“We are so rich in culture!”

Meanings and values of Vodun as cultural heritage in Ouidah, Benin

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

The thesis looks at definitions, meanings and values of living traditions as cultural heritage through examining the local views of Vodun cults as cultural heritage in Benin, West Africa. The research is based on participant observation, informal discussions and interviews carried out in Ouidah, Benin, during December 2015 – February 2016. The thesis examines the phenomenon by using theories of cultural heritage, secrecy and postcolonialism, and comparing Vodun with other West African examples of traditions performed as cultural heritage.

Previous research has focused on how traditional religion called Vodun has been promoted as cultural heritage by political, cultural and religious dignitaries in the purpose of increasing cultural tourism, building a modern image of Benin and forging a national identity. By shedding light more specifically on how common people experience, interpret and value the heritagization of a previously misrecognized and diabolized local spiritual practice, the thesis contributes to the anthropological body of knowledge on cultural heritage, West Africa and Vodun.

The thesis examines the relations between spirituality and culture, secrecy and universal cultural heritage, and empowerment, alienation and commodification. The analysis points out that, although Vodun related events are also used as entertainment by the locals and foreign tourists, the core of the cultural heritage is perceived to be its esoteric spiritual content. Cultural festivals can be used to raise local youth's interest also in the spiritual aspects of Vodun. Besides entertainment, Vodun spectacles are performances of power of the spirits, and they intend to show that there are secrets that the audience has no access to. Although the secrets belong to certain persons, Vodun as cultural heritage is felt to belong to all Beninese or indeed all Africans. Vodun is defined as original African spirituality which is perceived to have a special bond with Africans and essentially define Africans and Africanness in opposition to the West.

The thesis concludes that, although commodification and folklorization are experienced as threats, Vodun as cultural heritage is perceived and experienced as empowering. Giving recognition and valuing a practice which has been extremely denigrated, misrepresented and oppressed for centuries by colonial and other oppressive Western practices is allowing the locals to reclaim agency, redefine Africanness, and defy Eurocentric norms and definitions. Consciousness of the past, present, and future racial inequality is seen important in the production and performance of Vodun as cultural heritage. Appropriating, indigenizing and reworking the discourse of heritage in locally meaningful ways can also be seen as fitting with the logics of Vodun which are characterized by appropriating, accumulating, and reusing powers and foreign influences.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
cultural heritage, secrecy, identity, race, empowerment, Africa, Vodun

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Tutkielma käsittelee merkityksiä ja arvoja, joita liitetään elävien käytäntöjen määrittelyyn kulttuuriperintönä tarkastelemalla paikallisia käsityksiä vodun kulteista kulttuuriperintönä Beninissä, Länsi-Afrikassa. Tutkielma perustuu kenttätyöhön, joka sisältää osallistuvaa havainnointia, epävirallisia keskusteluja ja haastatteluja Beninissä Ouidahin kaupungissa joulukuusta 2015 helmikuuhun 2016. Työssä tarkastellaan ilmiötä kulttuuriperinnön, salaisuuksien ja postkolonialismin teorioiden avulla sekä vertailemalla sitä muihin Länsi-Afrikkalaisiin esimerkkeihin perinteistä, joita esitetään kulttuuriperintönä.

Aiempi tutkimus on keskittynyt poliittisten, kulttuuristen ja uskonnollisten eliittien toimiin perinteisen uskonnon, vodunin, määrittelemisessä kulttuuriperinnöksi tavoitteenaan kulttuurituriSmin lisääminen, Beninin modernin julkisuuskuvan rakentaminen ja kansallisen identiteetin muodostaminen. Tutkielma lisää antropologista tietoa kulttuuriperinnöstä, Länsi-Afrikasta ja vodunista valaisemalla erityisesti sitä, miten tavalliset ihmiset kokevat, tulkitsevat ja arvostavat aiemmin mustamaalatun ja sorretun henkisen käytännön kulttuuriperinnöllistämisen.

Tutkielma tarkastelee henkisyyden ja kulttuurin, salaisuuksien ja universaalin kulttuuriperinnön sekä voimaantumisen, vieraantumisen ja esineellistämisen välisiä suhteita. Analyysi osoittaa, että vaikka paikalliset ihmiset ja ulkomaiset turistit käyttävät voduniin liittyviä tapahtumia viihteenä, kulttuuriperinnön ytimen katsotaan olevan vodunin esoteerinen henkinen sisältö. Kulttuurifestivaaleja voidaan käyttää herättämään paikallisten nuorten mielenkiintoa myös vodunin henkisiä puolia kohtaan. Viihteen lisäksi vodun spektaakkelit ovat hengille kuuluvien voimien performansseja, jotka pyrkivät osoittamaan sellaisten salaisuuksien olemassaolon, joihin yleisöllä ei ole pääsyä. Vaikka salaisuudet kuuluvat vain tietyille henkilöille, vodunin kulttuuriperintönä koetaan kuuluvan kaikille beniniläisille tai laajemmin kaikille afrikkalaisille. Vodun määritellään alkuperäisenä afrikkalaisena henkisyytenä, jolla nähdään olevan erityinen side afrikkalaisiin, ja sen nähdään määrittelevän afrikkalaisia ja afrikkalaisuutta vastakohtana länsimaille.

Tutkielmassa todetaan, että vaikka esineellistäminen ja folklorisaatio koetaan uhkina, vodun kulttuuriperintönä nähdään ja koetaan voimauttavana. Aiemmin äärimmäisissä määrin halvennetun ja sorretun käytännön arvostaminen kulttuuriperintönä mahdollistaa paikallisille oman toimijuutensa takaisin vaatimisen, afrikkalaisuuden uudelleenmäärittelyn ja eurosentristen arvojen ja määritelmien haastamisen. Menneen, nykyisen ja tulevan rodullisen epätasa-arvon tiedostaminen nähdään tärkeänä osana vodunin käsittämisessä ja esittämisessä kulttuuriperintönä. Kulttuuriperintödiskurssin omaksumisen ja muokkaamisen paikallisesti sopivin tavoin voidaan nähdä myös sopivan hyvin vodunin logiikkaan, jolle on ominaista vieraiden voimien ja vaikutteiden omiminen, kartuttaminen ja käyttäminen.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
kulttuuriperintö, salaisuudet, identiteetti, rotu, voimaantuminen, Afrikka, Vodun

Contents

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1 Introduction

The aim of this master's thesis is to study the definitions, understandings and meanings of living traditions as cultural heritage through examining the local views of Vodun cults as cultural heritage in Benin, West Africa. This thesis is based on participant observation, informal discussions and interviews during a three-month fieldwork in the coastal town of Ouidah, Benin. My informants consist of mainly local common Vodun practitioners and non-practitioners including Christians, Rastafarians, and Muslims. In addition, I have also interviewed some Vodun priests and dignitaries.

My long-lasting interest in Vodun originates already in the mid 1990's when as a teenager I stumbled upon Hurbon Laënnec's book Voodoo: Truth and Fantasy (1995) in the local library. I was fascinated by the Haitian Voodoo, not the vision of it in the popular culture, but exactly by how it was so misunderstood. How such an "exotic" thing can be ordinary and common at the same time? I was also curious about the transmission of heritage from generation to generation for hundreds of years, and the history of the slave rebellions as well as the "vestiges" of African homelands in the memories and practices. My interest gradually shifted to its roots, to the cradle of Vodun, Ancient Dahomey, now Benin.

For a very long time I assumed anything related to Vodun would be impossible to study in the scope of a master's thesis. As Vodun consists of so many secrets and restrictions, one would need years of fieldwork just to gain access and finally one would be confronted with the ethical problem of what can be written without compromising the secrecy and the trust. But during my exchange year in 2013 in Montpellier, France, I attended a course by Gaetano Ciarcia, who did research on the memorialization of slavery in Ouidah and on how Vodun as cultural heritage was used to give Benin a global and modern aura. I understood that it was possible to study Vodun in Benin without going too deeply into the religious content of it. Since then I have written many essays and my bachelor's thesis about Vodun as cultural heritage. I noted that most of the studies written about Vodun and its cultural heritage dimension were concentrating on the views and practices of the political, cultural and religious elites and dignitaries. Those who are not in prominent positions in the society have not been studied extensively. In order to fill this research gap, my aim in this master's thesis is to shed light on the meanings common people associate with the heritagization of Vodun.

Traditional religion called Vodun has been promoted as cultural heritage by politicians and cultural and religious dignitaries in the purpose of increasing cultural tourism, building a modern image of Benin and forging a national identity. One of the most important and evident manifestations of this phenomenon is the annual Vodun festival, which attracts or is supposed to attract large amounts of foreign visitors and international interest. Vodun is what separates Benin from other West African nations aiming to increase tourism by appealing to African diaspora dispersed by the European slave trade to come home to "Mother Africa" to explore their ancestral roots.

I use in this thesis terms *African*, *Western*, *European*, and *White*. I would like to state that these categories do not represent single, unproblematic, or homogeneous groups. I do not wish to essentialize people, instead, I use these categories precisely to describe and analyze how my informants essentialize themselves and others and to what purpose. These categories are not my invention, they are in constant use in my informants' speech. Especially *African* and *White* are used as such. Quite often the contrast to *African* was a general *You*, which referred depending on the situation to *Western*, *White*, *European*, *Euroamerican*, *(Neo)Colonial*, or anything non-African. This is why I sometimes use these terms interchangeably and I do not define them very clearly as they were also very vague and general categories in my informants' speech, and as their main point was to show and talk about what is *African*.

Obviously my own position in the field affected enormously the encounters I had with people, the data that I got, and the analysis that I have made. The general *You* in my informants' speech in opposition to them, the *Africans*, indicated that I was the representative of the Other: white, European, female, wealthy in comparison to them, and academic. It is likely that my otherness prompted my informants to highlight the issues of race, difference, inequality, essentialization and Africanness, or at least talk about them differently than they would have if I was a black male or an African anthropologist. However, it was clear that these issues were important to my interlocutors in these precise encounters as they brought them forth time after the other.

Therefore, as for so many other students doing their fieldwork, my research questions reformed and changed during the field. Originally I set out to study how Vodun is understood and performed as cultural heritage. But as people continued to emphasize the

Africanness and unequal power relations between Africa and the West, I understood that they wanted to tell me why recognition of cultural heritage matters at the local level.

My research questions thus are as follows: How is Vodun defined, understood and performed as cultural heritage by the common people in Ouidah? How is secrecy approached and handled in the process of heritagization of a spiritual practice? And, what are the meanings and values of heritagization of Vodun to the local common people? I will analyze them in the light of previous research on cultural heritage, secrecy, race, and postcolonialism derived both from anthropology and cultural heritage studies.

Vodun and its heritagization in West Africa is a particularly fascinating phenomena within the context of globality and locality, flow and closure, since it encompasses very openly the paradoxes between constant change, assimilation and adaptation on the one hand, and boundedness, secrecy and tradition on the other; globality, diaspora and the idea of Pan-Africanism on the one hand and the locality, closure and creating new borders on the other. It also embodies the double movement of cultural and religious disenchantment and re-enchantment, the fear of loss of respect through commodification and the hope of revitalization through performance, as well as the power play and agency of local people, spirits and audiences.

I start the thesis by introducing my fieldwork and methods, and giving a more detailed discussion on ethical concerns. In chapter 3, I proceed to make some theoretical observations of the main concepts and approaches in earlier research, after which in chapter 4, I give background information about the context of the subject of the study: the cultural politics of Benin, basic information about the city of Ouidah, and about Vodun as spiritual practice. In chapter 5, I analyze how Vodun is spoken of as cultural heritage, what is valued as heritage, and how it is performed, received and experienced. I proceed to discuss secrecy in chapter 6, in which I look at the importance of secrecy in Vodun, and how it is related to and should be dealt with in the process of patrimonialization. In chapter 7, I will look at why heritagization is important to my informants. I show how Vodun as cultural heritage is related to consciousness of race, power and domination, and how it can be perceived as empowering.

2 Methods

2.1. Fieldwork and data

I did almost three months of fieldwork from December 2015 to February 2016 in the city of Ouidah, on the so-called Slave Coast in the Gulf of Guinea. Ouidah was the obvious choice for my fieldwork as it is the city that holds the biggest annual celebration on the Vodun Day, the 10th of January, which attracts many foreign tourists, and where Vodun is generally understood to be very prominent both as religious practice and as celebrated cultural heritage. In Ouidah, Vodun seems to be everywhere. One can see the *fetishes* (as people call them without any derogatory connotation) and temples in all neighborhoods, healers, diviners and priests advertise their services with signs on the streets, and Vodun images are depicted on the walls. December to February was an obvious choice for the period of fieldwork, as it is the most active time of the year for Vodun ceremonies and spectacles. The beginning of the year is considered the most important time for blessings, and spectacles and ceremonies started long before and lasted long after the 10th of January, although most of the foreign tourists stay in the town only for that one day.

Before starting my fieldwork, I had done a three-month long internship in the village of Grand Popo, some 40 kilometers from Ouidah. Although I did not consider this as my fieldwork, it did help me a lot with familiarizing myself with and getting accustomed to social rules and habits, Vodun performances, and in general Southern Benin. During my stay in Grand Popo, I visited Ouidah a few times, explored the touristic routes, met a few future informants and arranged practical matters, which helped assure that I was ready for the fieldwork as soon as I arrived in Ouidah in December 2015. This did not mean that I would have known from the start what, how and who to ask and talk to. Attitudes towards Vodun seemed to be very different in Ouidah than they were in Grand Popo. In fact in Ouidah, it was much easier to bring up my interest in Vodun as its special relationship with the town was often the main reason for foreigners to come to Ouidah.

The exotism of Vodun, its secrecy and notorious reputation contribute to the fact that it has become a very popular topic for all kind of journalistic and artistic projects. Unfortunately many of these projects that result in popular or artistic documentaries, films, photography books, novels, travel books and collections of material items are done with the intention of capturing controversial material to draw attention in the West. They

often concentrate on the blood, animal sacrifices, trance, sorcery and other exotic and shocking elements and speak very little about the spirituality and the worldview behind the practices. They are most often done with little background information, during a short stay in Benin and with only a few informants and point of views.

Knowing this, I was initially under the impression that most people would be wary of foreigners coming to ask questions about Vodun, and I thought I would not even try to attend ceremonies nor inquire into the religious base of Vodun more than I already knew. My intention was to try to make it as clear as possible that I did not want to pry into the secrets that were not meant for my ears. But perhaps to my surprise, I did not encounter any of the mistrust towards foreigners that I expected. Instead, I was often explained very politely the importance of secrets and how one was not in the position of unmasking them to me. Very often when I mentioned Vodun for the first time, the first reaction of people was ”I am sorry, I do not know anything, but I can take you to see my father/uncle/mother/grandmother who is a priest/priestess/adept/chef de culte”. Despite my best efforts to explain that I was not there to see religious dignitaries, but to hear views of ordinary people about the cultural side of Vodun and not its religious or esoteric content, I think the intention of my study was misunderstood more often than not. Which, I admit, actually benefitted me greatly, because I was also shown the spiritual and religious aspects of Vodun, and I understood that the two aspects, cultural and spiritual, go together and it is impossible to understand one without the other. If I had tried to study the cultural side of Vodun with only the literary background information from Western books, my understanding of the phenomenon of Vodun as cultural heritage would have been much more cursory and mild. I am grateful for all these discussions that contributed to the making of this thesis either directly or indirectly.

Vodun is a Fon language word meaning *spirit*. Just like my interlocutors and most of my written sources, I use it in this paper to denote both the individual spirits and the whole system of traditional religious belief and worship in this region of Benin. Other possible spellings are Vodoun, Vodu, Vudu, as well as Vodou, Voodoo, and Vaudou which refer more often to the religion practiced in Haiti.

My fieldwork consisted of informal discussions, interviews, participant observation of spectacles relating to the worship of Vodun and of cultural performances inspired by Vodun, participation on the Vodun Day, visits to the shrines and temples and meetings

with some priests, as well as visits to the touristic sights. My data also includes printed brochures from festivals, as well as Vodun related discussions in social media. I had approximately 60 informants. They range from 14 to around 70 years of age, of which most are 20-40 year old men. They included mostly Vodun practitioners, Catholics, Protestants, and a few Rastafarians and Muslims. They are from different ethnic groups, mostly Hueda and Fon. Most of my informants were living in Ouidah, but I also had a few discussions in Comé, Grand Popo, Savi and other nearby small towns. All my discussions were in French, as three months was too short a time to learn any of the local languages.

Most of my data consists of rather informal discussions. Some are very short encounters on the street, giving me only a few comments which were nonetheless interesting and important, and many are deep discussions lasting several hours with people I talked with almost daily. Both my interviews and my discussions were unstructured and open-ended. I wanted to study how and what people would tell me spontaneously on the matter when I told them that I was interested in Vodun as cultural heritage. Nearly everyone had something to say even before I would ask any questions. Many of my informants did not want our discussions recorded, or if I would have asked to record, it would have changed the setting completely, hence in many cases I have to rely on my own fieldwork notes. 18 of my interviews are recorded. Although most of the data that I have used in my analysis is not recorded, extracts in this thesis are from the recorded interviews. I have chosen them because they represent well also the unrecorded discussions. To protect the anonymity of my informants, all the names I use in the thesis are pseudonyms.

Finding informants was not difficult, as people were as much curious about me and my motivations as I was of them. I did not need to have a very specific plan in the morning, as I would start walking the long street from my home towards the city center, before long someone would come and stop me. This kind of unscheduled fieldwork worked best in this situation, because through the “radio-trottoir” I heard if there was a spectacle or a performance to be held and in which quarter of the town, and often also got accompanied there. Also, making scheduled appointments proved to be often difficult, as people tend to come late, cancel or reschedule the appointments without notice.

2.2. Limitations of the data, difficulties and ethical concerns

This kind of unplanned fieldwork did not come without problems, of course. I spend also long time visiting places and people, and listening to discussions that were not the main subject of my thesis. Sometimes I got frustrated that even when I tried to direct the conversation to my main points of interest, sometimes a whole day passed, and I felt like I had nothing but repetition of the same phrases. But I think the main limitation of my data is related to whom I spoke with and whom I did not. The majority of my informants are male. This is partly because it was more common that men would come and talk to me, but also because I did not speak any of the local languages. Quite often the women I spoke with either did not speak enough French to talk about these matters, were not interested in talking about Vodun or cultural heritage, or they felt that it was not their place to talk about this. Most of those women that I met who spoke very well French were Christians who did not want to speak of Vodun related matters at all. It is my understanding that most of the women who practice Vodun, speak little French. There are exceptions, of course. I have interviewed a few women who were or had been high in the hierarchy of Vodun practice, and were willing to speak about it with me in French.

According to the American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics (2012), anthropologist should try to explain the object and the use of the study to the informants as best as he or she could. I did my very best but this proved challenging. As practices around Vodun and the society in Southern Benin at large, are very hierarchical, the people I discussed with usually told me that they were not the key persons of interest, and that they could and should take me to see someone higher in the hierarchy. I tried to explain that my focus was on the thoughts of the common people and not on the discourse of those in high positions. This might have been often misunderstood, and I believe some of the people I spoke with did not realize how important informants they were to me, and vice versa, some of those in high positions believed their contribution greater than it was. Also the actual subject of the study was often misunderstood. I was taught what Vodun is also from the spiritual and religious aspect although that was not my main intention.

From the very beginning of my stay in Ouidah, I was taken to see fetishes, temples, the parts of convents that non-initiates were allowed to enter, I was taken to meet priests, consult the Fa, and watch ceremonies and spectacles. But what I think is important, is that as far as I know, I was never taken to places where I should not have been nor exposed to

any secrets that I should not have heard. I made it clear to all my informants and acquaintances that I had no intention of prying into the secrets that were not meant for the non-initiated. I always tried to treat my friends and informants and their religious practices with respect to the best of my knowledge regardless of their religion.

Money and compensation were a difficult issue for me. I never knew whether I should or I should not pay the people who helped me, or how, when and who to compensate for their time and effort, and in this regard, I am sure I made many mistakes. Anthropologists do not often pay to informants (although the practice is common in some areas), and frankly in some cases it would have felt patronizing and disrespectful, but on the other hand I felt uneasy taking people's time without compensation. I generally trusted more those people who did not ask for a compensation, as they would be more likely to tell me what they wanted and less motivated to tell me just what I wanted to hear. Those that directly asked me for money in exchange for information were often either in tourism business, in which case they were not my main focus, or seemed to misunderstand my subject entirely, as they assumed I was looking for knowledge about Vodun or access to temples. People also warn that those who are most eager to make a profit, do not usually know much. And as I had not come to hear secrets, I definitely did not want to pay anyone promising me (or implying) that they would reveal secrets for money.

Despite these limitations, my data was very rich. In my analysis, I have divided my data into three themes. The first one, spirituality and folklore was chosen by me already before entering the field because of its relevance to the anthropological study of cultural heritage. The other two, secrecy and African empowerment, arose from my field as distinct important themes because of their recurrence in the interviews and discussions with so many informants. Next I will present the main themes of my theoretical framework.

3 Theoretical framework

3.1. Cultural heritage

Fear of losing culture and difficulty of passing traditions on to new generations have been major causes of concern for both anthropologists and for the societies they have studied since the beginning of anthropological research among the so-called "primitive" cultures. Many famous anthropologists, like Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Lévi-Strauss and the like, were trying to record the old traditions before they would forever disappear. The general assumption was that these societies were rooted in tradition, and cultural transmission in them was done organically from generation to the next without much worry, but when they would come into contact with modernity, they would be unable to resist change (Berliner 2015: 21 – 23). But the world did not become uniform. As Marshall Sahlins pointed out, all cultures incorporate content from others, but societies adapt the content to their structures in their own cultural specific ways. The contents are given new meanings or old meaning are attached to different things. To the members of the society, culture is felt authentic whether the content that is incorporated into it comes from a known or an unknown source, adopted in a distant or a closer past (Sahlins 1999).

In this research, I take the theoretical perspective which defines cultural heritage as a mode of cultural production. Heritage is something that has a recourse in the past, but it is formulated in the present and often oriented to the future. It is not something that exists on its own, and could be lost or found, but rather an active process of cultural production, where something is singled out and given cultural value above other things. Old practices are given new meanings when they are defined as cultural heritage. An everyday practice or a ritual could be regarded as outmoded and incompatible with aspirations of modernity and globalization, but defined as intangible cultural heritage, it becomes a mark of modernity (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). The process of choosing the specific traditions to value and leaving others to be forgotten is always done in the present and it deals with the questions that are important today, and thus defining cultural heritage is always political (Tornatore 2010).

Although cultural heritage can be best defined as active cultural production, I am not speaking of "invention of traditions" in the way Hobsbawm (1983) defined them. According to him, many traditions are invented, especially those relating to building and

strengthening national identity. These traditions construct continuity with the past, which would be revealed as artificial and fictitious in closer scrutiny. Hobsbawm contrasts these invented traditions with those that somehow are not invented. I find that his approach is not very useful in studying cultural heritage practices and their meaning in different cultural contexts. I would rather follow Sahlins in the general acceptation that all cultures are hybrid and the hybridity is a problem only to a scholar who would be trying to find out the historical authenticity of traditions (Sahlins 1993: 19). This is especially relevant in my study as Vodun traditions are very much characterized by hybridity and appropriating foreign influences which are indigenized to fit with local understandings (Hamberger 2011: 366 – 367).

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been influential in how cultural heritage is conceived on national and local levels (Smith & Akagawa 2009: 1). UNESCO keeps lists of World Heritage Sites and of World Intangible Heritage. The lists themselves are a mode of heritage production, because the lists gives context to the sites and practices on them by putting the sites in relation with the other masterpieces (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 57). Anthropologists' attitudes toward UNESCO have been multifaceted. Many have seen in its practices attempts to new imperialism with ideas of Eurocentric universalism, but others (such as Claude Lévi-Strauss) have worked with it closely seeing in it potentiality for increasing tolerance and reducing racism. The anthropological criticism towards UNESCO often aimed to tackle its tendency to portrait peoples and cultures as bounded, immutable and essentialized others. But anthropologists have been increasingly turning their attention towards studying the practices of UNESCO and how they affect the local views on culture and heritage. The scholars think a simple critique of UNESCO's practices is not enough, but that anthropologists should rather study how these international policies produce new social, cultural, political, religious and esthetical conceptions, structures and functions (Berliner 2010).

Rowlands and de Jong (2007: 20) have pointed out that although influential, western heritage discourse is not hegemonic. Rowlands and de Jong, as well as other anthropologists, have studied alternative ways to (re)define, (re)appropriate and use heritage in the post-colonial context of West Africa. In these cases heritage is not left to heritage experts to deal with, but agency in heritage practices is reclaimed by those who

have an interest in it. My research will add to this body of knowledge by showing how people also in Ouidah reclaim agency by appropriating the language of heritagization and why they feel it is important to do so.

The safeguarding of cultural heritage often means different things to different stakeholders although they influence each other: local society, officials on the local and national level, heritage experts, international organizations and tourists. This might cause disagreement and disenchantment between the actors involved. Tourists and international organizations protecting cultural heritage often experience a kind of exo-nostalgia toward a culture that is not their own (Berliner 2010, 2012, 2015). They lament the loss of culture and its continuity when they discover that people do not for example use traditional dresses anymore in places which are defined as cultural heritage sites like the village of Luang Prabang in Laos studied by David Berliner. Instead of static continuity towards the traditions and their past, the locals saw rapid changes in the village produced by acceptance to UNESCO's World Heritage list and felt it was a possibility to participate in modernity (Berliner 2010, 2012). According to Berliner, one important element in production of cultural heritage is nostalgia as an attitude towards the past which is seen as irreversible and gone forever. It is an emotional posture often seen in public discourses and practices about one's own culture as well as those of others. Nostalgia is longing for the past that is idealized and glorified, and where life and belonging to a group was somehow simpler. It is also longing for an imagined future (Berliner 2010, 2012).

Besides interviews and spiritual events, my ethnographic data includes also cultural festivals. A festival can be seen as a particularly suitable mode of presenting intangible heritage. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, by bringing the traditions in front of a live audience, festival focuses more on the performers than the content of heritage. This way it highlights their agency in defining and constructing heritage rather than just seeing them as the passive transmitters of heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 57 – 58). The public performance of a ritual can also be seen as one way of safeguarding and transmitting the cultural traditions to next generations. A ritual performed in a cultural festival setting can have many different interpretations and meanings to different spectators and participants. It can be at the same time an important religious event and entertainment (Siikala & Ulyashev 2011: 185 – 197).

Heritage and memory are both instruments of cultural power (Harvey 2001: 336), as are forgetting and cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005). The disputes over heritage are not simply about who owns the heritage but rather who controls the past (Smith 2006). The power of heritage and collective memory as tools of building and maintaining cultural identity is recognized also by those in power who aim to control the minority, subversive or defeated groups by forced forgetting and deliberate destruction of heritage. When some narratives are legitimated as heritage and history and others silenced, it is about the exercise of power (Trouillot 1995: 25). Owning heritage is thus especially important for dispossessed and misrecognized peoples. By presenting traditions to outside audiences they can reclaim existential recognition and reconstruct collective identity (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009). People in Ouidah and more largely in West Africa can be seen as especially dispossessed and misrecognized due to the transatlantic slave trade, colonization, oppression of traditions like spiritual practices of Vodun, and continued racial, economic and political inequality with the rest of the world. Since the politics of recognition is related to the politics of heritage (de Jong & Rowlands 2008: 131), it might be induced that destruction and refusal of acknowledging heritage implies refusal of recognition of the particular group. Thus recognition of heritage of indigenous, minority and other repressed groups as well as colonized states is particularly important. Recognition and celebration of heritage of the formerly repressed is related to recognition of their cultural rights and empowerment (Smith 2006). De Jong and Rowlands (2007, 2008), Basu (2008) as well as Smith (2006) propose that heritage offers healing and a possibility of cultural renewal in case of nations and groups with painful memories of destructive wars, suppressive colonization and alienation and feelings of loss. As a tool for healing and reconciliation, heritage implies both remembering and forgetting.

In my study, I concentrate on the meanings that the common people have on heritage making as they differ from those of the public commemoration and heritagization practices which are already studied in Ouidah. I do not juxtapose official and popular views but rather examine how different things are emphasized and how official actions are reinterpreted in locally meaningful ways by the common people. In this I am drawing on Rowlands and de Jong (2007) according to whom, especially in West African context, popular memory is often juxtaposed with the public sphere of the state. Collective memory is seen as being authentic and in continued conflict with the attempted acts of state-building and construction of national identity. Monuments, commemorations and

other state ceremonies are seen only as efforts of the state to reassert itself. Rowlands and de Jong argue that this dichotomy between popular "authentic" memory and states' monumentalizing memorial practices is fruitless as studies show how popular memory is pervading the official sphere and official commemorative practices are being appropriated, reclaimed and reused. Official history and popular collective memory are not necessarily antithetical but can draw from each other (Rowlands & de Jong 2007).

In short, one could conclude that cultural heritage is related to multiple temporal aspects: it relies on the authority of the past, but is produced in the present and as such, affects present practices and views of the past while being directed towards the future. "Having" culture posits nations and minority groups on the world map on equal footing with others, and is a mark of modernity. Giving an outmoded practice a respected status as cultural heritage, the process of patrimonialization gives it a new life and mediates between tradition and modernity. It also mediates between local and global, defining identity and belonging to a group and separation from others according to globalized discourses of heritage.

3.2. Secrecy

Besides cultural heritage studies, my theoretical framework in chapter 6 is including also anthropology of secrecy. Secrecy and secret societies are prevailing in African societies and they have been dealt with in numerous ethnographies. Most of them have been dealing with esoteric knowledge in rituals and its role in society. Charles Piot (1993: 354) classifies four types of analysis of secrecy in African societies, which regard secrecy as enhancing the educational role of the secret societies and forming political ties (structural-functionalist), as social control (Marxist), as a metaphor for sexuality (Freudian) or as communication (semiotic). Piot himself analyzes the everyday practices of secrecy in non-ritual contexts in Northern Togo. He asks what the indigenous motivations for secrecy are, and attempts to set them in relations the larger set of cultural meanings.

In my analysis I will be mainly drawing on the work of Ferdinand de Jong (2007) according to whom, secrecy is a practice that includes also those who are excluded from the secret content itself. Those that are not allowed to know the secret content are participating in the practice by keeping themselves ignorant or pretending not to know. The practice of secrecy creates trust and social cohesion beyond the secret society that possesses secret knowledge.

I will also draw on Beryl Bellman's (1984) study relating to the practices relevant to communicating secrets in Poro secret society in West Africa. According to him, the paradox of secrets is that they are actually constructed to be told, thus secrecy can be approached as a communicative and interactional phenomenon. Members of the secret society need to learn how and in which contexts the secrets can be communicated while respecting the practice of concealment at the same time. Secrets are communicated for example in initiations and rituals as well as indirectly through metaphors and myths.

Besides Africa, Melanesia has been prominent in anthropological studies on secrecy. According to Fredrik Barth's (1990) analysis on different modes of knowledge and its transmission, and their relation to cultural reproduction, the Melanesian initiators need to be exchanging and producing relations while at the same time concealing the secrets to enhance their value. The secrets have to be shared only sparsely.

Secrecy can also be approached through ways in which its signs are exhibited without the disclosure of its content. According to Jones (2014: 56), Zempléni (1996) states that this happens for example in masquerades of secret societies in which the uninitiated audiences can watch the spectacles but are forbidden know the initiated operators of the masks. Secrecy can also be used to produce locality because they create and maintain boundaries between people, and performances of secrets such as masquerades can be presented to outsiders to show the local particularity and authenticity. Masquerades can be simultaneously entertaining and communicating secrets (de Jong 2007).

According to de Jong's (2007) study, secrets are used for example in Senegal and Gambia to incorporate the global into the local and come to terms with modernity. Although by the locals, secrecy is not seen as modern, it is a means to incorporate the modern into the local world view. In fact, practices of secrecy are historical practices that have always been used to incorporate the impacts of colonialism, capitalism and democracy.

3.3. Identity, race, and empowerment

My last analytical chapter 7 is following postcolonial theories about identity, race and empowerment. The current research on identity is based on the understanding of identity, individual or collective, as something that is not fixed essence but a construction through social performances. But essentialist notions of identity as fixed, inborn, natural and transmitted through blood, are often heard outside of academic research (Brodwin 2002:

323). In essentialist thought nationality or belonging is based on primordial attachments which are assumed given: people are born into their particular communities. Shared biology and ancestry can be overpowering and coercive as people are bound to the members of their family and community not only because of shared interest or necessity but due to the primordial tie itself which is given undisputable importance. Primordial ties can be based on for example assumed blood ties, race, language, region, religion or custom (Geertz 1973: 259 - 263).

Essentialism is a form of reductionism in which categories are formed ”supposing unchanging, primordial ontology to what are the historically contingent products of human or other forms of agency” (Herzfeld 2010: 235). Temporality and agency are thus suppressed. In anthropology, essentialism has been much studied as central to ideologies like nationalism, but there has been little interest in it as an aspect of ordinary social relations. Recently there has been growing anthropological interest in search for cultural authenticity as a basis of collective legitimacy which can be seen as one form of essentialism (Herzfeld 2010: 234 – 236).

One of the essentialist ideologies relevant to my study is Afrocentrism as many of my informants’ comments echo its claims. The Afrocentric ideology developed as a means to correct the Eurocentric gaze on the world and on Africa, their history and current state. Afrocentrism argues that Africa has been put aside from its earlier position as the center of the world. The Afrocentric essentialist thought is based on the idea that groups possess an essence which makes them similar to each other, and differ them fundamentally from others, without taking into account space and time. Africans are seen sharing the same essence through history and across the continent and the diaspora. Sharing the same characteristics, history and suffering is perceived as a necessity in the struggle against the hegemonic White oppression. The focus from the importance of the color line between the Blacks and the Whites has been shifted to ethnicity and culture which are defined as African. This assumes essential common African epistemology, cosmology and ontology regardless of geographical location, and historical and social contexts (Adeleke 2009). One of the main Afrocentric thinkers since 1980’s is Molefi Kete Asante to whom Afrocentricity is an intellectual orientation, and not a political one (Asante 1987: vii - viii).

Afrocentrism can be seen as using strategic essentialism and building subaltern consciousness which are theorized by Gayatri Spivak. In the context of India, she speaks of "*strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" which is aiming to deconstruct the colonial and rewrite the history from below. It is based on self-consciousness and emerging collective consciousness, which forms on the basis of essentialist belonging, and this is used in criticizing the dominant historiography, and more widely in the struggle of the subaltern groups. (1996: 214 – 215.) The notion of strategic essentialism has been used in studies of feminism, postcolonialism, and race.

3.4. Commodification of culture and culture as property

Although I am not exactly studying the commodification or commercialization of Vodun, nor is my focus on ethnic groups, the influential study by John and Jean Comaroff is of importance to my analysis. In *Ethnicity, Inc.* (2009), they tackle the diverse and current issue of commodification of identity, ethnicity and culture. Commodification of ethnicity involves a double process of incorporation of identity, making ethnicized populations into corporate-like groups, and commodification of cultural products and practices. Especially interesting and relevant to my study is how incorporating ethnicity and its commodification can bring about increasing recognition and empowerment but also lead to alienation and disempowerment.

Although the commodification of culture is not new, it is a growing tendency both in Euro-American nation-states and among the dispossessed Third World and Fourth World peoples. People across the world are commodifying and marketing their cultural and ethnic difference. It is an ambiguous process which is related to both empowerment and alienation. According to classical economics, the availability of cultural products to mass consumption would diminish their aura, but as Comaroff and Comaroff show, the processes of cultural commodification are never straight forward. Cultural products are not always loosing value because of commodification, instead, the mass circulation can reaffirm ethnicity and the status of the people as proprietors of the culture (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009).

The producers of culture are at the same time its consumers. By ambiguating the distinction between the performer and the audience, marketing identity can "(re)fashion identity, (re)animate cultural subjectivity, (re)charge collective self-awareness, forge new patterns of sociality". When the producers are also consumers at the same time, they are

observing themselves perform their identity, and are "in the process objectifying their own subjectivity" (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009: 26). Producing and consuming one's own culture is a mode of self-construction, of producing and feeling of one's own ethnicity, in my study, the Africanness.

According to Comaroff and Comaroff (2009:10), Graburn (1976) asserted that producing art or performances, Fourth World peoples are sending a message: "We exist; we are different; we can do something we are proud of; we have something uniquely ours." For minorities, performing and marketing culture is part of a quest of existential recognition from outsiders. But to the foreign spectators, the performances usually mean less, and for the performers this might eventually also lead to self-parody and devaluation. (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009: 25).

Ownership of cultural heritage has often been a subject of dispute and especially indigenous groups have used cultural heritage and indigenous identity formed on the basis of it, in political struggles for their rights (Brown M. 2005: 45 - 47). Often when one group defines something as their cultural heritage, they tend to monopolize the tradition and prevent or limit other groups' rights to it (Silverman 2011). Cultural heritage is thus seen on the one hand as possession and under control of a specific group and on the other hand as a common resource important for the universal humankind (Brown M. 2005: 49).

Commercialized culture is often directed towards tourism. At the local level, there can be various approaches to commercialized tourism. For example in Ghana, although the tourists are criticized in many aspects, it was also expressed by the locals that besides monetary revenues and new job opportunities, cultural tourism enhances the locals' interest in their own culture. The government and businesses have subsidized traditional chiefs in organizing festivals that are also major tourist attractions. Subsidies enable the continual organization of these festivals despite the diminishing power and wealth of the traditional chiefs. The festivals still hold traditional significance despite the modern context of commercialized tourism (Bruner 1996: 300 – 301).

4 The context and background: Vodun in Benin

Before starting my analysis, it is necessary to briefly give some historical, geographical and spiritual context of my field and my subject of study. I will first present the context of cultural heritage politics in Benin, then present Ouidah as my field site, and finally address some basic knowledge about Vodun as a spiritual practice.

4.1. Cultural heritage politics in Benin

In the 1990's Vodun cults started to be promoted in Benin as intangible cultural heritage connecting Benin with its diaspora in the Americas. Before, the cults and their leaders were persecuted especially during the Marxist-Leninist dictatorship of Mathieu Kérékou from 1972 until 1991 (Tall 1995a: 197). However, during Kérékou's regime, there was also an attempt to separate the traditional knowledge of healing and plants used in traditional medicine from the cults' religious content and the political and social power of their leaders. Kérékou wanted to valorize this ancestral knowledge and incorporate it to the modern health care system, simultaneously regarding religions as backward and incompatible with modern (socialist) state (Tall 2009a: 146 – 147, Tall 1995a: 197). Many priests, priestesses and practitioners were jailed and killed, and temples and sacred sites were destroyed (Brown K. 1999: 148). Kérékou had a multifaceted relation to Vodun: he used its symbols and images to enhance his own image as powerful, used Vodun powers against itself in the hunt for sorcerers, and regarded powers of religious leaders as a threat to socialism but also later harnessed them in the fight against imperialism (Strandsbjerg 2015).

The transition to democracy happened peacefully in 1991, and it was connected to the new valorization of traditional religions and ancestral knowledge (Tall 1995b: 797, Ciarcia 2013, Araujo 2010b). Support and valorization of the Vodun community was associated with the newly elected president Nicephore Soglo who had become mysteriously ill during his campaign and was believed by some to have been saved by traditional healers (Brown K. 1999: 148, Tall 1995a: 199 – 201). In the 1990's there were two major projects attempting to promote Benin's cultural heritage in relation to the Vodun and the slave trade past: Ouidah 92 -festival and the Slave Route -project (Tall 1995b: 797, Ciarcia 2013, Araujo 2010b).

The first International Festival of Vodun Arts and Cultures called Ouidah 92 was held despite its name in February 1993 in three Beninese cities: Ouidah, Cotonou and Porto-Novo. The Ouidah 92 festival was organized especially to celebrate and highlight the reciprocal cultural exchanges between the African and American continents and accentuate the role of Benin in the globalization process (Law 2008: 19). The festival's main target audience was the international diaspora: its brochure was translated into English, its main sponsors were the French Ministry of Cooperation and Development, the government of Germany, and the government of the United States, and it concentrated on the official events with invited international guests (Araujo 2010a: 148, Araujo 2010b: 158, Rush 2001: 33). But there were also unofficial events which were attended and organized by the local practitioners who did not receive any financial support (Brown K. 1999: 149), the festival was thus not uniquely a top down "artificial" performance of cultural heritage separated from the "authentic" local traditions.

Defining Vodun cults as cultural heritage and as a resource has aimed not only at increasing tourism, but also developing a local version of a modern national identity unifying different groups, empowering Benin in the eyes of the global world, and criticizing the modernist discourse according to which the local traditions are seen as incompatible with modern economic and social development (Sutherland 2002). Celebrating the cults enable the local elites to represent themselves simultaneously as valuing ancestral knowledge and traditions and thus looking for support from traditional leaders and practitioners of the cults, and as modern leaders embracing globalization, fostering economic and social development and gaining support from the diaspora and international organizations. Defining Vodun as cultural heritage can be seen in this respect as an attempt to control the political and economic resources relating to the development which a "newly found" tradition could create (Ciarcia 2008b: 38 – 39, 41).

During this time Benin's official tourism policy used the slogan "Benin, cradle of Vodun" (Law 2008: 19). By emphasizing its position as the root and as the mythical place of origin of these religions, Benin established itself also as a sacred center and emphasized its agency both in the past and in the modern world (Sutherland 2002). Vodun is what distinguishes Benin from the other West African nations aspiring to augment the cultural tourism by stressing the connections with the diaspora (Forte 2009: 437). The main tourist attractions in other countries – for example in Ghana, Senegal, and Gambia – are mostly

material vestiges of the slave trade such as European fortresses that were used to hold the slaves before embarking them on the slave ships (see for example Bruner 1996, Ebron 2000).

Another major project relating Vodun, the African diaspora, and cultural heritage was the Slave Route. It was initiated by UNESCO in relation to the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas. The idea behind it was to remind the world of the still ongoing processes of cultural change and reciprocal cultural exchanges set in motion by the transatlantic slave trade, which could be interpreted as one of the greatest human tragedies of the world. It was also a reminder of the often forgotten impact of the African slaves on the development of the New World's cultures (UNESCO 2006: 191 – 192). With the support of Haiti, the project was located in Ouidah. Since Ouidah has little material vestiges left of the slave trade era, the monuments on the 3 km route from the town to the beach were built according to local narratives and legends. I will not go into detail about the contested historical accuracy of the narrative the route puts forward. What is of interest here is the route's relation to Vodun. Alongside the route there are several statues by artists who were explicitly encouraged to search inspiration from Vodun. The statues depict Vodun spirits and symbols of the Dahomean kings. The kingdom of Dahomey was famous for its activities of war, slave raiding, and controlling the commerce of slaves between the local slave traders and Europeans (Ciarcia 2013, Araujo 2010b). Vodun is connected both to the victims and the perpetrators of the slave trade, which makes it an interesting object of celebration in relation to the commemoration of slavery. One of the reasons why UNESCO has not accepted the Slave Route in its list of World Heritage is because it could not be interpreted unambiguously as a monument against slavery (Ciarcia 2013: 93 – 94).

The 1990's saw an increase in the interest among the African diaspora in the quest for roots and affirmation of their African heritage and identity. In the cultural heritage projects aiming to increase cultural tourism from the African diaspora Benin emphasized the joyous reunion with the long lost brothers and sisters upon their return to Mother Africa for a visit. Unlike other West African countries, it did not so much focus on the history of suffering of the slaves that many African American tourist are looking for. Instead it was publicly acknowledged that the trade had benefitted the community by adding to its wealth, importance and bringing in European "civilization". The attitudes

towards the slave trade were unapologetic, or at least non-judgmental. But since the risen interest in the international roots tourism as a source of revenue, the focus of the memorialization has shifted towards the treatment of the slaves, their suffering, and the repentance and forgiveness (Law 2008: 12 – 19, 25). Repentance is seen as important moral and emotional aspect in the pursuit of international recognition (Ciarcia 2008a: 6). As the examples of the Vodun festival and Vodun statues on the Slave Route show, African agency instead of the victimhood is still the main focus in the discourses of the interactions between Benin and the diaspora.

In a society, which comprises of descendants of European and African slave merchants (many of whom still occupy important social positions) and descendants of local slaves (a genealogy still stigmatized) as well as descendants of returned ex-slaves from Brazil, it is more convenient to celebrate the Vodun as the uniting factor with the diaspora instead of the history and suffering of the slaves. The simplistic representations of victims, heroes and perpetrators are replaced with wider valorization of African art, religions and cultures (Araujo 2010b: 155, 166, 172 – 173).

By stressing the connections with the diaspora and the development of the Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean religions, Beninese state seems to attempt to establish a place for itself among the independent modern nations. The projects related to the history of the slave trade have not focused solely on developing international tourism, but also on affirming that Benin has been influential in the development of other nations in the world. Through the involuntary migration of its people, Benin had contributed to the world heritage. The projects raising awareness of Benin and its status among the countries of the world have been aiming to both increase the international tourism revenues and influence the creation of a positive national identity. One of the aims of celebrating the Vodun cults in this respect has also been making the new democratization of the country apparent to the world and to the Beninese people (Sutherland 2002; Ciarcia 2008b, Landry 2011: 207; Ciarcia 2008a: 5). According to Peter Sutherland (2002: 66 – 67), the diasporic history of Africa is being actively used in building the equally diasporic future.

However, the project of building a national identity in Benin failed largely because the process of defining the Vodun cults as cultural heritage was concentrating too much on the ideas of the diaspora (Tall 2009a: 148). It tried to appeal to the international tourists by creating a transatlantic Black identity but failed to take into account the cultural and

ethnic diversity of Benin (Sutherland 2002: 71). On the other hand, the rise in the tourism industry did not meet expectations either. After the upsurge in the 1990's, the economic and political investments to cultural heritage declined both from the international organizations and from the new government, and the Slave Route was neglected and left to decay (Ciarcia 2013: 93). The ex-dictator Kérékou converted to Pentecostalism and returned to power in 1996, this time as democratically elected president. His new discourses emphasized the relation between Christianity and democracy, and associated Vodun with dictatorship, Satan, and Kérékou's political advisor Nicephore Soglo, who was the president of Benin in 1992 – 1996 (Strandsbjerg 2000).

4.2. Ouidah

Ouidah is a medium-sized town on the coastal area of the Bight of Benin in the Gulf of Guinea. It is a modest city compared to the bigger cities in Benin such as the commercial center Cotonou or the administrative capital Porto Novo. It has some big houses and rich and powerful families, but most of the town is built of modest small family compounds. Only the few main roads are paved and have some lightning. There are a few luxury hotels and finer restaurants, but most of them are on the beach, 3 km away from the center of the town. The tourists visit the most important sights on tour buses, as they are quite far from each other: for example the Slave Route being 3 km long, the Python Temple located in the center and Sacred Forest at the edge of the town.

Educational and cultural institutions as well as popular entertainment are mostly located in bigger cities. There is no university in Ouidah, nor cinema or concert venues, and only a few night clubs. The newest investment in Ouidah's cultural life is in 2013 established museum of the Zinsou Foundation which exhibits contemporary art. The museum stands out from the rest of Ouidah with its air conditioning, fine restaurant, free and functional wifi, and guides with uniforms. Rather than a buzzling economic or cultural center, Ouidah is a small town characterized by compounds separated with small red sandy streets outside the main street, small bars everywhere, small street side stalls that sell everything one might need outside of the busy market days, and signs of presence of Vodun nearly everywhere.

The main ethnic groups in Ouidah consist of the Fon, and the minority group Hueda from which the city of Ouidah gets its name. Ouidah has also been spelled by Europeans as Whydah, Juda, Ajudá and Fida. The locals call it also Glehue. Historically Ouidah

belonged to the Hueda kingdom before being conquered in 1727 by the Fon kingdom of Dahomey. The capital of the kingdom, Abomey, is in the inland some 100 kilometers to the north of Ouidah, and its royal palaces are accepted to the UNESCO list of World Heritage since 1985. Dahomey was colonized by the French in 1892, became independent in 1960 changing its name to Benin in 1975. The modern state of Benin should not be confused with the Benin Kingdom which was a precolonial kingdom situated in what is now Nigeria. Although it is now modest, in the precolonial period Ouidah was the principal commercial center, and from the 1670s to the 1860s the most important slave port in the region called the "Slave Coast" by the Europeans. According to estimates, over one million slaves transited through Ouidah, which makes it the second largest slave port in Africa after Luanda, in Angola (Law 2004: 1 – 2, 7, 18, 127, 279).

In Ouidah, the African agency in the slave trade is generally acknowledged and the town has both descendants of the slave traders as well as descendants of the slaves that were not sold to the Europeans but retained in Ouidah. The slave trade enriched the kings, the local merchants, and there has been a general consensus that it benefitted the town bringing prosperity and foreign influences. Most of the slaves were shipped to Brazil and the Caribbean. Some of the slaves gained their freedom in Brazil and returned to Ouidah (Law 2004: 13 – 14, 199 - 200). The mutual cultural influences with Brazil are still visible for example in Ouidah's architecture and place and family names.

The Portuguese, English, Dutch and the French had fortresses in Ouidah, but none of the European powers had exclusivity to the slave trade with Dahomey. Of the fortresses, only the Portuguese fortress is still standing, and it now houses the historical museum of Ouidah. A public square is named after the French fortress which was demolished in 1908 (Law 2004: 12), but the Dutch and the English fortresses are not usually mentioned in everyday situations.

Ouidah was economically and politically marginalized in the colonial period and after the independence of Benin. However, Ouidanese families have been part of the ruling elite also since independence, but they have largely left to live elsewhere. But as ceremonies in the ancestral homes and for the deceased members of the family are still important, Ouidah has also been called "a vast necropolis" with its most prominent households maintained essentially as funeral shrines (Law 2004: 277 – 280).

According to some of my informants, it was common practice in the precolonial period to appropriate or destroy the spiritual powers and Vodun spirits of the conquered people. This is still visible in Ouidah as the Vodun of the conquered Hueda people are more likely to be hidden or protected in the courtyards in an attempt to protect them from the conquerors, whereas the Vodun shrines of the conquering Fon are more likely to be visible and exposed in public open spaces.

4.3. Vodun as spiritual practice

The background information that I present here about the spiritual practice of Vodun is mostly based on the information given by my informants in Ouidah, but it is consistent with the fuller ethnographic accounts by researchers concentrating on this subject. See for example Herskovits (1938), Herskovits & Herskovits (1964 [1933]), Verger (1954, 1957) and Maupoil (1961 initially written in 1943) for classic studies on the matter, as well as Falen (2011, 2016) Hamberger (2011), Lovell (2002), Landry (2013, 2019), and Noret (2007, 2008, 2013) for more recent studies.

In December in Ouidah, I was going to meet for the first time the father of my informant, a priest who was soon going to become the head of an important Vodun cult. My informant, Eric, who had always grown up with Vodun tradition and practice, told me I should just to follow him and do as he does to show respect for his father and for the spirits. So, I observed and kneeled before the priest, kissed the ground, was blessed, drank sodabi (palm wine), and had my discussion with the priest. After the meeting, we went to eat on a roadside stall with Eric. Again he told me to follow him and do as he does. Before eating, he touched his head, his heart, and his shoulders one after the other. So I did the sign of the cross like the Catholics. He told me that the night before the ceremony of installation of his father as the head of the cult, they will go to the Catholic Cathedral to ensure also their blessings.

As this experience from my field illustrates, Vodun is characterized by great fluidity, adaptation, and appropriation of foreign and new influences. This is the most striking characteristic of Vodun and also the most relevant to my study as it affects the way in which people adapt and indigenize also other foreign influences. Hamberger (2011:366 – 367) states that Vodun's openness to influences, the capacity to incorporate them and the speed in which it is capable of renewing itself is not a weakness but rather a strength.

Because of this, the distinction between “traditional” and “modern” elements in Vodun is pointless and impossible.

According to Joel Noret (2013: 200), the religious context of Vodun is heavily marked by esoterism, and it is based on the logic of accumulation of powers which means that foreign influences are willingly incorporated if perceived to be powerful. Spirits have been moving from one area to another in West Africa for centuries through migration, slavery, warfare and commerce. In this region, as well as assimilating slaves and conquered peoples into the systems of worship of the conquerors, it was also common for families incorporate their slaves’ Vodun into their practices of worship, and for conquering peoples to steal or appropriate the Vodun from the people they subjugated if these spirits were perceived either useful or dangerous (Noret 2013: 200). Also attitudes towards non-African foreign religions are usually welcoming. The story tells that it was the people from the cult of the Python Dangbe who willingly gave a piece of land to the Europeans so that they could build their Catholic cathedral just opposite of the Python Temple in the center of Ouidah where they still stand facing each other.

Due to this openness and fluidity, adhering (partially or largely) to different religious denominations while simultaneously practicing Vodun is not incompatible nor uncommon. This is why it is impossible to use statistics to say how many people in southern Benin practice Vodun. I was often told that the differences between religions were actually quite small: All, Christians, Muslims, Rastafarians and Voduists, serve the same God in the end, and it is only the way how to access the Supreme Being that differs. For Vodun practitioners, the contact to the Supreme Being is made through Vodun spirits, just as for the Christians through Jesus, Maria or the Saints.

Usually when I said to people that I was interested in Vodun, without asking they started explaining what Vodun is. The explanations always started with ”*Vodun is a spirit”.* It is talked of at the same time as many spirits or one Supreme Being with many branches or manifestations. Although, it is also commonly thought that the emphasis put on one Supreme Being might be subsequent influence by monotheistic religions. In Benin, and in the world, there are hundreds of Vodun spirits and it is impossible to count their exact number since in different contexts two spirits could be regarded as separate ones and in another as two versions or manifestations of the same spirit. Hamberger (2011: 317) asserts that the main Vodun should actually be thought of as categories of spirits instead

of individual spirits in the way they are most often presented in the literature. Vodun actually illustrate webs of relations which are based on contiguity or similarity. It is also interesting that my informants always stressed that Vodun is a spirit, whereas Hamberger (2011: 316) states that Vodun is a physical being which is situated in a specific location in the world. It can displace itself, but it is installed in a specific place for a certain time. When showing the physical manifestations of Vodun such as the piles of soil, concrete, metal and other various substances, people in Ouidah variably say it *is* the Vodun or that it is where the Vodun *reside* or is installed.

Some Vodun belong to a family or a kin group and their cult is restricted, others have temples and cults all over Benin, West Africa, or even all around the world and one can be initiated in them regardless of one's ancestry (see for example Barnes 1997). Ancestors are venerated and respected as spirits or indeed they might become Vodun. Vodun are associated with four basic elements: Earth, Fire, Water and Air. I will not present different Vodun spirits here, as I am not concentrating on their individual characteristic or their respective cults in this thesis. I will present the spirits of Egungun and Zangbeto in more detail in chapter 5, in which I give also an ethnographic account and analysis of their spectacles.

The worship or serving of the spirits consist of chants, prayers, sacrifices of various substances, and spirit possession. These practices are all specific to each Vodun: they have their own preferences when it comes to sacrifices, dances, chants, drumming, prayers, taboos, days of the cult, and so on. Sacrifices often include alcohol, foodstuffs and animals or their blood which seen to have a lot of power. It is said that the spirits continue to have their power if people keep feeding and respecting them but they will go away if people stop the veneration. The relationship between Vodun and the people is reciprocal. People need Vodun and the ancestors to survive and have a good life, and the spirits have to been compensated for their favors. The relationship between people and Vodun can be initiated by either one of them. When a Vodun chooses a follower, it will usually cause him or her misfortune until the person is willing and capable of doing an initiation and/or installing the Vodun. All misfortune is thus usually interpreted as action of the spirits. But on the other hand, as Hamberger (2011: 322) states, a relation with a Vodun spirit always represents a potential source of advantages.

Fa (often also spelled Fâ) is the traditional form of divination. Fa is often consulted before every important decision in life: at the birth of a child, marriage, choosing a career, moving house or whenever there are particular problems or sickness. Fa is consulted in the beginning of the year to know what should be taken into consideration for the coming year. It is also consulted to know the spirits' will. The system of divination consists of 256 signs that the *bokonon* will interpret according to the situation. Some spirits, such as Egungun, can be consulted also using coconut shells.

Esoteric knowledge and different grades of initiation are essential part of Vodun. The regular practitioners need the priests to serve the spirits. Some practitioners become adepts (*vodunsi*) by spending considerable time in the convent learning the language, chants, preferences and practices belonging to their spirit. The convents and temples are run by priests or priestesses who are regarded as proprietors (literally mothers) of the spirit. There is hierarchy between major and minor spirits and their cults, but the cults or temples are quite independent. There is no head of religion, although the Daagbo Hounon of Ouidah claims to be the pontiff, indeed, the Pope of Vodun. He is the highest authority among the major chiefs of cults in Ouidah, but not necessarily outside Ouidah. At the moment there are two Daagbo Hounons due to succession disputes (see Tall 2009b).

I will now turn to my analysis of Vodun as cultural heritage. Presenting Vodun as spiritual practice was relevant also to my discussion of it as cultural heritage as my informants repeatedly asserted that the spiritual and cultural go hand to hand, they cannot be separated and they are mutually complementary. First in chapter 5, I will discuss how they are nevertheless seen different, and what this means for cultural heritage production. In chapter 6, I will analyze secrecy and its relation to universal cultural heritage and finally, in chapter 7, I discuss Vodun as persecuted religion which is revalued in the light of African identity, and how this is experienced as empowering.

5 Spirituality, Heritage and Folklore

In this chapter I present and analyze three different kinds of Vodun related events which are performances that are open for anyone to see. I analyze the separation of the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Vodun, and the practices and meanings of cultural heritage as entertainment. I discuss how religious cultural heritage relating to Vodun is used and can be used as inspiration for (profane) amusement by and for the locals, and what are the consequences feared or hoped for by people with different perspectives to Vodun. The following questions guide my analysis: Is Vodun becoming a reified cultural heritage reflecting the idea of bounded ethnic groups or how it is perceived as a cultural resource open to be used as influence for arts and entertainment by anyone or by certain people? How does international discourses of heritage influence the way in which heritage is perceived by local common people in Ouidah? Can Vodun as entertainment lead to its devaluation as a spiritual practice or how can it make the young generation become more interested in its spiritual core?

Meyer, de Witte (2013) and Jethro (2013) argue that setting something apart and lifting it up as heritage is a form of sacralization, which makes it appear powerful, authentic, incontestable and central to social life. But at the same time redefining a religious practice as heritage implies profanation. In this sense formation of religious practices as cultural heritage includes two seemingly opposite processes: heritagization of the sacred in which the religious tradition becomes recognized and redefined as heritage and sacralization of heritage in which heritage becomes imbued with sacrality. Both are understood as being political-aesthetic practices. Recognizing heritagization and sacralization as processes is important and highlights that both heritage and the sacred are socially constructed and not given, and they are constantly renegotiated between various actors and can always be contested.

Interestingly, the relation of cultural heritage to entertainment has been much studied from the perspective of (mostly international) tourism. Instead, my focus is on the value of cultural heritage to the locals, and I mention tourism only briefly when it is of relevance, therefore I will not discuss anthropology of tourism in more detail. For how everyday religious Vodun practice is transformed into a commodity and marketed to tourists see for example Forte (2009).

5.1. Vodun spectacles

In Ouidah people go and see Vodun performances for entertainment. I include in the category of Vodun performances for example the Egungun and Zangbeto masquerades, and also performances where Vodun adepts (of for example spirits such as Heviosso, Sakpata, Achina) dance in the honor of their Vodun or celebrate the coming out of the convent after the initiation period. They are colorful performances that usually include drumming, singing and dancing and sometimes also, especially in the case of Zangbeto, magical tricks. As I will concentrate here and in chapter 6 largely on Egungun and Zangbeto performances, I will first give a short description of these spirits and events related to them.

Egungun is a spirit of a dead ancestor who has come back to give advice. Only some families have Egungun tradition. Usually it belongs to families of Yoruba ethnic group (more numerous Nigeria, and some other towns in Benin such as Porto Novo). There is also the Fon equivalent of Kuvito (Kulito), which is less often mentioned. According to anthropologist Joël Noret, Egunguns are masks in the form of which the ancestors come and visit their descendants after long rituals in which they are ancestralized. All of them do not strictly represent known ancestors, but in Ouidah most of them are actually directly identified with the deceased persons of the lineages that have the Egungun tradition. This tradition as well as the presence of the Yoruba families in Ouidah is directly tied with the slave trade and the West African system of slavery. The Fon kingdom of Dahomey raided the Yoruba regions for slaves especially after the conquest of the Oyo kingdom in the beginning of the 19th century, and some of the slaves were kept in Ouidah instead of supplying the transatlantic slave trade. The Fon slave owners elsewhere in Dahomey largely assimilated their slaves to their cults whereas in Ouidah, in the hands of some Afro-Brazilian slave owners, the Yoruba slaves could organize their own cults for the ancestors. It is likely that there were adoration and practice of the cult, the existence of the particular Egungun clothes, and the hearing of the special voice of the ancestors already before the first masks would come out in Ouidah during the last years of the Fon regime or after its fall during the first years of the French rule. After that, the presence of the Egungun tradition has grown in the city, and it is now practiced by both those who have had it and kept it in their family and those who have appropriated it through initiation or other means. As with other Vodun practices, the people adhering to the cult can be partially adhering also to Catholicism or (more rarely) Islam (Noret: 2013: 199 – 200).

Egunguns come out and do performances in public at some occasions. They are dressed from head to toe in fine clothes, nowadays usually sewn with shiny beads and with a large cap. According to Noret (2013: 205) the glamour, finesse and especially the expensiveness of the clothes is undoubtedly involved in endowing the spirits and the cult with prestige and legitimacy. Non-initiated people should never touch the clothes, and this is often said to result in death if the contact is intended. Even if by accident, the contact would cause serious illness or trouble. Those that are initiated to the cult, have the knowledge to protect themselves with herbal medicines. Egunguns usually have with them an assistant who watches out for the physical contact, keeps their clothes away from the ordinary people with the help of a stick, translates their speech and also restrains the them in some occasions. During the masquerades, Egunguns come toward certain persons to give them advice or to ask for money. Most of the time however, they dance or parade around, and sometimes chase the audience. Running from them is considered popular entertainment for boys and young men. Young people go very close on purpose just to be chased after. Sometimes Egunguns carry sticks or whips, and beat the boys that come too close. In most of the cases I witnessed, when the whip was used, Egunguns lashed with it as hard as they could, which seemed painful. Both Egungun and Zangbeto can be regarded as actors who impose social control and act with impunity.

Zangbeto is sometimes called the phantom. He is the guardian of the night. In the old days and still in some villages, he would patrol during the night and punish criminals and those who are out too late. During different kind of festivities, Zangbetos are asked to come out and do performances. They are cone shaped things covered with raffia of different colors, which move and whirl around very fast. Sometimes the cone is turned around and its insides are shown to the public to prove that there is no human being under the mask. When turned back down again, he starts moving, shaking and whirling around immediately. Zangbetos do tricks such as produce or make disappear different kinds of things. Sometimes when turned around, the cone uncovers for example a living snake, a Chinese lucky cat or a tiny Zangbeto that also starts moving around.

Folashade Hunsu (2011) has analyzed the oral art and the relevance of Zangbeto in Badagry, Nigeria. In her discussion paper, she sees Zangbeto as much more than a local vigilante group performing security functions. It is an institution of the Egun ethnic group which promotes social harmony in Badagry by functioning through a combination of oral

art and symbolic action rather than use of violence. Zangbeto literally means "watchers or men of the night." For one of the explanations of the origins of Zangbeto, she writes:

> "One of the responses given by the head of the group in Yeketome, Badagry, is that Zangbeto dates back several centuries to when an Egun man was said to have been pursued by his enemies and needed to flee from his hometown unnoticed in the night. Using supernatural powers, he disguised himself by covering his body with dried leaves and raffia and by making scary sounds with the horn of an animal. Thus he was eventually able to leave the town unharmed and undetected by his enemies. He later founded a settlement, which he named Hugbonu (in modern Porto Novo, Benin) and subsequently had the men with him dress in a similar manner and keep watch over the new settlement by night to ensure that his enemies did not attack him in his new home. Since then, Zangbeto has been used to keep watch over settlements and towns of the Egun community" (Hunsu 2011: 10 – 11).

According to Hunsu (ibid. 15), "The masquerade is only a constitutive part of a whole. Zangbeto is a group, an institution, and even a way of life that is represented in physical form by the mask." At night he polices the towns without the mask, and at daytime he comes out with the mask and entertains at major events of the cultural group. Women can witness the daytime masquerades but not the night-time activities. From the songs, Hunsu concludes that Zangbeto is a messenger which vocalizes the wishes of the authority that is not mentioned, either a visible one or the spirit which is the power behind Zangbeto. On the other hand, Zangbeto is sometimes the metaphor for the spirit itself. As a messenger, he is above everyone else in the audience, even those in powerful positions in the society, like the kings. He acts also as the peacemaker and a moral and cultural spokesperson mediating in social conflicts across religious and cultural groups. He is not worshipped, the society is not considered a religious organization, and its members can belong to different religious denominations and see themselves serving the community by acting in a Zangbeto society. Membership is voluntary, and members value highly solidarity and commitment. The Zangbeto songs are created within the group, and can be modern, although the organization itself dates to pre-modern times. The songs can be very satirical and entertaining (Hunsu 2011).

In Ouidah, Egunguns and Zangbetos can come out on different kind of situations. Egunguns come out to dance and perform when they are honored yearly, or when they have themselves asked to come out. There are numerous Egungun performances especially around the 10th of January celebrations. The performances by Zangbetos, however, are less restricted. I have seen their performances accompany many non-

spiritual events such as the dance festival Wétché, a theatre play on the 9th of January in Ouidah, and the 15th year anniversary of the Finnish-African cultural center Villa Karo in the village of Grand Popo. Egunguns, on the other hand, would not come out on these type on events, and indeed, as far as I know, their performances do not accompany some other event: they are the event itself.

The Egungun and Zangbeto events are masquerades in which the audience is not supposed to know the identity of the initiated dancer behind the mask. The other events that I am speaking about in this chapter are spectacles in which, the *vodunsi*, Vodun adepts, are dancing on a public square the rhythms and dances of their spirits. According to my informants, these events are organized to honor, celebrate and please the Vodun spirits. The spirits are fond of singing, drumming and dancing, and are happy when people honor them with these activities. These performances can be periodical fixed days or they can be determined by the spirit itself asking through the Fa divination to be brought out on a certain day or because of a specific event such as the end of reclusion period of the vodunsi in the convents. The spectacle is often accompanied by a ceremony, but the actual religious ritual where food, alcohol and animals are sacrificed is usually held in private within the convent or on the family altar with none or only a few outsiders, and quite often very early in the morning, whereas the spectacle of dancing is held in a public place, and is open for everyone to see.

People coming to see these performances are most commonly local young men and children. Many of my young informants explained that they come to see performances because it is the entertainment that is available to them. When there is not much going on in the city, and they hear by word of mouth that adepts are dancing or Egunguns or Zangbetos are coming out, they go to see the drumming and dancing just for fun. One of my teenager informants, Ludovic, compared going to see the Vodun spectacles to going to the movies: there are no movie theatres in Ouidah, so instead, people are interested in any spectacle going on in the town, their native village or the neighboring villages. People participate in these performances as spectators, and only the adepts and/or initiates are dancing. The drummers are usually a semi-professional groups who are being paid by the organizing convent or family. Spectators watch, and engage in the spectacle by donating small amounts of money to dancers and drummers.

In the case of Egunguns, spectators sometimes interact with them, as Egunguns come and give advice and/or demand money. This is usually initiated by the Egungun. Although most of the people remain simple spectators, one of the common ways for young men and boys to participate in the Egungun spectacle is to provoke them by going as near as possible and then running away as the Egunguns chase them. Physical contact with their clothes is considered very dangerous causing mystical misfortune or death. Some Egunguns also carry a whip and hit those who come too close. Some of my informants said this was sports for the young men: they enjoyed the chasing, and the more aggressive Egunguns were, more exited were the youngsters teasing them. Relatively passive Egunguns were thought of as boring. The Egunguns clearly had their personalities and moods: some were calmer just parading around, some enjoyed dancing and performing, some were chasing people playfully and others quite aggressively. This sometimes got out of hand for example when at a spectacle by Kuvitos (Fon tradition of Egunguns), persons escaping from them were running to the national highway, and at the big Egungun performance where even the calm spectators were not safe anymore and even I had to be running with the young men even though I was usually told that Egunguns would not chase foreigners. After the performances got out of control, the crowd simply dissolved and people returned to their homes and Egunguns retired to their convents.

Women and girls are in the minority watching the spectacles, although usually majority of the dancing vodunsi are female in the events that honor the spirits. This does apply to the Egungun and Zangbeto which are societies for men, exclusively, and the dancers behind the masks are initiated but not known to the public. I was explained by both women and men, that women are not so much interested in that kind of entertainment (especially related to Egungun), and also they do not have the time to come and watch since they are responsible for the time consuming tasks of cooking and cleaning as well as working often in small retail and street food stalls.

In Ouidah, I personally never heard or saw any disrespectful behavior by spectators towards the spirits or the adepts, if provoking Egunguns is not thought of as such. But in Grand Popo, at a Mami Wata (a spirit related to the sea) ceremony held at the beach many young men who gathered to see the adepts getting into trance and throwing themselves into the sea were shouting insults and making fun of the adepts. Why this happens in Grand Popo is beyond the scope of this thesis but here it is worth mentioning because it

highlights the more respectful atmosphere and attitude towards Vodun in Ouidah compared to other places in Benin. Those Ouidanese that do not accept the Vodun and its spectacles, simply avoid going near them. When discussing with me, they did voice their criticism of the practice of Vodun and the dangers of going to see performances but they or anyone else did not mention any attempt of publicly ridiculing Vodun or the practitioners.

The busiest time for yearly spectacles stretches from December to February, because this is the time when Vodun community is giving and receiving blessings for the New Year. During the weeks around and especially after the Vodun Day, the 10th of January, there are several ceremonies and spectacles every day. The tourists usually stay in Ouidah only the 10th of January, hence at the spectacles I observed there were sometimes one or two Whites: tourists, reporters or photographers with their guides, but many times I was the only white person attending. The spectacles are free of charge and presented at a public place, but sometimes have special seats for very important guests or tourists. Tourists and photographers might pay for a good seat in front of which the children are chased away, they can pay for the permission to take photos and hire a personal guide, but they do not pay for the actual spectacle. I Ouidah, I never heard of a spectacle specially organized for foreign audience or at their request. Zangbeto performances on the other hand, are sometimes organized to accompany other festivals. In Grand Popo, there was a very big Zangbeto performance held in association with the 15th anniversary of the Finnish-African cultural center Villa Karo. This was obviously paid for by Villa Karo and its associates but it was free for all and minority of the spectators were European guests. Spectators are sometimes giving money to the dancers and drummers according to their means. The local VIP guests are making the initiative themselves to give money, but foreigners (seated at the VIP seats) rarely seem to do so, and they are asked and sometimes harassed into giving money. In chapter 6, I will return to Egungun and Zangbeto masquerades again to analyze more closely their relation to the practice of secrecy and revelation.

5.2. Vodun Day Festival

"A celebration in Africa is the same as a Vodun celebration. There is nothing else. Whether you are there or not, you are part of the celebration of your family."

This was said by Aurelien, a Vodun practitioner in his thirties, concerning not only the Vodun Day but regarding in general all family celebrations going on for example in the native village while the younger generation is living in the city or abroad. According to him, every family or community has an annual celebration in which they ask for and give blessings for the whole family, also for those that are not present. With the installation of the Vodun Day, there is one common day during which people can celebrate *"in a general fashion"*, he said.

According to Victor Turner (1982), when a society celebrates an occasion, it also celebrates itself. A celebration is a manifestation of the essence of the group, a symbolic expression of the communality of the group. When celebrations heighten the awareness of the sense of community, and conflicts are temporarily suppressed, celebrations can bring reconciliation in the community. The multivocality of the symbols at festivals, as well as the use of both play frames and ritual frames in celebrations permit them to be flexible arenas with the possibility of exploring new things. They affirm the vitality of the society, redefine and revitalize its social structure and proclaim the society has rich meaning to its members (Turner 1982, Turner & Turner 1982).

The Vodun Day festival is defined by the locals as a celebration of the Vodun traditions. It is not merely a festival presenting the traditions or a religious ceremony, but a celebration in the honor of Vodun. As more relaxed than a religious or a political ceremony, it is a space and time of new meanings, and it has been analyzed as a platform of debate where different political and historical conceptions on local, national and transnational level can be discussed (Sutherland 2002: 71). Its date in the beginning of the year was settled because it is traditionally the time when people settle their disputes within the family and the community and give blessings to each other for the beginning of the New Year. As explained by Francisco, a man in his thirties, who was Catholic but also into Vodun:

"It is a celebration which is very interesting, because when we do it, there comes blessing for the country. Everybody is at ease and also the Vodun are at ease, because killing the sheep and pouring the blood on these things [the Vodun], [result in that] they are well and they work well."

The Vodun Day, 10th of January, now officially renamed as the Day of the Indigenous Religions, is a huge celebration in Ouidah. The main official event is organized by the supreme leader of Vodun in the town, the Daagbo Hounon. At the moment there are two Daagbo Hounons, due to the disputed succession (see Tall 2009b). Daagbo Hounon Tomadjlehoukpon II Houwamenou from the Houxwe Palace organizes the main official festival at the beach with the procession in the town with visits and sacrifices at the most important spiritual places. His palace receives financial support from the state for the organization of the festival, and the festival has important political figures giving speeches at the beach. The other, Dada Daagbo Hounon Houna II organizes his smaller and less official festival in town in his palace. I participated on the bigger official festival and also had interviews with Daagbo Hounon Houawamenou and his wife Miannon Kpessi Kondodo who is herself a high priestess and very vocal and active promoting Vodun for example also in social media such as Facebook. According to Daagbo Hounon Houawamenou, the festival is a celebration of the religion. As Christians and Muslims have their national holidays in Benin, now since 1997 Vodun also has its own. High priests of important Vodun cults were prominent in the campaign to have the 10th January installed as a national holiday. As I concentrated on common people instead of the religious dignitaries, I never met Dada Daagbo Hounon Houna II, nor visited his palace, but I did have also informants who preferred his festival.

Again, just like for the smaller Vodun spectacles, admission to the festival sites and watching the performances is free, but the organizers sell photographing licenses without which taking photos is not allowed for foreigners. Locals do not buy licenses, but can take photos with their mobile phones. Besides this, tourists can pay for a good seat or often pay for a local guide. The revenues from the licenses and the state subsidies are used for example to construct the stands (rows of seats with huge canvas roofs) at the beach, for communication and advertisement as well as paying for the sacrificial animals.

The Vodun Day, on the 10th of January 2016, started with a sacrificial ceremony at the palace of Houxwe in the morning. There were mainly adepts and foreign tourists with or without professional guides. The tourists were filming and photographing as the old Queen of the palace sacrificed various substances on the spirit and as the adepts were dancing. The festival continued with a procession through the town and visits at important temples and places where sacrifices and prayers were performed. Of these places, the

Sacred Forest and the Python Temple are also very important tourist destinations, but sacrifices such as goats and chickens were made also at the sites of Vodun of Adjigo, Aïzan of the market place and Agbakon which are not usually on the common tourist routes. The Aïzan of the market place is especially interesting, as the story tells that it protected especially the slave merchants.

The cortege was attended by Daagbo Hounon, his wife and other important chefs of cults, adepts, tourists, locals, media reporters and security personnel. It is interesting that in the Sacred Forest, tourists and other visitors used the common entrance, and adepts and chefs of cults went in through the gate that is only allowed for the initiated. But after the ceremony was performed, however, all exited the forest through the entrance of the initiated normally prohibited for the non-initiated people.

On the afternoon the celebration continued at the beach where a huge area was prepared for the visitors and the performances next to the emblematic Door of No Return memorial built in the memory of the departed slaves. There were VIP seating for important political persons, although the president did not attend that year. The official program started with short political speeches. In the middle of the huge sandy space there was a small stage were the Vodun were paraded one after the other, with the speaker presenting the Vodun spirits, although in a very lousy audibility. After the presentation of the Vodun and their dances, there was again another sacrifice of a goat next to the stage. There were also political speeches by the prefect of the City and at least one presidential candidate. The political speeches tended to concentrate on the diasporic nature of the Vodun and welcoming especially the roots tourists from Americas and the Caribbean, as the studies on previous Vodun Day celebrations by Ciarcia (2008, 2013), Sutherland (2002), and Tall (1995a, 1995b) have affirmed.

There were many western tourists present, and although they were definitely not the majority in the public, they were, however, the most visible: not knowing the proper behavior, getting too close with their cameras and being urged back to their seats by the police. Mostly the audience was African. However, and interestingly, many of my informants and friends did not go to the beach. When asked why, they said they had been so many times before, preferred to celebrate with the family doing a private ceremony early in the morning, had some other obligations, or preferred the Vodun Day celebration organized by the other Daagbo Hounon. Most of them had a relative or a friend attending,

most often their mother or a grand-mother. Although my informants exclaimed that it was important for the nation to have a Vodun Day, participating in it did not seem important to them. As illustrated by Aurelien's comment at the beginning of this subchapter, they can feel that they are part of the celebration even if they would not be present as the blessings delivered during the Vodun Day are extended to concern everyone in the community. The most important meaning of the Vodun Day for them, however, is not in its ritual proceedings but rather in the fact that Vodun is given an official national holiday, it is recognized, and people both locally and internationally are taking it into consideration.

Of those of my informants generally in favor of Vodun, all expressed an opinion of the Vodun Day as a very good thing bringing Vodun visibility and respect in the eyes of the world. They believed that the tourists participate because they are interested in seeing what Vodun is, the locals attend because they want some entertainment to watch or are working as tour guides or selling their crafts or food at the beach, and the adepts participate because they want to celebrate their Vodun. But, without a personal and knowledgeable guide (and skilled in languages, if the tourist is not francophone), I believe the Vodun Day festival does not enhance much the basic tourists' understanding of Vodun as there is no general information available. The tourists come for the colorful dances and rhythms, but their interest in spirituality of Vodun rests very shallow, as was regretfully noted by Joseph, who worked as a tourist guide and wanted to propose introductory tours to Vodun with lectures, visits to temples and discussions with priests, so that the tourists could understand better what they were seeing and experiencing during the Vodun Day. But he said that unfortunately, the tourists were not interested.

Although there are sacrifices made during the Vodun Day festivities, most people agree that it is not a religious ceremony, but rather a celebration. The important ceremonies are done before the sunrise within the temples and familial altars. Therefore, the meaning of the Vodun Day is very different for different participants. Many highlight its double function as a celebration of a religion and a display of indigenous culture which highlights and venerates the positive characteristics that make Ouidah and Benin unique. It is also interesting that official speeches by politicians and religious specialists often concentrate on the diasporic exchanges, paying special attention to those coming from the diaspora, and hosting official visits at the Houxwe palace. But the big majority of the Ouidanese

who do not have a special relationship with the palace or the roots tourists, rarely mention the diasporic aspect of Vodun. To them, it is more important to show the Europeans (particularly the French) that they are proud of their essentially indigenous African traditions that the colonialists, missionaries and still nowadays the neo-colonial powers try so hard to eradicate. I will discuss this aspect more thoroughly in chapter 7.

5.3. Cultural festivals

During the time of my fieldwork in Ouidah, there were also a few cultural festivals where traditional dance was presented as the main or as side attraction: Wétché, Agogo and Kaleta. I concentrate here on Wétché ("My Dance"). In December 2015, it was organized for the second time by a dance group, Les Super Génies - Azizadaxo, which wanted to promote traditional local dances. The sponsors were among others the mayor of Ouidah, an influential presidential candidate running for 2016 elections, the tourist office, Dada Daagbo Hounon Houna II, some enterprises and influential private people. The groups performing the dances came from the surrounding area, other cities in Benin like Cotonou and even from Togo. The festival lasted for two evenings, and the third day was reserved for the campaign of the presidential candidate. The audience was mainly local young adults and children, both male and female. Especially the small children seemed very excited: they kept dancing on the empty space left between the stage and the rows of seats for the audience until they had to be repeatedly chased away.

The festival started with a procession through the town including three Zangbetos, performers with high stilts, and costumed dancers from the performing groups. There was a stage for performers and a stand with canvas roof for spectators built at the square in front of the historical museum of Ouidah (the Portuguese fortress). The main program started with Zangbetos, continued with the dancing competitions of children, and later the performances of the dance groups. The performances mixed traditional dance and theatre.

The organizers were themselves mostly young adults who wanted to valorize the traditional dances. They were afraid that the traditional dances were disappearing because the young people seemed more and more inclined to dance modern fashionable dances coming for example from Ivory Coast, instead of valuing their own local culture of which the traditional dances were a part. Wétché was thus mainly targeted at the locals to make them appreciate and inspire further interest in the traditions. The organizers said this had worked in previous years, as after the performances of traditional dance young people

had come up to the organizers to express their interest and some people had joined the group and took part in its exercises.

The dances are imitating the Vodun, but the dancers themselves are not initiated. Francisco, a member of the dance group organizing Wétché, said these dances and Vodun were definitely a part of his culture although he was not initiated. I had numerous discussions with him on different topics relating to Vodun and he was always defending tradition and Vodun practices. Francisco often said it was his tradition and he was into it while being also Catholic. When asked about his religion, he asserted similarly to many other informants of mine that:

"I'm versatile, I'm everywhere. I'm Catholic, but I'm also – I'm on all sides. When we talk about Vodun, I'm there, when we talk about the Catholic [church], I'm there."

Regarding Wétché, he explained that there are certain dances they can dance and others that are permitted only for the initiated. For example, they do the dance of Sakpata, because this Vodun has deliberately asked to be imitated, he has given the permission to non-initiates to perform his dances. The permission is not granted by other Vodun, hence they will not dance their dances, because it might be dangerous. The dances imitate Vodun but they are not identical and some steps can be modified, as Francisco explained:

"We are in art, we are not in Vodun. The Vodun is separate and art is separate […] But we can say that the source of art is Vodun."

Although the festival is clearly not a religious event, it is organized in a way that respects the Vodun tradition. According to Francisco, it is entertainment, but it is more valuable than mere entertainment because it is based on tradition. The dancers want to show all that they are capable of, and how they value their tradition in their respective localities. They are proud to demonstrate their appreciation of the traditional dances and encourage others. They are afraid that the traditional dances are disappearing also because those people who are avoiding Vodun as a religion do not want to see these dances. But knowing one's own tradition is important to Francisco because it is unique to every locality, and it is what people will ask from a person when he or she is travelling or meeting foreign people: to demonstrate the traditions of one's home country or village. Wétché itself is not organized with the tourism revenues in mind, but its mission is to keep alive the traditional local cultural heritage, which is thought to be the reason the

tourists visit Benin. However, some of the tourist guides thought that the festival is and should be organized for international tourists. Nonetheless, in December 2015, I was the only white person in the audience.

As can be seen from the examples above, people have different expectations towards Vodun performances. For some they are exclusively cultural amusement or entertainment and for others their main point is the spirituality and their religious meaning. For many informants they are first and foremost celebration of either the culture or the spirits.

5.4. The cultural and the spiritual

How different interpretations and meanings attributed to a festival can co-exist has been studied also by Anna-Leena Siikala and Oleg Ulyashev in relation to a sacrificial ritual performed in a Khanty cultural festival in Siberia. It was attended by all kinds of people, from the performing shaman and participating locals, to visitors from abroad and observing researchers. They all had different interpretations of the festival and different views on what was meaningful. The ritual was at the same time an important religious event and entertainment. According to Siikala and Ulyashev, the ritual's religious meaning was not diminished because it was performed in a modern festival context. Rather, the goal of the festival was to mediate between the different interpretations of the ritual. It was addressing the issue of ethnic identity of the minority group by valuing the traditions and highlighting the connection between ethnic history and values. The public performance of a ritual can be seen as one way of safeguarding and transmitting the cultural traditions to next generations (Siikala & Ulyashev 2011: 185 – 197). This is evident also in Benin where the public performances in festival contexts are one way of transmitting the tradition and inspiring the quest for the deeper understanding of the values attached to it. Different interpretations and motives for participating in these festivals are accepted, and understood. Knowing that the performances are for some spectators simply aesthetic enjoyment is not diminishing the spiritual value that they have for other participants. This is the case with the Vodun Day festival but also with Egungun and Zangbeto masquerades as well as with the spectacles organized in the honor of the Vodun spirits. As Noret claims, Egungun masquerades have different meanings to participants as well as different parts of the ceremony having different meanings. When the masks come out on their yearly masquerades, it is certainly reaffirmation of the Egungun owning lineages and their identities but also moments of enjoyment from

aesthetic performances. But this spectacular aesthetic performance of respect and tribute for the ancestor spirits is only the second part of the day, the first part being the actual interaction with the ancestors in the morning of the ceremony when the spirits are consulted using the coconut shells to know their will and state of mind. Also, the Ago, which are more recently deceased ancestors who are not yet fully ancestralized, and have not yet been given their permanent Egungun clothes, can evoke emotional reactions with the close relatives who knew them personally while they were still living (Noret 2013: 205 – 206).

In the case of the Khanty, as well as in the examples from South Africa by Comaroff and Comaroff (2009), the festivals are addressing the issue of ethnic identity of the minority group. However in Ouidah, these performances are also addressing the issues of identity, but not necessarily of a certain ethnic identity of a minority group. The Wétché presented dances from many ethnic groups from the area, the Vodun Day festival celebrates many spirits and traditions which belong to different ethnic groups and Zangbeto and Egungun performances are watched and enjoyed by many ethnic groups. I propose that the issue of identity these events are addressing is less of a minority group but rather a local West African, more generally African or even Pan-African identity including all descendants of Africans.

Although different expectations and reasons to attend Vodun performances are accepted, some of my informants expressed a clear wish that cultural and spiritual events need to be separated. They acknowledge that cultural events can be inspired by and related to religious and spiritual practices but they should not be confused. They expressed a fear that in Benin the cultural and spiritual are often mixed up. This kind of fear was expressed by both Vodun practitioners as well as by those Christian circles that define Vodun as idolatry that Benin should get rid of.

The Vodun practitioners and priests feared that confusing cultural and religious events would diminish the respect towards traditions and spirituality. The fear was that if cultural and spiritual events are confused, people might lose the understanding that there is more to Vodun than meets the eye in these performances. They talked of the danger of Vodun becoming mere folklore, which to them meant a spectacle of dances and music without any knowledge or care of the spirituality behind the practices. With folklorization, my informants feared that Vodun would lose respect. And since respect for the traditions and

for the elders is essential in its transmission, folklorization would lead to difficulties in the transmission of the spirituality and knowledge to new generations. Eventually without proper respect and deeper interest, Vodun traditions would disappear as they would not be transmitted anymore. Many of my informants asserted that therefore Vodun inspired cultural festivals, such as Wétché, are acceptable as long as people understand that this is not the real Vodun.

Vodun Day was seen by my informants as primarily a spiritual festival and a celebration organized by the Vodun community, to which foreigners come to embrace and learn about Vodun. The visitors could by their own choice come and see only the cultural side, but what was important to my informants was that they would understand that the cultural side was not the only thing there is to it. My informants often explained that culture and spirituality always go hand in hand. The spiritual practices are always accompanied by cultural manifestations but that does not mean that cultural manifestations should be taken as spiritual practices. Confusing a superficial cultural practice to a spiritual practice would imply profanation in which the spirituality and sacrality is lost (Meyer & de Witte 2013: 277). This is why my informants argue that cultural and spiritual events should be acknowledged as separate although there would be both cultural and spiritual aspects accompanying each other in one event.

Similarly, also evangelical priests and others who were not in favor of Vodun expressed fears relating to the confusion of cultural and spiritual elements in the events. They criticized the Vodun Day Festival for becoming a spiritual instead of a cultural festival. They see the practice of Vodun as idolatry prohibited in the bible, as a sin and as the root of all problems. They explained that they would accept a cultural festival, but idolatry, animal sacrifices and worship should not be a part of a cultural festival. Despite my efforts to try to find out what in their view was part of the culture separated from religion which would be acceptable, I did not manage to get an answer. The discussion would always be brought back to the Vodun as the evil to be eradicated, and to the biblical stories proving this need, despite the common exclamations "*I have nothing against culture!*"

In many of these discussions the message they were conveying was that they would accept Vodun culture stripped off its sacrality but they did not think it possible. The general attitude of people in Ouidah towards the spirits and religions, regardless of their confession, was that the Vodun spirits, and the spirits of other religions exist, and it is for

people to choose their confession and to decide whether to worship them or not. The Evangelicals were no exception: they often knew Vodun very well and believed in the existence of the spirit and its force, but they held the force to be bad, having its source in Satan. Therefore, only partially profanated Vodun performances were still seen ultimately as worship of the spirits. They often also expressed the idea that it is dangerous for the spectators to go and watch spectacles like the Egungun and Zangbeto masquerades or the vodunsis coming out and dancing. They said that people can target and harm others with spiritual forces at these events and any other events relating to Vodun.

While the former president Nicephore Soglo, who initiated the Vodun Day with the festival of Ouidah 92, was praised in the circles in favor of Vodun, he was criticized heavily by the Evangelicals for bringing Vodun back to the surface. According to my Evangelical informants, before the 1990's Vodun was on its way of disappearing or at least it was driven underground and to the remote villages. It was Ouidah 92 that bought it back to the minds of people, to everyday life and to public space. According to one of my evangelical informants, Soglo was clearly lying and deceiving the public when he proclaimed the festival to be a cultural celebration instead of a religious event. Cultural and spiritual were not separated clearly enough. The evangelicals would have wanted Vodun to lose its sacred and spiritual character and be profanated if it could not be entirely eradicated. Hence the partial profanization by the heritage process was not enough, as it was clear that to some participants the festival conveyed important religious meaning as well as official and public recognition.

Evangelical priests also feared that even if it would be possible to have a festival which would present only the cultural side of the Vodun, it might inspire interest in the young people. The cultural would bring back the interest in the spiritual, although they would be separated on the surface. On the other hand, this was precisely the argument used also by those who were in favor of the merging of the cultural and the spiritual in the festival.

Many of my informants, who were common practitioners of Vodun or Catholics in favor of Vodun, expressed a wish that especially young people would get interested in Vodun spirituality through these cultural events, celebrations and performances. For them, whether it was a question of purely cultural festival, such as Wétché, or a mixed cultural and spiritual event, such as Vodun Day, the masquerades and dances in honor of the spirits, the presence of Vodun tradition was positive. Presenting cultural, visible sides of

Vodun would not diminish the respect towards it, but rather add value to it. But my informants did express the need to recognize and differentiate the actual religious rituals from the public performance, as indeed happens on the Vodun Day when practitioners make their private sacrifices in the morning surrounded by only the family or the congregation of the convent and only later join in the public celebration. Or when Egunguns come out and dance, it is regarded as a performance but it is preceded with the ceremony at the house or the convent, where the actual important messages from the ancestors to the living are passed. When it is wished that Vodun performances make young people interested in Vodun and traditions, it is always acknowledged that the dances, songs, drumming, costumes and performances are not the actual tradition to be preserved and transmitted. But rather, it is hoped that the knowledge about them and the interest in these cultural manifestations would lead the person to look for more profound spiritual knowledge, tradition and values. If the interest of the spectator stops at the level of the visible superficial traditions, it is still better than abandoning the ancestral traditions altogether. In the view of these informants, performing Vodun tradition as folklore is not a zero sum game between superficial tradition and preserving spiritual heritage, but rather a stepping stone from the superficial to the deeper level. As Aurelien put it when asked whether it is good to do the cultural part without the adoration of the cult:

"Thank you, I say. Everything that can be done to make the Vodun more visible is welcome for me! [... It will not diminish the value of the cult] because the cultural part is only the cultural part, it has nothing to do with the cult. […] You cannot do the cult without the cultural part but you can do the cultural part without doing the cult."

Vodun related and inspired performances cannot be separated from the underlying spiritual core, as many of my informants have made clear: they go hand in hand. But at the same time they need to be separated because the spirituality is not visible and not easily accessible and might be lost if there is too much profanation of the religious tradition in the process of its heritagization. Those who consider Vodun as their cultural heritage consider the spirituality (but not necessarily the sacrality) to be this heritage that they want to appreciate and not only the external manifestations of it. As Francisco explained when he was talking about separating the spiritual side of Vodun, the adoration of the cult, and its cultural manifestations:

"You have to have spirituality before the culture. It is the spirituality that guides the culture. The cultural marches on the spirituality. What spirituality says, the culture does. The two go together as a pair."

It is interesting to compare the heritagization of Vodun to the museumification of the living quarters of a Candomblé priestess Mae Menininha in Brazil. Anthropologists Maria Paula Adinolfi and Mattijs Van de Port (2013) studied how Candomblé circles appropriated the language of museumification in transforming the room of the priestess into a heritage site. Despite apparent profane dimensions, the sacred nature of the site was not diminished, but rather articulated in a new way.

The divinities of Candomblé had become emblems of the Afro-Brazilian culture and religious ceremonies were perceived as colorful dances, primitive music, and Afro-Brazilian folklore. After being defined in museums as superstition and black magic, Candomblé became framed as heritage. From 1990's onwards Candomblé practitioners have attempted to regain control of their representational matters and restrict the use of Candomblé symbols and imagery for example through a court case against the use of sacred symbols in carnival parades. They also critiqued the folklore ensemble of the Bahian state for performing sacred dances on stage. By realizing memorials and museums inside sacred places, they adopted the language of museumification although their aim was to restore Candomblé as a religion rather than represent it as cultural heritage or folklore. But according to Adinolfi and Van de Port (2013) there is no contradiction, because the language of the museum institution endows Candomblé with prestige, value and respect in a way that matches the practitioners' religious values. The memorial allows the people to articulate their religious values in a language that is recognized also by the wider society. In this, the Candomblé circles appropriated and adopted the language of the museum, but were not subjects to its hegemony.

I argue that the same thing is happening in Ouidah. People are adopting the language of heritagization, and they are using it to give recognition and prestige to Vodun. By framing Vodun as particularly African cultural heritage to be valued, people are reclaiming the control to represent and define the practice that was previously misrecognized as black magic or worship of the Devil. Similarly to Candomblé's museumification, the wider recognition of cultural heritage, institutionalized or not, imbues Vodun with the prestige and respect that fits together with the practitioners' religious values.

5.5. Living tradition and Authorized Heritage Discourse

In the definitions of intangible cultural heritage, the living traditions and their transmission is highlighted (Tornatore 2010). But what is pertinent in the conceptions of safeguarding heritage is that traditions are seen as being endangered. There is thus a contradiction in the discourses and conceptions of immaterial heritage. Heritage that is lively enough is in no need of protection and an endangered tradition is impossible to save. As cultural heritage, then, endangered traditions are given a new life as representations of themselves. In this process they are produced and their meanings change (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 56). But the meaning is also fixed and the practice frozen to a certain frame and moment in time.

Vodun is a good example of a living tradition which is constantly changing while claiming age-old roots. As a religion, it has no sacred scripture to which to refer to for ancient practices and meanings, and one of its essential features is openness to new influences and accumulating powers from outside instead of trying to shut the influences out. Many divinities have been adopted from neighboring peoples and even Jesus is considered by some to be a Vodun spirit. Other divinities have been abandoned and forgotten because they were not felt to be practical and powerful anymore. Practices relating to worship and initiation also change. For example, many of my informants mentioned that one of the positive changes is that the time the initiates spend in the convent is reduced, and therefore it does not prevent children from going to school anymore. There is hierarchy between divinities, convents and priests, but Vodun has no leader, although in Ouidah, Daagbo Hounon is considered to be the most important of the high priests and has taken the title of the Pontiff or Pope of Vodun. Ergo, Vodun changes constantly and it is probably because of its capacity to change and adapt to changes, it has been able to survive despite all the persecution both in West Africa and in the Americas and the Caribbean. As Klaus Hamberger (2011: 363) stated, Vodun is not like a sacred text frozen in time, it is rather like a living language.

My informants assert that Vodun itself does not change, as it is a spirit, it is eternal and immutable. But people and society change, and therefore the relations that people entertain with the spirits and spirituality, change. People distance themselves from the spirits intentionally by abandoning the practice but also unintentionally by using Vodun to advance personal material goals without respecting the spirituality. Many people claim

that some priests do not have the power they used to have because "the spirits are not with them anymore", or that the spirits have left certain places because people do not know how to interact with them or do not bother to do it properly. But also many of my informants feel that despite some people losing contact with it, Vodun would still retain its force and could call on people. The spirit might skip a generation and call the children who would then have to re-establish the material Vodun and the practice of worship in the family despite the abandonment of the parents. I will discuss this in more detail in chapter 7.

Although Vodun is not aspiring to get on the UNESCO list of intangible heritage, UNESCO's definitions of heritage are affecting wider discourses and practices relating to heritage making. According to Laurajane Smith (2006), within UNESCO and other heritage institutions, there is an Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) which is Western, dominant, privileges expert knowledge, and considers heritage above all material, monumental, aesthetic, and often national. UNESCO Convention on Intangible Heritage 2003 is often viewed as a response, emphasizing intangibility instead of materiality, and giving a greater role to the local groups in defining their own cultural heritage. It is seen as a concept that would have a bottom-up approach, appreciating the grass-roots level expertise of the practitioners of the living tradition and thus democratizing the process of heritagization (Blake 2009: 3). Still, creating a list is itself a practice shaped by AHD: it validates and authorizes certain perception of cultural heritage, it excludes others, and creates meaning and value which are framed and understood through the position on the list (Smith & Akagawa 2009: 4).

Of Vodun related cults and practices, oral heritage of Gelede and the Ifa divination system are on the list of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO a, UNESCO b). Gelede is a spiritual practice and a masquerade practiced by some Yoruba groups in parts of Benin, Nigeria and Togo. Since it is not practiced in Ouidah, and was never mentioned by my informants, I do not discuss its heritagization in this study. Those few people with whom I spoke about it in Benin assumed that its position on the list was due to the promotion by certain active Yoruba in high positions in Nigeria. Ifa divination is practiced by the Yoruba, but it is considered to be the same as Fa or Afa for the Fon and other ethnic groups in Benin and Togo. Although, according Timothy Landry (2013), who trained himself to be a bokonon using the Fa/Ifa, even in Benin, Ifa is considered to be the original

and more valued divination method than the Fa. The official position of Ifa as cultural heritage was pointed out by some of my informants as proof that Nigeria officially respects its cultural heritage whereas Benin is lagging behind. Ifa/Fa also inspired and was used as entertainment in Benin for example in a theatre play called *Notre boussole ancestrale* (Our ancestral compass) which was said to be *"un divertissement didactique patrimonial"* (Didactic patrimonial entertainment). The play clearly had the objective of being both entertaining and informative, and it sought to promote Ifa/Fa as ancestral wisdom and cultural heritage. It consisted of the actual play and an explanatory lecture of the divination system, and when it was commissioned to be played for foreign tourists in Grand Popo, the lecture part was also translated to the majority language of the audience.

The palace Houxwe of the Daagbo Hounon Houwamenou promoted the idea of Vodun as cultural heritage and some of the young people associated with it told me on my first encounter with them that Daagbo Hounon was recognized by UNESCO. But when asked, they did not actually know what UNESCO was and what its recognition meant. But just mentioning the name was intended to enhance the legitimacy of the palace as the appropriate actor and expert both in relation to Vodun and cultural heritage. But, to most commoners, the listings of UNESCO or inscription to a national list of cultural heritage bears little significance.

As Laurajane Smith (2006) argues, cultural heritage is a social and cultural practice of producing identity and meaning, and as such is both constituted by the discourses about it and shaping those discourses. The discourse and practice of heritage cannot be dissociated from each other. The predominantly western expert discourse on heritage affects the grass-roots level practices of heritage in West Africa but it is not uncritically adopted as such. The discourses of heritage, as well as its close partner, the hegemonic discourse on modernity, are adopted and adjusted to local cultural practices and meanings in various ways (Geschiere & Rowlands 1996, de Jong & Rowlands 2007).

The common people in my study who were not prominent figures in cultural, social or political life talked of heritage, cultural patrimony and tradition interchangeably without reference to official listings or denominations. Many of my informants said that the state should protect cultural heritage and its transmission to future generations but this did not imply the necessity of an official recognition and no concrete measures were proposed.

What was seen as threatening cultural heritage was the lack of respect due to commercialization or the greed for social and economic power.

What my informants felt as the reason for the diminishing respect towards the traditions was not their folklorization as such, but the corrupting force of money. Because tourists would pay for participation in the private rituals, it was feared that some people would lose their integrity and let the foreigners have access to things that should be kept secret or within the family or congregation. Those that would be willing to sell their knowledge for money are generally assumed to be people who do not possess a lot of or correct knowledge, and many people say that there are many fakes out there who pretend to be specialists only to rip off the ignorant tourists or deceive those Beninese who would want to buy social and spiritual power without putting in the effort of learning. The real connoisseurs of the traditions are supposed to share their knowledge only sparsely with persons that have deep respect for the safeguarding of secrecy. If they suspect that knowledge might be misused and diluted by selling it, they should prefer take their traditions to the grave with them. I will discuss secrecy in more detail in chapter 6.

But since all the Vodun performances and spectacles that I have discussed here are public and free of charge, even to the tourists, the availability (or not) of the tourist money does not seem to be affecting the tradition of the Vodun performances to the same extent as in many other cases such as Kankurang masquerades in Senegal which is increasingly being reified as cultural heritage and losing its meaning and power in the local society (de Jong 2007). I will contrast Vodun spectacles with Kankurang masquerade in more detail in chapter 6. As the Vodun performances are not performed exclusively to tourists, they are not so powerfully conditioned by European expectations of Africanness. They are influenced by it, using the discourse of Africa as the cradle of humanity, image of Mother Africa and diffusing essentialized conceptions of ethnicity, race, culture and tradition, but these performances and the discourses they transmit are ultimately addressed to locals. According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995), cultural heritage is a way of producing "hereness" and locality, and exporting it through tourism. But it is also a means of producing identity and meaning (Smith 2006), and thus it constructs "hereness" and locality for the locals in relation to the "other". In Ouidah, discourses of Vodun as cultural heritage affect the ways in which locals perceive their position in the world and the

relation between Africa and “the West” both in history and today. I will discuss this in chapter 7.

I assert that although European expectations of Africa affect the folklorization of Vodun performances, the locals in Ouidah feel that they or rather the next generation, the young, are in charge of how Vodun performances are presented as heritage. Their interest, attitude and affiliation is what ultimately defines whether Vodun as heritage consists of superficial, visible and open for all music, dances and costumes or esoteric spiritual practices and knowledge (accompanied by superficial cultural practices).

In this chapter, I have looked at different kind of Vodun related events from spiritual ones to purely cultural festivals, and analyzed how the cultural and the spiritual are separated or intertwined in defining Vodun as cultural heritage. I have argued that in my informants’ view the cultural heritage that they would like to promote is the invisible spirituality behind the practices. They fear that misunderstanding the visible customs as the heritage would lead to diminishing the tradition to mere folklore which is seen as having lost the spirituality. I have also argued that Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006) and UNESCO driven notions and practices have an effect on how my informants view heritage. When Vodun is generally spoken of as cultural heritage, the notion imbues it with prestige by putting it on relation with other internationally valued masterpieces of culture. The AHD is not hegemonic, however, and my informants adopt, appropriate and rework the discourse on heritage particularly by putting value on the spiritual core. Although Vodun is gaining new meanings as heritage, it cannot be claimed having lost its old ones as religion. Next, I will look more closely at the importance of the invisible spiritual core, the secrets that are the basis of Vodun, and more precisely, I will discuss the practice of secrecy, the concealment, revelation, performance and transmission, and their relation to making universal cultural heritage.

6 Secrecy and heritage for all

"It is in this way that the culture of Benin is so rich – there are so many secrets."

This was said by Samuel, a Vodun practitioner in his mid-twenties, when he was explaining what he thought comprises the cultural heritage of Benin. I had heard many times the phrases "*Benin is rich in culture"*, *"Ouidah is rich in culture"*, and *"we are so rich in culture"* from many different informants, but Samuel specified that by it he meant the amount of secret knowledge.

At first glance knowledge that belongs strictly only to certain people and universal or national cultural heritage may seem contrary to each other. However, in this chapter I analyze the relations between secrecy and Vodun as cultural heritage. I will be guided in my analysis by following questions: How secrets are producing locality? How is preserving secrets, as possessions of the few, possible, while defining Vodun as cultural heritage belonging to a much larger population? And, what are the problems concerning their transmission? How are secrets displayed in Vodun performances? I analyze these questions mainly in the light of Ferdinand de Jong's (2007) approach to secrecy as a practice that includes also those who are excluded from the secret content itself. These practices of secrecy are used to come to terms with modernity and the changes it has brought about. According to his study, although secrecy is not seen as modern, it is a means to incorporate the modern into the local world view in Senegal.

6.1. Producing locality

What secrets and cultural heritage have in common, is their capacity to produce locality. For Appadurai (1996), locality is relational and contextual. It is not the same thing as the actual spatial neighborhood, but rather a dimension or a value, the phenomenological property of social life. It is realized in the existing social forms which constitute the neighborhood. Locality is not taken for a given, but rather produced and maintained by various practices. Rites of passage are used in producing localized subjects and spatio-temporal locality is produced materially (among others by buildings and infrastructure) as well as through rituals. In the modern, globalized world, different instances – for example the nation-state, international organizations, market forces and mass media – affect the way localities are produced, and their productions is increasingly fragile (Appadurai 1996).

De Jong (2007) has argued in his study about the practices of secrecy surrounding the masquerades and initiation rites in Senegal and Gambia that secrecy is one of the means to produce locality. Secrets make the locality special. They create and maintain boundaries between people, they differentiate people and locality from all the others. Traditions involving practices of secrecy like the masked performances are not performed only to preserve tradition. They generate and define identity and difference at the local as well as at the transnational level. Initiations are used in making local historical subjects in the translocal modern world. Performances of secrets are also presented to outsiders, mainly tourists, to show the local particularity and authenticity. Secrets are used in Senegal and Gambia to incorporate the global into the local and come to terms with modernity. In fact, practices of secrecy are historical practices that have always been used to incorporate the impact of colonialism, capitalism and democracy (de Jong 2007).

This is very similar to how cultural heritage can be seen to produce and present local particularity in the globalized world. Heritage is a way of producing ”hereness” and it is produced, not found or taken for granted (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 393). Traditions are important in building a group identity, whether ethnic or national. This is a continuing process of simultaneously defining elements that unite the group and differ them from others. Labelling something as “tradition” or “cultural heritage” forms a link with the present and the past which is invested with ethnic or national significance and authority. What is chosen as representative of the group’s identity and traditions is thus not arbitrary, but has a meaning and it is given new value in the process of definition (Siikala & Ulyashev 2011: 19 – 20). Often when one group defines something as their cultural heritage, they tend to monopolize the tradition and prevent or limit other groups’ rights to it (Silverman 2011). Cultural heritage is thus seen on the one hand as possession and under control of a specific group and on the other hand as a common resource important for the universal humankind (Brown M. 2005: 49).

In Benin, certain traditions, Vodun divinities and especially the knowledge behind the practices were said to belong to certain people due to their ethnicity, family, gender, age, and their initiation grade. It would be dangerous for others to know the secrets that are not destined to them. To know secrets, one has to prove that one is conscientious enough to handle them.

Vodun is certainly a means to produce locality in Ouidah in the same way as the masked performances produce local particularity in de Jong's examples of Kankurang and Jola initiations. People in Benin generally agree that nowhere else in Benin is Vodun as visible as it is in Ouidah. There seems to be a temple with paintings on the outer walls, a sign of a Vodun healer or priest, a Legba or another Vodun protecting the village or the neighborhood, or just a white flag denoting the presence of the spirit in almost every street corner. The saying goes that Ouidah is the cradle of Vodun and many people agree with this. Vodun is what makes Ouidah special and important in the world. This is illustrated for example in the comment that I heard often from many different informants:

"Africa is the cradle of the humankind and Vodun is the first religion."

Many people told me that *"Ouidah is rich in culture"*, which refers to two things: Vodun and the history of the town as one of the biggest slave ports of the transatlantic slave trade. Rites of initiation and purification, cultural heritage festivals, and Vodun spectacles as entertainment produce localized subjects. Convents, sacred forests, the places and statues where Vodun reside on the crossroads and markets, and other material manifestations as well as ritual purifications of the town and the marches accompanying the celebrations, are practices of generating and maintaining locality. In some practices, Vodun is used to overcome the problems of producing locality in a translocalized world where spatial neighborhoods and localities – as dimensions or values in Appadurai's (1996) terms – are not equivalent. Material memorials of the slave trade (like the Slave Route, the Door of No Return and the Door of Return) and the cultural festivals and spiritual voyages from the African diaspora are intended to produce locality which is relevant far beyond the boundaries of Ouidah or Benin.

In a similar line with Kankurang masquerade and Jola initiations in de Jong's study, Vodun in Ouidah is used to generate identity. The French word *patrimoine* (heritage, patrimony) is widely used in Benin in association with Vodun also by uneducated classes especially when referring to cultural or spiritual heritage set up by the ancestors. Also when heritage and tradition are used in association with material things, arts or traditional ways of doing, they always seem to imply passing on some of the respected intangible ancestral wisdom. This ancestral wisdom is both the secret that needs protection that in some instances belong to certain minorities, and general, universal wisdom and spirituality that everyone should aspire to understand. The heritage is the intangible,

hidden thing behind the physical avatars or the traditional practices of drumming, dancing and worshipping the Vodun. This was often brought out by many of my informants, and well crystallized in this comment by an evangelical priest:

"[Egungun and Zangbeto]…those are symbols of Vodun. But what is happening, we cannot say, what is hidden behind Egun, behind Zangbeto, we cannot say. We cannot refuse culture. But the essential is not in it. The essential is hidden. It's hidden in their midst, what constitutes the real Vodun."

As well as in this comment by Aurelien:

"There is a force that is here. What we see are only representations, but the Vodun itself, it is a spirit."

I have previously already mentioned Egungun and Zangbeto masquerades. Next, I will analyze them in relation to secrecy, as they are interesting examples of essence that is hidden while the performance itself is open for anyone to watch and actually designed to demonstrate that there are secrets behind the visible spectacles.

6.2. Egungun and Zangbeto masquerades

I have given the basic outline of Egungun and Zangbeto spirits, societies, and related performances in chapter 5.1. Here I will concentrate on analyzing their relation to the concealment and performance of secrets.

Both Zangbeto and Egungun societies are restricted to men and they are very secretive. Just as in de Jong's (2007) study about the Kankurang masquerade, the masker is never known and it is emphatically denied that there could be a human being inside the mask. There are also secrets which protect the initiated for example from the harm of the physical contact with the Egungun's clothes or the punishment from Zangbeto for meeting him in the village at night. Just like Kankurang in de Jong's (2007: 130 - 132) study, Zangbeto and Egungun are means of social control. They are supernatural agents that act with impartiality. According to de Jong (2007: 130 – 132), there are many similar cases in other African states in which masks are used by secret societies to exert power.

According to Sydney Kasfir (1988: 3 – 4) play and seriousness are not necessarily opposing each other. Play and ritual are simultaneously present in many masked

performances, and it is not always useful to make a distinction between sacred and secular. Indeed, many masquerades in West Africa have been changing from ritual to play and entertainment and vice versa. De Jong (2007: 128 - 151) presented an example of Kankurang in Senegal that been secularized from feared mask into playful show. The mask had lost its power because everyone had learned its secret but there were attempts at restoration of the secret and restricting the performances. People were making a difference between the real Kankurangs of the bush in ritual context and false Kankurangs in the shows.

In Ouidah, with Egungun and Zangbeto, entertainment, seriousness and keeping the secret of the mask are not exclusive. Although they offer playful entertainment, they are not secularized like the Kankurang, and people do not claim that the Zangbetos or Egunguns in the shows would be false, quite on the contrary, the spectacles intend to show what the real spirit is like and what he is capable of. My informants spoke of them as spectacles, shows or entertainment that they go to and watch, sometimes because there is nothing else to do in the city. According to Ludovic running from Egungun's whipping makes them "laugh and do sports". Yet at the same time Egungun and Zangbeto performances are staged especially to show their mystical force so that they could still be feared and respected. They still exert the power and are used as means of social control and their performances as entertainment are subjected to this purpose.

Damien, a Vodun practitioner in his twenties, explained Zangbeto like this:

"He is the guardian of the night, it still continues, it continues to govern. It is protection. […] During the day, he tries to show his importance to the people. That he is able to do that kind of things."

At performances, the secrets are kept and especially in the case of Zangbeto, the performance is all about showing that there is a real secret behind it. The performance proves to the audience that it is indeed a mystical being capable of doing tricks that humans are not capable of. Zangbetos and Egunguns stage performances that gather large audiences of locals. When there are white tourists or high ranking officials attending, they are treated as VIP quests sitting on the front row while most of the locals are standing. The things that Zangbetos produce when they are turned around, are shown first to the distinguished quests and sometimes they are asked to join in the performance by

completing some kind of task for example touching the snake, verifying that it is real and living, or spitting the local alcohol on something for benediction.

Although tourist guides are offering to take tourists to see performances of Zangbetos and Egunguns, the performances themselves are not commodified like the Kumpo masquerade. According to de Jong (2007: 156 – 172), Kumpo has a status of national heritage in Gambia and it is regarded as representing an ethnic group in a multi-ethnic state. Its public performance serves different goals. It is performed to tourists in hotels for money, to high-ranking officials for political support and to locals in cultural festivals articulating their cultural identity. Kumpo is reified cultural tradition that the locals watch as audience but do no longer participate in. Although it is commodified, its secrets are not violated, but they seem to have lost value (de Jong 2007: 156 – 172).

In Ouidah however, I did not observe the same kind of process of commodification of masked performances. Although tourists are often VIP guests at Egungun and Zangbeto performances, they are not the only nor the main audience of the show. Tourist might pay for example to have a seat with the best view while the local audience is standing, to be allowed to take photographs and/or pay their guide to take them there. But the performance itself is free for anyone who simply passes by and wants to watch. Especially Zangbeto performances are often staged in connection with different kinds of celebrations but they are not performed exclusively for tourist groups at hotels or other tourist spots. Similarly to Kumpo, the locals watch Zangbeto and Egungun performances and do not really participate in them apart from the young men teasing the Egunguns. But by watching, the locals are participating. As Egungun and Zangbeto are restricted cults, there is no other way for the non-initiated to participate except coming to witness the shows and participating in the practice of secrecy by remaining or pretending to be ignorant. All the performers and organizers are initiated members of the cults unlike in de Jong's examples.

Zangbeto performances, and all of the Egungun performances, require the authorization of the spectacle by the spirits themselves. The authorization is usually assured by consulting the Fa. If the spirit denies the performance on that specific day or altogether, it will not be performed. Only initiated men can perform Zangbeto and Egungun masquerades, therefore, it is not like the Kumpo, which is performed for tourists by the Mandinko ethnic group although the masquerade is not part of their cultural heritage but

that of the Bainunk (de Jong 2007: 168). If in Kumpo the secret has lost its value and potential with the mask being increasingly performed as entertainment, in the case of Zangbeto and Egungun masquerades the importance of the secret content is reinforced by the means of these spectacles performed as recreation.

De Jong points out that performances of secrets are staged as local forms of authenticity. They are used in creating particularity of the locality and creating difference from others. In tourist performances, difference between Africa and Europe is highlighted. By othering themselves, the performers are trying to make the locality a more attractive tourist destination to gain resources from the growing cultural tourism industry (de Jong 2007: 171). Using Vodun to express differences between Africans and Europeans was very common also in Benin. Sometimes Vodun was seen as something that makes Ouidah or Benin special and differentiates it from other West African places trying to get their share of tourism flows. On the other hand, sometimes it was seen as something essentially African in contrast to Europe or the West that the tourists represent, as in these comments that I heard often from many different informants:

"It is our African culture; it is what our grandparents left us. Vodun is African. […] We are in Africa!"

"It is what separates us from the Europeans."

The locals often assumed that foreign people come to Benin especially to see Vodun performances. When talking about cultural festivals and performances Francisco pointed out their importance in showing to the outside world what the locality is all about:

"Those who come from abroad, it is for the tradition that they come here for."

As did Samuel, who was talking about the crowds of foreigners coming to see the Vodun Day:

"Benin is a small country. It is known across the world through Vodun."

As traditions are being reified, canonized and inscribed into national and international policies on culture and discourses on identity, it is feared that the they will only come to represent locality but will lose the capacity to actively produce it (de Jong 2007: 22). In Benin, there are projects of revalorization of traditions related to Vodun, but they are not

being reified into a national canon, nor inscribed as representing any ethnic identity. As I have stated in chapter 5.5., my informants said the government should protect the cultural heritage but no one proposed any concrete measures of how this should be done. Especially one of my informants, who belonged to a family possessing Egungun tradition, called for more official activities to safeguard certain traditions in order to keep their ownership in the hands of the original rightful owners.

6.3. Secrecy as an inclusive cultural practice

Although the content of the secrets belong to a small group of people, most of my informants agree that Vodun is part of their heritage, whether they are adepts and owners of some of the secrets or not. Vodun as cultural heritage belongs also to Catholics, Muslims, Protestants and Rastafari. Innumerable times I heard the phrase *"It is my culture. It is my tradition!"* pronounced with emphasis. Many even say that Vodun is part of the cultural heritage of every Beninese or every African whether they are proud of it or not, or are even aware of its existence. I will explore the connection between Vodun and all Africans perceived to exist in blood and essence in chapter 7. Here I will consider how those who are not in the possession of secrets are nevertheless included as owners of this cultural heritage by practice of secrecy. I am drawing on de Jong's analysis of secrecy as inclusive cultural practice in my discussion of how people claim ownership of heritage at the same time as they acknowledge that they do not have access to its secret core.

According to de Jong (2007), what is important is not the actual content of the secret but the practice of secrecy from the part of those who know the secret as well as those who are excluded from it. In fact, when revealed, the content of the secret might seem banal, and many who are not supposed to know the secret content have already heard of it. In Benin, the importance of the secret content was often emphasized. Laurent, a Christian in his thirties, compared the keeping of secrets of Vodun to protecting national security in other countries, saying that:

"They do not reveal how to make an atomic bomb to all the students going to study in the USA, do they?"

Sometimes it is the secret content itself which is said to be important. Whereas other times it is rather the understanding and the meaning of the secret that is more crucial than its actual content. One might know the secret but it does not automatically mean that one is

able to understand the meaning of it. One learns gradually to comprehend and use the secret information and therefore, if one has not been through an initiation one would not be able to understand the secrets that are revealed to those who are initiated. Even though the secret content would be something that outsiders would have already heard about, it is said that one needs profound consciousness and life-experience to understand its meaning and its use. The stage of one's consciousness was often mentioned as the pre-requisite of learning the spirituality behind the tradition. Joseph explained it in the context of the Fa consultation as follows:

"If I do a consultation for you, there are things that I say, but there are other parts that I see, that you are not yet at the stage of hearing. […] not everything needs to be said. It is the teacher who has to use the methods, to find the solution, without you, who is concerned, knowing about it. I should serve the spirit in your place, since you are not aware of the message [of the spirit]."

As mentioned, de Jong (2007) analyzed secrecy as a practice that is used both by those who keep secrets and those who are excluded from them. Practice of secrecy creates complicity and mutual dependence between those who are in the possession of secrets. But it is not a power struggle between those who know and those who want to know. Those who are excluded from the secret content play their part in the practice of secrecy as well. They respect the secret or pretend not to know it even if they do. Through the practice of secrecy they are included in the congregation although excluded from the secret knowledge. In de Jong's ethnographic examples the congregation included everyone who accepted the mask as their joint secret whether they actually understood what the secret behind the mask was. And those who tried to expose the secret (for example a French man, a missionary, the police forces) were not playing their part in the practice of secrecy and hence they were seen as outsiders.

Regarding Vodun, the non-initiated know their limits and do not try to push them. They know they are not supposed to enter the convents and certain sacred places, they know not ask certain questions or touch certain things. In fact, breaking the norms of secrecy are said to result automatically in instant death or mystical misfortune. If one is initiated one can talk about the secrets with other initiates, but not with the uninitiated. The uninitiated know that there is information which is out of bounds for them and usually do not try to unveil it. They are also practicing secrecy to the same extend as those who are

owning the secrets. Noret (2013: 206) argues that what actually enables the Egungun spiritual practice is the silence of the women. According to him, everyone, including women, know some things about the cult but they cannot admit it nor talk about it. If they would, they would be exposed to violent repercussions or at least they would risk losing all social honor and trust. No one really beliefs in contact with the clothes resulting in mystical death but everyone avoids the contact for the respect of the cult (Noret 2013: 206). This was one of the concrete situations in which I complied with the practices of secrecy: out of respect for my informants and for the mythology and performance of the spirits, I never questioned or pressed my informants to admit that in reality people know things they are not supposed to know as this was not relevant to my study.

Officially, different sorts of information is available to different initiation grades: those who are simple initiates do not have access to the information that the adepts learn when they spend long periods, sometimes years, in the convents. It is said that in the convent, the vodunsis learn a new language, and even if they were made to reveal their secrets, the uninitiated would not understand the language of the adepts. This comment by Francisco illustrates well the practice of secrecy:

"Tradition is a bit complex, even for me. There are things that even I don't know, many things that I don't know. I am not supposed to know everything. "

In Ouidah, there are nevertheless some people who do not comply with the practices of secrecy. Some tourists ask questions or talk about Vodun in a way that puts the initiated or the conscious common practitioner in a difficult position. But more often than nosy tourists, my informants brought forth the problem of corrupted and fraudulent priests or practitioners. People who would try to gain access to secrets, and through them to power, without going through a proper initiation, and people who sell secrets just to gain some money, are very much despised. They have broken the complicity and violated the mutual dependence for their own short term benefit. They could not be respected anymore. This was evident in many comments of my informants, as illustrated here by Joseph and Alexandre who were both tourist guides:

"If people today are distancing themselves from the spiritual world, they are right, because the teacher becomes a false teacher, he becomes a teacher without secrets."

"There are things that you cannot reveal, if you reveal them, it's like losing the thing. You cannot sell the secrets, it's personal, it's a gift. You lose the gift when you give it to someone, but that someone who bought it cannot use it because it's not his."

In Ouidah, all those who are accepting the practice of secrecy are included in the congregation whether they are initiated or non-initiated Vodun practitioners or Christians, Muslims or Rastafarians. My informants repeated many times that if you are Beninese, you cannot ignore Vodun. Although some people claim they do not know Vodun and they are not interested in it since they are devout Christians or Muslims, they know enough to respect the practice of secrecy. I was often told that it is everyone's personal choice whether to serve Vodun spirits, Christian God, Jesus or Allah, and no one can force the practice of a religion upon another. But respect is compulsory regardless of denomination. One can be born to a Vodun family and convert to Christianity but one should still keep the secrets to oneself and refrain from prying into the secret information that is not meant for one. Even families that have been Christians for generations and families that prohibit their kids any contact with Vodun, know enough about it to be able to play and respect the game of secrecy.

There are nevertheless also people who consider unmasking secrets a positive change. These few persons had lived in the West and were not close to Vodun tradition, and they brought up Vodun as a means of social control. This is a comment from Aimé who moved back to Benin after spending most of his childhood in Europe:

"What was feared earlier, what was hidden, is now more open. You don't need to be afraid anymore because you would be afraid of what exactly? So, it is better that things are revealed so that everyone can know what they are dealing with."

As I have noted earlier, Vodun is often said to be part of one's heritage whether one accepts it or not: there is a special bond between the Vodun and all Africans, and they cannot deny it. I will explore this in more detail in chapter 7, but here it is interesting to compare it to Michael Herzfeld's (2005: 3) notion of cultural intimacy, which is the *"recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality"*. Things that are implied by cultural intimacy are not something people would be proud of. They are talked of and recognized as comprising identity of the group

only among themselves and not brought forward as identity markers in relation to others. They are a kind of public secret about the perceived shared social flaws.

It was evident that for some, Vodun and its secrets represent rather cultural intimacy than celebrated cultural heritage. They would avoid talking about Vodun, saying they know nothing of it, which was clearly not the case as later on they would acknowledge the influence of Vodun in the history of their family or in the everyday lives of their neighborhoods. As an evangelical priest who was fiercely against Vodun told me when talking about it: *"we cannot refuse culture".*

Existence of sorcery and malevolence against fellow humans was often mentioned as something that characterizes Beninese people in a bad way. Some would associate Vodun with these practices of doing spiritual harm to someone else, but mostly people tried to explain how Vodun was not the same thing as sorcery. Equating Vodun and practices of sorcery is widespread among some Westerners and local Christian circles, and it was advocated by the early missionaries. By many Christians, Vodun spirits are translated as the Devil in much similar fashion as in Birgit Meyer's (1999) research on Ghana. However, my informants took time to explain how good and bad cannot be separated, they go together, hand in hand. Vodun and all other religions and practices can be used for the good as well as for the evil. It is up to the individual to use the secrets and powers of Vodun for the good. But, according to many of my informants as well as acquaintances from other parts of Benin, the particularity of Beninese people, and especially people from Ouidah (or according to some, especially the Fon) is that they are jealous of each other and often wish to do harm to their fellow citizens. To do this, they would use spiritual instead of physical violence. It is this malevolence and the use of sorcery which could be seen as constituting cultural intimacy of the Ouidanese or the Beninese. It is the dark side, the not-celebrated aspect of the tradition that many Beninese admit sharing. Some people directly associate this to Vodun and thus give Vodun its malevolent reputation. For others, this is only misuse of the force of Vodun and not part of its spirituality.

Complicity created by the practice of secrecy within the group who possesses secrets as well as within the wider congregation, is closely related to the way secrecy is related to power relations. I will now turn to address power relations but I will do this by concentrating mainly on the way in which power relations are constructed, maintained

and perceived through the performance of spectacles. Secrecy and power are related in many ways in everyday life, ritual settings as well as national politics and economy. This is beyond the scope of this study.

6.4. Secrecy and power in performances

Practices of secrecy not only reflect power relations, they establish and maintain them actively. I have already discussed Zangbeto and Egungun as examples of masks that are used as means of social control. They act with impartiality and impunity. According to de Jong (2007), masquerades establish power relations with the audience including former colonizers. In the performances, they are treated as non-initiates and are denied access to secret knowledge. I will address the issue of the white spectators perceived as former colonizers in more detail in chapter 7.5.

Usually when masquerades are played in the ritual context, the audience is not in the position to contest the relationship with the mask. But when the masquerades are played to tourists or high-ranking citizens in modern-day Senegal, the relation between the audience and the players is altered. The high-ranking audience is no longer subjected to the authority of the mask. The secret loses its coercive potential although the secret is not revealed (de Jong 2007).

As I have already mentioned in chapter 5.1., I had never heard of Zangbeto or Egungun performed exclusively to tourists or distinguished guests. Performances are usually in a public place and open to everyone to see. Most of the audience is local people. VIP-guests are seated in the front row where they can have a good view but they are mostly subjected to the same rules as the other audience, for example not touching Egungun's clothing. To the wealthier guests, Egunguns make their authoritative claims for money. The guests are contemplating the visual show, they are not trying to contest the authority of the Egungun, and so he is not going to threaten them with the whip or the touch. It is the young men and boys who deliberately come too close to test their limits who need the enforcing of the authority. But I did observe a very big Egungun spectacle because of which one of the major roads of the city was blocked due to the big crowd of people watching and running on the road. Towards the end, the chasing had become quite fierce and almost out of control instead of the more common performance where the Egungun stays within certain limits of the square. By that time the organizers had cleared away the seats and taken their VIP guests to safety.

Zangbeto performances during the day are not only entertainment. Although many informants say the daytime Zangbeto and the night-time Zangbeto are different, they also say that at daytime, Zangbeto shows the audience its supernatural powers and the tricks it can do. The purpose of the performance is to show what the spirit is capable of and could do in the night-time and prove that it is indeed a supernatural agent. This could be seen as an attempt to subject also tourists to the authority of the mask. Therefore in my view, in Ouidah, the masks have not lost their coercive power as a result of the different relationships that the mask has with different audiences as is the case of Kumpo in Senegal studied by de Jong (2007). On the contrary, the shows are intended to enhance the power of the mask.

Although Zangbeto and Egungun still retain their secrets and at least partly retain their coercive force, the respect towards them is clearly diminishing. My informants lamented the lack of respect from the younger generation although they themselves were not much older. They commented that the use of whip is now much more necessary since the young boys and men need to be forced to have respect. They are coming much too close to Egunguns and are taking unnecessary risks. Also they said that now there are children who take their mothers cloth, cover their head, and play Egungun, which would have never crossed the minds of my informants when they were children.

Some people I talked with had a critical stance towards the way Egunguns are demanding respect. When I went to see Egungun performance with Sylvain, a Vodun practitioner in his late twenties, he told me not to run even if everyone else would be running. He said Egunguns could do nothing to me if I refused their intimidation. He thought the spirits should not be demanding money from Western guests. Extorting money from white people might be seen by some as a sign of power over the former colonizers but by others as a sign of Egungun himself being corrupted and not acting with the dignity appropriate to ancestors.

In Senegal, there were attempts by the local elders to regulate and restrict the Kankurang masked performances to ritual contexts to increase the respectability which had been lost with the unregulated, common performances played for different purposes (de Jong 2007: 145 – 149). In Ouidah, the performances of Zangbeto, Egungun and other Vodun related spectacles are regulated by their respective convents and societies. And, as I have pointed

out, the locals insist that they are ultimately regulated by the spirits, since they cannot be performed without their consent.

Apart from relations of the mask with the audience, keeping secrets is a way of balancing unequal power relations between Africa and Europe or the West. Many of my informants were worried that unveiling secrets of Vodun causes serious harm to either the person revealing them, to the person that they are revealed to, or to the group, the nation or the black population in general. There is always a danger that someone might misuse this powerful information. These are comments by my informants, Damien and Laurent, who had more European friends and contacts than my informants in general:

"If you sell these kind of things, what is going to be left for us?"

"We can show you how we do ceremonies but you cannot know our secrets, because today things develop fast in your countries [i.e. Europe/the West], you have means and you have capacities […]. The secrets that are ours, that are from here [if we tell them to you], you will surpass us even more."

These comments are very similar to those that Landry (2013: 115 – 116) heard a few years earlier, and they illustrate the local fears that the Whites could appropriate Vodun secrets, develop them, and turn them against their rightful owners. Similarly to Landry's interpretation, my understanding is that the locals often see Vodun knowledge as the last weapon that could be used to defend Africans against the invasion by the Whites.

6.5. Transmission of secrets and cultural heritage

I have so far discussed the importance of the practice of keeping the secret. But it is not the only essential part in the practice of secrecy. The secret retains and gains its social value only because and through its transmission and partial revelation. If one has secret knowledge, but no one else is aware of its existence, it does not bestow one with the social prestige that is intended. If the secret dies with its owner, apart from its possible practical use value, it has not had the social impact inherent in the practice of secrecy. When secrecy is analyzed as a cultural and social practice, and related to cultural heritage, it necessarily implies transmission, communication, revelation, and performance.

In his study of the Poro secret society in West Africa, Beryl Bellman (1984) has addressed especially the questions relating to the practices relevant to communicating secrets. The

paradox of secrets is that they are actually constructed to be told. In the initiations and everyday life people learn ways to communicate the secret while at the same time being recognized by others as being trustworthy and keeping secrets. Bellman treats secrecy as a communicative event and an interactional phenomenon. In the Kpelle society in which the Poro function, there were many ways in which the secret can be shared. People can manipulate the context, since the context of interaction defines if the information is secret. They can reveal secrets indirectly by using so called ”deep talk” – metaphors, myths and parables. According to him, secrets are also communicated in ritual practices which at the same time teach the participants the practice of concealment.

In comparison, secrets in Vodun are mostly defined as ancestral knowledge that are passed on in initiations and other interaction with elders, teachers and masters. They are also bought and sold. Secret knowledge can also be acquired from divinities and ancestors for example through Fa. It is essential to have respect for the elders and divinities, or else they would not want to part with their knowledge since they would not estimate the younger person worthy and capable of keeping the secret.

Many Beninese today lament the lack of respect towards the elders and quote the famous proverb *”When an elder dies in Africa, it is like a library that burns”*- the original proverb usually refers to the rich oral traditions in Africa, but when my informants cited it they did not emphasize the orality of the traditions so much as the lack of will or occasion to transmit the secret knowledge to new generations.

Fredrik Barth (1990) has analyzed different modes of knowledge, and their transmission and relation to cultural reproduction. According to him, the Melanesian initiators are trapped in a double bind, because their social rank is determined by owning and obtaining secrets as the value of knowledge is increased by veiling it and sharing it only sparsely, but if they do not give the secrets away, they are not exchanging and hence not producing relations. They transmit their knowledge only in situations of initiation therefore their relations with the initiates are weak and temporary.

In Benin, the value of knowledge is enhanced by withholding and choosing carefully with whom to share it as is in Melanesia, but in contrast to it, its transmission necessitates a strong and enduring bond which is first and foremost based on respect. Secret knowledge and the capacity to understand it cannot be transmitted in a day or two, not even a year.

In this fragment from a discussion with Alexandre, the importance of the gradual transmission as well as the importance of the personal character of the receiver is portrayed:

"People [tourists] come, they want to know the reality, but the reality is profound, they cannot know it in one day. Even us who are in the family, even to my child […] I have power, I have secrets, I cannot show them to him in one day. I take the time to study his character."

Indeed in Benin, there are many levels of secrets. Some of them may be revealed in an initiation which can be a fairly simple and short ritual depending on the cult to be initiated in. But to become an adept in the cult, one needs to spend time in the convent learning and deepening one's knowledge of the divinity in question and its relation to the surrounding world. Sometimes the seclusion in the convent can be years. If one wants to become a priest or a priestess, one should first stay close to an older priest or priestess for a long time. The critique of the current changes of practice in Vodun was often related to people proclaiming themselves priests without the proper experience of learning from one, or trying to gain access to secrets easily without proper effort and without accepting the costs of money, time and respect.

What was seen as changing by my informants, was not people's beliefs on Vodun and its power: in their view Vodun still had its force and spirituality. But because of corruptive effect of money and modernity, people were seen as losing their ability to keep secrets, which actually does not result in these secrets becoming widely revealed but rather more rarely communicated in the right conditions. When revealed for money or for other benefits, secrets are only partially revealed and partially understood, and consequently they become useless. As my interlocutors often explained, it is not good when people buy cults to add to their divinities, because if it does not belong to their family heritage, the buyers could never understand the deepest secrets of the cult entirely. There would be a great danger of misuse. Descendants who are spiritually close to the ancestors in the cult have learned it gradually and can always go back to asking the ancestors more through Fa. When practitioners are not conscious enough to own and keep secrets and use the force of Vodun as it should be used, it is the Vodun spirits who leave the people. This was mentioned often when there was talk about recent changes related to Vodun, as Joseph claims:

"The spirituality has distanced itself from people because people do not have the capacity to localize it anymore, to keep secrets of the spiritual world. The spiritual world has a secret part that has to be kept."

Many people in Ouidah seem nostalgic about the respect towards the elders which still should be one of the corner stones of social life in Benin. In the early days people would know their place in society and would respect those who have a higher status because of initiation grade or age. They would not have attempted to question this social order. The lack of respect was grieved by informants of every age, but most emphatically by the young adults in their twenties and thirties. This is a comment by Laurent:

"It's the grandparents that respected the laws, but today we are a bit stubborn, we want to see what is at the bottom, because we don't know what is there. It's the fathers and the grandfathers who know."

Besides my main informants who were all common people, I had various discussions with Vodun priests and priestesses, also with some of the highest ones in Ouidah including Daagbo Hounon. I was told that a few decades back this would not have been possible, but that nowadays anyone can go and see a high priest and talk with him or her. Some thought this was a good and necessary way of Vodun practice adapting to modernity but others nostalgically lamented the lack of respect all these changes were leading to.

Some priests, although recognized as authentic, were accused of not having the force of Vodun to back them up anymore. They had not spent enough time close to their spiritual and religious teachers to learn all the secrets. I was often told of miracles that the high priests in the early days could do – separate the waters and walk on the sea for example – that their successors can no longer perform.

The difficulty of transmission of secrets not only affects the confidence of practitioners towards the priests but also the relations that common people have among themselves. Practices of secrecy create mutual dependence. This is not done only through concealment but rather through careful communication and sharing of secrets. If there is no sharing, there is no complicity. But if there is suspicion or proof that someone is divulging secrets for his own short term benefit, the complicity is broken. As Bellman (1984) points out, it is a matter of context of the interaction which defines whether the information can be shared. In Benin, the ritual context (the initiations as well as time spent in the convent) is

important as the right context, but the receiver's status, character and consciousness was often mentioned as the necessary qualities for the proper sharing of secret knowledge. This further emphasizes the practice of secrecy in Ouidah being a social phenomenon that pays attention not only to the context of the interaction but to the particular persons participating in it.

Behind the practices of producing cultural heritage are the fear of losing traditions and the desire to preserve and transmit them to the future generations, although in a new form – as cultural heritage rather than a ritual practice for example. According to Berliner (2012b), the fear of losing culture, identity and traditions is very pervasive in the modern world. Societies have always worried about the difficulties of transmission but it is particular to modern times that preservation, transmission and need to find one's roots are seen as values in themselves, and even as moral and political obligations. But there are many ways of thinking about loss, heritage and transmission. They mean different things to people in different cultural and political settings and should always be considered in the context of everyday lives of the people concerned. Be it for the global institutions like UNESCO, the nation-state or for the locals, there are different things at stake concerning the necessity of transmission as I have already shown (see chapter 6.1.).

In my informants' speech, the connotations for the words heritage, (patrimoine,) tradition and folklore were very different. Heritage and tradition were often used as synonyms. They were seen as the things passed through generations, usually within the family, and including not only the visible manifestations and ways of doing but also the knowledge and spirituality. As I have argued in chapter 5, folklore, on the other hand, was often talked of as something that has lost its true meaning. Folklore could comprise the songs, dances and costumes, but not the meaning behind the practices. Some were afraid that some Vodun related spectacles could become "mere folklore". On the other hand, people also thought that it was important to have pure cultural festivals to show for example the dances without the spirituality. It would keep people interested in learning them, and maybe this might lead to a more profound interest in traditions. Especially organizers but also other informants never referred to those cultural festivals as folklore, but as art which is inspired by Vodun traditions.

Vodun is an important source for artists, and this was seen by all of my informants as a positive thing. In this thesis I have focused on performances, and have had to rule out

Vodun as inspiration for other contemporary artists, although Vodun inspired art is very prominent in Ouidah, to mention only the statues on the Slave route and the various exhibitions in the Zinsou Foundation's museum of contemporary art. Vodun and its relation to art is more closely studied for example by Dana Rush (2001). According to my informants, Vodun as art or as culture can preserve secrets and make people interested in the spiritual core, and thus it gives hope for the transmission and continuity whereas Vodun as folklore is more likely seen as loss of spirituality and secrets, and thus as failed transmission of the core of heritage.

In this chapter I have been analyzing how the secret core of Vodun is present in the production and in the meanings of cultural heritage. Although the secrets are something that belong to only a few persons or lineages, and they create mutual dependence and complicity among those who share them, they include also the wider society through the practice of secrecy. In this, it is not the secret content that matters but rather the social practice of keeping and communicating secrets which is shared also by those who are excluded from the content. Although accepting that the secret information belonged to a restricted number of persons, Vodun was defined by most of my informants as cultural heritage belonging to all Beninese or even all Africans and the diaspora whether they have ever had any contact with or knowledge of it. Owning the secret core is not necessary to owning cultural heritage, and the importance of secrets is not diminished by the conception that Vodun belongs to a wider population as cultural heritage.

In the next chapter, I will analyze more closely how Vodun is related the idea of being essentially African, being proud of one's roots and African identity, and how this can be experienced as empowering.

7 Recognition and empowerment

When I started my fieldwork, I set out to study how Vodun was seen as cultural heritage by the local common people, and how tradition and modernity were intertwined or contrasted through practices of heritagization. But as so many anthropological studies, mine changed its course when I noticed that most of my informants kept bringing up the racial inequality, colonialism, oppression, exploitation, and the juxtaposition between the Africans and the Whites. The important question for them was not *how* Vodun is patrimonialized but rather *why* it matters, and what it can do.

As many social scientists (Brown M. 2005, de Jong & Rowlands 2007, 2008, Basu 2008, Smith 2006, Comaroff & Comaroff 2009) have discussed, cultural heritage is offering repressed and minority communities the possibility of recognition and reclaiming cultural and social rights as well as material resources and power to govern them. It can also be used to come to terms with loss and trauma in post-conflict situations (Antze & Lambek 1996). The uses of heritage by indigenous and other minority groups is a widely studied subject. But in the case of Benin and Vodun, the question is not about minority rights as such but rather about the empowerment of the whole African continent in the postcolonial world order which is seen by my informants as dictated by the Whites.

Laurajane Smith and Emma Waterton argued that heritage is not simply about identity, but it is a "process through which individuals and collectives negotiate their social position within particular societies"; it is creating and managing a sense of social place in the society and in the world. At the global level, states are using cultural heritage to negotiate their sense of place in relation to each other (Smith & Waterton 2009: 293). In Benin, the political, cultural and religious elites have already used the heritagization of the slave trade history and Vodun to establish and manage Benin's sense of place in the global world by way of situating it in the heart of the global flows of people and cultural influences. The official discourses of Vodun as cultural heritage emphasizes Benin's and Ouidah's position as the birth place of global Vodun based religions, and as the source of cultural influences which have contributed to the historical and cultural development of the Americas (Ciarcia 2008b, Ciarcia 2013, Sutherland 2002).

In this chapter I concentrate on individuals instead of the nation state, and analyze how my informants see and manage their sense of place by appropriating the language of

heritagization. Drawing from Smith and Waterton (2009), I argue that my informants use heritage to define their position in the society not only at the local and national level but also at the global level. In the interviews and discussions I had with my informants, Vodun as cultural heritage was often seen as a positive force strengthening their position in relation to the Western world. Again, following Smith and Waterton (2009), I argue that speaking of Vodun as one's own cultural heritage is a socially constructed symbolic practice that reclaims power and agency to Africans in the post-colonial setting. Although not everyone promotes Pan-African or Afrocentric ideology explicitly, these practices which reclaim power through valorizing heritage, and my informants' discourse about them, often echo Afrocentric paradigms by essentializing Africa, emphasizing it as the center of the World, and confronting it with Eurocentric historiography and perspective.

In what follows, I analyze how Vodun as cultural heritage is used in imagining and depicting the power relations between the Africans and the Whites, how heritagization can be experienced as empowering through this negotiation, and how it is being threatened by commodification. First, however, I need to address the differences in the official and popular discourses regarding the audiences to which the cultural heritage displays and the discourse is directed to: Who is the *Other* interested or supposedly interested in African cultural heritage besides the locals themselves?

7.1. The Diaspora and the Whites

Although I acknowledge that the official and popular memories and understandings of cultural heritage overlap and cannot be clearly separated from each other (see Rowlands & de Jong 2007), I found that the common people's discourse on Vodun as cultural heritage had a differing emphasis from that of official discourse of the spiritual, cultural and political dignitaries. The official discourse concentrated largely on the suffering and loss related to the slave trade as well as on the diaspora it created (Ciarcia 2013, Ciarcia 2008b, Sutherland 2002: 71, Tall 2009a: 148). The emphasis on the slave trade in the official discourse was well illustrated for example on the UNESCO funded Slave Route which is one of the most important touristic sites in Ouidah. The focus on the slave trade and the diaspora is also clear in the speeches of the politicians and high priests influential in the heritagization process. It is notable that the official and public discourse hardly ever evoked the trauma and loss caused by colonialism and the diabolization and persecution of Vodun in Benin.

My informants, on the contrary, focused much less on the diaspora or the slave trade. Those who did talk about the diaspora were either affiliated somehow with the high priests who use the official and public discourse, or evoked the diaspora only briefly when explaining how Ouidah was the birth place of all Vodun based religions. Some of my informants acknowledged that there were tourists from the diaspora who are coming to learn about their own African roots especially on the Vodun Day, but when they talked of Vodun being performed to non-locals, their imaginary audience was always white European and most often particularly the French tourist.

I am not claiming that the slave trade would not be present in the collective and individual memories in Ouidah, but rather that the slave trade and the diaspora is not expressed as the most essential feature of Vodun as cultural heritage as much as it is present in the official discourse. It is clear that although slavery is not widely discussed, it is present in the stories, family lineages and Vodun practices – as for example in the ceremonies for the spirits of the ancestors of the locally owned slaves (see for example Hamberger 2011: 355 – 356, Noret 2008, Brivio 2013). The march for repentance which is designed to acknowledge the African participation in the slave trade is held yearly, but it gathers only a small following and a few banderols are set up at public places. When it comes to how Vodun is understood as cultural heritage by the common people, I argue that the diaspora and the slave trade memories are left in the background.

When visitors from the African diaspora are coming on a spiritual journey of discovery, exchange of knowledge and practices, or mission to establish diasporic contacts they are usually hosted by big and well-known Vodun convents. If they are coming on a more touristic journey of discovery of roots and culture, they are taken care of by tourist guides. Thus, locals who are not working in tourism industry or affiliated with the biggest convents have little contact with the visitors from the diaspora, and their influence on local lives seems to be relatively minor. Instead, it is the presence of the Europeans that is seen and felt by the locals as impacting their daily lives.

Although people in Ouidah do not often talk directly about the colonial times, they repeatedly bring up the history of oppression and exploitation of Africa by the Whites, and its continuity to the present day. People in Benin commonly use the word the Whites (*les Blancs*), and it can refer very generally to the West, the Europe, the colonizers, or all the White people. Although the decades of colonization are not especially mentioned, the

sentiment that colonial control is not over is very common. One such example is the West African CFA franc which was originally created as the currency for the French West African colonies. During my fieldwork, it was perceived by many of my informants as well as talked of in the social media as a tool used by the French government to keep controlling West African economies. Also in many of my discussions any interference – whether by European governments (especially France) in the national politics of Benin or of any another state in Africa, or by that of any white person regarding local customs or norms – is easily interpreted as a neo-colonial attempt to further control and exploit Africa and Africans in order to enrich Europe and increase its power. Indeed, the relationship between Africa and Europe is often seen as a constant power struggle in which Europe and the Whites not only want power and riches for themselves but also wish to impoverish, deplete, and destroy Africa and Africans. Consequently, those who fought against the European oppressors and exploiters, are appreciated as heroes. For example, the Dahomean kings are highly regarded for keeping Dahomey independent until 1892 and fighting back against the French, and their statues align the Slave Route. Although paradoxically, it is the Dahomean kings who also controlled the slave trade and sold slaves to the European merchants from the 17th to the 19th centuries. An example from the 21st century international politics is Muammar Gaddafi who is sometimes regarded as an Afrocentric leader unfairly persecuted by the West in an attempt to control Africa.

Benin is a former colony of France, its official language is French, and people rarely speak any English. It follows that most foreigners who take any contact with the locals are francophone. Also foreign owned businesses like some hotels and restaurants are usually French owned. Therefore, to many of my informants the stereotypical foreign person in Benin is White and French. The French have a double role in the everyday life of Benin: on the one hand they are seen as the stereotypical white people or former colonists exploiting and controlling Africa, and on the other hand, as the white tourists interested in the African spirituality and its cultural dimensions. I claim that their current interest in Vodun and related performances strengthen my informants' sentiment that the Whites failed their attempts at domination of Africa and oppression of its spirituality, and it empowers them to claim that Vodun has effective, positive and beneficial force both spiritually and culturally.

7.2. Oppression and survival

I argue that celebrating Vodun as cultural heritage is valued by the locals partly because it can represent, illustrate, and symbolize the power of resistance against White domination. Appropriating the language of heritagization – and witnessing the continued practice of Vodun as a religion – empowered my informants to argue that colonization, missionary practices and the current politics of international organizations, national governments and individuals have failed or are failing to subject Africans under their power. They have failed to eradicate Vodun, and to abolish the respect for elders and ancestors, and thus have failed to transform Africans to conform to European models and expectations. Due to the long lasting and forceful denigration and oppression of Vodun as well as its still ongoing misrepresentation in popular culture, Vodun's current valorization both as cultural heritage and as spiritual tradition by the locals themselves can be interpreted as a practice of defying Eurocentric norms and definitions.

The critique that my informants expressed towards the Whites was related to their attempts to subordinate and exploit Africa. Many European or Western (however well-meant) interferences are interpreted as attempts to exploit or re-colonize. The critique is not directed towards the Western cultural manifestations as such. My informants were definitely not traditionalists who would like the way of life to go back to the pre-colonial or any other former period. They were excited to embrace modernity, and change their way of life if it did not mean surrendering control outside Africa. Foreign ways and goods were not seen as negative per se. For example, most of my informants occasionally wore western clothes, or supplemented their West African wax cloth clothes with western accessories, had or wanted smartphones, used them for filming, taking photos and circulating in the social media, appreciated school education and Western medical care, and were in general of the opinion that modernity has brought about improvement to the quality of life through economic development. But they also expressed that adopting Western ways would be very reproachable if it was to mean abandoning one's own ways and traditions. According to my informants, foreign ways should be used to complement one's own tradition, not to replace it. If one would always wear only western clothes, it would mean that one does not appreciate the Africanness or the local customs. One has to know what is acceptable to film or post in social media in relation to traditions. One has to be critical of the content of education and health care as they can be used as tools

for brainwashing and recolonization. One also has to acknowledge that the benefits of the economic development are meagre because of the continuous exploitation by the West.

The abandoning of Vodun and African traditions was often seen as result of the Europeans' missionary and colonial actions and power. On the contrary, the survival of Vodun was seen as showing the agency of Africans as well as the proof of the power of the spirits. Vodun was forcefully denigrated and discredited both in West Africa and in the New World, and the fact that the missionaries, the colonists or the postcolonial dictatorship could not entirely eradicate Vodun was itself a powerful proof for my informants that Vodun has real force and a purpose.

Many of my informants mentioned or talked about this, but I will present a quote from Aimé, one of my Rastafarian informants who elaborated this in length and very consciously. Born in Benin, he had lived his childhood in Europe, and emigrated back to Benin as a young adult. He consciously framed his respect for Vodun in relation to the oppression and liberation of the black people which is essential in Rastafarian ideology. Having rejected the Vodun violently when he was young, as he learned more he became more conscious of the relation Vodun has with the racialized power relations and the cultural identity of the Africans. In his fifties at the time of my fieldwork, Aimé respected the Vodun and its practitioners, and tried to inculcate this attitude to his children but personally preferred to keep his distance from the actual practices. According to him and to another Rastafarian informant in his fifties, Marcus, this is a common attitude among the Rastafarians: to appreciate Vodun because of the African roots but not take any part in its spiritual practices. Aimé explained:

"Despite the 500 years of the bondage of the black race, the descendants of the slaves kept all the time this aspect, it is the only really precious thing of Africa that they kept for themselves, that is the Vodun. […] despite the time, despite the chains, despite the whip, despite everything that was forced on them, they kept it […]. Why, we can ask. If it didn't have its importance, its impact, its necessity, why was it conserved? […] The thing that is not good should be erased since generations past but the thing is here, persists, and it is now globally recognized, one has just to see the crowds on the 10th of January. […] People from all nationalities come to Ouidah to see this thing that was so misunderstood before. If it was so bad, so negative, who would take the risk of taking the plane just to

participate in it or see it, so there is inevitably something in it that can be beneficial somehow."

Many others also referred to the past of Vodun as denigrated as diabolized tradition but less in relation to slavery but more in relation with the colonialism and the missionaries. It was often explained with pride that Vodun is so strong it could not be erased no matter how hard the Europeans tried. My informants were especially proud that now the Whites are coming from all over the world to see this tradition that was so misrecognized before. Vodun is thus identified with resistance to oppression and when it is publicly recognized as valuable cultural heritage, it shows that the resistance was powerful and effective. When Vodun is viewed as the symbol of resistance and survival of the black people, the struggle, resistance and Vodun are all legitimized and revalued in the same process. When Africans and Whites are seen as defining each other through opposition, Vodun appears as the proof of the power of Africans against the domination and the failure of the Whites to dominate.

Another aspect that proved the usefulness and power of Vodun to my informants is its spiritual uses against enemies. Many of my informants brought forward the idea that Vodun was effectively used as a weapon to fight against the European colonists. It was implied that without the power of Vodun the kingdom of Dahomey would have succumbed much earlier under the French rule. Damien expressed it as follows:

"What is tradition? The respect of what my ancestors followed and used in fighting back in past, for example they used the tradition to fight against the slavery: with the help of tradition, the King Gbehanzin used the tradition to fight back. […] We know that our ancestors used it in the past to fight back. So, why should we leave it all?"

What is interesting in the above quote is not only how Vodun is said to have been used as power to fight oppressors, but also who is fighting which oppressor. Gbehanzin was the last king of Dahomey, who fought in the 1890's against the French colonizers and not against the slave trade. The international slave trade had been officially prohibited already in the first half of the 19th century and also illegal transatlantic slave trade had ended in 1860s (Law 2001). In this comment, Damien is conceptually equating one predator for the other: the predators of the slave trade with the predators of the colonization, corresponding to Piot's observations in the neighboring country, Togo (1999: 37 – 38).

This is also interesting as according to historian Robin Law (2004: 276), people in Ouidah were generally relieved at the end of the oppressive Dahomean rule in the hands of Gbehanzin, and thought that the conditions were better under the French. At the time, the French conquest did not represent the loss of independence but rather the substitution of one colonial regime for another. Damien and many others informants of mine, on the contrary, see Gbehanzin as the hero, defending African independence against the European actions, disregarding local conflicts and oppressive regimes. Their interpretation of historical events highlights the importance that is currently placed on the power imbalance between Africa and Europe.

The survival of Vodun despite the oppression against it both in West Africa and in the New World, and its use as a powerful weapon against enemies, are empowering images which my informants use to argue that Vodun is not a backward tradition to be discarded. It should be valued and safeguarded as it can still be useful in the struggle against oppression because it is tied with the idea of essential Africanness.

7.3. Being African

In everyday situations, whether I was eating, walking, wearing West African style clothes, watching Vodun spectacles, having a Fa consultation done, having a serious conversation or just small talk, I was constantly confronted with the dichotomy of Africans versus the Whites/Europeans/Westerners. The words *Africa* or *African* were everywhere and used to describe how Benin or Ouidah was like or how things were done there. People often identified themselves as African and often markedly defined it in contrast to the Whites. When my informants spoke of themselves, things or customs as African, the word usually had a positive connotation, and when people wanted to compliment me, it often included a comment on how "African" I looked like or acted, or how I was not "like a European". Interestingly, when people criticized themselves or their own society or customs, they often did not refer it as African but as Beninese.

Afrocentric ideology, the Negritude movement and Pan-Africanism come to the fore in many of my informants' comments. Those of my informants that were most vocal and open about their Afrocentric views were the Rastafarians. But also other informants put forward many Afrocentric claims. History and science was often seen as flawed by Eurocentric lies only made up to subject Africans under neocolonialist schemes.

Many people brought forward the theory originally developed by Cheikh Anta Diop (1974), that the basis of European religions and cultures are in Egypt which itself is Black African culture. Many of my informants said that the proof of Vodun as an ancient, original African belief and cultural system is in the Bible. I was told the same stories from the Old Testament both by those for whom it was the proof that Vodun was ultimately bad and had its source in Satan and/or in the ignorance and stubbornness of the people, as well as by those for whom it just proved that Vodun had existed long before Christianity and was originally African, and indeed, had existed already in Ancient Egypt. Usually the story quoted was that of the people making the golden calf and worshipping it while Moses was on the mount getting the Ten Commandments from God. In this story, the golden calf represents the Vodun of the people in the Old Testament. One of the reasons why the bible was often used as a trustworthy source of history perceived to be able to contradict Western scientific research, is that it can be interpreted from the Afrocentric point of view, whereas historical research can be judged as inevitably Eurocentric and biased.

It is interesting how my informants' comments on Vodun relate to the Afrocentric ideology. On the one hand, Vodun as essentially African spirituality is used precisely to strengthen and confirm Afrocentric ideas, to bring the center of the attention back to what is the "essence of Africa", but on the other hand, it is used in the production of locality, creating new boundaries and taking into account and highlighting the geographical location, different historical experiences and social contexts that the Afrocentric discourse is supposed to avoid. As I have mentioned earlier, people associate Vodun strongly with Benin and especially with Ouidah. Similarly, other researchers (see for example Forte 2009: 437) have pointed out that Vodun is what makes Ouidah special and different from other West African tourist destinations which are promoting roots tourism or tourism related to the slave trade. Attitudes towards local traditional religions are quite different in the other countries of the region. For example Piot (2010) saw in Togo mainly the rise of Pentecostalism, rejection of Africanity, and retreat of tradition. And, in Ghana, the Christianity is appropriated and indigenized, and traditional religions are associated with the Devil (Meyer 1999). In both Togo and Ghana, the traditional religions are meaningful, and they are an integral part of Christianity as they represent the negative aspects that need to be discarded and left behind to be able to appropriate new modern Christian identity. Although this true also in Benin in some, mostly protestant, circles, it

is interesting that, by contrast, there is a strong tendency in Ouidah to represent Vodun as positive, future oriented tradition which is meaningful especially in the light of modern conscious African identity.

My informants saw Vodun as essential part of being Beninese or being African. The idea that all Africans have Vodun in their essence and that they cannot ignore it even if they would like to, came up almost every time anyone with a positive attitude towards Vodun spoke of it as cultural heritage. It was seen as something inseparable of people born in Benin or Africa. Here are only some examples of different wordings by my various informants.

"It is the [umbilical] cord that cannot be cut."

"You cannot be African and say that Vodun doesn't exist."

"Every African has inevitably a link with the Vodun. The conditions are different here in Africa from where you come from. Here we do the ceremonies for the child when he is born, we consult the oracle, because if you deny the Vodun, out of ignorance, you do something that you shouldn't, well it's too bad for you. For you it is not the same. The iron sharpens the iron. You don't have the Vodun blood. […] Many people ignore that they have a cord with the Vodun. This is way they fall into the net of the Christians who cheat."

"A million years can pass, and the cord is still there, if it is in your blood, its transmission is automatic. The proof is that everywhere they found themselves in, they made the Vodun there. […] If the Vodun has chosen you, it doesn't matter where you are, he will come."

"Vodun is the religion of all the Beninese people. They cannot ignore it. Everyone is born into Vodun, although they might choose another path later and become Christian or Muslim. But they can never fully abandon Vodun. Some distance themselves from it but they return as soon as there are some problems. And then we try to help them and solve their problems. Some pretend to distance themselves. They go to the church all day, but then at night they do the ceremonies for Vodun. Or they send someone to buy the ingredients and the priests do the ceremonies for them. Even the [Christian] priests and pastors come to us when they have problems, and ask for blessing."

The first two were said by many informants in different occasions. The third comment is by Aurelien, a common Vodun practitioner, and the fourth one by Aimé, a Rastafarian. The last quote is from an interview I had with a respected priestess in a high position.

When my informants stressed that Vodun is inseparable from them and other Beninese or other African people, they were actually explaining to me how things should be rather than how they are. They acknowledged that there are indeed many people who have entirely abandoned Vodun and the traditions. They argued that the abandonment was done because of ignorance. People ignored the essence of Vodun or the good in Vodun because it was so forcefully denigrated by the Church. Some of my informants blamed the Europeans for having brainwashed the Africans. Following tradition was seen more as a conscious choice whereas abandoning Vodun was seen as abandoning critical thinking and relinquishing one's self-determination to the Church or to Western ways.

Some thought that Vodun had already permanently lost its most important powers because of the practitioners abandoning their tradition. Others believed that the Vodun spirits never lose power, and that it will be possible to re-install the spirit of the family even after generations of abandonment. The gaps in the continuity of the tradition were seen as not good, as some knowledge would always be lost, but a seamless continuity was not seen as the prerequisite for the survival of Vodun. All these comments about Vodun as the umbilical cord that cannot be cut or as the tradition that one is not able to ignore point to the idea that the Africans are seen as having a certain disposition to understand and learn about the Vodun because it has been their forefathers' tradition, and because this disposition runs in the blood or in the genes.

Many informants told me about people who were returning to Vodun despite their parents having abandoned it long ago. The Vodun spirits can call for them although know nothing of it. To illustrate, I give an example of an informant of mine in his early twenties, born Catholic but who had now found his way back to Vodun after becoming disappointed with the Church and being "lost" for a few years. Pascal had not grown up with Vodun tradition because his parents had abandoned it and forbidden him and his siblings to go near any Vodun related events in the town. At the time of the interview Pascal thought that Vodun belongs to everyone, but when he was younger he did not feel that it would be part of his own culture. He simply thought that Vodun was something that was ultimately bad. But he said that he always knew there must be something powerful in

Vodun since it was so strictly forbidden and veiled in secrecy that the non-initiated could not understand. In the end, his mother who had been a devoted Catholic, came back to Vodun as well, and became a vodunsi, an adept. At the time of the interview Pascal was still quite in the beginning of his own spiritual journey to learn about Vodun, but he was sure it was the right path for him. He thought that the traditions should be respected and that his parents should have never abandoned the spirits. He asserted that whatever the Africans are doing – changing religions, going to the church or the mosque – they will always feel that Vodun is calling for them.

Pascal and many other informants associated returning to Vodun to a conscious and independent choice based on thorough reflection and introspection. A few of my informants said they had done their research on other religions. They had gone to the Church, read the bible, some even went to the mosque to be able to make a conscious choice in favor of Vodun.

In contrast, many of my informants presented abandoning Vodun tradition and replacing it with Christian one as blindly following Western ways, and falling stupidly into the traps constructed by the Whites with their own agenda. The simple act of converting into Christianity or going to church is not seen as a bad thing in itself, as Christian God is also seen as having powers which can be used to gain a better life or to heal from illnesses, and as Christian powers and their uses are not seen as incompatible with practicing Vodun. But abandoning Vodun in favor of the religion of the Whites would mean that one letting oneself to be duped and abused. A young Vodun practitioner, Louis, said that one should always trust and follow only one's own ancestors, as they will help their own descendants. He explained that as Jesus was White, Christianity will help the Whites and destroy the Blacks. I argue that emphasizing reflection, consciousness and independent choice in presenting stories of people returning to a formerly persecuted religion is one way of empowering oneself and reclaiming agency as African. Rastafarian Marcus put is like this:

"We have a lot of problems here because we become more and more stupid because we forget exactly these values, we renounce these values. There are many young people who – it is a trap actually – we don't take the time to reflect, to think, we only follow according to the tendencies, and that makes us fall in these traps. We run all the time, we have no

time for reflection. […] In general, if you are weak in spirit, you give up and you change yourself to fit their lifestyle which is not suitable for you from the start."

In contradiction, sometimes returning to Vodun was presented in a quite opposite way. Others (or indeed the same informants sometimes) expressed, that when Vodun is calling, one cannot ignore it. Returning to do services, to construct a destroyed family altar, or to hold a feast in honor of the Vodun, was not seen as a choice but as a necessity and a compulsion. If not obeyed bad things could happen. In this regard, one has no choice if the Vodun spirit has already chosen a follower. One has to obey, but it is still not seen as bad as willingly being duped by relinquishing one's self-determination to a foreign religion designed to benefit the Europeans.

I have shown how Vodun is seen by my informants as being in the essence of all Beninese or African people, and how choosing Vodun consciously and independently is confirming their agency both in the past struggle and in current modernity. Making the choice to safeguard Vodun values is seen as important because it orients the people towards the correct path and a future which is controlled by themselves instead of the Whites.

7.4. Orienting towards the future

Although cultural heritage is drawing form the past, it is always produced in the present and is directed towards the future (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Tornatore 2010). The following comment by Damien points not only to the consciousness of the choice that I have discussed above but also to how Vodun is seen as the path that shows the way to the future:

"You need to try to be reborn, knowing yourself, who are you, who am I, what am I doing, what am I going to do. You have to know that, you have to have a vision. It is very very important, and the tradition is here, it puts you on that path."

Vodun as tradition is here seen as a tool that can make people conscious, and help them make good choices in life. This is also evident for example in the theatre play I have mentioned earlier, which defined the Fa divination method as an ancestral compass which is showing the way. Correspondingly, it is thought that losing Vodun and abandoning one's own traditions will result in one getting lost, making bad decisions, and falling into

the traps of those who will take advantage of others as expressed in these examples by Aurelien, Samuel and Marcus respectively:

"There are certain things that we can never abandon, like the ceremony of coming out for a child when he is born, or the Egun. If we abandon them, the next generation will be totally lost."

"You have to know necessarily the culture of your country, if not, it is like you are lost. One always has to know one's origins."

"If we don't come back to these values, we are going nowhere, and the West knows it very well. And they help us going in circles, to pick a direction where we get lost."

This last comment by Marcus refers to two interesting points. This extract, and the discussion that preceded it, suggested that Vodun is based on values that are very different from those of the West which has lost its spirituality and integrity. To Marcus, those values are what need to be cherished in order to prevent Africa from losing power to Europe. This discussion also referred to the destruction of cultural heritage as a means of domination and repression. This comment points to the idea that, when Vodun is misrecognized and misrepresented by the Whites as backward or as devilish, it is done on purpose to control the Africans.

It is interesting to compare how Vodun as cultural heritage in Ouidah is part of current modernity and how it orients people towards the future with Charles Piot's research in Togo. In his book *Remotely global* (1999), he challenged the ostensible paradoxes between modernity and tradition, global and local, and core and periphery by analyzing how an apparently traditional village society in Togo, geographically far from modern urban centers, was constantly shaped by and within modernity, as well as modernity also in the West was shaped by African cultural influences. But after a decade of changes in Togo, Piot (2010: 1 – 20) found the postcolonial theory not sufficing anymore to theorize the current situation. The postcolonial theory was focusing on the African agency, hybrid culture, appropriation and indigenizing things and ideas coming from outside, and reworking, defying and resisting Eurocentric culture and colonial design in building alternative modernities. But the new situation in Togo was characterized by the retreat of the state, new forms of power, Pentecostalism, rejection of Africanity, embracing of Euro-modernity, discarding of tradition and refusal of hybrid culture. According to Piot, some

of these characteristics are fundamental features in common to the whole region of West Africa, including the retreat of tradition. Despite being the neighboring country to Togo, and sharing many cultural and religious traits, in Benin, or especially in Ouidah, the approach to tradition and longing for a certain kind of modernity seems to differ from that of Togo. The rise of Pentecostalism, opposing tradition and hybrid culture, the desire of Euro-modern culture and escape from Africa is also visible in some parts of the population but even more apparent is the celebration of tradition and African identity, appropriation and reworking of the Western culture, and the sentiment that valuing tradition and African identity could be the only or the most fruitful route to modernity without subjugation by the West. Following Vodun and its traditional values allows my informants to feel culturally rich and powerful, and criticize the West which has taken the path of losing spirituality.

7.5. Rich in culture

Many of my informants spoke of Vodun and related traditions as something they possess and something that the Whites do not have. In many discussions, my informants presented an idea that the Europeans should learn from the Africans, because they have something that the Europeans lack. The Whites have lost their respect for the ancestors and the traditions, and more importantly they have lost spirituality. Europeans and other white tourists certainly come to Benin for various reasons. Some of my informants said tourists come just to see some Vodun performances and then they leave without gaining deeper knowledge about the spirituality. The tourist guides lamented that they tried to promote their services to provide Vodun tours, lectures and explanations around the Vodun Day but the tourists were not interested. But some of my informants also thought that foreigners come to Benin because they are searching for the spirituality which is lacking in their own countries. The fact that tourists were coming to Benin to watch Vodun performances was itself proof that Vodun must have spiritual value. It was thought that Europe was weakening because of the abandonment of spirituality and hence the Europeans must come to the source of the humanity's original religion and spirituality, Vodun. See for example Forte (2009, 2010) for studies of spiritual tourism and initiations to Vodun cults by white people.

Some of my informants thought Europeans come to Benin because they already feel the lack and the need for something that they do not have, and the Africans could provide

them with it. Others thought that the foreigners do not yet understand that they are missing something and that the Vodun spectacles are there precisely to show to the Whites what the Africans have and what the Europeans do not have. My informants mentioned not only the traditions, dances, artistic skills, dresses, drumming and spirits but also the powers and secrets which I have already discussed in chapter 6.

Vodun is seen as power, and many of its practices are directed towards its accumulation and use. The force can be used by the people who possess it. As I have presented in chapter 6, there is a hierarchy in the Vodun society between those who possess knowledge and secrets, and those who do not have access to them. There are different levels on this hierarchical ladder, as those who are have spent time in convents (the vodunsis) possess more knowledge than those who are only initiated to the cult, who in turn possess more knowledge than those who are not initiated at all. I argue that assigning the Whites the role of the ignorant audience – who can receive but cannot command the performance nor understand or have access to its secrets – is actually adding another bottom layer to this hierarchical ladder. Contrasting the Whites who are seen as completely ignorant, lacking the information but sometimes willing or eager to gain it, to the Africans who essentially possess a relation to the Vodun even though they would have decided to ignore it, permits my informants to claim that all Africans belong to the category who possesses something more than the Whites. The categories of the haves and have-nots gain a new meaning from the commonly felt Africans as have-nots (money) to Africans as the haves (knowledge, power, and spirituality). This is in line with de Jong (2007: 116) according to whom, secrets establish power relations also by creating boundaries especially vis-a-vis the former colonizers. This is done by a kind of symbolic reversal of the colonial domination when the colonial rulers are transformed into and treated as non-initiates and are refused the entry into sacred places or are denied access to secret knowledge.

When my informants stressed that they own something when they have Vodun, in sum, they meant many things: they have spirituality, power, secrets, and also they possess culture. As Aimé put it:

"[What should be preserved of Vodun is] …this side also that permits Africa to have a cultural identity, like the Japanese have theirs and the Chinese have theirs, every country has its own culture. It helps us to place ourselves somewhere, to know that we belong to a culture, that we have something which is ours and that others don't have."

As I have already discussed in chapter 5, the cultural aspects related to Vodun are appreciated also because they are the part of the heritage that is possible to export and perform to audiences. When culture is commodified, it does not mean only material physical objects but it includes also the marketing of an aura (Ebron 2002: 168). The imagined authenticity of the place and its aura make it the site of desire for foreign tourists. However, it is not only tourists that are affected by that aura. Many of my informants expressed hopes that as the local young people see how modern Europeans flock to Ouidah to see the Vodun performances, they will themselves start seeing their own traditions as desirable. The phenomenon was noted also by Edward Bruner (1996) on Ghana. According to him, one of the consequences of tourists' interest was the increase of Ghanaians' interest in certain aspect of their own culture. But international tourists are not the only way to enhance the image of Vodun in the eyes of the young people. One of the purposes of the Wétché dance festival was precisely shaped by the idea that if young people see how many skilled dancers and dancing troupes come to Ouidah also from bigger cities only to show them what they are capable of, the young people would see also their own local culture as a site of desire and something that they should want to show off and compete to become better at. As young skilled semi-professional dance troupes bring Vodun to the center stage in a public square, they are actively changing the image of Vodun from associating it with traditional backward village of the grandparents to the traditional but modern, active, progressive and successful city life.

A performance can be viewed as a kind of public speech which creates its own audience by addressing it with a message which presupposes the existence of an audience (Warner 2002). Receiving the message can create a feeling of belonging to a wider imagined community which, in this case, can be the Vodun community, all the Beninese, all the Africans, and it follows all the Black people of the world. In any case, the locals find that Vodun Day's message as well as messages of other Vodun performances are addressed to them and appeal to them in various ways and to various extent although many do not even participate on the festival's events. For most of my informants, one of most important messages that Vodun Day creates is not delivered in the actual celebrations nor affected by the ritual or folkloric proceedings of the festival but rather it is the fact Vodun *has* a Day. By proclaiming a national holiday in its honor, Vodun is lifted to the same respectable status as the other religions. The holidays in the Christian calendar such as Christmas and in the Muslim year such as Tabaski (Eid al-Adha), are national holidays

in Benin for everyone regardless of their religion, and so now is the Vodun Day, nowadays renamed as the Day of the Indigenous Religions. Thus, the audience receiving the message of Vodun as a respected national tradition and one of the official religions is much wider than comprising just of those who actually physically attend the festivities.

Performances and audiences are also constantly reshaping one another. The audience of locals, tourists or dignitaries can enhance the value of the performance, and make it desirable also for other possible audiences. On the other hand, a certain kind of audience can make the performance lose its aura in the eyes of another as in the case where secret traditions become mere folklore shows for tourists. The shows can lose their prestige in the eyes of the locals, and become meaningful only as means for economic profit.

Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) have pointed out that the marketing of one's own cultural identity and ethnicity is not always leading to the diminishing of their value as the classical economics would indicate. The availability of cultural products to mass consumption can lead to alienation and parody, but it can also reaffirm the status of the people as owners of their culture and give recognition to formerly dispossessed people. Comaroff and Comaroff (2009: 26) suggested that marketing identity can "(re)fashion identity, (re)animate cultural subjectivity, (re)charge collective self-awareness, forge new patterns of sociality". They provided an example from South Africa in which a Tswana person expressed that to be a human, one must "have culture". To him "marketing what is "authentically Tswana" is also a mode of reflection, of self-construction, of *producing* and *feeling* of Tswana-ness" (cursive in the original text). He felt that searching for and finding something that is genuinely theirs is important especially to people dispossessed of their past (ibid. 2009: 9). Marketing one's own culture is reclaiming one's own ethnicity, and also reclaiming control and agency not only over resources of cultural heritage but also over definitions of selfhood, ethnicity and, for my Ouidanese informants, reclaiming definitions of Africanness. My informants thought that Vodun is already a part of their identity and collective self-awareness, but lifting it up also as a cultural product could further reanimate the youths' interest in their local culture, refashion their identity as African, and recharge their collective self-awareness and consciousness of the struggle against past and present inequality.

Cultural performances and both popular and official discourses on cultural heritage are contributing to the production of the aura of desirability of the locality both in the eyes of

tourists as well as the new generations of locals, and these mutually affect each other. Ouidah is constructed as a site of the birthplace and the center of spirituality imagined as authentically African both by and for the locals and the tourists. The performances continuously shape and are shaped by the imaginaries and the discourses on what it means to be local or to be African.

Most of the white tourists conform to the practice of Vodun secrecy because their contacts with the performances and locals stay at a very superficial level especially if they are staying only a very short time around the Vodun Day. But transgressions happen such as asking inappropriate questions, voicing one's disbelief of the spirits, and buying things and knowledge that should not be bought so easily. I will now turn to address the fear that my informants expressed concerning the threats that commodification and corruption present to Vodun as a spiritual practice and cultural heritage.

7.6. The threat of commodification

I have argued that Vodun as cultural heritage is being used to show, among other things, that the Europeans' power is limited. The Europeans are powerful because they have money but they should not be able to buy everything. If people would do as they should in my informants' opinion, Vodun secrets could not be bought with only money but they would require also respect and deeper spiritual understanding. This does not mean that money is not involved. On the contrary, money is inseparable from Vodun practices. The priests need to be paid for their services, the convents, vodunsis and musicians need to be compensated for their efforts, sacrificial animals need to be bought for the ceremonies, and food and beverages have to be offered for the community. Many ceremonies are very expensive, and families sometimes have to wait and save for a long time before they are able organize a ritual or a ceremony deemed necessary for their wellbeing. Vodun economies could very well be the subject of an entire thesis, but as it was not the main topic of my conversations or interviews, I will consider it here only briefly insofar as it is relevant in the light of my informants' fears of Vodun becoming cheap folklore.

In his PHD thesis, Timothy Landry (2013), an American anthropologist, who trained himself as a bokonon (the diviner who uses Fa or Ifa divination system), studied the Vodun economies, transnational flows of secret knowledge in Vodun and the politics of spiritual tourism. Although I did not focus on tourists per se, my observations from the field conform to his in that the tourists' lack of knowledge and their misunderstanding of

the spiritual economy in Benin contributes in many ways to the construction of power relations and the flow of spiritual secrets as well as the confrontations related to them. Ceremonies are expensive for the locals and, in many situations people pay according to their means. The priest might reduce the costs for the members of the family or those in need, and those who are supposed to be wealthier might have to pay more, sometimes even beyond their means. People do not wish to be judged as stingy in the fear of spiritual retribution or sorcery if they do not meet the needs of the relatives in need. Money is also an important symbol of spiritual capacities and success and a sign of the favor of the spirits, hence people want to appear wealthy. Many of the practices are directed towards the accumulation of wealth and power in which case the sum paid is expected to yield its worth manifold in the future.

The foreign tourists are usually paying more for their ceremonies than the locals, because they are assumed to have the means. They are often left feeling exploited or even duped as it is generally thought that they have come with the preconception that Africa is cheap, and that real spirituality is immaterial and priceless. They might feel that material contributions to spirituality would make it less authentic. But what is more relevant to my focus on locals, is that these understandings of spiritual economies leave many of the locals feeling like the foreigners want to exploit them by stealing their spiritual and cultural secrets or buying them for pennies. Paying correctly for the ceremonies and practices is also a form of respect, and showing acknowledgement of the value inherent in them. "The respect is expensive!" Joseph repeated many times as he was explaining to me how one should acquire spiritual knowledge from those who possess and master it. By "expensive" he meant that respect requires a lot of effort, and showed that this effort is both material and spiritual, it requires time, humbleness, obeisance as well as money.

However, according to Landry (2013), basically everything relating to Vodun is possible to buy with money. This is in contrast to the ideal my informants constantly spoke about. According to them, one should not be able to buy one's way into the cults and ceremonies belonging to certain families or social groups, or buy secrets that become unusable or dangerous in the wrong hands. However, there was constantly the fear that this is being done. Not only that the tourists and foreigners would be gaining access to things that should be restricted only to certain people, but also that they were paying money for the wrong things, for example buying authentic and used religious objects for their private

collections in which they would not be used for spiritual purposes. Buying secrets which do not belong to one and (mis)using them in the way also the locals would – such as for protection or enhancing ones' own position in the society – is one thing, but another is to buy secrets and things and change their register altogether.

My informants expressed fears that when secrets of Vodun end up in the wrong hands, they might be used to increase one's power in relation to others or to harm others, and that the secret would lose its power either entirely or the person who sold it would lose it. There is also the risk that the person who sold the knowledge wrongly would lose the respect of the society, blessings of the spirits, and consequently face misfortune and even death. When my informants mentioned other Africans buying secrets that did not belong to them, they did not usually specify who would be the victim of the buyer's increased power. But when they talked about the Whites buying the secrets, it was usually seen in the light of the power relations between the Whites and the Africans. The victims would not be other Whites in the buyer's own community; rather, it was a common opinion that if the Whites bought or got access to the power of the Africans, they would become even more powerful and would be able to exploit the Africans to a greater extent as I have already argued in chapter 6. In this sense, for many of my informants, although Vodun represents hope for self-determination in the postcolonial era, it also incorporates fears of losing that self-determination. If Europeans managed to take Vodun away from the Africans, either by destroying it or by appropriating its powers, the power relations would become even more unequal.

I have discussed so far how my informants fear that commodification might lead to people buying and selling secrets to those who should not have access to them. Another, perhaps more generally studied aspect of commodification of culture, is its alienation and it losing value and meaning through mass consumption as discussed in chapters 5 and 6. In chapter 5, I have presented fears that my informants have about Vodun being presented as mere folklore if the performers and audiences forget that the real heritage is the invisible spirituality behind the colorful performances. In chapter 6, I have contrasted Vodun performances which are still regulated by their respective convents to de Jong's studies about Kumpo and Kankurang which have become reified cultural heritage that are performed to tourists by people to whose ethnic traditions these practices do not belong. According to my research, although my informants sometimes voice fears about Vodun

being commodified and losing value because of it, more often they see marketing their traditions as reaffirming their status as proprietors of the culture.

As Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) assert, there is immense variation of how marketing and commodifying identity and culture is being done across the world. It is an ambiguous process that can include and result in recognition and empowerment as well as alienation, disempowerment and conflict, and it is important to pay attention to the question of who controls the conditions of representation and alienation of culture. According to them, the people commodifying their own culture are not "dupes of the market" but rather act with a certain measure of critical and tactical consciousness. Critical consciousness is precisely what my informants are calling for when they are defining cultural and spiritual heritage of Vodun as essentially African. When they associate Vodun with African identity contrasted with the Whites, and value the formerly denigrated tradition which is now associated with power, they are actively reaffirming and reconstructing critical consciousness of historical and current injustice and inequality. Vodun as cultural heritage is used in defying Eurocentric perspectives and building modern Afrocentric identity.

8 Conclusion

In this thesis I have analyzed the meanings of heritagization of Vodun to the local people in Ouidah. I have discussed a number of different paradoxes and contradictions that defining a living religion as cultural heritage presents. Vodun absorbs and incorporates paradoxes of tradition and modernity, locality and globality, spirituality and culture, secrecy, universality, power and agency, which makes it a particularly fruitful object of study.

First, I have analyzed how the process of patrimonialization is simultaneously devaluing and banalizing the same tradition it is meant to revalue. Changing from the register of spiritual religion to cultural heritage raises the fears that people will increasingly regard Vodun spectacles as folklore to come and witness as audience, and lose respect towards the spirits, the ancestors, and the elders who possess the spiritual knowledge. To most of my informants, however, the essence of Vodun as cultural heritage is not only the spectacles and the dances, but the spirituality behind them. At the same time as it is promoted and celebrated as cultural heritage, Vodun is still widely practiced and spirits are worshiped in Ouidah, and also many people who do not practice it nevertheless observe and respect its spirits, rules, customs and practitioners.

The spiritual content is perceived to form the core of cultural heritage of Vodun instead of the folkloric visible aspects and customs that always accompany and complement the spiritual. People understand the spiritual and cultural as inseparable aspects of the same phenomena, but at the same time they argue that they should be understood as separate. My informants fear that confusing them might lead to dismissing the spirituality and forgetting that there is more to Vodun than its visible manifestations. On the other hand, many people welcome cultural festivals which bring Vodun out in the open because they think it might lead to increasing interest among the local youth also in its spiritual core. While being important rituals or celebrations of the spirituality, many Vodun performances are also simultaneously entertainment for the spectators – whether international or local. Different attitudes and motivations for participating in the events are understood and accepted.

The unofficial cultural heritage status given to Vodun is providing it with new meanings and significance. The words *cultural heritage* and *patrimony* generally carry positive

connotations in Benin and the notions are internationally valued especially through the Authorized Heritage Discourse, consequently, Vodun is put on the same level with other internationally appreciated cultural heritage. Recognition of cultural heritage and tradition is important especially to formerly oppressed, dispossessed and colonized peoples as also other previous research shows. The Vodun Day on the 10th of January, now officially renamed The Day of the Indigenous Religions, is appreciated as giving recognition to Vodun both as cultural heritage and as a religion, as well as honoring the practitioners as proprietors of the tradition. It is a day of celebration of the cultural spectacles, dances, drumming, clothes and customs, but it is also a celebration in the honor of the spirits. Because it is a national bank holiday for everyone such as the most important holy days in the Christian and Muslim calendars, it is a yearly reminder that now Vodun has also an official status as a religion comparable to the imported world religions.

I argue that as a living religion, Vodun cannot be defined as a practice that would have lost its original purpose and given a new life as cultural heritage as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1995: 369 – 370) characterized the production of heritage. Although it is presented in folkloric spectacles, it cannot be argued to be objectified and commodified to the same extent as some of the other West African traditions that I have contrasted it with in this thesis. It is being defined and valued both as spirituality and as cultural heritage and, while its meaning is changing, it does not necessarily mean losing its original purpose. To many of my informants, holding on to traditional African values that Vodun represent is as important as receiving recognition through its heritagization.

Secondly, I have analyzed the paradoxes of secrecy and the position that secrecy, concealment and esoteric knowledge have in the phenomenon of cultural heritage which is defined almost universal and openly performed to audiences. Vodun is a religion based on different types of knowledge and power which are not available to everyone equally. One has to have right to the specific knowledge through birth, grade of initiation, age, gender, apprenticeship, respect, or spiritual disposition. But despite this, the practice of secrecy includes also those members of the community who are not in the possession of the secret knowledge itself. Those who are not in the position of knowing, often do not attempt to know, do not question, or indeed they pretend not to know.

One of the paradoxes of secrecy is that secrets are actually constructed to be told and performed. Without at least partial revelation, performance, and transmission the secrets have no social value. I have shown with examples of Egungun and Zangbeto masquerades that, besides entertainment and celebration, Vodun performances and spectacles are also demonstrations of secrecy and power. They attempt to display the force of Vodun, and show the audience that there is something more profound behind the masks than what they can see. Although concealment is emphasized, the practice of secrecy is ultimately created through sharing. With the perceived changes through modernity, the diminishing respect towards the elders, and the corruptive effects of money and profit, the transmission of secrets in the correct context has become more difficult. With the feared disappearance of secrets, also the spiritual core of Vodun is felt to be in danger of distancing itself from the people. It is feared that without its secrets, Vodun would become meaningless folklore. I have contrasted the Vodun performances with other West African masquerades which have indeed become reified cultural heritage performed to audiences by groups which are not held to be the rightful owners of the tradition. In Benin, however, Vodun related performances are still being regulated and performed by their respective denominations and societies. Also cultural festivals that have no spiritual aspect are organized respecting restrictions set by the spirits or their cults. There are customs that can be performed to audiences also by non-initiated people, customs that are allowed be modified and used as inspiration for different arts, and customs that should be kept in the possession and control of their respective cults and their members.

Although access to esoteric knowledge in Vodun is restricted, it is possible for a much wider population to claim that Vodun is indeed part of their heritage because it is strongly associated with Africanness and perceived to be in the blood and in the essence of all Africans. This brings me to my third cluster of conclusions. In this paper, I have discussed how Vodun is related to Africanness, empowerment, and recognition. I have argued how giving recognition and valuing a practice which has been extremely denigrated, misrepresented and oppressed in the history as well as still is in Western popular culture, is allowing my informants to reclaim agency and defy Eurocentric norms and definitions. The fact that, despite the long lasting oppression, Vodun has not disappeared, nor lost its position as a spiritual practice, and that it is gaining new value and meaning as modern cultural heritage, is used as a proof to argue that Western actions against it have failed. Vodun is perceived to be too powerful and useful to be eradicated. My informants see

Vodun as inseparable from Africans, and essentially defining them in relation to the Whites. It follows that when Vodun is seen having power and defying domination, through its special bond with Africanity, all Africans can be seen as having power in relation to the West. On the other hand, losing control of the secrets of Vodun and its definitions because of commodification or the young generation's lack of interest or respect, is associated with the fear of continued or indeed increasing European or Western domination and loss of autonomy. Commodification of heritage can lead to empowerment and increasing agency but also to devaluation, disempowerment, and alienation.

Although it might be true, as Tall (2009a: 148) and Sutherland (2002: 71) argue, that building a national identity in Benin failed largely because the process of defining Vodun cults as cultural heritage was concentrating too much on the ideas of the diaspora, and creating a transatlantic Black identity failed to take into account the cultural and ethnic diversity of Benin, I argue that the process of heritagization of Vodun was actually building empowered African identity on the basis of giving official, national and international recognition to a formerly misrecognized spiritual and cultural practice. Despite its diasporic content being somewhat overlooked, the heritage discourse is being appropriated, used and given new emphasis by the common people. By giving recognition to a practice, also the practitioners, as owners of the culture, are recognized and valued. At the same time, recognition of tradition and its modern uses urges the locals to further challenge and defy Eurocentric definitions of Vodun, and consequently, of Africa as backward and inferior. Appropriating, indigenizing and reworking the discourse of heritage can be also seen as fitting with the logics of Vodun which are characterized by appropriating and accumulating powers and foreign influences.

Defining cultural heritage is always political, and it is done in the context of the contemporary agenda. The continuity with a particular past is chosen and set apart. In the case of Vodun, its history as a spiritual tradition formerly rejected, diabolized and persecuted by the Whites is highlighted, and thus its revalorization is hoped to further raise consciousness of the past, present and future inequality and exploitation of Africa by the West. Although popular and official discourses on heritage certainly overlap and affect each other, it is interesting that the past chosen to be emphasized by my informants differs from that of the official discourse largely concentrating on the slave trade history and the diaspora. I have has thus addressed the gap in previous research which has been

concentrating mainly on the official discourse of cultural heritage by the political, religious and cultural elites and dignitaries. My thesis is contributing to the body of anthropological knowledge of cultural heritage practices and meaning making by exploring how Vodun as cultural heritage is interpreted particularly by the common people in locally meaningful ways.

An anthropological study is always a product of an encounter between the anthropologist and the informants in a specific context of space and time. Mine was as much influenced by the people I met as by my own characteristics as a white European student. In these encounters, in Ouidah, in 2015-2016, racial issues, consciousness of the history of exploitation, African identity and empowerment, recognition and the importance of spirituality rose as the most important topics of conversation.

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