

Introduction

'Mobutu knew that the light was in the country. He knew that some people had gone to Japan and brought it back from there', Joseph told me. The sun had set on the terraced slope of Kinshasa's Mongafula neighbourhood, where we had been talking for a good two hours. In his early fifties, Joseph is a husband, a father of four children, and a *missionnaire* (missionary) for a local branch of a Japanese 'new religion' (Japanese: *shinshûkyô*) that reached Congo via Brazil and Angola. The 'light' he mentioned refers to the invisible healing energy of *Johrei*, which initiated members of this movement channel towards other people as a divine force to purify, heal and empower each other. Joseph remembers how in the heyday of Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko's rule in the 1980s, when he was still an ordinary follower of an older local branch of this Japanese movement, many prestigious Zairois from the political and economic elite were seeking to be initiated into the teachings and practices of this non-Christian movement. Healing powers from Japan could be tapped for protection and distinction by actively embodying a feeling of being special, through silence, motionless sitting and focused looking at each other, generating an atmosphere of being powerfully different, and differently powerful, from the increasingly abounding crowds of the loud, crowded and ever-moving city of Kinshasa.

Many of those who were close to Mobutu were followers of non-Christian spiritual movements, and when on 16 February 1992, Mobutu's soldiers brutally dispersed the protest walk known as *La Marche Chrétienne* amid bloodshed, the regime jeopardised what little remained of its popular credit. In the wake of repeated looting in Kinshasa,¹ the Mobutist state elite gradually dissipated, and the elitist spiritual movements lost many of their followers, including Joseph.

Today, however, things are different. A new nation, the Democratic Republic of Congo is reconstituting itself with new elites, a new president, a far larger and much younger capital city and a thoroughly transformed urban religious field. Many 'spiritualists' are today from a younger generation who, during their lifetime, knew neither Mobutu nor Zaire. Socio-economic backgrounds of 'spiritualists' also differ. If

in Zairian times the Catholic Church, together with the Protestant and Kimbanguist mainline churches, were the unquestioned pillars of official religiosity, today the religious landscape of the city is marked by the highly public and sensationally domineering Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCCs), locally referred to as *Eglises de Réveil* (Churches of Awakening). Many of them have transnational ties to Brazil, South Korea, Nigeria and the United States, and are no longer dependent on geographical ties inherited from colonial times.

In this field-based study, I examine the ways in which Congolese followers of two spiritual movements of Japanese origin and inspiration (re-)produce and 'make sense of' seemingly alien religious practices in the urban environment of Kinshasa. The ethnography revolves around the movement *Eglise Messianique Mondiale* (henceforth EMM), French for *Sekai Kyûseikyô* (henceforth SKK: Church of World Messianity) which was founded by Mokichi Okada (Meishu Sama: Lord of Light) in Japan in 1935, and the *Temple Messianique Art de Johrei* (henceforth TMAJ), a local schismatic offshoot of the former from 2012. All pioneers and followers are Congolese, which sets this study apart from studies of religion in a diasporic context. The book explores the role of a non-conformist religious minority who are critical of Pentecostal Christianity and consider themselves to be the vanguard of their time. EMM and TMAJ's key religious practices are historicised and discussed in the context of West Central Africa's tradition of religious renewal (Janzen 1977), while focusing in particular on contemporary diversification within the religious landscape of Kinshasa. By offering an account of the tensions that these non-Christian practices generate in the lives of their followers, mainly by manipulating spiritual matters, this study aims to contribute to scholarly insights into the religious production of difference, conflict and authority, on the micro-social level of contemporary urban Africa.

I have opted for an aesthetic and thing-based approach that goes beyond discourse and takes the materiality of practice seriously. In order to assess a plurality of contrasting and putatively conflicting religious practices, this appears to be a promising method. The 'aesthetic' approach is grounded in Aristotle's understanding of *aesthesis* as the realm of 'our total sensorial experience of the world and ... our sensuous knowledge of it' (Meyer and Verrips 2008: 21). 'Sense making' is thus understood as the production of both sensory experience and of meaning, without the two being separate domains. The aim has been to overcome the analytical distinction between a phenomenological focus on experience on the one hand, and a mentalistic concentration on meaning on the other hand. 'Sense' can thus be seen as generated

through a full-body engagement and sensory friction with the world, a process to which meaning is not opposed but rather a constitutive part, as will become clear from the analysis in the following chapters.

Like the followers of other religious movements, including PCCs, the followers of non-Christian 'spiritual movements' are attracted by the promise of health, prosperity, power and overall fortune. Movements of Asian origin are generally expected to procure these favours in abundance, because of Asia's, and particularly India's, reputation of overtly hosting the world's most powerful secrets of magic. Many are also attracted by the close and individual 'pastoral' guidance offered continuously by missionaries like Joseph. Given that reliable authority structures are often missing and moral insecurity is rampant in Kinshasa, personal counselling is highly valued. Others are attracted by a nostalgia for the spiritual teachings and practices of their African ancestors, many of which they see as being repeated, or at least revalorised, by spiritual movements like EMM and TMAJ. Despite their 'non-African' allure, these may therefore be seen as neotraditional (De Witte 2012) or, at least, alter-traditional religious movements, offering a way to valorise and deal with Africa's cultural heritage. African traditional religion was unjustly diabolised by missionaries, many spiritualists explain, and power objects were stolen by the colonial authorities in order to serve their own hegemonic goals. Another motive may be found in the millennial programme of ethical renovation, moral renewal and superiority that spiritual movements advocate. This offers followers a voice for and an opinion of themselves and their situation in the wider world. Youngsters especially thus obtain the opportunity to study, experience and explore the things of life, which in the highly unstable and directionless cosmos of the city of Kinshasa is an increasingly attractive venture. Lastly, urban religiosity is a powerful means for people to make themselves and their world aesthetically, i.e. with their bodies and senses, including the mind.

City of Seekers

The concept of 'crisis' has been deployed to depict the situation of many inhabitants of the Democratic Republic of Congo ever since the 1990s, when dictator Mobutu Sese Seko's power started dwindling. It was only in 1997 that he fled the country under the pressure of Laurent Désiré Kabila's rebel army, which had made its way to Kinshasa all the way from the east of the country. After this first of the two Congo Wars, seven different national armies from neighbouring countries were involved in the occupation and defence of parts of the territory.

What has been called 'Africa's World War' (Prunier 2011) ended only when EU- and UN-brokered peace agreements were signed in 2002 and 2003. After a transition phase, Joseph Kabila, whose father Laurent Désiré was murdered in 2001, was officially elected president in 2006, and his chief opponent Jean-Pierre Bemba imprisoned soon after by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Thus Mobutu's thirty-two years of kleptocratic regime were followed by almost a decade of war and political turmoil, which remains unresolved in parts of eastern DRC to this very day. Congo's population has been depicted as being in a situation of long-term crisis ever since (De Boeck 1998, Trefon 2004), which points to the question of the analytical usefulness of the 'crisis'-concept, as it produces and thus inadvertently legitimises Congo's situation of ongoing exceptionality (cf. Roitman 2013).

Despite the acclaimed growth of DRC's national GDP in recent years and an obvious building boom in the capital Kinshasa and other urban centres, for most the trickle-down effect far from materialised into reality. Thus for the larger part of Kinshasa the insecurity about any upcoming future persists, forcing people into *la débrouille* (the art of improvising to get by). In view of a largely absent formalised and accountable economy, the importance of the 'miracle' concept becomes clear, as has been advocated and popularised by the innumerable born-again churches, which have spawned in Kinshasa ever since Mobutu formally introduced 'democracy' in 1990.²

Not only in Kinshasa, but also in other African cities, the general trend to liberalise the economy and the media has led to a transformation of the public sphere where the mediating qualities of audiovisual media were soon discovered to be homologous to the workings of the Holy Spirit (Meyer and Moors 2006, Pype 2012). For many followers of Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCCs) the main objective of the technology of prayer is to assure well-being and, ideally, to evoke a miracle. It is as if the 'invisible hand' of the market needed to be bribed so as to generate a favour and grant a miracle out of the crisis at least for a while. Drivers of motorbike taxis (*wewas*) in Kinshasa, for instance, explain that their daily income is highly volatile and ranges between 5 and 30 US dollars. Much depends on one's daily *horoscope*, they explain, which is the amount of one's daily spiritual favour that determines whether one will find a lot of clients or only a few. It does not come as a surprise that many *wewas* are therefore also ardent churchgoers. For most, praying remains the only technique that impacts on one's market situation so as to improve the private horoscope. In this situation of material insecurity and economic unpredictability, the feeling that one's life and the economy at large are governed by more than merely

human hands is rampant, as has also been documented and discussed by a significant number of scholars.³ It should be stressed, however, that the idea of 'occult economies', as Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) call it, is from a Central African point of view not new and feeds on a longstanding history of human-spirit relations, as I also discuss in Chapter 8.

This persistent unpredictability and uncertainty, and the resulting dearth of order, control and physical security, is one of the causes of the eclectic and sprawling presence of varied religious movements, whether Christian or non-Christian. Next to the larger compounds and buildings of the Catholic and Protestant mainline churches, which are well inscribed in the city's urban landscape, many highly visible and neatly fenced mega-temples have been constructed by the Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) and a number of born-again organisations. The church *Message du Temps de la Fin* (Branham Tabernacle), which follows the teachings of U.S. prophet William M. Branham (1909–1965), the Assembly of God and, increasingly, the Nigerian Winners' Chapel of Bishop David Oyedepo have all been building impressive mega-churches. They are some of the possible alternatives followers can choose from besides the countless local church foundations. Like Congo's famous music orchestras, churches are usually referred to by the names of their charismatic leaders: there are the churches of Neema Sikatenda, son of Iyadi Sikatenda (*Nzambe Malamu*, Church of the Good God), of 'Général' Sony Kafuta 'Rockman', of Bishop Pascal Mukuna (*Assemblée Chrétienne de Kinshasa*), of Maman Olangi (*Combat Spirituel*), Léopold Mutombo (*LMK Ministries / Ministère Amen*), Denis Lessi (*Arche de Noé*) and many others. Over the past twenty-five years the longstanding dynamic of schism and renewal has led to an intense multiplication of pastors and their churches. This is particularly visible in Kinshasa's *cités* (from the former *cité indigène*), as the poorer and more densely populated suburbs are called in distinction to the city's glossier administrative and political neighbourhood of *la ville*. Most branches of Congo-originated Pentecostal churches in the *cités* have smaller buildings, if any at all. In the absence of striking architecture, what makes them noticeable to passers-by is the persistent sound of distorted microphone preaching and rumba rhythm of Congolese religious music, which is performed live during the daily evening prayer sessions.

On 25 May 2010 I had the privilege of witnessing first-hand the militaristic allures of the Kimbanguist Christmas ceremonies at their headquarters in the neighbourhood of Kasa-Vubu.⁴ Despite a recent schism in the *Eglise de Jésus-Christ sur Terre par son envoyé spécial Simon Kimbangu*

(EJCSK), Kimbanguism remains an important pillar of religious life and Congolese self-identification in Kinshasa, as well as a striking example of Weber's 'routinisation of charisma'. Less routinised examples of the tradition of Kongo *ngunza* prophetism, which gave rise to the 'Modern Kongo Prophets', such as Simon Kimbangu (MacGaffey 1983), include a number of *Eglises des Noirs*. These are known in Kinshasa through the figures of the military prophet Atoli, for instance, who combines his activity as a prophet with a military vocation and allure. Like Atoli, figures like Papa Nkusu frequently participate in TV debates to defend the decidedly Afrocentric and anti-imperialist position inherited from the Kongo prophets, which remains critical of external cultural influences and reminiscent of the anti-colonial struggle.⁵ The most radical movement in this regard is *Bundu dia Kongo*, whose members suffered a military crackdown by a special commando of the Congolese police in 2008 (cf. Wamba-Dia-Wamba 1999, De Boeck 2004a: 106–107, Covington-Ward 2016). In Lower Congo,⁶ after this violent incident, many followers joined the *Eglise Chrétienne Union du Saint Esprit* (ECUSE) church, which was founded by *ngunza* prophet Tata Gonda (cf. MacGaffey 1983). Their initiates wear so-called *sacs*, although their appearance in public is restricted to certain areas of the Lower Congo province. More publicly visible in Kinshasa are the aesthetically impressive white gowns, sticks and beards of the *Babas*, as Kinois call the followers of the Church of John Maranke from Zimbabwe (cf. Jules-Rosette 1975). On Saturday mornings they gather for prayers in the open. Many Kinois denounce them for presumed polygamy, which indicates that next to aesthetic markers of buildings, dress codes and sound infrastructure, moral precepts of purity are also important boundaries in the urban religious landscape: Branhamists, for instance, like other Pentecostals, are known for their abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, skirts and sleeveless shirts. Given its sheer size, the panopticum of religious movements in Kinshasa cannot be exhaustively presented here.⁷

Despite certain similarities with other more recent popular trends such as African Pentecostalism, spiritual movements remain stigmatised minorities and are often qualified as 'occult sciences' by Christians in Kinshasa. This is directly linked to the common conviction that Mobutu and his clique, who were ardent followers of non-Christian 'secret societies', had in fact sacrificed the country and driven it to ruin (B. White 2005). In turn, a formal opposition to and explicit criticism of Christianity, in particular of the numerous *Eglises de Réveil*, persists among the followers of such movements.

Yet, similarities are equally striking. Much of Joseph's emphasis on the spiritual nature of Congo's problems, or on the abundance of

demons in the city, closely resembles the 'Pentecostal worldview' in Africa (Kalu 2008: 169). Misfortune in general, EMM teaches, should be confronted spiritually. Another theme that spiritual and born-again movements share is the production of miracles. It is not surprising, therefore, that Joseph and his fellow *Messianiques* (EMM's followers) refer to their movement as a 'church' (Fr./Li. *église*).

Moreover, one of EMM's 'ministers' sometimes enjoys wearing a black *tenu de pasteur* (pastor's uniform) with a priestly collar, and *Messianiques* refer to their healing activity of *Johrei* as a 'prayer' in action (i.e. without words). The Christian 'Our Father' prayer has become part and parcel of the movement's liturgy during the 'prayer' gatherings in its different units. This tendency to mimetically connect and attach oneself to the semiotic realm of Christian churches differs strongly from the times of Zaire, when non-Christian movements were elitist, secretive and often the result of trans-African elite networking with ties to the former colonial metropolises (Louveau 2012).

Today, most movements openly invite new followers to public conferences through posters and banderols distributed throughout the city. Even 'initiation' ceremonies are sometimes announced publicly. As the case of EMM exemplifies, geographical trajectories have also diversified. After local precursors assured their contact with Japan via France and Belgium, EMM was transplanted to lusophone Africa by missionaries from Brazil. It is from Angola that fellow Congolese 'pioneers' imported EMM to Kinshasa. Similar South-South connections apply to Soka Gakkai International, which was imported from West Africa, or the neo-Hindu Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University, which reached Africa directly from India.

Thus, despite obvious differences in historical experience between Latin America, India and Africa, there is much to indicate that a democratisation and mainstreaming of alternative spirituality, as has been observed in Brazil (Carpenter 2004) is also on the rise in contemporary Africa. Africa's cities especially have an increasingly young population, which is gradually growing more curious about the knowledge, spiritual techniques and discoveries of a wider and increasingly multipolar world. *Lelo tokomì na tango ya mondialisation* ('Today we have reached the age of globalisation') explained Kabasela (43), who is from Kasai province and speaks Lingala and Tshiluba but no French. During the Congo Wars he was a soldier under Laurent Désiré Kabila before he left the army and turned to selling mobile phone airtime at Kinshasa's international airport. Explaining why he is interested in Japanese spirituality, he argues that 'today all things belong to the people of the entire world. For example minerals, intelligence kept in Europe, aeroplanes,

motorcycles from China, and so on. Everything belongs to everyone' (Kabasela, Mikondo, July 2013).

In Angola, where EMM's African headquarters have been located since 1991, an estimated 37,000 followers have joined the movement.⁸ In DRC about 2,500 members have been steadily frequenting the various units since EMM was set up in 2001, and this number is on the rise (figure from June 2012). Followers are a kaleidoscope of Kinosis society and include elite nostalgics, clerks, employees and students, but also a large number of those who have not had access to secondary school or any higher education. In terms of differences from Brazil or Japan, the majority of *Messianiques* in Congo are male (see Chapter 1).

Reminiscent of the 'cultic milieu' in the West (Campbell 1972), most followers like Kabasela call themselves 'spiritualists' or 'seekers' (Fr. and Li. *chercheurs*). Given that in French *chercheur* can mean 'seeker' as well as 'researcher', this seems to be less an adaptation of Western New Age terminology than an expansion of research jargon from universities. Being a *chercheur* implies being a legitimate non-affiliated nomad on the search for knowledge, experience and miracles. Many seekers are university students who wish to complement their curricula with the insights and principles of 'spirituality', enabling them to discover how the world really works. Many younger seekers have impressive conversion careers (although it is questionable whether the 'conversion' concept can still grasp the fluidity and volatility of many such seekers' wanderings, cf. Kirsch 2004). Being a seeker does not imply denouncing Christianity altogether. Many seekers I encountered have had or still continue to have close engagements with one or several Christian churches. Yet a verbose criticism, especially of born-again Christianity as too dogmatic and too pastor-centred, is a persistent tenor among seekers. Recurrent are the claims that all the pastors of the born-again world who have made it big have at one point or another in their career been in close contact with the teachings and practices of the spiritual movements they so ardently diabolise. If these claims are to be trusted, then the Pentecostal field is much less hermetic and feeds on a much bigger variety of religious experiences and insights than much of the recent academic literature on the subject suggests.

Kinshasa, in a way, is in itself a city of seekers. *Kobeta libanga* (to crash stones) – the hardest and most menial work possible – is the expression commonly used for the art of getting by, no matter by what means. The curiosity to learn, grasp and experience how things in the city's largely informal economy work so as not to 'crash stones' all the time is part and parcel of this task and for many a vital necessity. The inclination to 'seek', in a wider sense, is therefore a crucial mode of existence in this

'place of meander and *dérive*' (Monaville 2013: 9), where infrastructure continues to exist chiefly as an architecture of words and bodies (cf. De Boeck 2004a, 2006). In the last decade Chinese, Lebanese, Indian and Congolese entrepreneurs have erected signs of promise and hope in the urban space: hotels, fountains, sidewalks and executive towers, such as the building called the 'Modern Titanic' (cf. De Boeck 2011). The phallic height of these buildings in the administrative centre of *la ville* is complemented by a number of newly renovated boulevards. Smaller roads in *la cité* are often repaired only hastily and tend to erode and break up much sooner than expected. The road network in these densely populated areas resembles the social and professional networks many Kinosis attempt to entertain. Both seem perpetually short-lived and threatened by overloads of expectation. Similarly, seekers' quests are driven as much by the excitement for the miraculous as by the hardship of perpetual disappointment. Again and again, erosion causes recalibration, reconnection, perpetual death and resurrection.⁹

Foreign Technologies of Power

Already from the mid-1970s onwards, what had emerged in the Japanese interbellum as an innovative adaptation of an older Shintō-Buddhist healing ritual, came to be interlaced in Central Africa with a historically rooted penchant by those in power for the manipulation of invisible forces. Anthropologists have repeatedly pointed to the need to seriously consider that there are 'assumptions and understandings of ... relevant causal forces in politics (that differ from) Western political and social scientific paradigms of politics and the state', as Schatzberg (2001: 139) phrases it.¹⁰ This older logic, which states that there are secrets of invisible forces at work in the world, had also been applied to missionaries, who were held to have purportedly kept a number of important secrets from their African followers so as to safeguard their hegemony. As will be shortly explored in the following, this logic became apparent especially in first-contact situations as well as in the foundation of African Independent Churches (AICs).

A striking account of such a first-contact situation is recounted by Isichei (1995: 202), who quotes a Catholic missionary in Lower Congo, who had exclaimed: 'Guess what! The biggest fetisher [*sic*] of the whole district thinks he's a Christian! He knows Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph and Saint Anthony, who carries the baby Jesus in his arms' (cf. Isichei 1995: 202, footnote 87). Isichei comments that anthropologist MacGaffey considered this conversion 'Christian veneer, created as a

protective screen to shield an ancient cult from the missionaries and the colonial administration.' 'Both hostile missionary, and sympathetic anthropologist', she goes on, 'concur that the movement was not genuinely Christian.' Yet, she writes, 'there is nothing in the data to suggest this, and perhaps they simply chose to practice a new religion in familiar ways' (ibid.). The position of the Catholic missionary mentioned by Isichei resembles that of a Japanese delegate of one of the Japanese new religions in Kinshasa (Joseph's former movement), whom I met in Brussels. Explaining to me what the Congolese do with the practice of Ikebana in Kinshasa (cf. Chapter 3), he stressed that in Congo 'they have always said that, if the flower is for therapy, then it is *magie*' (interview, Brussels, September 2012). In his opinion, arranging flowers entails tranquillity and serenity and therefore has a healing quality, but this had nothing to do with magic. Would it be possible to suggest that, instead of getting the message wrong, we can say with Isichei that Kinois who practise a Japanese religion 'simply chose to practice a new religion in familiar ways'? Indeed, as for many the practice of Japanese religion in contemporary Congo is a first-contact situation, this might be a valid answer. However, taking into account the pluralistic religious field in a city like Kinshasa, where the mutual positioning with regard to other religious movements influences affiliations and interpretations, it cannot be the only answer.

The assumption of hidden secrets also became apparent in the founding moments of African Independent Churches, whose charismatic prophets (*ngunza* in Kikongo) in West Central Africa 'emphasise[d] the Spirit and protection from witchcraft, and stress[ed] persistently the idea of the secret teaching of Jesus' (Isichei 1995: 202). Kimbanguism (MacGaffey 1983) and the Nigerian Aladura movement (Peel 1968) too, had already phrased their revelations as the recovery of the 'hidden power of the Whites' (cf. H. Turner 1978) that missionaries from the mainline churches had concealed from them. Later, especially since independence, it appeared that the West's real secrets were not so much inherent in Christianity, but rather to be sought in those forces that Christianity itself was trying to quarantine as its own constitutive Other. This included the realm of freemasonry (cf. Cohen 1981), nineteenth-century occultism and also non-Christian religions from Asia.

Thus, also in the times of Congo's postcolony, lodges of Freemasons and Rosicrucian orders, or the prestigious Grail Movement, started attracting novel elites, while Mobutu encircled himself with private spiritual experts including Indian magicians, marabouts and most powerful African *ngangas*. Still today rumours circulate about the

infamous demonic gatherings of his private secret society called 'Prima Curia', which were triggered by a number of speculative newspaper articles in the 1980s (cf. Braeckman 1992). Mail order systems, linked to Rosicrucianism, made sure that magical assets could be ordered directly from Europe (MacGaffey 2000: 16), while a trade in power objects from India had been underway via West Africa since early on in colonial times (Drewal 1988). Movements of Asian origin and inspiration such as Sukyô Mahikari, Eckankar and the Mokichi Okada Association International (MOA) were associated with the spiritual powers and secrets necessary for success. Still today the imaginaries of Asia and the Orient, of China, India and Japan, as well as the 'hidden' side of Europe, resonate powerfully with notions of magical power. No doubt the cultural pride and determination with which many Asian nations, in particular Japan, tackled colonial subjugation and its legacy, must have impressed African leaders like Mobutu in the aftermath of the Bandung conference.

In a recent study, Wuaku (2013) historically analyses the implantation and popularisation of Hinduism in Ghana. He emphasises the role of 'folk ideas about outside sources of spiritual power' in the appropriation of incoming religious traditions (Wuaku 2013: 12–13), and that notions of Indian religion as a most powerful form of magico-religious power have been crucial to the development of Hinduism in Ghana. These notions are historically rooted, he explains, in contacts established by Ghanaian soldiers who served in the colonial armies of the British Empire in India, Sri Lanka and Burma during the Second World War, as well as by Bollywood films and local ambulant magicians practising 'Indian' magic on African streets.¹¹ Though Congo was not part of the British Empire, Indian movies and ambulant magicians were responsible for the same stereotypical moral geography whereby Congo's inhabitants regarded India as the world centre for magic.¹² Wuaku points to the importance of 'magico-religious power', or 'spiritual power', which he defines, like Hackett, as the 'ability to transcend the normal course of events, to possess knowledge beyond the human ken, to be able to effect the miraculous, to possess spiritual gifts, which may be beneficial to the individual or the community, to ward off harmful forces or adversaries, and the ability to realise the objectives of life, that is to raise a family, enjoy economic self-sufficiency and good health' (Hackett 1992: 285). As will be discussed below, spiritual power, rather than being merely the result of 'belief', is intimately tied up with the practice and performance of social and aesthetic difference. Religious movements of Asian and in particular Japanese origin, have a lot to offer in this regard. Moreover, EMM and TMAJ's missionaries

have sufficient proof of the benefits of their spiritual discipline, which has been able to protect one of them even from a bullet.¹³

The notion of a continuum of non-African technologies of power that are superior to African sorcery, conflating Asian magic with the 'hidden power of the Whites', became obvious to me when one of EMM's missionaries, who considers himself a local expert in Japanese spirituality, asked me to look for a particular book for him in Europe. The author was a certain Papus (G.A. Encausse, 1865–1916), whom Wikipedia identified as a French esoteric and Rosecrucian. As a child this missionary had personally observed how an Anglican missionary from Europe had handed this book to one of his African Anglican colleagues, in secret, he had told me. The book's title *La science des nombres*, as indicated by him, matched with what I could find on the internet; the book was a treaty on numerology. The aura of secrecy surrounding it somehow vanished, however, when I showed the missionary how to download it straight from the internet.

While Mobutu's friendship with Mao Zedong is well known – Mao's outfit was the template for the anti-European Zairian male dress, the 'Abacost' (from *à bas le costume*, down with the suit) – many also remember Mobutu's visits to India. Still today, India is considered the hotspot of magical power, which Mobutu is said to have consulted on his visit to Indira Gandhi in 1973. It is common knowledge in Kinshasa that India has never been allowed to participate in a football world cup game, because of its reputed magical superiority, which outlaws Indians from competing in any sporting competition (this also demonstrates that the Congolese do not know how competitive the Indians are at cricket). But the Chinese also appear to be skilled magicians, which they demonstrate through their engineering skills. The following vignette is illustrative in this regard.

In the first days of May 2012, a rather unusual video clip, five minutes in length, circulated on the city's mobile phones.¹⁴ It showed an ugly little monster with an upright torso sitting on top of the rolled-up pile of its snake-tailed body. The head of the motionless alien was covered with long golden hair, and two little green arms suggested, along with the blonde hair and the gazing open eyes, that it was no animal, but, despite its anthropomorphic appearance, nor was it human. A small group of people were recording the footage in awe, and a repetitive shrieking sound had been added to it from a digital source so as to imitate the creature's voice and lend it an overall horrifying impression. The attraction of the clip was further enhanced by the explanatory narrative that circulated at the same time. Both on *Radio Trottoir* (cf. Ellis 1989) and in a number of news programmes on TV, the little video

received substantial public attention. The creature had been captured, it was said, *en face* (on the other side), in Congo-Brazzaville, which is Kinshasa's closest national and geographical Other on the other side of the Congo River. There it was now waiting for scientific examination in the hands of the other Congo's authorities. The creature had been captured by none other than Chinese spiritual experts, who had been called in for assistance by the Chinese construction company in charge of building a bridge as part of an infrastructure project ordered by the government. Multiple times construction had to be stopped and started from scratch, the story went. According to the narrative, the water spirits were opposed to the construction of a bridge to the extent that workers had even been killed in unusual accidents. The foundations of the bridge had dissolved and floated away into the water several times. As a result, the construction team from China had called in the help of their spiritual experts. In the words of a neighbour, they were 'Buddhist monks'. This delegation of spiritual experts had taken to the river in a little rowing boat and performed unknown rituals and incantations on the water. Again complications had occurred and two of the monks had drowned. Eventually, after six hours on the water, the leader of the delegation himself had returned, bringing with him the captured creature that he had pulled out of the river's depths. This is how the monster, which was commonly referred to as *le monstre de Brazzaville* or *le démon du fleuve*, was captured, and thus the bridge could eventually be built. Many, after receiving the video, had watched, discussed but then deleted it from their phones for fear of the demon in the telephone being able to bewitch (Fr. *envoûter*, Li. *koloka*) them. One spiritualist called it a media trick, a fake that doubtless came from West Africa, where internet criminality is known to be big business. Others, including highly educated interlocutors, were convinced the video rather confirmed the real existence of such water creatures. A member of the Grail Movement and self-declared expert in spiritual matters pointed to a book he had at home which dealt with this kind of creature. Clearly, the *démon du fleuve* video fed well into the existing repertoire of urban legends that circulate in Kinshasa's shared imagination.¹⁵

About two decades ago, comic strips were the media that materialised and supported the circulation of rumours as 'the printed equivalent of Radio Trottoir' (De Boeck 2004a: 185). Today mobile phone technology has come to replace the comic strip in this regard. But more than this, the story of the monster makes indisputable reference to the magico-spiritual techniques of the spiritual experts invoked by the Chinese engineers to overcome the resistance of the water spirits. If we take into account the idea that rumours generally undergo a process of

levelling, sharpening and assimilation, after which the result allows for a rough estimation of what story is considered valid for the collective sensitivity (Stewart and Strathern 2004: 42, L. White 2000), the account is telling. I gathered numerous accounts from older Congolese who told me of engineering projects, in particular the building of bridges, that were haunted by spiritual obstruction. In one such account, which the pastor of a local Assembly of God church shared with me, the former Belgian colonial authorities had constructed a bridge working exclusively at night, fearing the locals would discover their secret techniques necessary for such engineering. Clearly, as the rumour about *le démon du fleuve* tells us, the theme of foreigners having spiritual secrets and techniques that they keep from their African counterparts (H. Turner 1978) also remains powerfully present when it comes to Asian actors.

Issues at Stake

Spiritual Movements and their Study

In the context of demographic explosion and rapid urbanisation, the aura of secrecy, which many spiritual movements carry also due to their Zairian and elite-connoted past, is turning into an increasingly popular and accessible resource of power for an increasingly large number of people. Often seekers actually enjoy performing secrecy and the production of aesthetic difference. Similar to the Pentecostal programme to democratise access to spiritual power, spiritual movements also appear to be more democratic than before. Currently present in Kinshasa are Soka Gakkai International (SGI), Eckankar, the Grail Movement (*Message du Graal*), Christian Science, Sukyô Mahikari, Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University (Raja Yoga), Guru Siyag's Siddha Yoga,¹⁶ Sekai Kyûseikyô (SKK) with three different branches – the Mokichi Okada Association International (MOA), *Eglise Messianique Mondiale* (EMM) and the *Temple Messianique Art de Johrei* (TMAJ) – the Unification Church of Reverend Moon (Moonies), Bahá'í Faith (*Foi Baha'i*), the Supreme Master Ching Hai International Association, etc.

Despite the public prominence offered to Jesus Christ by PCCs, Jesus is clearly no longer the only spiritual superhero whose power circulates in Kinshasa today. In her census of religious movements in the Nigerian town of Calabar, Rosalind Hackett (1989: 153–165) was the first to notice the importance of these new religious movements, mostly of Asian origin, which she baptised 'spiritual sciences', or 'spiritual science movements' (cf. Hackett 1986a, 1986b, 1989, 1992). As Wuaku



Illustration 0.1 Prayer cards in Kabasela’s wallet. The aforementioned seeker Kabasela carries a number of ‘prayer cards’ as protection in his wallet. These include, from top to bottom, Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity; Dada Lekhraj of the Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University; Simon Kimbangu, the founder of the Kimbanguist Church, who is depicted along with the seventeenth-century Kongo prophetess Kimpa Vita; a card of the Guru Siyag’s Siddha Yoga organisation; two portraits of Ching Hai (founder and head of the International Association of the Supreme Master Ching Hai); as well as a picture of TMAJ’s prosperity goddess Daikokokuten (cf. Chapter 1). Photo by the author.

summarises, and to a large extent similar to Pentecostalism’s assets, these are known to stress the precedence of the spiritual over the material, ‘the human ability to use the mind or words to manipulate the material world, the importance of empowering oneself by acquiring secret formulae underlying the unseen world, and the need to engage in spiritual exercises such as meditation, to gain personal spiritual advancement etc.’ (2013: 64, note 7).

In the Africanist literature, ‘spiritual sciences’ has become the common term to use for what in Kinshasa is often referred to as *movements spirituels*. At the time of Hackett’s study, published in 1989, popular Pentecostal actors had not yet conquered the public sphere with the popularising effects of audio-visual media. Also, the reality

of urban religious diversity was only just starting to generate scholarly interest. Spiritual science movements naturally appeared to scholars as an ensemble of alien, non-African movements that were odd, at best, when compared to the older African religious initiatives, and especially difficult to penetrate.

Despite Hackett's pointed findings, none of the subsequent literature reviews on religious movements in Africa mentions them (Ranger 1986, Ellis and ter Haar 1998, Meyer 2004). Recent francophone work on contemporary religious pluralism (Dorier-Apprill 1996, 2002, 2006, Lasseur and Mayrargue 2011) also ignores spiritual movements (but see Louveau 2011).

A reason for this might be an anthropological bias towards 'world religions', especially Islam and Christianity, and what we may call 'denominational nationalism', i.e. the tendency to focus on denominational boundaries by ignoring dynamics of mimesis and cross-fertilisation as part of the pluralisation of urban religiosities observable today.¹⁷

Religious diversity in the city and also the mutual conditioning of urban and religious space (Kirsch 2004, Lanz 2013) are today an undeniable reality. Even without having to choose or convert to any particular denomination, the bodies, senses and mindsets of contemporary African urbanites are unavoidably modulated by a variety of religious influences. Given the increasing presence of religion in the public sphere, this occurs both directly and indirectly, through more or less conscious attention but also inattention (cf. Larkin 2014). Contemporary urbanites grow up with a range of discourses, practices and moulding religious experiences. Therefore, this study goes beyond the internal dealings of EMM and TMAJ. Both these movements serve rather as vantage points from which to consider the bigger religious landscape of the city as a continuously recalibrating web of associational configuration whose ultimate nodal points are the bodies of practitioners.

In academic literature spiritual (science) movements mostly appear only as Christianity's Other (Adogame 2010: 485–486, Kalu 2008). Historical studies have pointed to the creative potentials released in the foundations of Zionist and African Independent Churches. That creativity and experimentation continue to thrive¹⁸ and have been exceeding the boundaries of Christianity, and Islam seems to be often ignored; moreover, except for Simon Kimbangu and Kimpa Vita, none of the spiritual leaders depicted in Kabasela's wallet are, ethnically and geographically speaking, more or less 'African' than Jesus Christ. Would it not be helpful and do more justice to seekers like Kabasela if we considered these movements as religious movements within the scholarly tradition of studying religion in Africa? This study prompts

us to confront the question of what is, from the perspective of a seeker like Kabasela, so different between a spiritual movement 'from Japan', and a 'Christian' religious movement, apart from the obvious historical precedence that the latter can claim in Africa and, concordantly, in Africanist scholarship.

So far a spiritual movement has not yet been studied in its own right within a diversifying urban setting such as Kinshasa. Except for Hackett's initial ground research, Wuaku's recent study (2013) and Louveau's internal ethnography of Sukyô Mahikari in France and West Africa (2012), spiritual movements are only slowly generating interest as legitimate topoi of inquiry in the field of African studies. This despite the fact that they have much in common with other religious movements, as this study shows. The reason for this may lie in the relative inaccessibility of these formerly often elitist movements, as well as latent normative understandings of what 'Africa' is and should be in terms of religious creativity and expression. Ranger reminds us that 'we should see mission churches as much less alien and independent churches as much less "African"' (Ranger 1987: 31, quoted in Meyer 2004: 454–455), which reverberates in the main thesis of Wuaku's study: 'while Ghanaians appropriated and deployed the alien Hindu world through their own cultural ideas, in the context of this new encounter the worldviews of worshippers would themselves be transformed as they engage Hindu ideas in dealing with their day to day modern lives' (Wuaku 2013: 4). In Meyer's terms, 'essentialist differences between Africa and the world or the local and the global are impossible to maintain' (Meyer 2004: 463, see also Bayart 2000). This truly anti-essentialising assumption is the starting point of the present study.

Auspicious Alterity Japan

The Brazilian TV series *Inde, Une histoire d'amour* was a big-impact hit in Kinshasa. This soap opera, to the surprise of many, was entirely produced and directed in Brazil and consisted of a complete Brazilian cast.¹⁹ It dealt with the themes of love, especially forbidden love and juvenile delinquency, the Indian 'joint family', jealousy and witchcraft, traditional Hindu arranged marriages, the practice of dowry etc. It covered the time span of India's transition to democracy in the 1950s through to the socialist era of the 1970s and the neoliberal 2000s, also engaging with the theme of diasporic Indians. The 'old' and the 'new' India are enacted in the series through the intergenerational trajectories of a family and its connections in Brazil, Rajasthan and Dubai. In Kinshasa, a growing feeling of cultural resonance between Asian

and African cultures is noticeable. Indian-style clothes have recently become fashionable during parties and in music videos. Moreover, if until about a decade ago the main destination for hospital treatment was South Africa, today it has become India with New Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai having become impressive hubs of medical tourism from Africa. Considering the queue of youngsters who in 2013 tried to enter the Indian embassy in Kinshasa in the mornings, it would seem that Indian universities are adding considerably to the increasing flow of people between Congo and India. In a way this compensates for the rise of Indian, mostly Gujarati, traders in Kinshasa, who have come to dominate the trade in electronics around the commercial centre of Avenue du Commerce.

Studies of Asian cultural influences in Africa have remained restricted to South Africa,²⁰ West Africa²¹ and East Africa.²² As in the case of Ghanaian Hinduism, studied by Wuaku (2013), the cultural traffic in these regions was encouraged by intercontinental connectivity during the time of the British Empire. Central Africa, however, and francophone Africa more generally, has been overlooked so far (but see Louveau 2012). A turn towards the East in this area appears even more a creative deviance from, if not a defiance of, older, historically shaped, geographical trajectories. By fashioning new networks and creative cultural flows via the lusophone world, EMM and TMAJ's leaders seem to shake off the historical thrust of their Congolese colonial geography. These novel trajectories seemingly deterritorialise cultural flows and lift them out of their historical embeddedness in former colonial spatial orders.

The increasing intensity of cultural cross-fertilisation between Africa and other non-Western parts of the world, which today has come to include, more prominently, China, India, Brazil and Japan, points to the theoretical debates about the patterns that underlie the putative 'globality' of cultural flows. This entails problems of how to approach cultural difference in an ever more interlacing world. Persistent economic inequalities notwithstanding, the centre-periphery model is today no longer valid in the face of the multilaterality of cultural flows that govern local cultural creativities. Flows of people, ideas, money, technology and media, as Appadurai's (1996) -scapes model suggests, have come to employ, and mould, novel trajectories, which reshuffle and multiply proximities and distances that come about through instances of appropriation, transculturation, domestication, hybridisation, etc.

How can we conceptualise such flows from a local perspective? In order to emphasise the fluidity and ongoing circulation of cultural forms, I suggest the notion of *(re-)production* because of its unambiguous

praxeological emphasis on human agency without discarding the possibility of structural factors conditioning the process. Adding the hyphenated prefix *re-* opens up a spectrum between creative and original *production*, which is totally agency based, and mimetic *reproduction*, suggesting the interference of a process of cultural patterning, mostly guided by intuitive knowledge of a putative tradition (one is influenced by something that is thought to have been there before) or of a putative elsewhere (one is influenced by something that is thought to be practised elsewhere).

When describing transnational trajectories, we unavoidably encounter a dilemma: how can we describe and interpret phenomena that cross existing geographical, social and symbolic boundaries, without naming the spatial entities contained within these boundaries and hence reiterating and reinstating them by using objectifying spatialising categories? Considering that concepts have ontogenetic power, the question arises as to whether scholars, by employing spatialising language and categories, are not therefore often inadvertently complicit in (hegemonic) projects of world construction? The dilemma resembles what Brubaker (2004) terms ‘commonsense groupism’, i.e. the impossibility of talking about ethnicity without thinking in groups and hence reiterating their presumed essence. In the same vein, we cannot think of flows and trajectories without thinking in spatialising terms. The creation of new spatial concepts, which reflect the realities on the ground, as for instance Gilroy does with the concept of the ‘Black Atlantic’ (1993), can barely be a solution for the transnational case analysed here, whose spatial ties extend from Japan to Brazil and Africa, etc. Descriptive spatial(ising) concepts such as Japongo or Japilongo would cause amusing provocation by pointing beyond the spatialised cultural containers of ‘Japan’, ‘Brazil’ and ‘Congo’, but can they be viable analytical alternatives, especially if none of the actors involved uses them? The national level remains a chief organisational and identificatory spatial entity, which matters strongly to *Messianiques* in Kinshasa. Hence my suggestion to consider the movement of EMM/TMAJ as a Congolese spiritual movement ‘from Japan’ (cf. Chapter 1).

‘Repertoires of resonance’ (Wuaku 2013: 6) are dependent upon perceived cultural affinities and identification. In the case of Japan, for instance, Congolese are indeed aware of certain affinities. The name *Kasai* is known to be popular both in Congo and Japan: Kasai is the name of a Congolese province and at the same time a common surname in Japan.²³ Moreover, there is an awareness of a comparable cultural heritage, as is apparent in EMM and TMAJ’s practice of ancestor worship (cf. Chapter 8). Even more striking than these perceived affinities

are the differences that Congo and Japan share vis-à-vis the West. A repeated credo among spiritualists in Kinshasa is that the West is too 'materialistic' and focused on a 'Cartesian' understanding of science, lacking the 'spiritual' side of things. For *Messianiques* in Kinshasa, ideas of Japan as a hub of 'spirituality' and of this being the key to its technological development lends comforting support in the endeavour to distance oneself from the West. While EMM's *responsables* (people with a formally allotted task) stress that they practise a 'religion' in its own right, as 'spiritualists' their aim is to simultaneously add the spiritual workings of the world to the 'materialistic' discoveries of science.

Japan is known in Kinshasa for car manufacturing and information technology, but especially for martial arts and *haute couture*. The inhabitants of the neighbourhood of N'Djili are renowned for repairing, recycling and remaking spare parts and cars. One of the streets where workshops specialise in Japanese cars is known as *petit Japon* (little Japan). In addition to Toyota, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Suzuki, Lexus and Yamaha, Sony and Toshiba are also well-known Japanese brands.

The notion of Japan stands out, however, when it comes to fashion design. Names of Japanese designers such as Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo are well known, especially among those Kinshais attracted to the world of elegance. This is reflected in the impact of kimono fashion among *Sapeurs*, the members of the Congolese *Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes* (la SAPE) (cf. Gandoulou 2000) as well as during ritualised combats between local youth fight groups. As Pype (2007) has found, so-called *sportifs* are inspired by the heroes Jackie Chan, Bruce Lee and Arnold Schwarzenegger in their efforts to appropriate foreign martial arts, while fights are organised in the gangs' training grounds called *dojon*. Also the centre of the Japanese religious movement Sukyô Mahikari in Kinshasa is called *dojon*, which is openly identifiable as such by the letter signs on the outer wall of its prestigious building next to the military camp Kokolo. In the realm of music a mutual admiration exists between Congo and Japan: while Congolese rumba star Zaïko Langa Langa celebrates Japaneseness on his album entitled *Nippon Banzai* (1986), the Japanese band *Yoka Choc* emulates Congolese rumba with such astonishing perfection that many Congolese do not believe their ears and eyes when watching them on Youtube.²⁴

However, compared to India, Japan offers a different, and more restricted, 'repertoire of resonance' in Kinshasa. Rather little is known about Japanese history and culture, which gives local leaders of movements such as EMM and TMAJ considerable room for freedom and creativity, also to translate 'Japan' into a feeling, a mood or a sensuous inclination towards the embodiment of difference, expertise and



Illustration 0.2 *Taxi-bus Japonnais*. The *Japonnais* [sic] is not only an outstanding car mechanic. Among the members of la SAPE (*Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes*), he is a *Sapeur* of outstanding, overpowering elegance. In the public championship of speed, endurance, public appearance and humour on Kinshasa's overcrowded roads, taxi-buses and their teams claim to be irresistible and outstanding like a *Japonnais*. Photo by the author.

sophistication within the local situation. The fact that so little is known about it, just like about so many other parts of the world, entitles *Messianiques* and their local leaders to enjoy a wider interpretational freedom, which often serves the cause of building emically valid cultural resonances.

Things, Difference and Authority

Aesthetic difference would not be of interest to anyone were it not for its ability to generate and grant authority. Before anything else, authority is the capacity to be the author of one's life. Inherently expansive and dependent on regimes of personhood, it often also extends to the capacity to author others' lives. Authority is always a relational achievement and thus dependent on things, persons and the assemblage, continuum or network through which they exist (cf. Latour 2005). Like these networks themselves, authority also requires perpetual generation and negotiation, sustainment and stabilisation, and ideally, institution and infrastructure, in order to be perpetuated.

The ethnography presented here offers insights into the use of material things, spiritual technologies and an aesthetic repertoire that generate boundaries, tensions and sometimes conflict. This brings us to the question: what role do religious movements play in people's negotiation and production of authority? The importance of this question becomes particularly clear in light of the wider absence of formalised authority structures and ethical reference points in Kinshasa, a densely populated city of urbanites seemingly in need of structuring authority.

It has already been observed that the above-mentioned 'occult economies' argument is not the only one that explains the upsurge of religious activism in urban Africa since the late 1980s. A significant factor is the generation of moral authority and the ability to foster a kind of personhood that encourages the agency and expressivity of the individual (Meyer 1999). Differently put, it is the fostering of a subjectivity that suits the conditions of urban life (Marshall 2009). The building of the person, or the subject, is inherently intertwined with authority, be it on the smaller, interpersonal level of authoring oneself, or on a wider, collective scale of shaping feelings of collective personhood.

Messianiques' production of aesthetic difference is a welcome resource in this regard. Referred to locally as one's 'aura' or one's 'spiritual level' (cf. Chapter 6), aesthetic difference equates to embodied authority and is generated in association with thingly matters, whose usage and 'sense' in the local understanding is at times divisive. The matters concerned include flowers (Chapter 3), *Johrei* healing (Chapters 5 and 6), silence and Japanese mantras (Chapter 7), ancestor worship (Chapter 8), as well as the respective theories and interpretations that *Messianiques* promote regarding these things. Suspicions about witchcraft (see Chapter 2) catalyse the perceived aesthetic difference, which is thus fabricated in an ongoing mutual positioning of both insiders and outsiders of spiritual movements and their things.

This positioning process ties in with the understanding of the African city as a demiurgic continuum in which actors author themselves and their urban world on both an intellectual and sensory level. This draws on previous work that has stressed the agency and creativity of mainly young urban actors.²⁵ De Boeck's understanding of the city as an 'architecture of words' (2004a, 2006) is therefore a persistent theme in this study, with words being simultaneously vehicles of mental representation as well as sonic things that have a capacity to reach out to the body and the senses as the building blocks of world (cf. Chapter 7).

The Aesthetic Approach

The aesthetic approach relies on the material turn in the study of religion, placing things and materiality at the forefront in the study of religious experience and spiritual presence.²⁶ There were three crucial reasons for choosing the aesthetic approach. Firstly, in the context of religious diversity it would be easy to fall prey to the simplicity of a symbolic categorisation of movements in terms of the respective 'belief systems' they advocate. Such an attempt would disregard the fact that in a city with a highly sensational religious public sphere the body and the senses are constantly moulded by a variety of religious influences. To evade the above-mentioned 'denominational nationalism' it is necessary to study difference and authority praxeologically and not on the basis merely of 'representations' such as distinct dogmas or theological traditions. The aesthetic approach promises to see emically perceived continuities beyond seemingly different formalised symbolic repertoires.

Secondly, authority is not just about making people adapt and live according to a certain abstract discourse, but also about making them sense the world and their existence therein in a particular way. The senses and the body are prime sites for religious difference and authority production.

Thirdly, many spiritual theories I encountered among seekers in Kinshasa strikingly resemble and dialogue well with the theoretical concerns of religious aesthetics, materiality and the agency of things in recent scholarship (cf. Lambertz forthcoming). To put it otherwise, the aesthetic approach corresponds well with emic ways of reasoning.

Webb Keane (2007) has studied the missionary encounter between Dutch Calvinists and the inhabitants of the Indonesian island of Sumba at the beginning of the twentieth century. Matthew Engelke (2007), on the other hand, has studied the Friday Masowe Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe and the refusal of this church to use the Bible because of its too material nature. For the Friday Masowe Apostolics, the Holy Spirit inevitably has to be 'live and direct'. In both Keane and Engelke's cases, there are rival attitudes regarding the role of things as legitimate or illegitimate carriers of spiritual agency. Similarly, in the increasingly Pentecostalised setting of Kinshasa, *Messianiques* encounter difficulties in validating their usage of religious things such as flowers, amulets and sacred calligraphies as material technologies to mediate spiritual presence.

Surface as Depth: Aesthetic Boundaries, Iconic Chains and Atmospheres

To study these religious things and their usage in the urban context, a number of conceptual tools are helpful. Both Keane (2007) and Engelke (2007) emphasise the role of Charles S. Peirce's semiotic triad of symbol, icon and index. A *symbol's* relation with that which it signifies is arbitrary and based merely on negotiated convention. This reflects the older trend of Saussurian semiology, which had insisted that the sound of language, for instance, carries in itself no meaning. Peirce contradicted this assumption by adding the icon and the index, both of which stress that a sign's material qualities, as for instance its sound, also matter in the generation of its meaning. In the case of the *index*, the sign has a common origin or shared material causality with that which it points to. Thus, the index 'indicates' the cause that brought it about. Classic examples include the thermometer, which indicates the temperature of a feverish body, or the weather vane, whose direction indicates the direction of the wind. An example relevant to Central Africa is a child's illness, which in the event that ordinary therapy does not help is often seen as pointing to a bigger moral or social problem in the wider family. In the case of the *icon*, the sign's sensory or aesthetic surface resembles, or is identical with that which it stands for.²⁷ The icon, to a certain extent, stands *as* that which it stands *for*. In a way, it imitates, but it forgets that it does so and thus becomes or substitutes what it was meant to imitate. It *is* or *does* its meaning, which, in turn, cannot exist without its respective form or aesthetic surface.

By making the distinction between meaning and matter, between depth and surface, disappear, Peirce's notion of the icon lends itself well to the study of spiritual presence from a material point of view. The icon is an aesthetic actor in its own right, or, as Webb Keane (2003: 411) phrases it, it offers to 'undo the sign's withdrawal from its worlds'.

Birgit Meyer (2009a) has suggested that rather than being 'imagined' by offering a cohesive meaning to a community, as Anderson's (1991) notion of 'imagined communities' suggests, as 'aesthetic formations' social groups are always fabricated on the basis of cultured, organic entanglements of things, persons and their senses. In the pluralistic context of Kinshasa, and especially because of the contested nature of EMM and TMAJ, the role of thing-made boundaries vis-à-vis respective aesthetic Others, deserves particular attention. In the absence of a bigger infrastructure of distinction, aesthetic difference that can be embodied is a particularly helpful resource for performing confidence and self-respect. To understand the role of things in such boundary making, it is necessary to go beyond an understanding of boundaries

as merely symbolic. Hence the notion of ‘aesthetic boundaries’, which are drawn and come about thanks to the aesthetic, and atmospheric, performativity things inevitably have as a result of their own localised sensual history. The concept of performativity is understood in line with John Austin’s (1962) theory of performative speech acts (cf. also Fischer-Lichte 2004). If extended to things, performativity is what things do, if their thingly and instrumental ‘speech acts’ are felicitous, to people on the sensory level.

An emphasis on the role of aesthetics and the iconic quality of things opens the door for a number of non-objectifiable, yet thing-related factors, such as styles (Meyer 2010a: 744), moods, atmospheres or sensory inclinations. In his ‘new aesthetic theory’ entitled *Atmosphäre*, the philosopher Gernot Böhme (2013: 15) contends that before we perceive something, our senses are always already ‘tuned’ (*gestimmt*) by the atmosphere of the place where we are located. From such a perspective it becomes clear that the aesthetic effect of things cannot be estimated if they are treated in isolation. Rather, they have to be seen in their respective iconic entanglement. This aesthetic interlocking, or intermedial conflation, is what I have tried to capture with the notion of the ‘iconic chain’, opening the door for synaesthetic, inter- or transsensorial, and inter- and transpersonal experience. By being iconic, the aesthetically entangled assemblage of the iconic chain does not only indicate or mean a boundary of difference by arbitrarily standing *for* it. It actively does and performs the aesthetic boundary of difference by standing *as* its material embodiment.

EMM and TMAJ’s iconic chain comprises a range of things, including the body and the hand, the *Ohikari* amulet, the *Goshintai* calligraphy, flowers, EMM’s founder’s photograph, dreams, prayers and silence, which, as I argue in Chapter 7, is also a thing. The notion of iconic chain involves all these things as a sequence of mutually dependent, inter-related and interlocking elements, which perform an aesthetic synergy on the practitioner’s continuum of senses.

Semiotic Ideologies

Webb Keane’s study focuses on the role of things and their respectively generated agencies as the basis of tensions and debates. He introduced the concept of *semiotic ideologies* as an expansion of the notion of *language* (or *linguistic*) *ideology*. Drawing on Michael Silverstein he defines such ideologies (note the plural) as ‘sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use’ (Silverstein 1979: 193, quoted in Keane

2007: 16). Keane explains that ‘language ideologies, however, do not just reflect on language as it is given: people act on the basis of those reflections. They try to change or preserve certain ways of speaking and criticise or emulate other speakers. These efforts can be as subtle as the *intuition* that people from certain backgrounds are not quite trustworthy, or a *hesitance* to express certain values in one’s mother tongue; they can be as violent as the state suppression of minority languages’ (Keane 2007: 16, my emphasis). Put differently, language ideologies are what people know, explicitly or implicitly, about what language can do. They determine what they can do with it and what others can do with it to them. But Keane’s theory is not limited to the use of language. With the concept of *semiotic ideologies*, he extends the perspective to what people know about what ‘music, visual imagery, food, architecture, gesture and anything that enters into actual semiotic practice’ (Keane 2007: 21) is granted to be doing, or what people (know they) are entitled to do themselves with these practices in particular situations. These situations are, as in fact any situation is, governed by respective semiotic ideologies. This has important consequences for one’s co-subjectivity and co-agency with things: one’s actions and interactions, one’s intuitive knowledge about one’s power or agency are always conditioned, or tuned, according to currently valid semiotic ideologies, which mould and determine what one considers can be done as a possible, authorised action (in association/assemblage) with a thing’s sensual, iconic surface and respective technological utility. It goes without saying that the one who is more aware than others about valid semiotic ideologies may tune and orchestrate not only his own, but also other people’s actions, by modelling their sensual attitudes with regard to the thingly world.

Thus, like the above-mentioned concept of (re-)production, the concept of ‘semiotic ideologies’ lends itself to overcoming the analytical divide between agency and structure: some people might be less aware than others about the fact that their daily practices follow the guidelines of semiotic ideologies. For these, semiotic ideologies act as conditioning structures. Others, however, know a great deal about their particular members’ resources (Fairclough 1989: 24) and may consciously manipulate certain semiotic ideologies so as to generate authority over others. Differently put, on the one hand semiotic ideologies condition and determine what people subconsciously do by behaving putatively ‘automatically’, i.e. out of unaware, precognitive intuition, reflex, or within the framework of their habitus. On the other hand, more ‘reflexive’ individuals can employ their awareness to ‘set the tone’ and claim authority by making others follow particular semiotic ideologies.

'Ideology', by tending towards expansion and persuasion, indicates that authority will be granted to those who can determine the semiotic ideology others ought to follow and will themselves continue to promote. The promotion of a semiotic ideology is therefore tantamount to an authority claim.

This makes the concept suitable for the analysis of different religious formations in a pluralising urban religious landscape. As already mentioned, authority is not just about making people 'believe' certain things, but about making them sense the thingly world and their existence therein in a certain way. The concept of semiotic ideologies conflates both these dimensions and therefore lends itself well to the rival and conflicting ways in which people and things relate to each other. These relations are far from stable, but are volatile and driven by interest and intention. The rival tensions, frictions and debates about what things are and what they may do is precisely what the concept of 'semiotic ideologies' allows us to grasp on the micro-social level.

Architecture of the Study

The organisation of the study seeks to reflect the proposed methodology and its focus on seekers' things. Chapter 1 discusses the Japanese origins and global trajectories of the EMM movement, as well as its implantation and schismatic multiplication in Kinshasa. Chapter 2 introduces the degree of suspicion and condemnation levelled against non-Christian spiritual movements, mostly by born-again Christians. A central argument here is that in the context of the city, suspicion must be understood as an infrapolitical resource, which explains why the boundaries between Christian and non-Christian movements so ardently persist.

The remaining chapters revolve around the various things EMM and TMAJ put into practice: Chapters 3 to 8 single out the most important of EMM and TMAJ's practices so as to historicise and contextualise them one by one in the religious history of West Central Africa and the pluralistic religious environment of contemporary Kinshasa. Each of the chapters constitutes a separate ethnographic essay on the basis of the same methodological framework: Chapter 3 discusses the (re-)production of Ikebana flower arrangement. Chapter 4 zooms in on ritualised rubbish removal and the sensory generation of citizenship through touching urban public soil. Chapters 5 and 6 address the healing energy of *Johrei* in the context of religious and medical pluralism, which is followed by the matter of 'vibrating' Japanese mantras and the power of

vocal sound and silence (Chapter 7). Lastly, the ‘imported tradition’ of ancestor worship is discussed in Chapter 8. Aesthetic difference and authority recur as leitmotifs throughout all chapters. Persistently faithful to the aesthetic approach, they all reveal continuities and disjunctions between spiritual movements and Christian ones from the actors’ point of view.

The Research: Seeker among Seekers

The study is based on a total of seventeen months of fieldwork in Kinshasa between February 2010 and September 2013. Despite shorter visits to Lower Congo, the Bandundu province and Kisangani, it was chiefly carried out in Kinshasa’s *cités*. Getting to know ‘how this city works’, with all its intensities, surprises and challenges, was as time-consuming as it was indispensable. It allowed me to grow familiar with the ways in which people connect and get around, both socially as friends and family, as well as physically in the city’s public transport system. Before I took to motorbiking so as to gain time, mainly for home visits, taking taxis and minibuses enabled me to have some of the most extraordinary encounters, intense experiences of heat and physical proximity, and probably the biggest traffic jams possible. It also taught me the precautions, reflexes and interaction skills necessary to feel secure at any moment. With EMM, TMAJ and their *bandimi* (followers) being dispersed all over Kinshasa, I was thus able to frequent various different neighbourhoods.

The ethnographic research meant participating in as much of EMM and TMAJ’s church life, and in as many life situations of their followers, as possible. This also meant getting in touch with followers of other churches and spiritual movements, including PCCs, Catholic missionaries, Kimbanguists, and the spiritual movements of Sukyô Mahikari, Mokichi Okada Association, Brahma Kumaris, the Grail Movement, Rosicrucians (AMORC), Soka Gakkai International, the Moonies and Freemasons. As the research focus progressed, the vantage point from which I learned to perceive the city gradually became that of EMM, TMAJ and their *bandimi* in combination with those of my local friends and families in the neighbourhoods in Masina Sans-Fil and Kingabwa.

The situation of EMM and TMAJ being stigmatised minorities did not render research very easy. When in May 2010 I met a professor Mwene Batende at the University of Kinshasa, he was thrilled about my idea of doing an ethnography of a spiritual movement. Clearly aware of their understudied situation, his excitement was less about the topic

itself, however, than about the fact that I was a European. This kind of research can only be done by somebody from outside, he said, pointing to the fact that any local researcher would be suspected by spiritualists of wanting to misrepresent their non-Christian teachings as diabolic. His encouraging insight reconfirmed that my white complexion as a *mundele*, and my European, Belgian origins were going to influence the relationship I would have with any interlocutor at any given moment.

What had encouraged my interest in the EMM movement was that in none of the various initial talks with the *responsables* and *bandimi* of this movement did I feel pressured to state my religious background or affiliation. More generally in Kinshasa, the question *Osambelaka wapi?* (Where do you pray?) is among the first that people ask, and indicates the importance of denominational affiliation for one's group identification. I soon understood that having sincere discussions about agnosticism and atheism was not a viable option in a heavily Pentecostalised setting, so I eventually turned to evoking another facet of my biography by answering *Nabotama na libota ya baCatholiques* (I was born in a Catholic family). EMM explicitly invites followers to combine different religious affiliations. Peter Clarke recounts how the former head of the Brazilian section of World Messianity (on which Kinshasa indirectly depends) presented the movement as an 'ultra religion', totally supradenominational, going beyond and underlying all other existing religions, and 'encapsulating the fundamental principles of them all' (Clarke 2006c: 131).²⁸ In Okada's writings this feature is termed 'super religion' (Okada 1999 [1984]: i). The founder justified it by calling his movement a 'department store Church': 'like a large store that includes many kinds of departments our teachings encompass Christianity, Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, general philosophy, science and fine arts. ... we must extend our hands to help everyone and everything that exists on earth' (Okada 1999 [1984]: 15). While many *Messianiques* were actually taking advantage of this openness, I would find out in the course of the research that EMM's *responsables* were often less embracing as the doctrine suggests. Below the surface of EMM's official tolerance they perceived especially Kinshasa's *Eglises de Réveil* as denominational rivals, which was encouraged, no doubt, by the discrediting tone these other *Eglises* are used to voicing regarding EMM (cf. Chapter 2).

In May 2010 I attended an 'initiation ceremony' at EMM's headquarters in Gombe. To my surprise, not a shred of secrecy was perceivable. The initiation, which was done on a Sunday morning, consisted of the initiate offering 50 USD in an envelope to his ancestors and receiving the Ohikari medal around her/his neck in front of the entire church community in a cordial prayer-like gesture by the delegate from Angola.

In some cases, a confession ritual called *réflexion profonde*, which was abandoned by TMAJ, as well as some study of Meishu Sama's teachings, were required. This meant participating in teaching sessions with an open question and answer round at the end. EMM's 'initiation' was clearly much less linked to a ritual death and rebirth as a new person, as it is known from traditional initiation in Africa (V. Turner 1968), than the 'baptism' of born-again Christians. Although I knew that the non-denominational openness was probably part of a wider proselytising strategy of a minority movement, I was surprised by the overall openness and interest of many seekers and *bandimi* who frequented this 'Japanese' church. In May 2010, I thus asked EMM's local *ministre* for permission to do an ethnographic study of EMM in Kinshasa. His welcoming and positive response was combined with an invitation to be initiated, which I understood to be part of his missionary duty. Would it not grant him and his movement an additional prestige to have initiated a European student? Or was it perhaps the idea of my initiation fee that encouraged him? (In 2012 the amount was raised to 100 USD.) I had gotten used to the fact that in Kinshasa my presence was being used for a lot of different purposes. I also knew that each time I had followed somebody to his born-again church, for instance, the person whom I had followed would do everything to present me to the pastor so as to politicise my presence for his/her own personal honour. Formal conversion was clearly not a necessary element for my presence to be instrumentalised, nor could it stop this from happening. I therefore accepted the *ministre's* invitation to be initiated, knowing that this would also allow me to establish an even more serious relationship with my interlocutors. At the same time, I would have the possibility to explore the aesthetic practice of *Johrei* from both the receiving and the giving end, while wearing an amulet for a while has been an equally rewarding ethnographic experience (cf. Chapter 6). In the context of systematic condemnation, this was indeed a trust-enhancing measure, while I have always, in every dialogue and conversation, stressed my identity as a student who is doing anthropological fieldwork.

During my third research stay in 2012, the schism occurred and TMAJ was founded (cf. Chapter 1). This placed me in an uneasy situation of seemingly having to choose between factions, given that I knew both the followers of EMM as well as those of the novel TMAJ movement. I took this incident as an occasion to increase my distance from both movements and encompass a wider perspective. I thus stopped wearing my amulet and no longer transmitted *Johrei*.

A research day would generally start with a writing phase in the early morning. Then the day would either be spent at one or several

prayer sites so as to practise *Johrei*, participate in prayers and teaching sessions, and talk to *Messianiques*. Alternatively, a day would include home visits and meetings with interlocutors. I thus came to visit many homes beyond EMM and TMAJ's different units in Gombe, Kinshasa, Lemba, Kimbanseke (Mokali), Mpasa-Maba, Nsele (Inforbank), Masina (Petrocongo), Mbinza, as well as Mbanza Ngungu in the Lower Congo province.²⁹ I also participated in several public cleaning campaigns (*salongo*) (Chapter 4), as well as collective gardening sessions in EMM's garden of 'natural agriculture' in Mangengege (*bilanga*) (Lambertz 2016b).

The constitution of a core focus group of interlocutors was interesting precisely because of the gradual regular distancing of some members from their respective movements. It was often difficult to visit people at their homes, since it was usually impossible to speak openly about non-Christian spiritualistic matters in the vicinity of their family members. I therefore carried out home visits especially with those in the position of *responsable*, i.e. with a formal responsibility in one of the movements, and whose families were usually also *Messianiques*. Given that they consider EMM or TMAJ to be very similar and comparable to Christian churches, they had much less difficulty with being outspoken at their homes. Others encouraged home visits but requested that I be diplomatic concerning matters of the church. To protect the interlocutors both from in and outside the spectrum of spiritualists who are present in the text, all names in the present study are pseudonyms. It should be noted that this is an urban ethnography from the vantage point of a religious minority. Just like other ethnographies, such as Katrien Pype's study of Kinshasa's born-again Christians (2012), for instance, it is not representative of the entire city's population.

It should be stressed that there were striking similarities between the endeavours of 'spiritualists' and my own 'scientific' endeavours. Most spiritualists call themselves *chercheurs*, which in French can mean both 'seeker' and 'researcher'. Given that I was also a *chercheur*, though one who was paid through a university stipend, this designation made me their fellow *chercheur* from Europe. My research was seen as having the same aims and intentions as that of a local *chercheur*, be it to gain insight into the ways in which visible and invisible things work among humans and in the world at large, into techniques of healing and becoming prosperous, as well as the aspiration to wonder and discover by way of experiencing, by sensing and modulating the body (what else is 'participant observation'?), or by way of ludic sensory friction with the unknown. Is anthropology's quest really different from the quest of 'spiritualists' in Kinshasa? I gradually came to sense what Harry West

describes in *Ethnographic Sorcery* (2007), that this local understanding of my own 'work' was in fact telling me a lot about myself, my passion for anthropology, and about the implications of power, status and also my own aesthetic difference that, in my case, I was unwillingly carrying with me as my skin. The present book can therefore be read as both an ethnography of inquiry and an inquiry into ethnography. I have come to accept, and have increasingly started triumphing at the thought, that although differently framed and encouraged by more material resources, the research I present here is essentially very comparable to the quest of seekers in Kinshasa, and that in the end I have been, and I continue to be, a seeker among seekers.

Notes

1. Kinshasa was looted in 1991, and again in 1993 (cf. De Villers and Omasombo 2004, Jewsiewicki, Mbuyamba and Ngombu 1995).
2. Given the persisting hardship in the 1990s this project was locally perceived as *démocratie* (cf. Yoka 1999).
3. E.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, Geschiere 1997, Marshall-Fratani 2001, Marshall 2009, Moore and Sanders 2001, Van Dijk 2000.
4. Special thanks to Katrien Pype for making me join her on this unforgettable day.
5. See in this context the classic study by Balandier (1953), as well as Mwene-Batende (1982).
6. Given that the data gathered for this book was collected before the province of *Bas-Congo* was renamed *Kongo Central* in 2015, the name *Lower Congo* is used instead of *Central Kongo*.
7. For religious pluralism in Kinshasa, see also De Boeck 2004a: 75–138 and Pype 2012: 27–62.
8. Cf. <http://www.izunome.jp/en/border/africa/>, accessed 13 December 2014.
9. This study builds on existing ethnographies of the city of Kinshasa. The works of De Boeck (2004a) and Pype (2012), in particular, are indispensable references.
10. Cf. Bernault n.d., 2005, Ellis and Ter Haar 2004, Geschiere 1997, Ndaywel è Nziem 1993, Schatzberg 1993, 2000, 2001: 111–144.
11. On cultural ties between India and Africa, see Hawley 2008.
12. In addition to the circulation of chromolitographs studied by Drewal (1988) dance videos featuring Bollywood actresses dancing to the tune of a snake charmer became influential in Kinshasa in the 1950s on local understandings of India. Cf. the film *Nagin* (Hindi: female snake) from 1954 (available on YouTube). In the 1980s the image of India was popularised in Congo through films like *Nagina* and *Nigahen: Nagina Part II*. Here, actress Sridevi, well known in India, turns into a snake at night while dancing uncontrollably to the typical tune associated with the snake charmer (interview with

- Mr Kirit Vohra, Gombe, March 2013). Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IaJ2_CehkoQ, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ish42wa35B4>, accessed 12 December 2014. The apparel of the actresses in such videos, usually shiny snake- or mermaid-like clothing, has most probably also influenced the Congolese imagination of Mami Wata.
13. This reminds of the protective magic of rebel leader Pierre Mulele (Isichei 1995), for instance, or of the Mai Mai in Eastern Congo (Vlassenroot 2012).
 14. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GrEruhMZNxc>, last accessed 12 December 2014.
 15. See the chapter 'Mythologie de la violence à Kinshasa' in Yoka 1999.
 16. The website of the Indian organisation Guru Siyag's Siddha Yoga (GSSY) – the Hindi title of the organisation translates as *For Economic Prosperity and Removal of Diseases* – has sections in Kikongo, Lingala and Swahili. Cf. http://www.the-comforter.org/How_to_Meditate_Lingala.html, accessed 13 December 2014.
 17. The abounding religious diversification in many cities around the globe prompts us to think about the affiliation between anthropology and so-called 'world religions'. The 'anthropology of Christianity', for instance, initiated by Joel Robbins (2003, 2007) as a 'self-conscious, comparative project' (2003: 191), has gradually grown into an accepted subfield of the discipline. For obvious reasons, the presence of non-Christian, yet truly global spiritual movements, challenges such a world-religion perspective. While the Church of World Messianity (EMM) calls itself an established 'religion' in Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, the United States, Brazil and now Africa, would it therefore qualify as a 'world religion'? Or should we attempt to inaugurate an 'anthropology of spiritual movements', or of 'new religious movements'? Analytical concepts have ontogenetic power. By reiterating, and indeed institutionalising, Christianity as a 'world religion' with its personal group of scholars and research departments, do anthropologists not risk becoming accomplices in the hegemonic endeavours of those who wish to label themselves as part of a 'world religion'? While it is unquestionable that the anthropology of Christianity has benefitted from and triggered the most outstanding scholarship, the data presented in this book prompts us to ask whether an 'anthropology of religious pluralism' would be a rewarding analytical alternative.
 18. But see recent work on the Nigerian movements of 'Chrislam' (Janson 2016) and Nasfat (Soares 2009).
 19. *Caminho das Índias* is a Brazilian Emmy-winning television telenovela (soap opera) produced by *Rede Globo*. It was first broadcast in Brazil from 19 January to 11 September 2009.
 20. Cf. Chidester, Tobler and Wratten 1997, Kumar 2000.
 21. Cf. Larkin 1997, Vander Steene 2008, Wuaku 2009, 2012, 2013, Drewal 1988, Rush 1999, 2009, Dovlo 1993, 1994, 1995, 1998.
 22. Cf. Srinivas 2008, Younger 2010, Eisenlohr 2006.
 23. Not forgetting *Okada*, the Japanese founder of EMM, which is also the name given to motorbike taxis in Nigeria. Cf. Beekers and van Gol 2012.

24. See for instance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exll4j9XcEg>, accessed 24 March 2017.
25. Cf. De Boeck 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006, De Boeck and Honwana 2005, Simone 2001.
26. See Meyer 2008a, 2008b; Meyer and Houtman 2012; Espirito Santo and Tassi 2013; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Keane 2008.
27. In Peirce's own terms, 'an icon is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses, just the same, whether any such object actually exists or not' (Peirce 1940: 102).
28. Thus, in Brazil and Bolivia, Catholic clergy have also become sympathisers and practitioners of World Messianity, and in recent times it has attracted some 300 Theravada Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, who now both receive and transmit *Johrei* (Clarke 2006c: 570).
29. A visit to Mbuji Mayi and the novel units of Lubumbashi and Kenge was unfortunately not possible, and nor was a visit to the African headquarters in Luanda, Angola.