their subsequent reincarnation.

As *mhuumu* and *dihuude* are attended by so many people, I am aware that I may be observing and participating in events without the prior knowledge and informed consent of all the other participants. However, I never attend *mhuumu* or *dihuude* of complete strangers nor do I go alone. The primary organisers usually know beforehand that I will be attending and even expect my participation and documentation of the event.

Regardless of the type of research, good relationships are crucial, especially in a milieu where relationships and reciprocity are central to the functioning of society. As Banks states ‘[s]ocial research has to be an engagement, not an exercise in data collection... social research itself is a social activity’ (2001: 179; cf. Gibbal 1988: 216). In general, establishing new relationships involves several visits with gift exchange before a person may feel comfortable enough to share deeply and honestly about their knowledge and experiences. I sought out fifty-one people with whom I already had an established relationship, many of whom I consider my friends. Sometimes these were people I had previously worked with, at other times they were people who knew me through my husband. With all of them, there was an established relationship of mutual trust and understanding (Fontana and Frey 1998: 53, 59-60, 65 & 73; Silverman 2001: 90; Tillmann-Healy 2003), even if this was by extension through my husband (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 74). As the interviewees willingly told me when they did not know something and pointed out when I had misunderstood them, I was reassured that they were not fabricating information for my supposed benefit.

The Bebelibe practice of adopting outsiders into a community and assigning them corresponding kin terms means that we have close family ties with three communities, namely Cobly (where we live), the village of Touga where my husband originally conducted research in the late 1990s and the village of Oroukparé where Bienvenue, my assistant, comes from (see Map 2).

Our long-term presence and adoption into several communities means that we are no longer considered outsiders nor do we feel as such (van der Geest 2011b: 259), but neither will we ever be truly Bebelibe. This odd position has its advantages as we are granted ‘insider’ privileges and now have access to events and information that we

were previously excluded from, whilst people are not surprised by our apparent ignorance or social *faux pas*. Narayan claims that such privileges result in ‘better scholarship’ (1993: 677). Following van der Geest, this position as a quasi-insider means that the researcher has ‘methodological and epistemological advantages which most anthropologists lack’ (2011b: 259; cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 89), Fellow Bebelibe conducting the same research may experience more problems as they are expected to know the social norms and information they seek (Anderson and Jack 1998; Ouattara 2004: 160; Taouéma 2010: 45). Things I may have considered exotic in the early days no longer distract me. This allows me to focus on understanding the different aspects of Bebelibe society (McCutcheon 1999: 4-5; Narayan 1993: 677).

I was able to arrange interviews with fifty of the people. One lady, declined to be interviewed once she learnt that the topic was about death. Generally, the subject of death is not controversial and is part of everyday conversation. People willingly express their opinions about why someone died and discuss how a burial or funeral went. As van der Geest observed for the Kwahu of Ghana, ‘death is always around and takes its toll at all ages... Death is part of life’ (2004: 902). This particular lady’s reticence was due to accusations that she was a harbinger of death and a witch. There were potential ramifications for her, if she had gone through with the interview and should someone have died afterwards.

When selecting the people I hoped to interview, I chose a variety of candidates including those who live in a town setting (Cobly) versus a village setting (Touga and Oroukparé), male and female, young and old, those who attend church (protestant and catholic) and those that do not, to see if there is a pattern of opinions according to age, education, milieu, and religious affiliation.⁹ I also included key figures in the community such as village elders, priests and town council members. I recognise, however, that this study may not be representative of the whole population.

Of the fifty interviewees, only fifteen were women, nine of whom were widows. Generally, my husband and I have found that men are more forthcoming and willing to participate in research. Although witchcraft accusations are more commonly levelled at women, I do not think this explains why women are less forthcoming, despite the incident outlined above. Conversely, the men’s willingness to participate may be because they represent the public face of the family. Widows are the exception. As they have to assume roles normally performed by men, they often become more forthright.

⁹ See Interview Statistics in the appendices for a breakdown of the sample.

Moratti (2009: 82) encountered similar difficulties when conducting research in internet cafés in several Beninese cities. She notes that the young women she met were generally more reticent to participate in her research than the men.

Another challenge concerned communication. Although I have lived in Coby for over ten years, I do not speak Mbelime to the degree needed for in-depth interviewing. I am aware that I could miss the semantic nuances and implicit meanings of some of the things I was told (McCutcheon 1999: 20; Pike 1999: 31). Logic of thought also differs and, conversely, the interviewees would sometimes answer a question I asked in a way I was not expecting (Fontana and Frey 1998: 58). As Bell (2002: 136) points out, wording is important. For example, when I asked how burial practices had changed since the interviewees' childhood, several people responded that they had not changed. This surprised me given that coffins were not used when the person concerned was a youngster. When I asked, however, what had been introduced to the burial ceremony, the same people would talk about the arrival of coffins and other paraphernalia. For them, the basic burial ceremony has not changed but has rather been embellished.

The situation is further complicated as the wider language of communication is French. This meant that I was working in English, then translating into French whilst trying to think with Mbelime logic as I framed the questions so that they would be correctly understood by the interviewee. Bienvenue, my assistant, was my first interviewee. I discussed the questions in detail with him afterwards and made sure he understood the nature and purpose of the research. After the first two interviews we conducted together, we discussed the questions again, which helped me to further refine them. For example, I originally asked the interviewee to list the different components and explain what they did, and how they related to one another. We realised that this was too open and vague. We decided that I needed to ask about each component individually.

Bell (2002: 141-142; cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 116) points out that putting interviewees at their ease is important. The first time I met with a potential interviewee, I explained the nature and purpose of my research as I felt it was important that they understood why I was conducting the research and how I would use what they shared with me (Bell 2002: 142; Fontana and Frey 1998: 70). I explained that the interview should take around one hour and asked if they would be willing to work with me. We then arranged where and when the interview could take place, and I asked if they would be happy for me to record the interview. Most interviewees chose to be

interviewed at their home, but other locations included my home and, in several instances, the interviewee's workplace.

Another practical challenge concerned gaining informed consent. I decided against written consent for two reasons. Firstly, many of my interviewees' literacy skills are limited. Secondly, I felt it inappropriate for the situation and relationships involved in my research (van der Geest 2011a: 143-144), as written consent could be associated with political motivations. To overcome this, I sought verbal consent at the start of each interview by asking if the person was happy to help me with my university research, if I could record our interview and if I could use what they shared in written documents such as my dissertation. Having already established that I could record the interview beforehand, the MP3 recorder was already running so that I had evidence of their responses. As it was, many of the interviewees were perplexed that I needed to ask permission to interview, record and possibly quote them. Most just answered with in the affirmative, but several gave speeches reiterating the nature of our relationship and that helping me with my research reflects the reciprocity that has been established between us.

I chose to record the interviews so that I could concentrate on the discussion and allow the conversation to flow as naturally as possible. This also facilitated a full analysis of the interview. Having a record of vocabulary used for certain concepts is important, especially for potential vocabulary differences between churchgoers and non-churchgoers, or to indicate where and how Christian notions have been adopted more widely. As Meyer (1999: 55, 80-82) points out, it is important to understand what happens to the meaning of words when they cross linguistic or cultural boundaries whilst Hammersley and Anderson (2007: 145) observe that the vocabulary people employ helps in understanding how they perceive the world and construct reality.

Forty-nine of the fifty interviews were recorded. The one exception was due to a technical glitch, necessitating that I took notes instead. I fully transcribed the French dialogue of each interview whilst Bienvenue transcribed the parts in Mbelime that relate directly to the dissertation. These sections were then back translated into French. That way I could compare what I originally said with how Bienvenue related the question in Mbelime, and what the interviewee said with what Bienvenue told me in French during the interview. I was not worried that Bienvenue would deliberately mislead me as we have worked together since 2002 and have a good relationship. However, I am aware that he may have his own biases and assumptions that could influence how he framed the question and what he subsequently told me (J. Merz 1998: 6). The back translations

reassured me that he was generally doing a good job. The main problems were when tiredness set in and if an interviewee talked at length, meaning that Bienvenue could not always recall everything the interviewee had said.

Throughout my research, I reflected upon my own understanding and assumptions about life after death (Bowman 1992: 1; Crane and Angrosino 1992: 4). My Christian upbringing has shaped my understanding, meaning that I believe in God and the concept of eternal life. Growing up I knew about reincarnation and, although it was never part of the Christian teaching I received, I remember talking hypothetically with my sister, saying that I would like to come back as a cat. During the interviews I found myself sympathising more with those who held to reincarnation than to those who had rejected it. Having lived in a milieu where reincarnation is the norm, I have found that it offers a good explanation for certain phenomena. Some of these I can rationalise in terms of genetics and inheritance, but others are not so easily explained, such as the potential danger for those who share the same reincarnating ancestor.

In general, I have struggled with the Christianity portrayed by the local churches in Cobly. Obedience, separation from the *paiens*¹⁰ (pagans) and *Uwienu*'s (God) judgement are more in focus when compared to my personal experience of Christianity, which focuses on *Uwienu*'s grace and forgiveness. During my research, however, it struck me that all the interviewees talked about *Uwienu*'s judgement to some degree, regardless of whether they were churchgoers or not. In non-Christian thought *Uwienu* is distant and can only be communicated with via intermediaries. Maintaining good relationships with these intermediaries and by extension *Uwienu* is important. During the interviews, many spoke about *Uwienu*'s displeasure should someone have the misfortune to die a bad death and thus return to *Uwienu* before their designated time. Therefore, it seems that what I am actually confronted with is the local Christian outworking of underlying values and understanding of *Uwienu* (cf. Meyer 1998: 322), which in turn, might have been exacerbated by missionaries focusing on appropriate Christian behaviour and rule-keeping, as happened amongst the Ewe of Ghana (Meyer 1999: 77).

According to research conducted by my husband, it seems that this Christian outworking results in more rigorous rules and regulations than normally encountered when communicating with *Uwienu* via his intermediaries. This in turn may account for those who have become disillusioned with the church as mentioned above (cf. Horton

¹⁰ Churchgoers often refer to non-churchgoers as *les paiens*.

1971: 105). This outworking probably goes beyond what the first missionaries intended (Meyer 1999: xix, 81-82). Thus, the tensions I experience result from a certain level of dismay at how the local church has appropriated certain aspects of Christianity. Conversely, this dynamic process is fascinating in its own right and one I seek to understand as an anthropologist. My commitment to anthropology as an academic discipline calls for a suspension of my own viewpoint during research and openness towards others. McCutcheon (1999: 6-8) suggests that the adoption of methodological agnosticism could go some way to resolving the potential conflict between different ways of understanding the world around us. He points out, however, that a completely neutral position is not possible and calls for a 'reflexive stance' (1999: 9; cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 15-18), which recognises that we 'are all equally immersed in the same pool of meaning-making...' (1999: 9), whilst Hammersley and Atkinson affirm that, despite the constructed nature of an anthropologist's data and findings, this 'does not automatically imply that they do not or cannot represent social phenomena' (2007: 16). This, in turn, brings me to the question of what meanings the fifty interviewees derive from their understandings of life after death and the resulting phenomena that I perceive.

RESULTS

Composition of the person

As noted above, part of my research was to establish the composition of a person and what happens to the different components when someone dies. I shared that there are three basic components: *ukuɔnu* (the physical body), *kebodike* (vital force) and *mtakime*, which I defined as a component that gives agency and purpose to the person and which Huber describes as the person's destiny (1973: 433). During the interviews, the majority of interviewees affirmed that *kebodike* animates the body and provides the force needed to live. As previously noted, a dream is the living-out of *kebodike*'s nocturnal activities, meaning that it can take leave of the body. Some interviewees attributed dreaming to the *mtakime*. What seems to be important is that whilst one is nocturnally active, the other stays put and maintains the bond with the body (cf. Erny 2007: 39).

Several of the French-speaking interviewees referred to *kebodike* either as the person's spirit or soul¹¹. Some interviewees equated *kebodike* with *mtakime*, explaining that the two were the same. Huber observed that for the majority of his informants *kebodike* and *mtakime* were identical (1973: 433). Most of the interviewees, however, did not view the two as identical, but they *are* interdependent. When *kebodike* and *mtakime* work together in harmony, the person is well balanced emotionally, mentally and physically. This balance – or lack of it – affects the person's behaviour and character. Antoine¹² (ex-Catholic) explained that according to senior family members and the forefathers,¹³ as *mtakime* and *kebodike* were interdependent, they were treated together, thus the term *mtakime* was commonly employed when referring to them both. He pointed out that the two words are now treated as completely separate components and that *kebodike* has been popularised by modernity and the church, which teaches that it is the person's spirit.

During the interviews, various roles and qualities were attributed to *mtakime* including guiding and orientating *kebodike*, especially through discernment, seeing,

¹¹ Protestant teaching defines *kebodike* as soul and *mtakime* as spirit; whilst Catholic teaching defines them the other way round.

¹² See Interviewee Profiles in the appendices for further details of the interviewees I refer to or cite.

¹³ Interviewees regularly referred to '*les parents*' (the parents) or '*n tɔɔ denbe*' (lit. 'my father group'). This category refers to senior family members in general and often includes those who have already died. 'Father' is a broad category that includes all paternal males who are senior to you.

interpretation of dreams and a sense of right and wrong. It also protects and strengthens *kebodike*. Several said that it is *mtakime* that makes people unique and that it is their destiny given by *Uwienu* (God). Specifically Christian interpretations of *mtakime* included: angel, the Holy Spirit, a gift of the Holy Spirit such as discernment and healing, and that it is *mtakime* that enables people to encounter God. As *kebodike* and *mtakime* are interdependent, I refer to them as *kebodike-mtakime* from this point forward.

Other concepts I discussed during the interviews were *upinsihu* (fontanel and respiration), *mfoosimu* (breath and breathing) *diyammade*, (thinking/decision making), *unitokihu* (ability to have healthy children) and *uhensihu* (shadow/reflection). By and large, these are sub-components of *kebodike-mtakime*.

Many of the interviewees explained that *upinsihu* was the fontanel and important for respiration, especially of unborn and newly born babies, after which *mfoosimu* takes charge once the fontanel has sealed over. Despite its physical manifestation as the fontanel, *upinsihu* was strongly linked with *kebodike-mtakime*. Several interviewees explained that *upinsihu* provides the connection between *kebodike-mtakime* and the body. Other roles associated with *upinsihu* were destiny, strength, wellbeing and intelligence. The majority of interviewees closely associated *mfoosimu* with the work of *kebodike-mtakime*. There were some, however, who attributed *upinsihu* and *mfoosimu* to purely physical actions of the body that ceased when a person died.

Diyammade is the ability to think, reflect, make choices and take decisions, whilst the *unitokihu* is the ability to have healthy children. As with *upinsihu* and *mfoosimu*, the majority of interviewees linked *diyammade* and *unitokihu* with the work of *kebodike-mtakime*.

The *uhensihu* is a person's shadow and reflection. However, its role as a sub-component of *kebodike-mtakime* was more ambiguous. Although most interviewees attributed it to *kebodike-mtakime*, others felt that it was linked to the body, and some explained that it is a phenomenon resulting from the action of light.

Having established the composition of the person, I needed to determine how death is understood. Death is only physical. *Kebodike* (vital force) and *mtakime* (agency/purpose/destiny) make up the real person. The body dies when both *kebodike* and *mtakime* leave, unlike the state of dreaming where one remains behind. They then return to *Uwienu* (God). For the majority of the interviewees, *kebodike-mtakime* and their subcomponents remain united during their return to *Uwienu*.

Through the course of the interviews, several interviewees explained that although death is the result of *kebodike-mtakime* severing their bond with the body to return to *Uwienu* (God), this bond is not entirely broken. It is only once the flesh has decomposed that the bond is completely dissolved and *kebodike-mtakime* are liberated to move on. The situation is further complicated as, for other interviewees, the bond between body and *kebodike-mtakime* is broken completely when the person dies. The complexity and evident confusion as to how long it takes for this bond to be dissolved became apparent when discussing the introduction of coffins and their impact on *kebodike-mtakime*. I discuss this further below, but first need to present what people shared about reincarnation.

Reincarnation

In addition to the body, *naano* (life) and *cabili* (destiny), Swanson also listed the *ɲaali* (ancestor form) as a component for the Gourmantché (1985: 109-161). As noted above, I wondered whether *disihide* (reincarnation) could be the Bebelibe equivalent of *ɲaali*. When asked about *disihide* the overwhelming majority of interviewees, including those who have rejected reincarnation, replied that this is when *kebodike-mtakime* is sent by *Uwienu* to go and reincarnate. Basaadi summarised *disihide* as follows: ‘*Disihide?* Ah! It’s the deceased who is dead, who then comes back and they will give birth to him/her. That’s what they call *disihide*.’^{viii} Therefore, *disihide* is the act of reincarnating rather than a reincarnated component as I originally thought. *Kebodike-mtakime* not only remain united during their return to – and time with – *Uwienu*, but stay united when *Uwienu* authorises them to reincarnate.

It is generally acknowledged that children are never named after their reincarnating ancestors, nor are they ever told who their reincarnating ancestors are. Although I did not specifically ask about this during the interviews, several interviewees commented on this fact. Konna explained that to even draw parallels between a person’s behaviour and that of a deceased is dangerous. If the deceased happens to be the reincarnating ancestor, such statements could kill the person. This does not mean that nobody knows who the reincarnating ancestor is. It is still important that the reincarnating ancestor be identified, in order to confirm the true identity of the child (cf. Keller 1986: 24) and as a safeguard should someone need to be revived. Such a situation can arise when the same ancestor reincarnates several people (see below). Thus, during pregnancy, the father-to-be consults a diviner to find out who the reincarnating ancestor is. This knowledge is shared with a few community elders,

known for their discretion. The mother is never told for fear that she might use the name in anger.

Thirty-eight of the interviewees affirmed that reincarnation happens, whilst eight rejected reincarnation and four expressed uncertainty (Table 1)¹⁴. In the following subsections, I discuss firstly the opinions of those who affirmed reincarnation, followed by the thoughts of those who expressed uncertainty, and finally the views of those who have rejected reincarnation.

Reincarnation Affirmed

The majority of those who affirmed reincarnation also affirmed that everybody reincarnates regardless of how they died (Table 2), although the reincarnation process may not be straightforward. For example, David (ex-church) explained that normally *Uwienu* (God) only sends people back after they have become an ancestor. If they die a bad death, however, they cannot become an ancestor. Bad deaths include accidents, suicide and murder; deaths that result in people returning to *Uwienu* before their designated time. Such people then return to reincarnate of their own accord. Antoine (ex-church) gave a similar account explaining that *Uwienu* severely judges those who die a bad death and that they should not reincarnate. Despite this, they reincarnate anyway. Several interviewees explained that someone reincarnated in this manner would suffer the same fate unless ceremonies are performed to try and break the cycle of bad death and reincarnation. Others who die may become ghosts first – especially those who died single – and spend some time haunting others before they eventually reincarnate.

Based on the general feedback from the interviewees, the usual procedure for those who die normally is to first return to *Uwienu* (God) and be judged. After some time, *Uwienu* sends them out again. There is some negotiation about their new destinies including their vocation in life, whether they will have a good or bad *unitokihu* (ability to have healthy children), their form (male, female, tree, termite mound or animal), where they go (which family) and when they are expected to return (die). For those who die a bad death, by defying *Uwienu* and reincarnating anyway, they are unable to change their destiny, so the same fate awaits them.

Reincarnation usually follows the patriline. However, it can also be matrilineal. During the interviews, several people made reference to a ceremony called *tibaakite*, which is performed for children reincarnated by an ancestor of one of their direct or

¹⁴ See Tables in the appendices for this and other tables noted below.

classificatory fathers' or grandfathers' *maternal* family – ancestors that are clearly of a different lineage (cf. Huber 1973: 434). Consequently, the children do not feel completely at ease within the lineage they now find themselves. *Tibaakite* allows them to become reintegrated into their original lineage, whilst also maintaining membership of the lineage into which they are born (and where they continue to reside). The maternal uncle who performs the *tibaakite* ceremony becomes a second father to the child.

For some of the interviewees, individuals may choose to go to a different family entirely or unrelated ethnic group (Table 3). Isaac (churchgoer) explained that whether black or white, as *Uwienu* (God) created everyone, individuals are not limited to reincarnating in the same family but can go elsewhere, whilst Philippe (ex-church) said that individuals could come back as whites, especially if they suffered in their previous life.

Most of the interviewees affirmed that people could change sex (Table 4). Luc (churchgoer), explained that *kebodike* is sexless and *Uwienu* decides whether people should come back as men or women, depending on the role he has for them. Several others explained that people often seek to change sex if they suffered as a woman or a man during their previous existence. Sometimes the change is evident with men who enjoy cross-dressing, cooking or brewing sorghum beer¹⁵, for example, and women who are courageous and strong. Neither is reincarnation always one-to-one, but can be multiple as a deceased's *kebodike-mtakime* can reincarnate several people (Table 5), in which case *kebodike-mtakime* divide to produce several other *kebodike-mtakime*. For several of the interviewees one person can reincarnate up to twenty people (one for each finger and toe of the deceased). For some, such as Basaadi (no church), Alma (churchgoer) and Konna (churchgoer), this explains population growth. Isaac saw it as *Uwienu's* way of limiting a person's power. For others, such as Tenyomè (ex-church), it also explains differences in stature. Where reincarnation is one-to-one, the person will be tall; where it is multiple, the people will be short.

As with the Betammaribe mentioned above, there are potential consequences for those who share the same *kebodike-mtakime* when one of them dies. Accordingly, the others are forbidden from attending *mhuumu* (burial) and *dihuude* celebrations as they are in danger of dying too (cf. Guigbile 2001: 211). This seems to stem from the *kebodike-mtakime* of the deceased 'calling' to their reincarnated counterparts to come

¹⁵ In Benin beer-brewing is usually the woman's domain.

and join them. Sarah (churchgoer) said that it is as if someone goes to witness her own burial. Anne (ex-church) explained what needed to happen should someone attend *mhuumu* or *dihuude* of another with whom they share the same *kebodike-mtakime*:

Should someone collapse when she arrives, if people notice that she has fallen, they take her away from the crowds and find a chicken to sacrifice for her. Someone performs the sacrifice for her and says: “The other one is dead and you are no longer together. Let the other take his own path and you take yours.”^{xix}

Robert explained that during this ceremony an elder whispers the name of the reincarnated ancestor to the still-unconscious person. *Kebodike-mtakime* return and the person is revived. If those who are in danger happen to live in the same village as the deceased, they usually leave so that they are not exposed to any of the burial or funeral proceedings, nor should they eat any of the food or drink any of the sorghum beer produced for the occasion. Sébastien (churchgoer) shared from personal experience:

Sébastien: When my aunt died, I was forbidden from attending her burial. They told me that the same person had reincarnated us. So I didn’t go. Despite this, I still got sick and suffered a lot (laughs)... so that means it’s the same person who reincarnated us... We’re not far from each other [linked by their shared reincarnation], so these sorts of things, that’s *disihide* [reincarnation].

Sharon: ... and if you had gone? Would it have been dangerous for you?

Sébastien: Yes, it would have been dangerous. If I had gone, I would’ve died or grown old before my time.^x

I later learnt from Sébastien’s mother that he should have left town entirely. As he did not, he could hear the music and drumming, which is why he got sick. Despite the biblical teaching he has received, Sébastien shared that, ‘reincarnation exists; for this I believe I side with tradition’^{xi}. Other churchgoers, such as Esther and Isabelle, have also witnessed people collapsing or getting sick in similar circumstances. Accordingly, they remain convinced that reincarnation happens despite biblical teaching to the contrary. Sarah is uncertain what to think. On the one hand she feels she should accept biblical teaching that there is no reincarnation, on the other hand how can such phenomena be explained?

I was interested to learn that the majority of interviewees (Table 6) affirmed that, in rare cases, people reincarnate *before* they die. Interviewees explained that these people are usually very old and housebound as their bodies are barely functional. Several interviewees shared that should the reincarnated baby interact with the still living reincarnating elder, one of them will inevitably die so that their *kebodike-mtakime* can reunite.

Finally, reincarnation is not always human-to-human (Tables 7-8). The majority of those who affirmed reincarnation also affirmed that people could reincarnate trees. The reincarnation of animals and termite mounds was more ambiguous. Interviewees were also less certain about the free movement between different beings. For example, Takide (no church) and Isabelle (churchgoer) both thought that animals can reincarnate into humans, and humans into animals, but the change seems to be one-way only. Kodaani (ex-church), however, explained that there is free movement between humans and animals; although our physical shapes may differ, our underlying composition is the same. Talking about trees, Basaadi explained that once people have been a human and a tree, they are then in a position to decide which life they prefer for their next reincarnation. Many of the interviewees explained that people choose to become animals, termite mounds or trees if they suffered as a human.

For some of the interviewees, only certain people reincarnate (Table 2). For Tenyomè (ex-church), Basaadi (no church) and Kodaani (ex-church) those who die a bad death or are killed during their lifetime cannot reincarnate but become ghosts instead. For Idibiènou (ex-church) those who fail God's judgement go to be with the devil, whilst for Isabelle (churchgoer) Christians reincarnate and non-Christians go to be with the devil. For Marc and Matthieu (both churchgoers) only non-Christians reincarnate; Marc added that it is the devil who sends people to reincarnate. Luc explained that only the best Christians reincarnate as God sends them out on special missions. Luc was the only churchgoing interviewee who backed up his understanding of reincarnation biblically by referring to John the Baptist as the prophet Elijah returned.

For those who attend church and affirmed that everybody reincarnated, I was interested to know what difference going to church makes. For some such as Théophile and Isaac, going to church does not change what happens *after* someone dies. *Uwienu* created everyone and as everybody believes in *Uwienu*, they all return to him, then reincarnate. For others, such as Stéphane, Eliza and Alma, Christians receive a warm welcome in heaven and their judgement will be less harsh. Whilst Nicole does not go to church, her friends do. She too shared that non-Christians will be judged more harshly as they are sinners. After seeing the better treatment that Christians receive, they are more likely to become Christians in their next life.

Reincarnation Uncertain

Sarah, Louise, Arnaud and Gilbert all expressed uncertainty about reincarnation. All four attend church and take seriously the biblical teaching they have received. As

mentioned above, Sarah's uncertainty stems from the apparent incompatibility between what she has experienced and what the Bible says. After some deliberation, she tentatively arrived at the conclusion that Christians probably do not reincarnate, whereas non-Christians do.

Gilbert arrived at the same conclusion as Sarah. He spoke with conviction against reincarnation at the beginning of the interview, stating that he cannot accept it on the grounds of biblical teaching. However, this conviction seemed to waver as the interview went on. It became apparent that he does still accept the idea of reincarnation for non-Christians.

Arnaud's uncertainty also reflects incongruities between biblical teaching and experience:

Sharon: It is said that people reincarnate.

Arnaud: Yes, reincarnate.

Sharon: But you don't believe this.

Arnaud: According to the Bible, one sees that (sucks teeth) for the moment I don't know.

Sharon: And according to you what's *disihide*?

Arnaud: *Disihide*, yes it's incarnation, it's to incarnate, thus if I die, in two or maybe ten years you'll see me again, you'll see someone who resembles me, same characteristics, same thing, what I did, you see the same way of behaving. It's like that, okay, and he thinks, "Ah, that man has emerged again."...

... Does the Bible say, you incarnate, you return, it's this I'm not, I don't believe... God says that we will all be resuscitated on the last day. Now is it true that when you die you come back after a time, is it really like that?...

You see that people are similar, you see I don't know why it's like that. We are always two or three... in the world.^{xii}

My interview with Louise initially left me baffled. Although she clearly understood her viewpoint, it made little sense to me at the time. The conversation seemed to go around in circles as she explained that non-Christians reincarnate, whilst Christians are reborn. When people die they need to pass by *Uwienu's* (God) judgement. If they were good they go to live in *Uwien' seede* (God's homestead); if they were bad they are sent away and they cause other people to have seizures. Those who are sent away reincarnate, whilst those who are accepted by God eventually return and are reborn. It was after some reflection that I realised that she might have reinterpreted the evangelical message that Christians need to be 'born again' as a literal rebirth following physical death.

Reincarnation Rejected

Finally, eight of the interviewees have clearly rejected reincarnation. Of the eight, seven were churchgoers, and one used to go to church.

Gaston (ex-church) has decided that reincarnation cannot really happen as the idea of multiple reincarnations does not make sense to him; how can someone build twenty houses from the material of only one house? He admitted that he does not know what happens instead. He knows that people return to *Uwienu* when they die and they will be judged, but he is not sure what follows except that they continue to exist. The Bible says that Jesus is now at *Uwienu*'s right hand. So if Jesus lives eternally despite having died, so will we.

Idaani reached his conclusion after attending seminars run by his church and reading the Bible in Ditammari, the neighbouring language, which makes no reference to reincarnation that he has found. He has concluded that any evidence that suggests that reincarnation may be real is really the devil's trickery. Those who have lived a life pleasing to *Uwienu* return to him when they die as they have earned their rest; other people go to be with the devil.

Emile, Adrien, Edith and Henri all attend the same church. They have reached their conclusions from what they have heard during services and attending Sunday school, which has classes for everyone irrespective of age. When I first asked Emile what he thought about reincarnation he responded:

I am no longer traditional hmm?... My point of view is truly different, for example, incarnation about which we're talking, no, I don't believe in that.^{xiii}

Emile, Adrien, Henri and Lucas all referred to biblical passages that talk about the resurrection of the dead and Judgement Day, after which people either go to heaven or to hell. Edith, like Idaani, thinks that people are deceived by the devil into believing in reincarnation so that they perform sacrifices for him.

Paul, who has not been to school, has been partly influenced by church teaching that reincarnation does not happen. He explained, however, that *kɛbodike* is in the blood and gets transmitted this way to the next generation, which is why people resemble each other. When people die, their *mtakime* returns to *Uwienu* (God), after which he is not sure what happens.

Having presented what people think about reincarnation in general, I now look at how people perceive the relatively recent arrival of coffins.

Coffins

Robert, who is in his thirties, remembers when coffins first came to the Commune in the 1990s, as people started discussing the arrival of *uhidikpakihu* (body-trunks). He explained that the first people to use coffins locally were Christians and *les intellectuels* (those who have been to school). Generally, the interviewees strongly associated coffins with the whites, acknowledging that coffins originated with them. They then explained that it was *les fonctionnaires*¹⁶ (public service employees) who introduced coffins locally. Those who have a public service role have little choice about where they work. Consequently, they are exposed to other cultural practices and ideas, including the use of coffins, which have been popularised elsewhere, often as a result of direct contact with whites. Several interviewees added that if *fonctionnaires* died elsewhere, their bodies would be sent back in a coffin. Patrick shared that:

We say that we know French. That's what we follow. It has changed us. Before, we didn't know the whites. Now we have seen the whites, and have emulated them, we have learnt to speak and write French. Therefore those who were over there saw what the whites do. They're the ones who brought them [coffins] here to show those of us who were uncivilised and now we are civilised... they took our children for the army and today our children go to school and become *fonctionnaires*, then they die. It's from over there that coffins came, it was from over there that people who died were transported back here in coffins and we saw them. At that time if you were not a *fonctionnaire*, you couldn't be buried with a coffin. Then our children became apprentices and learnt and became carpenters and now they can make coffins. So even if you're not a *fonctionnaire* you can now be buried with a coffin.^{xiv}

Today *les fonctionnaires* and *les intellectuels* are often perceived as having become white:

Sharon: According to you... as a Christian, there's no problem to send the body to the morgue or to use a coffin, is this okay with you?

Gilbert: It's okay because we've adapted to the whites (laughs). People have made us whites...^{xv}

Other people, such as migratory workers, have been exposed to coffins elsewhere too. David mentioned that people also see coffins being used on the television. However it is *les fonctionnaires* of recent years who had the financial means to pay for coffins and other 'modern' burial paraphernalia, and who popularised their use. With time, others have started to do likewise, even if it means getting into debt. For many, coffins symbolise modernity.

¹⁶ *Les fonctionnaires* is a broad term that refers to civil servants, people working in state administration and public-sector workers such as teachers, doctors, post-office employees, etc.

The use of coffins necessitates rectangular graves, which are customarily reserved for bad deaths, whilst good deaths are normally buried in round burial chambers. Despite concern about other changes, the majority of interviewees were not worried that good deaths could now be buried in rectangular graves. Many interviewees pointed out, with a chuckle, that you could not put a rectangular coffin into a round hole. When buried in a round burial chamber, the body is arranged in a foetal position; the burial chamber can be likened to a womb (cf. Erny 2007: 27). Except for some church burials, people still arrange the corpse on its side in the coffin, rather than on its back.

Other changes that have accompanied the use of coffins include dressing the corpse, use of talcum powder and perfume, graves that are cemented and tiled, sometimes on the inside as well as the outside, and most recently, burial in the house of the deceased (July 2012) and burial in a mausoleum (March 2013). Some of these changes necessitate the use of a morgue, the closest being 53 miles away, as extra time is needed to prepare for the burial. Ordinarily, people would be buried within 24 hours of dying.

Some churches also encourage the use of coffins. Henri and Lucas explained that their churches have a social fund and will help pay for a coffin if the family cannot afford it. During my conversation with Lucas, he implied that Christians should be buried in a coffin:

Sharon: Can a believer also say, “me, when I die, I don’t want a coffin”?

Lucas: If he says that he doesn’t want a coffin, he’s deceived! He’s deceived, why? Because modernisation is already well established, it’s prosperity.^{xvi}

When I asked the interviewees what they thought about coffins, some of them were initially reticent to express their view if it appeared to be criticising the whites, so they simply said that coffins were good. As the interview progressed, however, it was evident that for many coffins are problematic, whether in terms of the practical considerations of cost, the social pressure to conform, or their impact on reincarnation. Many interviewees gave multiple reasons why they were in favour, against, or had mixed feelings about using coffins (Table 9). The most interesting juxtaposition between those in favour of coffins and those against, concerned the body having contact with the earth. Six of the interviewees who favoured coffins explicitly stated that it protects the body from the earth; whilst nine of those who think coffins are bad also stated that it is because it protects the body from the earth.

For those who favoured coffins, the idea of the body getting dirty, eaten by worms or nibbled by rodents was distasteful and dishonouring to the deceased person. More importantly, these interviewees – together with several others who did not think that coffins are problematic for reincarnation – explained that as the bond between *kebodike-mtakime* and the physical body is completely severed at death, the coffin could not hinder someone from reincarnating. Here is what David shared:

Sharon: Can, okay, concerning what happens to the person after death, for reincarnation, can these changes... have an effect on reincarnation or not really?

David: No, they don't have an effect because before you're even put in the coffin, when you died, before you're put in the coffin you're not, you're not there.

Sharon: You've already left?

David: You've already left, but our senior relatives who – some do not know this – they believe that you won't be able to leave [the coffin] and reincarnate, but this isn't the case. When you die, one says, "ah, that person is dead", you're no longer there. You have already left. It's only your body that's there. That's it. The spirit has already left.^{xvii}

Tenyomè added that if coffins really blocked reincarnation, then people would not use them.

For others, however, coffins are problematic because the body needs to first mix with the earth for reincarnation to take place. This suggests that the bond between *kebodike-mtakime* and the body is not completely broken with death, but only once the body has returned to the earth. Several interviewees added that we need to become earth again as this is what *Uwienu* (God) used to create us. The degree to which the body needs to mix with the earth varied. Kodaani shared that the body needs to mix quickly with the earth and that there are some people who now add some earth into the coffin. This being the case, it may not be the act of decomposition that is important but actual contact with the earth. For others, such as Philippe, the flesh needs to decompose before reincarnation can take place:

Philippe: There are many, many people [buried in coffins] and their *mtakime* can't get out. They bury, those that are buried directly in the ground, those people can get out. He/she must get out to become a complete person.

Sharon: So... the body needs to decompose before reincarnating?

Philippe: M hm.

Sharon: So that means that even though *kebodike-mtakime* have left the body, they're still linked with it until it has decomposed?

Philippe: Yes! There's still a link.^{xviii}

Regardless of the degree of decomposition needed, coffins are clearly problematic. Whilst it was acknowledged that wood also rots, some interviewees, such as Idibiènou pointed out that it takes a lot longer and reincarnation is retarded. Consequently, she has told her children that she does not want to be buried with a coffin, neither should they cement her grave:

I have told my children, I said the day that I die, I don't want them to say that they placed me in a coffin, what they do there, when they take cement to block, block there, and I said I don't want that. My ancestor didn't do that.^{xix}

For Joel, the use of materials such as glass in a coffin blocks reincarnation entirely. I imagine that the same would be true when the inside of the tomb is cemented and tiled.

Others explained that although the coffin did not necessarily slow down reincarnation, it could blind or disorientate *kebodike-mtakime* so that the father-to-be and diviner cannot establish who the baby's reincarnating ancestor is. Patrick's explanation implies that *kebodike-mtakime* lose their identity:

They say, "if you're buried with a coffin, you can no longer come out [reincarnate] as you were before." You will change. This means that you're neither Ubielo nor white. You will come out and you won't be normal; as you were. And at that time the sacrifices, they can't perform sacrifices for you because your *upinsihu* has been covered [by the coffin]. It's no longer visible; they can't reach your *upinsihu* to arrange it so that you can become a normal person. That's why there's so much suffering for us now.^{xx}

For Patrick the *upinsihu* (fontanel) is the socket that *kebodike* plugs into in order to connect with the physical body. It seems that by blocking *upinsihu*, *kebodike-mtakime*'s link with the corpse is prematurely severed and they no longer know who they are. If this is the case, then an individual's identity includes their physical being and it is only once this physical aspect has been reintegrated with the earth that *kebodike-mtakime* can assume a new identity whilst recalling who they were before.

Another analogy that expressed the problematic nature of coffins was the perceived increase in caesareans and problematic births since coffins were introduced. *Kebodike-mtakime*'s struggle to escape the coffin is consequently played out in their subsequent rebirth:

Ntanki: Now they bury with coffins. When they say that someone has reincarnated you, the person who has been buried with a coffin that is nailed shut, when he/she reincarnates someone, the birth will be complicated, complicated. It will be difficult. What do you do with the nails? They'll say that the woman is overdue; you need to know that the coffin with nails, how do you get out in time with those nails?^{xxi}

Besides coffins, the issue of decomposition is further reflected through *dihuude*, the funeral celebrations that follow several months or years after *mhuumu* (burial).

Dihuude and the Grave Pot

Dihuude (death celebration) is celebrated for adults who have died a good death.

Dihuude always happens in dry season (March-April) when agricultural activities are minimal. Conventionally, *dihuude* would be held for the deceased during the dry season following their death. Due to escalating costs, however, it may be several years later – if ever – before a family can now afford to celebrate *dihuude*.

There are aspects of *dihuude* that appear to exemplify why it is important for the flesh of the corpse to decompose. The different events of *dihuude* build up to placing a large earthenware pot (*usiedu*) on the grave of the deceased. A hole is then pierced in the pot. The pot and hole appear to have several functions. Firstly, they mark the grave and can be compared to a gravestone. More importantly, many of the interviewees explained that the pot provides a house for the deceased, whilst the hole is the door or window. This, in turn allows the deceased to come and go and to ‘breathe’. This is how Yooka described it:

It’s during *dihuude* that they take the pot, accompanied by drums and ululations, so that it can be placed [on the grave] and it’s a time of joy. It’s a sign so that the children don’t forget: “it’s my father who’s buried here and it’s for him that we’ve placed the pot.” Don’t you see that they’ve placed the pot there? They pierce, they pierce, it’s the work of *Uwienu* (God). If the deceased is still there inside, he/she can breathe.^{xxii}

Yammu explained that *kebodike-mtakime* pass by the hole to go in search of a woman in order to reincarnate:

Yammu: Yes, the deceased there. You pierce the hole and it’s night and he’s lying in the grave. He’s lying in the grave and if he wants to reincarnate, yes when he wants to leave, he leaves by the hole there and he goes to the woman and her husband who are asleep. Ah ha, he arrives when they are asleep and he waits beside the woman. The time comes when the husband gets up and wants his wife. What does he [the deceased] do? He enters [the woman during intercourse] and is transformed into blood and then a person.

Sharon: And is it *kebodike-mtakime* that leave by there, by the hole?

Yammu: *Mtakime* and *kebodike*. Yes, that’s what leaves. And afterwards they go into houses and women get pregnant with them. Women get pregnant with those who reincarnate. The woman gets pregnant with him.^{xxiii}

For others, such as Joel, Patrick and Basaadi, the hole is the doorway by which *kebodike-mtakime* can visit to verify that the body has decomposed. Patrick and

Basaadi's explanations suggest that it is only once the body has returned to the earth that a new body for *kebodike-mtakime* can be created from the old:

Patrick: When *kebodike* returns from *Uwien' seede* (God's homestead), from heaven, it's via the hole that they pierced that *kebodike* will enter to touch the soil and make contact once again with the body in order to take it and form a new child that the parents will give birth to. That's why they pierce the hole. Thus when *kebodike* comes, it's via the hole that it must enter.^{xxiv}

Basaadi: The hole has been pierced. The body that they buried, when the body will be in the hole and his *kebodike* there, the time when he wants to reincarnate a new being, the body must leave by the hole there to go together with *kebodike*.^{xxv}

For many of the interviewees, however, the pot and hole are perceived in purely symbolic terms as today, by the time *dihuude* may take place, the deceased has already reincarnated. *Dihuude* also represents the official 'sending off' of the deceased to join the other ancestors.

Finally, *dihuude* is an important time of social networking and reinforcing ties between the maternal and paternal families of the deceased. As with *mhuumu* (burial), many of the interviewees lamented the escalating costs of *dihuude*. This is mainly due to increasing expectations of the maternal family whose demands for more meat, drink and entertainment need to be met. Many now postpone *dihuude* until they have the means to afford it. This, in turn, creates a backlog of uncelebrated deaths.

I now examine more closely the implications of what the interviewees shared with me in terms of how *kebodike-mtakime* and reincarnation are understood, especially in light of Christianity and modernity.

DISCUSSION

Implications of Reincarnation

Despite differences in understanding about the finer details of reincarnation in terms of sexuality, single or multiple reincarnations, reincarnating as other beings, patriline versus other families and beyond, it is evident that for the majority of my interviewees reincarnation happens. Keller (1986: 11) points out that all reincarnation doctrines the world over are founded on the principal that humans are more than just physical beings and it is their immaterial and invisible element(s) that assure continuity after death through their reappearance in another physical body. Thus, rather than discussing definitions of reincarnation for the Bebelibe in terms of the different theories and modalities mentioned in the introduction – theories that divert the reader from the real issues at heart – I focus on some of the implications of reincarnation as understood by my interviewees.

Szatkowski (2007: 81) named two conditions that he considered essential for reincarnation: that it should always be within the same clan and that reincarnation ceases when the deceased's name is forgotten. I first address the claim that reincarnation is always within the same clan. Although reincarnation within the patriline is acknowledged as the norm, it is not limited to this. As demonstrated above, reincarnation can be matrilineal. Bonnet (1981: 137-138) notes that Mossi women (Burkina Faso) can reincarnate either in their own lineage or that of their husbands, given that they have contributed to the continuation of their spouses' lineages. When this happens, they reincarnate one of their son's or grandson's children. Although Sewane (2001: 193-195) does not specifically mention matrilineal reincarnation, she observes that Betammaribe patrilineages are nourished by the maternal lineages. She adds that reincarnation is linked to where someone is buried. Those buried elsewhere can reincarnate members of the family who buried them, whilst also reincarnating within their lineage, assuming that a shrine has been built for them. Sewane relates an instance of Betammaribe children with Caucasian-shaped noses, who were reincarnated by a white man who was buried there. With more people travelling, dying and being buried elsewhere, this – and similar scenarios – may explain why some of my interviewees have broadened their horizons to allow the deceased to reincarnate those who are not their patrilineal or matrilineal descendants. Such a broad perspective may also be linked to the elastic nature of Bebelibe kinship that allows for the incorporation of

strangers into a given community. Neither is reincarnation necessarily limited to humans but can include trees, termite mounds and animals. Generally there seems to be a wide choice of how and where people reincarnate, which in turn is influenced by the circumstances of their previous life and the hope for something better the next time around, a point I return to below.

Turning to Szatkowski's claim that reincarnation ceases when the deceased's name is forgotten: it is true that certain groups within the region, such as the Anyi (Thomas 1994: 163), Ewe (Manoukian 1952: 42), Igbo (Stevenson 1985: 19-20) and Sisala (Mendonsa 1976), do name their children after their reincarnated ancestors and that, for some, once the name is forgotten, the ancestor has ceased to – or can no longer – reincarnate and is considered 'socially dead' (Mendonsa 1976: 65; cf. Erny 2007: 43). This is not true for the Bebelibe I know. On the contrary, announcing the names of reincarnating ancestors can kill the individuals concerned. It seems that the ancestor's power is invested in his anonymity. If the reincarnating ancestor's identity becomes public knowledge, the ancestor feels vulnerable and can no longer protect the person as his *mtakimε* is compromised and *kebodike* is left open to attack. Consequently, the ancestor leaves and the person dies.

As noted above, only the father, diviner and some trusted community elders know the identity of the reincarnating ancestor in case individuals who collapse during *mhuumu* (burial) or *dihuude* celebrations need to be revived. As Huber (1973: 423) noted, and Anne and Robert shared (see above), in order to revive those who collapse, a ceremony is performed to separate them from the deceased person. During the ceremony an elder calls back the *kebodike-mtakimε* by whispering the name of the reincarnated ancestor to the still-unconscious person. Sewane (2001; cf. Mercier 1968: 335) describes an almost identical situation amongst the neighbouring Betammaribe. As I mentioned above, this is one phenomenon that is not easily explained outside of reincarnation. Sewane (2001: 217) too was unable to make sense of this phenomenon and lamented that years more of research would not make a difference.

Thus, for the Bebelibe, and the Betammaribe, it seems that people's names are unique to a specific identity whilst they existed in physical form. As each new child then receives a new name, reincarnation is not limited by the remembrance of a given ancestor's name as their non-physical being receives a new identity – or identities – with each reincarnation. Meanwhile, a given ancestor's identity is remembered through ancestor veneration. Although this specific identity is eventually forgotten with successive generations, the ancestor's *kebodike-mtakimε* still live on.

For most of the interviewees, *kebodike-mtakime* remain together when they return to *Uwienu*, and are still united when he then sends them back to earth to reincarnate. Before being sent, *kebodike-mtakime* negotiate a new destiny (except for bad deaths, who reincarnate against *Uwienu*'s will). It is this combination of *kebodike-mtakime* and their subcomponents, which in turn are shaped by the chosen destiny, that make people who they are. As previously mentioned, several factors can be negotiated with God before reincarnating. Thus it is *kebodike-mtakime* in their entirety, with their new destiny, that reincarnate.

Padenou and Barrué-Pastor (2006: 181-182) claim that, amongst the Betammaribe, those who share the same ancestor are considered identical. This claim is unfounded for the Bebelibe. In the case of multiple reincarnations, *kebodike-mtakime* divide and each *kebodike-mtakime* chooses its own distinct destiny. This ensures that individuality is maintained and each person is considered unique, even though their respective *kebodike-mtakime* remain linked, as demonstrated by the perceived danger of attending *mhuumu* or *dihuude* of someone who shares the same reincarnating ancestor.

Bloch notes that death is 'merely an episode in a much longer story which has begun before and continues afterwards' (1988: 14) and challenges the Western understanding of 'the person as a bounded individual' (1988: 15). He suggests imagining 'a different system' where the combination of components in a given person means that the person is unique and has individuality, whilst the cyclical nature of these components means that the person is also part of a holistic system, a 'cross-cutting whole' (1988: 16). Therefore, when individuals die, it may be the end of their individuality but it is not their end (1988: 16-19).

Another instance that illustrates that people are not 'bounded' individuals is when exceptionally old people reincarnate *before* they die (cf. Dupire 1982: 16; Sewane 2003: 322-323; Stevenson 1985: 18). This raises more questions that need further research in order to understand why *kebodike-mtakime* choose to move on and reincarnate without letting the person die first.

Onyewuenyi disputes that reincarnation happens at all. He feels the term is inappropriate and is 'an unreflective common man's view' and should be 'dropped entirely' (1982: 63). Onyewuenyi consequently rejects reincarnation whilst upholding the role of ancestors. He suggests that ancestors rather interact with the living through their vital force, as an ancestor is in a position to 'influence and effect many births in his clan without emptying his personality' (1982: 75). I too have puzzled over how someone can maintain the status of venerated ancestor and reincarnate simultaneously,

and tried to explore this during the interviews. This was not an issue for my interviewees and several thought it odd that I struggled with the concept. Several mentioned that it is the person's *uhensihu* (shadow) that becomes the ancestor, whilst others referred to the fact that *kebodike-mtakime* can divide. This dual-notion of existence is not without precedence (cf. Nabofa 1983: 311-312; Sundermeier 1998: 14; Gottlieb 2004b: 81). Ikenga-Metuh explains that as '[m]ultiple location is one of the qualities of the spirit' it is not surprising that an ancestor can be simultaneously 'in the spirit-land, the ancestral shrine, and in the reincarnated' (1987: 269).

Onyewuenyi further refutes reincarnation as:

Africans do not hold that conception is caused by the spirit of the ancestor. The biological conception of the child results from the concurrent act of God and the parents. The influence of the ancestor, which has been called "reincarnation", comes later on... (1982: 76, emphasis mine).

As with Szatkowski's generalisations about clans and names, Onyewuenyi's generalisation does not work for the Bebelibe either. Many of my interviewees shared that *kebodike-mtakime* were implicated in the act of conception, as Yammu's description (see above) demonstrates. As previously mentioned, for the Gourmantché, the *ɲaali* (ancestor form) is present during intercourse and provides a mould for the new person's soul (Swanson 1985: 157, 241-244). Stevenson, writing about the Igbo, states that 'conception... requires a discarnate person wishing to be reborn' (1985: 18). Dupire (1982: 21-22) explains that for the Serer Ndout conception is not possible without the intervention of an ancestor's immortal soul, which acts as a fertilising agent by contributing its *kili* (personal odour) to the act of conception. This alerts God to provide the infant with a new soul, whilst the sexual act of the parents contributes the physical body. She concludes that:

The ancestor's odour, which is fixed in the blood of the foetus, is the only component of the person that is transmitted in its entirety after death. The *kili* is like a hereditary kernel of the immortal soul...^{xxvi} (1982: 27).

Although Sewane (2001: 195-196; 2003: 228, 322) does not explicitly link reincarnation to conception, she alludes to it by describing the deceased's desire to form new children.

Finally, reincarnation has a levelling effect as it allows people to accept each other's idiosyncrasies that might be questioned in other cultural milieu. Cross-dressers, and men who like to cook or brew sorghum beer, for example, can be accepted as men reincarnated by women (J. Merz 2011a: 8). Accordingly, reincarnation generates respect

for one another – who knows, your child may be your grandfather reincarnated – that helps explain the Bebelibe’s preference for a non-centralised social structure.

Having examined some of the underlying implications of reincarnation, I now examine how opinions of *kebodike-mtakime* are changing and how this impacts people’s perceptions of reincarnation.

Material Transformation

Huber’s (1973: 434-435) conclusions that reincarnation and destiny (represented by *mtakime*) are combined in Bebelibe thought, and the importance attributed to reincarnation as compared to other groups in the area, seem to be justified. His suggestion that the Bebelibe have fused the two notions of destiny and reincarnation, whilst other groups maintained them as distinctly different things, is not so clear. Could it not be the contrary? If reincarnation has diminished importance in the surrounding groups, could it be that they have separated out the two notions that were previously together? This would need further research.

As *mtakime* is rather a combination of destiny, together with characteristics (discernment, sense of right and wrong, for example) that allow people to relate well with one another, Huber’s use of the term ‘destiny’ is too limiting. Living in a shared community, which is based on interdependence, extends beyond relationships with other people and animals to include things, both natural and manmade. For many Bebelibe, things can also have *kebodike* and *mtakime*. As mentioned above, *mtakime* gives agency and purpose, which J. Merz defines as the ‘agentive purpose’ (2011a: 3). He (2011a: 7) notes that agency emanates from *mtakime* and is experienced through purposeful relationships with other humans, animals and things. Thus, in order for someone to relate and interact with something or someone else, each party needs to have *mtakime*. Relationships and interactions also provoke emotional responses. As an old man asked my husband: ‘How can you love a thing if it hasn’t got *mtakime*?’ (Interview by J. Merz, 11 April 2011). Things are said to be dead when they can no longer fulfil their purpose and relate to others. Their *kebodike* and *mtakime* then give life and agentive purpose to other new things. The cyclical nature of life means that ‘[e]verything that lives also shares in past and future life’ (J. Merz 2011a: 5; cf. Gottlieb 2004b: 80), which concurs with Sundermeier’s suggestion that ‘[t]o exist means “to be related to”... The body of the human being does not exist “in itself”; its “being” refers to relations and indicates origins’ (1998: 12). Writing about the Gourmantché, Swanson (1985: 158) concluded that life is directional rather than cyclical. It would seem that neither word quite fits the Bebelibe situation as the relational nature of *mtakime*

stretches both backwards and forwards to encompass past, present and future generations (cf. Erny 2007: 115). This being the case, life is both cyclical and multi-directional and ensures that *mtakime*'s relationality is maintained across generations, which in turn promotes social cohesion.

For some, however, there has been a subtle but significant shift in how they understand *mtakime* and *kebodike*. The two are being dematerialised (Keane 2007: 87) and, consequently spiritualised. Before the arrival of modern institutions – such as churches and schools – the concept of spiritual beings and invasive or ‘executive’ possession (Cohen 2008) did not exist, given that *mtakime* as agentive purpose allows one to interact with other beings non-invasively (J. Merz 2011a: 7; S. Merz 2011b: 11). Likewise for the Tallensi of northern Ghana, executive possession was considered ‘inconceivable’ (Fortes and Mayer 1966: 11) and ‘totally alien’ (Fortes 1987: 148). Missionaries, however, faced the challenge of expressing religious concepts to the Bebelibe. Hence, Protestants started to employ *mtakime* and *kebodike* for ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’, whilst Catholics used them for ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’. One consequence of church – and I suspect school – teaching is a dichotomisation of matter and spirit. This situation is not unique to the Bebelibe. Fast describes a similar situation for the Xhosa of South Africa when missionaries first arrived:

Central to missionary teachings on death was the belief in a soul which was spiritual, an entity completely separate from the physical self which lived on after corporeal death. Among the Xhosa, there was no clear distinction between soul-shadow-body... (1993: 164).

Fast (1993: 165) continues by explaining that the Xhosa word for ‘breath’ was used for ‘soul’ and that, with time, some seemed take on the concept of a separate soul.

The dematerialisation and spiritualisation of *kebodike-mtakime* does not necessarily alter the underlying animic ontology however; it is rather the *way* the physical body is animated by *kebodike-mtakime* that changes. Such a change results in matter being ‘purified’ of and separated from *kebodike-mtakime* (J. Merz 2011a: 11-12). One outcome of this change is that some Bebelibe now talk about the existence of spiritual beings and the possibility of being executively possessed. More importantly, this shift in understanding from vital force and agentive purpose to spirit/soul is a quick and complete separation of *kebodike-mtakime* from the physical body following death. Such a shift in understanding means that the threat of coffins diminishes, as they no longer interrupt the circulation of *kebodike-mtakime* on which the living world depends. Likewise the role of *dihuude* changes as people downplay its ceremonial role, whilst the

aspect of celebration and family union is heightened. In order to understand this shift more fully, I now examine why burial and *dihuude* are two separate events.

Having analysed the funeral practices of a number of societies, Hertz (1960 [1907]) discovered that many hold two funerals for the deceased. This ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ double-funeral practice has its origins with the need for the flesh to decompose, leaving behind the dry bones, before the ‘soul’ is properly liberated. He suggests that ‘the soul never suddenly severs the ties which bind it to its body and which hold it back on earth’ (1960 [1907]: 36). Hertz explained that there are ‘two complementary notions’ linked to the theme of wet and dry funerals: the first is that death is not instant and, for many, only ends when the body has decomposed. The second is that death is a transition: ‘while the old body falls to ruins, a new body takes shape’ (1960 [1907]: 48). In the same way, the Bebelibe practice of *mhuumu* (burial) followed by *dihuude* (celebration) seems to be in line with Hertz’s analysis. Some interviewees such as Yammu, Joel, Patrick and Basaadi (see above), linked the placing of the pot and piercing the hole during *dihuude* to *kebodike-mtakime*’s need to verify the state of the corpse before they can reincarnate. Patrick and Basaadi alluded to a new body being created from the old. It is probable that the round burial chamber, which many older Bebelibe still insist on having, with the body placed in the foetal position further reflects the need for physical deconstruction of the old body before *kebodike-mtakime* can be reborn. Dupire (1982: 19) and Sewane (2001: 195-196; 2003: 322-324) both mention the importance of the body decomposing before reincarnation can take place. Sewane (2001: 195-196; 2003: 322-324) adds that it is only once the bones are dry and white that the deceased can form new children. Guigbile (2001: 187-188), writing about the Moba of northern Togo, draws a parallel with pregnancy and birth by suggesting that if nine months are needed for a child to form in the mother’s womb, a similar amount of time is needed for the body’s deconstruction. It is only once the flesh has decomposed entirely that the deceased is able to move on.

For many of the interviewees, however, the significance of *dihuude* seems to have changed, with the pierced earthenware pot taking on a symbolic role. If there has been a transition from ritual need to symbolic representation, one reason for this may be linked to the fact that *kebodike-mtakime* have been dematerialised and spiritualised, allowing their complete and immediate separation from the body when it dies. This seems to be in line with Keane’s (2007: 87) observation that dematerialisation can result in rituals being stripped away, and Arhin’s opinion that Christianity ‘has helped in advancing the conversion of a predominantly sacred event into a profane one’ (1994:

313). The situation is further exacerbated by the mounting cost of *dihuude*. With the dematerialisation and spiritualisation of *kebodike-mtakime*, and the transition of *dihuude* to the symbolic, it becomes more feasible for families to postpone *dihuude*, as they no longer think it is needed for reincarnation to happen. This supports Jindra's observation that such events have 'lost their urgency' because they have 'lost their religious moorings' (2011: 126). Others – mainly churchgoers – have abandon *dihuude* completely by combining its celebratory aspects with the burial. Many interviewees – both church and non-churchgoers – emphasized *dihuude*'s importance for social networking and maintaining family cohesion. Thus it seems that it is this aspect that is taking precedence today – both during *mhuumu* (burial) and *dihuude* celebrations – whilst other ceremonial aspects are diminishing in significance.

Several interviewees intimated that in order to maintain their social standing, debt was preferable to mockery. During the interviews, I regularly felt exasperated when people lamented for the past and shared their discontent over the escalating costs of *mhuumu* and *dihuude*, the social pressure to conform and the resulting debts this created. If people are so unhappy with the situation, why do they conform? Noret (2011: 165-166), writing about southern Benin, also notes the anxieties funeral costs create. I later realised that being indebted to others – who are usually related in some way – is part of living in a shared community and probably helps maintain social cohesion. Nostalgia plays a role too as people strive to make sense of the 'abomination' as well as the 'blessing' of modernity (Geschiere *et al.* 2008: 1). But could it also be that people hope to consolidate family unity through the means of extravagant festivities? Van der Geest observes that in southern Ghana '[f]unerals provide occasions for the living to demonstrate their social, political and economic excellence. Money indeed measures the quality of the funeral and the family' (2006: 487; cf. Arhin 1994). In an earlier article, van der Geest (2000: 123) concludes that good funerals are important as they demonstrate the family's prestige through their success in life and the respect and admiration they have gained from others, whilst also publicly displaying family solidarity.

Keane points out that '[d]ematerialised religion has consequences for agency' (2007: 87). As *mtakime* changes from agentive purpose to spiritual being, what are the ongoing implications for social cohesion? Many Bebelibe I know complain that social cohesion *is* breaking down. If, as I suspect, this is linked to a change in how *kebodike* and *mtakime* are perceived, then other means of maintaining cohesion are needed, such as promoting the festive aspects of funerals. Van der Geest (2006: 499) suggests that

technological change can lead to increased commercialisation and heightened competition between families wanting to demonstrate their social prestige. The availability of morgues, for example, means that people are no longer limited by time constraints when planning a burial. He adds that the influence of money and the importance of maintaining social prestige means that funerals have become ‘celebrations for the living, using the corpse and curriculum vitae of the deceased as a means to achieve glory for themselves’ (2006: 496).

Monga, writing about funerals in West and Central Africa, concludes that rituals have lost their ‘legitimacy’ and are now inspired by ‘flashy modernism’^{xxvii} (1995: 65). So what does it mean to be modern?

Being Modern

During my interviews, the majority of the interviewees regularly referred to *ubɔɔyɔ* (old times) by describing what they had learnt from their *parents*. The word ‘parent’ can refer to living relations of older generations and their ancestors. Some interviewees went on to explain how things have changed with *upaanu* (new times) sometimes for the better, sometimes not. Some perceived specific changes – such as the introduction of coffins – as good, whilst others thought them bad, illustrating that coffins continue to be controversial. There were signs of both rupture and continuity of opinions. Many interviewees initially responded that burial practices had not changed even though they then went on to give examples of how the burial has been embellished through the introduction of coffins, perfume, talcum powder, dressing the corpse, construction of elaborate tombs, et cetera. Some justified these as signs of becoming modern. This complexity of ideas exemplifies the ‘disjunctures and contradictions’ (Geschiere *et al.* 2008: 2) that exist when trying to come to terms with modernity. Geschiere *et al.* point out that the word ‘modern’ is ‘one of those “words that fly” – perhaps because its promise of a better life gives an illusory consistency to the often contradictory variety of its contents’ (2008: 1; cf. Thomassen 2012: 169) and that ‘[d]efinitions of modernity easily invoke a kind of internal balance, clarity and closure’ (2008: 2). This search for balance, which often results in the creation of moral dualisms, seems to be especially prevalent among certain forms of Christianity such as Pentecostalism (cf. Laurent 2003: 274-275; J. Merz 2008: 208-209). The fact that those I interviewed dichotomised *ubɔɔyɔ* (old times) and *upaanu* (new times), indicates that they are searching for such balance and clarity, and possibly even closure, as they try to come to terms with the reality and rapidity of the socio-cultural change they are experiencing. Although some of my interviewees – usually churchgoers with formal education – clearly saw

themselves as more modern than the *paien* villagers, I came away from my research with the sentiment that such an opinion cannot be justified. These so-called ‘pagans’ clearly demonstrated that they are as much part of the modern world as the educated ‘believers’ and are also searching to make sense of the rupture that they associate with *upaanu*.

Piot, writing about the Kabre of northern Togo, suggests that the savannah region in general ‘has long been globalized and is better conceptualized as existing within modernity’ (1999: 1). He realises that this may seem contrary to appearances with the Kabre’s apparent ‘earmarks of a still pristine African culture’. He goes on to suggest that the Kabre’s ‘apparently traditional features... owe their meaning and shape’ as much to their ‘encounters with Europe’ over the centuries as to their indigenous origins (1999: 1; cf. Piot 2001; Meyer 1999: xix; Ikenga-Metuh 1987: 279-281; Horton 1975: 392-393). The Kabre’s interactions with others and appropriation of ideas from elsewhere are deliberate and the society cannot be considered bounded or internally focused, nor is it possible to separate ‘tradition’ from ‘modernity’ (1999: 16-24; 173-174; 2001: 165; cf. Geschiere 1997: 8). Renne, writing about perceptions of fertility in a southwestern town of Nigeria, notes that there is an ‘ongoing dialogue’ rather than a ‘uniform shift from a “traditional” religious view to a “modern” secular one’ (2002: 564; cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xi, xxii). The village, following Lambert, should be considered a translocal community (cited in Gugler 2002: 25), whilst Gupta and Ferguson note that ‘instead of assuming the autonomy of the primeval community, we need to examine how it was formed as a community out of the interconnected space that always already existed’ (1992: 8) and Nkrumah points out that ‘[o]ur society is not the old society, but a new society enlarged by Islamic and Euro-Christian influences’ (2008 [1964]: 87; cf. Parrinder 1957: 264). These observations are equally valid for the Bebelibe. This being the case, how can the apparent rupture associated with colonialism be explained? During encounters and interactions with others that predated the arrival of colonialism, people had the time to assess, choose, assimilate or reject the new things they encountered. Colonialism, however, not only exposed people to new things but to the notion of modernity itself and its antithesis ‘tradition’. As noted above, the Bebelibe were not only seen as anarchic, but are a ‘modern’ creation as colonialists sought to class the different groups they encountered. Consequently they were labelled as traditional and backwards. The unprecedented changes affected by colonialism split Bebelibe history into the two eras now known as *ubɔɔyɔ* (old times) and *upaanu* (new times).

How individuals choose to interact with *upaanu* varies depending on what they choose to appropriate from the different influences they are exposed to. Following Geschiere *et al.*, different ‘trajectories of modernity’ (2008: 5) are apparent within any given society, as the interviewees’ different ways of understanding reincarnation demonstrate. Those who choose to adhere to reincarnation in its more or less ‘traditional’ form are no less modern than those who have rejected it. Thus different trajectories of modernity reflect the choices people make; choices that are not necessarily related to age or formal education. For example Sinbonko, who is in his seventies and has never been to church or school, wants to be buried in a coffin. He does not think that coffins block reincarnation given that *kebodike-mtakime* have already left; whilst Sébastien, who is in his twenties, goes to church and has completed secondary education, thinks that coffins do block reincarnation and shared that he sides with tradition. Although Sinbonko has not been to school, his views have been broadened through time spent in Ghana and travelling to other parts of Benin. Consequently, he has been exposed to cultural practices elsewhere, whereas Sébastien has not. Nevertheless, certain trends in trajectories were apparent amongst those I interviewed:

- Those who do not think that coffins are problematic for reincarnation generally accept that *kebodike-mtakime* separates completely from the body at the point of death; *kebodike-mtakime* have been dematerialised and spiritualised.
- Like Patrick, who compared *upinsihu* (fontanel) to a socket and *kebodike-mtakime* to a plug, many of the male interviewees in the mid-twenties to mid-thirties bracket, used technology to illustrate their understanding of the invisible components and reincarnation.
- Of the twelve who rejected or questioned the legitimacy of reincarnation, eleven attend church, and seven have (or have had) positions of responsibility in the church and a higher than normal exposure to biblical teaching.
- Churchgoers who accept reincarnation, found ways to combine both reincarnation and biblical teaching to create a modified eschatology.

As yet, published Scripture does not exist in Mbelime and many churchgoers rely on teaching and interpretation by others, unless they are literate in French or Ditammari, a neighbouring language. It is hard to judge, then, to what degree the Bible has truly influenced people’s perception of reincarnation and how much is based on what they have been taught in church and Sunday school. For some individuals like Luc, who have studied the Bible for themselves, there are passages that seem to support the notion

of reincarnation (cf. Jaton-Kunz 1986; Schönborn 1986). Edith and Henri have clearly rejected reincarnation after learning about the end times, heaven and hell during Sunday school, but others who attend the same church – such as Isabelle and Esther – have not.

Thus, different trajectories result in different localised forms of Christianity. Following Noret, these Christianities result from ‘entanglements of “traditional” and Christian habits of thought’ which may be ‘considered as a general trait of African religious modernities’ (2011: 174. I would add that this is a trait of *all* forms of Christianity worldwide). With regard to reincarnation and eschatology, these variations included Luc’s position that only the best Christians reincarnate; Isabelle’s position that only Christians reincarnate whilst non-Christians join the devil, whereas Marc and Matthieu shared that only non-Christians reincarnate. For those who held that everyone reincarnated, becoming a Christian diminishes *Uwienu*’s judgement and ensures a warm welcome when the person returns to *Uwien*’ *seede* (God’s homestead). This supports Meyer’s view that ‘indigenous interpretations of Christianity are not *given* by the missionary, but *made* by converts themselves in a process of appropriation (often against the meanings the missionaries intended to evoke)’ (1995: 125). For those who have rejected reincarnation in favour of eternal, non-cyclical, life with God – or in hell – it would seem that they are moving towards an understanding of ‘the person as a bounded individual’ (Bloch 1988: 15), which brings me to the issue of reincarnation versus ‘Eternal Life’.

Reincarnation versus ‘Eternal Life’

Fast writes that missionaries assumed that everybody feared death and saw it as ‘a complete separation from life’ and would therefore welcome the news that ‘heaven awaited those who had found and followed the way provided by Jesus Christ’ (1993: 162-163). Death, however, does not necessarily result in such a separation and, although certain types of death are feared, death itself is needed in order for life to continue. For those who grow old, death is even welcomed (van der Geest 2002). Zahan (1986: 63; 1965: 178; cf. Ikenga-Metuh 1987: 274) notes that people in Africa are strongly attached to life on earth, and leave with the hope of returning; life elsewhere holds little interest for them. Ikenga-Metuh (1987: 267-268; cf. Okwu 1979: 21) explains that with each new life, people hope their circumstances will improve, whilst Horton points out that the African view that ‘the life in this world is the best there is’ is in complete opposition with Christian, Hindu and Buddhist thinking, which consider the worldly life ‘flawed’ and strives for a ‘condition utterly different and incomparably better’ (1984: 416; cf. Erny 2007: 117; Parrinder 1957: 265-266; Stevenson 1985: 15-16). Therefore,

if 'heaven' literally is on earth, people's focus is on making the best of it. Several of the interviewees shared that they started going to church because they hoped to improve their current circumstances. Ngong explains that 'salvation means averting situations that diminish human material well-being' (2009: 3). He (2009: 14; cf. Meyer 1999: 212-216) adds that the Pentecostal movements and African Indigenous Churches are popular as they provide a means of overcoming life-threatening forces, whilst promoting physical wellbeing. Consequently, people are initially attracted to Christianity not because of the eschatological benefits of being 'saved' and gaining eternal life, but rather the immediate physical and material benefits associated with it, together with the promise of 'upward social mobility' (Meyer 1999: 96; cf. van der Geest 2002: 20) and in order to be viewed as civilised (Meyer 1999: 177). For many of my interviewees, going to *Uwien' seede* (God's homestead) was not associated with achieving a state of perfection and spending eternity with *Uwienu* (God); it was rather a temporary homecoming before returning to continue an earthly existence. Consequently, the Christian message of spending eternity with *Uwienu* seems to have had little impact and notions of reincarnation are not necessarily challenged. Van der Geest (2002: 14) notes that despite the many Christian churches and the general importance ascribed to biblical texts and Bible reading in Ghana, Christian notions of heaven and hell were not commonly accepted.

Duru, writing about the Igbo of Nigeria, shares that reincarnation 'is one notion which the missionaries have been unable to dispel' (1983: 3). Bastide (1965a: 14), writing about Afro-Americans, concluded that reincarnation had metamorphosed by taking on an eschatological dimension that promised an escape from a society full of racial prejudice where the Afro-American had no chance of advancing, as it gave hope of being reborn elsewhere. Bichet (1986: 272-273) suggests that it is because the Christian message of grace, God's love and forgiveness, has been obscured that reincarnation not only continues to be accepted, but is growing in popularity. It offers hope for those who have been exposed to a secularised outlook based on science and evolutionary principles that suggest that death is the end. Although he is writing about Europe, his observation about grace struck me as it was this very lack of grace in the local church in Cobby that I struggled with. While the church continues to focus on God's judgement, and the threat of hell, it is not surprising that reincarnation continues to dominate. Meyer (1999: 78-80) too reports that Christian teaching about heaven, hell and Judgement Day created ambiguities amongst the Ewe that remain unresolved.

One question I did not ask, and should have done in retrospect, was how the interviewees understood hell and whether they perceived this as the end for an individual. Matthieu's view that it is the devil who sends people to reincarnate suggests that hell too has been incorporated into the ongoing cycle of life, at least for non-Christians. Thus, for some Christians, reincarnation means non-Christians are provided with another chance to convert. This being the case, reincarnation is remodelled to reflect the Asian model that emphasises individuality and redemption (Sundermeier 1998: 24-25). For the moment, it seems that reincarnation continues to be more attractive than spending eternity in *Uwien' seede* (God's homestead) or hell.

CONCLUSION

...Christian doctrine has changed little in people's outlook on death. Local concepts of death may assume Christian terms without changing much of their original meaning. Ideas about ancestors and reincarnation, for example, are rarely supplanted by Christian teachings. In this connection I am reminded of what Jon Kirby, anthropologist and Catholic priest told me about an old lady he used to visit and pray for whenever he passed her village. After a particularly difficult period in bed she bid him to pray for her: "Father pray for me very hard. Pray for me that I die. I am fed up with living. Pray for me that I die quickly and that I am re-born an American. For I know now that I will never have the chance to go there in this life!" (van der Geest 2004: 907).

In this dissertation I have presented how fifty Bebelibe understand mortality and regeneration. Death is not considered the end of life, but rather part of the cycle of reincarnation. When a person dies their *kebodike* (vital force) and *mtakime* (agentive purpose) eventually return to *Uwienu* (God), after the flesh of the corpse has decomposed, leaving only the bones. During *dihuude* (death celebrations) an earthenware pot is placed over the grave, and a hole is pierced so that *kebodike-mtakime* can 'breathe'. Thus liberated, they are free to reincarnate. Having negotiated a new destiny, *Uwienu* then authorises *kebodike-mtakime* to return to earth and be reborn. The relational nature of *mtakime* ensures that relationships are maintained across generations and promotes social cohesion.

The relatively recent arrival of modern institutions, such as churches and schools, and modern paraphernalia such as coffins, are impacting funeral practices and how *kebodike* and *mtakime* are understood. Coffins have proved controversial as many fear they block or slow down reincarnation by preventing the corpse from decomposing quickly and mixing with the earth. Meanwhile, in an effort to communicate the Christian message, missionaries used *kebodike* and *mtakime* to translate 'soul' and 'spirit'. Thus dematerialised and spiritualised, *kebodike-mtakime*'s separation from the body is immediate and complete at the moment of death. For those who accept this, coffins no longer pose a threat as *kebodike-mtakime* have already left and returned to *Uwienu*. The role of *dihuude* also changes with a focus on family festivities rather than ceremonies.

Christian teaching, however, seems to have had little effect on the local understanding that reincarnation happens. Although some people have rejected reincarnation in favour of eternity in heaven or hell, most still hold that reincarnation

happens in some form or another. People appropriate the parts of Christianity and modernity that they find attractive on their own terms. This results in different trajectories of modernity and localised forms of Christianity.

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Appendices

Glossary of Mbelime Terms

<i>bēhidibē</i>	The dead
<i>bēnitibē</i>	Humans
<i>bēsihibē</i>	‘The reincarnated’ (those who reincarnate)
<i>dihuude</i>	‘Death celebration’. Second funeral that follows burial several months or years later. Only held for those who qualify to become ancestors.
<i>disēnpode</i>	Bush being; the devil
<i>disihide</i>	Reincarnation
<i>diyammade</i>	Ability to think and reflect; make decisions
<i>kēbodike</i>	Vital force
<i>mfoosimu</i>	Breath and the act of breathing
<i>mhuumu</i>	‘Death’, also the word employed for all the events surrounding, and including, burial.
<i>mtakime</i>	‘Agentive purpose’. <i>Mtakime</i> gives agency and purpose to the being, enabling it to relate and interact with others.
<i>siihō</i>	To reincarnate (<i>u siihō</i> ‘he/she has reincarnated’)
<i>sipiensi</i>	The whites
<i>tibaakite</i>	Special ceremony performed for children reincarnated by a maternal ancestor of their father or grandfather.
<i>tihidicancante</i>	Ghosts, usually of men who died single.
<i>tiwante</i>	Animals
<i>ubōoyō</i>	Old times, literally ‘oldness’.
<i>uhensihu</i>	Shadow/reflection
<i>uhidikpakihu</i>	Coffin, literally ‘dead-body trunk’
<i>ukuōnu</i>	The physical body
<i>unitokihu</i>	Ability to have healthy children; herbal bath for babies
<i>upaanu</i>	New times, literally ‘newness’. Term used to refer to all things new, colonial and post-colonial times. Translated as <i>la modernité</i> in French
<i>upinsihu</i>	Fontanel and respiration
<i>usiedu</i>	Grave pot
<i>usiihō</i>	‘The reincarnated’ (person who reincarnates)
<i>uwienu</i>	God, Supreme Being, Creator of all
<i>uwien’ seede</i>	Heaven or paradise, literally ‘God’s homestead’

Interview Questions

Below is the list of the areas I addressed throughout the course of the fifty interviews. The questions served as my interview guide. As mentioned above, apart from the opening question about *kebodike*, the order I asked the questions varied, whilst I left some topics out, depending on how the interview developed.

Non-physical components that make up a person

- What is *kebodike* / what does it do?
- What is *mtakime* / what does it do?
- Do *kebodike* and *mtakime* work together?
- What is *upinsihu*/what does it do?
- Is it part of *kebodike* & *mtakime* or the body?
- What is *diyammade*/what does it do?
- Is it part of *kebodike* & *mtakime* or the body?
- What is *unitokihu*/what does it do?
- Is it part of *kebodike* & *mtakime* or the body?
- What is *uhensihu*/what does it do?
- Is it part of *kebodike* & *mtakime* or the body?
- What is *mfoosimu*/what does it do?
- Is it part of *kebodike* and *mtakime* or the body?
- What is *disihide*/what does it do?
- Is it part of *kebodike* and *mtakime* or the body?

Uwienu, where you go when you die and new life

- What happens to *kebodike*, *mtakime*, other linked components and the body when a person dies?
- Where is *uwien' seede*? Do you have an idea what it's like there?
- What is *uhidihu* and where is it? Do you have an idea what it's like there?
- How does new life begin; at what point does *kebodike*, *mtakime*, etc. enter a new person?
- What's *Uwienu*'s role?

Death and Burial

- What's the difference between a good death and a bad death?
- Does this change what can happen to *kebodike*, *mtakime*, etc. of the person?
- Are those who had a good death buried the same way as those who had a bad one?
- Since you were a child, has the way that people are buried changed? Are there things that people use or do that they didn't use/do before?
- What do you think about these changes?
- Why have people started using coffins? Where did they come from?
- Can coffins affect what happens to *kebodike*, *mtakime*, etc. of the deceased?
- (Only asked some church-goers) Does your church require that you be buried in a coffin?
- Who are the *tihidicancante*?
- Was there a time long ago when people didn't die?
- Why do we die?

Dihuude

- What is *dihuude*?
- How has it changed since you were a child?
- What do you think about these changes?
- Why do people place an earthenware pot on the grave/at the head of the grave during *dihuude*?
- Why do people pierce a hole in the pot?

Reincarnation

- Is it possible for someone to reincarnate before they die? If so, why? Is there a danger for the person s/he reincarnates should the two meet?
- (Post death) Is it possible for someone to reincarnate more than one person at a time? Do you have an idea how many people s/he can reincarnate?
- (If more than one person is reincarnated) Are there any consequences for those who share the same reincarnated ancestor? For example if they attend the burial or funeral of someone who shares the same ancestor?
- Do men always reincarnate men, women reincarnate women, or can one change sex?
- Is reincarnation limited to the immediate family or can a person go elsewhere to reincarnate?
- Is reincarnation always human to human? If not, why not?
- (If reincarnation is not limited to humans) Once a tree, termite mound or animal, can the person become a human again?
- (For those who go to church and have not denounced reincarnation) Does going to church affect what happens to your *kebodike*, *mtakime*, etc. when you die?

Behidibe

- Who/what are the *behidibe*?
- How is it possible for someone to be an ancestor and reincarnate?

Interview Statistics

Men	35
Women	15

Marital status:

Men:		Women:	
Married	30	Married	4
Widowed	1	Widow	9
Divorced/separated	2	Divorced/separated	0
Single	2	Single	2

Age range:

Men:		Women:	
18-30	8	18-30	2
31-40	10	31-40	3
41-50	5	41-50	6
51-60	3	51-60	2
61-70	1	61-70	1
71-80	6	71-80	1
81-90	1	81-90	0
90+	1	90+	0

Church attendance:

Men:		Women:	
No church	7	No church	1
Ex-church	13	Ex-church	4
Goes to church	15	Goes to church	10

Church affiliation:

Men:		Women:	
Catholic	2	Catholic	4
<i>Assemblées de Dieu</i>	6	<i>Assemblées de Dieu</i>	3
<i>Ministère de Jésus</i>	6	<i>Ministère de Jésus</i>	2
<i>Pentecôte</i>	1	<i>Pentecôte</i>	1

ex-Church affiliation:

Men:		Women:	
Catholic	7	Catholic	1
<i>Assemblées de Dieu</i>	3	<i>Assemblées de Dieu</i>	1
<i>Ministère de Jésus</i>	5	<i>Ministère de Jésus</i>	2
UEEB	1		
<i>Christianisme Céleste</i>	1		

(NB some people tried several churches before choosing one or leaving altogether)

Education:**Men:****18-30**

No school	4
Some primary	1
Some secondary	3
Career training	0
Literate in Mbelime	4
Nothing at all	2

31-40

No school	4
Some primary	3
Some secondary	3
Career training	2
Literate in Mbelime	10
Nothing at all	N/A

41-50

No school	4
Some primary	1
Some secondary	0
Career training	0
Literate in Mbelime	4
Nothing at all	N/A

51-60

No school	2
Some primary	0
Some secondary	0
Career training	0
Literate in Mbelime	3
Nothing at all	N/A

61-70

No school	1
Some primary	0
Some secondary	1
Career training	1
Literate in Mbelime	1
Nothing at all	N/A

71-80

Nothing at all	6
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81-90

Nothing at all	1
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90+

Nothing at all	1
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Travel:**Men**

No travel	2
Elsewhere in Benin	3
Further afield	29
Unknown	1

Women:**18-30**

No school	0
Some primary	0
Some secondary	2
Career training	0
Literate in Mbelime	0
Nothing at all	N/A

31-40

No school	3
Some primary	0
Some secondary	0
Career training	0
Literate in Mbelime	1
Nothing at all	2

41-50

No school	5
Some primary	0
Some secondary	1
Career training	0
Literate in Mbelime	3
Nothing at all	3

51-60

No school	2
Some primary	0
Some secondary	0
Career training	0
Literate in Mbelime	1
Nothing at all	1

61-70

No school	1
Some primary	0
Some secondary	0
Career training	0
Literate in Mbelime	1
Nothing at all	N/A

71-80

Nothing at all	1
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No church, no education, no travel (beyond a 30 mile radius of home):

1 Oldest male interviewee

Interviewee Profiles

A small profile of each interviewee whom I have cited or referred to directly in the main text of the dissertation is provided below. The interviewees are listed according to order of appearance in the main text.

Pseudonym	Age-range	Church status	Formal Education	Other information
Antoine	51-60	Ex-church	Literate in Mbelime	Has been to Ghana and Nigeria
Basaadi ♂	71-80	No church	None	Village priest
Konna ♀	41-50	Churchgoer	None	Has not travelled
David	31-40	Ex-church	Career training	Has been to Ghana and Nigeria
Isaac	31-40	Churchgoer	Literate in Mbelime	Has been to Nigeria
Philippe	41-50	Ex-church	Some primary school	Born in Ghana, has been to Nigeria
Luc	31-40	Churchgoer	Literate in French & Mbelime	Church elder. Has been to Nigeria
Alma	51-60	Churchgoer	None	Has been to Ghana
Tenyomè ♀	71-80	Ex-church	None	Has not travelled
Sarah	41-50	Churchgoer	Some secondary schooling	Works for an NGO. Has travelled within Benin
Anne	51-50	Ex-church	Literate in Mbelime	Has been to Nigeria
Robert	31-40	Ex-church	Some secondary schooling	Works for an NGO. Has travelled within Benin
Sébastien	18-30	Churchgoer	Completed secondary school	Had not yet travelled when interviewed
Esther	61-70	Churchgoer	Literate in Mbelime	Has travelled within Benin
Isabelle	31-40	Churchgoer	Literate in Mbelime	Has been to Nigeria
Takide ♂	71-80	No church	None	Has been to Ghana
Kodaani ♂	51-60	Ex-church	Literate in Mbelime	Has been to Ghana
Idibiènou ♀	41-50	Ex-church	None	Has travelled within Benin
Marc	41-50	Churchgoer	Literate in and teaches Mbelime	Has been to Nigeria
Matthieu	18-30	Churchgoer	Literate in Mbelime	Has been to Ghana and Nigeria
Théophile	18-30	Churchgoer	Literate in and teaches Mbelime	Has been to Ghana
Stéphane	41-50	Churchgoer	Literate in Mbelime	Has been to Ghana and Nigeria
Eliza	31-40	Churchgoer	None	Has been to Nigeria
Alma	51-60	Churchgoer	None	Has been to Ghana

Nicole	18-30	No church	Completed secondary school	Has not travelled
Louise	31-40	Churchgoer	Literate in Mbelime	Has not travelled
Arnaud	31-40	Churchgoer	Completed secondary school	Works for an NGO. Has been to Ghana
Gilbert	61-70	Churchgoer	Career training	Has been a church elder and worked for a mission agency. Has been to Ghana
Gaston	31-40	Ex-church	Completed primary school	Has travelled within Benin
Idaani ♂	51-60	Churchgoer	Literate in Mbelime and Ditammari	Church elder, Member of the town council. Has been to Ghana
Emile	31-40	Churchgoer	Some secondary schooling	Has been to Ghana
Adrien	18-30	Churchgoer	Has his BAC	Works for an NGO. Has been to Ghana and Nigeria
Edith	51-60	Churchgoer	Literate in Mbelime	Has been to Nigeria
Henri	31-40	Churchgoer	Career training	Has travelled within Benin
Lucas	18-30	Churchgoer	Studying for his BAC	Has travelled within Benin
Paul	41-50	Churchgoer	Literate in and teaches Mbelime	Member of the town council. Has been to Nigeria
Patrick	31-40	Ex-church	Some primary schooling	Has been to Ghana and Nigeria
Joel	18-30	Ex-church	Literate in Mbelime	Has been to Ghana and Nigeria
Yooka ♂	71-80	No church	None	Has been to Ghana
Yammu ♂	81-90	No church	None	No travel, oldest male interviewee. Has since died
Ntanki ♂	71-80	No church	None	Has been to Ghana
Sinbonko ♂	71-80	No church	None	Has been to Ghana and travelled within Benin.

Tables

Table 1: Opinions about Reincarnation

<u>Reincarnation</u>	
Attended the Catholic church when interviewed	5
Attended a Protestant church when interviewed	9
Ex-Catholic	6
Ex-Protestant	8
Ex-church (church not known/tried several)	2
Never been to church	8
Total =	38
<u>No Reincarnation</u>	
Attended the Catholic church when interviewed	0
Attended a Protestant church when interviewed	7
Ex-church (tried several)	1
Never been to church	0
Total =	8
<u>Uncertain</u>	
Attended the Catholic church when interviewed	1
Attended a Protestant church when interviewed	3
Ex-Catholic	0
Ex-Protestant	0
Never been to church	0
Total =	4

Tables 2 to 8 present the opinions of those who affirmed that reincarnation happens.

Table 2: Does Everyone Reincarnate?

Yes	22
Not sure if <i>tihidicancante</i> (ghosts) do	2
Only Good deaths reincarnate	2
Only Christians reincarnate	1
Only the best Christians reincarnate	1
Only non-Christians reincarnate	2
Those who kill or fail <i>Uwienu</i> 's judgement do not	2
Not sure	6

Table 3: Which Family?

Paternal descendents only	20
Patrilineal and matrilineal descendents	7
Not limited, can go anywhere	6
Not sure	5

Table 4: Can You Change Sex?

Yes	27
No	6
Not sure	5

Table 5: Is Reincarnation One-to-One or Multiple?

Only one-to-one	8
Can be multiple	28
Used to be one-to-one, but now multiple	1
Not sure	1

Table 6: Can People Reincarnate *Before* They Die?

Yes	21
That's what I've heard	2
No	9
Not sure	6

Table 7: Reincarnation of Other Beings

<u>Trees</u>	
Yes	25
No	9
Not sure	4
<u>Animals and Termite Mounds:</u>	
Yes	17
Termite mounds only	2
Animals to human, but not human to animals	1
No	14
Not sure	4

Table 8: If Yes Above: Other Beings – One-way or Both Ways?

<u>Trees</u>	
One-way only i.e. once you've changed form, you cannot go back to being human	5
Free movement	7
Not sure	12
<u>Animals and Termite Mounds:</u>	
One-way only i.e. once you've changed form, you cannot go back to being human	5
Other way only i.e. an animal can become human	4
Free movement	8
Not sure	6

Table 9: Coffins – Good, Bad or Indifferent?

<u>Good as...</u>	
...it shows that we are modern	5
...it allows your children to demonstrate their gratitude	1
...the body is not exposed to dirt, mud, rodents, termites	6
No explanation given	10
<u>Good but...</u>	
...it's too expensive	3
...it creates social pressure to conform	1
...it has a negative impact on reincarnation	3
<u>Bad as...</u>	
...it's too expensive	6
...it creates social pressure to conform	3
...it has a negative impact on reincarnation	12
...the body cannot mix with the earth	9
...we should return as we came (just as we are, with no additional paraphernalia)	3
...you can no longer distinguish good from bad deaths	1
...it's the devil's work so people no longer respect our customs	1
...people no longer really know who they are (stuck between the old and new times)	1
<u>Bad but...</u>	
...it's the sign of the times, you can't stop change	1
...it's okay for others	1
<u>Indifferent</u>	2
Change can't be evaluated in terms of 'good' and 'bad'	1
No explanation given	2

French & Vernacular Quotes

- ⁱ Chapter One, page 3: ‘Seule la langue M’bèlmè, anciennement appelée yendé, *sert de ciment à ce peuple*’ (Sambiéni 1999: 36, emphasis mine).
- ⁱⁱ Chapter One, page 6: ‘La définition du *n’tákime* se complique quand on voit cette notion liée à celle de la réincarnation. Chez les Nyendé nous retrouvons en effet les deux conceptions *intimement liées* l’une à l’autre’ (Huber 1973: 434, emphasis mine).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Chapter One, pages 6-7: ‘Tout homme né en ce monde, croit-on, est un ancêtre revenu (*ossihò*) en ce monde... En interrogeant sur le contenu véritable de cette croyance, l’on apprend qu’il ne s’agit ni d’une simple métaphore, ni d’une simple surveillance de la part de l’ancêtre en question. Il paraît plutôt que, d’après la pensée de la majorité, c’est l’âme même de l’aïeul qui reviendrait... Ainsi l’un des informateurs bien estimés parlait avec révérence de ses deux petites filles à cause de leur *n’tákeme* qui serait venu de ses parents maternels... Il pense que c’est sa mère elle-même qui est renée [sic] dans l’aînée...’ (Huber 1973: 434-435).
- ^{iv} Chapter One, page 8: ‘enfants-nés-pour-mourir’ (Lainé 1990: 87). This, in turn, is a literal translation of the Fon and Yoruba term *abiku* (Lainé 1990: 89).
- ^v Chapter One, page 9: ‘...terme qui me paraît impropre’ (Bonnet 1994: 102)
- ^{vi} Chapter One, page 10: ‘...la réincarnation se réalise toujours à l’intérieur du même clan et ne concerne que les morts récents. Aussi s’arrête-t-elle avec l’oubli du nom du défunt. En effet, ce sont les deux conditions indispensables pour qu’elle puisse se produire’ (Szatkowski 2007: 81).
- ^{vii} Chapter One, page 12: quote in full: ‘Les exemples auxquels je me référerai relevant pour l’essentiel d’une Afrique “traditionnelle” qui n’existe plus comme telle’ (Erny 2007: 22).
- ^{viii} Chapter Three, page 22: ‘*Dī sihida ? Aā ! U hīdo ū n hīi, u kōti mīnī a be nīn’ kōtā n u pēētā. Be tē nēne kū ū sihīde*’
‘*Disihide ? Ah ! Le mort qui est mort, il est revenu et ils vont encore lui mettre au monde. C’est ça ils appellent disihide*’ (Interview with Basaadi, 9th March 2012).
- ^{ix} Chapter Three, page 25: ‘*A u tóntó dī bōnde dīyē u dōdī. A u dōdō dī bōnde dīyē a be yáátó be té ā u sēntā wē n dēnnā n wāānī nē n nō kē kódíke n u yūosi. N u yūosī dī bōnde dīyē n yē: « sōo hīi nīyē hē nne ū yīe dī kōn’ hē kómímú. Yēē sō ā cīenū, ū hō cīenū »*’
‘Si elle tombe au moment d’arriver [à l’enterrement/funérailles]. Si, au moment de tomber et les gens constatent, ils la prend en dehors de la foule et ils vont chercher une poule pour lui faire le sacrifice. Il lui faire le sacrifice et dit : « L’autre est mort et vous n’êtes plus ensemble. Laisse lui son chemin et prend pour toi »’ (Interview with Anne, 8th February 2012).
- ^x Chapter Three, page 25: Sébastien: ‘chez moi-même un cas il y avait la sœur de mon papa qui était mort. On m’a interdit d’aller là-bas, que c’est une même personne qui nous a réincarné, je ne suis pas allé. Malgré ça le malheur, après ça j’ai eu chaud, chaud toujours [laughs]... donc ça, ça veut dire que c’est une même personne qui nous a réincarné... nous ne sommes pas loin quoi donc, les choses comme ça c’est ça *disihide* [reincarnation]
- Sharon: et si tu es allé ? Est-ce qu’il y a un danger pour toi ?

Sébastien: oui, il y a un danger. Soit tu viens, tu meurs aussi ou bien tu tombes malade et devenir vieux, les choses comme ça' (Interview, 11th February 2012).

^{xi} Chapter Three, page 25: '... parce que même dans la vie il y a la réincarnation... mais ici là, je crois que je rejoindre un peu la tradition' (Interview, 11th February 2012).

^{xii} Chapter Three, page 27: 'Sharon: on dit que les gens se réincarnent

Arnaud: oui se réincarnent

Sharon: mais vous même vous ne croyez pas

Arnaud: selon la Bible, on voit ça, [sucks teeth] pour le moment on ne sait pas

Sharon: et selon vous qu'est-ce que c'est le *disihide* ?

Arnaud: *disihide* oui c'est incarnation c'est incarné donc ça dit si je meurs err dans deux ou bien en dix ans on me revoit, on revoit quelqu'un qui me ressemble et ca, même carac, caractéristiques même chose, ce que je faisait on voit comment la manière d'agir, c'est comme ça ben il pense, « ah l'homme là il est encore ressorti. »...

... Est-ce que la Bible a dit, on incarne, on revient, c'est ça que je ne suis, je ne crois pas. Dieu a dit, a dit que c'est le dernier jour on va ressusciter, ressusciter maintenant est-ce que c'est vraiment vrai quand on meurt on fait quelque temps on revient encore, est-ce que c'est vraiment ça ?...

On voit qu'ils sont, qu'ils se ressemblent vous voyez, on ne sait pas pourquoi c'est comme ça. Nous sommes toujours deux ou trois... dans le monde' (Interview, 1st March 2012).

^{xiii} Chapter Three, page 28: 'je ne suis plus traditionnel hmm? ... Mon point de vue est vraiment autre, par exemple l'incarnation dont on parle là, non, je ne crois pas en cela' (Interview with Emile, 28th February 2012).

^{xiv} Chapter Three, page 29: 'Tī yēnni tī yáátɔ m̄ pīeme n̄ bā. Maa n tūunī mēmme n̄ bā. Nēnne yē tī yēsīne n̄yē. Tī dēe ten' hē yá pīenke n̄yē. N mēm̄mēnī a tī yaā kē pīenke n ke sénnɔ n fúđɔ maa n yōótɔ m̄ pīeme maa n fúđɔ n díétɔ. Donc bē n díedɔ n mīnnī n̄hē, be yāasī sī pīensī nānkī n̄yē. Bēbe yē dēe tī tōō n mīnnī maa n tī bēnkī tēē n kpāā mandē n hē hóntɔ a tī hóntɔ. Maa n pāahɔ n tī bēnkī nne n̄ nāā n tē bā be pinsī tī búsí ā súose a tī búsí bōkīsī m̄ nāakūodime n kōnnī ā kowékpīēne n nīn' hī. Mīnnī n̄hē kū tī kpākīte dēnnī n̄yē, bē nitibe hīi n̄ mīnnī n̄hē kū a bebe tōō n mīnnī tī kpākīte n̄yē n̄nē a tī n̄onfe yaā. A nē bōnde a tī búó a n dōnne hēē n hē ū pīencōncūōnɔ ā hē nīn' fúđi n tākinā kpākīhy. Ne yāanī yāanī n̄yē a tī búsí mōnsī hító hító n kótɔ n kúúto m̄ tōm̄mū n bēn̄mō n pāānɔ n kóúto menisīe dēnbe bē mōnbe n nī fúđi n former be báábe. Bāa tēē n kōn' hē nō pīencōncōnbe, tī fē mēn' fún' sīpɔ tī kpākītē n̄yē.

Nous avons dit que nous connaissons le français. C'est ça que nous suivons. C'est ça qui nous a changé. Avant on ne connaissait pas le blanc. Maintenant nous avons vu le blanc, nous nous sommes approchés de lui [pour l'imiter] et nous parlons aussi le français et nous savons écrire. Donc c'est ceux qui sont là-bas qui ont vu ce que les blancs font. Ce sont eux qui l'ont apporté pour nous montrer, nous qui ne sommes pas civilisés et maintenant nous sommes civilisés... ils avaient attrapé nos enfants pour l'armée et [aujourd'hui] nos enfants vont à l'école et deviennent des fonctionnaires, puis ils meurent. C'est depuis là-bas que les cercueils sont venus, c'est là-bas que les gens sont morts et ils ont été transportés avec cercueils jusqu'ici et nous avons vu. Et en ce moment si tu n'étais pas fonctionnaire, tu ne pouvais pas être enterré avec cercueil. Après nos enfants sont rentrés dans l'apprentissage, ils ont appris et ils sont

devenus des menuisiers ils peuvent fabriquer eux-mêmes les cercueils. Même nous qui ne sommes pas fonctionnaires nous enterrons avec les cercueils' (Interview with Patrick, 2nd March 2012).

^{xv} Chapter Three, page 29: 'Sharon: Puis selon vous de... comme tel que chrétien, il n'y a pas de problème d'envoyer le corps à la morgue, d'utiliser le cercueil, pour vous ça va ?

Gilbert: ça va. Parce qu'on a adapté aux blancs (laughs). Les gens nous a fait les blancs...' (Interview, 1st February 2012).

^{xvi} Chapter Three, page 30: 'Sharon: est-ce qu'un croyant peut aussi dire, « moi, quand je meurs, ah je ne veux pas cercueil » ?

Lucas: s'il dit il ne veut pas cercueil, il se trompe ! Il se trompe, pourquoi ? Parce que c'est déjà bien une modernisation là, c'est la richesse' (Interview, 8th March 2012).

^{xvii} Chapter Three, page 31: 'Sharon: pour ce qui arrive à la personne après la mort, pour la réincarnation, est-ce que ces changements... a un effet sur ça ou ça n'a rien fait pour la réincarnation ?

David: non, ça n'a rien fait parce que avant même qu'on te met dans cercueil, quand tu meurs, avant qu'on te mette dans cercueil, tu n'es, tu n'es pas là.

Sharon: tu es déjà parti ?

David: tu es déjà parti, mais, nos parents que, certains qui ne connaît pas d'abord, il croit que quand tu meurs... comme ça là, et quand on te met dans cercueil, tu n'arrive pas à sortir et réincarner mais c'est pas ça quand tu meurs déjà là, on dit « ah telle personne est décédée » tu n'es plus là. Tu es déjà parti. C'est ton corps même qui est là. C'est ça. L'esprit est déjà parti' (Interview, 7th February 2012).

^{xviii} Chapter Three, page 31: 'Philippe: *Bē nitibe tennē be hōsī sō, bē bōsī, bē takime hē yōsi n fusī n dīedō. Be sīpō, be sīpō n sō bēyē ā tēēhē n yēmme donc nē nitibe bēbe dīedō n wē. N nīn' dedi mōnnē n ne n nō ū niito ū n cānsi.*

Les gens là sont nombreux, ils sont nombreux [ceux enterrés avec cercueils], que leurs *takime* ne peuvent pas sortir [des cercueils]. Ils enterrent, ceux qu'ils enterrent dans la terre comme ça donc ces gens là ce sont eux qui sortent. Il doit sortir pour être une personne complète.

Sharon : alors... le corps doit pourrir avant de se réincarner ?

Philippe : m hm

Sharon : alors ça veut dire que même que le *kebodike-mtakime* a quitté le corps, il reste un lien avec le corps jusqu'à ce que ce soit pourrisse ?

Philippe : *Hūū ! Ne mēn' tén' kpāā n caatī wē.*

F : Oui ! Il y a toujours un lien' (Interview, 21st February 2012).

^{xix} Chapter Three, page 32: '...*n pedimú nyē n bīisí a n yē á n hii dī dāāde dīyē, n hē dú a si yēnni si takinō ū kpākīhū, nē n tē tennē n nā ā dēetā simāa n nā ā pōnnā pōnnā tennē a n yēnni n hē ne dū. N bōyāa hōn' hē ne pānnō.*

...j'ai dit à mes enfant, et je dit si le jour que je meurs, je ne veux pas qu'ils disent qu'ils m'ont placé [dans] le cercueil, ce qu'ils font là que de prendre le ciment pour boucher, boucher là et j'ai dit je ne veux pas ça. Mon ancêtre n'avait pas fait ça' (Interview with Idibiènu, 2nd March 2012).

^{xx} Chapter Three, page 32: ‘...*be yōōmū n wē n tē: « á be ā sībínō nne ū kpākīhy, ā kōñ’ hē nīñ’ fúdí n dēnnī nne n dōnne ā dēe dēnnī n nē n nō kīyē. » A nīñ’ yēsīne wē. Ne pedimú n tē nē bōnde, ā kōñ’ hē nō bíédóó, ā kōñ’ hē nō pīenke. A nīñ’ dēnnī a be kōñ’ hē nīñ’ ya ā bōfide. A nō kīyē. Maa nē bōnde fī yūōsite be kōñ’ hē nīñ’ fúdí n na yūōsi parce que be, be pohjō n sō ā pīnsihy. Ne pīfī wē, be kōñ’ hē nīñ’ fúdí n nīntā ā pīnsihy n fúdí n hy yūōsi normalement be nō n nī hy yōsiki nīyē a n nō ū niitō. Nēne yē tennō a n mēmēmēnī a m yanyamme fī hōsíkō nne.*

...ils disent : « S’ils t’enterrent avec cercueil, tu ne peux plus sortir [comme nouveau né] comme tu étais avant. » Tu vas changer. Cela veut dire au moment là, tu n’es pas ubièlo, tu n’es pas blanc. Tu dois sortir [comme nouveau né] et tu n’es plus normal. Comme tu étais. Et en ce moment les sacrifices, ils ne peuvent plus te faire les sacrifices, parce qu’ils ont déjà couvert [avec cercueil] ton *pinsihu*. Il n’est plus visible, ils ne peuvent pas atteindre ton *pinsihu* pour pouvoir arranger normalement comment ils devraient le faire pour que tu deviennes une personne [normale]. C’est pour cela que maintenant il y a trop de souffrance pour nous’ (Interview with Patrick, 2nd March 2012).

^{xxi} Chapter Three, page 32: ‘*N mēmēmēnī be sībīne nīyē fī kpākīte tennē, be mēn’ tén’ yē tennē a u wāa ā sīhī nīyē, be sībínō ūyē tennē ū kpākīhy n kpááhō ī pīēnī tennē, á u tē u tē u dedōō n siihō ū niitō. U pēēfife cēki cēki wē. Ne nī n hūōnī wē nē bōde. U nīñ’ nānkīmē pōñti dēnbe tennē? A be n tē ū nītipūōhō tennē u potōō, a nī yā ū kúóhy tennē a ī pīēnī, u nīñ’ nānkīmē n ya ī pīēnī n dedi fēeme.*

Maintenant ils enterrent avec les cercueils là. Quand ils parlent que quelqu’un t’a réincarné, la personne qu’ils ont enterrée avec cercueil qui est fermé avec les pointes là, si elle sort pour réincarner une personne. L’accouchement sera compliqué, compliqué. Ce sera difficile à ce niveau. Comment faire avec ces pointes là ? Et ils vont dire que [l’accouchement de] la femme est en retard, il faut savoir que le cercueil là avec des pointes, comment faire avec les pointes là pour vite sortir’ (Interview with Ntanki, 21st February 2012).

^{xxii} Chapter Three, page 33: ‘*Dī húúde dā kū a be tōō nne ā kankaane nne sī húyeesī a dī weede bō a be tōō n bōkī n pōhjnā. A ū sīedū a sī bīsí ā hītā nī nne nī yā: « N tōō yē hōn’ sipú nīnē. » A hē búó be u pohjinaa ? Be tén’ wésídí tō be tén’ wésídí ū wienū hō pāñnīmē. U nīñ’ nī fúdí, á u nīñ’ nē bō sō u nā n dokī n fōōsī’*

‘C’est le jour de *dihuude* qu’ils portent la jarre avec les tam-tams et les hululements et c’est la joie et ils la portent pour la placer. C’est un signe pour que les enfants n’oublient pas : « C’est mon père qui est enterré ici. » Tu ne vois pas qu’ils ont placé la jarre ? Ils percent, ils percent c’est le travail de *Uwienu*. Si la personne qui est morte est toujours dedans, elle peut respirer’ (Interview with Yooka, 9th February 2012).

^{xxiii} Chapter Three, page 33: ‘*Yammu: Hāā, ū hīdō tennē bā. U wétō nīyē bā, fē bodīfē tennē bā a u dūā sō ā sīhī bā, ū hūōtū n hīnnī bā. U dūā sō nīyē ū hūōtū n hīnnī á u dū n sīhī n dedi, hāā, u dū n dēnnī nīyē n dedi fē bodīfē tennē kū n bōkī ū nītipūōhō, ū nītipūōhō nne ū yāa a be duā. Hēhē, u bōkō nīyē a ū nītipūōhō nne ū yāa a be duā a u tontá n nīñ’ dūā n u kpekīne nne wē. Be hitá dī bōnde, a ū nītiyāa ā hītā dī bōnde dīyē nne nī dū ū pūōhō tennē. U nī n nānkīmē ? A u kuutá bā n pāñnā m hīnime n pāñnā ū niitō.*

‘Faire quoi ? Oui, le mort là. On a percé le trou et c’est la nuit et il est couché dans la tombe. Il est couché dans la tombe et s’il veut se réincarner, oui quand il veut sortir, il sort par le trou là et il chez la femme et son mari quand ils sont couchés. Ah ha, il est arrivé quand la femme et son mari dormaient et il reste à côté de celle-ci. Le moment

venu, l'homme s'est levé il voulait sa femme. Qu'est qu'il va faire ? Il entre et il se transforme en sang et après en une personne.

Sharon: est-ce que c'est le *kebodike*, *mtakime* qui sortent par là, par le trou ?

Yammu: M takime tennē nne ū bōdīke. Hgá, nēnne yē ā dīedō. N kotá nī, n fún' ā kōtá nī n tūnnā ā sīe a bebe nī n be pūōnō. Nne n pūōnō bē nitibe fúnē. U nītipūōhō a u puoní ūnī.

Mtakime et *kebodike*. Oui, c'est ça qui sort. Et après ça revient dans les maisons, et on les porte grossesse. Et elles portent en grossesse les gens [ceux qui se réincarnent] maintenant. La femme le porte en grossesse' (Interview, 11th February 2012).

^{xxiv} Chapter Three, page 34: '*...kē bōdīke nī n kōti mīnnī dī bōnde dīyē ū wienū sēēde n kōti mīnnī ī húní be wétō dī bōde dīyē ke nīn' kúútá nēnne kū n dānpū tī táte n tāntā sō ū kūōnū bō nēyē n fōōnā n kotá n u contacter n u dēetā n fōōnā n bōkī n u webinā nne ū niito n u kōnsīne kē bīike kōtinē n fōōnā a be u pēētā. Nē hō húní yē tén' tōō a be ku wetá dī bode. Nēnne dū n nī pēdimu n yē kē bōdīke kē n yāanī tennē ke kūūti nēnne kū.*

...au moment que *kebodike* et de retour de la maison de Dieu et à son retour du ciel le trou qu'ils ont percé c'est là que *kebodike* va entrer pour toucher le sable et aller jusqu'où se trouve le corps pour le contacter encore et le prendre avant de le coller à la personne pour lui transformer encore un enfant avant qu'ils [les parents] le mettent au monde. C'est pour ça qu'ils percent le trou. Cela veut dire que *kebodike* qui vient c'est par là qu'il doit entrer' (Interview with Patrick, 2nd March 2012).

^{xxv} Chapter Three, page 34: '*U wétō dī bode. Be sībínō tī kōnte tīyē, ti nīn' n ne bō sō nīyē a ū bōdīke tennē, u nīn' sīihī dī bōnde dīyē ū nītipaanō, ū kūōnū tennē ku nīn' dedi dī bode tennē kū n nōō nne kē bōdīke tennē.*

Il a percé le trou. Le corps qu'ils ont enterré, quand le corps sera dans le trou et son *kebodike* là, au moment quand il va réincarner un nouvel être, le corps là doit sortir par le trou là pour aller ensemble avec *kebodike*' (Interview with Basaadi, 9th March 2012).

^{xxvi} Chapter Four, page 38: 'L'odeur de l'ancêtre, qui se fixe dans le sang du fœtus, est la seule composante de la personne qui transite intégralement par delà la mort. Le *kili* est comme le noyau héréditaire de l'âme immortelle...' (Dupire 1982: 27).

^{xxvii} Chapter Four, page 43: '...les procédures et les rituels ne se réfèrent plus à un contenu historique déterminé; les symboles ont perdu de leur « légitimité » en changeant de nature... Presque partout, le rituel en vogue s'inspire d'un « modernisme » tapageur plus que de « traditions » que l'on aurait pieusement conservées...' (Monga 1995: 65).