AFRICAN COSMOPOLITANISM AND THE ATLANTIC

Trade, Imperial Contact and Relating to the Past in the Niger Delta (Nineteenth to Twenty-first Centuries)

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Abstract

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This thesis analyses the role of material culture in shaping imperial contact in the Niger Delta, a centuries-long hub for transatlantic trade, and examines the ways in which people use the remnants of this material culture to relate to the past in Nigeria's petro-state today. Based on sixteen months of fieldwork in Nigeria and London, it gives a nuanced account of the politicisation of transatlantic encounters in the current political economy of oil. Drawing on Mikhael Bakhtin's (1981) notion of 'chronotope' and Kristina Wirtz's (2014) concept of 'temporality-emplacement', it moves beyond the often-contested concepts of 'history' and 'memory' and looks at the performative modes with which people use material culture to relate to the past, stake claims in the present and envision possible futures. The concept of chronotopes allows for a better understanding of how people perform time and space with help of 'things', including images, artefacts, bodies and the environment, and thus create worlds which allow particular subjectivities to emerge. In the Niger Delta, where African merchant elites have been 'seeing and acting beyond local environments' (Prestholdt 2008) for centuries, these subjectivities are predominantly cosmopolitan. Gifts from transatlantic trade and international commodities fostered cosmopolitan lifestyles and identities. Today, it is this cosmopolitan reach that makes the remnants of transatlantic encounters particularly valuable for the formation of heritage and the contestation of land and, thus, mineral rights. Taking a crisis of leadership in the Kingdom of Warri and a film made by expatriate Nigerians in London as starting points, the thesis compares the competing chronotopes of Pentecostalism, sacred kingship, ancestral worship, theatre and museums in Nigeria's postcolony and highlights their entanglements with intra- and interethnic as well as national-regional and transnational politics. It gives insights into the interdependencies of cultural practices and shifting political economies and contributes to a better understanding of Africa's relationship with the Atlantic world.

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1. Introduction. Approaching the Material Culture of the African Palm Oil Trade

'Like a family visiting a fallen soldier.'

These were the words with which Rex Clarke, a member of the Itsekiri diaspora community in London, summed up the experience that he and his fellow Itsekiri had when visiting the National Maritime Museum in London for the first time in November 2014. They had seen a small, but eclectic collection of things that had once belonged to Nanna Olomu (1840–1916), a prominent merchant and political representative of the Itsekiri in the western Niger Delta, today's Nigeria, in the late nineteenth century. When, during the 'scramble for Africa', Nanna insisted on the political and economic sovereignty of his people, the Royal Navy attacked his town Ebrohimi in 1894, looted his possessions and burned his town to the ground. The majority of Nanna's possessions was sold to finance the attack[1], but some of the items were taken as colonial war trophies by navy personnel to the United Kingdom and were later donated to the National Maritime Museum. This gesture of colonial appropriation is captured in the inscription on a small ivory tusk in the museum's collection: 'Captured from Nana at Benin 1894' (Fig. 1.1).

More than a hundred years after these events, the National Maritime Museum sought to look into the histories behind these objects and applied for an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award with the University of Oxford to explore the stories that this ivory tusk as well as three canoe flags, a blunderbuss, a drum, an umbrella and the diary of Admiral Frederick Bedford, who had led the attack against Nanna in 1894, could reveal. The choice of the collaborating university department was revealing about the directions that the research project was

[1] Hickley, John Dennis. 1894. *An Account of the Operations on the Benin River in August and September, 1894*, London, inventory number: HIK/104.15, Caird Library, Royal Museums Greenwich.

supposed to take. It was not the Faculty of History but the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology which became the academic home for these explorations and whose theoretical and methodological understandings shaped this research project. There was an explicit acknowledgement that in order to understand the African experience of the imperial encounters that led to the forceful 'migration' (Basu 2011) of these things from the Niger Delta to the UK it was important to employ a diachronic approach, understood as research in the archive and research with so called 'source communities'(Peers and Brown 2003), understood as people who had a historical and affective connection with the collection.



Figure 1.1: Ivory tusk on stilts reading 'Captured from Nana at Benin 1894'. The reworked colonial trophy is the exception to the rule concerning the provenance of Nanna Olomu's collection at the National Maritime Museum. It was not donated to the museum by navy personnel or their descendants but purchased as part of the Michael Graham-Stewart Slavery Collection in 2002. Inventory number: X2002/046. Photo: National Maritime Museum, Royal Museums Greenwich.

The assumption behind the 'sharing of collections' (Buijs, Hovens, and Broekhoven 2010) was that collaborative research could help to foster a deeper understanding of the social and cultural meanings of these objects for Itsekiri in the nineteenth century and of the meaning of these objects for Itsekiri in the diaspora and in Nigeria today. Moreover, collaborative research into colonial collections for example with First Nations in Canada had shown that the reconnection of people with what they believed was long-lost heritage could be a 'healing' and culturally revitalising experience (Peers 2013). Even though Rex Clarke's above

mentioned remark on the reconnection of Itsekiri in the diaspora with Nanna Olomu's objects at the National Maritime Museum suggests that this encounter developed into a meeting of family members, living and dead, this meeting across space and time has so far not sparked the revitalisation of particular cultural or religious practices. During my sixteen months of fieldwork with Itsekiri in London and Nigeria (three of those months in the Niger Delta), it became clear that the collaboration with my Itsekiri research partners was less a means of healing colonial trauma but rather a means of asserting African agency in the narration and 'canonisation' (Assmann 2008) of Itsekiri history and, via Itsekiri history, of the history of imperial contact and cultural exchange in West Africa more generally.

The self-assertive re-inscription of Itsekiri experiences into African and global history is but one of many multisensory and polysemic potentials or 'affordances' (Basu and De Jong 2016, Basu 2017a) of the collection at the National Maritime Museum. The things' materiality also defies an analysis along beaten paths, resisting straight-forward classification, for example, into categories of 'primitive art' (Price 1989), defined in the Western eyes as things for ritual use, untouched by outside influences. Their materiality rather points to the things' cross-cultural production and use and, consequently, to the long exposure of the Itsekiri and other merchant elites in the Niger Delta to the Atlantic world. The flags were made of imported woollen bunting and were most probably a collaborative effort between British merchants and African flag makers (Fig. 1.2). The blunderbuss had been produced in the UK around 1800, but was among Nanna's possessions when Rear Admiral Dickson, who fought in the war against Nanna, took it to the UK in the 1890s (Fig. 1.3). The gun had most probably been traded in exchange for palm oil, the main export good from the Niger Delta in the nineteenth century, either with Nanna or one of his predecessors.



Figure 1.2: One of Nanna Olomu's flags at the National Maritime Museum, donated by Captain F.H. Kennedy in 1968. The flag measures 2,4 x 4,2 metres and includes a painting of man shooting a leopard with a rifle. Nanna's name as well as the Union Jack, in the left–hand corner, are stitched on the imported woollen bunting. Inventory number: AAA0555. Photo: National Maritime Museum, Royal Museums Greenwich.



Figure 1.3: One of Nanna's blunderbusses, made around 1800 in the UK and most probably traded with either Nanna or one of his predecessors in exchange for palm oil; donated to the museum by Rear Admiral Dickson in 1946, inventory number: AAA2509. Photo: National Maritime Museum, Royal Museums Greenwich.

What is intriguing about these things are their stories of trade, imperial contact and cultural exchange and the prospect of looking beyond histories of European collecting and narratives of colonial conquest. Moreover, their cross-cultural production and use question rigid notions of inward-looking and stagnant African societies and rather highlight the openness and creativity of coastal people in their engagement with the Atlantic world.

What can these things tell us about the ways in which Itsekiri merchants and other coastal trading elites in the Niger Delta related to Britain's imperial agents (merchants, diplomats and navy personnel) before and during colonial conquest? What can they tell us about the lifestyle that these elites forged due to their exposure to the Atlantic world? And how and to what purpose do people in Nigeria today relate to them and other material remnants of transatlantic encounters? The answering of these questions aims to uncover African agency in trade, imperial contact and cultural exchange between West Africa and Europe and thereby seeks to contribute to a growing body of literature that goes beyond victimising accounts of transatlantic trade and colonisation to understand Africa's active engagement with the world (Northrup 2002, Morgan and Hawkins 2004, Cooper 2009, Green 2012, Getz 2013).

Nanna Olomu's things were collected at the end of a highly dynamic period of imperial contact in which the abolition of the trade in enslaved people in 1807 and its supplementation by the trade in palm oil led to political economic reconfigurations on the global as well as on the local scale. Palm oil and, from the 1850s onwards, palm kernel were amongst the most sought-after trading goods of the Victorian era and paramount in shaping British-Nigerian relations prior to the establishment of formal colonial rule in the 1880s and 1890s. They were used as lubricant in machinery as well as in the manufacture of soaps and candles (Lynn 1997). They were amongst the lubricants that greased Britain's industrial revolution and had major impact not only on Empire Cities like Liverpool, Manchester and London (Driver and Gilbert 1999, Cain and Hopkins 2001, Sherwood 2007, Haggerty, Webster, and White 2008, Beaven 2012) but also on the lifestyle and socio-political organisation of people in the Niger Delta, the main hub for palm oil in the nineteenth century.

Despite the trade's far-reaching cultural repercussions, scholars have analysed the impact of the palm oil trade in West Africa solely from the perspective of political economy. On the one hand, they have looked at its role in the abolition of transatlantic trade in enslaved people

(Ikime 1969, Northrup 1976, Jones 1983, Law 1995, Lynn 1997). On the other hand, they have analysed the trade's impact on the political-economic organisation of communities in the Bights of Benin and Biafra (Dike 1956, Horton 1969, Hopkins 1973, Latham 1973, Martin 1988, Jones 2000, Mann 2007) and its role in the consolidation of British indirect rule in southern Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth century (Alagoa 1964, Anene 1966, Ikime 1968, Alagoa 1970, 1972, 1976, Ayomike 1992, Alagoa 1995, Cookey 2005). The major cultural ramifications of trade in this highly dynamic period of imperial contact, however, remain understudied. My research seeks to fill this gap by looking at the role of material culture and particularly its exchange and consumption in shaping imperial contact and in forging elite lifestyles (Cohen 1981) and identities in dialogue with the Atlantic world.

Moreover, the material remnants of these Atlantic encounters have led highly visible 'lives' (Appadurai 1986b, Kopytoff 1986) in the Niger Delta up to today, serving, amongst other things, to display family wealth and forge regional as well as national identities. The thesis, thus, also traces the lives of Atlantic material culture from Nigeria's post-independence oil-boom era to the military regime of the 1990s (Barber 2000, Apter 2005) and to interethnic conflicts and youth insurgencies in the Niger Delta at the turn of the twentieth century (Watts 1994, 2001, Adunbi 2015). Hence, it discusses the ways in which people in Nigeria's postcolony have used material culture to revaluate the political, economic, cultural and, in particular, religious dynamics of past transatlantic encounters and to comment on and stake a claim in the current political economy of crude oil.

Analytical Framework

Drawing on a vast body of literature on the Atlantic (Gilroy 1993, Law and Mann 1999, Morgan 2000, Bailey 2005, Gilroy 2010, Klein 2010, Nwokeji 2010, Peterson 2010, Ferreira

2012, Green 2012, Thornton 2012, Suárez Bosa 2014), I follow Frederic Cooper (2009) in taking the Atlantic not only as a geographical zone but as an analytical perspective, understood as a focal point of analysis for transcontinental movements of people, goods and ideas and the material and immaterial legacies that these transcontinental encounters produced over time. Cooper defines the Atlantic as a dynamic 'web of connections' (2009, 33) or 'meshwork' (Ingold 2011, 2015) of nodes, blockages and movements, as an 'intercontinental zone in which cultural inventiveness, synthesis, and adaption take place, both reflecting and altering power relations' (Cooper 2009, 40). He highlights the interdependencies of political economy and cultural practices – an analytical perspective that is crucial for understanding how the transatlantic trade shaped cultural practices and, vice versa, how these cultural practices influenced how trade was conducted and power relations were negotiated (see chapter 1).

A concept that seeks to capture Africans' active engagement with and contribution to transatlantic meshworks is 'African cosmopolitanism'. Introduced by Achille Mbembe as 'Afropolitanism' (2005), its aim is to emphasise the openness, flexibility and creativity with which Africans have been engaging with foreign goods, ideas and people for centuries. While one strand of the debate on Afropolitanism has focused on 'the social imaginary of a [recent] generation of Africans born outside the continent, … embrac[ing] movement across time and space as the condition of possibility of an African way of being' (Gikandi 2010, 9-10), Jeremy Prestholdt (2008), Trevor Getz (2013), Cécile Fromont (2014) and Francisco Bethencourt (2017) and have focused on historical and material processes of engaging with the globalising world on the African continent. Looking at consumption practices of merchant elites at the nineteenth-century Swahili coast, Prestholdt uses the slightly different phrasing of 'African cosmopolitanism' to conceptualise 'ways of seeing and acting beyond local environments' (2008, 88). Prestholdt employs this term in order to differentiate it from the

more widely used notion of ‘modernity’ (Austen 1992, Hobsbawm 1996, Piot 1999, Bersselaar 2007, Fardon 2014), a term that describes a particular shift in the ways people in Europe perceived time, space and global relations in the nineteenth century and, therefore, cannot be easily transplanted into the African context. He rather argues that Africans created their own

> visions of globality that mirrored modernity in some ways, but simultaneously cultivated their own singularities that, like Western concepts of modernity, inflected the experience of intense global [or transatlantic] interconnectivity. (88–89)

I am applying this notion of African cosmopolitanism in my analysis of past and present Atlantic encounters in the Niger Delta to highlight the African merchants’ awareness of being part of a ‘global cultural economy’ (Appadurai 2008) and to stress the active ways in which Africans shaped and still shape these transatlantic and, thus, translocal (Röschenthaler 2006, Freitag and Oppen 2010, Ivanov 2012) relationships. Hence, by bringing together Cooper’s processual notion of the Atlantic with the concept of African cosmopolitanism, I seek to stress the African agency in colonial and postcolonial encounters and the intrinsic entanglements of cultural practices and shifting political economies.

What links the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial transatlantic meshworks in time and space is their materiality. On the one hand, as I will show in chapter 1, it was the trading and gifting of things, mainly international products and palm oil, that decisively shaped the meshwork of relationships in the imperialising ‘contact zone’ (Pratt 1992, Clifford 1997) of the nineteenth-century Niger Delta. One the other hand, as I will show in chapters 2, 3 and 5, it was the things’ ‘heritagisation’ or, in other words, their aesthetic and political ‘selection [as] cultural forms which are – more or less persuasively – canonized’ (Meyer and de Witte 2013, 276), that helped Nigerians renegotiate their relationship to precolonial pasts after independence (gained in 1960).

The most common way of analysing these processes of heritagisation is using the much-discussed concept of 'memory'. Paul Connerton's seminal work on *How Societies Remember* (1989) has laid the groundwork for understanding the performative ways in which communities create common 'images of the past' to foster social cohesion. In dialogue with Maurice Halbwachs ([1950] 1980) and Pierra Nora (1989), Connerton argues that present circumstances determine how and what a group or an individual remembers from the past and that, reversely, these recollections shape the understanding of the present. Moreover, follow-up studies by, for example, Jennifer Cole (2001) have highlighted the ways in which past experiences, particularly traumatic ones such as colonisation, can influence how and what people remember today. Though, as David Berliner (2005) has rightly pointed out, 'memory' has since become interchangeable to 'culture' or 'identity' in many anthropological writings and has therefore lost its analytical rigour. He calls for a more precise analysis of not only what and how people remember but also what and how they forget (Trouillot 1995, see also Sarró 2007, Littlewood 2009, Stoler 2011). Yet, despite the acknowledgement of the interdependence of 'actively circulated memory that keeps the past present' or, as Aleida Assmann (2008) has termed it, the 'canon', and the 'passively stored memory that preserves the past past' or, in her words, the 'archive', there is still a lack of analytical tools to conceptualise and compare different modes of how exactly people relate to the past. Drawing on the burgeoning body of literature on material culture and the senses (Radley 1990, Seremetakis 1996, Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, Lankauskas 2006, Bennett and Joyce 2010, Diawara, Lategan, and Rüsen 2013, Meyer and de Witte 2013, Howes 2014, Meyer and Port 2018b), this thesis seeks a possible way out of the analytical deadlock.

In the field of material culture studies, Nadia Seremetakis (1996, 9) has offered a helpful definition of mnemonic processes as 'culturally mediated material practice[s] that [are] activated by embodied acts and semantically dense objects.' While recent studies have

revealed ‘objects’ to be a European idea based on the Cartesian division between body and mind and body and material world (Classen and Howes 2006, Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, Meyer 2006) and rather prefer ‘things’ to denote ‘images, artefacts, bodily fluids as well as spaces and technologies’ (Houtman and Meyer 2013a, 17), Seremetakis’ focus on the performative and material ways in which people relate to the past opens up new avenues of research. It not only allows to discuss in detail the embodied, that is sensually, emotionally and mentally incorporated, modalities with which people relate to the past but also to analyse the time-space configurations that these modalities engender. Seremetakis takes the example of the replacement of a locally grown peach by international mass produce in Greece as a starting point to talk about a specific time-space configuration, *nostalghía*. She contends that ‘if your material culture is removed and replaced, you become unable to codify past, present and anticipatory experiences at the level of sensory existence’ (Seremetakis 1996, 3). Stripped of things that could elicit habituated sensory experiences, what remains is *nostalghía*, from the Greek *nostos* meaning journey or return and *algho* meaning longing and pain, or, more precisely, the painful longing to journey back in time and the realisation that the place you longed to return to no longer exists. In this sense, the *nostalghía* evoked by the absence of locally grown peaches could be considered what Mikhail Bakhtin has coined a ‘chronotope’.

> In the literary artistic chronotope, […] time […] thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (Bakhtin 1981, 84)

Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope, understood as the ways in which writers narrate time and space and thus create worlds which enable particular subjectivities to emerge, has inspired a variety of feminist (Hohne and Wussow 1994) and postcolonial (Wirtz 2014) scholars working on media (Steinby and Klapuri 2013, Jordan-Haladyn 2014), performance (Barber 2000, McCaw 2016) and history (Lambek 2002). They have expanded Bakhtin’s insights from European literature to performative acts in art, religion and everyday life in sites such as

Cuba (Wirtz 2014), Nigeria (Barber 2000), Madagascar (Lambek 2002) and Bosnia (HadžiMuhamedović 2018). By extension, they also stress the fact that European historiography – in its chronological and 'purifying' (Wirtz 2016) way – is but one amongst many chronotopes co-existing and overlapping in today's postcolonial world (Palmié and Stewart 2016).

In this thesis, I will combine insights of material culture studies and the senses with the notion of chronotope that Kristina Wirtz has recently put forward in *Afro-Cuba* (2014). In her analysis on the ways in which Afro-Cubans perform relationships to the African continent and to a pre-enslavement past and, in so doing, form racialised subjectivities, she has emphasised the performative quality of chronotopes and expanded the term to denote the embodied process of 'temporality-emplacement'. While Wirtz focuses mainly on dance, embodied rituals and speech acts, my thesis draws attention to the material processes which underpin such temporality-emplacements. I will discuss three ways in which people in the Niger Delta use bodies and things to relate to the past, specifically staging the past in theatre (chapter 4), embodying the past in ancestral worship (chapter 5) and curating the past in a museum (chapter 6), and analyse the 'temporality-emplacement' each of these modes engenders. Chapter 3 will moreover take the case study of a recent crisis in leadership in the Kingdom of Itsekiri (or Warri) to introduce the main themes that negotiations about African cosmopolitanism have entailed over the last two centuries: trade, religious contact and cultural (ex)change. By differentiating and comparing these material-based modes of relating to the past, I seek to contribute a better understanding of how people in Nigeria's 'postcolony' navigate what Achille Mbembe (2001, 16) has identified as 'interlocking presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones.'

Sourcing Historical Research

I found material and archival sources for the analysis of past transatlantic encounters not only in the collection, logbooks and naval diaries at the National Maritime Museum, London, but also in published travel accounts and diaries of British traders (Merseyside Maritime Museum, Liverpool) and colonial personnel (Commonwealth and African Collections, Bodleian Library Oxford). The correspondence between the Foreign Office, the Royal Navy and the consuls in the Niger Delta (National Archives, London) and between the consuls and British and African merchants within the delta (National Archives Ibadan) proved particularly revealing concerning the complex and often contradictory strategies of the British and African actors involved. Historical photographs from the British Museum, the Unilever Archives, the Liverpool Records Office, the World Museum Liverpool, the Manchester Museum and the Museum der Kulturen, Basel, dating from the 1880s onwards give invaluable insights into the lifestyle and self-fashioning of the Niger Delta merchant elites in the late nineteenth century. The collection at the Nanna Living History Museum in Koko, Delta State, Nigeria, holds the extensive private collection of Nanna Olomu who was the only exiled leader from this part of West Africa who was able to return home alive. His collection, together with private archives in the delta, were indispensable for understanding the modes of collecting, consumption and display in the era of the palm oil trade.

Filming Together

I gained the ethnographic insights into the material culture-based ways of relating to the past mainly by two research methods, participatory observation and collaborative filmmaking. Both of these research methods grew out of my initial attempt to 'share' (Buijs, Hovens, and Broekhoven 2010) the Itsekiri collection at the National Maritime Museum. As Paul Basu (2011) acknowledges with his notion of 'object diasporas', West African objects in British

museums not only encompass roots and routes. Building on Paul Gilroy, Basu (2011, 3) also insists that 'even traumatic origin narratives [of things] can be reconfigured to become sources of strength and creativity.' The reconnection of Itsekiri in the diaspora with their 'object diaspora' at the National Maritime Museum sparked such a creative response and led to a collaborative film project that explored the outward-looking past and cultural heritage of the Itsekiri people.

The initiative for this film project (Fig. 1.4) came from the president of the diaspora organisation Ugbajo Itsekiri UK (literally translated 'Itsekiri Gathering UK'), Dr (and by the time of finishing this thesis Chief) Mogba Eyeoyibo. Chief Eyeoyibo's idea of a documentary film reflected Ugbajo Itsekiri UK's mission to uphold Itsekiri cultural practices in the diaspora and to contribute to the Itsekiri community in Nigeria. His aim was to educate younger generations of Itsekiri about their past and invited me to contribute my knowledge about and access to Itsekiri things in British museums and archives to the film. Moreover, by offering the film to collaborating cultural institutions like the National Maritime Museum, he envisioned raising the profile of the Itsekiri in the UK and, if the film was shown on TV or at an international film festival, in the wider world. Thus, he intended to harness my interest in Itsekiri pasts for a project that would not only benefit me, but more importantly the wider Itsekiri community in the diaspora and in Nigeria.

From a methodological standpoint, the film project had the potential to avoid the often criticised, one-sided way of extracting knowledge from research partners without reciprocating and to co-create a narrative in which my voice would be in dialogue with those of my Itsekiri partners (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Ruby 1992, Minh-Ha 1993). The film project, which was to include heritage sites and experts in Europe and in Nigeria, was firmly in Itsekiri hands. Three members of Ugbajo Itsekiri UK spearheaded the project. Chief Eyeoyibo acted as producer, Rex Clarke as director of the film and his sister Roli Clarke as

executive producer. The budget for the film equipment and the travel expenses for the Itsekiri members of the team was raised within the Itsekiri community in London and in Nigeria. I saw my role in facilitating access to cultural institutions in the UK (the National Maritime Museum and the World Museum Liverpool respectively) and was given the role of the interviewer who elicited information about Itsekiri pasts and presents with our various interview partners. By ceding authority to the Itsekiri film team concerning the choice of interviewees, film sites and film aesthetics I sought to put into practice the ethnographic ideal of speaking 'alongside' (Ruby 1992) or 'nearby' (Trinh T. Minh-ha in Chen 1992) my research partners. These postcolonial ideas of doing ethnography and co-creating knowledge were severely tested in the field and, as the film project is still ongoing, I will allude to the ongoing translations of differing ideas of film style, historiography and polyphony in the concluding chapter.

As a research method, the film project provided valuable insights into Itsekiri ways of canonising transatlantic pasts. It was also crucial in gaining access to Itsekiri cultural experts, historians and heritage sites in the Niger Delta which would otherwise have necessitated months of building trust in the field. Given the unstable political situation in the Niger Delta, my embeddedness in the film team became vital to accomplish my research there.



Figure 1.4: London-based filmmaker Rex Clarke and delta-based cameraman Jakpa Gbubemi film my interview with Anthony Nanna, a grandson of Nanna Olomu, in the courtyard of the Nanna Living History Museum in Koko, Delta State, Nigeria. Photo: Rex Clarke and Jakpa Gbubemi, 2015.

Understanding Shifting Political Economies

The political economy of the Niger Delta has undergone a profound transformation since the African palm oil trade in the nineteenth century. Whereas the colonial state championed the export of food crops like palm oil in the south or groundnuts in the north, the discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta in 1956 led to a complete reorganisation of Nigeria's economy. By the 1970s, Nigeria's economy was depended on the exploitation and export of crude oil and the currency of the newly independent state (1960) was reconfigured as petro–naira (Barber 1982, Apter 2005). Today, more than ninety-eight percent of Nigeria's export earnings and around eighty percent of its federal government revenues stem from the oil business. Most of the oil exploitation takes place in the Niger Delta. It has caused severe

destruction of wildlife and the environment and the disproportionate allocation of oil revenues by the federal government has left many Niger Delta communities struggling with the collateral damages of the industry (Watts 1992, 1994). Especially the youths find themselves confronted with a lack of future perspectives and, since the 1990s, have taken up arms to fight for a share in the oil industry and its revenues (Watts 2008a, Adunbi 2015, Ugor 2015). In general, the struggle for a more equitable distribution of oil revenues and over land right issues has created many civil war-like outbursts of violence between the federal state and communities in the Niger Delta, between ethnic groups and between youths and local elites in the Niger Delta (Osaghae 1995, Welch 1995, Frynas 2001, Okonta 2003, Watts 2003).

For the Itsekiri in the western Niger Delta the most severe period of violence was the so called 'Warri Crisis' between 1999 and 2003 (Human Rights Watch 2003) where the three main ethnic groups in Delta State, the Itsekiri, the Ijo and the Urhobo, vied for land rights in Warri, the capital of Delta State. The inter-ethnic conflict spread from the capital into the creeks of the delta and, even after the declaration of cease-fire in 2003, violent skirmishes between ethnic groups continued. The armed struggle of youths further continued till 2009 when a presidential amnesty program sought to pacify the region and re-socialise disenfranchised youths with educational programs and compensatory payments (Tamuno 2011, Adunbi 2015). Today, distrust remains between members of different ethnic groups and inhabitants of Warri and environs still struggle to regain their previous standard and security of living. It was this highly politicised context scarred by interethnic rivalry and the unpredictable violence of youth militias that influenced my fieldwork in the Niger Delta.

However, 'petro-violence' (Watts 2001) and inter-ethnic rivalries not only set the context for my access to and safety in the field. Power struggles pervade nearly every aspect of life in the delta and especially public ways of relating to the past have been politicised in order to stake claims in the political economy of oil (Curnow 2002, Adunbi 2015). The material culture of

former transatlantic encounters plays a crucial role in this respect and mediates the ways in which Itsekiri relate to the past and stake a claim in the present. The thesis thus explores how and to what purpose Itsekiri use the remnants of the material culture of the African palm oil trade and other transatlantic encounters in the context of the current political economy of oil.

Tracing African Cosmopolitanism from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-first Centuries

My focus on material culture allows me to trace African cosmopolitanism in the Niger Delta's shifting political economies from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. On the one hand, I look at the ways in which merchant elites collected and displayed international goods and thereby not only forged cosmopolitan lifestyles and identities but also actively shaped the imperialising contact zone of the nineteenth-century Niger Delta. On the other hand, I analyse the material-culture based ways in which Itsekiri economic and cultural elites, the Royal House of Warri and Nigeria's changing military governments used the material remnants of past transatlantic encounters to make sense of and stake a claim in their respective postcolonial presents.

In chapter 1 *Becoming Imperial. Politicising the Gift in Atlantic Africa* I discuss how trade and gift giving forged a highly dynamic meshwork of relationships in the Niger Delta which created 'conditions and contingencies in which [British and African] actors made decisions, mobilized other people, and took actions that both opened and constrained future possibilities' (Cooper 2009, 46). More precisely, I trace the transformation of gifts, mainly in the form of customised international goods such as hats and staffs, from the 'shake hands' or 'dash' in commercial interactions in the first half of the nineteenth century to the political instrumentalisation of gifts during the 'scramble for Africa' (1884–1914). By locating this politicisation of the gift within the shifting political economies of the slow abolition of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people (1807–1866), the palm oil trade (1820–1900) and

colonialisation (1884–1914) I examine the often divergent notions of reciprocity and contract among British and African actors and analyse the different interests and expectations that shaped these imperial encounters. On the one hand, the analysis of the economic, political and cultural entanglements of the gift in West Africa's imperialising contact zone seeks to contribute a new perspective on the anthropological scholarship of the gift (Munn 1986, Strathern 1988, Piot 1991, Thomas 1991, Carrier 1995, Guyer and Belinga 1995, Godbout and Caillé 1998, Godelier 1999, Graeber 2001, Mauss [1925] 2016) which goes beyond dichotomous notions of gift versus commodity economies (Tsing 2013). On the other hand, it seeks to highlight the material processes through which people in imperialising contact zones established cultural, political and economic relationships, forged identities, struggled to maintain sovereignty or impose dominance and drew themselves and others into relationships of dependence (Thomas 1991, 1994, Gosden and Knowles 2001, Kingdon and Bersselaar 2008, Kingdon 2019).

In Nigeria's ever dynamic postcolony, it is particularly gifts from transatlantic encounters that play a pivotal role in relating to experiences prior to or during colonisation. Gifts manifest the cosmopolitan reach and charisma of past (economic and political) leaders and thus particularly lend themselves, amongst other things, to symbolic appropriation. Chapter 2 *Mobilising Things. Competing Chronotopes in the Age of Oil* discusses such a symbolic appropriation in the Itsekiri Kingdom and the crisis in leadership that thus ensued. In 2013, Olu (King) Atuwatse II (1943–2015) sought to mobilise the royal crown, a gift, according to a widely shared Itsekiri understanding, by the King of Portugal to the Itsekiri Prince Dom Domingo in 1610, to enforce his Pentecostal beliefs throughout the kingdom. The Olu sought to symbolically connect the prince's conversion to Catholicism four hundred years prior with his own Pentecostal convictions and to instigate an iconoclasm (Sarró 2009) of ancestral and other pre-Christian sites. His decision was met with fierce protests by the youths, women and

chiefs of Itsekiriland who rejected the king's Pentecostal chronotope of a 'complete break with the [ancestral] past' (Meyer 1998) and highlighted the vital link of ancestral practices and land and, consequently, land rights in Nigeria's political economy of oil. By looking at the competing chronotopes of Pentecostalism and ancestral worship, the chapter no only seeks to contribute to the debate on Pentecostalism (Marshall-Fratani 1998, Smith 2001, Larkin and Meyer 2006, Shaw 2007, Marshall 2009, Engelke 2011, McCauley 2013, Peel 2016) and sacred kingship (Adeboye 2007, Warnier 2007, Graeber and Sahlins 2016) in Nigeria. It also emphasises the *longue durée* of Itsekiri engagement with the transatlantic world and develops religion as one of the main themes that runs through negotiations of African cosmopolitanism from the post-independence oil boom era to Sani Abacha's military regime (1993-1998) and inter-ethnic conflicts at the turn of the twentieth century.

Chapter 3 *Staging the Past. Translating Red and Black Oil* takes up where the previous chapter left off, namely Olu Atuwatse II's efforts of reconciliation with his subjects after his failed attempt to establish Pentecostal rule. The program of his twenty-eighth coronation anniversary in 2015 included the theatre production *Olu Akengbuwa* (Eyengho 2015) which centred on a political crisis in the Itsekiri Kingdom in the middle of the nineteenth century and re-enacted, with the help of family heirlooms (gifts) from the era of the palm oil trade, formative events in the imperial encounter between Itsekiri leaders and British imperial agents (Fig. 1.5). The play is the last in a list of Nigerian theatre plays on prominent anti-colonial fighters from the Niger Delta such as Jaja of Opobo (Bell-Gam 1996a), King Koko of Nembe (Rotimi 2001a) and Nanna Olomu (Umukoro 2001b). Together with John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's *Oil for Oil* (2000), the plays discuss – gendered – leadership in times of colonial encroachment and often make no distinction between red (palm) oil and black (crude) oil. This deliberate refusal of definition can be read as an act of translation whereby past events are interpreted and brought to 'bear' (Barber 2000, 430, Lambek 2002) in the present

according to the needs and interests that the playwrights perceive in their society. I use the notion of translation, understood as a transformative transfer across time and space (Derrida 1985, Bhabha 1994, Benjamin 2002 [1923]), to analyse the ways in which the playwrights employ the medium of the theatre play to stage historical experiences and draw moral lessons from the past. The chronotopes that the theatre performances afford are self-reflective in that they ask the audiences to scrutinise the ways in which Niger Delta elites position themselves and act within the globalising world and its imperial meshwork of relations. With this analysis, I seek to expand on Karin Barber's (1982, 2000) seminal work on Nigerian theatre in the era of the petro-naira and offer a new, translational perspective on staging the past and performing gendered leadership in times of perceived 'crisis' (Vigh 2008).



Figure 1.5: A scene from Olu Akengbuwa *in which Britain's consul Beecroft (in white) hands over the staff of office to Idiare, the first 'Governor of the Benin River' (in 1852). The original staff of office as well as other heirlooms of the Idiare family were used as theatre props. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.*

In chapter 4 *Embodying the Past. Performing Family Wealth and the Immanence of Ancestors* I elaborate the ways in which Itsekiri use gifts of transatlantic encounters, handed down through generations, to not only showcase accumulated family wealth but also to perform the

immanence of ancestors. During *ukueke*, young men wear family heirlooms together with richly draped wrappers and silk shirts as signs of wealth and prestige and parade them through town (Fig. 1.6). In rituals contexts such as traditional marriages or funerals, the same young man clad in family heirlooms can transform into *Okparan* or, in other words, embody the ancestors. This performance of ancestral immanence (Wirtz 2016) was also central at the funeral of Olu Atuwatse II who died in September 2015 and was transitioned into ancestorhood during a three-month-long mourning period. The mourning period established a liminal chronotope that transformed places, bodies and subjectivities (Turner 1967, van Gennep 2004 [1909], Mitchell 2006, Turner [1969] 2017). It gave Itsekiri citizens of Warri the opportunity to visually make their presence felt and, thus, to stake a claim in the oil city after the prolonged interethnic conflicts of the late 1990s and early 2000s. It also necessitated the reconstruction of the ancestral island of Ode-Itsekiri after a prolonged period of neglect by the Pentecostal king. Moreover, the burial of the Olu's body retraced the founding story of the monarchy and demarcated the territorial extent of the kingdom. My analysis of embodied forms of relating to the past seeks to contribute a material and performative perspective to the study of funerals in West Africa (Anderson 1987, Eicher and Erekosima 1987, Warnier 2007, de Witte 2011, Jindra and Noret 2011) and highlight the continued role of sacred kingship for communal identity formation as well as place-making and place-claiming (Smith 2004, Geschiere 2005, Pratten 2008b) in Nigeria's petro-state.



Figure 1.6: Ukueke *or displaying accumulated family wealth during the royal funeral of Olu Atuwatse II. Photo: Lucky Abolokeji, 2015.*

In chapter 5 *Curating the Past. The Nanna Living History Museum* I trace the conversion of the cosmopolitan compound that Nanna Olomu built after his return from exile in 1906 into an ancestral site after his death in 1916, into a national monument at the height of the oil boom in the 1970s and into a museum during Sani Abacha's military regime. The different ways of using the building and its contents necessitated different, though overlapping forms of curation, including collecting (Gosden and Knowles 2001, Harrison, Byrne, and Clarke 2013), caring (Flynn and Hull-Walski 2001, Arnold 2015, Longair 2015) and canonising (Assmann 2008, Meyer and de Witte 2013) and involved the performance of various chronotopes – ranging from the invocation of ancestral immanence to the referential narration of the past. While Nanna used the building to display his collection of translocal things and curate cosmopolitan hospitality, his interment within the building's walls necessitated new forms of care, such as annual performances of *ukueke* and *Okparan*. When the building and its contents became nationalised in the 1970s, the translocal and therefore geographically and

conceptually transgressive quality of Nanna's collection posed difficulties to the cultural politics of the oil boom era which sought to envision a precolonial past untouched by outside influences (Apter 2005). Also the military regime of the 1990s sough to fix the polysemic potential or affordance (Basu 2017a) of the collection by equalling Nanna's anticolonial struggle with Sani Abacha's brutal use of force, engendering a multi-layered negotiation about what it meant to be a leader in Nigeria's political economy of oil. However, despite the building's museumification, the Nanna family has retained its privilege of touching and, in the case of *ukueke*, wearing things as 'essential – and expected – means of acquiring knowledge' (Classen and Howes 2006, 201) about and from the past. Looking at the different chronotopes that the museum afforded throughout its 'life' (Appadurai 1986a, Kopytoff 1986), I seek to contribute a processual and performative perspective to the study of museums in Africa (Ardouin and Arinze 1995, Coombes 2003, Molyneaux and Stone 2011, Coombes, Hughes, and Karega 2014, Mawere, Chiwaura, and Thondhlana 2015, Abiti 2018) and highlight the multisensory (Seremetakis 1996, Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, Berner, Hoffmann, and Lange 2011, Binter 2014, Mathur and Singh 2014) and polysemic potentials of 'doing museums' in the twenty-first century (Kreps 2003b, Phillips 2005, Byrne et al. 2011, Schorch and McCarthy 2019).

Speaking Nearby

The analysis of mobilising, staging, embodying and curating the past can only give snapshots of the ways in which people have been navigating Nigeria's postcolony or, in Achille Mbembe's (2001, 16) words, a 'time' and, I argue, a place 'of existence and experience [where] pasts, presents and futures interlock.' The things of transatlantic encounters materialise experiences of economic and political elites who engaged with and shaped the

Atlantic world and it is their successors who mobilise, stage, embody and curate them. This 'canon' (Assmann 2008) of Itsekiri pasts either strategically suppresses marginalised experiences, such as enslavement, or is unable to articulate them due to what Ann Stoler (2011) has termed 'colonial' or, in this case, transatlantic 'aphasia'. Hence, while the concept of African cosmopolitanism offers new ways of thinking about African agency in the past and present globalising world and may overcome dichotomous notions of 'tradition' versus 'modernity' (Austen 1992, Hobsbawm 1996, Piot 1999, Bersselaar 2007, Prestholdt 2008, Getz 2013, Fardon 2014), it also has to take into account the internal power relations on the African continent which enabled these self-assertive positionings 'beyond local environments' (Prestholdt 2008) to emerge. My conclusion, thus, asks about those experiences who are not part of the Itsekiri canon of transatlantic encounters and envisions further avenues of research. It also embeds these questions within ongoing negotiations about the past, like the collaborative film with Ugbajo Itsekiri UK that awaits finalisation, and highlights the dynamic entanglements of cultural practices and political economy in the age of oil. The focus on the material and performative ways in which people relate to the past has thereby the potential to overcome the analytical deadlock of concepts of 'memory' (Werbner 1998, Berliner 2005) and to analyse lived experiences of interlocking pasts, presents and futures in their plurality (Zeitlyn 2015). Thus, by looking beyond the Itsekiri canon I seek to look at 'the underneath of things' (Ferme 2001) or, in other words, the political economic struggles and ways of identity formation that the material remnants of transatlantic encounters facilitate. In so doing, I seek to avoid an oppositional notion of easily malleable and falsifiable memory and the seeming soundness of academic historical discourse (Palmié and Stewart 2016). It is rather the relationships and frictions between the canon and the archive, those unspoken things which 'preserve the past past' (Assmann 2008), that enable a broader understanding of the cultural, political and economic dynamics of transatlantic encounters and its material

legacies. I therefore intend to speak ‘nearby’ (Trinh T. Minh-ha in Chen 1992) my Itsekiri research partners and establish a productive dialogue between their relations to the pasts and mine.

2. Becoming Imperial. Politicising the Gift in Atlantic Africa

> *Sir, I have the honour to inform you that the King of Cabinda has declined to receive the presents […]. I was told […], that the King could not receive them […] without a written declaration from the captain that they were 'for nothing,' […] I immediately wrote to say, he would get them 'for nothing:' that he had signed a Treaty and the Queen of England had sent him presents; but received in answer that he could not accept them.*[2]

This disagreement about an anti-slave-trade-treaty between King Mongoya of Cabinda and Lieutenant Need of the Royal Navy in 1855 is emblematic for the ways in which African rulers at the coast of West and Central Africa and Europe's imperial agents (traders, consuls and navy personnel) forged and contested economic and political relationships in the nineteenth century, a highly volatile and crucial period of imperial contact. It points to different notions of contract – a processual concept of contract via gift exchange versus a singular, signed piece of paper – and highlights the central role of gift exchange in constituting and challenging relationships in Atlantic Africa. In this chapter, I argue that a focus on such gifts and their acceptance, refusal and reciprocation can yield new insights into the constantly shifting power relations that shaped the transition of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people to so called 'legitimate trade' in natural resources (1807-67) and subsequent colonisation (1884-1914). A focus on gifts, their materiality and the struggles over their meanings allows us to look at the connecting and disconnecting qualities of material culture in imperial contact. In other words, it sheds light on the material processes through which people established cultural, political and economic relationships, forged identities, struggled to maintain sovereignty or impose dominance and drew themselves and others into relationships

[2] Lieutenant Henry Need to the Admiralty, 30 January 1855, ART/10/1, MS65/134, National Maritime Museum Manuscripts, Royal Museums Greenwich.

of dependence (Thomas 1991, 1994, Gosden and Knowles 2001, Kingdon and Bersselaar 2008, Kingdon 2019). Hence, it allows new insights into the processes of becoming imperial.

Gifting in Atlantic Africa

Marcel Mauss' seminal *Essay on the Gift* ([1925] 2016) which discussed the importance of gift giving, receiving and reciprocating for the social cohesion of non-capitalist societies has inspired several major strands of anthropological debate: a specialised literature on regional differences in gift exchange and related notions of personhood in the Pacific (Munn 1986, Strathern 1988, Gregory [1982] 2015), a growing body of literature on the central role of gifts in capitalist and neoliberalist societies (Godbout and Caillé 1998, Graeber 2001, Tsing 2013), and a broader discussion at the intersection of economic anthropology and material culture studies about the biography and transmutability of things, or, more precisely, their properties and the encoding of value in exchange (Appadurai 1986b, Kopytoff 1986, Thomas 1991, Gosden and Knowles 2001, Kingdon and Bersselaar 2008). Moreover, Nicholas Thomas (1991, 14) has drawn attention to gift exchange as a social and political process and acts of 'consumption and personalisation' in the colonial contact zones of the Pacific. However, in most of these debates, including Mauss' essay, ethnographic examples from Atlantic Africa, with a few notable exceptions (Guyer 1993, Apter 2005, Piot 2009), remain conspicuously absent. A main reason for this omission could be that Atlantic Africa does not lend itself to dichotomous interpretative models such as commodity economies versus gift economies, understood as individualist, money-based exchange systems of alienable products and collective systems of prestations and counter-prestations that establish mutual dependency and reciprocity, respectively. As Karin Barber has highlighted, economic exchange in Atlantic Africa 'cannot be described as the articulation of two preexisting sets of relations, capitalist and noncapitalist', but rather as 'workable systems that originated at the interface of local and

European commerce' which 'spawned idiosyncratic artistic genres' (Barber 2013, 112) and forms of cultural expression.

Studies on transcultural economic activities in Atlantic Africa have, thus, rather focused on things that helped to translate between radically different regimes of value and served as 'vehicle for the creation of new interpersonal obligations' (Pietz 1988, 115), one example being the 'fetish' or *nkisi* in early Portuguese-Kongo-relations, or on commercial transactions more generally (Guyer 2004). In her ground-breaking study on the logics of Atlantic African economies, Jane Guyer (2004) rejects the idea of equivalence which, according to her reading of Mauss, has been fundamental to the theory of both gift and commodity exchange. Instead, she stresses that, although African economies have been monetised for centuries, it is not fixed ratios (equivalences) between money and things that allow to turn a profit, but rather the deliberate maintenance of asymmetries of value that allow for conversion across thresholds and, thus, to make gains. According to this economic logic, pricing takes the social, cultural and economic capital of all actors as well as the particular context and conditions of a transaction into account. Gains, thus, accrue for both sellers and buyers. However, Guyer's focus on currencies and 'marginal gains' disregards the crucial role that gifts play in these exchanges. I seek to bring back the gift, understood as things 'of exchange in which parts of the giver are embedded, extending social relations beyond the transaction' (Tsing 2013, 23) into the discussion about economic exchange in Atlantic Africa. Following Andrew Apter's (2005, 122-176) line of argument, I will show that gifts were part and parcel of translations between regimes of value and conversions across thresholds. In addition, I will trace the ways in which rituals of gift exchange, which had been developed in the context of transatlantic commerce, subsequently played a crucial role in forging political relations during processes of colonial encroachment. In order to understand this 'politicisation' of the gift, it is necessary to look at the trading rituals that developed at the 'interface of local and European commerce'

(Barber 2013, 112), taking the Niger Delta 'in the very eye of the Atlantic trade' (117) as a foil for discussion.

Trading Rituals and Transvaluation

The Niger Delta lends itself, with its many creeks and islands, to small forms of organisation. Whereas the Kingdom of Warri (Itsekiri) traces its monarchical roots back to the Kingdom of Benin in the west of the delta, city-states made up of lineage-based houses or 'canoe-houses', such as Bonny, Brass and New Calabar (Ijo) in the central delta and Old Calabar (Efik) in the east, developed their hierarchical social organisation in dialogue with the transatlantic trade in enslaved people, which started in the sixteenth century and peaked two hundred years later. These highly hierarchical social organisations were 'geared toward individual achievement, i.e. […] self-aggrandizement or self-making […], through the recruitment of people, with opportunities for extreme and rapid social mobility' (Barber 2013, 113). In other words, recruiting people through marriage, pawnship or slave raiding into relationships of dependence (Lovejoy and Falola 2003) resulted in 'wealth-in-people' (Guyer 1993). This 'wealth-in-people', in turn, was based on, and added to, 'charisma' (Guyer 1993, 253) which was achieved by 'the cultivation of [the] singularity of persons', encompassing 'personal beauty, strength, skill and general worth' (259). At the Atlantic coast, this charisma depended, I argue, heavily on the ability to establish trustworthy and gainful relationships with European trading partners; one particularly valuable manifestation of these gainful relationships being personalised gifts such as staffs and hats embellished with the name of the respective African merchant. Countless portrait photographs of African merchants from the end of the nineteenth century testify to their significance in self-fashioning (for example Fig. 2.1). But what made these gifts so valuable for their recipients? To be able to answer this question, we have to look at the trading rituals that had been developed during the Atlantic commerce.



Figure 2.1: Photographer not recorded. Chief (Prince) Egbe of Warri with some of his relatives, ca. 1895. Note the personalised hat and staff as well as other items of import like the decanters and cloths of various origin. Inventory number: UAC/1/11/10/3/2/1. Photo: Unilever Collections, Unilever Art, Archives and Records Management, Port Sunlight.

Travel accounts of the period of the trade in enslaved people (Adams 1823, Landolphe and Quesné 1823a, Crow 1830), memoirs of the 'legitimate' trade in natural resources (De Cardi 1899, Harford 1899)[3], in the case of the Niger Delta in palm oil, and oral history that I conducted in the delta in 2015 and 2016 suggest that the basic patterns of trading rituals remained relatively stable till colonial encroachment. Particularly the memoirs of Harry Cotterell (1841-1913) and Charles Napoleon de Cardi (1844-1906), a British and a French trader active in the delta from the 1860s to 1890s, give insights into these rituals and the attitudes and mutual perceptions with which the European and African middlemen conducted the trade.

[3] See also Harry Cotterell. 1910. *Reminiscences of one connected with the West African Trade from 1863 to 1910*, unpublished memoir, inventory number: OA. 1290, Merseyside Maritime Museum, Liverpool.

Above all, the European merchants had to conform to the elaborate trading etiquette of their African 'customers,'[4] which consisted in officially hosting them on their ships, sharing a sumptuous meal and 'shake-hands' , a term in the trade vernacular of the coast denoting the presenting of gifts to the ruling African merchants and their retinue. Already at the beginning of the century, 'these presents chiefly consist[ed] of gold-laced hats, silver-headed canes, pieces of rich silk, and embroidered coats and waistcoats' (Adams 1823, 123). It was these ceremonial gestures of hospitality and goodwill that made it possible to 'break trade' and start the actual commerce which included the payment of the 'comey' (Dike 1956, 43), that is export duties levied onto European traders, and the fixing of exchange ratios – between fictional units of account (such as the 'trade ounce' and the 'pawn') and palm oil. Once the prices and the range of goods that the African merchants wanted to procure were fixed, European traders advanced these goods on trust to the African middlemen, who then travelled to the hinterland to exchange them for palm oil.

Like their European counterparts, the African middlemen had developed specific rituals for receiving their guests. They set out to welcome their European visitors in their war canoes, pulled by up to eighty paddlers, accompanied by the rhythm of their talking drums, their flags flying in the wind (Lander and Lander 1832, 232-233). Moreover,

> on such occasions the Chiefs would rig themselves out in the most grotesque costumes one can imagine – full suits of cast-off Livery, Naval and Military Uniforms, and even Dress Suits were used to improve their appearance, and to show respect to their visitors.[5]

It was an extravagant, multisensory way of communicating their wealth and power to their European visitors, albeit some of the intended messages seemed to have been lost in translation. While Africans on the shore and trading partners in the hinterland would

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[4] Cotterell, *Reminiscences of one connected with the West African Trade*, p. 21.
[5] Cotterell, p. 81.

immediately recognise the appellations with which the talking drums praised the owner of the canoes, as Itsekiri historian J.O.S. Ayomike explained to our film team, most European traders heard 'savage music' (De Cardi 1899, 445) and beating 'tom-toms'[6] . The flags adorning the bow and/or stern of the canoes were easier to recognise and gave proof of a trader's name, accomplishments and commercial and political alliances (Fig. 2.2). Hence, the disembodied extension of a trader's presence in the form of drum language and iconographic flags not only testifies to the multisensory qualities of the merchant's performance, but also alludes to his varied target audiences and channels of communication.

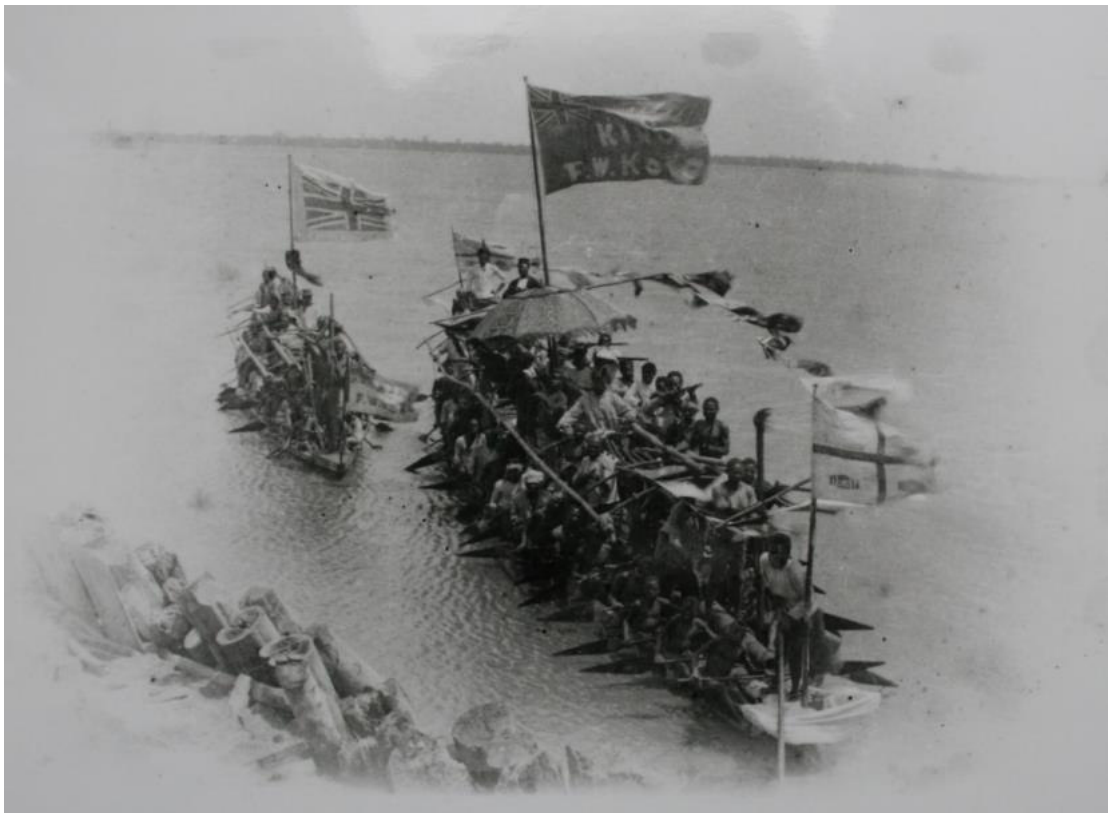


Figure 2.2: Photographed by Jonathan Adagogo Green. King Koko of Brass, central delta, in his state canoe, 1898. Notice the elaborate iconography of the flags including the Union Jack and local symbols like a shark denoting the family of the canoe's owner. Inventory number: 0.9777/236-249, No. 237. Photo: Manchester Museum.

[6] Cotterell, p. 25-26.

Similarly, the international fashion style that the African middlemen donned for the occasion disturbed and impressed the European visitors in equal measures. Whereas African merchants seemingly tried to show off their success in the palm oil trade and their knowledge in and idiosyncratic interpretation of European festive costume and regalia, many British traders were not sure how to cope with forms of self-expression that 'confounded the fundamental alterity of the African' (Apter 2005, 134). Despite ridiculing these forms of African fashion, traders like Harry Cotterell and Charles de Cardi, who spent decades trading in the delta, forging commercial relationships and familiarising themselves with local customs, often learned to appreciate these products of cultural arbitration as a sign of mutual 'respect.'[7] They sensed that the African merchants were keenly aware of their position in the transatlantic economy and had developed ways of 'seeing and acting beyond local environments' (Prestholdt 2008, 88). Jeremy Prestholdt calls this positioning in the globalising world a particular form of 'African cosmopolitanism' (see also Northrup 2002, Mbembe 2005, Getz 2013) or 'vision of globality' (Prestholdt 2008: 89) that was as much formed by transatlantic encounters as it itself shaped these encounters.

The trade rituals, which I have reconstructed above, mediated these encounters. They highlight the processual quality of coastal trade where people and things - ships, canoes, commodities and gifts and the fluid landscape of the Niger Delta – intertwined in ever-changing formations, testifying to Tim Ingold's notion of a 'world of incessant movement and becoming' (Ingold 2011, 141). Following Ingold's processual vision of life, the commercial transactions and cultural arbitrations can be interpreted to have formed 'knots […] woven from the countless lifelines of its manifold human and non-human constituents as they thread[ed] their ways through the tangle of relationships in which they [were] …

[7] Cotterell, p. 81.

comprehensively enmeshed' (Ingold 2011, 148). This meshwork, though, was shot through with claims to political, economic and cultural power. Looking at these enmeshments from a Marxian perspective, which pays close attention to power relations, Andrew Apter defines them as a form of transvaluation, or, more precisely, as a 'mediation of economic and cultural oppositions through commodity exchange, whereby sign-values and exchange values, givers and receivers, sellers and buyers, achieve formal commensurability' (Apter 2005, 123). Apter stresses the fact that canoes were more than 'merely […] symbols of wealth and power' (ibid.) and emphasises the transitive and transformative quality of the canoes as key sites of political, economic and cultural arbitration. Read against the backdrop of Anne Haour's (2013) argument that trade between West Africa and Europe created liminal spaces specifically dedicated to accommodate strangers and to broker cultural differences, the middlemen's war canoes and European trading hulks can be identified as such liminal spaces in which political, commercial and cultural values were negotiated and contested.

Gifts played a key role in all of these forms for transvaluation. The giving and receiving of gifts at the beginning of trade rituals recognised the sovereignty of all parties involved. They were the prerequisite to 'break trade', materialising commercial interests and alluding to potential future gains. Gifts were also crucial to forging identities and establishing more binding and longer-term connections between the various actors at the coast. A main reason for this was the logic of trade which consisted in advancing goods on trust and – in the period of the trade in enslaved people – often receiving a member of the middleman's family as pawn in return. Despite this mutual dependence, the only certain signifier of a trader's economic success and, thus, trustworthiness was his ostentatious display of wealth in form of dress, European style architecture, furniture and lavish entertainment (Ikime 1969, 59). Moreover, a large fleet of trading canoes manned with paddlers as well as armed forces, all of them bonded, manifested his wealth-in-people. The middlemen's idiosyncratic interpretation

of international fashion and their taste for European furniture and architecture showcased their cosmopolitan connoisseurship and can be read, not so much as a consumption, but as an 'investment, a performative conversion, a devotion of present income to the hope of future gains' (Guyer 2004, 99). However, personalised gifts in which 'parts of the giver were embedded' (Tsing 2013, 23) distinguished those African middlemen who had been able to not only forge commercial ties based on the exchange of commodities, but also longer-term personal relations with European trade partners. Hence, personalised gifts were the ultimate material testimony of a person's cosmopolitan reach, the decisive addition to a person's charisma in the Atlantic trade.

Forging an Economy of Friendship

Even though the initial gift of trading rituals suggests that the African merchants' counter-gift was the 'breaking of trade', numerous sources testify to the various other ways in which African rulers reciprocated them. The most obvious being the supply of food, shelter and support in crossing the dangerous bars at the Atlantic coast of the Niger Delta. The commercial ventures of Jean-François Landolphe (1747-1825), a French trader in enslaved people in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, give an idea of how these exchanges took place. His memoir (Landolphe and Quesné 1823a, b) can be read as a string of encounters mediated via the exchange of gifts.

Having had experience in trading sugar and cotton with the plantation regime of Saint-Domingue (known since the revolution of its enslaved workers from 1791 to 1804 as Haiti) and having assisted in the trade in enslaved people at the West African coast for several years, Landolphe was made captain of his own ship in 1777. The same year, the Compagnie de la Guyane, with its headquarters in Nantes, sent him to the Kingdom of Benin, a major supplier of enslaved people since the late fifteenth century, first, to the Portuguese and later the Dutch,

French and English. Landolphe's assignment was to establish a factory at the kingdom's trading port Ughoton (Gwato). The Oba of Benin seemed inclined to this commercial prospect, sending two emissaries to accompany Landolphe from the coastal town of Ughoton to the kingdom's capital about forty kilometres in the interior. In exchange for the food, hammock, umbrella and porters, with which the emissaries had provided him, Landolphe gave them 'various presents, such as three beautiful hats with golden bands, a role of superb Cholet handkerchiefs, a role of Persian cloth, three arm loads of tobacco for smoking, with a dozen Holland pipes' (Landolphe and Quesné 1823a, 97).[8] This exchange of gifts for supplies repeated itself till they reached the capital of Benin. On his audience with Oba Akengbuda, Landolphe presented the king with 'an embroidered scarlet cape, a hat with a golden band, and a string of corral strung on a pipe stem, worth 500 francs' (101). On his second audience, he presented

> his Majesty four pieces of Persian cloth, the same number of Indian handkerchiefs, two strings of coral, a robe of white satin decorated with gold and silver, with a pair of sandals of the same material; these two gifts came from the wardrobe of Louis XV. It all was worth 100 Louis. (107-108)

Landolphe's choice of gifts proved successful. The Oba validated their agreement with a human sacrifice and bade him farewell with an ivory tusk and locally manufactured fabrics as a present. After the settlement of export duties, Landolphe bought 410 enslaved men and women and 6,000 ivory tusks in exchange for a variety of merchandise accounted for in the unit of 'cloths', comprising textiles of French and Indian manufacture, French hats with a red seam, tobacco from Brazil, rifles and ammunition, copper basins, iron bars, corals and brandy (126-7).

On his way from Ughoton down the River Benin to the Atlantic coast, Landolphe's ship hit a bar. Unable to circumnavigate it, the French captain was forced to stay in the Niger Delta till

[8] Translation from French by the author.

the rainy season let the water level rise again. It was in this moment that the Olu of Warri (also known as Itsekiri), situated at the mouth of the Rivers Benin and Forcados, saw his chance to draw Landolphe into his sphere of influence. He sent out a fleet of canoes, spearheaded by Okro, his Minister of War, to offer him food and water supplies.

> I begged this honest man to accept, as a small sign of my thanks in such a predicament, two pieces of Cholet handkerchief. I also had him bring to the king a scarlet mantel and a hat with a golden band. Hardly five days later two canoes arrived, loaded with ten thousand yams. (131-2)

The multiplication of a small number of gifts into alimentation for his whole crew and enslaved cargo did not end there. For four months, Olu Erejuwa I (also known by his Christian name Sebastião Manuel Octobia, 1760–1795) sustained the crew and enslaved men and women with supplies. As a sign of their new-found 'friendship' (137), the Itsekiri monarch asked for a French flag which he hoisted on one of his canoes. What could have been the rationale behind this show of generosity and identification with the French kingdom? Captain Landolphe had already exchanged most of his merchandise for enslaved people in the Kingdom of Benin. Hence, Olu Erejuwa I could not expect to accrue immediate gains. However, his investment in the form of gifts in 'hope of future gains' (Guyer 2004, 99) paid off. When Captain Landolphe returned to the Niger Delta in 1783 he was, again, unable to navigate the bar. Faced with the choice between sailing back to Ughoton or anchoring further south at the shore of the Itsekiri Kingdom, he chose the latter. The enslaved people whom he had bought at Ughoton were distributed among the villages surrounding Warri, the kingdom's capital, being lodged as 'prisoners of war' (Landolphe and Quesné 1823a, 314). Landolphe and his crew stayed on board of the ship, venturing onshore to have an audience with the king or go on hunting trips. Perceiving Warri to having a climatic advantage to Ughoton and presumably being won over by the Olu's hospitality, Landolphe soon began to consider moving his factory from the Benin's trading port to Warri. After a consultation with his

ministers, the Itsekiri monarch agreed. Three years later, it would be Landolphe himself who hoisted a French flag at his factory in Warri.

As Marcel Mauss ([1925] 2016) stated early on, the gift is never free, but self-interested and constrained (see also Douglas 1990). Olu Erejuwa I's subsequent proposition emphasised this fact. When Landolphe's stay drew to a close, Okro, on behalf of the king, did not ask the French captain for a payment or lavish gifts in kind, but to take a member of the royal family with him to France. Prince Boudakan, the first-born son of the Olu's sister, had volunteered to 'learn the language and customs of the French' (Landolphe and Quesné 1823b, 6). Expressing his 'gratitude for so many benefactions and for the amazing confidence with which the king honoured' him, Landolphe promised to 'take particular care for the education of the young prince' (7). They sailed from Warri to Saint-Domingue where Landolphe sold the remaining enslaved people for sugar and coffee. 100 men and women had died of smallpox on their voyage across the Atlantic. Prince Boudakan's presence at Saint-Domingue was honoured by the Governor General of the colony who presented him with a silver-decorated sword embellished with the words 'Given to Prince Boudakan by Monsieur de Belcombe, Governor-General of Saint-Domingue, in 1784' (12-3). The prestation sword signalled the commercial alliance between the French Empire and the Itsekiri Kingdom. It also suggested that transatlantic relations during the era of the trade in enslaved people might have been negotiated not only along racialised but also along class lines (see also chapter 3).

In Paris, Prince Boudakan and his two servants, who had accompanied him from Warri, were lodged in the Rue de Berri near the site where the Arc de Triomphe was to be built twenty years later. Captain Landolphe paid for his lodging (150 francs per months) and organised lessons in dancing, music, French and writing. 'He was particularly sensitive concerning his rank. When, in society, someone called him *Monsieur Boudakan*, he insisted: I am *Prince Boudakan'* (15, original emphasis), affirming his identification by class rather than race. In

1786, the prince was presented to Louis XVI and the dauphin upon which the French king arranged for the Itsekiri prince an allowance of 1,500 francs per month. In the meantime, Captain Landolphe partnered with Louis-Marie Marion-Brillantais to found the Compagnie d'Owhère et de Benin. Louis XVI granted them a charter to trade exclusively in the Rivers Benin and Forcados for three years. It is hard to ascertain whether Prince Boudakan's presence in Paris was a decisive factor in convincing the French king of the sincerity of this commercial endeavour. It definitely augmented Prince Boudakan's social and cultural capital, echoing the travels of another Itsekiri prince across the Atlantic two hundred years earlier. As I will discuss in following chapter, Prince Dom Domingos' stay in Portugal from 1600 to 1610 conciliated the commercial interests of the Portuguese Empire and the Kingdom of Warri.

In July of 1786, Captain Landolphe, Prince Boudakan and a crew of 140 men, amongst them two engineers, several carpenters and a surgeon, sailed back to Warri. The prince's return was met with several days-long celebrations. The Olu acknowledged Boudakan's newly accumulated cultural and social capital by putting 'on his neck a second string of coral, the mark of a new dignity which made him like the great men of this nation' (37), that is, most probably, an *Oron-okun*, a sign of chieftaincy. Several years into his stay in the kingdom, Okro, on behalf of the king, sent Landolphe a similar coral necklace. Did this entail Landolphe's ascent to chieftaincy? It was, at least, a sign of acknowledging his contribution to and assimilation into the kingdom.

The French captain, on his part, presented the Olu with

> a set of furniture in red and white satin, a complete bed with crimson carving, and three pretty panes of glass, … a scarlet cape with gold trim, a hat with white plumes on top and a cane with a silver head. 'This cane,' I observed, 'can serve to make your will known when you wish to ask something from me. You can be assured that I will give you anything at this sign.' (38)

Landolphe would later give an additional silver-topped staff to Okro for is assistance in defending their joint venture. Its engraving echoed his sentiment of gratitude: ‘Given by the Compagnie d’Owhère et de Benin to Captain Okro, in testimony of his good services’ (73). As I will explain in the last section of this chapter, such staffs, as a sign of office and recognition, would become central in mediating African-European relations in the late nineteenth century – at the brink of colonisation.

Landolphe and Olu Erejuwa I chose the peninsula of Ugborodo at the rim of the Atlantic Ocean as site for their factory. While Landolphe’s carpenters built his main house in the centre of the island, the Olu’s men surrounded it with eight houses built ‘according to Warri fashion’ (34). The French king’s flag was hoisted in front of the factory, with thirty-two cannons fortifying the settlement. This fortification was deemed necessary not only against potential local enemies but also against European rivals. Attacks did follow by, amongst others, British merchants who had formed an alliance with the ‘King of Aunis, a tributary of the King of Benin’ (98), most probably the ruler of Isale-Eko (later known as Lagos island), which were crushed by Okro and his men. Though, it was not warfare but the tropical diseases of the delta that cost the lives of most of the European crew. Moreover, the French Revolution (1789–1799) threatened to bring the continuous supply of employees and goods to an end. As a response, Landolphe started to receive foreign vessels at his shore, eventually becoming a middleman between European merchants and his Itsekiri trading partners. He made sure to follow the latter’s taste in international goods, regularly sending a ship to the Ivory Coast to buy merchandise from international merchants stationed there to complement his stock at Ugborodo. His profit in the trade in enslaved people was ‘immense: more than 30,000 francs a day’ (98).

After six years, Landolphe’s business ventures came to an abrupt halt, again by an attack of his British rivals. It can only be speculated about what triggered the assault. In general, the

relationship between the rivalling European Empires of France and Britain had deteriorated in previous years. France's support of the colonists against Britain in the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783) had led to many hostile encounters not only in North America but also in the Caribbean. Landolphe had participated in several of such skirmishes surrounding the island of Saint-Domingue (by this point in time at the brink of revolution to become Haiti). In the Niger Delta, these hostilities were mirrored by the fierce competition between French and British traders. According the Landolphe's account, four captains of the company Dobson-Bekler of Liverpool visited Landolphe on 1 May 1792 under the pretence of thanking him for rescuing one of their colleagues from a sinking ship, presenting him with six chandeliers and two mahogany desks of Indian manufacture. They returned in the early hours of the next morning, trying to kill Landolphe and setting his factory on fire. With the explosion of 10,000 bags of gun powder ('dix milliers de poudre', 116), stored at Ugborodo, the French entrepreneur's commercial venture ended up in smoke.

Landolphe took shelter at Warri, but soon left the Niger Delta on board of a French ship. When he returned several years later, having fought the British in the French Caribbean and suppressed a revolt by enslaved workers at Guadeloupe, he learned that not only Olu Erejuwa I but also Prince Boudakan had passed away. 'Having brought back too much knowledge from France … he had been poisoned' (343). One of Prince Boudakan's brothers had succeeded Erejuwa I on the throne.[9] But was it too much knowledge that had killed him? Was this knowledge still of the same value once the French-Itsekiri joint venture had collapsed? Or was it maybe the treaty that Prince Boudakan had signed with Landolphe in 1788 in which he had sold the island of Ugborodo and pledged to trade with no other nation but France,

[9] Among the Itsekiri it was custom that, in case the Olu did not produce an heir, the successor to the throne would be chosen among the Olu's sister's sons.

apparently on behalf of the Olu (469-476)? It seems highly unlikely that Prince Boudakan would have had the authority to sign a contract on behalf of the Itsekiri when the monarch was still alive. Especially, since such a treaty, curtailing the Itsekiri's right to free trade, would have anticipated the Protection Treaties of Britain's colonisation of the Niger Delta by a century.

Regardless of the accuracy of Landolphe's account, the land rights of Ugborodo and its environs have remained a contested topic to this day. Since the exploration of crude oil in 1963, it has been hosting Chevron Nigeria Ltd., with a string of challenges for the environment, interethnic understanding and social justice. As recent as in 2017, it was the site of a fierce battle between Itsekiri and Ijo families claiming the name of and, hence, rights on the location on which the new Nigerian Maritime University was to be built (Amaize 2015a, Atevure 2018, BigPenngr 2018, Ogundele 2018, Okafor 2018a) (see also chapter 7).

Landolphe's memoir exemplifies the ways in which European merchants and African rulers used gifts to attract potential trading partners and sought to establish long-term relationships. Their gifts were invested with interests and were, themselves, investments in the hope of future gains. Britain's abolition of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people in 1807 changed little in this respect. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, littoral rulers could rely on established trading ties with European trading partners in order to continue their trade in enslaved people while simultaneously establishing their trade in palm produce (Latham 1973, 1974, Jones 1989, Lynn 1995, 1997). By the 1850s, the palm oil trade had become one of the most lucrative businesses of transatlantic commerce, bringing a new wave of traders, particularly from Britain, into the Niger Delta. Their accounts, such as the memoir of Harry Cotterell (1841–1932), give insights into the ways in which gifts continued to shape not only commercial but also cultural relations at the coast.

From a general point of view, Harry Cotterell's memoir tells of the social mobility which the palm oil trade afforded (Newell 2008). Born into 'poor circumstances'[10] as fifth child of a family of eighteen, he rose from being an errand boy for booksellers in the streets of Liverpool, at the age of ten, to chairperson of the African Association, a major trading company in palm oil in the western Niger Delta (in existence from 1889 to 1914). Self-taught in the libraries of Liverpool, Cotterell apprenticed himself as a cook's mate and steward on steamers going to Montreal and New York, before being able to enter the trade at the West Coast of Africa in 1863. Lured by 'prospects of advancement,'[11] he was first stationed at New Calabar, before being made chief clerk of the trading hulks of Messrs Irvine & Woodward at Bonny. Using the newly introduced steamship services between Liverpool and West Africa, he was able to convert international merchandise into palm oil three times faster than those companies supplied by sailing ships. In 1877, he teamed up with the Liverpudlian trading company of John Holt and, in 1889, amalgamated the nine major companies trading in the eastern Niger Delta into the African Association. His ascent to chairperson of the company echoes the social mobility that the palm oil trade had afforded Liverpudlian traders already half a century earlier. After the abolition of the trade in enslaved people in 1807, John Tobin (later Sir John Tobin) had married his commercial interests with those of Duke Ephraim of Old Calabar to export palm oil which was to be used as lubricant for the ever-increasing cotton industry in Lancashire. Whereas Duke Ephraim was able to monopolise the trade in palm produce in Old Calabar and, consequently, centralise his political power, Tobin became one of the most influential merchants and, in the end, mayor of Liverpool (Latham 1974). At the height of their careers, Tobin gifted Duke Ephraim a polished brass throne with the inscription 'THIS CHAIR Presented by Sir John Tobin to his friend Duke EPHRAIM, King

[10] Cotterell, p. 2.
[11] Ibid., p. 19.

of OLD CALABAR Liverpool, September 10, 1826' (Latham 1974, 864), materialising both, their commercial friendship and social ascent (see Fig. 2.3). Harry Cotterell, on his part, relied on trustworthy trading ties with a variety of African merchants in Bonny, which he nurtured by the exchange of gifts.



Figure 2.3: Photographer not recorded. Original caption: 'Prince Archibong II, 1910'. Eyo Archibong II ruled Old Calabar from 1859 to 1872. Edem Archibong III from 1872 to 1879. The photographic style suggests the photographer to be J. A. Green, active in the Niger Delta from 1891 to 1905. It is, thus, hard to ascertain which ruler of Old Calabar is depicted in this portrait. Nevertheless, the portrait testifies to the continued use of foreign royal emblems like a velvet-padded crown and Victorian-style throne till the time of Britain's colonial encroachment. Inventory Number: UAC/1/11/10/3/2/1. Photo: Unilever Collections, Unilever Art, Archives and Records Management, Port Sunlight.

Cotterell described his time at Bonny as one of 'friend[ship],'[12] reminiscing not only about the commercial but also about the cultural exchanges that formed part of his life at the coast. Whereas he spent most of his evenings reading or playing cards on board of his hulk, he was invited by his African trading partners to celebrate special occasions, such as the installation

[12] Cotterell, pp. 7, 40, 54, 111.

of a new head of a ruling family or 'canoe house', on shore. Known for his love for signing, he was repeatedly asked to perform

> from the low penny gaff comic songs of Billy Barlow type, to the gems in the opera of Balfe, Wallace, and other composers […] The audience was most enthusiastic, although I hardly think the greatest number of them would understand a single word of what I sang.[13]

On other occasions it would be local dance groups who entertained their European visitors. Although these exchanges of musical gifts can be read as a testimony to the transcultural appeal of music, West African dance moves and musical rhythms would often be interpreted as 'grotesque,'[14] highlighting the bias with which European agents would evaluate such transcultural exchanges.

On Cotterell's final departure from Bonny, Oko Jumbo, a particularly close trading partner and 'friend', chose, as a parting gift, an item of transatlantic commerce which was appreciated by European and African merchants alike. He presented Cotterell with 'some valuable coral beads, six of which I had made into waistcoat buttons, and the remainder I gave to my wife, which she still wears.'[15] Looking back at his life, the Liverpudlian trader characterised himself as

> a firm believer in the promise that to cast your bread on the waters is to have it returned to you after many days, as I do not remember any single instance in my life where sooner or later I have not been able to return a kindness received by an equal kindness, or been able to return slight for slight, if not actually blow by blow.[16]

Was it his experiences of forming commercial alliances via the exchange of gifts that had made him into such a fervent believer in reciprocity? Or rather his Anglican belief? Cotterell had, amongst others, assisted Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther in establishing a mission at

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[13] Ibid., pp. 12-13.
[14] Ibid., p. 36.
[15] Ibid., p. 112.
[16] Ibid., p. 12.

Bonny from 1864 onwards. Like Landolphe and Tobin before him, Cotterell characterised his relations at the coast as a form of friendship which was contingent on reciprocity and trust, or, more precisely, based on the condition that the interests of the trading partners were mutually met. These interests were indissolubly entangled with the subjugation of enslaved people – first as a commodity of and later as a workforce for transatlantic trade. Hence, if there ever was an 'economy of friendship' – spurred by the hope in 'marginal gains' and negotiated and maintained by the exchange of gifts – at the Atlantic coast, it was a friendship among European merchants and African elites which 'legitimate[d] the production of social inequality' (Bayart 2000, 252).

Besides, this friendship was continuously put to the test. Numerous accounts tell of the ways in which the failure to repay trust impaired the relationship between trading partners, leading to the seizure or 'pawning' of property and persons to recover debt. Presumably to channel the many instances of self-administered justice via 'pawning', African rulers had developed judicial bodies to settle disputes over outstanding debt, such as the *Egbo* society in Old Calabar (Pratten 2007, 52-3). In 1849, Britain stationed a consul off the coast of the Niger Delta at the island of Fernando Po and started to establish Courts of Equity in coastal trading towns where European and African traders were supposed to settle disputes over, among other things, pricing and outstanding debt. Despite this first attempt to curtail African judiciary powers, European traders continued to pay the considerable entrance fees to join *Egbo* till the 1880s, highlighting the perseverance of African sovereignty in the face of early colonial encroachment.



Figure 2.4: Watercolour depicting Lieutenant Need of the West African Squadron negotiating an anti-slave-trade treaty with the King of Ambriz, today's Angola, February 1855, painted by Lieutenant Henry Need. Inventory number: ART/10/1, MS65/134. Photo: National Maritime Museum Manuscripts, Royal Museums Greenwich.

Gifts Forging Contracts

If European traders accepted and adapted to the 'economy of friendship' at the coast, using gifts to attract and bind people, how can we explain the various misunderstandings and conflicts which the exchange of gifts engendered? The historical record suggests that such disputes over gifts emerged when new imperial agents, such as the Royal Navy's West African Squadron, entered the Atlantic interface and tried to re-define the meaning and value of certain gifts and, consequently, power relations. The Royal Navy's West African Squadron was founded in 1808 with the aim to suppress the transatlantic trade in enslaved people by capturing slave-ships and signing anti-slave-trade treaties with West African rulers (see for example Fig. 2.4). Moreover, from the perspective of British imperial politics, the abolition of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people and the growth in palm oil trade were

interdependent. As ‘every stolen slave was not only a lost producer of goods for export but also a lost consumer of goods from countries such as Britain’ (Huzzey 2012, 137), British abolitionists propagated ‘legitimate’ forms of commerce such as the palm oil trade as a ‘remedy’ (Buxton 1840) for the trade in enslaved people. However, the abolitionist rhetoric combined commercial, strategic, spiritual, and moral objectives, ‘taking on the role of a knight, bishop, or queen as readily as a pawn’ (Huzzey 2012, 159) and, thus, could be used to fuel expansionist as well as anti-expansionist politics. Initially, the British government did not advocate colonial rule, but used the West African Squadron to suppress the trade in enslaved people. Only in the second half of the century, the Royal Navy provided military protection for British traders, consuls and missionaries and, at the end of the century, military prowess to break the sovereignty of the coastal people.

The dispute between King or Mabouk Mongoya of Cabinda, in today’s Angola, and Lieutenant Need of the African Squadron in 1855, mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter, is particularly revealing of the ways in which the Royal Navy’s practices interrupted long-established rituals of connecting and binding people via gifts. Whereas the gift exchange of trade rituals allowed for continuous renegotiations of commercial relations and a reaffirmation or dissolution of relationships of trust, the Royal Navy’s insistence on a single signed treaty sought to halt this process. Mabouk Mongoya’s refusal of Lieutenant Need’s gift as well as the encounters which preceded it highlight the fact that this reliance on written contracts was fraught with conflict. Like many other middlemen along the coast of West and Central Africa (cf. Latham 1973), the Mabouk sought to continue the trade in enslaved people and claimed that, in the previous year, another agent of the West African Squadron, Officer in Command Wilton, had tricked him into signing the treaty in the first place. According to the complaint that the Mabouk filed with the Portuguese in Luanda, Officer Wilton had offered him to take charge of the education of one of his sons. The written consent that he signed for

this purpose turned out to be the anti-slave-trade agreement that the Mambouk had previously refused to sign. After Wilmot's 'Machiavellian triumph […] the Cabinda leaders protested in a letter to the Portuguese in Luanda, asserting their recognition of the Portuguese flag and calling on the Portuguese [who no longer officially supported, but tolerated the trade in enslaved people at this point in time] to give them protection' (Martin 1972, 147). This episode illustrates several important factors in the shifting power relations of the African Atlantic. It points to the sometimes 'Machiavellian' methods that the Royal Navy used to change the 'moral economy' of the transatlantic trade 'which legitimate[d] the production of social inequality [and] the management of the rent of dependency' (Bayart 2000, 252). It also draws attention to the readiness of African elites to forge alliances with imperial powers if that served their interests (Bayart 2000). Most importantly, it shows that the treaty as new form of contract did not entail the same potential of building and negotiating relationships of trust. Whereas the processual notion of contract via gift exchange suited the 'unpredictable, fluctuating and competitive world of individual self-creation' (Barber 1995, 217) of the Atlantic interface, signed treaties sought to fix relations to a particular point in time. Once established, for example by the show of military might, written contracts could not be renegotiated. Yet, as we will see in the following section, gift giving retained its central role in negotiating relationships of power.

Internal Power Struggles and Imperial Gifts

The transition from the trade in enslaved people to natural resources was not only accompanied by an increasing presence of imperial agents such as consuls and the Royal Navy at the coast of West and Central Africa. Coastal societies also had to cope with internal economic and political transformations. Hence, various new actors sought to 'thread their

ways through the tangle of [Atlantic] relationships' (Ingold 2011, 148). Especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, these relationships were not only of economic but also of political nature. Despite the introduction of written treaties, gifts continued to shape the meshwork of Atlantic relations where the presence of new imperial actors as well as internal socio-political transformations afforded unforeseen alliances as well as fierce conflicts.

The most significant internal transformation was the growth of domestic slavery. Even though slavery had been an integral part in many West African societies, the rising demand in the labour-intensive palm oil production and trade led to an increase of domestic slavery in palm oil trading as well as palm oil producing societies. The demand for bonded work force was in large part met by the long-established system of pawning in which particularly women and children as well as criminals were given as pledges for outstanding debt. However, the pawn-system allowed for considerable social mobility and successful unfree traders were able to buy themselves free and found their own trading businesses (Dike 1956, Ikime 1969, Mann 2007, Falola and Heaton 2008).

In the Kingdom of Bonny in the eastern Niger Delta, the social mobility of people of slave status made it possible that by the 1860s a war of succession was fought out between the so called 'head slaves' of the ruling 'canoe houses', that is, cooperative, family-run trading units who acted as local governmental institutions and consisted of a trader's family and their enslaved people (Dike 1956, Alagoa 1970, Jaja 1991, Cookey 2005). As 'head slaves' of their respective canoe houses, Jubo Jubogha or abbreviated Jaja and Oko Jumbo, Henry Cotterell's friend (discussed above), had gained wealth and, thus, power, as merchants in the palm oil trade and were now in a position to influence local politics. In their struggle over supremacy, the two men also sought assistance among rival British traders who supported their party of choice with armaments (Dike 1956: 194). Jaja (1821–1891) together with several leading 'canoe houses' seceded from Bonny and founded a new settlement upstream on the Ikomtoro

River in 1869. He named his new settlement Opobo after the legendary king Opubu of Bonny who ruled at the beginning of the nineteenth century and re-established religious traditions which had ceased to exist in Bonny due to the influence of Christian missionaries (Dike 1956, Cookey 2005).

But Jaja, as formerly enslaved person, not only used the name of his new settlement to associate himself symbolically with the power of the Perekule monarchy in Bonny. As the art historians Martha G. Anderson and Lisa Aronson (2005) have shown, he also used fashion associated with the royal lineage of Perekule, the ruling dynasty in Bonny, and the related priesthood of the *Ikuba* shrine (dedicated to *Iguana*, the highest deity of Bonny). For this purpose, Jaja wore imported *kakibite* (tortoise) cloth from the Ijebu-Yoruba in the west which was the traditional dress of the Perekule kings and performed the role of the traditional priest. Moreover, he distributed this image of himself as a priest of the *Ikuba* shrine via a photo (Fig. 2.5, taken by the Swiss medical doctor and anthropologist Carl Passavant between 1883 and 1885) which showed him performing a traditional libation in honour of *Iguana* (Anderson and Aronson 2005: 128-129).

In addition, a second photograph of Jaja (Fig. 2.6) wearing an Ibani style wrapper and European style shirt, jacket and hat showed him surrounded by European trading goods and sought to address, according to Anderson and Aronson, a European as well as an African audience as a proof of Jaja's wealth and power, and, I might add, cosmopolitan connoisseurship.



Figure 2.5: Photographed by Carl Passavant, ca. 1885. Portrait of Jaja of Opobo, clad in woven cloth imported from the Ijebu-Yorùbá. According to Anderson and Aronson (2005) this photo shows him pouring a libation for the local goddess. Inventory Number: (F) III 23749. Photo: Museum der Kulturen Basel.

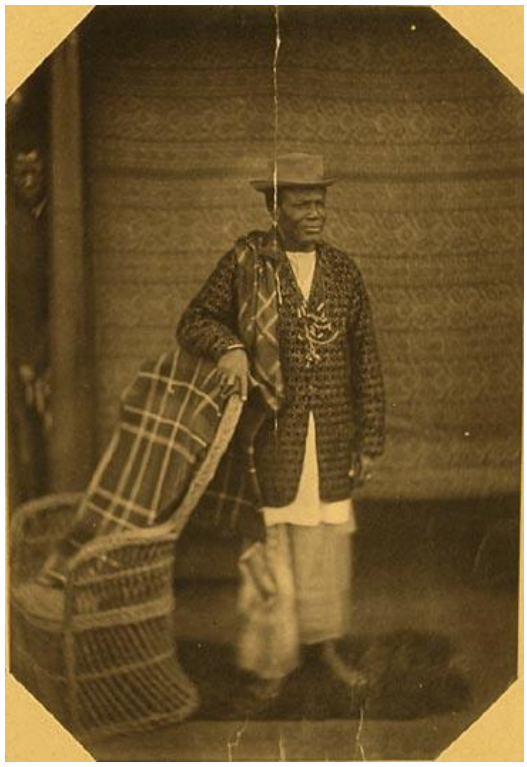


Figure 2.6: Photographed by Carl Passavant, ca. 1885. Portrait of Jaja of Opobo wearing the typical Ibani interpretation of the cosmopolitan fashion style of his time: a wrapper of imported Indian madras cloth, an English shirt and jacket and hat. The basket-chair further underlines his cosmopolitan connoisseurship. Inventory number: (F) III 23750. Photo: Museum der Kulturen Basel.

Jürg Schneider (2013, 36) plausibly argues that the exchange of portrait photography among European and African actors at the nineteenth century West African coast was similar to 'how business cards are given to business partners today'. According to Schneider, these photographs acted as visual currency and formed part of an 'Atlantic visualscape' (ibid.). Following this reading of African portrait photography, another of Jaja's portraits depicting him together with one of his sons, most probably his successor Frederick Sunday Jaja, both clad in maritime uniforms, suggests an official photographic introduction of his successor to the British-West African trading community (Fig. 2.7). Hence, the photograph might have been one of Jaja's attempts to visually consolidate the dynasty of this newly founded kingdom

and, accordingly, could be interpreted as visualisation of future prospects that Jaja envisioned for his trading empire.

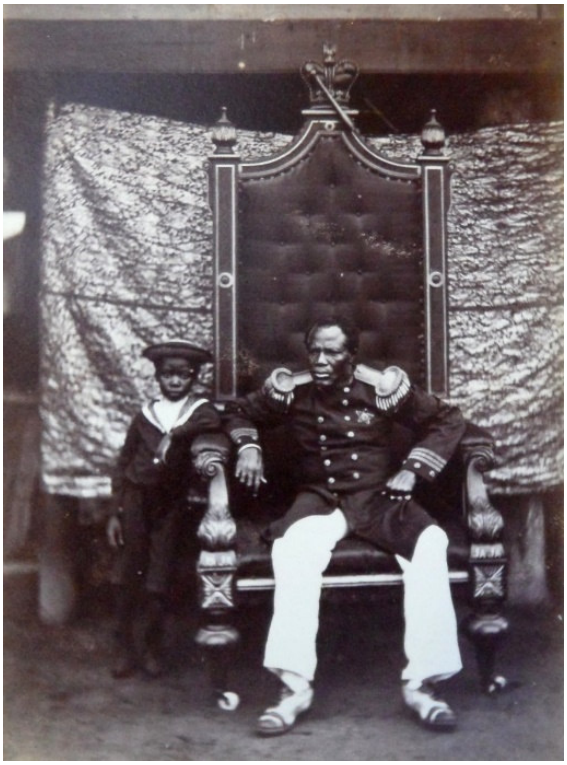


Figure 2.7: Photographer not recorded. King Jaja of Opobo most probably with his son Frederick Sunday Jaja, before 1887, inventory number: MSS. Afr.t.35 (I), Box 7. Photo: Commonwealth and Africa Collections, Bodleian Library Oxford.

Besides these internal measures and his cosmopolitan self-fashioning campaign, the new Amanyanabo (King) of Opobo also sought to solidify his new-found position with the British by diplomatic means. In January 1873, he signed a treaty with the British consul Charles Livingstone who was accompanied by Commodore J. E. Commerell, the Commander-in-Chief of HM's Naval Forces at the Cape of Good Hope and Coast of West Africa (the successor of the West African Squadron in 1867), and by European traders stationed in his town (Hertlest 1880, 349). This treaty recognised Jaja as 'King of Opobo' and acknowledged the payment of comey (export-duties) due to him. At the same time, it banned the British agents from accessing the hinterland markets, thus, emphasising Opobo merchants' position as middlemen in the palm oil trade. Yet, armed skirmishes between traders of Bonny and Opobo continued. Trade canoes were stopped and cargo was confiscated. Both, the

Amanyanabos of Bonny and Opobo, lodged appeals to the consul to take a side in the conflict. Williams, Jaja's secretary from Sierra Leone, transcribed the Amanyanabo's indignation and rhetorical means of persuasion in the trade vernacular of the coast:

> And they [Chiefs of Bonny] going about trying to disturb me. Now they unite to say that they sure to carry war canoes to fair [hinterland market]. Seeing war canoe never carrys oil? And in all these they mean to say they are for peace? […] As they propose that you are going to England in short and the Acting Consul will be appointed in Bonny River they will get the chance to do what they like.[17]

Given the tense situation, Jaja intensified his diplomatic efforts and aligned himself politically with the interests of the British Empire. In October of 1873, the Royal Navy inquired whether the rulers of Bonny and Opobo would provide military support in the fight against the Ashanti Kingdom, in today's Ghana. Each ruler would receive ten pounds 'as a present'[18] for every hundred men. The men would be paid one shilling per day. The Amanyanbo and chiefs of Bonny raised concerns that the military training by British officers would put either side of the conflict at an advantage. In the same breath, they sought to rectify the British perception of the two kingdoms:

> It appears to us that the authorities at Cape Coast have been misled, as to the nature of this country. We are not a warlike people having been brought up to peaceful pursuits, and our trading business finds employment for all the [… men here]. Opobo are the same as ourselves, and we are strongly of the opinion that Jaja and his Chiefs will not be willing to part with their slaves. But should Jaja supply some [soldiers], it will only be just that we would do so also.'[19]

Jaja did comply and sent fifty (most probably bonded) men, a headman and an interpreter. In addition to the suggested monetary payment, he requested 'blue jackets or shirts with proper

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[17] King Jaja of Opobo to Consul Charles Livingstone, 9 June 1873, CALPROF 4/1, Vol 3, National Archives Ibadan. Jaja refers to the *modus operandi* at that point in time that, once the British consul would take a home leave, he would be substituted by a British merchant with experience in the Court of Equity – in this case, a merchant in Bonny –, giving the Bonny elites a leverage in the ongoing conflict.
[18] Captain James Nicol, Cape Coast Castle, to Consul Livingtone, 11 October 1873, CALPROF 4/1, Vol 3, National Archives Ibadan.
[19] The King and Chiefs of Grand Bonny to Consul George Hartley, 22 October 1873, CALPROF 4/1, Vol 3, National Archives Ibadan.

buttons'[20] and straw hats as compensation for his men, emphasising the importance of clothes as sign of rank and remuneration. The king and chiefs of Bonny followed suit. It has not been reported how many men returned from battle.

After the successful conquest of Kumasi, the Ashanti capital, Commodore William Hewett of the Royal Navy presented Jaja of Opobo with a golden sword as a sign of gratitude for his services.[21] Such presentation swords had come into fashion in the late eighteenth century, recognising the achievements of Royal Navy personnel for the expanding British Empire (McGrath and Barton 2013, 76-82, McAleer and Petley 2016, 1-2). One of the earliest recorded prestations of such swords occurred in Barbados in 1757 when the assembly of planters awarded Captain Middleton (later First Lord of the Admiralty) '100 pistoles [...] to buy him a sword for taking a French privateer infesting the coast of the island.'[22] Their imperial rival France had adapted a similar approach to acknowledging the assistance in commercial endeavours, such as the prestation sword gifted to Prince Boudakan at Saint-Domingue in 1784. The presentation sword, thus, was the quintessential imperial gift, testifying to and drawing Jaja into the imperial relations of the British Atlantic. However, the interpretation of the sword within Opobo society might have considerably differed. It probably added to Jaja's charisma and signified his ability to mobilise and tap into the ever-increasing British relations in the delta. Today, the sword serves as a 'symbol of royal authority' of Opobo's founding figure, 'commemorate[ing] the role of Opobo's peace-keeping force in Ashanti, Ghana (Gold Coast), a friendly African Kingdom' (Jaja 1991, unnumbered page).

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[20] Captain James Nicol, SS Biafra, to Consul George Hartley, 30 October 1873; King and Chiefs of Grand Bonny to Consul George Hartley, 3 November 1873, CALPROF 4/1, Vol 3, National Archives Ibadan.
[21] Cotterell, *Reminiscences of one connected with the West African Trade*, p. 104.
[22] Victoria & Albert Museum, Sword, inventory number: M.17&A-1978, http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O97757/sword-unknown/, last update: 12 February 2018.

Dismantling African Sovereignty

Jaja's assistance in extending imperial relations in other parts of West Africa did not deter the British from dismantling his own sovereignty, once European interests in the African continent changed more generally. Jaja's rule (1869–1887*)* fell in the time of the 'scramble for Africa' in which Britain was rethinking her strategy of an 'informal empire' (Lynn 1999) on the continent and, in the case of the Niger Delta, started to extend her spheres of influence via the signing of Protection Treaties. These Protection Treaties had become necessary in order to be able to make territorial claims at the Berlin Conference (15 November 1884 to 26 February 1885) where Europe's old (Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark), new (Germany and Belgium) and potential (Austria-Hungary, Italy, Sweden-Norway) imperial powers as well as the United States and the Ottoman Empire vied for influence on the African continent. Since the involvement of the West African Squadron, written treaties had become a common diplomatic tool to negotiate the terms of trade, and African middlemen like Jaja had begun to use them to reinforce their interests in the ever-shifting economic and political meshwork at the coast. Yet, negotiations about treaties had to comply with the rituals of gift giving developed during the transatlantic trade. This was also true for negotiating Protection Treaties from 1884 onwards.

Lengthy correspondence between the consuls in the Niger Delta and the Foreign Office in London attest to the plethora of things that coastal rulers received in order to start negotiations about the status of protection. Among them were a Japanese sword for the King of Brass, a musical box for the King of Bonny and a telescope for the Duke of Old Calabar.[23] Additional gifts were silks, cottons, damasks and satins in various qualities and of various origin

[23] Correspondence between Consul Edward Hewett et al. and the Foreign Office, 22 May 1884 to 8 November 1885, FO 84/1939, The National Archives, London.

(manufactured in India, China and Britain), tapestries of Persian and European manufacture, a court suit and a navy uniform, several rocking chairs, mattresses and pillows, mirrors, silver plates, goblets, bowls, scissors, an accordion, a melodion, two magic lanterns, two chromolithographs of the Queen as well several breech-loading guns, cartridges, knives, tobacco and rum. The Foreign Office had allocated 2,000 pounds to buy these gifts and had asked the Vice-Chairman of the National African Company (from 1886 to 1900 known as the chartered Royal Niger Company), George Taubman Goldie, to select them. Taubman Goldie commissioned the purchases with companies based in London and Birmingham.[24] Moreover, his agents active in the central Niger Delta provided additional gifts tailored to the taste of their African trading partners.

The diplomatic bartering at the Berlin Conference demanded swift action of the consuls at the coast of West Africa. While the merchandise destined for the treaty negotiations was shipped from Liverpool to the Niger Delta, Consul Edward Hewett petitioned with the Royal Navy to send him a vessel in order to access the creeks. Moreover, he asked British traders such as James Pinnock and David Macintosh, both agents of the National African Company, to assist him in the coastal trading towns they were most familiar with. In several cases it was the British traders who handed over the presents before the consul had arrived or after he had already moved on to his next diplomatic visit. In addition, royal naval officers started to sign treaties on their own accord to speed up the process, testifying to the intrinsically entangled meshwork of diplomatic and commercial relations which enabled the signing of Protection Treaties in the first place.

[24] The London based companies were Jackson & Graham, Silber & Fleming, D. Nicholson & Co., S. Goff & Co. and Kerr & Scott. The Birmingham based company was G. Kynach & Co.

At the very beginning of this process, Consul Hewett fell ill and was replaced by Harold White, a young member of staff of the Foreign Office. Unlike his predecessor, White was unfamiliar with the cosmopolitan taste of the African middlemen and inexperienced in the trading rituals of the coast. Deeming some gifts 'too valuable to be given away [as they] … could be neither appreciated nor deserved by the natives,'[25] he sought to impose his own value regime on the transactions. He withheld several items like as a gold watch and chain and silver ornaments. Such European handicraft was much appreciated by the coastal trading elites (see chapter 6) but did not fit the pejorative idea of the local population as inward-looking 'natives' who, in the eyes of Acting Consul White, seemed to be unaware of the globalising world of which they were a part of.

White was not alone in this revaluation of gifts and, concurrently, with the revaluation of the receivers of the gifts and their relationship to the British Empire. His successor Henry Johnston prided himself on selling off 'large' gifts which White had not distributed, such as expensive satins, to buy 'a number of small articles more suitable for distribution among the people whom I had to conciliate or to reward.'[26] Johnston reserved 'lavish' gifts, like two rocking chairs for King Eyo of Old Calabar, for coastal middlemen who helped him to settle 'palavers' with people in the interior according to Britain's imperial interests. The rewarding of African elites, who were deemed 'loyal'[27] to Britain's imperial interests, foreshadowed the system of 'indirect rule' (cf. Afigbo 1972) – a rule based on power relations existing prior to colonial encroachment – that was to be established in the decades to come.

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[25] Former Acting Consul Harold White to the Foreign Office, 19 November 1885, FO 84/1939, The National Archives, London.
[26] Consul Henry Johnston to Lord Salisbury, Foreign Office, 18 April 1888, FO 84/1939, The National Archives, London.
[27] Ibid.

The revaluation of gifts, though, did not render them obsolete. On the contrary, they were still key in forging relations at the West African coast. During the signing of Protection Treaties, gifts acknowledged the sovereignty of the British and African parties involved – even though the aim of these treaties was to undermine the sovereignty of the latter. Moreover, Protection Treaties did not inevitably lead to Britain's domination of the Niger Delta. Jaja of Opobo, as several other of his contemporaries, successfully negotiated for the removal of paragraphs in the treaty, which concerned the abolition of domestic slavery and the access of traders and missionaries to the hinterland markets. Moreover, he insisted on retaining trading rituals, among them the acceptance of comey and gifts (Alagoa 1970). At first, presumably due to the time pressure of the Berlin Conference, the British complied. Jaja continued to practice his sovereignty, that is to 'lay down the law' (Graeber and Sahlins 2016, 378), and repeatedly blocked British traders from accessing the hinterland markets. Once British traders ventured to build a factory in the oil markets under Jaja's influence, known then as Qua Iboe markets (cf. Cookey 2005, 106-116, Pratten 2007, 62-63), the Amanyanabo used his spiritual authority to deter palm oil producers to trade directly with European merchants. At the same time, Jaja established a monopoly in trade with the Scottish company Miller Brothers and started to export palm oil to Britain on his own accord. Back from his hiatus in Britain, Consul Hewett was besieged with complaints from traders such as John Holt, Harry Cotterell and George Watts and soon sought to set the record – or better the treaty – straight. He demanded Jaja to pay thirty puncheons of oil as fine for the blockage of free trade, allow all British traders immediate access to the oil markets and to return the gifts that he had received as part of the trading rituals. In response, Jaja extended his diplomatic efforts north, across the Atlantic, and sent a delegation of his kingdom to plead his case directly with Lord Salisbury, the Secretary of Foreign Affairs in London. The aim of the delegation, consisting of the Chiefs Cookey

Gam, Shoo Peterside, Albert Ja Ja and Sunday Ja Ja as well as George Miller, the founder of Miller Brothers, and his agent D. Farquhar, was to

> enlist Lord Salisbury's Sympathy with the protest which Ja Ja had addressed to Her Majesty's Government against 'his markets' being taken away from him, which markets had been, Mr. Miller, alleged, granted to Ja Ja by Consul Livingstone in 1873.[28]

In the same time, the Amanyanabo personally addressed several letters to Lord Salisbury, reiterating that the treaty in 1873 acknowledged him as the sovereign of Opobo and that

> I and my Chiefs … of course signed [the Protection] Treaty with Her Majesty's Government upon the sole basis that there should be no interference whatever with regards to our Laws, Rights, and privileges of our market … [Indeed, we] would intent paying a heavier fine than the thirty puncheons claimed by Consul Hewett if we thought that we have really gone contrary than what has previously agreed upon.[29]

Moreover, Jaja sought to mend his relationship with Consul Hewett, expressing astonishment about Hewett's request to give back the gifts or 'shakehands' that he had received as part of trading rituals.

> I am extremely surprised by the 'shakehands' matter as this not being the first of Your visits and same has taken place years gone by […] [If] you were thinking it […] wrong on my part receiving same I think it would have been nothing but right that you speak to me long ago that is, if the friendly terms which suppose to exist between us are considered lasting.[30]

Jaja further explained that the British merchants had given the gifts on 'their own free will […in order to] enable them to make a large trade' (ibid.) with himself and his chiefs, thus referring and reaffirming to long-established trading rituals.

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[28] Foreign Office to Consul Henry Johnston, 30 September 1887, CALPROF 2/1 Vol. 34, National Archives Ibadan.
[29] Jaja of Opobo to Lord Salisbury, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 26 March 1886, CALPROF 2/1 Vol. 34, National Archives Ibadan.
[30] Jaja of Opobo to Consul Edward H. Hewett, 29 March 1886, CALPROF 2/1 Vol. 34, National Archives Ibadan.

But what exactly did the 'breaking of trade' via gift exchange entail from the perspective of the African middlemen? Throughout Atlantic Africa, people used to pay homage to their rulers via gifts, thereby acknowledging the gift exchange that their 'divine' or 'sacred kings' (Graeber and Sahlins 2016) had accomplished with their ancestral spirits or deities. The king's sacrifices or gifts (cf. Peel 2000, 185-6), in turn, ensured the fertility and prosperity of the land and people.[31] Hence, gift exchange was not perceived as a closed cycle between a ruler and his people, but rather as several corresponding and interdependent systems of exchange. The initial gift of Atlantic trading rituals, thus, could be read, not only as an acknowledgement of the sovereignty of an African ruler, but also as honouring the debt that had accrued via the ruler's gift exchange with the spiritual world. According to the latter understanding, it was the exchange with the spiritual or 'metapersonal' (Graeber and Sahlins 2016, 3) realm that made Atlantic commerce possible in the first place. Moreover, David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins have shown that a king's 'access to metahuman powers may have [had] subjugation effects on people beyond those directly affected by the acts of the persons of authority' (ibid.). Extending Graeber's and Sahlins' insight to the Atlantic interface, I would like to argue that a king's successful relationship with metapersonal beings did not only give him power over his own people but also the ability to influence people outside of his territory; such as palm oil producing people in the hinterland and the myriad of European traders who returned every trading season or stayed for a longer period of time to sell their international goods. Reversely, it was these European traders who acknowledged the king's position via the giving of gifts. Hence, a privileged relation to the metapersonal realm

[31] Among the Itsekiri, the ritual for the people's prestations to their king is called *gbosen*. I am particularly grateful to Chief Mogba Eyeoyibo for discussing the historical and – changed – contemporary meanings of *gbosen* with me.

could be converted into a privileged position in transatlantic relations, or, more precisely, into a ruler's charisma – both, in the commercial and 'in the original, god-infused sense' (ibid.).

Thus, Jaja's refusal to return the gift to his British trading partners was not only a refusal to give up his sovereignty but also an attempt to keep his charisma intact; a charisma which he had meticulously elaborated by tapping into his spiritual powers as new king of Opobo while, at the same time, building up his cosmopolitan self-fashioning campaign. This self-fashioning campaign, in turn, was dependent on the logic of the gift which mediated the economic, political and cultural relations at the Atlantic coast.

Consul Hewett might not have understood all intricate, multi-layered meanings of gifts and their directionalities, but he had realised their overall significance. In his eyes, it was no longer the task of the British traders to acknowledge the sovereignty of their African trading partners via gifts. If anything, it was the Empire's political agents who, from the signing of Protection Treaties onwards, were to 'conciliate or to reward … loyal … [African] chiefs'[32]. However, before Hewett could administer the final blow to Jaja's sovereignty he fell ill again and was replaced by Henry Johnston (later Sir Henry Hamilton Johnston), an explorer of the African continent and fervent colonialist. By September 1887, Johnston 'considered the state of things … to be so dangerous to the peace and order of the British Protectorate as to call for immediate action.'[33] While the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir James Ferguson, dismissed Jaja's delegation in London with the plan that 'a Naval Officer should hold an investigation at Opobo unto the various features of the question', Consul Johnston, in concert with Lieutenant and Commander Pelly of HMS *Goshak*, called a meeting with Jaja at

[32] Consul Henry Johnston to Lord Salisbury, Foreign Office, 18 April 1888, FO 84/1939, The National Archives, London.
[33] Foreign Office to Consul Henry Johnston, 25 November 1887, CALPROF 2/1 Vol. 34, National Archives Ibadan.

the beach of Opobo. 'Alarmed … by the 700 men in large canoes' that accompanied the Amanyanabo, Johnston gave Jaja 'the alternative of peaceably surrendering to [him] … and accompanying … [him] to Accra, or of being considered and treated as an avowed enemy of the British Government.'[34] Confronted with such 'gunboat diplomacy' (Kubicek 1999), the Amanyanabo acknowledged defeat. In the eyes of the colonial agent, the canoe regatta of trading rituals had turned into a menacing flotilla;[35] his exertion of sovereignty into an obstacle to colonial rule. Accra, which Jaja's men had fought for in 1873, would become the Amanyanabo's site of imprisonment.

Revaluating Gifts Under Indirect Rule

Jaja's deportation to Accra and subsequently to the island of Saint Vincent in the West Indies should not distract from the fact that Britain depended on 'loyal' chiefs to sustain the new Oil Rivers Protectorate (1884–1893). Given the multitude of city-states and oil-producing societies in the interior, the colonial administration initially favoured the centralisation of power in the hands of selected coastal rulers. This strategy can already be observed during the signing of Protection Treaties.

In the Kingdom of Warri in the western Niger Delta an interregnum (1848–1936) had shifted the trading and, hence, political authority away from the royal lineage to the most successful traders of noble and chiefly descent. For the British to be able to negotiate trading conditions with the Itsekiri, they fell back on the well-established authority of the 'Governor of the Benin River' or *Gofine*, a political post comparable to a finance and foreign minister. During the 'scramble for Africa', it was Nanna Olomu (1853–1916) who occupied this position. Even

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Andrew Apter (2005) has traced the subsequent revaluation of canoe regattas during the colonial regime to the post-independence celebrations at FESTAC in 1977.

though the British and a majority of Itsekiri acknowledged Nanna as political representative of the kingdom, the riverbanks of the western delta were littered with self-governing Ijo settlements. Moreover, several rivalling Itsekiri chiefs challenged his claim to the title of *Gofine*. Hence, when, in August of 1884, Consul Hewett ventured into the western delta with the aim of signing Protection Treaties, it was necessary for him to receive signatures not only from Nanna, but also from other influential Itsekiri representatives and the heads of the Ijo settlements. Yet, whereas the Protection Treaty was signed by Nanna and several other influential Itsekiri chiefs[36], the heads of the Ijo communities were asked to sign a declaration that they were under 'Jekri [Itsekiri] jurisdiction'[37]. This attempt to centralise power in the western delta was emphasised by the way in which the consul distributed the gifts. They were given to the Ijo leaders 'in presence of Consul Hewett, Commander Cargie of HMS *Flirt* and a few of his officers, the [European] Agents trading in Benin River and Nanna (Governor) and many of the Chiefs of Benin River' (ibid.). Hence, Nanna was not only on the receiving end of gifts but literally sided with those who distributed them, being a charismatic leader of the Itsekiri and an imperial agent of the British at the same time. This constellation seemed to marry Hewett's and Nanna's interests and to materialise the envisioned power relations at the coast. However, whereas Nanna probably sought to enhance his charisma and strengthen his position among the Itsekiri, the Ijo and the wider international trading community, Hewett saw it as a necessary step to British control in the western Niger Delta.

Nevertheless, the British gave Nanna several indications that he might be able to retain sovereignty. Like Jaja of Opobo, Nanna successfully negotiated the expungement of several clauses in the Protection Treaty which concerned the access of missionaries to Itsekiri

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[36] The Protection Treaty was furthermore signed by Chiefs Chanomie, Dudu, Numa, Ogree, Fragonie, Nafomie, Etchie, Mudwa, Brigby, Awalla and Peggy.
[37] Alexander Henderson to Lord Salisbury, Foreign Office, 14 January 1888, FO 84/1939, The National Archives, London.

territory and of British traders to the hinterland market. Moreover, Vice-Consul David Blair officially awarded Nanna the staff of office of the Governor of the Benin River, emphasising his position as intermediary between the Itsekiri and the British. Since the beginning of the interregnum in 1848, British consuls had used such staffs to acknowledge the position and power of the *Gofine*, drawing on one of the most sought-after gifts of transatlantic transactions (see also chapter 4).

Staffs in many different forms and materialities were omnipresent in Atlantic Africa, generally serving as signs of office, position and power (Picton 1991). For example, the Yoruba in today's Nigeria used dance staffs as an extension or 'portrait' of ritual specialists (Drewal 1990). The rulers of Dahomey, in today's Benin, used ceremonial staffs as mnemonic devices (Blier 1991). For the members of the *Egbo* society in Old Calabar, the *ofo*, a small, unadorned wooden staff, served as a 'vital instrument for the classification of persons, for the differentiation of roles […] and empowered their performers for social and moral control' (Ejizu 1986, 144). Concurrent with their high local value, staffs became sought-after gifts in the transatlantic trade. In the Niger Delta, they mostly consisted of a wooden handle and a silver top, often engraved with the name of an African merchant, reflecting the close ties between trading partners – such as between Jean-François Landolphe and Olu Erejuwa I at the end of the eighteenth century. Britain's political agents realised their significance and used staffs to confer or recognise power, drawing African rulers in a web of imperial relations.



Figure 2.8a, b, c: Nanna Olomu's staff of office and two details of the engravings on its top, in the collection of the Nanna Living History Museum, Koko, Nigeria. One side reads 'Nanna Governor', the other side shows the royal coat of arms of the United Kingdom. Photos: Julia Binter, 2015.

Nanna's staff of office consisted of a slim, polished wooden staff with a round silver top which was richly decorated and engraved with the words 'Nanna Governor', on the one side, and the royal coat of arms of the United Kingdom, on the other side (Fig. 2.8b and c). The ornament itself consisted of curved, floral garlands, which, on closer examination, resembled manillas, a horseshoe-shaped currency made of bronze or copper prevalent at the coast since the trade in enslaved people. Regardless of this putative resemblance, for Nanna, the staff materialised the potential to gain wealth and power. Like the French flag that Olu Erejuwa I had hoisted on his canoe one hundred years earlier, the Itsekiri might have read the Royal Arms as a testimony to Nanna's ability to attract and manage relationships with Britain's imperial agents. For the British, it could have simply been a sign of turning Nanna into an imperial agent himself. Hence, Nanna's position in the newly established Oil Rivers

Protectorate was far from fixed, changing according to the perspective and interest of the people involved.

Britain's inconsistent strategies of colonisation further complicated the constellation of power in the western Niger Delta. By 1886, the National African Company had gained a charter by the Queen, renaming itself Royal Niger Company and starting to expand its sphere of influence by signing Protection Treaties with rulers upstream the central estuaries of the Niger as well as westward into Nanna Olomu's sphere of influence. Among those rulers were the heads of the Ijo communities who had pledged to be under Itsekiri authority just a few years prior, thus threatening Nanna's newly founded paramountcy. As a response, Nanna lodged an appeal with the Court of Equity in Warri and the Foreign Office in London. Whereas consul Hewett initially supported Nanna's appeal, Lord Salisbury settled the matter by affirming that 'whichever British authority signed the treaties the area accrued to the Crown' (Salisbury in Ikime 1968, 61). Furthermore, sinking oil prices forced Nanna to block trade, antagonising the private British traders who were active in the area alongside the Royal Niger Company. Thus, 'the longer Nanna associated with the British, the more he realised … that British interests and ambitions were at cross purposes with his' (Ikime 1968, 64).

The British, on their part, feared that, by insisting on his commercial and political sovereignty, Nanna 'threaten[ed] to become a second Jaja'[38]. Consequently, on his tour through the western Niger Delta in 1890, Vice-Consul George Annesley demonstratively broke Nanna's staff of office, marking the official end of his political career in the Oil Rivers Protectorate.

[38] Consul-General Claude Macdonald to the Foreign Office, 1 September 1891, F.O. 84/2111, The National Archives London.

Yet, it took another four years of diplomatic skirmishes till the British used military force to break Nanna's sovereignty, with the Royal Navy attacking Nanna's town Ebrohimi, looting and burning it to the ground. Dore (Dogho) Numa (birthdate not recorded–1932), his Itsekiri rival for the title of *Gofine,* had helped the British to lodge the attack against Ebrohimi and would do the same against the Kingdom of Benin in 1897. For his services to the British Empire, Dogho Numa was granted the status of 'Chief Political Agent' in the Niger Coast Protectorate (the successor of the Oil Rivers Protectorate, 1893–1900) and, eventually, Paramount Chief in the colony of Nigeria (1914–1956) (Ikime 1965). Dogho's und Nanna's rivalry and relations to the British Empire have remained an intensely discussed topic in theatre plays in the Niger Delta to this day (see chapter 4).

Under the Royal Navy's heavy fire, Nanna managed to escape to Lagos where he gave himself up to the colonial authorities. Trialled in a 'kangaroo court' (Ayomike 1992), he was sentenced to life in exile, like Jaja of Opobo, at Christianbourg Castle in Accra, today's Ghana. Thanks to the continued efforts of one of his British trading partners, George Neville, who petitioned with the Parliament in London, Nanna was the only leader of the region who was able to return to his homeland alive, founding a new settlement and rebuilding parts of his trading empire in 1906 (Neville 1915, see chapter 6). Moreover, Neville procured the upper half of the broken staff of office from the wife of former Consul-General Claude MacDonald and sent it to Nanna with a note saying 'a memento of the old times.'[39] The former symbol of power had become a nostalgic mnemonic device.

[39] George Neville to Nanna Olomu, 19 August 1915, no accession number, Nanna Living History Museum, Koko.



Figure 2.9: Doulton's Manganous Carbon (Water) Filter, in enamelled stoneware, that Governor-General Frederick Lugard gifted Nanna Olomu in 1915. Nanna Living History Museum, Koko. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.

In February of 1915, one year after the Southern Nigeria and the Northern Nigeria Protectorates had been amalgamated into the new colony of Nigeria, Nanna Olomu received another gift. On one of his several tours through the colony, Frederick Lugard, first Governor-General of Nigeria and author of the highly influential *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922), which laid out the system of indirect rule in the British Empire, rendered Nanna a visit at his new town Koko. They shared a meal in his house, 'a strange mixture of native and European'[40], as Lugard's brother perceived it, thus, commenting on the cosmopolitan taste with which Nanna had reinstalled himself in the Niger Delta. According to Anthony Nanna, grandson and custodian of Nanna's estate (today's Nanna Living History Museum), Lugard presented the 'very fine old man'[41] with a newly patented water filter from London (Fig. 2.9). This exchange of gifts – the welcoming gesture of food and the latest

[40] Edward James Lugard, *Journal Jottings 1912-1915*, p. 162, MSS. Brit.Emp.s.72, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.
[41] Ibid.

fashion in hygiene from Britain – echoed precolonial encounters during transatlantic trade. It emphasised the high value of new technologies in Atlantic Africa and the influential position that Nanna seemed to have retained in the colony. It also highlighted the continued, albeit altered use of gifts in colonial Atlantic Africa. Whereas during the period of the transatlantic trade gifts were used to recognise the sovereignty of African rulers and to forge successful commercial ties, they had now become a means to recognise their position in the system of indirect rule. Gifts, thus, had played a crucial role in processes of becoming imperial.

Conclusion. Gifts Creating Charisma and Binding People

In this chapter, I have argued that, once we overcome the dichotomy of gift versus commodity economies, gifts can be a valuable analytical category to understand the ways in which people negotiate relationships across political, economic and cultural thresholds. Atlantic Africa, as the 'interface between local and European commerce' (Barber 2013, 112) and prime site of 'colonial contact' (Pratt 1992, Clifford 1997), particularly lends itself to such an analysis. The focus on the materiality of gifts, understood not only as the material properties but also the underlying forces and potentialities of things of exchange 'in which parts of the giver are embedded' (Tsing 2013, 23), allowed insights in the always-dynamic struggles over sovereignty and the power of interpretation. By tracing the giving, accepting, refusing and reciprocating of gifts from trading rituals to the signing of protection treaties and diplomatic visits in the colonial state, I demonstrated that the exchange of gifts shifted from acknowledging the sovereignty of African rulers to drawing them into relationships of dependence. Gifts, thus, were an integral part of becoming imperial.

Nevertheless, processes of becoming imperial were far from teleological. If nothing else, the struggles and misunderstandings about the meaning of gifts highlight the fact that gifts had the capacity to establish unforeseen and contradictory relationships, opening up potentially

new ways of resistance and collaboration. They were key in forming the 'conditions and contingencies in which [British and African] actors made decisions, mobilized other people, and took actions that both opened and constrained future possibilities' (Cooper 2009, 46). Hence, the act of gift exchange was invested with the potential of imposing power as much as forging alliances and generating resistance.

For the African merchant elites, gifts materialised a person's cosmopolitan reach or, more precisely, the ability to attract and bind people according to their economic interests. They were, therefore, crucial in forming cosmopolitan identities and a decisive addition to a person's charisma in the transatlantic world. These traces of charisma and cosmopolitan reach are also one of the main reasons why gifts of past transatlantic encounters are still highly valued in the Niger Delta today. They form a key part of merchant families' heirlooms (see chapters 3 and 5) and are used as theatre props (see chapter 4) and prominent items of display (see chapters 3 and 6). The following analysis traces the many lives of the material culture of transatlantic encounters within the Niger Delta's ever-shifting meshwork of environmental exploitation, transnational trade and cultural (ex)change.

3. Mobilising Things. Competing Chronotopes in the Age of Oil

'I […] pledge that, as signified by the cross of Jesus Christ that is at the top of our crown, the Iwere kingdom will be under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.'

With these words *Omoba* or King-to-be Godwin Toritseju Emiko ascended the throne of Warri in 1987 (Palace of Warri 2014, 89). He did so as first Pentecostal king in the history of the Itsekiri monarchy. Though, for the *Omoba,* it was not so much an innovation but rather a completion of a process which had started four hundred years prior. With reference to the silver crown that the Itsekiri prince Dom Domingos, known as Olu Atuwatse I, had brought with him from Portugal in 1610, the *Omoba* understood his ascendance to the throne as 'a second chance […] to restore the Kingdom of Warri to God' (Palace of Warri 2014, 89, Emiko 2015, ii). The final initiation ritual before his coronation seemed to prove him right. During the sword picking ceremony, in which the *Omoba* was blindfolded and picked among his ancestors' swords (*Uda*) the one that would determine his royal name, Prince Emiko chose Atuwatse I's sword. As Olu Atuwatse II he saw his destiny in heralding a new Christian era for the Itsekiri kingdom which, from his Pentecostal perspective, included the slow but steady divestment of pre-Christian practices and abandonment of ancestral sites (Adeboye 2007). At a time when Nigeria's economy was experiencing a significant decline, his Itsekiri subjects seemed less concerned with the king's religious orientation than with the political economic advantages that the new, London-educated Olu could bring to their land. However, twenty-six years into his reign, the Olu's attempt to 'make a complete break with the [ancestral] past' (Meyer 1998) plunged the kingdom into a deep crisis, causing a 'loss of balance and the inability to control the exterior forces influencing [his people's] possibilities and choices' (Vigh 2008, 5). His rejection of not only the ancestors but also their sacred connection to the

land threatened the very foundation of the kingdom and put the Itsekiri's claim on land and, thus, mineral rights at peril.

This chapter looks at the competing, material-culture based ways of relating to the past along which this crisis was negotiated. It discusses the ways in which things, and, in particular, gifts, understood as materialisation of local and translocal relationships, were mobilised or 'activated' (Apter and Derby 2010) to contest the very nature in which the past was supposed to figure in the present. While the Olu used the royal crown to reference cosmopolitan experiences of his predecessor Dom Domingos in order to enforce his Pentecostal 'temporality-emplacement' (Wirtz 2014) of disconnecting with (certain aspects of) the past, the youth, as the king's main antagonists, drew on their masquerades (Pratten 2008a, b) as materialisation of ancestral relationships with the land to contest the king's intended iconoclasm (Sarró 2009). By looking at the competing chronotopes of Pentecostalism and ancestral worship, the chapter seeks to expand on Birgit Meyer's (1998) foundational discussion on the time-space configurations of Pentecostal practices (see also Engelke 2011) and highlight the crucial role that material culture plays in relating to the past (Radley 1990, Seremetakis 1996, Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, Lankauskas 2006, Bennett and Joyce 2010, Diawara, Lategan, and Rüsen 2013) and staking claims in Nigeria's political economy of oil.

Practising Pentecostalism in West Africa

Pentecostal movements in Nigeria emerged soon after the (re-)introduction of Christianity during British colonisation (Peel 1968, 2000) and have become, particularly in the last three decades, a crucial factor in the country's political and cultural life (Ojo 2006, Marshall 2009, Obadare 2018). As early as 1918, a movement called *Aladura*, meaning the 'one who prays'

(Probst 1989), in Ijebu-Ode sought to overcome the 'moral-psychological determinism' (Peel 1977, 130) propagated by British missionaries and developed spiritual solution to worldly matters such as 'sickness, barrenness and the need for mundane guidance in an uncertain world' (141). Rather than waiting for personal and communal prosperity by accepting Christianity and acknowledging sins, as the missionaries propagated it, the *Aladura* grew out of a more pragmatic understanding of religion as the knowledge of and ability to invoke 'appropriate supernatural "powers"' (126) to affect change amongst the living. Prayers, spirit possessions and public evangelism, led by charismatic prophets who claimed to have received the divine call, were merged with the need to find adequate means to cope with the colonial situation. Education, foremost reading and writing, and the access to international goods made missions and their schools particularly attractive to the youth who sought to forge 'novel and agreeable lifestyles' (132, for the nineteenth-century Gold Coast see Meyer 1999a). Thus, early Pentecostal movements such as *Aladura* or a religious revival led by Garrick Sokari Braide in the Niger Delta in the 1910s (Ojo 2006, 31, see also chapter 6) contributed to a gradual 'Africanisation of Christianity' (Peel 1977, 141). From the 1920s onwards, British and US-American Pentecostal movements such as the British Apostolic Church (in 1931) and the Los Angeles-based Foursquare Gospel Church (in 1955) joined Nigeria's ever dynamic religious meshwork. In the 1960s, American evangelists such as Billy Graham and Tommy Lee Osborn started to conduct mass meetings throughout the country. In 1973, Prince Godwin Emiko attended one of Osborn's rallies in Benin City where he not only met his future wife but was encouraged in his Pentecostal faith. 'Still brimming over with zeal, he would give a public testimony of his rebirth and new life at the Christ Apostolic Church at the Palace [of Warri]'(Emiko 2015). Emiko had already heard his 'altar call' a year prior at a Christian Union meeting at the University of Lagos. The prince was therefore part of a new wave of young, educated people who, after the traumatic civil war (1966–1970), congregated in

interdenominational bible study groups on college and university campuses to not only 'imagine both collective life and their position as individuals in contemporary Africa' (Larkin and Meyer 2006, 297) but also to 'engage world Pentecostalism as global culture' (Yong 2007). Twenty years later, the churches' emphasis on the 'faith gospel' of prosperity and healing attracted worshippers from all strata of society, seeking to alleviate life under military rule and impoverished economic and welfare conditions (Ojo 2006). A recurring theme in all of Pentecostalism's phases in Nigeria, from the colonial period (1884–1960) to post-independence and post-civil war society and the military regimes in the 1980s and 1990s, has been its promise to 'surpass the limits of locality' (Larkin and Meyer 2006, 297), making it a key means of 'seeing and acting beyond local environments' (Prestholdt 2008, 88) and, thus, of African cosmoplitanism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Seen from the perspective of African cosmpolitanism, Olu Atuwatse II's reference to Dom Domingos' travels in the Portuguese Empire seemed to have been an obvious connection to make – if it were not for Pentecostalism's 'temporalising ideology' (Larkin and Meyer 2006, 292) of 'making a complete break with the past' (Meyer 1998). Before I discuss the intricate temporality-emplacements that the Olu sought to enact during his reign (1987–2015), I first give an overview of Dom Domingos' cosmopolitan positioning in the globalising world of the seventeeth century which the Pentecostal king was relating to.

Converting in the Era of the Transatlantic Trade

The Itsekiri monarchy's first contact with the Portuguese Empire can be traced back to the second half of the sixteenth century, a time when the Portuguese had been active in the Bights of Benin and Biafra for over sixty years. Already in 1493, the Portuguese had occupied the island of São Tomé in search of land to grow sugar. The nearby Kingdom of Kongo provided an eventual source of enslaved labourers and São Tomé became the first outpost for the

Portuguese trade in enslaved people and of missionary work in the Bight of Benin. In 1555 the Augustinian bishop of the Diocese of São Tomé sent monks to Warri who were to reinforce trade and introduce Christianity to the Itsekiri Kingdom. The monks were allowed to establish a Christian settlement which they named Santo Agostinho and to baptize the Olu's son Sebastião, after the reigning king of Portugal (Ryder 1960, 2-3). According to oral history transcribed in 1936 by the Itsekiri historian William Moore ([1936] 1970, 32), Prince Sebastião was also sent to the Portuguese colony of Angola 'where he was educated to read and write, and speak the Portuguese language fluently'. Although this first educational journey of an Itsekiri prince throughout the Portuguese Empire has not yet been corroborated by archival records, the religious and educational journeys of Sebastião's son, christened Domingos, have left a variety of archival traces in the National Archives in Lisbon and the Vatican Archive in Rome (Ryder 1959, 1960, 1969, Kenny n. d.).[42]

At the request of his father, Dom Domingos was sent to study at the Colégio de São Jerónimo in Coimbra, Portugal, in 1600. In 1604 he was transferred to the Colégio de Santo Agostinho in Lisbon, run by Augustinians and, in 1606, to the Colégio de Santo Antão, one of Lisbon's Jesuit schools (Kenny 1983). In his ten years in Portugal, Dom Domingo studied theology and, most probably, other subjects relevant not only to the proselytisation of his people but also to transatlantic trade. According to the correspondence between King Filipe III and his Viceroy, Bishop Afonso de Castelo Branco, the African prince was treated with the respect due to a member of the royal court. The Portuguese monarch himself arranged and paid for

[42] Father Joseph Kenny O.P. (1936-2013), a Catholic missionary and historian of religion at the University of Ibadan, conducted extensive research on *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa, 1480-1850* (1983). On the webpage of his religious order, The Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., he published numerous translations of the Portuguese and Latin archival sources that he used for his research (Kenny n.d.). Even though detailed citations are missing, I had to rely on these translations due to my lack of knowledge in Portuguese and the constraints and scope of the DPhil project. Wherever possible I cross-reference these translations with publications by A.F.C. Ryder (1959, 1960,1969) who has written in detail about early missionary work in the Bight of Benin.

the expenses of Dom Domingo's stay in his kingdom, including a yearly stipend of 200,000 reals (raised to 320,000 reals in 1604) and ordered

> to give him and his servants and one cleric accommodation befitting his state, and to be very careful to respect the person of this prince, so that he may not be in need and may be treated with the courtesy he deserves.[43]

This cosmopolitan hospitality had been developed in over a century of diplomatic exchange between Portugal and West and Central Africa. Many African rulers had realised early on the mutual benefits accruing from trading with Europe and about forty years into the transatlantic trade in enslaved people, 'a regular parade of official delegations from the coast reached Portugal' (Northrup 2002, 5). In 1448, the kingdom of Kongo on the lower Congo River sent its first emissary to Portugal. In 1486, an embassy from the kingdom of Benin followed. A delegation from the Jolof Kingdom on the lower Senegal River reached Portugal a year later. Moreover,

> a new Kongolese embassy in 1488-1500 helped make the monastery of Saint Eloy in Lisbon a […] center of African studies in Europe, where Kongolese learned European religious and secular knowledge and where Portuguese missionaries were trained in Kongolese culture. (ibid., 5-6)

Hence, Dom Domingos' study visit to the University of Coimbra in 1600 was embedded in a long history of diplomatic and cultural exchange.

Seen in this light, the Itsekiri Prince's marriage to a Portuguese noblewoman, a daughter of Cristovão Pereira and niece of the Conte de Feira, seems to follow established patterns of diplomatic exchange (Kenny 1983, 48). 'Class was a more pervasive force in fifteenth-and sixteenth-century Europe than were culture and colour, so both African and European patterns of family alliances favoured marriages as part of diplomatic ties' (Northrup 2002, 10). One of

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[43] King Filipe III to Vice-King of Portugal, Bishop Afonso de Castelo Branco, Valladolid, 17 July 1604, quoted and translated by Joseph Kenny, http://www.dhspriory.org/kenny/DH02E.htm, last accessed: 11 February 2016.

the earliest proposals recorded by an African dignitary was that by Emperor Yishak of Ethopia to King Alfonso V of Aragon in 1428. Even though the proposed marriage between their families did not realise, other marriages between noble families from West Africa and the Iberian kingdoms did. For example, a nobleman from the kingdom of Kongo married into the royal household of Portugal in the mid-sixteenth century. Fifty years later Dom Domingos followed suit.

However, Dom Domingos' marriage to a Portuguese noblewoman, whose name has not been recorded, was but one of many ways in which the kingdoms of Warri and Portugal aligned. Even though the Itsekiri prince did not fulfil his host's wishes to become ordained, he undertook 'a pilgrimage to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela and managed to have the Order of Christ conferred on himself, his father and one of his brothers' (Ryder 1960, 6). Moreover, Dom Domingos made sure to further consolidate the diplomatic and commercial ties between Warri and Portugal by presenting the king with petitions for the benefit of trade and Christianity in Warri.

Whether the Itsekiri prince and King Felipe III had the same economic and religious interests in mind remains unanswered. What is certain is that Filipe III granted Dom Domingos' wishes of free trade between Portugal and the Kingdom of Warri and promised to look into the possibilities of increasing the trade by the export of black peppers and other spices. He moreover equipped Dom Domingo with three priests

> especially chosen by the King's chaplain, for the service of the church in Warri, together with all the necessary vestments and ornaments. After much seemingly deliberate delay, Domingos at last left Portugal with a sizeable retinue - his wife, a chaplain and ten servants, four of whom had been made knights hidalgo of the Portuguese royal household. (ibid.)

According to oral history, Dom Domingos moreover brought with him a pair of silver crowns for himself and his wife and ascended the throne of Warri in 1625 as Olu Atuwatse I, reigning for about eighteen years. His silver crown (see Fig. 3.1) – adorned with a cross at its centre –

has become, together with a pair of Benin swords, the royal emblem of the Itsekiri monarchy and, thus, 'rallying point for the Itsekiri nation', as Chief Brown Mene, official spokesperson of the Itsekiri royal court, explained to our film team in 2015.



Figure 3.1: Olu Atuwatse II in full regalia, including the silver crown which is said to have come as a gift from Portugal in the early seventeenth century. Photo: Emiko 2015, 102.

What might have been the reasons for Olu Sebastião's and Atuwaste I's conversion to Catholicism, understood as the 'process by which the primary religious identification of a people changes' (Peel 1977, 108)? Was it a revival experience similar to the one Prince Emiko had at a Christian Union meeting at the University of Lagos in 1972? Or was it more pragmatic deliberations that informed their decision, like access to Western education and international goods that John Peel (Peel 1968, 1977, 1990) and Birgit Meyer (1999a) have identified as motifs for conversion in the nineteenth century? Seen through the analytical lens of Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) 'logic of practice' and his notion of different dispositions and forms of capital in a given social field, religion and consequently education were of paramount importance for social actors in the field of the transatlantic trade. For the

Portuguese, proselytisation turned African 'Others' into trust-worthy trade partners who shared similar values and beliefs (Fromont 2014, 5). For West African rulers like Sebastião and Domingos, conversion to Catholicism and education abroad meant an exceptional rise in their cultural capital that they were able to convert into economic as well as social capital, for instance the marriage into a Portuguese noble family.

Whether the Itsekiri monarchs abandoned their pre-Christian beliefs in favour of their new-found religion or rather supplemented them, cannot be answered with certainty. The continuation of their polygamous lifestyle suggests the 'Itsekiri were holding with considerable tenacity to certain […] external rites and symbols of the Roman Catholic religion without abandoning their more important social customs' (Ryder 1960, 23). Moreover, the abilities and knowledge that Atuwatse I obtained thanks to his stay in Portugal remained unachievable for the majority of his subjects and might have further contributed to his charisma as sacred king and mediator between the spiritual realm and his people (Adeboye 2007, Warnier 2007, Graeber and Sahlins 2016, see chapters 2 and 5). However, Portuguese sources testify to the continued effort by Sebastião and Dom Domingos to uphold the Christian faith at their court and to spread it among their people. When, after 1616, the Portuguese were unable to permanently station a priest in Warri, Sebastião and later Atuwatse I instructed their people 'in the Christian doctrines and arranged religious processions' (Ryder 1960, 7). All reports, though, suggest that Catholicism remained a court religion.

This view is also substantiated by the information that Olfert Dapper ([1868] 1964) compiled about the Itsekiri Kingdom in the seventeenth century. By 1644, the son of Olu Atuwatse I and his Portuguese wife, Dom Antonio de Mingo, had ascended the throne of Warri and celebrated 'his ancestry [i.e. his cultural and social capital] by dressing in Portuguese fashion

and sporting an epee at his side' (ibid. 314; for an artistic interpretation of Portuguese fashion in the seventeenth century by an Edo artist see Fig. 3.2). Even though most people in the kingdom still believed in 'witchcraft' (ibid.), the king and his court tended towards the Christian faith.

> There is a church in Ouwerre with an altar on top of which is a crucifix, two chandeliers and pictures of the Holy Virgin and the Apostles. The Negroes [sic] go there with rosaries and pray to God in Portuguese. Some of them can read and write and incessantly look for books in Portuguese (Dapper and Italiaander [1868] 1964, 314-315).[44]

However, for the Itsekiri monarchs, their deliberate exposure to a foreign belief paid off in more than spiritual and intellectual terms. According to Dapper, Dutch slavers procured an average of 400 enslaved people per year in Warri and exchanged a variety of international goods for them (Alpern 1995) which the Itsekiri elite incorporated into their lifestyle. Moreover, the kings' religious conversion helped them to loosen ties with the mighty Kingdom of Benin to the west of the Niger Delta. As papal decrees forbade the delivery of arms to infidels and the Oba of Benin repeatedly declined Portuguese missionaries access to his kingdom, the Itsekiri monarchs were at an advantage, being able to procure weapons to defend themselves against the Benin army that considerably outnumbered theirs (Ryder 1960, 1, Kenny 1983). Moreover, the additional spiritual power associated with the Catholic faith might have enabled them to counteract the supernatural powers attributed to the Oba of Benin. Hence, even though Portuguese and Itsekiri elites probably had different interests and intentions when entering in commercial and cultural exchange, the trade in enslaved people was perceived to be a mutually benefiting enterprise for Europeans and Africans alike.

[44] This is a translation of the German version of Dapper's text by the author.



Figure 3.2: Unidentified artist from the Bronze Guild of the Kingdom of Benin. Plaque depicting a Portuguese merchant and manillas, the currency for enslaved people, sixteenth or seventeenth century. Most probably looted from the Palace of Benin in 1897; sold to the Museum für Völkerkunde (Ethnological Museum of Vienna) by Wilhelm Albert Maschmann in 1899. Inventory number: 64799. Photo: KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien.

In the *longue durée*, the Itsekiri monarchs' adherence to the Christian faith mirrored regional power struggles in Europe and the political economic shifts of the transatlantic trade. According to A.F.C. Ryder (1960), rivalries between the Portuguese, the Spanish and the Vatican hindered the further development of Christianity in Warri. Moreover, the eventual demise of the Portuguese Empire and the rise of the Dutch, French and British led to the eventual abandonment of the Catholic faith in the Itsekiri Kingdom. All in all, nine out of sixteen Olus of Warri reportedly practiced (their version of) Christianity till the abolition of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people in 1807.

Shortly after Britain's proclamation of the abolition of the trade in enslaved people, Captain Adams of the Royal Navy visited Warri and painted a vivid picture of the remnants of the Catholic mission there. He described the king to be little interested in Christianity, but was impressed by 'several emblems of the Catholic religion, consisting of crucifixes and mutilated saints [which were displayed on a] rude kind of table' (Adams 1823, 125) in the first

apartment of the royal palace. Moreover, ‘a large wooden cross, which had withstood the tooth of time [sic], was remaining in a very perfect state, in one of the angles formed by two roads [of the city] intersecting each other’ (ibid.) According to oral history the kings of Warri had lost faith in the Christian religion by the end of the eighteenth century and had reinforced pre-Christian beliefs and practices. Thus, the display of these Catholic icons might have been less for the purpose of maintaining a royal court chapel but rather for showcasing past cosmopolitan achievements, similar to the practice of displaying and parading heirlooms (*ukueke*) today (see chapter 5).

The notion of displaying accumulated family wealth and cosmopolitan charisma also applied to the outfit that the Olu of Warri donned to greet his British guests.

> [The Olu] had on a white satin waistcoat trimmed with silver lace, a silk purple coat much embroidered, black satin small-clothes with knee buckles, coarse thread stockings, shoes and buckles, and a large black hat trimmed round the edge with red feathers; all of which appeared to us of Portuguese fabric, except the coat and waistcoat, which, there is little doubt, had, at a former period, been worn by some noble peer or knight at the court of St. James’s. (Adams 1823, 124)

Thus, even though the faith in the Catholic religion might have faded by the time of the abolition of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people, the material remnants of religious encounters, in form of historical displays and fashion, was very much alive.

Today, it is predominantly the Olu of Warri and his chiefs who are tasked with the care and public display of the kingdom’s Catholic past. The royal emblem, consisting of the Portuguese crown over crossed Benin swords, as well as the dress of the Olu and his chiefs, the latter in the form of a white flowing shirt and a white wrapper tied with a red sash strongly resembling Catholic ritual garments, testify to the Itsekiri’s long history of cultural and religious contact with Europe and the wider Atlantic world (Fig. 3.3). The material remnants of this religious encounter speak to the notion that ‘Africans encountered Europe with their eyes open, sometimes in amazement, usually in keen awareness of their own self-interest’

(Northrup 2002, xiv). They affirm that African cosmopolitanism, understood as an active engagement with the globalising world, did not develop in the era of the African palm oil trade, but was rather an essential feature of Africa's contact with Europe at large (Getz 2013). On a more sombre note, the cosmopolitan things also point to the complicity of European and West African interests in the transatlantic trade in enslaved people and to the interdependences of religious contact, cultural exchange and commerce in the shaping of the Atlantic world.



Figure 3.3: The Olare-Aja of Jakpa, the most senior representative of the Ologbotsere family, crowning Olu Ikenwoli I on 12 December 2015. There is a triplicate presence of the Portuguese crown in this scene: 1) as part of the national emblem on the wall which also includes crossed Benin swords, 2) as relief on top of the back of the throne and 3) the actual crown lifted to be put on the king's head. The dress of the Olu, e.g. *the red cope (Catholic priest's cape) and dalmatic (long, wide-sleeved tunic worn during Catholic liturgy), as well as the garment of the chiefs resemble gowns worn by Catholic clergy members. Photo: Royal Palace of Warri, 2015.*

Negotiating Transatlantic Pasts in the Age of Oil

When I started my research into Itsekiri pasts in 2013, the kingdom's early contact with the Portuguese Empire was a matter not only close to the heart of Olu Atuwatse II but also a widely discussed topic amongst cultural experts and laypeople alike. Hence in order to understand how the Olu sought to mobilise the cosmopolitan experiences of Dom Domingos to implement his vision of a Pentecostal kingdom 'under the one and only God' (Palace of Warri 2014, 89), we have to understand how the Portuguese impact on Itsekiri cultural practices was perceived across different strata of Itsekiri society.

When the film team of Ugbajo Itsekiri UK and I set out to discuss the main narrative threads of our film, it became evident that Nanna Olomu and his anti-colonial struggle was but one important chapter in the Itsekiri's centuries-long engagement with the Atlantic world. What the film team was particularly keen on showing was the 'culture' that the Itsekiri had developed in dialogue with Europe and neighbouring communities. In 1480, three years after the Portuguese had arrived at this part of the West African shore (Ryder 1960), the Oba of Benin sent his first-born son Ginuwa to the western fringes of the Niger Delta, awarding him the title *Ogiame* or 'King of the sea'. There the Benin prince consolidated several settlements of various migration backgrounds such as the Igala in the north and the Ijebu-Yorúbà in the west and founded the Kingdom of Warri (also known as Itsekiri or Iwere). Apart from court protocol, royal regalia and songs in Edo (the language of the Kingdom of Benin), the Itsekiri language today is considered a dialect of Yorúbà with a plethora of Portuguese loan words. Most of the goods introduced in the era of the trade in enslaved people still bear (corrupted) Portuguese names, such as *kemije* (from the Portuguese *camisa*) for shirt, *zapatu* (*sapato*) for shoe, *garafa* (*garaffa*) for bottle or *bandeiri* (*bandeira*) for flag. Once we started filming in the Niger Delta, barely an interview went by without mentioning at least a couple of these Portuguese loan words and nearly every interview partner felt obliged to mention the history

of contact with the Portuguese on his or her own accord. Rex Clarke and I had decided to hark back to a seminal film in European film history, *Chronique d'un été* by Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch ([1960] 2012), who had used the newly developed hand-held camera to go to the streets of Paris and ask random people one question: 'Are you happy?,' (Henley 2009, 136-176). Rex had proposed to ask a no less suggestive question to people in the streets of Ode-Itsekiri: 'Are you proud to be Itsekiri?.' While all of our interviewees answered the question enthusiastically in the affirmative, the follow-up question, 'Why?,' more often than not sparked explanations about the Portuguese-Itsekiri past. Some interview partners even ascribed Portuguese roots to things that were of Victorian origin, such as earthenware jars from Bristol, and tended to explain the origin of words or things as Portuguese when there was clearly doubt about it.

There are several possible explanations for this emphasis on the Portuguese, and not the Dutch or French, as the main intermediaries between the Itsekiri and the globalising world. First, our interlocutors contrasted the British and other European Empires they had traded with by 'telescoping' (Vansina 1980) the Dutch, the French and the Portuguese into one continuous and harmonious precolonial era of trade and cultural exchange. Whereas the British were associated with colonial encroachment and conquest, the Portuguese and the three centuries of precolonial trade with various European Empires signified political sovereignty and economic and cultural self-determination.

Secondly, land right claims and contestations which have intensified since the discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta in 1956 have been substantiated with claims to centuries-long contact with Europe. Itsekiri historians and lawyers have been using historical maps and correspondence from the era of the trade in enslaved people and palm oil to certify the kingdom's existence before the establishment of colonial rule and to legitimate current land and, thus, mineral rights in a fierce contest over oil revenues (Lloyd 1967, 1974, Ayomike

1988, Edevbie 2000, Ekeh 2005, Ayomike 2009, Agharowu and Oritseweyinmi 2013, Adrian 2015, 2016). Hence, the emphasis on the contact with the Portuguese was not only an affirmative recourse to a self-determined past but also pointed to the politicisation of transatlantic encounters in the current political economy of oil (Curnow 2002).

It was in this heated context that Olu Atuwatse II tried to bring his Pentecostal 'crusade' (Emiko 2015, 7) to a close. According to the Olu's diary entries, which his wife and children scanned and published in a commemorative booklet in 2015, the 'crusade' had already started in 1976 when Prince Emiko had entered 'in a covenant with God […] to restore the kingdom to Him' (Emiko 2015, 7). On 21 May 1976, he had pledged to

> 1) restore the wasted years in my life, 2) […] abide in Him daily, John 1:5[7], 3) […] be married to Duro Shaw in September 1977, 3) […] get my LL.M Degree in 1979/80 […], 4) be a millionaire and backing the work of God with my money, 5) […] live a happy/ joyful, meaningful, long and God blessed life with my wife Duro, 6) […] see our children grow and established in the fear of God. Thank God for answering and granting my request in Jesus Name Amen. (ibid., i)

It seems that Prince Emiko's written prayers were answered. He married, finished his studies at the University of Lagos and at Guildhall University in London and became a successful lawyer and founder of his own law firm in 1982. Moreover, in 1987, was able to successfully lobby for royal succession, even though it was his younger brother Ikenwoli Emiko who had been groomed by their father to ascend the throne of Warri after his demise. According to my conversations with several Itsekiri insiders, it was Prince Godwin Emiko's international education, his 'cosmopolitanism' and his savviness in legal and commercial issues that convinced the five king making families to elect him as the new Olu of Warri. Similar to Dom Domingos election to the throne, it was, again, cultural capital and its convertibility into economic capital that was paramount in deciding the succession of leadership in the Itsekiri Kingdom. Olu Atuwatse II sought to stress this fact by publishing a richly illustrated coffee table book in honour of his twenty-fifth coronation anniversary in 2012. Over ten pages, glossy

photographs showed Atuwatse II and his retinue visiting the headquarters of the multinational energy corporation Chevron in California in 1989, thus showcasing his commercial acumen and staging the king as ideal representative of the Itsekiri Kingdom in Nigeria's age of crude oil (Figs. 3.4a and b).



Figures 3.4a and b: Olu Atuwatse II talking to a Chevron executive (above) and with his retinue of chiefs at the headquarter of Chevron in California in 1989. Photo: Royal Palace of Warri 2012, 90-91.

However, apart from economic diplomacy, Atuwatse II had also started to put his 'crusade', a term referencing Pentecostal self-definitions as 'end-time army' (Ojo 2006), for a Christian

kingdom into practice. He stopped visiting the old capital, Ode-Itsekiri, in order to avoid getting in contact with the ancestral powers that resided there and refused to perform rituals to honour and appease the ancestors. He also stopped leading the annual masquerades in the rural areas of the kingdom that were considered important to cleanse the villages spiritually and forbade his chiefs from doing so either. The negligence of his role as spiritual leader and mediator between the living and the dead has to be understood against the backdrop of his Pentecostal perception of the ancestral past. As Birgit Meyer has shown in her study on Pentecostalism in Ghana, it is necessary for Pentecostal worshippers to, first, 'seize a 'objectified conception of culture', preconstituted during colonial missionary contact as 'heathen' and 'backward looking' (Larkin and Meyer 2006, 287), and , then, 'break with it' in order to become 'reborn' (Meyer 1998). The break or rupture, thereby, is 'a long-term project', as Matthew Engelke (2011, 181) has explained in his discussion of Pentecostal practices in the Masowe Church in Zimbabwe. Moreover, according to Engelke, every rupture with the past 'is also always a realignment' (186) with other pasts. Worshippers of the Masowe Church, for instance, not only wear long white robes and a coiffed beard and carry walking sticks, thus 'paying homage to representations of biblical figures in twentieth-century Christian popular culture' (ibid.). They also call their way of glossolalia 'ancient Hebrew' (187) and, hence, establish a Biblical time-space or chronotope. Olu Atuwatse II, on his part, did not have to reach back to Biblical times to forge his own chronotopic realignment. The life of his predecessors, their turn to Christianity and economic acumen in transatlantic trade, seemed to offer an appropriate background upon which to break with the ancestors while simultaneously celebrating their cosmopolitan achievements.

But what are the consequences if the king, the custodian of a people's ancestral past, decides to deliberately neglect his responsibility to nurture the connection with this past? On the quiet, people who still adhered to ancestral beliefs would start blaming the Olu for the problems that

had befallen the Itsekiri during his reign; the most severe grievance being the so called 'Warri Crisis' from 1997 to 2003 (Human Rights Watch 2003). In May of 1997 the military government under General Sani Abacha created a number of local government areas, including a Warri South-West Local Government Council. 'An Ij[o] expectation based on official statements that the local government headquarters would be in Ogbe-Ijoh, an [Ijo part of] town, was disappointed when the location published in the federal government gazette turned out to be Ogidigben, an Itsekiri area' (Human Rights Watch 2003, 4). As political patronage associated with the location of the government headquarters was thought to be crucial for the success in the political economy of oil, a series of riots and clashes between the Ijo and the Itsekiri ensued. Hundreds of people died, property and houses were destroyed and six Shell Nigeria installations were taken over, leading to a significant drop in the oil production. The conflict also extended to towns in the creeks of the delta which entailed additional loss of property and lives. It took six years to settle the conflict, with the Itsekiri conceding the location of the headquarters to an Ijo part of town. Other disputes about land demarcations and related stakes in regional elections spurred further violence between Ijo, Urhobo and Itsekiri in the years that followed.

Against the backdrop of these recent conflicts about land rights, the decision of the Olu to finally cut the ancestral cord with his forefathers in September 2013 proved one step too far for his subjects. Without prior consultation with either his council of chiefs or the broader Itsekiri public, a written edict was leaked to the press in which the Olu renounced his title *Ogiame* claiming that it bound him to the ancient covenant that, according to his understanding, his predecessors had struck with the goddess of the sea, *Umale Okun*. He furthermore rejected the Itsekiri national anthem on the ground that it included references to the deities of the sea and finally called for the destruction of 'all ancient and new altars in Iwereland not raised up to the Lord' (Palace of Warri 2014, 90). In other words, this edict not

only intended the entire iconoclasm of ancestral and other spiritual sites, it also shook the very foundation of the Itsekiri Kingdom. Without the title with which the Oba of Benin had conceded the territory at and of the sea to his son and founder of the Itsekiri Kingdom, how would the Itsekiri be able to stake claims on the land they were living on and off?



Figure 3.5: Ipi *masquerades blockading the palace gates of the Olu of Warri, 9 September 2013. On the first day, the* Ipi *masquerades still wore the royal colours red and white. On the consecutive days they changed the white cloth to black cloth as symbol and threat of death. Photo: Amaize and Arubi 2013.*

As soon as the edict leaked to the public, turmoil broke out once again. Youth leaders staged a protest in front of the palace, calling for the *Ipi* masquerades, known for their power to celebrate as well as to punish, to support their cause (Fig. 3.5). They were joined by the market women who put up soup kitchens to feed the protesters.

'The concerned protesters' with the motto 'Our Culture is Our Right' published the following response to the king's edict:

> [This] symbolic protest [...] is inspired by the highest level of patriotism and uncommon Itsekiri nationalism. It is a revolt, not against the coveted divine direction and covering of the Almighty God, but against the flagrant desecration of our

> collective cultural patrimony. […] This revolt calls all Itsekiri sons and daughters who submit themselves to the very definition of Itsekiriness. We cannot suddenly, in an attempt to be civilized, import an alien culture to exalt our holy and awesome God for calling us 'Itse' (blessed) before we were born. We did not force ourselves to be Itsekiri nor did we create this territory for ourselves. God did. To that extent, we cannot now in a bid to being strangely rebranded obliterate, annihilate or despise our very existence for any reason. (Newuwumi 2014, 97)

Inferring from this statement, the young protestors insisted on the intrinsic entanglement of ancestral practices and the people's relationship to land and favoured a syncretistic approach to religion over the exclusivist claims of Pentecostalism. It did not negate the Itsekiri's past of cultural and religious contact *per se*, but rather perceived the exclusivist 'culture' of Pentecostalism as threatening to not only ancestral worship but also territorial claims.

Two years after the events, at the funeral of Olu Atuwatse II, I met the leader of the protest, Omolubi Newuwumi, and asked him why it had been particularly youths who had called for the masquerades. The youth leader, a priest to a local deity and founder of a masquerade himself, highlighted their continued significance for social control and 'justice' and told me the following story about his birth village of Tebu:

> Years back, Chevron wanted to drill the first well in Benin River in Olero Creek. […] A service company was employed […] to carry out the dredging. But when they came back the next morning, all the waist [that they had removed the other day] was back in the water. They were there for some time [before] they called a physician [sic]. He put on his diving equipment, went into the river, and, when he came back, asked: 'Which community is Tebu community here? […] There is a masquerade inside the water that says that the children have not seen him before. […] It is only when the masquerade is properly dressed and shown to the children, that we allow that dredging to take place.' […] And, eventually, Chevron came, brought a lot of foodstuff, seven cows, seven goats, everything was seven, seven, seven, and that masquerade was played for three days. And after one week, they went for the dredging, and the dredging was successful.

The mythologised story of the introduction of oil exploration into the western Niger Delta reads like a parable about rural communities' efforts to assert agency in the emerging political economy of oil. Looking closely, though, it was not only the current owners of the land but also its original settlers that claimed a portion of the oil wealth. That is to say, the

‘masquerade’ that Newuwumi was referring to was based on the long-held belief that the first settlers of the land, who had ‘lived amongst and intermarried with […] the Urhobo, Ijo and Mahin [settlers from Ijebu-Ode] in the pre-Ginuwa day’ (Moore [1936] 1970, 13), had been superseded by the Benin prince and invading armies, eventually ‘dematerialising into the ethereal world’ (14). Called *Umale*, those original owners of the land became a ‘peculiar species of some immortalised beings’ (13), who were perceived to demand, as was the case in Olero Creek, to be invited amongst the living via masquerades in order to ‘dwell with them’ (ibid.). ‘Playing masquerades’ was thus a way to link up with these pre-monarchical ancestors and, consequently, to lay primordial claims on the land.

Though what exactly was the attraction of such masquerades for Itsekiri youths? As David Pratten (2008a, 46) has shown for Ibibio and Annang youths in the east of the Niger Delta, ‘young people in Nigeria appropriate the contradictions of masking to contest their political marginality.’ Stripped of most economic and cultural possibilities to gain social maturity, young people have started to use the ‘”paradox-making” role of the mask’ not to disguise themselves but to reveal and harness ‘the unknowable, uncontainable, hidden energies that lie beyond human agency and control’ (ibid.). In this sense, masking and related forms of mobilising ‘hidden energies’ such as charms and spiritual ‘medicine’ (Pratten 2008b) are forms not only of empowerment but also of critique of prevalent economic, political and cultural relations of power. Moreover, as Newuwumi explained to me, masquerades are also a form of ‘solidarity to support each other’ and a means to exert control and violence in times, such as during the ‘Warri Crisis’ (1997–2003), when youths and rural communities felt marginalised and unheard by the Itsekiri royal palace. It was therefore a logical step for young people to call for the masquerades in order to make themselves heard by the king and protest his attempted iconoclasm. The masquerades’ changing colours, from red and white,

referencing the Olu's colours, to red and black, as sign of immanent violence and possible death, emphasised their willingness to take up battle against the Olu's Pentecostal 'crusade'.

The youths were soon joined by high-ranking chiefs of the kingdom. On the second day of the revolt the Council of Chiefs, the king's closest circle of advisers, distanced themselves from the decision of the Olu. They published a rebuttal of the king's claims where they sought to reinterpret the meaning of the title *Ogiame*. According to them, *Ogiame* only designated a territorial and not a spiritual title that was given to the founding prince by his father, the Oba of Benin, conferring the land to the Itsekiri people (Chiefs 2014b). In the same vein the Itsekiri Leaders of Thought (2014, 96), the leading Itsekiri think tank and opinion maker in the kingdom, stated that

> Ogiame has been the unchanged name of the Warri monarch since its creation in 1480 [...] If the former is abolished, the monarchy would be extinguished and if Atuwatse II ceases to be Ogiame, his reign as the Warri monarch would have expired. Neither is possible.

In addition, the extended royal family signed a public letter also distancing themselves from the Olu's decision and stressing the religious freedom that, in their opinion, Itsekiri cosmopolitanism was known for. They were joined in their claim by the Council of Chiefs who insisted that conversion could not be done by force (or edict), but by 'witnessing miracles' or evangelism and once again asked the monarch to 'follow the path of honour and withdraw the declaration' (Chiefs 2014a, 92-93).

After four days of protests Olu Atuwatse II withdrew his declaration. As soon as the king's decision was made known, the *Ipi* masquerades came out once again, this time to rejoice, wearing red and white cloths. In a reconciliatory gesture, the protestors also joined the king in a thanks-giving service at his Foursquare Gospel Church. But even in this reconciliatory gesture lay defiance. In order to acknowledge the Olu as their legitimate monarch the people greeted the king in the traditional fashion, kneeling in front of him, spreading their arms wide

open before pulling them together in front of their chest and bowing their head to the ground, all the while exclaiming ‘Ogiame suo!’ (‘Long live Ogiame!’). The people had won the ‘spiritual war’ against their king and, consequently, maintained their claim on land that the title *Ogiame* referred to.

Or did they rather reach a consensus, as a Nigerian colleague corrected me when I presented my interpretation of the events at a conference at Ondo State University in 2016? The tussle over how to relate to the past could have gone in a different direction, as Olufunke Adeboye (2007) has demonstrated in her study on Pentecostal Obas in Yorúbàland. In 2003, the fourteen-year rule of Oba Adara Aderiye, the Olode of Ode-Ekiti, was abruptly cut short when the king sought to break with the ancestral past. He was ‘beaten up by irate youths, stripped of his paraphernalia and later chased out of the town naked’ (2007, 1). Likewise, Oba Samuel Popoola Adelegan, the Ogboni of Ipole, in Osun State, was banished from his kingdom after a twenty-two-year rule.

> The refusal of the Oba to continue to appease the two major deities of the town (*Ogun* and *Owari*) following his spiritual ‘rebirth’ infuriated his people. He was later reinstated after three years in exile by the state government in 2007 amidst continuing protest from the womenfolk. (ibid.)

However, there have been Obas who found ways to reconcile their Pentecostal convictions with the spiritual and social needs of their wider communities. Already at the end of British colonial rule, Isaac Babalola Akinyele ascended the throne of Ibadan despite his Pentecostal faith and refusal to worship the local deities. Backed by the colonial government and, after independence, by the Action Group, he brought his experiences as staff of the Native Authority, as Councillor in the Ibadan council, and ‘nineteen years of moving up the chieftaincy ladder’ (11) into the royal office. His ‘turbulent’ reign (1955–1964) is today known for developing Ibadan’s infrastructure and educational system. With similar steadfastness, Oba James Ashaolu Adekeye, the Onimoji of Imoji, in Kwara State, denied his

call to the throne twice before reaching an agreement with his community to sign an official contract, which guaranteed him the right to abstain from ancestral worship, in the presence of a lawyer. Again, in a different way, the Ooni of Ife, Oba Okunade Sijuade, relinquished his title of *Oluaye* ('Possessor of the universe') in 2001 as sign of his Pentecostal rebirth, but continued, nevertheless, to 'carry out his traditional ritual obligations' (15). Pentecostal Obas have since joined forces and founded organisations like the Association of Born-Again Christian Obas (AOBACO) to 'encourage and strengthen one another […], reach out to their fellow Obas and evangelise them' (14). Being president of a similar organisation, the Christian Kings Mission (CKM), from 2012 until his death in 2015, Olu Atuwatse II was surely aware of these developments and sought to implement his Pentecostal crusade by appealing to the Itsekiri Kingdom's cosmopolitan past. Yet, the exclusivist claims that he deduced from 'the cross of Jesus Christ that is at the top of our crown' (Palace of Warri 2014, 89) did not match with the notion of religious plurality that the wider royal family and his subjects saw in it. While mobilising the crown did 'thicken time' and make 'space visible, charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history' (Bakhtin 1981, 84), the subjectivities that emerged for the Olu and his subjects were different. For the youths and chiefs alike, African cosmopolitan life in the era of the transatlantic trade was not one of 'drawing boundaries' (Engelke 2011, 184), as the Pentecostal king might have construed it, but one of transgressing them.

With the choice of Olu Atuwatse II's successor in 2015, the five king making families sought to mend the (attempted) ruptures that the Pentecostal king had inflicted on the kingdom's meshwork of interlocking (ancestral and cosmopolitan) chronotopes. The new Olu of Warri is Atuwatse II's younger brother who had been ignored in favour of the Pentecostal king in 1987. Olu Ikenwoli I is known to be a Christian and a 'traditionalist', meaning that he is willing to communicate with the ancestors and primordial deities and to renew the kingdom's

'covenant' with them. His name after the coronation is a name that no other Olu of Warri has born before. To the surprise of many Itsekiri I spoke to, the sword picking ceremony for *Omoba* Ikenwoli included a brand-new sword without the 'weight of the past' (Lambek 2002) (Fig. 3.6), allowing the king-to-be to inscribe his own name onto it. At last, the royal palace had devised a way to make a break with the ancestral past that the Itsekiri population was willing to embrace. Though, unlike Olu Atuwatse II's intended iconoclasm, the rupture that the sword picking ceremony enacted was not meant to suspend the relationship with the ancestral past but to innovate it.



Figure.3.6: Omoba *Ikenwoli during the sword picking ceremony, 12 December 2015. Photo: Royal Palace Warri.*

Conclusion. Breaking and Realigning with the Ancestral Past

The Olu of Warri's and his subjects' fierce contest about how to relate to the ancestral past highlights the ways in which 'pasts, presents and futures interlock' (Mbembe 2001, 16) in Nigeria's postcolony in, at times, violent ways. In 2013, the Olu sought to finalise his

Pentecostal ‘crusade’, which had started with a revival experience in the 1970s, by not only making a ‘complete break with the [ancestral] past’ (Meyer 1998) but also by ‘realigning’ (Engelke 2011) himself with the cosmopolitan experiences of his predecessors in the seventeenth-century Portuguese Empire. He did so by mobilising the silver crown that the Itsekiri Prince Dom Domingos had brought from Portugal in 1610 and the stories of religious conversion and European education that the crown was able to elicit. However, his chiefs, the extended royal family and the youths protested the subjectivity that the temporality-emplacement of the Olu proposed. While they did embrace the idea that the Itsekiri Kingdom had produced ‘the first university graduate of Africa’, as the interviewees kept telling our film team, they did not agree with the exclusivist and iconoclastic claims of Pentecostalism that the Olu sought to superimpose on Christian conversion in the seventeenth century. African cosmopolitanism, as they understood it, was not an experience of drawing cultural and religious boundaries but one of transgressing them. Moreover, the Olu’s attempt to destroy ancestral sites threatened cultural practices, like masquerades, with which not only the youth used to ‘contest their political marginality’ (Pratten 2008a, 46) but, more generally, rural communities could stake a primordial claim on land. This performative way of mobilising ancestors to stake a claim in the age of oil stood in contrast to the means that the Olu had at his disposal. Throughout his reign, the king had sought to demonstrate that he was able to discard the chronotope of ancestral immanence and still perform his role as leader in the political economy of oil. He sought to merge his Pentecostal cosmopolitanism with the outward-looking past of his predecessors to establish a charisma that, paradoxically, he thought could be sustained without the ancestors. In front of the palace in 2013, the masquerades invoked the presence of primordial ancestors or deities to not only criticise the Olu’s take on cosmopolitanism pasts and presents but also to physically threaten the king and fight for their own survival. The ways in which the Olu and his subjects navigated this crisis

also highlighted the role of things, like the crown and masquerades, to establish relationships to a plurality of pasts and related visions for possible presents and futures. Olu Atuwatse II's vision for a kingdom 'under the one and only God' (Palace of Warri 2014, 89) did not materialise. Rather he had to find ways in which to reconcile with his subjects. The following chapter looks at one of these strategies, the staging of a theatre play about a similar crisis in leadership in the nineteenth-century where not only religion but also international trade and colonial encroachment informed the choices of leaders in the Itsekiri Kingdom.

4. Staging the Past. Translating Red and Black Oil

'The Olu […] he stayed till the end'

… was the first answer that my companion gave me on my question whether he had liked the theatre play that we had just seen. It was not a comment on the performance of the actors or the way the play had been staged. It was, albeit indirectly, a comment on the content of the play. *Olu Akengbuwa* was about the events leading up to the 88-year-long interregnum in the Itsekiri Kingdom in 1848 and the ways in which British and Itsekiri had coped with the power vacuum that thus ensued. Given the recent crisis in leadership in the Itsekiri Kingdom in 2013, so called 'Ogiamegate' (Emiko 2015, 9) in reference to the Watergate scandal in the USA (see chapter 3), it was striking that Olu Atuwatse II had chosen this play as part of the official program celebrating his coronation anniversary in April and May of 2015. Even more striking, especially in the eyes of my companion, was the fact that the king and his retinue of chiefs had chosen to watch the play and had 'stayed till the end'. Together with a diverse crowd, straddling generation, gender and class, the Olu had participated in witnessing the historical events as they unfolded on stage where greed, hubris and disrespect for pre-Christian religious authority suspended the kingship for an indefinite time. The play, therefore, echoed problems which the Itsekiri society was facing in the present.

Olu Akengbuwa (2015) by Alex Eyengho is but one in a string of plays by Niger Delta playwrights who use events of imperial contact in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to comment on issues of the petro-era. Matthew M. Umukoro's *Nanna Olomu. A historical play* (2001b), Henry Leopold Bell-Gam's *King Jaja* (1996a), Ola Rotimi's *Akassa You Mi. An historical drama* (2001a) and John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's *All for Oil* (2000) discuss issues of 'purposive leadership' (Rotimi 2001b, viii), 'solidarity' (Green 2001, xi) and 'unity' (Bell-Gam 1996b, i) in a time of political and economic encroachment and intense

transcultural exchange. The transcultural exchange is often addressed in the ways in which political leaders navigate Christian and pre-Christian beliefs and highlight the impact that their choices have for the wellbeing of their people. In this context, the playwrights imagine leadership predominantly as male and, in the case of *Olu Akengbuwa*, outright reject female leadership, rehearsing 'the figure of the male patriarchal leader of legendary renown' (Jeyifo 2004, xvi). Moreover, all of the playwrights refuse to specify which natural resource the actors on stage talk about, using the term 'oil' without indicating whether they mean red (palm) oil or black (crude) oil. This deliberate refusal to specify can be read as an act of translation whereby historical events are interpreted and brought to 'bear' (Barber 2000, 430, Lambek 2002) in the present according to the needs and interests that the playwrights perceive in their society. I would like to use the notion of translation, understood as a transformative transfer across time and space (Derrida 1985, Bhabha 1994, Benjamin 2002 [1923]), to analyse the ways in which Eyengho – and by extension Umukoro, Bell-Gam, Rotimi and Clark-Bekederemo – employ the medium of the theatre play to stage historical experiences, draw moral lessons from the past and negotiate possible meanings of 'good' leadership and intra- and interethnic relations in the face of colonial and postcolonial encroachment. In so doing, I seek to expand on Karin Barber's (1982, 2000) seminal work on Nigerian theatre in the era of the petro-naira and offer a new, translational perspective on staging the past and performing – gendered – leadership in times of perceived 'crisis' (Vigh 2008). The chronotopes that the theatre performances thus afford are deeply cosmopolitan or, more precisely, self-reflective on the ways in which Niger Delta elites position themselves and act within the globalising world and its imperial meshwork of relations.

Studying Nigerian Theatre

In her study of *The Generation of Plays. Yorùbá Popular Life in Theatre* (2000) Karin Barber traces the life of a travelling theatre group in Yorùbáland from its beginnings in the late 1950s to its expansion into and subsequent sublimation by video production in the early 1990s. She explains the various roots of 'modern' Yorùbá theatre, comprising church drama and 'native air operas' and, to a lesser extent, Alárìnjó masquerade shows (for the history of Nigerian theatre see also Jeyifo 1984, Adelugba, Obafemi, and Adeyemi 2003), and describes the organisational efforts and entrepreneurial skills it takes to realise a theatre play, the creative verve of its performance and the diverse reception by its audiences. Most importantly for the study of theatre in Nigeria, she proposes three concepts to analyse the process of generating a play: 'experience', 'example' and 'potential'. The theatre practitioners draw on their experiences in daily life and enact them on stage as examples in order to offer their audiences moral lessons which they can interpret and 'edit' according to their social positionality. In this process, 'every moment and every level of production is a site of creative potentiality' (9). As the plays of the travelling theatre group were unscripted and gave expression to their 'love affair for the Yorùbá language' (3), everything was 'continually emergent, continually requiring to be worked out afresh in the light of new circumstances' (430).

Even though the plays I am looking at are scripted and in English, the concept of potential or, better, potentiality applies in equal measure. For *Olu Akengbuwa*, Alex Eyengho recounted to me his lengthy discussions with representatives of the Palace of Warri about specificities in the plot of the play as well as the creative re-working of his text with the actors ahead of the performance at the coronation anniversary. Similarly, Ola Rotimi insists that 'the production must NOT drag [emphasis in the original]. Good pacing and the application of logical, perceptive cuts where necessary in the text, should help realize the pulsating dynamics deserving of the actions the play offers' (2001a, 2). Moreover, the audience's reactions can

differ according to their social setup and form an essential part in eventually generating the play. They are 'not only feeding the actors with their responses as a performance is actually in progress but also taking it upon themselves to extract a significant "lesson" which they can recount, contextualize, and reapply afterward' (Barber 2000, 204).

Beyond this common embrace of potentiality in performance as a fluid 'repetition with difference' (12, see also Derrida 1985, Butler 1999), Barber sees potentiality as constitutive for the Yorùbá understanding of self-realisation.

> People do not regard themselves as being actuated by rules and norms: destiny itself is emergent, only disclosing itself as a result of the individual's self-motivated original activity, his *esè* [feet] purposefully taking him along the path where is *orí* [head, or personal destiny] is headed […] 'Do not write people off: no one knows what someone may become tomorrow.' (Barber 2000, 430)

Destiny is thus understood as a process of becoming in time and space within pregiven, though malleable limits. It describes the ways in which 'people imagine and reckon with determining powers', be it 'high political powers, cosmic forces, or transcendental entities' (Elliot and Menin 2018, 292). In their call for an anthropology of destiny, Alice Elliot and Laura Menin identify 'malleable fixity' as common denominator shared amongst various historically and culturally infused notions of destiny. They ask how people envision themselves as acting and effecting change while 'being acted upon' (Mittermaier 2012) and stress the 'diverse temporal orderings of human – as well as divine and cosmic – action' (Elliot and Menin 2018, 292) involved in processes of self-realisation. Theatre practitioners in Nigeria, both popular and academic, have had a particular interest in staging and thinking through self-realisation on a personal as well as communal level. Whereas there are famous examples which refuse to show successful self-realisation, such as Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) (Odom 2008), most of the plays concerned with here highlight predestined agency in times of political and economic encroachment.

A marked difference between popular and academic theatre practices is the temporal and social situatedness of the examples they draw on. The Yorùbá theatre professionals in Barber's study mostly took inspiration from mythic tales or from the popular life of an emergent intermediate class, 'not illiterate farmers, not salaried professionals' (Barber 2000, 2), and gave moral lessons in self-realisation at a time – the 1970s and early 1980s – when the petro-naira afforded 'magical' wealth without hard work. By addressing 'ordinary people, very rarely the élite' (Barber 1982, 434), they constituted a particular type of 'modern collectivity' (Barber 2000, 204) or 'public' (12-13). In contrast, the scripted plays I am concerned with here reach into the past to stage historical examples and offer moral lessons about leadership in times of perceived social 'crisis' (Clark-Bedekeremo 2000, vi, Green 2001, xiv, Umukoro 2001b, 16), variedly understood as colonial encroachment, post-independence national-regional politics and the general economic and political decline in the 1990s, suggesting a cyclical or chronic rather than an exceptional state of affairs (cf. Vigh 2008). The audience (and readers) thus addressed are not only traditional rulers and the political and economic elites but also those social groupings who confirm or question them – which in the case of 'Ogiamegate' in 2013 encompassed people from all walks of life. They are plays by members of the cosmopolitan 'cultural elite' (Barber 1987) who were educated at national and international universities and are fluent in both traditional performative styles and academic, Western-type theatre, staging historical examples of cosmopolitan elite life to question leadership in different phases of the petro-state.

Ola Rotimi's *Akassa You Mi* premiered as a 'fringe event' (Rotimi 2001b, vii) of the Rivers State Arts Council during FESTAC '77 and might be read as a defiant gesture of inscribing the history of the 'small brave city-state' (Alagoa 1964) of Nembe in the central Niger Delta into the cultural nation-building project of the petro-state at the height of the oil boom (for details on the cultural politics of FESTAC '77 see Apter 2005 and my discussion later in this

chapter). Henry Leopold Bell-Gam's *King Jaja* premiered 15 years later, in 1992, at the University of Port Harcourt at a time when the illusion of wealth through oil had given way to 'economic alienation and political dispossession [via] rentier capitalism and prebendal politics' (Apter 2005, 259). Matthew Umukoro's *Nanna Olomu* premiered in 1994 at the Arts Theatre at the University of Ibadan and was shortly thereafter performed at the University of Lagos while Sani Abacha's military regime (1993–1998) was administering the final blows to political accountability and human rights on a national scale and, to a particularly severe extent, regionally in the Niger Delta. In fact, only Clark-Bekederemo's *All for Oil* premiered at the Institute of Church and Society in Ibadan in 2000 at the same time as the aforementioned plays were finally published in print. *All for Oil* was further shown at the University of Ibadan, the Yoruba Tennis Club and the National Theatre, both in Lagos. Its route not only indicates Clark-Bekedermo's eminent position in Nigeria's elite theatre scene but also the general re-flourishing of artistic practices after the transition to democratic rule in 1999. *Olu Akengbuwa* likewise traces back to this period of democratic restoration and, more specifically, to the film *Nanna of the Niger-Delta* (1999) by Aboyowa Ikomi for which Alex Eyengho was assistant director. Eyengho was inspired by the first half of the film about Olu Akengbuwa and his heirs' demise to stage a lesson of the perils of leadership at the coronation anniversary in 2015. The long period between the performance and the publication of the plays as well as between the film and its stage version attests to the fluctuating significance of theatre for the edification of elite audiences, be it at Nigerian universities, exclusive clubs or, as a more inclusive experience, at communal events of traditional rulers. It also highlights the cultural elites' continual inquiry into what it means to be a 'good leader' in a shifting but unfailingly unequal political economy.

Material Processes of Translation

The changing political and economic conditions critically inform the ways in which Nigerian theatre practitioners do their work. But how exactly do they establish a relationship to the past? Karin Barber uses the notion of 'editing' to describe the ways in which theatre professionals and audiences selected moral lessons from personal and staged experiences and defines this 'editorial project' (Barber 2000, 14) as distinctive of a Nigerian form of being 'modern' (13). Modernity or 'enlightenment' in post-independence Nigeria meant to 'edit the habitus from within – but as if from an external vantage point – conceptualising "tradition" as a field while still inhabiting it' (ibid.). This field was characterised by 'radical disjunctions, oppositions, and doubling [and] involved the attempt to recuperate valued elements from the very ideological repertoires that were being rejected' (ibid.). Nigerian theatre was an ideal medium to achieve this editorial stance - both being and imagining oneself as being inside and outside – by staging experiences and simultaneously evaluating them. This holds particularly true for the Niger Delta playwrights and the characters they put on stage. All of the playwrights were either born in or have familial ties in the communities whose pasts they are enacting and many grew up with family members who were experts in traditional performative styles such as dances and masquerades. At the same time, they studied at various national and international universities, closely engaging with Western theatre styles: Eyengho (*1969) at the University of Liverpool, Rotimi (1938–2000) at the Universities of Boston and Yale, Bell-Gam (*1950) at the University of Paris VIII, Umukoro (1953*) at the University of Wales. This cosmopolitan outlook informed the ways in which they perceived the past and translated it onto the stage. Moreover, they imagined their historical characters to have a similar bifocal ability to perform a subjectivity while at the same time commenting on it. Before discussing whether the cosmopolitan positionality of the historical characters stemmed from the playwrights' own 'editorial stance' (429) or was part of a more general, historically

informed way of performing subjectivity in the Niger Delta, I would like to turn to the notion of 'translation' with reference to what Barber conceptualises as 'editorial processes' (313).

Barber's understanding of 'editing' includes not only selection and 'composition by assemblage' (431) but also rejection, modification and recuperation. I would like to further expand on this plenitude of meanings and introduce the notion of 'translation' to grasp the temporal and spatial transfers and deferrals that editorial processes in theatre afford. Going back to the etymological root of the word, the Latin *translatio(n-*), meaning 'carried across', and the participial stem of *transferre*, meaning 'transferred' (Oxford Dictionary 2019), translation can be understood most broadly as a transformative transfer across time and space. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's influential essay *The Task of the Translator* (2002 [1923]), which stresses the transformative potential of translation, many postcolonial and poststructuralist scholars have played on the notion of movement in time and space. Whereas Homi K. Bhabha (1994) looks at cultural translation as a form of 'back-and-forth movement between different cultural processes' (Bassnett 2013, 342), Jacques Derrida (1985, 2007) takes a linguistic approach and extends Benjamin's notion of translation as *Überleben* or *Fortleben* (living on or living after) to mean 'a redemptive mode that ensures the survival, the living on, of an original text' (Brodzki 1999, 207). Read together, Bhabha's spatial and Derrida's temporal understanding of translation open up possible new ways to think about the processes with which theatre practitioners retrieve historical experiences via various media and modes (archival records, books, oral history, proverbs, dances, songs and many others), cast them in narratives of example which are then performed on stage and, consequently, interpreted by the audiences. Each act of carrying across experiences from past to present, from medium to medium and actors to audiences implies an active choice of selection, rejection, modification and recuperation – or, to put it in Derrida's terms, a *differance*, a transferral and deferral of meaning. This transformative potential of theatrical translation is

aptly expressed by Matthew Umukoro who defines his play *Nanna Olomu* as an 'artistic reconstruction and reinterpretation of an actual event, with emphasis on dramatic truth rather than historical veracity' and acknowledges that the play is a 'subtle blend of facts and fiction: the facts of history and the fiction of the dramatic action' (2001a, 8). Hence, translating the past in Nigerian theatre involves the creative tools of editing as well as the materiality of performance – the body and the things it interacts with (cf. Sofer 2003, Schweitzer and Zerdy 2014, Wirtz 2014) – to bring the past to 'bear' (Lambek 2002) in the present within the 'frame' (Barber 2000, 321) of the theatre stage. Theatrical performance thereby affords two temporal-spatial configurations: the timespace or chronotope (Bakhtin 1981) evoked by performance and the experience of the performance as it unfolds on stage. As Tracy Davis' (2010, 142) has shown, theatrical performance has the ability to suspend linear notions of time and to 'reconcile […] conventions of reminiscence, forecasting, and cross-temporal reflection'. Hence, it offers the audiences a vantage point from which to ponder possible relationships between pasts, presents and futures in their plurality (Zeitlyn 2015). In the last part of this chapter, I will discuss what kinds of chronotopes Niger Delta playwrights offer their audiences. For now, I would like to draw attention to how they do it and focus on their material processes of translation.

'A people in search of a leader' (Rotimi 2001a, 3)

Ola Rotimi's plot description at the beginning of *Akassa You Mi* anticipates a sentiment that echoes throughout the historical plays discussed here. The play's Ijo title translates as *The Akassa War* and describes the long route of self-realisation of Nembe's leader King Koko up to his concerted attack against the headquarters of the Royal Niger Company at Akassa in the central Niger Delta in 1895. The play begins at a time when Nembe (also known as Nembe-Brass), a formerly prospering, palm oil trading city-state, has been worn down by the Royal

Niger Company who usurped Nembe's trade routes to the hinterland markets and installed a taxation system that puts the Nembe merchants at a stark disadvantage.

Crocodile-Without-Shame and his fellow 'pirates' who are operating in the creeks, raiding British trade ships, reminisce:

> Amazige: In days gone by, for venturing into the waters of our fathers, White traders paid 'comey' to the king of Nembe. Next, whitemen paid what they called 'trust' [...] The blackman made his profit, the whiteman got his oil. The story ends. [...] Since the big Whiteman, Goldie, and his Royal Niger Company took over the lands of trade in the upcountry, our own black traders are forced to pay a lot of money for permission to trade as before. [...]
>
> Igodo: [...] our money all goes to the whiteman, and we starve. On the other hand, if we stop trading and look on, as the Nembe traders are doing now, the whiteman control everything all the same, and we still starve. (53-4)

Their dialogue reveals little about their experience as pirates in the creeks. It rather resembles a *maieutics* about Niger Delta history, in which Crocodile-Without-Shame teases his fellow pirates to explain the system of trade that preceded the rule of the Royal Niger Company. Their growing awareness of pre-colonial trade conditions consequently enables them to take stock of the political-economic situation they are facing under early colonial rule. Hence, consciousness about the ancestors' experiences, their agency and sovereignty, enables self-reflective positioning in the present.

This notion of self-assertive knowledge production about the past echoes the understanding of the Ibadan School of History whose members were famous for rebuking colonial historiographies and rewriting Nigerian history from African perspectives shortly before and after independence (cf. Ajayi and Alagoa 1974, Adesina 2006). The playwrights consulted the Ibadan School's publications and discussed their plays with its eminent historians. While Rotimi and Bell-Gam closely engaged with E. J. Alagoa's vision of Ijo history (Alagoa 1964, 1970, 1971, 1972, Alagoa and Fombo 1972), Umukoro collaborated with Itsekiri historian

Obaro Ikime (Ikime 1965, 1968, 1969). Alex Eyengho, on his part, screened a film interview with J.O.S. Ayomike, Itsekiri historian and president of the thinktank Itsekiri Leaders of Thought, at the premiere of *Olu Akengbuwa* in 2015, thus substantiating the historical events which were about to be performed on stage. [45] In the same vein, the title of Rotimi's play *Akassa You Mi* ('The Akassa War') also known as *Beke You Mi* ('The War against the Whiteman') emphasises the self-affirmative shift in narrating the past. It dismisses the British terminology of a 'raid', understood as 'the wild unprovoked acts of savages' (Alagoa in Green 2001, ix), and highlights the concerted effort to unite the Nembe people to go to war with the aim 'to ensure economic survival for their people, to break the stranglehold on trade […], and to maintain Nembe's sovereignty' (Green 2001, ix).

In a letter to the producers of the play in 1995, Rotimi remarks that he considerably reworked the play since its premiere at FESTAC '77, particularly with regard to his initial impulse to rectify colonial historiography. In the script for the centenary celebration of the Akassa War, he omitted several scenes, notably the final act of killing the British captives after the successful attack. In 1977, Rotimi had intended to show that the human sacrifice was 'meant to '"cleanse" the land of illness and anguish'. Eighteen years later, he rather sought to 'project Koko (and through him, the people of Nembe), as models in purposive leadership on the one hand, and communal solidarity and advance on the other' (Rotimi 2001b, viii). What might have been the reason for this omittance besides the 'prevailing social circumstances' in the Niger Delta and the self-declared 'artistic maturation' (vi) of the playwright? Was the theatrical performance of killing the British meant to not only amend colonial historiography

[45] Alex Eyengho consulted the publications of and conducted interviews with eminent Itsekiri historians, such as J.O.S. Ayomike (1988, 1990, 1992, 1993, 2009), a self-trained historian and head of the Itsekiri thinktank Itsekiri Leaders of Thought, and the colonial historian William Moor ([1936] 1970).

but also to serve as a symbolic act of cleansing the land of its colonial past? And if so, why did Rotimi deem the theatrical translation of this violent act unnecessary in 1995?

Rotimi's initial decision to include the ritual killing seems to overlap with the over-arching idea of FESTAC '77, also known as Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture. The pan-African festival sought to affirm, through a 'dramaturgy of power' (Apter 2005, 9), precolonial cultural traditions and, thus, to 'exorcise the ghosts of colonial domination' (16). Fuelled by the new-found wealth of the oil boom, the post-independence (1960), post-civil war (1966–1970), military government ventured to imagine and construct a nation which was as much 'indigenous' as pan-African. Andrew Apter has shown that this project of cultural self-affirmation was itself haunted by the ghosts of colonialism, 'convert[ing] colonial, [ethnicised] culture into indigenous idioms of national tradition' (2005, 16).

Moreover, in contrast to the idealised ethnic equality of the cultural spectacle, the *realpolitik* behind the scenes was fought along ethnic lines. Having grown up in Port Harcourt and Nembe, Rotimi was aware of the ethnicised power dynamics of post-independence Nigeria. The discrepancies in the distribution of political and economic power was especially felt by people in the Niger Delta who had bemoaned the dominance of the three major ethnic groups constructed under colonialism – the Yorùbá in the West, the Hausa in the North and the Igbo in the East – already before independence. In 1957, the Willink Commission had sought to address the concerns of ethnic minorities, aiming at strengthening regional-ethnic sovereignty by means of, amongst other things, states creation (Willink 1958, Akinyele 1996, Vickers 2010). Consequently, today's Benin and Delta States (1991) gained state status in 1963 as Mid-Western Region (re-named Bendel State in 1976). Rivers State (today's Rivers and Bayelsa States, 1996) only realised after the federal government had violently suppressed the foundation of the 'Delta Peoples Republic', proclaimed in February of 1966 by an insurgency

group called ‘Niger Delta Volunteer Force’. Its leader Isaac Adaka Boro (1938–1968), was born in Oloibiri, the site of Nigeria’s first oilfield discovered in 1958, and had witnessed the lack of political and economic agency by oil producing communities. He urged fellow Ijos – itself a relatively new ethnic construct comprising, amongst others, the former city-states of Nembe, Brass, New Calabar, Bonny and Opobo – to ‘fight for their freedom’ (Boro in Oriola 2013, 80), understood as economic and political self-determination. During Nigeria’s civil war (1966–1970), such sovereignty was further threatened by Biafran claims on the oil-rich region, leading Boro to side with the Federal Government and eventually dying in combat. Boro’s call to arms has been an inspiration for freedom fighters in the region ever since, serving militant groups such as MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, founded in 2006) as historical role model (cf. Obi and Rustad 2011a, Oriola 2013).

Boro’s life might have also inspired Ola Rotimi while writing *Akassa You Mi*, specifically for the character of Crocodile-Without-Shame, leading to a layering of historical experiences within the play. In the long tradition of self-fashioning and self-projection in the Niger Delta, Isaac Boro had designed a flag for himself, showing a star, the head of a crocodile and the head of a lion in white on a red background. The image of the crocodile head repeated itself on the flags of his colonel and lieutenant (Boro 1982, 111-2), becoming an emblem for the insurgency. Given the fact that other historiographies of the Akassa War of 1895, for example by E. J. Alagoa (Alagoa 1964, 1970, 1971, 1972, Alagoa and Fombo 1972), do not mention the participation of ‘pirates’ or youth militias in the events, it is likely that Rotimi used the figure of Crocodile-Without-Shame as idealised version of Ijo militancy to layer chronologically heterogenous experiences and make them speak to each other on stage. He created what Rosalind Shaw (2002) might call ‘palimpsest memories’ and what I would like to define as a palimpsest translation, using theatrical performance to superimpose various experiences of the past. This editorial strategy resonates with Walter Benjamin’s (2002

[1923], 257) notion of translation which highlights its potential to reveal something inherent but unexpressed in the original text that goes beyond 'individual elements of a […] language' and touches on the 'intention' of the original, thereby renewing it and securing its survival (*Fortleben*). Rotimi's script and, in particular, the theatrical performance allows for historical experiences to speak not only to each other but also to their 'intention' or overriding dynamics. In the case of *Akassa You Mi*, these dynamics concern leadership in times of political and economic encroachment and the fight for sovereignty.

By translating chronologically heterogenous experiences into the frame of the theatre stage, Rotimi allows the audience to contrast and compare, seek parallels, continuities and ruptures between violent resistance under early colonial rule and in the post-independence petro-state. He ends the play with King Koko's victory speech in which he warns his people:

> Koko: [...] the face of oppression comes in **different** colours, and at **different** times [emphasis in original]. Yesterday, it was the Whiteman, crushing us. Tomorrow, it could be even our own black brothers too drunk with power to let us breathe. In all this, always remember: oppressors can only reign, if the people join them. (Rotimi 2001a, 132)

Whether Rotimi already included this warning in 1977 or added it in 1995, is hard to ascertain. It speaks to a common perception in the Niger Delta that conditions in the post-independence petro-state barely improved in comparison to life under colonial rule (Clark-Bedekeremo 2000, Ken Saro Wiwa in Apter 2005). Lack of economic and political sovereignty has been repeatedly blamed on poor leadership on traditional, state and federal levels (Watts 1994, Soyinka 1996, Watts 2003). My Itsekiri research partners, for example, repeatedly gave me numbers to demonstrate the mismanagement of oil wealth. Whereas at the beginning of oil exploration in the Niger Delta 50 per cent of oil revenues would stay in the oil producing communities, it declined to 20 per cent in the 1970s and 3 per cent in the 1990s. Only recently it was raised to 13 per cent (Ejobowah 2000, Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative 2019). Moreover, the accusation that political and economic elites on

national and regional levels ‘eat money’ (Bayart 2009) instead of redistributing and sharing it, understood as clientelism, corruption and the moral stance to only look for one’s own gain instead of the common good, lets the playwrights call for ‘unity’ (Bell-Gam 1996b, i) and ‘solidarity’ (Green 2001, xi) ring particularly true. The shift from colonial oppression to dispossession and marginalisation within the post-independence petro-state might also have been one of the reasons why Rotimi felt it incongruous to perform the killing of the British captives in 1995. Whose ghosts would he have had to symbolically exorcise at the height of Sani Abacha’s military regime?

However, power relations in the petro-state have not only been fought along ethnic lines and regional-national demarcations. Above all, the plays’ call for unity addresses intra-ethnic fault lines. By giving examples of anti-colonial resistance, their narratives invert but, in the end, reaffirm power relations across gender and generation. The relationship between Crocodile-Without-Shame and King Koko is a particularly revealing case in point. The pirate addresses the king not as mature leader but as fellow ‘youngman’ and reminds him of his responsibility to take ‘action’ (Rotimi 2001a, 39), that is to lead a violent insurgency.

Youth and violent insurgency have been a recurring nexus in the Niger Delta ever since Isaac Boro declared the ‘Delta Peoples Republic’ in 1966. Youth – particularly male youth – have increasingly felt unable to attain social maturity as oil spills have made traditional occupations such as fishery impossible and ‘modern’ aspirations such as a university education no longer guarantee employment either in the state or the private sector. They have come to see violence, in particular the disruption of oil production and kidnappings, as viable way to drive a wedge into the well-greased machine of oil extraction and, thus, to claim participation in its political economy (Watts 2003, Obi and Rustad 2011b, Oriola 2013). Brutal suppression of such insurgencies by federal troops under military and civil governments hardly deterred them (Watts 2003). On the contrary, the amnesty program which was initiated by the Federal

Government in 2009 has demonstrated that violence pays. The program seeks to channel youth's actions into non-violent occupations, providing remuneration and international education opportunities in exchange for armistice. Male youth have thus come to recognise violence as effective political act – at least to amend their own grievances. Whereas it improves the living conditions of militant young men (and those who claim to be them), it does not address or change the problems of the extractive system per se (Adunbi 2015).[46]

Akassa You Mi was written and re-written several decades before the amnesty program. Yet, its dialogue seems eerily relevant to the 'politics of the belly' (Bayart 2009) of both, political elites and militant youth:

> Igodo: [...] We have muscles, we are hungry, we are thirsty; our wives are sick, our children die; the oppressors keep crushing our manhood; we have firearms. Are these not enough to make a man burn for action?
> Crocodile-Without-Shame: And then the oppressors give you food for your hunger, and alcohol to quench your thirst, and false praise to soothe crushed manhood, all will be well. Is that it? [...] This is the trouble with us. Like the python, fill the stomach, and contentment reigns. Even its safety means nothing. Isn't that so? [...] Any man, any being – black, white or green – any man with respect for himself, and pride for his race, would starve in the dignity of resistance, than belch in the contentment of domination by strangers. (Rotimi 2001a, 48)

By ending with the warriors' triumphant return to Nembe, the play leaves the effects and efficiency of violent resistance open for speculation. It does not mention the 'punitive expedition' by the Royal Navy that swiftly followed the Akassa War and cost many Ijo lives and property. It also does not mention the investigation of the British parliament into the war which, amongst other reasons, ultimately led to the revocation of the Royal Niger Company's charter in 1899 (Falola and Heaton 2008, 101-2). In 1995, Rotimi intended to play the role of

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[46] Omolade Adunbi (2005) has shown that the amnesty program has 'co-opted', 'incapacitated' and 'dispersed' the youth militants, rendering them incapable to further articulate their grievances. It restores the uninterrupted extraction of oil without addressing the broader issues of environmental destruction and revenue distribution. 'At the bottom of the ladder are community members, whose environments and means of livelihood continue to be desecrated by the activities of corporations' (217).

Crocodile-Without-Shame himself, suggesting a particular affinity with the idea of violent uprising as an effective strategy against colonial rule. Indeed, the pirate is literally 'without-shame' – in its double meaning – whereas King Koko is repeatedly blamed to have disgraced himself by not fulfilling his role as leader and failing to take 'action'. Yet, it is King Koko who, in the end, binds Crocodile-Without-Shame and succeeds in gaining his 'ecstatic self-submission' (118).

But how exactly does the play envision the king's path to 'purposive' leadership? As one of the main obstacles to self-realisation the play suggests his Christian faith. 'Shame on you!,' clamour the female elders of the town, 'His Christian God has made him soft. E-e-i-y-i!' (60).[47] It correlates his faith with his initial collaboration with the Royal Niger Company exemplified by his help to enforce payment for outstanding debt. He 'was too busy making friends with the whitemen, and learning the white custom of their white God in their white shrines' (92). Beleaguered by complaints of his people – young and old, men and women – about poverty and disease, King Koko seeks help from the chief priest of Nembe's 'arch-god' *Ogidiga*, who, in mythic times, united the canoe houses of Nembe (cf. Alagoa 1964, Sibiri 2014). At the shrine, Priest Ozongbai and King Koko ponder the meaning of leadership:

Koko:	To be king and to be a leader – are they twins of the same navel? [...]
Ozongbai:	To rule is to head the affairs of the land from above the people. To lead is to head the affairs of the land from among the people. The first is routine, self-interest first, the people's last; the other is involved, self-interest last, the people's first. No link, at all. [...] Your power is not absolute unless directed by the wishes of the people! [...]
Koko:	[...] What kind of leader d'you expect of me, anyway? A leader needs authority.
Ozongbai:	The people will give you that.

[47] What the play does not thematise is the fact that Frederick William Koko's (1853–1898) role as teacher in the missionary school and the cultural and social capital thus accrued had been deciding factors in electing him Amanyabo in the first place, reinforcing the split of the kingdom into Christian and traditional factions (Alagoa and Okorobia 2011). Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther had founded a missionary station at Akassa in 1861. In 1877, the St. Luke's Anglican Church followed at Ogbolomabiri, one of the three factions of the Nembe Kingdom, the others being Bassambiri and Twon-Brass.

Koko: And goodwill.
Ozongbai: The good work you do will win you that. (73-75)

King Koko is not yet convinced by this relational concept of leadership which rests on his attentiveness to the needs of his people and their mutual support. He is not economically powerful enough to man his own war canoe, a prerogative to be able to go to war. Hence, he needs to rely on the support of the other canoe houses of Nembe to supply him with bonded warriors, an infringement against Ijo tradition. As solution to his problem the priest gives the king a proverb – 'The monkey's neck' – and then elaborates: 'We see the monkey's neck, yet choose to tie a rope round its waist. Young King, what did I say?' Koko translates its meaning, 'You said every problem demands its own special answer' (72), followed by another proverb by the priest and the same translation.[48] In the course of the play, the king will use the advice of 'the monkey's neck' to first trick his people and then change tradition. Instead of going to war, he calls for an exploration trip to Akassa for which he is allowed to borrow warriors to man his canoe. Nearing the trade station, he unveils his actual plan of attack and, carried away by his rousing call to war, the canoe houses and pirates of Nembe follow him in unison.

This realisation of his destiny is made possible not only thanks to the wisdom of creative change encapsulated in proverbs, having been handed down through generations, but also by the way the priest enables the king to reflect on possible pasts, presents and futures. During their consultation, Ozongbai insinuates that the tradition of manning war canoes has been to

[48] This incorporation and translation of knowledge encapsulated in proverbs is a recurring theme in *Akassa You Mi* as well as in *Nanna Olomu*, *All for Oil*, *Olu Akengbua* and *King Jaja*. Though whereas Rotimi freely offers an interpretation, Bell-Gam (1996a), for example, refuses a direct translation and asks the audience to interpret the proverbs' meaning within the context of its use. Moreover, he introduces another medium which transports knowledge about the past, songs (cf. Alagoa 1966), and ends his play with a song in Ibani-Ijo, reserving the English translation for the printed version of *King Jaja*. In comparison, in *All for Oil* Clark-Bekederemo only offers the English translation of songs, emphasising the process of casting historical experiences into song over their original poetry (2000, 16-19, 63-65).

the detriment of Nembe cohesion, fuelling rivalries among merchant families instead of uniting them in the face of colonial encroachment.

> Ozongbai: About time the value of our history as one people cast off that bushman's passion for clan this and clan that, Young One. Indeed, that you have no clan makes you the choicest leader for our times. You stand neutral, acting only on that which benefits our peoples at large. Our land, good friend, now needs a **clanless** leader. (emphasis in the original, 78)

In the priest's speech, levels of time are superimposed. He uses the colonial trope of the 'bushman' to negatively evaluate certain aspects of tradition. In the same breath, he assesses the 'history' of Nembe as if speaking from a future vantage point looking back at the unification process which King Koko has yet to set in motion. Having thus foretold his destiny, the priest invokes the ancestors, bringing yet another layer of the past onto the scene:

> Ozongbai: [...] Now, Son of our ancestors, Koko [...] you of Igbeta lineage. I ask: Will you let the deepening chaos in our midst entomb our peoples and so turn the name of this great land into a mere 'once upon a time'? In the voice of your ancestors, answer me!
> Koko: It is well ... I shell lead the people! (79)

Once the king has rejected the possibility to settle for nostalgically looking back at an irretrievable past, 'a mere once upon a time', the priest rubs chalk on his forehead, strikes his shoulders thrice with his ritual staff and underscores King Koko's new-found understanding as a leader by declaring: 'Henceforth, the gods say your name shall be: "Ofrima Leke-leke' Outraged Shark-That-Knows-No-Rest!' (79). By pondering possible pasts, the priest has shown the king a path to lead in the future.

At first glance, it seems that, by surrendering himself to the temporal ruminations of the priest and the advice of the ancestors, King Koko is ritually transformed. Though, in line with Karin Barber's understanding of destiny in Yorùbá cosmology, I suggest that even though the consultation of the shrine unveils King Koko's destiny and the moral behaviour he has to assert in order to fulfil it, it is the actions he takes as a consequence that make him into a

legitimate leader. The priest's and, by extension, the ancestors' renaming of King Koko is a projection of his potential into the future. Only when King Koko succeeds in uniting the Nembe warriors under his leadership and his people cheer him on, their appellations, 'Ofrima Leke-leke!,' affirm his new-found status as their leader. In this way, the king's route to self-realisation attests to the relational process of subjectivity formation in the Niger Delta.

The Materiality of Performance

So far, my analysis has focused on the sources and media from which the playwrights retrieve knowledge about past experiences – amongst them, historiographic publications, oral history, and proverbs – and on one artistic strategy to translate and re-translate past experiences onto the stage at different times of Nigeria's petro-state. I am now broadening the scope and look at additional narrational and dramaturgical strategies, paying close attention to the material culture that helps to stage past experiences, including costumes and props.

In Henry Leopold Bell-Gam's *King Jaja* (1996a), the protagonist's relational process of self-realisation is most comprehensibly expressed by the three names that the Amanyanabo of Opobo is given throughout is life: Mbanaso (meaning 'The one whom the town fears') by his family in Nkwerre, the Igbo hinterland, Jubo Jubo Fem, abbreviated to Juo Juo (meaning 'The stubborn one'), by the members of the Annie Pepple House in Bonny, who have purchased him as a bonded adolescent, and Jaja (a corrupted version of Juo Juo) by the British traders and political agents. This change in names reflects the shifting meshwork of relations that Jaja navigates and fosters.

Moreover, it is the material culture of the Atlantic interface that highlights his changing social status and ever-fluid meshwork of relations within his own community and, especially, with the British. Two scenes stand out in this respect. The first is the crowning of Juo Juo as the

new head of the Annie-Pepple House, still at Bonny, where the Amanyanabo-to-be is ritually fitted out with emblems of Ibani royalty, namely a (*kakibete*-)wrapper, a sword and a crown. The ascension to the throne is witnessed not only by the whole community of Annie-Pepple House but also by the ancestors and gods who have been asked for their presence via a libation. The fitting out and, thus, transformation of Juo Juo's body mark a central communal moment on stage, performatively bringing together the realm of the living and the dead. Whether this act of evoking the ancestors on stage was perceived as 'just a [play] act,' as something 'quite distinct from what is real' (Butler 1988, 527), might depend on the audiences' ontological investment in ancestral worship and in the medium of theatre. For the Yorùbá travelling theatre, Karin Barber (2000) draws the conclusion that

> when traditional genres [such as masquerades and incantations] are quoted at greater length on stage, they are almost always used to make a definite dramatic point, so that their internal meaning and dynamics are firmly subordinated to the design of the dramatic narrative. (342)

Given the potential of material culture in Itsekiri performative practices to evoke a plurality of chronotopes – including the immanence of the ancestors as I will explain in chapter 5 – I would like to caution against the general subordination of 'traditional genres' to the dramatic narratives of theatre. There is always the potential that diverging chronotopes might invade the scene.

The second scene in *King Jaja* in which material culture plays a predominant role is the visit of a British delegation to Opobo, once the Amanyanabo has seceded from Bonny, violently claimed land from the Andoni people and founded his new city-state. The three men are Consul MacDonald, Consul Hewett and an unnamed pastor. They all bear gifts. Jaja accepts the gun and the tin of gun powder but rejects the bible. Moreover, they present a parcel which contains a naval outfit, a golden sword, a crown and a throne, mirroring one of Jaja's outfits during his photographic self-fashioning campaign (see Fig. 2.6 in chapter 2). Together with

the golden sword as ‘symbol of royal authority’ (Jaja 1991, unnumbered page, see chapter 2) they materialise his successful self-realisation as merchant and leader. In addition, Consul Macdonald delivers a letter from the Queen of England in which she congratulates the Amanyanbo to the ascension to the throne and ‘offers … [her] protection free of charge’ (Bell-Gam 1996a, 46). Consul Hewett further substantiates this offer with a Protection Treaty which King Jaja and his chiefs sign after a short deliberation, interpreting the treaty to be aligned with their interests. ‘It is reasonable comprehensible too. The new territory must be protected, trade, commerce, industry and justice must flourish on the new land’ (48), concludes the Amanyanabo. The staging of this encounter between King Jaja, his chiefs and Britain’s imperial agents conflates the intricate negotiations of power relations which occurred between the signing of the Trade Treaty in 1873 and the signing of the Protection Treaty in 1884 into a single scene (see chapter 2). It thereby translates the period of sovereign existence of the Kingdom of Opobo into an act of gift exchange. This exchange symbolically demonstrates the things that Britain had to offer in transatlantic trade, amongst them international fashion as well as weapons and a new religious faith, and the ways in which merchant elites accepted or rejected them. The gift exchange, therefore, becomes a mythic condensation of British-Opobo relations.

Bell-Gam takes several creative liberties in the narration of historical events, staging experiences in a condensed and, at times, mythic way while simultaneously commenting on them. For example, the protagonist not only proves his qualities as a leader through his actions. During the coronation ceremony, they are also summed up by the head priest as ‘a practical demonstration of a desire, motivation, inspiration, humility, tolerance, patience, perseverance and dedication towards ensuring security and improving the lot of the people’ (44). Moreover, the play considerably veers from the historical record. It makes the figure of Jaja a stout advocate for the abolition of slavery who denounces it as ‘most horrible and

unbelievable' and asks: 'Our fathers sell their own children to the Whitmen for money? What will the Whitemen think of the black race?' (19). While the play lets Jaja comment on the moral economy of the trade in enslaved people as if from a vantage point in the future, it does not show him taking concrete action to alter the system itself. Rather, the play demonstrates how he achieves social mobility via hard work and commercial wit, becoming the most successful palm oil trader in Bonny. At the demise of the head of Annie Pepple House, he is the only one willing and able to pay off the out-standing debt to European traders and consequently assumes the role of their leader. His actions, though, do not remain unchallenged. Not only does he have to overcome his stigma of having been enslaved, he also does not see eye to eye with some of his chiefs on how best to react to the British traders' venturing into the hinterland markets. Whereas some voices suggest opening up the oil markets, the king advocates 'to fight and to ensure that justice is done. We must protect our trade now or never [...] British protectorate does not bring oil, rather it sucks it across the seas to London. Is that what you call protection?' (54). He suggests a diplomatic fight, instructing Chief Cookey-Gam to 'carry the letter [of complaint] personally to the Home Office' (51). By stringing together concrete actions with generalizing statements about, for example, leadership and the trade in enslaved people and 'oil' (in its double sense), the play oscillates between the theatrical dramatisation of past experiences and socio-political commentary.

In comparison to *Akassa You Mi*, *King Jaja* ends on a sombre note. After the pastor's and the consuls' visit, the play takes a leap in time and space to Jaja's trial in Accra where the king denounces his 'unfair judgement' by the British court. While Chief Cookey-Gam supports the king in his denunciation of 'British tricks' (69), Chief Uranta insinuates that he might actually favour Jaja's demise: '… in London, tell the Queen, King Jaja administration too tight me, I want (*demonstrates expansion*)' (description in the original, 70). Faced by external pressure and internal dissent, the king turns to the crowd of 'sympathisers from all parts of Black

Africa' (55), who have gattered to witness the tribunal, and wonders: 'I cannot understand British diplomacy. I, King Jaja, to pay the prize of your greed in my kingdom. Admiral Hunt Grubbe [who serves as the judge], you have done your worst, only the gods will vindicate me' (72). Hence, even though the play celebrates social mobility and self-realisation across ethnic lines, it refuses to show successful strategies with which to fight colonial encroachment. Likewise, it does not settle for a final moral evaluation of the protagonist's actions. His 'stubbornness' (2) enables him to become king and resist against the British. At the same time, he alienates some of his followers by his tight ('stubborn') grip on power and still allows himself to be 'tricked' into signing away his sovereignty. He can only be vindicated by supranatural forces. Whereas *Akassa You Mi* left future developments open for speculation and, I might argue, hope, *King Jaja* closes with the Amanyanabo's deportation into exile and an original song in Ibani-Ijo which commemorates the relationship between Bonny, Opobo and the British:

Britain e e e e, Britain miesi	Britain made Igbani and
Igbani na Madu owu some	Madu to go into war
Britain e e, Britain miesi	Britain made Juo Jou
Juo Juo n'Oko Jumbo owu	and Oko Jumbo to go
Somme e	into war (72)

The dirge seems to lay blame for the rivalries and conflicts within the Kingdom of Bonny on the British and highlights the limits of Jaja's agency within the political economy of the Atlantic interface. 'I was a slave to our people and now a slave to the British, where is freedom?' (73).

What might have been the reason for this sombre ending? In an interview at his home on the campus of the University of Port Harcourt, Henry-Leopold Bell-Gam suggested to me the political-economic context of the plays' inception as well as his personal life experience as possible influences. He created *King Jaja* at the beginning of the 1990s when people throughout Nigeria felt the consequences of the collapse of the oil boom, chief among them

sky-rocketing inflation and a rise in organised crime (Barber 2000, Apter 2005). Moreover, the transition from a decade of military to democratic rule was hanging on a thread. Though, for Bell-Gam, it was the ethnised politics in the Niger Delta that most disconcerted him. Having returned from studying and working in Paris for fifteen years, he found a political-economic system where people were 'playing their indigene card'. 'For you to get something you have to be an indigene,' he described the 'political ecology of citizenship' (Apter 2005, 261). Being a descendant from a leading family in Opobo himself, he sought to write a play which transcended ethnised politics and compelled audiences to think about 'human destiny' as the ability for 'anybody [to] make it anywhere' – just as he did in Paris and an Igbo boy named Mbanaso did in Bonny 150 years prior. The dirge at the end was 'deliberate'. He wanted to keep the audiences in 'suspense'. Would Jaja be able to return home? Accordingly, would people in the Niger Delta be able to return to their sovereign way of life? The dramatic structure of the play suggests that the prospects were slim. The optimistic spirit of ethnic-nationalist self-affirmation during the oil boom captured in *Akassa You Mi* had given way to a more sceptical and nostalgic look at the past, suggesting a perception of the past as 'irreversible, … that return [was] impossible' (Seremetakis 1996, Berliner 2014, 375).

Even though Matthew Umukoro wrote *Nanna Olomu* (2001b) in 1994 at a time when Sani Abacha had already plunged the country into one of its most severe political and humanitarian crises, his 'artistic reinterpretation' (2001a, 8) of the life of the last Governor of the Benin River suggests a more assertive, if nonetheless complicated prospect concerning leadership and interethnic relations in the Niger Delta. In contrast to *King Jaja*, it does not follow the protagonist from childhood and adolescence to self-realisation as merchant and king, but rather lets the audience observe the protagonist through the eyes of the people whose lives he impacts. Rivalling Itsekiri merchants like Dogho (or Dore) Numa, palm oil producers in the Urhobo markets and British traders and consuls discuss the morality and impact of Nanna's

actions, gradually giving an idea of Nanna's position within the meshwork of relations in the western delta. Chief Awala and Dogho Numa, for example, condemn Nanna's rise to power as deeply amoral. They complain that is it not, according to a rotating system, Nanna's family's turn to provide the next Governor of the Benin River. Alluding to the underbelly of gift exchange, Chief Awala suggests that it is Nanna's immense wealth that enables him to 'buy his way through … with heavy gifts to members of the [deciding] Council' (22). 'But this flies in the face of justice, equity and fair play. Is power now a commodity up for sale to the highest bidder?' (24), exclaims Dogho incredulously. Having counted on being made Governor himself, he vows vengeance, thus giving a moral motivation for the actions – his support of the British – which he will take as a consequence.

The figure of Nanna only gets to speak in the second scene and then only to repeat his pledge of allegiance to the British Crown during his swearing-in ceremony as Governor of the Benin River. Nanna's initial alignment with British interests is performatively and materially expressed - by his reiteration of the consul's words and by the act of receiving his staff of office, 'smiling radiantly' (29). In general, Nanna is portrayed as wielding immense economic, political and military power which he uses to assert his paramount position – without lenience towards members of his family or respect for intergenerational conduct. To demonstrate the latter, the play picks up a story which has been circulating in many publication, films and oral histories about the last Governor of the Benin River: When, in the Urhobo markets, an elder of the town refuses to acknowledge Nanna's paramountcy by kneeling in front of him, referring to his own senior status, Nanna orders him to be kidnapped and bonded, leading to an outcry not only amongst Urhobo but also amongst rivalling Itsekiri chiefs. It is only after the British withdraw their support by breaking his staff of office and his council of chiefs repeatedly assesses the situation in the British Protectorate in a negative

way, that Nanna finds his voice to articulate resistance. In the end, it is him who pinpoints the 'root cause of our present problems':

Nanna:	OIL! (*Pronounced 'oyel'*) [...] Oil is the malignant force driving us to our doom!
Ololu:	But isn't it the oil that sustains our economy?
Nanna:	Yes, Indeed, Ololu. The irony of it all! The oil makes us and mars us. The day the white man found great quantity of oil in our midst was the day our fate was sealed. (82)

The 'present' thus alluded to can be understood as both, a moment in the chronotope of the play and a moment shared between the actors and spectators during the performance on stage (Davis 2010). By blurring the line between the historical experiences enacted on stage and the co-presence between performers and audience, the play allows for past and present to overlap, opening up a space to reflect on the continuities and frictions between the political economies of red and black 'oil'.

But how 'malleable' (Elliot and Menin 2018) is the 'fate' predestined by oil? Once Nanna has realised the futility of his cooperation with the British administration, he seeks to fight for his sovereignty. The growing distance between himself and the British is expressed by the way in which they relate to each other. It is no longer personal encounters and the exchange of gifts but letters that enable to negotiate and contest their relationship. With help of an intricate translational move, Umukoro (2001b) makes the audience aware of Nanna's strategies of resistance and their limits. He shows Nanna dictating and reformulating a letter to his secretary Jackson, addressed to Acting Consul-General Ralph Moor:

Jackson:	(*Resuming reading*) '[...] This makes me wonder whether you are not planning to capture and deport me like Jaja of Opobo …'
Nanna:	(*Interrupts again*) ... No, no, no, no cancel that. ... Sounds much too direct, doesn't it? [...] Write instead: '[...] This situation ... naturally makes me fear ... for my personal safety ... and freedom ...' OK, now read on.
Jackson:	'... Let me assure you that my people and I genuinely desire peace. [...] My white flag of peace is clearly displayed at the mouth of the main

creek. However, if any launch of warship forces its way through our gate that will mean a declaration of war, and my warriors will surely return FIRE FOR FIRE! [emphasis in the original]

Nanna: (*Cuts in again*) Hold it! [...] No, that isn't diplomatic enough. Cross is out and write instead: 'If any attack ... is made on us ... my people ... will have no choice ... but to take up arms ... and defend themselves.' (96)

By performatively translating the archival trace of Nanna's diplomatic fight onto the stage and imagining its creation, Umukoro reveals the possible intentions and discursive limits of Nanna's utterances within the diplomatic conventions of the British Protectorate.

The tightening limits of Nanna's agency are further emphasised by the sound design. While Nanna and Jackson are writing the letter, the audience can already hear the thunder of cannons as the Royal Navy makes their way through the creeks. Nanna manages to send his people off into safety and to escape – only to hand himself in to the colonial authorities in Lagos. When Moor and his men arrive at Ebrohimi, they find a deserted town – and a box containing Nanna's 'personal diary'. The diary is one of Umukoro's material 'fiction(s)' (2001a, 8) that he introduced into his translation of Nanna's story. It alludes to the potential of an untapped, dormant or not-yet founded archive (cf. Assmann 2008, Zeitlyn 2015, Basu and De Jong 2016) and asks, what if. What if a diary of Nanna existed? What else would it reveal about Nanna's interior motives and efforts to maintain sovereignty? How would the audiences, readers, artists and scholars translate it into their presents?

Similar to *King Jaja*, *Nanna Olomu* draws to a close with his trial at a colonial court. Though, it is framed in a different way. Like a split-screen, Umukoro envisions two rooms on stage: one for the court and one for the house of Dogho Numa who comments on Nanna's trial. While Chief Awala worries whether 'this foreign intrusion in our domestic affairs can have a terrible backlash; [...] Like the white man simply replacing Nanna's oppression with his own,' Dogho hazards the consequences: 'If that is the price we have to pay for Nanna's fall, then so be it. The hard fact is that [...] none other than the white man is powerful enough to bring him

down' (114). Meanwhile, Nanna ponders a portrait of Queen Victoria: 'Her Majesty is the accuser; Her Majesty is also the judge. Great, indeed, is Her Majesty's sense of justice!' (116). The portrait alludes to the remoteness and, yet, seemingly omnipresence of the Queen and, by extension, her colonial agents, while Nanna unravels the bitter irony of her all-encompassing judgement.

In an additional translational move, Umukoro further elaborates on his envisioned archive:

> Nanna: Let it be placed on record that I've been found guilty of fighting in defence of a black homeland. That may be a crime in a white court such as this; but in black courts the world over, and in the subsequent court of history, I stand discharged and acquitted. (118)

The archive in which Umukoro inscribes Nanna's utterances is none other than the 'court of history' where, inferring from the wording, past experiences are morally evaluated. It exists – in the form in which Umukoro envisions it – in the fleeting moments of performance on stage and between the pages of the published play.

Finally, the play alludes to the repercussions of Nanna's deportation into exile, jumping in time and space to the streets of Warri where Chief Dudu congratulates Dogho Numa to his 'rapid rise to power' within the colony. 'Aren't you also the Vice-President of the Benin River Native Council? [...] That makes you the effective successor to Nanna,' and wonders: 'But how has it been, working closely with the white man? He can hardly be trusted' (121-4). Dogho reassures him:

> Dogho: In fairness, Her Majesty's Government has been quite appreciative of my contributions so far. For instance, I've been awarded two commemorative medals in recent times. One for my service during the Ebrohimi War of 1894; the other for my assistance to the British during the expeditions to Benin in 1896 and 1897. (122-3)

Like Nanna's initial cooperation, Dogho's close alignment with colonial interests is expressed via honorary gifts, echoing the politics of gift exchange within the early colonial state (see chapter 2). However, the play also implies that gifts continued to serve forms of relationship

building which preceded and went beyond colonial vectors of power. In the play's epilogue, Nanna returns home and is 'received with wild jubilation [...] and gifts [...] by representatives of all the tribes in the region, particularly the Urhobo people' (124), those people he has been shown fighting, trading and intermarrying with. His positive reception, expressed via the exchange of gifts, suggests a revaluation of his past behaviour as Governor of the Benin River under early colonial rule.

Clad ordinarily and without any insignia of office, he joins the crowd on the main market square to witness the skills of Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ijo dancers. Starting out in their idiosyncratic dance styles, they gradually converge into what Umukoro envisions as 'unique and authentic Delta Dance' which 'in form, style and content, exploits[s] their inherent similitude and diversity to contrapuntal advantage' (125). The convergence of locally idiosyncratic dance styles into one harmonious, though, contrapuntal dance, is reminiscent of the politics of dance during FESTAC '77 (Apter 2005, 113-4). Then, the organisational committee had designed 'national categories' according to which dance forms from all over the country were selected and evaluated. Stripped of their regional idiosyncrasies and spiritual elements, they were merged according to genres which were supposed to represent the nation at large. Umukoro's last scene suggests a similar project of performative community building via dance on the regional level. Does his vision, consequently, entail a levelling of ethnicized identities in the Niger Delta? Nanna's prominent position vis-à-vis the communal dance gives reason for doubt. He 'takes his usual position in the front row of the auditorium, flanked by his wives and some of his former associates' (125), writes Umukoro in his stage instructions, thus suggestively re-asserting is pre-dominance amongst the crowd. 'He says nothing,' the playwright continues, '(what more is there to say?); he simply takes a graceful bow and, smiling broadly, waves his thanks and farewell to the appreciative audience' (125). The epilogue – entitled 'Requiem' – is indeed a performative dirge, albeit a utopian one. Bidding

farewell to Nanna as one of 'the foremost African patriots and Nigerian nationalist fighters' (128), the play bids farewell to a sovereign past of ethnic self-determination while dancing into an interethnic future 'uniquely' and 'contrapuntally' (ibid.).

Reassessing African Cosmopolitanism Under Colonial Rule

The events of John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's *All for Oil* (2000) tie in where Umukoro's *Nanna Olomu* leaves off. It shifts its focus to the historical figure of Chief Bekederemo, an Ijo merchant of considerable economic and political renown in the western Niger Delta. He has gained his wealth by chartering ships from Messrs John Holt Company with which he goes to Lagos to sell palm oil and buy international goods which he then resells in Sapele and Warri (39). Through his eyes, the audience can witness the extent to which Dogho (or Dore) Numa's paramount position and actions within the colonial state impact the lives of people in Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ijo territories. The play foregoes showing the protagonist's path to self-realisation and unfolds over a short period of time, suggesting little change in the protagonist's moral outlook or behaviour. It rather shows Chief Bekederemo trying and failing to diplomatically resolve the problems that people in the Niger Delta face under early colonial rule. In this process, maritime rituals and cosmopolitan forms of dress stemming from the era of transatlantic trade are critically reassessed.

The play starts with Chief Bekederemo and his brother-in-law Chief Egbe, a prominent Itsekiri merchant (see fig. 2.1 in chapter 2), at the latter's house in Ugbanwengwe, today a part of the town of Warri. They have just returned from participating in a canoe regatta which was organised by Dogho Numa for welcoming Sir (later Lord) Frederick Lugard, Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief of the newly amalgamated colony of Nigeria. Chief

Bekederemo passes a withering verdict on the way in which the maritime ritual of receiving foreign guests is performed under colonial rule:

> Bekederemo: The things you people pick up from the white man! Fancy dressing up in white drain-pipe trousers and tunics, all topped by toupee helmets. An all those brass buttons running all the way to their dog collars. Amazing they don't choke in their parades. [...] These dresses make masquerades of us, all for these receptions we have to hold for these people whenever they descend on us. (4-5)

Clark-Bekederemo suggests that his protagonist no longer perceives the consumption of foreign fashion and the organisation of canoe regattas as acts of self-determined self-fashioning. Rather, by referring to colonial military attire, he mirrors the shifting power dynamics in the Niger Delta which inform the ways in which merchant elites can perform their forms of self-display and appropriate foreign goods and ideas. The British are no longer temporary guests but invaders who 'descend' on the Niger Delta. In the same vein, international fashion might no longer be solely sought-after for its exotic luxuriousness and cosmopolitan flair but begins to symbolise the presence of the colonial state.

Yet, Chief Bekederemo knows the power play of cosmopolitan self-fashioning and plays it well; so well that Dogho Numa feels threatened by him. He storms into Chief Egbe's house, snorting with rage.

> Dore: You can't dispute the fact that you bedecked your *okolada* [canoe, emphasis in the original] with banners you specially imported from England, flew a dozen flags for a boat of thirty-two paddlers, all dressed up in red, green and purple, and you yourself wearing a beaded hat, robe of gold over silk wrapper and chain of beads and gold, flowing down your chest, and all round your arms more bands or coral beads, weren't you playing king to us all with your umbrella and staff fit for a crowned head? [...] Bekederemo, don't dare me further. [...] Nanna tried it, and you saw what happened to him. (7-8)

Moreover, the material culture of transatlantic trade is used to differentiate not only among rivalling coastal elites but also between them and their rural trading partners. When representatives of an Urhobo family render Chief Bekederemo a visit at his house in

Kaigbodo to ask him for help in fighting Dogho Numa's actions, his 'old bondsman' (vii) Branuvwere comments on their behaviour in a condescending manner.

> Branuvwere: I hope they [Urhobo delegates] have not broken some of our priceless dishes. You could see some of them eating with both hands as if the white man had put them away for days in his deaf house. Now they are there in the house you built for your [British] company visitors, all of them, many from their mud and thatch homes, eating today in an iron and glass house, brought all the way from England. What if they break the windows or carry away some precious silver ware under their clothes? Bekederemo, your generosity will wreck you one day. (28)

By letting the actors ornately describe the material culture of the coastal trading elites, Clark-Bekederemo invokes their cosmopolitan lifestyle on stage. The performers' utterances not only draw attention to their costumes, reaffirming their materiality, but also help to paint a mental picture of things beyond the frame of the stage such as the splendour of canoe regattas, imported merchant houses and collections of international dishes and silver wares (see chapters 2 and 6). Furthermore, their, at times, contradictory references to cosmopolitan lifestyles highlight the intricate web of identifications and differentiations amongst each other and with and against the British who have turned from welcome trading partners into possessive colonialists.[49]

Early in the play, Chief Bekederemo pinpoints the problems of this transformation: '[...] It's not only oil they [the British] talk of these days for which, mind you, they fix all the prices, but plain possession and transfer of our land' (4). It is this transfer of land that Dogho Numa facilitates and people from all ethnic affiliations are most concerned about. The play discusses how he sells land to the colonial government without the residents' 'consent' or 'knowledge'

[49] To complicate the meshwork of relationships in the Niger Delta even further, Clark-Bekederemo also addresses the role and perception of Saros within the African merchants' lives. The merchant elites perceive them as 'slaves' who were educated by the British in order to 'punish' them as teachers, 'coopers, produce examiners, store-keepers and beach masters' (14). Then again, the playwright shows how the merchant elites employ them as secretaries or lawyers and send some – not all – of their children to study with them.

(48). The ‘politics of the belly’ (Bayart 2009) of indirect rule are most vividly expressed in the way Dogho distributes the fines that people are ordered to pay (often in kind) to the Native Court over which he presides. He first makes sure that the British District Officer gets his ‘eggs for breakfast’ (20) before he rakes in the rest for himself.

In reaction to Dogho’s unproportional appetite, Chief Bekederemo charters a ship ‘of the class of “The Ivy”’ (49) from The Niger Company Ltd (the successor of the Royal Niger Company) to go to Lagos with the aim of intervening on behalf of the many disgruntled people who seek his help. Besides the selling of land, they are particularly concerned that Dogho Numa might attempt to be officially recognised as ruler not only of the Itsekiri but also of the other residents of the new colonial port city of Warri where merchant elites from all three ethnic groups (Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ijo) have flocked to in recent years. He seeks to do so by re-establishing the Itsekiri Kingdom (also known as Kingdom of Iwerre or Warri) and to be crowned king. ‘In that spirit he makes sacrifices of bullocks at Odogene to his ancestors contrary to the customs of the people.’ (29) Chief Bekederemo is accompanied by Joseph Egerton Shyngle, a Gambian-born lawyer of the Nigerian Bar who will later become first president of the Nigeria National Democratic Party in 1923. Egerton Shyngle is versed in the judicial system of the colonial state and knows his way through the archive that the colonial administration is growing continuously. He confronts Colonel Moorhouse with a report by District Officer J. Davidson at Forcados about the prospect of uniting the Itsekiri and Urhobo under the Crown of Warri. ‘Permit me to quote the relevant portion on page nine of our presentation: [...] ‘the two tribes will no more mix than will oil and water” (47). Moreover, he uses his knowledge of ‘classified information’ (46) to confront the colonial administration with its own transgressions. Colonel Moorhouse seems to be caught in the act: ‘Let me have it [...] I see, I see. So you’ve got hold of the Pretheroe Report on how we moved out the Ogbe-Ijoh people to build the new township of Warri [...] These people have their own devices. I

see, I see.' (46) Ostensibly beat at his own game, he promises to send 'high officials' to Warri 'to examine the matter on the spot.' (48)

Like Umukoro in *Nanna Olomu*, Clark-Bekederemo brings fragments of colonial archives onto the stage and discusses their potential applications. Though, they are no longer solely a device for inscribing someone into the 'court of history' (Umukoro 2001b). Clark-Bekederemo shows that archival material can also be applied by judicial experts such as Egerton Shyngle to reveal and contest the entanglements of indirect rule. In so doing, the playwright refers to the ample use of colonial archives in colonial and post-independence Nigeria to stake claims on land and reverse acts of expropriation (cf. Ibhawoh 2013). By publishing and commenting on archival material, Niger Delta historians like J.O.S. Ayomike (1988, 1990, 1993, 2009) and Peter Ekeh (2005, 2007, 2008) have become judicial-political agents themselves, influencing the ways in which land rights in Warri are negotiated and contested. The same might hold true for the playwrights. While writing his play in the year 2000, Clark-Bekedermo chose to select a file referring to the land of 'Ogbe-Ijoh' which, in 1996, had been one of the potential sites for the headquarters of a new Local Government Council Area in Warri over which Itsekiri and Ijo had subsequently fought a prolonged, bloody war (see chapter 3). Thus, by selecting certain files and related land right cases for his play and not others, the playwright contributed to the continuous creation and reconfiguration of the highly politicised 'topography of memory' (Connerton 1989) of the Niger Delta. Or, to put it in Kristina Wirtz's words, his theatrical 'temporality-emplacement' (2014, 23) via the performative use of archival sources might have reinforced the 'ecology of citizenship' (Apter 2005, 261) of one of Nigeria's most embattled regions.

However, Clark-Bekederemo also highlights the precariousness of retrieving information from archival sources, understood as the skills of re-contextualisation and translation which are necessary to render archival traces intelligible. He lets the figure of A.C. Burns, Political

Secretary in Lagos, read reports aloud, including their reference and file numbers, headings and categorisations, and emphasises the colonial, culturally insensitive context of their creation, their gaps and material fallibility.

Political Secretary:	[...] Signed ? Resident [...] I can't quite decipher the signature.
Colonel Moorhouse:	That could be James Davidson, Frank Hives or Brown. But no matter. Let's hear the other report there in your hand.
Political Secretary:	It is the Intelligence Report, (Historical) Mein Clan, and Western Ijo Division 24 (year not quite clear) N.A. Class Mark War 149/2. [...] Heading, Sir, is 'Bedekermo. 54' with one 'e' dropped out. [...] The typing is faint. [...]
Colonel Moorhouse:	Oh, yes, we murder most of their names in all forms, if we don't the men themselves in our push for possession of their land. (38-40)

Naming land and people and claiming ownership are clearly intertwined (as I will discuss in chapter 5, see also Lloyd 1963, 1974, Curnow 2002). That is the reason why the correct spelling and transcription of names is so important and why the work of anthropologists comes into play. 'Real tongue twisters they have for names,' concedes Colonel Moorhouse. 'But anthropologists Talbot here and Meek on the Benue inform us that every name, be it of place or person, tells a story of the tribe.' Seemingly oblivious of the legal implications of the act of naming, he appeals to his secretary: 'So it is always good to try and call them correctly for these are a proud people.' (38)

In the end, Chief Bekederemo's plan to intervene with the colonial authorities in Lagos is frustrated by Dogho Numa who uses his 'friendship' (44) with Colonel Moorhouse to intercept the delegation at Warri, telling them that the Ijo chief changed his mind. The British leave without having conducted a proper investigation. On hearing about Dogho's actions, Chief Bekederemo delivers a scathing verdict: 'The white man must always have one black man he can trust to do his purpose, and he will reward his chosen one out of all proportion, if only to punish his compatriots and peers for refusing to serve his cause'. His adviser Nemugha agrees. 'That's why he is now ruling the world. He uses the conquered against

themselves.' (57) Finally, Chief Bekederemo puts a curse on Dogho Numa: 'May his name be remembered only for the treachery and perfidity he perpetrated against the land of his birth. Thus, with my left hand, I sweep away the life of Dore as common dust. Whisk! Whisk! Whisk!' (58-9). Has Clark-Bekederemo, by re-enacting the curse on stage and envisioning the figure of Dogho Numa in an unequivocally negative way, fulfilled his curse?

In the last scene, on his potential deathbed, Chief Bekederemo strikes a more conciliatory tone, though only concerning feuds over clashing faiths. Having burned down the shrine of his town Kiagbodo – with the help of the British District Officer and against the will of many of Kiagbodo's residents –, he hopes that 'some of our offspring to come will staunch the wounds now bleeding between us. After all, teeth and tongue have achieved accommodation in a small space' (61). He lies in bed, awaiting to die. Of all the people and forces that could come to his rescue, it is the priest, whose shrine he destroyed, who enters his house and delivers a message.

> Fetaroro: Our ancestors have revealed to me in a vision that I must come to you. [...] You will not die. [...] Our father says there is still work for you to do here and beyond for our people. [...] Your song will go on as long as there is voice to sing. (66-67)

Notwithstanding their intended expulsion, it is the ancestors who foretell the chief's future. Clark-Bekederemo, thus, seems to end the play with a resilient gesture which reconciles the protagonist with his ancestral past and foretells a bright future. 'It is honey on all our tongues', proclaims Mitovwodo, the chief's wife, and 'oil for our lamps in the white man's new night market he calls Nigeria' (68). However, like *King Jaja*, *All for Oil* does not propose successful strategies of resistance. Rather, it ends with a general potential for action.

Gendering Political Power on Stage

In the plays discussed so far, paths to leadership in times of political and economic encroachment are marked as male. It is male figures who realise their destiny by 'taking action' (Rotimi 2001a), inscribing themselves into (material and imagined) archives and using them to stake claims – not only in the narration of the past but also in the possession of land. Female figures range from being soundboards for their husbands' thoughts to devoted wives and daughters whose bodies come to symbolise the suffering that the British afflict on the Niger Delta communities. They might be spoken about but rarely speak for themselves. Only in Alex Eyengho's *Olu Akengbuwa*, the plot also centres on a female character – Princess Idorolusan (also known as Iye) – whose actions develop the dramatic narrative and influence political and economic power relations. Bringing Judith Butler's (1988, 1993, 1999) theatre metaphor about the 'dramatization' of the body and the 'ritualized, public performance' of gender from the everyday back onto the stage, I will now analyse the ways in which the playwrights and actresses envision and perform figurations of 'women and [political] power' (Beard 2017).

On the one extreme is the figure of the mute young woman whose body serves as an index of the community and its internal and external relations. A particularly drastic example is the opening scene of *Akassa You Mi* (Rotimi 2001a) where a young woman named Itari is led on stage, soiled with black paint, as if to signify the blackening or racialising of her body. The crowd which has gathered in front of the palace is enraged. Itari has been raped by a British captain with the telling name of Captain Christian and his 'black krooboys' (4). She does not speak a word and is cleansed and cared for by the women of the royal household. It is her husband and King Koko who assess the crime and discuss possible ways to avenge her. In its passivity, Itari's body comes to signify the Royal Niger Company's invasion, materialising the penetrating force of colonialism (for a general discussion of sexualising tropes of colonial

conquest see Manderson and Jolly 1997). By employing the *topos* of the woman as embodiment of the community and its colonial experience, Rotimi follows a well-established and often criticised 'African male literary tradition' (Stratton 1990, 112, Jeyifo 2004), which Ola Rotimi readily acknowledges. He admits that *Akassa You Mi* is 'dominantly a male play' but highlights one female figure, 'the no-nonsense yet humorous character of ELDERLY WOMAN [...], as significant in what the character says and does on the message of tradition and social discipline' (Rotimi 2001b, viii, emphasis in the original). He refers to a scene which takes place while the men of Nembe are launching their attack against the British factory at Akassa. The priest Ozongbai is shown going from town to town to see whether the women fulfil their duty, understood as supporting their husbands and sons by singing and praying. In every house he enters, Ozongbai finds women sleeping and he whips them till they resume their duty. As some – anonymous – young women protest their punishment, asking 'Is that all we women will live l-o-n-g for? [...] 'to bear weights of husbands", an – equally anonymous – elderly woman reprimands them: 'Keep on like this, Girl, and there'll be no tradition left for your children's children to talk about. You hear ... (lunges at Girl, clamps a hand to her mouth, jerking her forcefully down)' (Rotimi 2001a, 123). By envisioning the punishment of deviating performances of womanhood not only by the highest religious authority of the community but also by the elder female generation, Rotimi seems to foreclose the potential for change.

For the most part, the tasks of female figures are imagined not as self-determined actions but as supporting – caring, praying, cooking, cleaning for – men. Moreover, in the plays discussed here, all male protagonists talk about how they take women as their wives or marry them off for economic reasons, thereby fostering relationships with their oil producing trade partners in the hinterland and British merchants at the coast. Though, they stop short of portraying these acts as commodification of female bodies. In *Nanna Olomu* (Umukoro

2001b, 62), Nanna's moral behaviour is demonstrated by way in which he rejects a young Urhobo woman whom 'my head slave seized [...] on a raid I never authorized and presented her to me as wife to gain my favour. [...] What! An unwilling bride under Nanna's roof? Taboo!' Yet, he 'was already hooked by her calm and bewitching looks' and consequently made her family an offer to 'marry her properly.' Umukoro does not enable the figure of the young bride to comment on the events, thus silencing female experiences of the political economy of marriage at the coast. In the end, these various acts of gendering female bodies on stage help to uphold 'the figure of the male patriarchal leader of legendary renown' who, according to Biodun Jeyifo, 'was deemed to represent the will to freedom of the colonized nation, putatively holding society together around the charisma and mystique of his person' (2004, xvi).



Figure 4.1: Victoria Ajomenyinje as Princesse Iye in conversation with Consul Beecroft, played by Offiong Edet Anthony, surrounded by the princess' female retinue, in a production of the play Olu Akengbuwa*, 1 May 2015, Federal Government College Warri. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.*

On the other extreme is the figure of Princess Iye in Alex Eyengho's *Olu Akengbuwa* (2015) (see Fig. 4.1). After the demise of Olu Akengbuwa in 1848 and the rapid death of his male heirs, she is the only surviving member of the royal household with enough economic power to steer the fate of the Itsekiri Kingdom. How did the royal household get to this point? Alex Eyengho summarised the reasons to me as 'power tussles, greed, back-stabbing' and 'over-ambition of the son to overtake the father.' The play starts with Prince Omateye and Prince Agbagba rivalling over the position of *Gofine*, understood to be the chief custom officer who gathers the *comey* (taxes) from the European traders. The offending object is the *Gofine's* staff of office that the Olu has passed to Prince Agbagba, giving the latter not only an economic but also a political advantage. Prince Omateye orders a replica of the staff with his British trade partners and manages to overtake his brother by gathering the taxes a day before schedule. As a result, the Olu awards the original staff of office to Prince Omateye. 'Shortly after,' recounts the figure of the narrator, which Eyengho introduced into his stage version of the film *Nanna of the Niger-Delta* (1999), 'Prince Agbagba dies mysteriously.' [50] Had the Prince been poisoned as several of my interview partners insinuated? 'There are certain things that you do not tell like that,' explained Eyengho his editorial choice to me. The director rather chose to use a crucial item of the material culture of transatlantic trade – the staff of office – to dramatise the internal power struggles within the political economy of the coast.

> There are about four schools of thought to the cause of the interregnum [1848–1936] [...] but I explored only two. I did not want to go into the other two because one of them was a Bini [Benin] perspective and another one which the palace [a committee of chiefs that Olu Atuwatse II had arranged to review the script] was not really comfortable with.

[50] *Olu Akengbuwa* has not yet been officially published. I am quoting from Alex Eyengho's unnumbered script.

The two ‘schools of thought’ that Eyengho did explore are two curses. They are the result of the power struggle between father and son which Eyengho translates into a fight over female bodies and their reproductivity.

It all starts with Roli, the youngest wife of Olu Akengbuwa, entering the main hall of the palace, visibly in distress. Prince Omateye has slapped her. ‘He has finally found a way to slap his father,’ moans the Olu. Prince Omateye, who has joined the scene, questions his father’s assessment: ‘What belongs to the Olu now [his wives] goes to his son after his death.’ He tells the king that he does not want to wait any longer to ascend the throne. ‘I’m getting old.’ Also, he ordered the *babaláwo* (‘Ifa priest’) of Ife, who Roli asked for help with her bareness, to help Princess Iye, his sister, instead. The Olu is infuriated. Not only has Prince Omateye disrespected his father by slapping his wife and attempted to undercut his reproductive line by alienating the *babaláwo*. He has also openly claimed the throne. ‘Oh, the throne? One should not sniff at what one will not eat!’ Referring to the tradition according to which the *Omoba* (King-to-be) leads the canoe regatta for the Olu’s burial ceremonies, he utters the fateful words: ‘When the king passes, the ferryman will also sail away. Oba ma gwoni, Ojigue wa gwola.’

The second curse is uttered by the *babaláwo*. On request of his wife Roli, the Olu orders the beheading of the priest from Ife. The *babaláwo* does not dispute the verdict but asks to be killed in his homeland. ‘If my blood is spilled here, Warri Kingdom will not see peace for three generations.’

The break in the Olu’s lineage is further substantiated by the exchange of substances. Prince Omateye sends his father a lock of his white hair, ‘a strong rope that can be used in tying up an elephant.’ The Olu returns the gift with bananas and honey to signify ‘the sweetness of his power,’ declaring: ‘The creeper plant that says the elephant will not pass, will have to

accompany the elephant on his way.' Having thus reiterated and foretold the swift demise of his son, the Olu passes away shortly thereafter. Within three days his son follows suit.



Figure 4.2: Chief Peter Fatomilola as the Ifa Priest, foretelling the destiny of Nanna to his father Chief Olomu, played by Norbert Young. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.

The last male heir to the throne is Princess Iye's brother Ejoh. He is a portrayed as a drunk, slurring his speech. It is thus left to Princess Iye to pull the strings behind and on the scene. She orders Prince Omateye's former 'head slave' Ebrimoni, whom she has inherited, to collect the *comey* on her behalf and swears that 'if anything happens to our brother Ejoh, I swear I shall seize the throne.' In contrast to the male protagonists whose destinies are foretold by the Ifa priest and the Olu (both being religious authorities), Princess Iye seems to carve out her own destiny. However, her sister Uwala questions her strategy of resting her power on the support and loyalty of her bonded men: 'If you enrich your slave, you create a potential master.' Prince Ejoh agrees: 'If a masquerade allows children to dance close, they will one day discover its secret.' When news reaches Princess Iye's household that Prince

Ejoh was made to eat 'tiger's liver,' Ebrimoni leads the bonded men of the house into song and declares Iye Queen.[51] None of the official (male) authorities of the kingdom are present. Their absence seems to mark the illegitimacy of the Queen's nomination.

Her apparent unfitness to rule is further emphasised by Britain's Consul Beecroft who renders the Queen a visit at her town of Batere which she has founded together with her sister Princess Uwala. The consul complains that the Queen does not have the male members of her house under control (see Fig. 4.1).

> Consul Beecroft: Ebrimoni has raided the premises of Messrs Harrison and that of Mr. Reuben Hemingway. [...]
> Iye: Ebrimoni and the other slaves are responsible for the collection of customs duties on behalf of the Warri National Council from all merchants, including those from your country. [...] We all have our own responsibilities. Mine is to my people, the monarchy and our culture. I must warn you that we shall resist any unwarranted interference in our affairs.

Consul Beecroft suggests that a man should lead these affairs and, at last, recommends Ebrimoni himself.

> Iye: Even strangers must remain a sense of decency. If the wild boar behaved like the domestic pig, it would ruin the town. If slaves were kings, no decent person would be left.

Her rebuttal of the consul's suggestion points out the limits of solidarisation between the female ruler and her bonded men. It also demonstrates the limits of social mobility of enslaved people within Itsekiri society which remarkably differ from those in the city-states of, for example, Nembe and Bonny.

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[51] One possible explanation for Eyengho's decision to mention the poisoning of Prince Ejoh and not that of Prince Agbagba might be that, unlike Prince Agbagba, Prince Ejoh was declared unfit to rule because of his drunkenness. His poisoning might thus have been socially legitimated.



Figure 4.3: Offiong Edet Anthony as Consul Beecroft hands over the staff of office to Diare Uwangue, played by Alfred Omagbemi. The staff is the original staff of the Diare family, handed down through generations. On the right-hand side, dancers of the Utieyen Oma Cultural Society, who have just performed the omoko *dance, cheer them on. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.*

Queen Iye's insistence to remain in power leaves Consul Beecroft 'no choice' but to intervene in the internal politics of the Itsekiri. 'In the interest of stability in the area, I will have a meeting with the chiefs, especially with the successful merchants, Chiefs Idiare, Olomu and Numa,' to nominate someone else to collect customs duties on behalf of the Itsekiri merchants. His suggestion falls on open ears. Chief Olomu, the most successful and thus influential merchant in Itsekiriland, has a long-standing feud with Princess Iye as she has not repaid outstanding debt to him. His family, who traditionally provides the Ologbotsere (prime minister) in the Kingdom of Warri, nominates Diare Uwangue to be the first 'Governor of the Niger.'[52]

[52] The play gives the title 'Governor of the Niger' rather than 'Governor of the Benin River' which is used throughout British sources and oral histories. I was not able to ascertain whether this was a *lapsus linguae* or a translational strategy to expand the Governor's area of influence from the Benin River to the whole of the river Niger.

The handing-over ceremony unfolds in Jakpa, where the extended Ologbotsere family has settled as a result of the rivalries and tumultuous events in Ode-Itsekiri. Consul Beecroft is saluted with seven cannon salvos and gifts are exchanged. As 'symbol of authority', the consul hands Chief Diare a silver headed staff of office. The staff not only materialises the relationship into which the Itsekiri chief and the British consul enter. Being the original staff of office which the Diare family has handed down through generations, it also adds historical credence to the scene. Moreover, the display of the family heirloom on stage mirrors other forms of performative display of accumulated family wealth like *ukueke* (chapter 5), thus augmenting the prestige of the Diare family on and off stage. Besides, the grandeur of the celebrants is further heightened by the *omoko* dance (also called 'big dance') via layer upon layer of imported cloths which hug the lower body of the dancers and swing in the rhythm of their steps, thus alluding to the wealth of their sponsor (see Fig. 4.3).

A few steps apart, Chief Olomu, also donning the Olomu family's original heirlooms, his son Nanna and Chief Dudu comment as the event unfolds:

Olomu:	Traditionally the staff was handed by the Olu. [...] I'm suspicious of the motives of British, especially with the new treaty, which we are expected to sign. [...] The terms of the treaty are extremely one-sided.
Dudu:	What choice do we have? The offensive against Bobi has shown the might of the Whiteman and their ability to use force when necessary. [...]
Olomu:	We are entering a new era of business with the Whiteman. An era when he now imposes leaders on our people and uses force to have his own way. I don't envy Chief Idiare. He has been given an impossible job.



Figure 4.4: Victoria Ajomenyinje as Princesse Iye attempts to seize the throne. Photo: Alex Eyengho, 2015.

After this pessimistic outlook, the play takes a leap in time and space to the town of Ebrohimi which Olomu has founded once he left Jakpa, thus tracing the decentralisation of economic and political power in Itsekiriland during the interregnum. Consul Beecroft renders Chief Olomu a visit and underscores his intention to influence Itsekiri politics. He intimates that he wants Chief Olomu to take over the position of Governor from Chanomi (Tsanomi), Princess Iye's son and successor to Chief Diare, as Chanomi has repeatedly stopped trade. Before Olomu can formulate his decision, the scene shifts to the palace at Ode-Itsekiri where the royal council of chiefs expresses their dismay over the political-economic situation: 'We need a new king, we have to find the head of the Ifa priest;' 'The Whiteman is giving too many powers to the governor;' 'Everybody, everybody in the kingdom is now a leader.' In this agitated atmosphere, Victoria Ajomenyinje as Princess Iye enters the scene, heading to the throne (Fig. 4.4). As soon as she attempts to sit on it, thunder and lightning, simulated via stroboscopic light, strike her down. Her final attempt to seize political power has been penalized by the (male) ancestral forces associated with the throne as seat of power. The play ends with the narrator, played by the actress Efe Mayford-Orhorha, recounting the male

leaders that follow, Olomu, Nanna, Dogho Numa, and the reinstallation of the monarchy with the crowning of Olu Ginuwa II in 1936. Like in Rotimi's *Akassa You Mi*, it is a woman, in this case a female narrator, whose words act to reinforce the idea(l) of male political leadership (for the performativity of utterances see Austin 1975, Butler 1988, 1997, Loxley 2007 and chapter 1).

From the perspective of self-realisation, *Olu Akengbuwa* is the most pessimistic play discussed here. Destinies of (potential) male leaders are thwarted by, in Eyengho's words, 'greed, back-stabbing and over-ambition.' Whereas Olu Akengbuwa deliberately weakens his line of succession and, thus, the political survival of his lineage, his male heirs are not patient enough to wait their turn to assume power and are consequently prohibited from fulfilling their destiny as leader. The only female figure who has the economic power to steer the fate of the kingdom is shown to assume political power illegitimately by the help of her bonded men. Princess Iye is reprimanded for doing so not only by her male foreign trade partners, represented by Britain's Consul Beecroft, but also by the ancestral forces of the kingdom. Hence, her story does not stand for a transformation from an egalitarian to a patriarchal society under the outside pressure of the androcentric world view of European trade partners, such as Eric Wolf (1982) has re-traced for the Montagnais Naskapi in today's Canada. It more closely resembles Gloria Chuku's (2005) seminal account of the transformation of gender relations and commerce in Igbo communities under British rule. The exploitation of labour-intensive food crops and the introduction of taxation systems put women in rural communities at a disadvantage and women in petty and long-distance trade, despite remarkable exceptions, tended to be replaced by men. Only be assuming male gender roles, some of them were able to remain and, at times, expand their trading networks. Similarly, Princess Iye might assume power in the economic sphere. The highest political power, though, remains out of reach for her.

Nevertheless, in *Olu Akengbuwa*, Consul Beecroft's insistence on a male representative and, thus, negotiation partner seems to correlate with patriarchal ideas of gender within Itsekiri society. The deep-rootedness of idea(l)s of male leadership was repeatedly demonstrated to me by, for example, the gendering of the Portuguese crown as symbol of Itsekiri monarchy (see chapter 3). Several of my – male – interlocutors, official experts in the field of Itsekiri history, recounted to me that the Portuguese king had given Dom Domingos and his Portuguese wife a pair of crowns in the expectation that she would be crowned Queen as soon as Dom Domingo ascended the throne. 'As if the Itsekiri would ever crown a Queen!,' mused my interview partners, often followed by a reference to the tragic fate of Princess Iye.

The reason for this gendering of political power might lie in the association of traditional political power with spiritual power (see chapters 2, 3 and 5) and, consequently, with notions which regulate the relationship between female bodies and spiritual forces. One of them is the notion of uncleanliness which is related to the reproductive capacity of female bodies and which resembles similar notions of women's 'incorporation of powerful fluids' and related ritual restrictions in the Kingdom of Benin (Curnow 1997, 76). In one of the earliest ethnographic accounts of Itsekiri ways of life, Reginald Granville and Felix Roth (1899) described separate paths for menstruating women which circumnavigated the roads where ritual sites where located. Today, such paths are no longer officially demarcated, at least not on the royal island of Ode-Itsekiri where, during the funeral ceremonies of Olu Atuwatse II in November 2015, ritual sites on both sides of the main road were re-activated for everyone to see and pass by. However, it was the ritual sites themselves which were clearly marked off – with industrial plaques showing the hazard-symbol, consisting of a human skull over crossed bones. Moreover, there still exist immaterial, though reinforced limits within which female bodies are supposed to navigate. One of them being a space of about five meters around the catafalque of the deceased king, a particularly potent spiritual site, which women in their

reproductive age were not supposed to enter. This gendered taboo entailed a circumscription of the mobility of female bodies which I experienced first-hand (see chapter 5).

The entanglements of female bodies (and particularly their reproductive potential), spiritual sites and political power also explains the gendered taboo of ascending the throne. 'In fact, no woman touches the throne,' explained Alex Eyengho to me, 'it is an abomination.' The notion of the female body's uncleanliness is most vividly expressed in the film version of the play. In *Nanna of the Niger-Delta* (1999) the breaking of the taboo is manifested in blood which starts to flow out of Princess Iye's womb as soon as she attempts to sit on the throne. It trickles down the seat while the self-asserted Queen is carried out of the royal chamber screaming in agony. During the stage performance of this scene at the coronation anniversary in 2015, the act of breaking the gendered taboo was heightened not only by thunder and lightning but by the screams of the figures of the chiefs who tried to avert the act of ascension. Their yelling mixed with that of the audience who had accompanied Princess Iye's actions with ever more frequent and vociferous interjections. To my ears it seemed that there were as many female as male voices trying to deter Princess Iye from her inevitable downfall. The scene was a powerful demonstration of what Karin Barber calls 'intense impact' (2000, 2) where the historical figures on stage and the members of the audience coalesced in punishing Princess Iye's attempt to assert political power or 'sacred kingship' (Graeber and Sahlins 2016), understood as the privilege to mediate relations with the metapersonal (spiritual) and the outside (transatlantic) worlds (see chapter 2 and 3).

Does the rehearsing of past patriarchal gender relations on stage at all reflect or effect the experiences of persons who identify as female and Itsekiri today? Most of the women I met at Ugbajo Itsekiri UK and in the Niger Delta lead self-sufficient and self-assured lives. However, political leadership within their Itsekiri communities still seems to be hard to reach for them. For example, when it was time to elect a new president for the diaspora

organisation, there was no doubt in the group that the person to lead would be male. Referring to Ugbajo Itsekiri UK's agenda to 'live and care for Itsekiri cultural heritage in the diaspora', members of the diaspora group of both genders legitimated their choice for a male leader with reference to their 'culture.' But whereas male members insisted that male leadership was an essential aspect of Itsekiri 'culture' with which it would stand or fall, women seemed more ambivalent about it. They complained, amongst other things, about the ways in which men sought to assert their power in decision making processes. It was often the case that women and men were co-organising events up to a point when the male members of the group would call for an exclusive meeting (understood as excluding women) where they would set out the agenda for the coming year and present the results of their deliberations after the fact. However, these androcentric practices do not remain unchallenged and decisions taken behind closed doors might be questioned and put up for negotiation in the plenum. Besides, as one female member of the organisational committee related to me: 'Let them [the men] talk. We arrange things in the background.' Such influencing behind the scenes might change in the future to a more overtly political positioning, if the official presentation of Ugbajo Itsekiri UK on the internet is any indication. Their homepage lists Princess Idorolusan (alias Iye) as 'the first Itsekiri woman leader and politician (1848–1851)'.[53]

And what do contemporary counterparts of Princess Iye think of the dramatisation of her life on stage? At the audience which Chief Rita Lori-Ogbebor granted me, she declined to talk neither about her famous ancestress nor about the theatrical translation of the latter's life on stage. She rather offered to tell me her story of self-realisation. Chief Lori-Ogbebor had witnessed the staging of Princess Iye's attempt to seize power in her role as Igba of Warri, forming part of the retinue of Olu Atuwatse II. She had obtained her chieftaincy title by Olu

[53] https://www.ugbajo-itsekiri.org/the-warri-kingdom-1/; last visited: 17 August 2018.

Atuwatse II, following the decision of his father Olu Erejuwa II (reigning 1951–1986) to award chieftaincy titles to women in the 1970s. Amongst the first women was Chief Florence Elemi-Rewane, a renowned gynaecologist and grand-niece of Dogho Numa, who had been raised to the rank of chief for successfully delivering eleven of Olu Erejuwa II's children. Whereas Chief Rewane's nomination might have been due to her successful management of female reproductivity, Chief Rita Lori-Ogbebor was nominated thanks to her commercial and media savviness as well as her good relationship with Olu Atuwatse II which dated back to their student life in London in the 1970s. Like the Olu, she had studied in the British capital, in her case journalism, before working as the first female programme director of the National Television Service in Lagos. In her time in the Nigerian metropole, she also married and started, amongst other things, a hotel business which today encompasses hotels in Lagos and Abuja. In Warri, she further expanded her portfolio with a shipping company (Seas and Creeks Limited) and with the sale of bottled water, a branch of business which has considerably grown in recent years due to the pollution of ground water caused by the petrol industry. In the late 1980s, she 'followed the call of Ogiame' back to the Niger Delta where she became part of his council of chiefs. In her nearly thirty years as Igba of Warri Kingdom, she has become 'mother to the state and the Niger Delta Region' who is known for 'speaking truth to power,' (Onoyume 2018) as countless newspaper articles attest to. She has been at the forefront of battles over claims on land such as Ogbe-Ijoh and Ugborodo (see chapters 2 and 3) and has launched media and juridical attacks against anyone whom she perceives as taking advantage of Itsekiri communities, be it DESOPADEC (Delta State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission) or the Governors of Delta State. Amongst her media-savvy actions, her rejection of a Christmas gift, consisting of a cow and rice, by the Governor of Delta State Emmanuel Uduaghan in 2012, stands out. She published an open letter to the

governor, objecting to both his gifts and his policies, which was swiftly taken up by local media outlets:

> I have spoken to you as a mother to a son. Itsekiri riverine areas are declining educationally and economically. The way our land is today shows no planning or foresight. There is no creation of jobs, neither is there adequate security of lives and property. For many years, there has been fighting and bloodletting in Escravos. In fact, things have got worse since you became governor. (Lori-Ogbebor in Arenyeka 2012)

Her public repudiation of the governor's gifts not only attests to the continued role of gift exchange in negotiating and contesting relationships in the Niger Delta. It also points to the considerable political influence that the 'amazon'(Amaize 2013), 'Iron Lady of Warri' (Amaize 2015c) and 'serial protester' (Asomba and Ejoh 2014), to name but a few of her *noms de guerre*, wields. In 2015, Governor Uduaghan's successor, Ifeanyi Okowa, saw no other way but to plead with the Olu of Warri to rein in Chief Lori-Ogbebor. She had launched legal actions against a new law instigated by the Delta State Government which would allocate only half of the 13 per cent of federal oil revenues destined for oil producing communities in the Niger Delta to DESOPADEC, the body responsible for distributing the funds. 'What is the state doing with the other 50 per cent [destined] to the oil and gas producing areas?,' (Omolubi Newuwumi in Amaize 2015b) queried one of her spokespeople. The Olu backed Chief Lori-Ogebor's claims and advised the Governor 'not to undermine the Igba of Warri [...] in negotiating the interest of the Itsekiri as if affects DESOPADEC' (Amaize 2015c). Though, he might have also known better than to thwart her actions. When, in 2003, he had sought to nominate a new representative for Itsekiri women in Nigeria and the diasporas, the Igba of Warri mobilised nearly 700 women who went onto the streets of Warri, 'carrying placards of various sizes and with various inscriptions denouncing the administrative style of the Warri Monarch' (Vanguard 2003). They presumably tied in with other forms of public female protest in South-Eastern Nigeria like the famous Women's War against British taxation policies in Abo in 1929 (Chuku 2005, Falola and Paddock 2011,

Matera, Bastian, and Kent 2012). Chief Lori-Ogbebor has remained the official representative of Itsekiri women ever since and has extended her power beyond Olu Atuwatse II's demise. His successor Olu Ikenwoli nominated her as member of his '7-man Presidential Advisory Committee [...] who shepherds his 26-man Olu-in-Council Committee' (Amaize 2016). Does this mean that she is assuming a male gender to steer the fate of the kingdom like Gloria Chuku's (2005) account about Igbo women straddling gender identities and economic and political power suggests? Chief Lori-Ogbebor's self-fashioning as 'mother of the Niger Delta' seems to indicate otherwise. She has rather been redefining what 'women and [political] power' (Beard 2017) mean in the Kingdom of Warri. Her potential for economic and political action – particularly via the use of public media – rivals that of her male counterparts. It might have also been one the reasons for not commenting on the play *Olu Akengbuwa* and its depiction of Princess Iye. For her, the play might have been 'just an act [...] quite distinct from what is real' (Butler 1988, 527). Instead, the chief allowed her commercial and political actions answer to the gendered subjectivities proposed on stage.

Hence, the plays discussed here offer performances of gendered subjectivities in times of colonial encroachment which do not necessarily reflect today's scope of female and male economic and political leadership in the Niger Delta. Yet, they form part of the 'canon' (Assmann 2008) of officially sanctioned and publicly 'activated pasts' (Apter and Derby 2010), giving moral lessons about past imperial encounters which the members of the audience are asked to apply in their presents.[54] While they might be used, particularly by Itsekiri men, to uphold hierarchical gender relations as part of notions of 'culture' and

[54] There has been a string of female writers in Nigeria who have tackled ways of doing gender in their literary and academic work, ranging from Flora Nwapa (2007, [1966] 1978) to Buchi Emecheta (2007) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013, 2014), and who have 'rewritten history, motherhood and rebellion' (Andrade 1990, Stratton 1994, see also Adimora-Ezeigbo 2005, Pape 2005). Though none of them, to my knowledge, cover anti-colonial resistance in the nineteenth-century Niger Delta. Hence, an analysis of their intriguing work goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

'heritage', they give few (successful) moral lessons to challenge or change them. I am now returning to a crisis in male leadership – Olu Atuwatse II's 'Ogiamegate' in 2013 – and discuss the correlation between past and present dramas of kingship and its impact on the performance of chronotopes.

Correlating Dramas On and Off Stage

At the staging of *Olu Akengbuwa* at the main hall of the Federal Government College in Warri on 1 May 2015, Matthew Umukoro's insights into theatre in Nigeria rang particularly true.

> Drama is life caught in a moment of crisis [...] manifested [...] in form of internal and external conflicts. [...] But there is no absolute resolution in dramatic construction. A play continues long after it has ended in the theatre, just as it has begun before it actually begins. (Umukoro 2010, 8-9)

While Umukoro might refer here to the writing and rehearsing as well as the reception of plays, his view of drama as an ongoing process is similarly applicable to the correlation between dramas (of kingship) on and off the theatre stage. When Olu Atuwatse II took his seat in the audience, his renunciation of the title of *Ogiame* and his attempted iconoclasm of ancestral sites two years prior was still fresh in the audiences' mind. Parallels with Olu Akengbuwa's hubris and disrespect for pre-Christian religious authority in 1848 – translated into the act of killing the *babaláwo* of Ife, the spiritual site of origin of the Kingdoms of Benin and consequently Itsekiri – were apparent even to newcomers to Itsekiriland like me. Moreover, the Olu's initial request to exclude the *babaláwo*'s beheading from the play indicated that the king was aware of a potential comparison himself, making it clear that recent communal experiences of crisis in leadership risked invading the historical scenery.

The negotiations between the director of the play, Alex Eyengho, and the Olu's council of chiefs give insights into the different ideas about what of the royal family's pasts was

supposed to be translated onto the stage and, thus, included in the 'canon' of Itsekiri history and what was to remain in the 'archive', understood by Aleida Assmann (2008, 98) as 'passively stored memory that preserves the past past.'

> But I said no [to excluding the killing of the *babaláwo*]. If we don't reflect it, there is no story to tell. [...] In any case, they [stories of Olu Akengbuwa and the *babaláwo* of Ife] are in the public domain. [...] I brought them books where it is recorded. I said, look, will you withdraw these books from the market?

Alex Eyengho's reference to other published sources not only substantiated the palace's lack of control over public narratives of Itsekiri royal pasts. It also hinted at the limits of editing such narratives.

Theories of translation might help us to better understand the tension between the malleability of the past and its limits. If we perceive 'the past as a foreign country' (Lowenthal 1985), David Zeitlyn's (2005, 2014) insights into translation between cultural contexts and practices seems particularly applicable. He has shown that, contrary to literary translation which is circumscribed by the length of a text, cross-cultural translation is potentially unlimited and can be best understood as an approximation to the 'complexity of everyday life' from an infinite number of angles. Yet, translating the past is also channelled by 'culturally variable sets of norms whose function is to regulate the inherent debatability of the past' (Appadurai 1981, 201). They inform the ways in which the past can be convincingly activated in the present and determine, I might add, what kind of chronotopes different modes of translating the past can create. Even though I do not intend to give a fixed set of such norms for Itsekiri practices like Arjun Appadurai (1981) does for his case study of a south Indian temple, I seek to identify practices and things which such performances cluster around, chief amongst them material culture associated with transatlantic trade such as the Portuguese crown (chapter 3) and other gifts of commerce (chapter 5 and 6). A particular quality of these things is their ability to evoke a variety of chronotopes and, consequently, to offer a multifaceted repertoire

of mobilising the past which enters in dialogue with theatrical modes of translation. Analysing translation across time and space means analysing the transformative qualities of mobilising past(s) to fit current needs and its socially negotiated limits. This tension might be best understood by metaphorical approximation. Bernard Herman sees translation as 'an act of rendering something (word, image, action, thing) accessible in terms that are familiar and comprehensible'. Yet 'to render is about giving up and giving in – an act of surrender carrying implications [...] of violence [as well as] duress' (2013, 121 and 129). Then again, Douglas Hofstadter (2009) uses an Italian wordplay to approximate the act of translation, locating the translator between *traduttore* (translator) and *traditore* (traitor). He offers a third word 'trader' which oscillates between the two poles. Translation, for Hofstadter, is a negotiation between trading off and trading in – a particularly apt metaphor for Appadurai's (1981) insight that the past is a 'scarce resource'. Inferring from these approximations, translating pasts can be understood as an affective and political, that is social and powerful, process of bringing pasts to 'bear' (Barber 2000, 430, Lambek 2002) in the present(s) via the materiality of performance with transformative effects on past and present as well as individual and shared experiences.

Turning from these theoretical insights to the specifics of the play, did the Olu, the director and the various members of the audience perceive the performative translation of *Olu Akengbuwa* on stage as treason or acceptable trade-off? Eyengho and the palace seem to have reached a bargain. The playwright had teased the palace to take the narration of royal pasts into their own hands while simultaneously appealing to a communal ethnic identity. 'Some other people will tell it wrongly. Let's tell it as best as we can as Itsekiri.' His appeal not only reflected, albeit indirectly, on the recently invigorated need for cohesion across religious and political affiliations within the Itsekiri Kingdom. It also played on the simmering interethnic rivalries in Warri and environs about who was to narrate the past of the land and,

consequently, make claims in the present and define its future(s) (see chapter 3). According to the latter line of reasoning, might the killing of the *babaláwo* be read as a symbolic act of the Olu of Warri's supreme authority to wield control over life and death in the western Niger Delta? At the very least, his presence at the premiere of *Olu Akengbuwa* attested to the Olu's willingness to face past (and present) crises of leadership.

The audience's various experiences of intra- and interethnic conflicts – informed by their gender, age, class and religious and ethnic affiliation – came to 'bear' in the present which audience and actors shared at the premiere. The correlation between the auditorium and the stage was further fostered by the position in the audience of the Olu and his retinue of chiefs. Contrary to elites in European theatre, the Olu did not sit at the back in a theatre box, high above the ground, surveying not only the theatrical performance but also its reception by his subjects. He sat on his throne in the first row while his chiefs formed a demi-circle, embracing the stage. Hence, it was the king's diverse subjects in the many rows behind him as well as on the stands flanking the auditorium who were able to observe his every reaction to the play, including the fact that 'he stayed till the end'. He had borne witness to the consequences of power tussles, greed and disrespect against pre-Christian spiritual authorities, manifested in an interregnum whose power vacuum was easily filled by other financially potent men. Thus, the spatial and visual correlation between the current Olu and his performatively enacted counterpart encouraged the audience to not only experience the theatrical chronotope 'holistically' but also to 'step back and contrast' it with their own recent experiences, 'always, of course, from their own "unresolved and still evolving contemporaneity" (Bakhtin in Wirtz 2014, 19). In the end, the theatrical translation of past experiences within the context of a recently shared crisis in leadership might have become what Matthew Umukoro (2010, 13) sees as the ideal of Nigerian (elite) theatre: 'a cathartic and pulsating communal experience, solemn, symbolic and profound.'

Performing Cosmopolitan Chronotopes on Stage

Theatrical translations across time and space have socially negotiated and, thus, malleable limits. It is the audiences who evaluate whether the theatrical chronotopes performed on stage push these limits or go beyond them. Moreover, as we could see with the Olu of Warri and Chief Rita Lori-Ogbebor, audiences also introduce their own intersectional positionalities into the ways in which they ascertain whether the playwrights are trading pasts in for convincing 'artistic reinterpretations' (Umukoro 2001a, 8) or selling them out. In the last section of this chapter, I trace the broader similarities and differences in the theatrical chronotopes of imperial encounters which the Niger Delta playwrights offered their audiences at different phases of Nigeria's petro-state.

While the playwrights all reach back to experiences of self-realisation in times of economic and political encroachment in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they use highly diverse strategies of translation, particularly with regard to temporal relations. The timespans covered in the plays range from entire biographies (such as *King Jaja*'s travel from his childhood in Igboland to kingship in Opobo and exile) to short periods of interactions between a leader and his Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijo trade partners and British colonial agents (such as in *All for Oil*). Likewise, the plays vary in their structuring of time. Whereas Ola Rotimi in *Akassa You Mi* layered experiences stemming from various colonial and postcolonial encounters to form a palimpsest translation, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo and Alex Eyengho stayed within imperialising contact zones of the nineteenth century, stringing together past experiences as a series of consecutive events, while Matthew Umukoro chose to work with a split stage to express the simultaneity of historical events. Moreover, possible relationships between pasts, presents and futures tended to become bleaker as the economic and political decline in the postcolony progressed. At the height of the oil boom in 1977, Rotimi envisioned a present which was hospitable to a variety of pasts (ancestral as well as

historical or pre-colonial) and projected a hopeful and open future. Fifteen years later, at the brink of Sani Abacha's military regime, Henry Leopold Bell-Gam mythically condensed Opobo-British relations in *King Jaja* and nostalgically foreclosed a return to a politically and economically sovereign past without showing alternatives for the future. In a similar vein, Matthew Umukoro acknowledged the end of pre-colonial ways of life in *Nanna Olomu* while tentatively envisioning an interethnic future (under Itsekiri leadership). In 2000, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo forwent precolonial sovereignty altogether and plunged the audience directly into life under indirect rule. '*All for Oil* is a play for our present times of crises after crises,' (2000, vi) he explained, diagnosing a state of chronic crisis for the Niger Delta which Henrik Vigh aptly describes as a 'loss of balance and the inability to control the exterior forces influencing our possibilities and choices' (Vigh 2008, 5). Such a feeling of chronic crisis brought about by exterior colonial aggression and interior 'politics of the belly' (Bayart 2009) hinders the 'possibility of agency' (Vigh 2008) and, hence, self-realisation. Yet, it does not lead to indifference to political or economic disorder or a lack of dreams of a new, old or different order. In this spirit, Clark-Bekederemo traced the shifts of power in African-British relations under early colonial rule, ending, after a reconciliation with ancestral forces, with a general, though unspecified potential for action. *Olu Akengbuwa*'s chronotope starts more than half a century earlier but has an even bleaker outlook. Alex Eyengho staged the self-destruction of royal leadership and the political takeover by other financially potent men of the Itsekiri Kingdom in dialogue with British diplomatic interests. The protagonists' actions are short-sighted. It is the narrator's task to articulate a bridge between the start of the interregnum in 1848 and its future ending in 1936. Eyengho gave his protagonists little opportunity to ponder possible pasts, presents and futures but rather asked the audience to evaluate the continuity of kingship and its perils, giving the play a sense of admonition. In brief, the temporal relations evoked in the plays range from palimpsest to nostalgic and

mythic and from open-ended to foreclosed – with a tendency to limit the protagonists' potential for action which deteriorated as part of the loss of the Niger Deltans' sovereignty of 'managing [...] the volatile resource [of oil]' (Clark-Bedekeremo 2000, vi).

The topographies of the theatrical chronotopes closely follow this movement from temporal openness to closedness. They are outlined by the travels of the (mostly male) protagonists, tracing the transformation of the historical territories of the coastal city-states. Whereas *King Jaja*'s journey leads him from the Igbo hinterland to Bonny, Opobo and finally exile, *Olu Akengbuwa* tracks the de-centralisation of the Kingdom of Warri via the settlements that leading Itsekiri merchants founded during the interregnum. *All for Oil* equally contours the shift in power relations via the protagonist's travel to Lagos, the heart of early colonial administration. The waterways, the defining characteristic of the Niger Delta, mostly feature as reference in the dialogues on stage. Only Rotimi makes them to a central site where the action on stage takes place. Similarly, it is *Akassa You Mi* which directly refences the environmental destruction of the Niger Delta (via a fisherman who complains about his bad catch), painting the most concrete or 'realist' picture of the material conditions and transformations of the delta. Later plays rather envision the land of pre-colonial times as abstract and mythic (Bell-Gam) or as a surface to nostalgically project by-gone ways of life (Clark-Bekederemo). Once the historical landscape is set at a temporal distance, they use archival materials to map concrete experiences of expropriation onto it (e.g. Ogbe-Ijoh in *All for Oil* and Ebrohimi in *Nanna Olomu*). What the plays have in common is their racialising of imperialising contact zones. The worlds they invoke are populated by 'white' and 'black' men (and, to a lesser extent, 'black' women) whose boundaries are drawn by their diverging interests of maintaining sovereignty or dismantling it. The characters of 'white' men are painted with less nuance than 'black' leaders-in-becoming. They are self-assured and know what they want, that is control over the resources of the Niger Delta for which they use any

'trick' (Bell-Gam 1996a) to attain it. Their 'whiteness' has less to do with the colour of their skin but with what Bourdieu calls their *hexis*, understood as their 'political mythology realised, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of feeling and thinking' (Bourdieu 1977, 93-94). For example, Offiong Edet Anthony who played Consul Beecroft at the premiere of *Olu Akengbuwa* not only used a white uniform (more reminiscent of a twentieth-century US Navy uniform than a nineteenth-century British one) to perform the British consul's whiteness but also a posh British accent and an arrogance which gave his pretentious meddling in Itsekiri politics credence. In a similar vein, the male leaders of the Niger Delta appeal to a shared experience of economic and political encroachment and attempts to fight it when they address a 'black' Pan-African auditorium (on and off stage) at their court hearings. Whereas *King Jaja* and *Nanna Olomu* draw clear lines between 'white' and 'black' interests, *Akassa You Mi*, *All for Oil* and *Olu Akengbuwa* suggest that the enemy might not only be found outside but within African communities (on intra-ethnic as well as postcolonial national levels). What unites the plays is their portrayal of 'national' heroes who fight for the sovereignty of their 'nation'. But even in this communal celebration lies an ambivalence which is characteristic for the playwrights' temporal-spatial translations. Just as 'oil' can stand for red and black oil, the 'nation' can be both, a precolonial ethnic as well as a postcolonial interethnic community. While inscribing themselves in the national narratives of the postcolonial petro-state (as first anti-colonial heroes of Nigeria), they reaffirm their ethnic-national identities.

The things that help to mediate between 'white' and 'black' interests are the material culture of transatlantic trade. The playwrights use gift exchanges, such as the staffs of office in *Nanna Olomu* and *Olu Akengbuwa*, the commemorative medals in *All for Oil* or the throne and sword in *King Jaja*, to highlight the making and breaking of political and economic relationships in imperialising contact zones. Likewise, the use of international things for fashioning

cosmopolitan identities is critically re-evaluated once the context in which transcultural appropriation and consumption take place is no longer made up of voluntary but coerced relationships. Material culture, thus, is central for performing cosmopolitan pasts on stage.

Given the envisioned Pan-African or at least national target audience of the plays, it is no surprise that the playwrights chose English, a colonial and postcolonial lingua franca, as their language of translation. It is not the choice of a cosmopolitan cultural elite with disregard for local languages. Rather, it reflects past as well as present experiences and necessities. Whereas coastal leaders spoke their mother tongues and the languages of their African and European trade partners long before colonisation (in their own vernacular ways), many young people in the Niger Delta today no longer speak the mother tongues of their parents fluently (amongst other things due to a lack of teaching minority languages in schools, cf. Igboanusi and Peter 2016) but rely on English as a 'modern' postcolonial language to navigate their presents and envision their futures. The choice of English, then, is not a way to emphasise elite cosmopolitanism but a way to address as many people within and beyond ethnic boundaries with lessons of 'purposive' leadership.

What then are these lessons of leadership? Even if the destiny of a potential leader is foretold, it is the man himself who has to make moral choices to realise it. This can only be done in a relational and reciprocal relationship with his subjects and, most importantly, with the ancestors. Only when the ancestral bond is renewed the male leaders-in-becoming find the strength to fight colonial aggression. This does not mean that men who have already converted to the Christian faith have to abandon their new-found beliefs (none of the plays suggests that). Rather, the potential for action of Christian leaders such as King Koko and Chief Bekederemo is dependent on their reconciliation with the ancestors, just as Olu Akengbuwa's and his heirs' demise is based on the king's disrespect for the highest spiritual authority of origin, the *babaláwo* of Ife. Most importantly, though, for the discussion of

chronotopes is the fact that to realise their destinies the men need to ponder potential pasts, presents and futures. They are all portrayed as men who are becoming aware of their position in time and space and, thus, within the imperialising transatlantic 'oil' market, 'thinking and acting beyond local environments' (Prestholdt 2008). It is their ability to balance the global and the local as well as the ancestral past and the Christian present that makes them into 'purposive' cosmopolitan leaders. Though, as the plays suggest, it is only men that can mediate both translocal relationships – to the metapersonal (spiritual) and the outside (transatlantic) worlds. In the end, the insistence on gendered (ritual) restrictions makes the theatrical translations of past experiences of African cosmopolitanism 'male' (Rotimi 2001b) and 'patriarchal' (Jeyifo 2004) stories. A translation that not all past and present female leaders would necessarily agree with.

Conclusion. Pondering Pasts, Presents and Futures

To conclude, even though the plays discussed here establish various time-space configurations, ranging from palimpsest to nostalgic and from open-ended to foreclosed, they all enable a particular type of subjectivity to emerge: the cosmopolitan leader-in-becoming. The plays are united by their openness to question relationships between pasts, presents and futures and to accommodate various chronotopes, such as ancestral immanence, into their narratives – a temporal-spatial inclusiveness which also the leaders-in-becoming are learning throughout their paths to fulfil their destiny. Moreover, the material performances on stage and their translations by the audiences blur the lines between past experiences of colonial encounters and contemporary experiences of political and economic encroachment and rivalling faiths. In this sense, they offer what Karin Barber (2000) calls a 'modern' editorial stance, understood as being and imagining oneself as being simultaneously inside and outside (of history or better evolving time-space). This editorial stance allows to not only ponder

different modes of relating to pasts, presents and futures but also to mediate between what is perceived as the local and the global. As such it is similar to the editorial stance of the modern European novel which Mikhael Bakhtin attested a particular ability for 'ideological translation'. Bakhtin defined such translation as a 'process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone's else's language, coming to know one's own belief system in someone else's system' and, thus, to 'overcome its otherness' (1981, 365). If we replace 'language' with chronotope we come close to the translation that historical plays by Niger Delta playwrights offer. Like European historical novels which, for Bakhtin, 'erased temporal boundaries' and 'recognised an eternal present in the past' (365-66), historical plays from the Niger Delta offer a reflective and self-critical mode for pondering pasts, presents and futures and for 'overcoming [their] otherness'. However, if we perceive 'modern' as dichotomous to 'traditional' or 'ancestral', it is hard to grasp the inclusiveness and the ability of translation that the plays and their protagonists demonstrate. Just as Jane Guyer (2013) insists that 'Africa has never been "traditional",' it might have never been 'modern'. It might have rather been cosmopolitan.

In the following chapters I will discuss two other ways of relating to the past, performing ancestral immanence and 'doing museums'. Like theatre, these ways of performing chronotopes are inconceivable without Niger Delta forms of African cosmopolitanism.

5. Embodying the Past. Performing Family Wealth and the Immanence of Ancestors

'Ale je efun. The earth has consumed chalk.'

The calabash, wrapped in a scarlet-red cloth, had been thrown on the floor. Its content, ritual chalk, spilled on the ground. As soon as the chalk touched the soil of the palace at Ode-Itsekiri, Chief T. Y. Pessu, the Ojomo of Warri and head of the Olu Advisory Council, exclaimed: 'Ale je efun. The earth has consumed chalk. The calabash is gone.' The inhabitants of Warri had heard rumours, but now it was official: Ogiame Atuwatse II had passed away. Only four months after his reconciliatory coronation anniversary, which included the theatre production discussed in the previous chapter, the king of Warri was dead. Chief Pessu gave instructions over the loudspeaker for the three-month-long mourning period that was to follow. Men and women of Itsekiriland were supposed to wear their wrappers upside-down. There was to be no drumming or festivities. Weddings and funerals had to wait until after the coronation of the new king. While the communal ritual life of Warri was put on hold, the *Omoba* or king-to-be went into *Idaniken*, a secluded place 'away from the palace', where, undisclosed to the public, rites would prepare him for the ascension to the throne of Warri. The mourning period would end with Ogiame Atuwatse II's fourteen-day funeral, followed by the coronation of the new king.

Chief Pessu's proclamation initiated a liminal chronotope where not only the deceased king and the *Omoba* but also the Itsekiri landscape would undergo a transformation. This chapter looks at the performative modes by which these transformations were enacted and discusses the relationships between the body (the king's as well as his subjects'), things and landscape, understood as 'a series of named locales, a set of relational places, linking by paths, movements and narratives' (Tilley 1994, 44). More precisely, it analyses the performative modes by which the past, situationally understood as accumulated family wealth, communal

history and ancestral immanence, is embodied within the landscapes of the Niger Delta. Local things and substances, such as the calabash and chalk mentioned above, and translocal things, such as trading gifts of transatlantic encounters, play a key role in performing these embodiments of the past, making communal history and ancestral immanence 'embodied part[s] of a lived experience' (Meyer and Port 2018a, 23).

For this focus on the body and, consequently, the senses, the chapter brings together anthropological performance theory (Mitchell 2006, Wirtz 2014, de Witte 2018), recent studies on materiality and religion (Meyer 2006, 2011, Houtman and Meyer 2013b, Meyer and de Witte 2013, Meyer and Port 2018b) and insights of phenomenological approaches to landscape (Bender 1993, Tilley 1994, Bender 2002, 2006, Ingold 2011, 2015). While I do not share Kristina Wirtz's (2014) critique of the concept of landscape as 'serv[ing] to distance one from the intimately situated, emotional experience of place' (23) – works by Christopher Tilley (Tilley 1994), Barbara Bender (1993, 2002, 2006), Paul Basu (Basu 2007a, 2012) and Tim Ingold (2011, 2015) clearly refute that –, I do share her concern with the temporal experience of place or, in Ingold's (2011) words, 'moving and becoming […] in the world.' Mikhael Bakhtin's (1981) notion of chronotope and Wirtz's (2014) expansion of it as 'temporality-emplacement' help to bridge the conceptual gap between time, temporality and landscape (for a disscussion of this gap see Ingold 1993, Bender 2002, Basu 2007b, Hicks 2016). Hence, conceptualising Ogiame Atuwatse II's interment and funerary rites as constitutive of a liminal chronotope (van Gennep 2004 [1909], Turner [1969] 2017) allows me to analyse the temporal and spatial aspects of these ritual performances in equal measure. It also allows me to examine the ways in which these performances transformed bodies, places and subjectivities. In so doing, I seek to contribute a material and performative perspective to the study of funerals in West Africa (Anderson 1987, Eicher and Erekosima 1987, Warnier 2007, de Witte 2011, Jindra and Noret 2011) and highlight the continued role

of sacred kingship for communal identity formation as well as place-making and place-claiming (Smith 2004, Geschiere 2005, Pratten 2008b) in Nigeria's petro-state.

Performing Funerals in West Africa

In their overview of the study of funerals on the African continent, Michael Jindra and Joël Noret (2011) trace several socio-cultural transformations from colonisation to decolonisation and postcolonial interdependencies which have had lasting effects on the ways in which funerals are performed today. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, religious changes like the adoption of Christianity impacted 'worldviews and notions of personhood [and] death' (26), enabling marginalised members of society, such as enslaved people and untitled or childless women who had formerly been denied 'immortality as ancestors' (29), a claim to a personalised funeral and an afterlife (for the eastern Niger Delta see Anderson 1987, Eicher and Erekosima 1987, for southeastern Ghana see Meyer 1999c, for what today is considered Yorubaland see Peel 2000, for the Cameroon Grassfields see Jindra 2005). Moreover, technological innovations such as mortuaries and audio-visual media changed the temporal and spatial parameters of funerals. While the possibility of freezing bodies and, thus, suspending them in time, helped to adapt the pace of interment and secondary funeral rites to the temporal needs of urban-rural as well as transnational kin relations, print, radio and video technologies expanded the ways in which funerals can be announced, recorded, archived and disseminated (for a detailed account of technological changes in Asante funerals see de Witte 2011). Yet, despite these religious and technological changes, funerals continue to not only 'draw people closer together' (Jindra and Noret 2011, 19) and reproduce social ties (Bloch and Parry 1982) but also to bring political, economic, religious and ethnic tensions to the fore (Cohen and Odhiambo 1992).

The funeral of Ogiame Atuwatse II was a case in point, unfolding at the very faultline between social regeneration and religious conflict. It gave Itsekiri from all strata of society the opportunity to come together and bid farewell to the king. At the same time, it laid bare the religious tensions which still existed despite the king's and his subjects' efforts of reconciliation. In the creeks at Ode-Itsekiri, the funeral rites facilitated the king's transformation from sacred monarch to ancestor. On the mainland at the chapel of the royal palace in Warri, the king's nuclear family and fellow Christians celebrated the deceased king's Pentecostal beliefs. While this might seem as one of the numerous accommodations of Christian and ancestral beliefs in West Africa (Jindra 2005, Noret 2008), the refusal of many Pentecostal believers to take part in the funeral rites at Ode-Itsekiri exposed the religious frictions that lingered on. Their refusal to travel to the island and physically participate in the rituals not only underlined the rituals' persuasive power. It also highlighted, in reverse, the collective performative effort it took to realise what the local media called the king's 'transition' (Archibong 2015, O'Neil 2015) into ancestorhood.

Birgit Meyer in collaboration with Marleen de Witte, Dick Houtman and Mattijs van de Port (Houtman and Meyer 2013b, Meyer and de Witte 2013, Meyer and Port 2018b) has introduced innovative ways with which to theoretically frame the realisation of religious phenomena or 'cultural production of the real' (Meyer and Port 2018a), such as the transformation or 'transition' of a king into an ancestor. Their concept of 'aesthetic formations' delineates aesthetic-political regimes which entangle people with particular cultural forms in sensorial, emotional and cognitive ways. Harking back to Aristotle's notion of *aesthesis*, understood as 'our total sensory experience of the world and our sensitive knowledge of it' (Meyer and Verrips 2008, 21), they emphasise the affective-sensorial relations between humans and things that make up the essential or authentic quality of religious experiences. Religion is here defined in a broad sense, referring to 'the ways in

which people link up with, or even feel touched by, a meta-empirical sphere that may be glossed as supernatural, sacred, divine, or transcendant' (Meyer 2006, 6). Sharing religious experiences and embodying them, that is incorporating them sensorially, emotionally and mentally, forms not only subjectivities but also communities. Hence, the Pentecostal believers' refusal to partake in the aesthetic formation of the king's funeral clearly marked their rejection of not only forming but also being formed by ancestral beliefs and related bodily practices.

However, the question remains how exactly people realise such aesthetic formations. Meyer et al. follow Merleau-Ponty (2004) Michael Jackson (1983) and Talal Asad (1993, 1997, 2006) in focusing on processes of mediation, starting with the assumption that all experiences are mediated by the body and its relationship to things – broadly understood as 'images, artefacts, bodily fluids [or substances] as well as spaces and technologies' (Houtman and Meyer 2013a, 17). In religious contexts, it is authorised forms of mediation that help to realise religious experiences and render the sublime immanent. Yet, while the body and the material world are necessary conduits by which the sublime can be made present, it is performative acts that 'bring [religious experiences] into being' (Mitchell 2019). Thus, performance, as the 'creation of presence' (Schieffelin 1998, 194), is equally important in understanding how aesthetic formations are realised. The embodied, reality-constituting quality of performative acts facilitates the formation of (gendered, racialised, etc.) subjectivities in everyday life (Goffman 1969, Bourdieu 1977, Herzfeld 1985, Butler 1988, 1993, Connell 1995, Butler 1999) as well as the transformation of subjectivities in rituals (Turner 1967, van Gennep 2004 [1909], Turner [1969] 2017). During Atuwatse II's funeral, two main performative processes were enacted which, on the one hand, facilitated the immanence of ancestors and, on the other hand, 'transitioned' the deceased king into ancestorhood. It was two interrelated, though

reverse movements in time, one rendering the ancestral past present and the other transforming the present into an ancestral past.

These movements in time were made possible by what Jon P. Mitchell calls the 'reciprocal dialectic' (2006, 395) of bodies, things and ritual performance. Following Arnold van Gennep (2004 [1909]) and Victor Turner (Turner 1967, [1969] 2017), Mitchell asserts that they are interdependent and mutually transformative. Ritual performance changes a person's cognitive-bodily orientation to the world or subjectivity. It also turns objects into subjects, i.e. endows them with agency (Gell 1998, Latour 2011), and transforms 'relatively neutral spaces of a lived environment to the symbolically and often politically charged space [of ritual]' (Mitchell 2006, 396). In turn, these 'material transformations' of bodies, things and places are not contained within the liminal space/phase of ritual (Turner [1969] 2017) but seep back into everyday life. The fact that, for centuries, Warri and environs have seldomly been neutral places, but sites of economic, political and cultural contestation, does not diminish Mitchell's argument. On the contrary, the funeral of Ogiame Atuwatse II impacted bodies, subjectivities and places well beyond the ritual itself. The impact was most clearly felt in the rural and urban landscapes of the Western Niger Delta whose ethnic-religious outlines were retraced and reinforced during the mourning period. Thus, before discussing the transformation of bodies and subjectivities in ritual, I will first look at the ways in which the mourning period's liminal chronotope facilitated changes in the landscapes which link the oil city of Warri and the ancestral island of Ode-Itsekiri.



Figure 5.1a, b and c: During the mourning period of Ogiame Atuwaste II, Itsekiri inhabitants of Warri decorated their cars with red and black bunting and license plates in the same colours. Photos: Julia Binter, 2015.

From Ruinous Island to Electrified Town. Transforming Places

During the mourning period, secular and sacred landscapes were mapped onto each other. Signs of mourning spilled into the streets of the oil city, while oil wealth transformed the ancestral island of Ode-Itsekiri. In the city of Warri, known in 2015 for its war-torn streets congested with oil tankers and oil flares at the horizon, the mourning period's liminal chronotope allowed Itsekiri citizens to showcase their affiliation with the kingdom in a way which had been banned since the violent interethnic conflicts in the late 1990s and early

2000s. They used the opportunity of the 'betwixt and betweenness' (Turner [1969] 2017) of the mourning period to adorn their cars with license plates displaying Atuwatse II's portrait and the announcement of his death. The cars carried Chief Pessu's exclamation, 'Ale je efun', 'The earth has consumed chalk', from homes to offices, from narrow allies to highways, tracing Itsekiri presences in the urban landscape and re-inscribing, albeit fleetingly, the sacred relationship between Itsekiri kingship and land into the streets of Warri. Red-and-black bunting, as symbols of royalty (red) and death (black), on the cars' roofs reinforced their visibility (see Fig. 5.1a, b and c).

For Itsekiri citizens of Warri it was the first, publicly condoned opportunity in two decades to visibly reinforce their ethnic presence in the city. In the early 1990s, Atuwatse II had translated the canoe regattas from the rivers to the streets of Warri, using trucks decked out with bunting and large flags to celebrate his annual coronation anniversaries. Urhobo and Ijo citizens had been appalled by what they perceived as an attempt to display not only cultural pride, but also cultural supremacy (Curnow 2002). Worries about Itsekiri paramountcy in Warri had accompanied Urhobo and Ijo people living in the city since its founding under British colonial rule. Situated at the first patch of solid mainland between creeks and hinterland, the city was strategically positioned to break the trade monopoly of the Itsekiri middlemen and advance the colonisation of the Itsekiri's former trade partners and source of enslavement, the Urhobo (Ikime 1969). The new colonial port drew people from all surrounding communities, gradually making the city the interethnic hub that it is today. As anthropologist Percy A. Talbot (1923, 1926, [1932] 1967) is quoted in reporting in the theatre play *All for Oil* (Clark-Bedekeremo 2000, see chapter 4), Warri's citizens have continuously perceived the naming of places and correlated titles as highly political acts. The act of naming the new colonial port city Warri, the anglicized name of the ancestral island of Ode-Itsekiri, speaks of the influence that Itsekiri elites very initially able to assert under British colonial

rule. Carrying titles connected to the land has been a controversial topic ever since. For example, when the Itsekiri monarchy was reinstated in 1936, conflicts broke out over the title that the new king was supposed to hold. While Urhobo and Ijo citizens preferred 'Olu of Itsekiri', Itsekiri representatives insisted on naming their monarch 'Olu of Warri', a difference of opinion that the lawyers of the Itsekiri monarch have repeatedly settled in their favour (Ikime 1969, Lloyd 1974, Emiko 1976, Ayomike 1988, 1990, Curnow 2002, Ekeh 2005, Ayomike 2009, Okoh 2016). Likewise, collective and individual presence in the streets of Warri has been closely linked to land right issues, particularly since the struggle for independence from colonial rule. In 1952, the visit of Itsekiri Chief Arthur Prest, then member of the pro-independence party Action Group and federal minister of communications, to Warri engendered riots by Urhobo citizens (Curnow 2002, 223). Prest was perceived as 'the chief organiser of Itsekiri claims of superiority' (Lloyd 1956, 79), having instigated the Itsekiri Communal Lands Trust which transferred land titles, which the colonial government had acquired from Itsekiri Paramount Chief Dore Numa in 1906, 1908 and 1911 and which Urhobo citizens had repeatedly contested, to Itsekiri elites and the Olu of Warri, respectively (Ekeh 2005, Ayomike 2009). That is to say, as Itsekiri citizens have been considerably outnumbered by their Ijo and Urhobo neighbours, they have been continually using judicial and cultural means to assert their position in the city. Atuwatse II's translation of canoe regattas into the streets of Warri in the 1990s might have been the most visible way to do so yet. Thus, the quarrel over the position of the local government headquarters in 1997 (see chapter 3) was the final spark that ignited the tensions simmering between the ethnic groups. After over a decade of civil war, tentative regeneration and intra-ethnic, religious conflict (see 'Ogiamegate', chapter 3), Atuwatse II's mourning period was the first occasion which offered all Itsekiri citizens – irrespective of their religious beliefs – a chance to publicly display their ethnic affiliation in and claim on the oil city. License plates showing the king's

portrait within the boundaries of Nigeria (Fig. 5.1c) might have expanded this claim even further.

On the island of Ode-Itsekiri, the funeral not only initiated an ethnic renewal but a renovation in the literal sense. As Atuwatse II had avoided to travel to Ode-Itsekiri and connect with the ancestral forces there, investment in the island had dwindled. When our film team visited the island in April 2015, five months before the king's death, the island lay in ruins. The central water plant had stopped working. The plaster on the mansions of the founding families of Ode-Itsekiri was crumbling down. Roof tiles were missing. Sand had started to reclaim the tarred streets. On the riverbanks, burnt-out houses, remnants of the interethnic conflict, lay empty. Our guide who had come with us from Warri to the island drew attention to the corrugated iron and clay huts lining the more remote streets. 'This is how we lived in the old times,' he explained to me, ushering me into the hut and pointing at a wood burning stove. What he did not draw attention to were tins of Ovaltine from Britain and Mama detergent from Japan piled on top of colourful plastic bowls. A slit between the iron sheets which formed the walls and roof filtered the sunlight entering the dwelling. Was it the wooden stove and clay floor or the international goods that served our guide as signs of 'the old times'? And whose old times did he refer to? Humble dwellings like this had coexisted with pre-fabricated mansions from Liverpool since the nineteenth century. The mixing of industrial and pre-industrial, of translocal and local things had been part of Itsekiri lifestyles for centuries. Yet, the narration of our guide established a developmental chronotope which pitched the former against the latter without mentioning the notion of class or rural-urban divides that underpinned his argument. When we stepped out of the hut into the street, it seemed like stepping from the past into the present. Though, it was a particular version of the past, made up of local technologies and devoid of industrial amenities like electrified stoves or lighting, which had the potential to reference both, a time prior to international trade relations and a

place at the margins of Itsekiri society. Likewise, it was a particular version of the present, made up of empty streets and crumbling buildings, which gave the impression that, for the most part, wealthy members of the Itsekiri Kingdom had suspended their relationship with the island.

The sole renovation project that was, at this point, envisioned for Ode-Itsekiri was related to the monarchy's ties to Christianity (see Fig. 5.2). Following our tour into the humble dwelling, our guide led us to a rectangular patch of grass situated at a crossroads. 'This,' he explained, 'is the place where the Portuguese built the church of Santoni, a corrupted word for Saint Anthony.' Gesturing towards a poster placed in the overgrown field, he added: 'There are plans to rebuild the church. It is a sign that we Itsekiri were the first Africans who invited missionaries. Christianity in Nigeria started here.' His narration emphasised not only the pride that many of my interlocutors, irrespective of their position in society, took in the Itsekiri's religious contact with the Portuguese. It also emphasised, more generally, the importance of things – in their material or immaterial, envisioned, form – in relating to the past (Seremetakis 1996). Yet, his tour also highlighted the general lack of investment in the island that had prevented the renovation of the urban centre of Ode-Itsekiri and that maintained the plan of reconstructing the church as symbol of early African Christianity rather than executing it. Six months later, it was not the church but the town itself that was being rebuilt. Also, it was not Christian but ancestral sites that were reactivated in order to facilitate Atuwatse II's transition into ancestorhood.



Figure 5.2: A poster next to the patch of land where, according to oral history, Portuguese missionaries built their church in the sixteenth century. The poster advertised the envisioned reconstruction of the building as 'Religious, History & Tourism Monument.' It was envisioned to include a 'reconstructed/ remodelled' chapel (inspired by Classicist and Gothic architecture from Europe), two community buildings for monks and nuns, a guest house, a museum and a clinic. The project was under the patronage of the Bishop of Warri, Rt. John Okeoghene Afareha, and Olu Atuwatse II. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.

When I returned to Ode-Itsekiri in the middle of the mourning period in November 2015 the town was humming with the noise of caterpillars, cement mixers and the shouts of construction workers. Old mansions were in the process of receiving a new coat of paint and a new roof. New family houses had started covering empty patches of land. The water plant was being repaired and the streets were being realigned. In-between the bustle, patches of bush were neatly corded off, showcasing industrial plaques with hazard-symbols. These shrines where off limit for the majority of people visiting and staying on the island and created an additional, sacred landscape to the one that was being rebuilt around them. While the chiefs of the kingdom renovated their homes and, thus, reinforced their family ties with the island, ritual specialists tended to the shrines which had been neglected for the most part of Olu Atuwatse II's reign. Neither iconoclasm via prolonged neglect, nor the intended iconoclasm

via physical destruction in 2013 seemed to have been able to root out the ancestral forces connected to the land.

Whereas not all inhabitants of Ode-Itsekiri cheered the reactivation of shrines due to their Christian beliefs, they emphatically welcomed the investment that was poured into the island. 'I am very happy that the chiefs finally remember us. This was long overdue,' told me Pa Oyebor in German at his house at Ode-Itsekiri. Having spent more than a decade in Stuttgart, Germany, in the 1970s and 80s, studying and working as a mechanical engineer, he had retired to his place of birth, Ode-Itsekiri, and had witnessed the deterioration of the island. Despite my initial surprise to listen to his life experiences in my mother tongue, he taught me how significant the renovation of the island was not only in spiritual but also in social terms. The royal funeral necessitated the reactivation of ancestral sites, shrines and family homes alike, and of rural-urban relationships. The wealth of the oil city, in the form of investment and social redistribution, made this double renewal possible.

As the renovation of Ode-Itsekiri progressed, the wealth of the chiefs sponsoring the construction works became ever more apparent. Enormous cargo ships carried machines, supplies and workers from the port of Warri to the island, while the chiefs' yachts and war ships, remnants of the interethnic conflict, speeded back and forth surveying and protecting their progress. This was a particularly impressive accomplishment since in November 2015 the south of Nigeria was without petrol. Nigeria's patrol station owners had gone on strike due to reforms that the then newly elected president Muhammadu Buhari sought to implement concerning the petrol sector. Given the dependence on generators for bridging the daily electricity outages, the lack of petrol meant a lack of electricity. As the strikes continued and the prices for petrol on the black market rose to a level which made it unaffordable for many citizens of Warri, the oil city grew dark and silent. In my neighbourhood, I had grown accustomed to the rattle of sewing machines fashioning commemorative clothes for the

funeral and celebratory clothes for the subsequent coronation. After three weeks of strikes, the rattle had died away. The surrounding houses had grown dark. Meanwhile, at Ode-Itsekiri, generators continued to fuel the construction works without respite.



Figure 5.3: This photo shows the royal jetty at Ode-Itsekiri as well as the town in its various states of renovation. At the centre, a newly built reception house welcomed the chiefs as they went onshore. To the left, an old mansion had already received new windows and awaited a new coat of paint. To the right, a burnt-out house still lay in ruins, while, next to it, an excavator was digging a new road. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.

One evening, returning from Ode-Itsekiri and driving through the unusually quiet streets of Warri, my companion indicated the reason for the industrial verve on the ancestral island. Passing by a petrol station I caught a glimpse of a black SUV getting fuel. 'Has the strike ended?,' I queried hopefully. He shook his head. 'This is a chief's car. He owns the petrol station and many others throughout town.' While the nation-wide strike had brought life in the oil city to a standstill, wealth from oil and petroleum itself had helped to reenergize the ancestral island in the creeks of the delta. The chiefs and petrol entrepreneurs, who, amongst other things, owned petrol stations and provided infrastructure for oil exploration, had taken it upon themselves to turn the island replete with material reminders of 'the old times' into an

electrified town with solar-powered streetlights, newly tarred roads, running water and renovated mansions. They brought a new, twenty-first-century version of African cosmopolitanism to the island which was fuelled by oil and underpinned by religious necessities. Their renovations established coevalness between rural and urban dwellings, bringing 'the old times' up to speed. At the same time, the reconstruction of family mansions and the reactivation of shrines helped to re-establish ancestral ties and offered the grounds on which the ancestral past could become present. Thus, the liminal chronotope of the mourning period transformed both, the oil city of Warri and the ancestral island of Ode-Itsekiri. It gave Itsekiri citizens of Warri an opportunity to reinforce their ethnic visibility in the oil city. It also initiated investment in the infrastructure and family mansions of the island and mandated the reactivation of ancestral sites in order to 'transition' the king into ancestorhood. Hence, it renewed the social, economic and religious ties between the past and the present capitals of (red and black) oil.

From Flesh to Catafalque. Transforming Bodies

The transition of Atuwatse II from king to ancestor was intimately linked to these transformations of landscapes and involved the re-entanglement of bodies, things and land. During the burial, it involved the material transformation of the king's body and its reconnection with the sacred landscape and founding story of the kingdom (see chapter 3). During the funeral, it consisted of communally bidding farewell to the king-as-ancestor. In order to start the burial rites, the king's body (or parts of it, according to some of my interlocutors) were transferred by boat to the royal cemetery at Ijala. In the late fifteenth century, Ijala had been the last stop of the kingdom's founding monarch Ginuwa and his retinue on their way from the Kingdom of Benin into the delta. Having married Derumo, an Ijo woman, and begotten two sons, Ginuwa passed away and was buried there. Subsequently,

their son Ijijen received an oracle by the chief priest Idibie to relocate to a new place. According to the kingdom's founding story related to our film team by Henry Erikowa, heritage manager and historian at Ijala, the priest threw a spear into the water which turned into a fish and guided the people to Ode-Itsekiri. There, they met five families, residents of the island and migrants themselves, who had come from Ijebu in the west and Igala in the north and who accepted Ijijen as their king (see also Moore [1936] 1970). Although Ode-Itsekiri has since then been the kingdom's capital, it is Ijala, the resting place of Ginuwa, where all Itsekiri monarchs are buried. Their graves have been marked by planting Iroko trees which form a sacred grove and are accessible only by a selected group of people. One month into Olu Atuwatse II's mourning period, the *Omoba* or king-to-be, Prince Ikenwoli Godfrey Emiko, emerged from seclusion (*Idaniken*) to accompany the deceased king's body to Ijala and led the main chiefs of the kingdom[55] into the grove to perform the *Iken* rites. While the rites themselves were not disclosed to the public, Chief Rita Lori-Ogbebor, the Igba of Warri, explained the significance of the rites to the press:

> The history that is being repeated in our kingdom by today's event also signifies the real exchange of baton between the departed Olu and his successor. The Olu designate went in with the departed predecessor to meet their ancestors and he came out alone. That bears a strong message of handover. This is even more significant than the open installation which is mainly ceremonial. (Lori-Ogbebor in Ogundele 2015, Yafugborhi 2015)

The *Omoba*'s visit to the sacred grove commenced Atuwatse II's burial rites which would last till the installation of the new king. It not only marked the reconnection of the deceased king's body with the land and burial site of his predecessors, thereby tying it in with the founding narratives of the kingdom. The *Omoba*'s and Atuwatse II's joint 'meeting [with] their ancestors' also hinted at an exchange of powers which was, according to Edward Ekpoko,

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[55] The chiefs included Chief Yaya Pessu, the Ojomo of Warri; Chief Felix Esisi, the Olare-Aje of Okere; Chief Roland Omagbemi, the Ewolufun of Warri and Chief Thomas Eyeritomi, the Akitigbi-Ayeola of Warri.

Secretary of the Itsekiri Leaders of Thought, a 'precedent' (Ekpoko in Yafugborhi 2015) for both, transitioning the deceased king into ancestorhood and enabling the king-to-be to ascend the throne of Warri.

Despite the symbolic significance of the burial rites for retracing the monarchy's relationship to the land of the western Niger Delta and, thus, reinforcing religious claims on it, the rituals' details were revealed neither to the public nor to me as a researcher. In other words, even though my guides to Itsekiriland were incredibly helpful in giving me insights into the histories and cultural heritage of the kingdom, they also outlined the limits that I, as a pre-menopausal, non-Itsekiri woman, had to respect regarding ritual knowledge and bodily conduct at ritual sites. Keeping with their wish, I will base the following discussion of the ritual aspects of the funeral, on the one hand, on a tentative comparison with similar practices of sacred kingship in West Africa (Nevadomsky and Inneh 1983, Nevadomsky 1984b, a, Warnier 2007) and, on the other hand, on things and gestures that I was officially allowed to witness.

Chief Pessu's announcement of Olu Atuwatse II's death – 'Ale je efun. The earth has consumed chalk. The calabash is gone' – pointed to the religious ties between the Itsekiri monarchy and the Kingdom of Benin and to a more widely prevalent understanding of the king's body as indispensable link between ancestral powers and land. In the Kingdom of Benin, the Oba's (king's) death has historically been announced by throwing a large piece of chalk on the ground while exclaiming: 'Orhue oghe Omo N'Oba bunrun' ('The chalk of the Oba is broken') (Nevadomsky 1984a, 41). According to Joseph Nevadomsky's (1984a, 42) account of the burial of Oba Akenzua II in 1978, the king's body was then covered with a thin film of clay and dried until it was buried in a part of the royal palace known as *Iwowa*, the 'chamber of prosperity'. The sealing of the burial chamber was accompanied by the words 'Otorri orhue' ('The earth has eaten chalk'). Chief Pessu's exclamation seems to have merged

the two gestures into one, focussing on the king's body (calabash) and its powerful substances (chalk) which were conjoined with the soil and the ancestral powers associated with it. His utterance also suggests a metonymic relationship between the king's body and things which Jean-Pierre Warnier (2007) has analysed in detail for the Kingdom of Mankon, in today's Cameroon. Warnier conceptualises the monarch's body as container for 'ancestral life substances' which the monarch receives via a weekly and yearly rhythm of gift exchange with his predecessors, in the form of offerings for life substances, and which he distributes amongst his subjects via the exchange of bodily substances such as breath, saliva and semen. Every member of the kingdom, including the monarch, is subjected to bodily regimes of conduct and care which form gendered and class-based subjectivities and enable the ritual transformation of bodily substances into ancestral life substances as well as their subsequent transfer amongst containers, that is bodies and their 'embodied material extensions' (Warnier 2007, 267) or things. According to Warnier, the Fon of Makon is, to this day, a 'pot-king', in the French double association of *roi-peaux* (skin-king) and *roi-pot* (pot-king), whose body, as container and surface, is 'a concrete metonymy of the palace and of the city' (ibid.). In the Kingdom of Benin, similar metonymies seem to have existed (and still exist) which allowed for the transfer of powers and the continual reconnection between bodies and land. For example, *egie-egbe* or 'body-titles' were awarded to ritual specialists and wives of the Oba who came to embody essential parts and metaphysical qualities of the king, such as *aro* (eye), *esa* (belly) and *utomwen* (longevity), and who were allowed to share and distribute the same substances as the Oba (Nevadomsky 1984a, 42, Bradbury 2017, 39). In the Itsekiri Kingdom, the identification of the king's body as calabash and his bodily substances as chalk, which is used in performing the immanence of ancestors in various ritual contexts (see below), suggest a similar metonymic relationship and, consequently, a similar cycle of gift exchange between the ancestors, the monarch and his subjects. Hence, from the perspective of practitioners of

ancestral beliefs, Olu Atuwatse II's prolonged neglect of ancestral sites might have disrupted this cycle of exchange and might have led to the 'illnesses' that had befallen not only the subjects of the kingdom, in the form of interethnic conflict in the late 1990s and 2000s (see chapter 3), but also the king himself. The monarch had suffered several strokes leading up to his complete renunciation of ancestral beliefs and his attempted iconoclasm in 2013. While adherents of ancestral practices might have found the reason for the king's ailments in his neglect of the ancestors, Olu Atuwatse II might have sought his recovery in the fulfilment of his Pentecostal beliefs and a 'complete break with the [ancestral] past' (Meyer 1998). During the burial and funeral, it was not only ritual specialists and the *Omoba* who reinforced the ties connecting the king's body, his predecessors and the land in secluded ceremonies. It was also reinforced publicly via multiple media outlets such as press interviews given by Chief Lori-Ogbebor. Moreover, in the official booklet *Funeral Rites* (2015), published by the Olu Advisory Council and the Warri Council of Chiefs, Olu Atuwatse II, together with his retinue of chiefs, was pictured strolling the streets of Ode-Itsekiri, 'his birth place and ancestral home of the Itsekiris' (13).

The mourning period concluded with the king's fourteen-day funeral at Ode-Itsekiri and underlined the metonymic relationship between the king's body and things. At one end of the freshly renovated festival hall, a funerary chamber in the form of a rectangular structure with gabled roof, decked out with red cloth, had been erected. Insight, at the centre, stood a hemispheric catafalque (*Uli Oku*) based on a four-poster bed, sumptuously draped in red and white fabrics. On top of it, twelve white feathers of an eagle formed a semi-circle, representing the pre-Portuguese crown of the Itsekiri. Three short, round necklaces made of coral beads and a long necklace with small white glass beads and a large coral bead at its centre (*Okun*), solely reserved for chiefs, were dangling underneath. On its left-hand side, a golden framed, half-length portrait of Olu Atuwatse II rested against the structure, mirroring

the colours, textures and items of the catafalque. The life-sized photograph showed the monarch on his gold-and-red-velvet throne, wearing a delicately embroidered white gown, the Portuguese crown and chiefly necklaces; his wrists, heavy with coral beads, resting in his lap (see Fig. 5.4). Image and catafalque visually reinforced each other and substituted the body of the king, whose physical remains lay interred at Ijala.



Figure 5.4: The catafalque of Olu Atuwatse II with the Okparan *(ancestral head of the family), seated on the right-hand side, welcoming the condolences. Photo: Lucky Abolokeiji, 2015.*

The catafalque, with its elaborately mounted fabrics, personal status symbols and jewelleries, has been used as substitute for a deceased's body in funerals of former (and current) merchant elites throughout the Niger Delta. For example, for funerals of high-status men and women of the Kalabari Kingdom in the east of the delta, Joanne B. Eicher and Tonye V. Erekosima (1987) describe a similar display. In the house of the deceased, up to three rooms are decked out with carefully selected cloths, covering the walls and a four-poster bed. The corpse is first dressed in *injiri*, a red plaid cotton fabric or *George* in the trade language of the nineteenth

century, and subsequently moved into a second chamber and redressed in West African textiles such as *akwete* (handwoven cloth from the nearby Igbo town of Akwete) or *acraa* (handwoven cloth from Ghana). After the burial, the display moves to the reception parlour where personal items are laid out on the bed as 'surrogate' (Eicher and Erekosima 1987, 44) of the deceased's body. Hats adorn the pillow, while necklaces, bracelets, watches and rings trace the body's outline. In addition, 'canes, fans and walking sticks appear on the side as if hand held' (ibid.), similar to the richly embellished gold-and-silver sword and sceptre leaning against the catafalque of Olu Atuwatse II (see Fig. 5.4). In the public reception parlour of a Kalabari Ijo funeral, expensive imported fabrics such as silks, damask, woollen flannel and velvets form part of the dress, 'representing a person who "goes out"' (ibid.). The fabrics used in the different rooms outline a person's movement through live, from the most intimate such as *injiri*, which has long become an 'authenticated' (Eicher and Erekosima 1981, 1995) Kalabari textile, to the most public and prestigious. The most highly valued fabrics on display are imported textiles which have been handed down through generations and safeguarded in families' 'cloth boxes.' Hence, the choice, age and quality of cloths, which serve as surrogate for the deceased's body, highlight the wealth and prestige of the deceased and his family, reaffirming their past and present cosmopolitan outlook.



Figure 5.5: Mourners from Obodo, one of the five settlements Prince Ijijen encountered when he founded the kingdom at Ode-Itsekiri, performing the Ere-Okposo dance during the royal funeral. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.

The same logic of cosmopolitan display characterises Itsekiri funerals. At the royal funeral, it was not only the generously draped flannel of the funerary chamber and the scarlet-red silk of the catafalque but also the clothing of the mourners which contributed to a kaleidoscope of cosmopolitan references. Each family, who bade farewell to the king, had carefully chosen and invested in *lace*, that is embroidered fabrics from Austria or Switzerland (see Plankensteiner and Adediran 2010), to create wrapper and blouse combinations rich in colour contrast and, thus, to flaunt their taste in contemporary 'traditional' fashion (see Fig. 5.5). The mourners performed songs and dances which narrated the entanglements of their family places with the royal house, from the *Ulu-Umalokun* dance, commemorating Prince Ginuwa's convenant with the sea goddess *Umale Okun* at Ugharegin in 1480, on the first day, to the *Ogiri* dance of Obotebe, which is said to have been founded by an Ijo man from the east (Alagoa 1972), at the last day (Chiefs 2015, 22-23). Similar to the reconstruction of houses and reactivation of shrines at Ode-Itsekiri during the first months of the mourning period, the

mourners at the funeral combined contemporary forms of cosmopolitan display, such as fashion, with re-tying their families' founding stories with the land in song and dance.

A particularly striking way of performing family history and wealth was *ukueke* (Fig. 5.6). *Ukueke* was variously translated to me as 'parading', 'showing' and 'displaying' and consisted of a young man or woman who had been chosen to wear and display their respective families' heirlooms. For men, they consisted of thick damask and silk cloths, which were sumptuously draped around their hips to form a multi-layered wrapper, a shirt (*kemije*), rows upon rows of coral beads around their neck and wrists, a sword and/or a staff with a silver top and a top hat, adorned with the name of the families' founding fathers who achieved economic and social success in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The personalised trading gifts of Atlantic encounters, such as staffs and hats, had been handed down through generations and referenced not only past economic and social achievements but also the ability to take care of this legacy despite colonial and postcolonial upheavals.

Looking closely, I was surprised by how well the textiles seemed to have been preserved. The damasks and silks glimmered in the sun and spotlight, projecting the movement of the *ukueke* forward while the wearers were solemnly making their way through the crowds. Admiring a particularly sumptuous wrapper, my companion explained to me that the cloth was indeed 'original. This one we bought from the market last week.' Startled by his definition of originality, I inquired further. How could a recently bought, mass produced good be an 'original heirloom'? As more and more people affirmed the explanation of my companion, I had to abandon my Benjaminian (2008 [1935]) notion of authenticity, based on a clear-cut distinction between copy and original (for a discussion of authenticity with regard to African art see Eicher and Erekosima 1981, Price 1989, Eicher and Erekosima 1995, Steiner 1995, Filitz and Saris 2013). As Birgit Meyer and Mattijs van de Port (2018a, 6) have persuasively argued, 'authenticity is not an essence to be discovered in a particular form of cultural

heritage but a quality produced in such a form.' For Itsekiri families with centuries-old experience in transatlantic trade, this quality was produced by replacing worn-out or fading textiles with new ones which had similar patterns in the 'same or better quality'. By wrapping the bodies of youth in the most shiny and sumptuous cloths available and accessorising them with trading gifts from previous centuries, the families showcased their ability to not only build on the successes of their ancestors but also to substantially add to them.



Figure 5.6: Ukueke of Chief Rita Lori-Ogbebor's family. By decking out not one but three men to perform ukueke, Chief Lori-Ogbebor highlighted the past and present wealth of her family. In addition, the chief was accompanied by a children's dance group, highlighting her status as the 'mother of the kingdom' (see chapter 4). Photo: Lucky Abolokeji, 2015.

In Itsekiri families, personalised heirlooms were mostly connected to male ancestors. Hence, when young women performed *ukueke*, it was the quality of the textiles which made up their wrappers – tied not around their hips, as it is done today, but above their chest as it had been

custom in the nineteenth century – and the sumptuousness of their jewellery, consisting of a meshwork of coral beads adorning their shoulders and pinned up hair, that expressed the prestige, wealth and taste of the family. Again, these items could be bought on the market and silver instead of coral jewellery had recently come into fashion. Moreover, bundles of damask, spread out like voluminous fans, were carried in each hand and added to the splendour of the performative display. In so doing, *ukueke* resembled *amabro* (Eicher and Erekosima 1987, 42), literally meaning 'going around the town', which the chief male mourner, dressed in heirlooms and accompanied by female relatives in *injiri* or *George* cloths, performed during funerals of Kalabari Ijo elites, showcasing the accumulated wealth of the deceased's family.

At Olu Atuwatse II's funeral, this form of performing family wealth was part of a larger meshwork of bodies and things which tied together the living and the dead, the monarch and his subjects and past and present forms of cosmopolitanism. While the catafalque, as substitute for the king's body, witnessed the performances of the kingdom's subjects, two oblong tables at each side of the funerary chamber, decked out with translocal things, reinforced the kingdom's cosmopolitan outreach. Nineteenth-century jars and earthenware from Bristol framed the imported porcelain figure of a whiskered Englishman in golden waistcoat and blue tailcoat. Next to it sat a blue-and-white porcelain vase, in the style of the (often copied) Ming dynasty, as well as bronze figures of horses and camels (see Fig. 5.7). The items had been brought together from various merchant families' private collections and stood for past, present and possibly future translocal economic ties. The latter was particularly true for the camel figures which, according to some of my interlocutors, referenced oil-producing countries in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia whose sovereignty on land and oil served several of them as a model which Itsekiri oil entrepreneurs were supposed to aspire to. Moreover, the red and white fabrics which enwrapped the two tables left no doubt about

who carried the material proofs of the translocal successes of the kingdom. According to this display, it was the Olu who had prepared the ground for and was now holding the cosmopolitan achievements of his subjects.



Figure 5.7: The festival hall between performances. During the breaks, the curtains of the funerary chamber were drawn, the catafalque concealed. The cosmopolitan display on the two oblong tables in front of the funerary chamber was further enriched by a nineteenth-century gas lantern on the right-hand side of the catafalque and twenty-first-century chandeliers hanging from the festival hall's ceiling. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.

The funeral's interplay of bodies and things, which established a meshwork of relationships between local and translocal places and time periods, can be conceptualised as an 'aesthetic formation' in Birgit Meyer's (Meyer 2009a, Meyer and Port 2018a) sense. Meyer (2009b, 8) highlights the 'formative impact of a shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies, and making sense.' At the funeral, the senses were tuned in to the drumming of the musicians which carried the songs and dances of the respective families forward, to the shine and grandeur of the *ukueke* and to the all-embracing presence of the catafalque-as-royal-body. While the extended funerary display, consisting of the funerary chamber, the catafalque and the arrangement of translocal

things, suggested the king to be the source and the recipient of past and present cosmopolitan achievements, the songs and dances of the respective families highlighted the monarchy's entanglements with the population and their land. Hence, the mourners' performances not only reinforced their ties with and contribution to the monarchy and thus emphasised their identity as royal subjects. They also formed the Olu as sacred king, an identity that Atuwatse II had emphatically tried to shed.

From King to Ancestor. Transforming Subjectivities

The burial of the king's body at Ijala and the celebration of its material substitute at Ode-Itsekiri initiated a transformation of the king in form and substance. While the material transformation of the monarch's body into a catafalque wrapped in scarlet-red cloth was a highly visual metonymic translation, his transition into ancestorhood entailed more subtle performances. In the following section, I attempt to approach this phenomenon via a broader discussion of Itsekiri ways of performing ancestral immanence.

The most impressive example of performing the immanence of ancestors that I was invited to witness was a *Temotsi* (Pessu 2012) or marriage. In the context of the *Temotsi*, *ukueke* played a key role, though its function changed from one of displaying accumulated wealth to ritual significance. The *Temotsi* took place in the bride's family home and began with the exchange of gifts in food and drink amongst the bride's and groom's families. Then, the groom was asked to remove his shoes and show his hands in order to determine whether his body was intact and 'no limps were missing'. Subsequently, three young women all decked out in exquisite *lace* were ushered into the room, one be one. Was the groom able to identify his bride amongst the women? He declined. The women were 'showered with gifts' in the form of Naira banknotes and led out. Only the third time, the actual bride was led into the room and

happily identified, paving the way for the ceremony to begin. All heads turned to the entrance (*Ogun-uli)*, waiting for the ritual head of ceremony to appear. In came a young man, a member of the bride's family (on the paternal side), clad in the family's heirlooms and performing *ukueke* while crossing the room. When he reached the table, the living head of the family (*Olori-ebi*) emptied his seat and offered it to the young man. A ritual specialist or 'master of ceremony' (*Agbofofo*) joined him, poured a libation and asked the young man to break chalk in a plate. In that moment, all the men in the room removed their hats. By pouring the libation, the young man had turned into *Okparan*, literally meaning 'the one who cuts the sacrificial meat', or, in other words, the ancestral head of the house. The removal of the hats acknowledged his transformation and the presence and authority of the ancestors. The bride and groom kneeled before him. Guided by the *Agobofofo*, the *Okparan* offered kola nut (with eight cotyledons symbolising completion), gin and clear water (*Usin*, symbolising a peaceful marriage) to the groom who shared the substances with his bride. Once the *Okparan* had joined the bride's and groom's hands and blessed the union, he said a prayer over a bottle of Gordon or 'the white man's' gin: 'Di uwa oyibo wi ara aghan' ('Let the riches of the white man come into your dwelling') (see also Pessu 2012, 23-24).

There are many details in this ritual that are worth unpacking: the role of gifts in relating families, the importance of gin as once 'modern' and now 'traditional' substance for ritual performance (Bersselaar 2007) and the omnipresent references to international trade and associated wealth as displayed in *ukueke* and prayed for by the *Okparan*. Yet, I would like to focus on the 'sensational form' of the ritual, understood as 'authorized modes of invoking divine presence and power and […] sensorial practices through which it is incorporated' (Meyer and Verrips 2008, 29). While there are other forms of invoking ancestral presence in the context of shrines and Ifa divinations, in public rituals, it is a specific 'reciprocal dialectic' (Mitchell 2006) between bodies, things and performative acts that realise ancestral

immanence. Heirlooms, understood as material remnants of Atlantic encounters as well as accumulated wealth, gin, for libation, and the invocation of the ancestors work together to invite their presence. The choice of bodies which serve as media for ancestral presence is a spiritual and a pragmatic one: 'Youths are often preferred because it is believed that they are cleaner and more appropriate since they may live longer than the adults to serve as a testator in case', explained Itsekiri historian Archibald Etikerentse to our film team via WhatsApp as preparation for filming in the Niger Delta. At the *Temotsi*, I moreover noticed the significance of sharing substances such as kola nut, gin and water, being handed from the *Okparan* or ancestors to the groom and bride. Whether these were considered 'life substances' in Jean-Pierre Warnier's (2007) sense, is a subject for future research.

The chronotope which the performance of ancestral immanence establishes is characterised by the efficacy of the ancestors (Wirtz 2016). They are not referenced as historical figures who once lived in the past but understood as entities acting in the present and impacting the living (Horton 1962). To render them present is a collective effort, implicating the *Agbofofo*, the *Okparan*, the *Olori-Ebi*, the bride and groom and their families. What if one of them does not fulfil their dedicate role, for instance, the *Olori-Ebi* no emptying his seat, the men of the two families not removing their hats, the *Agbofofo* not pouring the libation? At the *Temotsi*, there seemed to be only one person who did not fully comply with the ritual. When it came to the sharing of substances, the bride did not open her lips to drink the gin, nor did she eat the kola nut. Instead, she led it to her lips, diverted it in the last second and let it slip on the ground. Waiting for the ceremony to start, I had heard rumours that the bride had not been happy celebrating a *Temotsi* in addition to the Pentecostal marriage that she had envisioned. Yet, as she married a man from a different ethnic group, her family had insisted on 'upholding Itsekiri culture' and inviting the ancestors. Was her clandestine denial of embodying the ritual substances a way of resistance? And if so, was it effective? The answer might depend on who

one asks. As the bride clearly signalled me that her act was to remain a secret, I have not yet inquired further and anonymised my account. What this episode highlights, though, is the fine line between play and ritual, between make-believe and earnest acts, as well as the power of performance as reality-constituting (verbal and bodily) utterance, that Victor Turner (1974) and Judith Butler (1988, 1993) have so eloquently elaborated on.

The potential of turning *ukueke* into *Okparan* also has implications for the understanding of Olu Atuwatse II's funeral. As the *ukueke* made their way through the lines of dancers and approached the catafalque, they took a seat next to the oblong table at the right-hand side (see Fig. 5.8). Behind them, close to the catafalque, sat the royal family's equivalent, a young man clad in a scarlet-red shirt and wrapper, adorned with a white sash, chiefly beads and a white eagle feather in his hair (see Fig. 5.4). The *Agbofofo* approached the *ukueke* and poured a libation, rendering the ancestors present. What exactly the ancestors affected in these moments was not disclosed to me. Though I suggest that they helped to transition the Olu into ancestorhood.



Figure 5.8: Okparan*, being filmed by one of the film teams documenting the funeral. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.*

After two weeks of continuous dancing, singing, parading and praying – and many other ritual acts that were concealed from the public – the funeral at Ode-Itsekiri drew to a close. On the last night, no foreigners or women were allowed on the island. All that was related to me was that the 'most powerful masquerades' came out one last time and destroyed the catafalque, the last metonymic translation of the king's body, and finally completed Olu Atuwatse II's transition. A week later, at the very same spot, *Omoba* Ikenwoli Godfrey Emiko, his body draped in richly embroidered, scarlet-red damask and white silk, was crowned the new Olu of Warri (see Fig. 3.3, chapter 3). The journey from royal body to calabash, to catafalque and, finally, to royal body was complete. The material translation from body to things and substances and back again, all draped in red cloth, had made the transition of power possible.

Conclusion. Wearing and Embodying the Past

The liminal chronotope of the mourning period enabled transformations of places, bodies and subjectivities. It gave Itsekiri citizens of Warri the opportunity to visually make their presence felt and, thus, to stake a claim in the oil city after the prolonged interethnic conflicts of the late 1990s and early 2000s. It also necessitated the reconstruction of Ode-Itsekiri with the help of oil wealth and established coevalness between the oil city and the hitherto ruinous ancestral island. The burial of the king's body was not only used to retrace the founding story of the monarchy and demarcate the territorial extent of the kingdom, it was also pivotal in transitioning Olu Atuwatse II into ancestorhood and transferring the royal powers to his successor. The body's metonymic translations as calabash and catafalque further offered the public a way to link up with and bid farewell to the king. At the funeral, an intricate interplay of bodies, things and performative acts enabled those Itsekiri men, women and children who had not refrained from coming to the island due to their Pentecostal beliefs to reassert their relationship with the monarchy. Their songs and dances linked the royal house back to the

settlements which made up the territories of the kingdom and emphasised the contribution of their ancestors in the formation of the kingdom. The choreography of the catafalque-as-royal-body and of the performances of the dancers (as well as of the spectators as witnesses) not only formed the subjectivity of the mourners as royal subjects but also the subjectivity of the deceased monarch. The 'aesthetic formation' (Meyer 2009b) of the funeral (re)made the Olu into a sacred king, a role that he had emphatically tried to shed, and transitioned him into ancestorhood.

That is to say, the betwixt and betweenness of the mourning period enabled a range of overlapping and entangled chronotopes ranging from showcasing past and present cosmopolitan achievements via *ukueke* to performing the immanence of ancestors via *Okparan*. Hence, *Ukueke*, as the performative display of gifts from transatlantic trade and of accumulated wealth, and *Okparan*, as their transformation in ancestral immanence, contributed to an intricate meshwork of past and present translocal relationships. Besides, the performative transformation from *ukueke* to *Okparan* or, in other words, from wearing the past to embodying it also underlined the manifold affordances of things (Basu 2017a). They were able to serve as referent and metonym for people and relationships. It is this understanding of the culturally specific affordances of things that is necessary for unpacking the last mode of relating to the past discussed in this thesis, the Nanna Living History Museum in Koko.

6. Curating the Past. The Nanna Living History Museum

'Nanna sat here and Lord Lugard sat here. His third man sat here, and they had meal at this table. And when he left, he divided Nigeria into the North, the East, and the West.'

Anthony Nanna, one of Nanna Olomu's grandsons and family custodian of the Nanna Living History Museum in Koko, had explained every room of the museum, his hands gliding over cutlery and gas lamps, irons and cannons. He had lifted some of the things up and placed them in my hands so that I could feel the forms, shapes and weight of things past. Rex Clarke had shouted instructions from behind the camera to begin, hold and end Anthony Nanna's explanations of the displays so that our cameraman Jakpa Gbubemi could adjust the lighting or change the camera angle. When Anthony stood behind Nanna's dining table, his arms spread out as if to encompass the scene that he re-enacted with his descriptions, Rex asked him to repeat what he had just said. Our guide readily complied: 'In 1914, Nanna sat here and Lord Lugard sat here. His third man sat here, and they had meal at this table. And when he left', pointing to a display next to me, 'he gave Nanna this water filter and divided Nigeria into the North, the East, and the West.' Anthony's words and gestures towards the things on display not only brought Nanna Olomu's personality as cosmopolitan host back to life but also ascribed Nanna, the deposed Governor of the Benin River, an active role in the formation of the colonial state of Nigeria.

Starting from the performative way in which Anthony Nanna guided our film team through the Nanna Living History Museum in 2015, this chapter traces the life (Appadurai 1986b) of Nanna Olomu's compound, which he erected after his return from exile in 1906, from its building and initial use as family and ancestral home to its conversion into a national monument in 1979 and a national museum in 1996 to its latest reopening after the interethnic conflicts in the western Niger Delta in 2006. It not only pays attention to the materiality of the building and its contents, understood as the multisensory and polysemic potential or

affordance of things (Basu 2017a). It also analyses its entanglements with the economic and political dynamics of the Niger Delta and the Nigerian state in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As the life of the museum was informed by the ways in which changing social actors engaged with or curated its materialities, I will particularly look at different forms of curation, first by Nanna and his children and subsequently by Itsekiri historians and Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM). These different, though overlapping forms of curating include collecting (Gosden and Knowles 2001, Harrison, Byrne, and Clarke 2013), caring (Flynn and Hull-Walski 2001, Arnold 2015, Longair 2015) and canonising (Assmann 2008, Meyer and de Witte 2013) and involve the performance of various chronotopes – ranging from the invocation of ancestral immanence to the referential narration of the past. Hence, this chapter ties in with themes and insights from previous chapters, such as the performance of ancestral chronotopes (chapter 5), notions of leadership and postcolonial relationships between people in the Niger Delta and the Nigerian state (chapter 4) and the role of gifts in imperial contact (chapter 2). In so doing, it seeks to contribute a processual and performative perspective to the study of museums in Africa (Ardouin and Arinze 1995, Coombes 2003, Molyneaux and Stone 2011, Coombes, Hughes, and Karega 2014, Mawere, Chiwaura, and Thondhlana 2015, Abiti 2018) and highlight the multisensory (Seremetakis 1996, Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, Berner, Hoffmann, and Lange 2011, Binter 2014, Mathur and Singh 2014) and polysemic potentials of 'doing museums' in the twenty-first century (Phillips 2005, Byrne et al. 2011, Schorch and McCarthy 2019).

Decolonising European Ways of Doing Museums

Since its inception three decades ago, scholars in critical museology have argued that the museum was a European invention, which grew out of aristocratic cabinets of curiosities or *Wunderkammer* (Impey and MacGregor 2017) and was 'birthed' (Bennett 1995) with the founding of the British Museum in 1753 or with the opening of the Louvre to the public during the French Revolution (McClellan 1999). As Tony Bennett (1995, 2004, 2010) has pointed out, new forms of categorising and publicly exhibiting things formed subjectivities and hierarchised notions of selves and others, combining ideas of enlightened citizenship with the formation of nation-states and imperial expansion. Museums, according to Bennett, were part of an 'exhibitionary complex', consisting, inter alia, of world fairs (Geppert 2010), human zoos (Blanchard, Boetsch, and Jacomijn Snoep 2011) and specialising types of museums of natural history, art history and anthropology or ethnography (Thomas 1991, Barringer and Flynn 1998, Hooper-Greenhill 2000, Gosden and Knowles 2001), which rested on the material appropriation and ocularcentric exhibition of the world (Preziosi and Farago 2019). Particularly ethnographic museums became what Annie Coombes (1994) has called 'temples of Empire' where the collecting and exhibiting of things from a variety of ritual, artistic and performative contexts altered their ontological status. Whereas things might have formerly been used to connect with the ancestors or fashion cosmopolitan identities, they were now objectified, that is put behind glass to indexically reference foreign people who were imagined living at a different place in a different time (Karp and Lavine 1991, for a detailed discussion of the vitrine see von Zinnenburg Caroll 2017). As I have argued elsewhere (Binter 2019), the museum of the exhibitionary complex fostered a particular chronotope and time-space-subjectivity (Wirtz 2014) which invited visitors to look at and consume objects and, thus, to form an imperial subjectivity which contrasted the 'modernity' of the colonisers, associated with notions of technological and cultural progress, with the

ahistorical or timeless otherness of the colonised (Fabian 1983), elevating the former above the latter.

However, the multisensory and polysemic potential or affordance of things (Basu 2017b) tended to undermine the objectifying regime of the exhibitionary complex (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, Karp et al. 2006, Howes 2014). Constance Classen and David Howes (2006), for example, have highlighted the multisensory engagement with things in private and early public collections in eighteenth-century Europe. Things were smelled and, particularly, touched as 'an essential – and expected – means of acquiring knowledge' (201) – very much like the way in which Anthony Nanna invited me to touch the things on display at the Nanna Living History Museum. Yet, at the same time as private collections became public, European scholars were starting to differentiate between higher and lower senses, preferencing sight over hearing, taste, smell and touch. Whereas the former was favoured as sign of civilisation and sought to be refined in settings such as the museum (Duncan 1995), the latter was associated with primitiveness and ascribed to women, children as well as rural and foreign people. When the museum as powerful regime of knowledge creation was exported to the colonies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was 'translated' (Clifford 2019, 109) to its local contexts. 'No longer anchored to its modern origins in Europe' (ibid.), it was exposed to varying, multisensory ways of relating to things. Curators at an Indian museum, for example, unsuccessfully tried to enforce 'no touching, to spitting, no praying' (Mathur and Singh 2014) in their galleries. 'The instability of sacred and secular values accorded to objects in the South Asian context' (ibid., 11) destabilised the 'purifying' (Wirtz 2016) chronotope of the museum (for other postcolonial contexts see Flynn and Hull-Walski 2001, Peers and

Brown 2003, Golding and Modest 2013, Onciul 2015).[56] As we will see in the discussion of the Nanna Living History Museum, things, which are cared for in multisensory ways, are no longer solely used to reference people and places, often imagined to be of a timeless past, but may help, inter alia, to invoke the presence of sacred entities and thus to introduce differing chronotopes into the museum (Phillips 2012, Peers 2013). Hence, curation, from a cross-cultural perspective, can be understood as different forms of caring for things - from the Latin word *curare*, meaning 'to care' (Kreps 2003a, Longair 2015) – which are based on differing notions of human-thing-relationships and related time-space-subjectivities.

Moreover, the notion of the museum might be more widespread than initially expected. James Clifford (1997, 217) observed early on that 'accumulating and displaying valued things is, arguably, a widespread human activity not limited to any class or cultural group.' Also Kristina Kreps (2006, 458) maintains that 'the creation of structures or spaces for the collection, storage, display, and preservation of objects, as well as practices related to their use, interpretation, care, and conservation' have had long, dynamic histories beyond the European notion of the museum. She thus argues for a comparative museology where sites such as shrines, temples and community houses are analysed for their museological qualities. Drawing together case studies from North America, China, Indonesia and New Zealand she calls for 'liberating [material] culture – its collection, interpretation, representation, and preservation – from the management regimes of Eurocentric museology' (459). Hence, as the idea of the museum is based on how people relate to things, e.g. collect, interpret, preserve

[56] Moreover, changes in legislation such as the United States' Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 enabled, for example, stakeholders of the communities who had once produced and used things to introduce their ways of caring into museums. While human remains might be returned to their communities and reburied, conservators and curators, under the tutelage of Native American ritual specialists, devised new ways of storage and preservation. The National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institution, for instance, divested of plastic envelops so that things could 'breathe' and opened their depots to ceremonies of care where things were 'smudged', that is 'washed' with the smoke of burned tobacco, sage or sweet grass (Flynn and Hull-Walski 2001).

and display them, I will speak for the rest of this analysis of 'doing museums', similar to processual ways of 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Despite their possible similarities, European and non-European ways of doing museums often sit uncomfortably next to each other, particularly in postcolonial contexts such as Nigeria. While Nigeria's colonial administration introduced European ways of doing museums as part of the British Empire's exhibitionary complex, e.g. the National Museum in Benin City (1944), the National Museum in Jos (1952) and the National Museum in Lagos (1956-57) (see Kaplan 1994), local forms of collecting, caring for and displaying things were ignored or suppressed. In addition, the adoption of Islam and Christianity enforced the marginalisation of alternative museum forms such as shrines (Horton 1970, Alagoa 2001, for Guinea see Sarró 2009, Probst 2013, Strother 2017). After Nigeria's independence, Ekpo Eyo, the first Director-General of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), articulated the unease of many museum practitioners with the colonial legacy of the institution. 'The museums were … seen as white elephants staffed by eccentric colonialists, assisted by Africans glad of a job, and visited mainly by foreigners' (Eyo 1994, 325). Funded by the oil wealth of the 1970s, Ekpo Eyo and his team introduced multisensory and performative ways of engaging with museum collections in order to showcase their links to 'living cultures' (333) such as wood carving, dancing, tie-and-dying and hair braiding. Moreover, Nigeria's civil war from 1967 to 1970 had cut deep wounds into the social fabric of the country. While the official policy of 'No Victors, No Vanquished' sought reconciliation in silencing experiences of the war (Last 2000, Korieh 2012, Falola and Ezekwem 2016, Onuoha 2016, Lecznar 2017, Lodge 2018), the oil boom and Nigeria's organisation of FESTAC' 77 allowed the government to use cultural means of 'forging national unity' (Eyo 1994, 335, see also Apter 2005). For Ekpo Eyo and his team at the NCMM, this meant highlighting the aesthetic qualities of things and creative practices and downplaying their

regional specificities and religious potential. Their cultural efforts of nation-building prefigured other forms of doing museums in post-conflict societies on the African continent such as South Africa (Coombes 2003), Kenia (Coombes, Hughes, and Karega 2014), Uganda (Abiti 2018), Sierra Leone (Basu 2007b) and Zimbabwe (Mawere, Chiwaura, and Thondhlana 2015).

The conversion of the Nanna family's compound into a national monument fell into this time of 'spectacular' (Apter 2005) cultural efforts of nation-building. Before discussing the building's heritagisation, understood as 'the selection of certain cultural forms which are – more or less persuasively – canonized' (Meyer and de Witte 2013, 276), I will first trace the inception of the building and its contents from Nanna Olomu's collecting of ideas, technologies and things to their care by the Nanna family after the patron's transition into ancestorhood.

Collecting. Fashioning Cosmopolitan Identities

The 'Nanna palace', as it is known in Koko, is the materialisation of Nanna Olomu's avid collecting of novel ideas, technologies and luxury goods. He designed the palace after his return from exile in Accra, today's Ghana, and supervised its construction by his children and bonded workpeople from 1907 to 1910. In 1874, his father Olomu had advised Nanna to send enslaved people to the Benin River to plant cocoyam, giving the place the name Koko. As his former town Ebrohimi had become inhabitable after the colonial war – it was reported to me that the surrounding swamps were smelling of gunpowder to this day –, Nanna had called on his elder sister Ebeji and brother Ebisanine to move to Koko and prepare the ground for his return (Omatsola 2007 [1996]). When the deposed Governor of the Benin River arrived at its shore on 8 August 1906, he was greeted by 'rejoicing crowds' of his extended family, his

closest Itsekiri allies and former Urhobo trade partners and in-laws. According to the Nanna family's official narrative, also his bonded workpeople, re-defined as 'members of [his] house' by the colonial administration's *House Rule Ordinance* (2012 [1901]), welcomed his return (Omatsola 2007 [1996]). Surveying the land, Nanna soon chose an elevated spot four hundred metres inland to build his new home. He used local materials such as mud walls and a thatch roof to craft a rectangular, one-storey mansion counting nine big rooms, two dining rooms, one for his guests and one for his family, a reception hall and a vaulted colonnade encircling a courtyard, visibly drawing his inspirations from neo-classicist European architecture (see Fig. 1.4, chapter 1).

In the museum booklet published in 1996, family historian Emmanuel Omatsola (2007 [1996], 16) recounted that Nanna sought to 'recapture fond memories of Ebrohimi in this his new town', tying in with his experience of designing his and his father's houses at Ebrohimi in the 1860s. Even though the watercolour painting of Ebrohimi by Admiral Frederick Bedford, who led the attack against Nanna in 1894, shows a prefabricated, two-storey building most probably imported from the UK (see Fig. 6.1), one can still observe a clear continuity of collecting novel architectural ideas for fashioning Itsekiri houses from the middle of the nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. In an interview for our film, Olayemi Johnson Nanna, one of Nanna's grandsons, attributed the idea for a European inspired house design to the Itsekiri elites' close relationship with European merchants who showed them, amongst other things, European magazines and books. Before colonial aggression,

> Nanna and Olomu were […] people surrounded with relations, well-wishers, customers who […] bought the same idea and helped in developing this community. […] You also have to have the flair for this [kind of European things]. [… Olomu and] Nanna liked what they saw and put it directly into practice.

Contrary to other middlemen of their time like Prince George Pepple of Bonny who had been educated at Hall Place, Bexley, from 1861 to 1863 (Pereira and McKeon 2013)[57] neither Olomu nor Nanna had visited Europe. But they had visited Lagos, Britain's new crown colony established in 1861, and most probably also Old Calabar in the western Niger Delta where Efik merchants, by the end of the eighteenth century, had started to import prefabricated houses from Liverpool and to acquire collections of international trade goods, using their relationships with European traders and missionaries (Latham 1973, National Commission for Museums and Monuments 1986, Aye 2009).

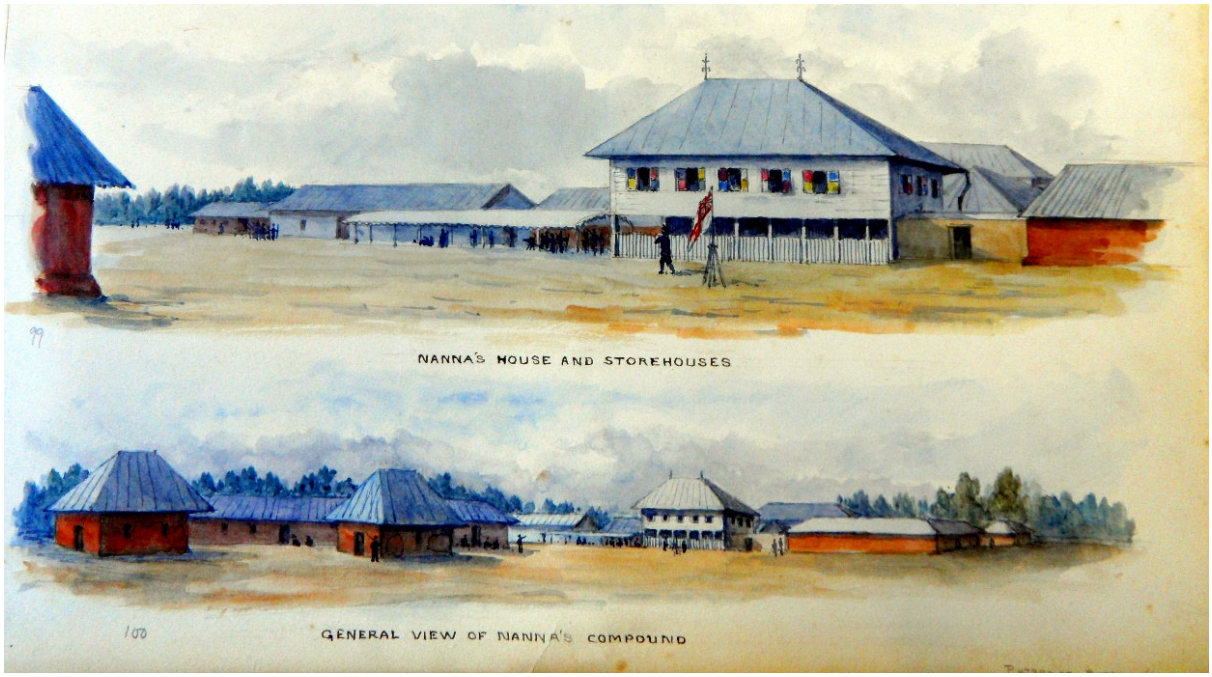


Figure 6.1: A watercolour painting of Nanna's town Ebrohimi with his mansion at its centre, painted by Admiral Frederick Bedford, 1894, p. 50. Inventory number: ALB0028. Photo: National Maritime Museum Manuscripts, Royal Museums Greenwich.

Despite the Itsekiri royal family's close association with Christianity (see chapter 3), Itsekiri merchants like Olomu and Nanna shunned European missionaries and relied on commercial

[57] See also Cotterell, *Reminiscences of one connected with the West African Trade*, p. 17.

relations to not only have direct access to international goods but also to order customised items like brass water pitchers inscribed with their name or a meteorite pendant which Nanna had sent to Britain to be set in gold (Fig. 6.2).[58] The last Governor of the Benin River also furnished his living space in Ebrohimi with 'very large handsome mirrors'[59], which covered the walls, and beds with spring mattresses. Silver and cut-glass decanters (Fig. 6.3), finely engraved, silvered tobacco boxes and a kola-nut container in the form of a porcelain hare all contributed to his eclectic cosmopolitan collection.



NANA.

WE give the portrait of Nana, or Nanna, the deposed Chief of Benin, on the West Coast of Africa, and also reproduce a photograph of a much prized ju-ju, or fetish, belonging to him. It consists of a portion of an aerolite, or thunderbolt, and is said to have fallen through the roof of the house of the late Chief Nana's father, in a state of white heat. It was set in gold, and has been treated with great respect as one of the principal charms of the House of Nana. The operations against this powerful chief have been followed with much interest by all those connected with the trade of this part of Africa. Some of Nana's followers escaped in different directions, together with his numerous wives and some thousands of slaves. The Chief himself surrendered at Lagos with a small retinue, and has been sent to Itu with one of his wives and only one servant, where the chief of that place is responsible for his safe-keeping, and answerable to Sir Claude Macdonald, Chief Commissioner and Consul-General of the Niger Coast Protectorate.

JU-JU BELONGING TO NANA

Our readers may remember that this powerful and turbulent Chief's town of Benin was recently bombarded and destroyed by four of her Majesty's cruisers, under the command of Admiral Bedford. The whole expedition was organized and carried out by Mr. Ralph Moor, Acting Chief Commissioner and Consul-General for the Niger Coast Protectorate.

The meteorite was sent home some years since to Mr. Pinnock, of Liverpool, an African merchant, who had it set, as it now appears, in 18 cara gold and sent out to the now deposed Chief, Nana.

Figure 6.2: A newspaper article explaining the life story of the gold chain pendant: A meteorite splinter fell through his father's roof and Nanna subsequently sent it to Britain via a trusted Liverpudlian trading partner and had it set in gold. The whereabouts of the necklace remain unclear. It might have been part of the loot that British naval personnel took with them when they captured Nanna's town in 1894. Diary of Admiral Frederick Bedford p. 52. Inventory number: ALB0028. Photo: National Maritime Museum Manuscripts, Royal Museums Greenwich

European visitors to Ebrohimi wondered about his cosmopolitan taste, particularly regarding his architectural design.

> His town, Brohoemi, made by his father Alluma [Olomu], was a most wonderful sight, the ground on which the greater part of it was built having been reclaimed from the

[58] The Nanna Living History Museum does not have a register. Accordingly, objects have not been given inventory numbers and cannot be identified as such.
[59] Hickley, John Dennis. 1894. *An Account of the Operations on the Benin River in August and September, 1894*, London, p. 7, inventory number: HIK/104.15, Caird Library, Royal Museums Greenwich.

> mangrove swamp by millions of canoe-loads of sand poured on it. The whole place was kept extremely clean, and the houses built in streets running at right angles to the main road, broad as Piccadilly, which connected Nanna's own part of the town with his father's, Alluma, which lay some half-mile distant (Boisragon 1897, 53-54).
>
> The majority of the houses, too, were equally the result of immense labour; the walls were built of a very fine, hard red clay, which was brought by canoes from a long distance. The different chiefs' houses were wooden, two-story buildings on a European model, and roofed with galvanised iron.[60].

One of the recurring themes in these descriptions is the writers' emphasis on the cleanliness of the town. This emphasis can be explained by what Stephanie Newell (2008) has identified as Christian conceptions of cleanliness which determined the perception of African people by many imperial agents in the context of the palm oil trade. Newell suggests that British traders and, in this case, navy personnel perceived African people as clean when they had already become consumers of imported trade goods. Yet, many British visitors to the delta found it hard to make sense of African cosmopolitan ways of life which defied European preconceptions of people 'without history' (Wolf 1982, see also Fabian 1983). For instance, King Boy Amain of Brass, situated in the central Niger Delta, sought to impress the Niger explorers John and Richard Lander (1832, 255) with his taste in European architecture and art. The king had given a carpenter from Old Calabar seven enslaved people as payment for building a house according to 'European' style using wood salvaged from a shipwreck. The house featured a veranda and four oblong rooms furnished with doors, cupboards and a table and was used as storage for the king's international trade goods and as home for some of his wives. Contemplating 'an old French print representing the Virgin Mary' hanging at the wall of their guestroom, the Lander brothers did not fully approve of the king's cosmopolitan collection. 'With a great number of chubby-faced angels administering to [Virgin Mary …] the whole group [was] designed and executed in a very bad taste' (255-56). In a similar vein, Obi (King) Ossai of Aboh, in the north

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[60] Hickley, *An Account of the Operations on the Benin River*, pp. 6-7.

of the delta, surprised his British visitors with his European table manners. ‘King Obi sitting in the gun-room at breakfast, habited in his scarlet jacket, and loose flowing trousers of the same colour. He relished the fowl, rice, and coffee exceedingly, and handled his knife and fork as if he had been accustomed to them all his life’ (Allen and Thomas 1848, 134). Hence, offering cosmopolitan settings which were considered ‘clean’ in the eyes of British imperial agents was not an easy task.



Figure 6.3: Dining table set at the Nanna Living History Museum, Koko. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.

Nanna also invested a considerable amount of time and economic effort to live up to the role of cosmopolitan host. Echoes of European table manners can be found in the crystal glasses, silver trays, porcelain cups, cutlery and a soda dispenser in glass and silver that are now on display at the Nanna Living History Museum (see Fig. 6.3). However, given the fact that Itsekiri people, to this day, prefer eating their meals with their fingers, there is reason to presume that European cutlery, like, for example, European furniture in houses of African merchant elites at the Swahili

coast, was appreciated ‘more as show-pieces than for real [or daily] use’ (Presholdt 2008, 97). A museum label in Nanna’s former dining hall underlines this interpretation:

> Even though Nanna cherished family life and upheld them in his kind attitude towards them, he was equally conscious of his status, prestige and exclusiveness. He wanted others to recognize these and did not compromise his privacy. He needed to relate to his African and European friends in an atmosphere of intimacy where business and mundane ideas could be shared. In designing his house he provided for these relationships. He had a separate dinging apartment, table and exclusive sets of utensils and cutleries.

Hence, the care for relationships was based on the collecting and displaying of things and Nanna was an accomplished curator of both, things and relationships, as Lord Lugard’s visit to his palace (discussed in chapter 2 and at the beginning of this chapter) testified to.

The interview partners for our film and the written sources have been unclear about what items of Nanna’s cherished collection survived the Ebrohimi War (most probably via evacuation) and his twelve years in exile and what things he acquired after his return to the Niger Delta. Though, the wealth of things currently in the collection of the Nanna Living History Museum impressively testifies to Nanna’s ability to tie in with his previous commercial success.

A key figure in Nanna’s return to the Niger Delta was his long-term British trading partner George W. Neville. Having worked as an agent of the African Steamship Company and later Liverpool’s Elder Dempster Company for twenty years, Neville had sought to found one of Nigeria’s first banks, the Bank of British West Africa, in 1894 (Fry 1976) – with Nanna’s investment. These plans had been faulted by the Ebrohimi War. In Nanna’s years in exile, Neville (1915) had launched several petitions at the British Parliament and Foreign Office to secure his release. As sign of gratitude for his support, Nanna not only sent Neville several portrait photos of himself, taken by the African photographer Albert Lutterodt and meant ‘to

be distributed to other friends'[61] who had supported his case. He also declared 8 August, the day that he touched Itsekiri soil again, 'Neville's Day' and named the first son born to him after his return from exile after his loyal British friend. Neville Nanna's namesake consequently sent a silver necklace with a pendant showing an elephant, the emblem of the Bank of British West Africa, as a gift and offered to bring the child to the UK to be educated there and prepared for a career at the bank. In the end, the gift's potential for 'future gains' (Guyer 2004) was not realised. Standing in front of three colour photographs of the necklace in a gold-coloured frame (see Fig. 6.4), Anthony Nanna explained to me that, after Nanna's death in 1916, his family decided against George Neville's offer, having grown 'too suspicious of British interests' in the colonial state. Yet, despite its unfulfilled potential, the family has not yet included the original necklace in the museum collection but has been retaining it as a personalised gift and treasured heirloom handed down through generations.

[61] Letter from Nanna Olomu to George W. Neville, Accra, 28 July 1906, Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies, Papers of John Holt & Company (Liverpool) Ltd., Mss.Afr. S: 1525, Box 7.



Figure 6.4: Three photos, two of them detailing the pendant, of George Neville's gift to Nanna's son born after his return from exile in 1910, currently on display at the Nanna Living History Museum. The labels detail the necklace's story and the gift exchange between Neville and Nanna or his son, respectively. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.

Despite George Neville's support, Nanna's ability to forge an economically successful position within the colonial state was not a pregiven. Several years after his return to the delta, Neville kept imploring the colonial government to restore Nanna's trading rights as oil merchant (Neville 2007 [1996]). Rather, Nanna's sustained prosperousness was based on his farsightedness. Based at Accra's Christianbourg Castle for his time in exile, he had realised the potential of the schools and workshops of the Basel Mission located there (Heuser 2016) and sent for ten of his sons and nephews to be educated at the mission. The pupils particularly excelled in carpentry and after their return home started a prospering furniture business with branches in Koko, Sapele, Aba and Port Harcourt. Their newly acquired skills also left their mark at Nanna's palace. They not only manufactured an elaborately lathed throne for Nanna (see Fig. 6.15) and seat for the *Olori-ebi*. Once the palace was finished, they also cut down the

Iroko tree that Nanna had been sitting under and surveying the construction work to make art-nouveau-inspired chairs and a dining table which Nanna used to host his guests at (see Fig. 6.3). Nigeria's 'longest, single wood bench', as it is described on the museum label, is also traced back to Nanna's foresight and his children's continued economic acumen.

The deposed Governor of the Benin River's ability to adapt to the ever-changing power relations at the coast, his collecting of foreign ideas, things and technologies as well as his continuous forging of relationships via gifts and the display of cosmopolitan hospitality or, more precisely, his care for or curation of relationships and things, underscores the ways in which African cosmopolitanism did not stop with direct colonisation. On the contrary, Nanna's eclectic collection, ranging from architectural designs to international luxury goods, testifies to his 'vision of globality' (Prestholdt 2008, 88) under at times violently changing conditions. Besides, the charisma that Nanna was able to re-accrue after his return from exile by founding a new town and re-amassing a collection of things and relationships predestined him for ancestorhood.

Caring. Tending to the Living and the Dead

As Itsekiri founder of Koko, Nanna Olomu's transition into ancestorhood transformed the building and its contents. The palace had not only been designed by Nanna and filled with his collection of translocal things and relationships manifested in them, thus oozing the charisma of its founder. Nanna's burial within the walls of the building also transformed the compound into an ancestral site which necessitated new forms of care. For Nanna's ten-day funeral in January 1917, his children manufactured an elaborately lathed four-poster bed with a catafalque decked out with sumptuous cloth, chiefly beads, staffs, sceptres, swords and Nanna's personalised hat (see Fig. 6.5). Some of these items, such as the hat, staffs and swords, can be found in the exhibition of the Nanna Living History Museum today. The

remnants of the funerary bed stand next to Nanna's gravesite in his former bedroom. Hence, the Itsekiri entrepreneur's body was merged with the soil and fabric of the building, insolubly tying them together. During Nanna's lifetime, the felling of the Iroko tree that Nanna had been sitting under during the construction works had had a similar effect. Imbued with sacred potential (see for example the sacred grove at the royal cemetery at Ijala, chapter 5), the manufacturing of furniture out of the Iroko tree had provided the extended family with materials to congregate, sit on and eat together. After Nanna's transition into ancestorhood it was the annual *ukueke*, the parading of Nanna's treasured possessions as heirlooms, and its transformation into *Okparan* that invited the founder of the town to join the living and congregate with them.

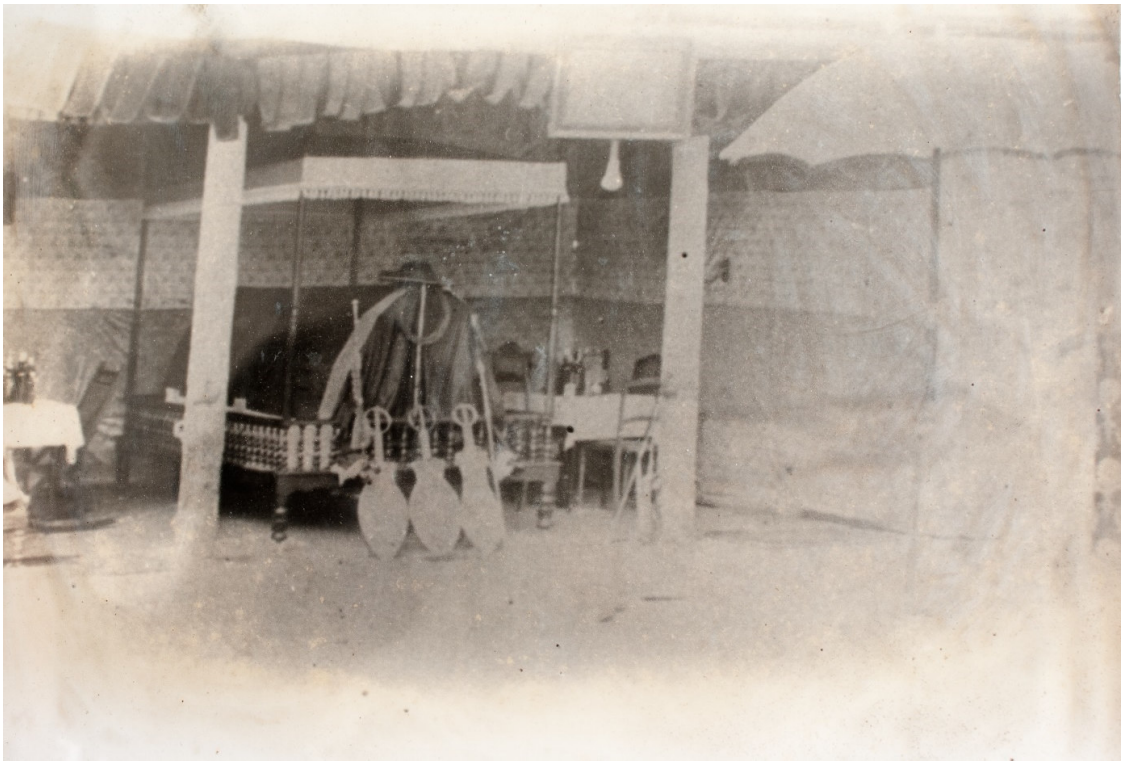


Figure 6.5: Photo taken by A. A. Thomason of Siluko, 1917. It shows Nanna's catafalque during his funeral or transition into ancestorhood in January 1917. Note the similarities between Nanna's catafalque and Olu Atuwatse II's in 2015 (discussed in chapter 5). They both consisted in a funerary chamber made out of cloth, a four-poster bed, elaborately draped textiles and personal things such as a headdress, beads, staffs, sceptres and swords. At Nanna's funeral, the two tables flanking the catafalque were reserved for the Olori-ebi *(living head of house) and* Okparan *(the ancestors), respectively. Photo: Nanna Living History Museum, Koko.*

While there are similar constellations of ancestors being buried within the family compound in the Kingdom of Warri, such as the ancestral homes that were renovated during Olu Atuwatse II's mourning period at Ode-Itsekiri, there are other forms of venerating the dead in the Niger Delta that combine gravesites with the display of heirlooms. The most thoroughly researched is the *Okpu* or ancestral shrines in the Kingdom of Nembe-Brass in the central delta. Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa (2001, vii) argues that the *Okpu* serves as a 'museum, meeting place for the living and place of communion with the dead' where things connected to the life of the founder of a town (or a prominent merchant or warrior), such as ritual things, imported luxury goods, personalised gifts, armaments and flags, are arranged around a platform (*Tanda*) representing the grave of the ancestor. Libations to the ancestor are poured in a hole on a specifically dedicated platform (*Ikpa*), while further libations holes on either side of the *Tanda* facilitate communications with additional ancestors who have not been physically buried at the *Okpu*. The rectangular buildings were formerly made up of mud walls and a thatched roof, consisting of an entrance hall and the main room of display. For the *Okpu* of King Francis Osamade Allagoa, Mini X (died 1967), new architectural materials such as cement and iron were introduced. Additional rooms for the hosting of guests or the accommodation of ritual specialists could also be added. Moreover, descendants might refurbish crumbling structures, 'since the condition of an *Okpu* could indicate the vitality of a lineage or of its political status in the community' (2-3), emphasising, similarly to the Itsekiri performance of *ukueke*, the display of accumulated wealth as sign of a family's transgenerational success.

The collections of things at the *Okpu* of prominent politicians, warriors and merchants mirror the socio-cultural upheavals which the Niger Delta elites were navigating in the nineteenth century. For Amanyanabo (King) Joshua Constantine Ockiya, Mingi VII (died 1879), who had accepted Samuel Ajayi Crowther's mission (the Church Missionary Society, see

Crowther and Taylor 1859, Page 1888, Epelle 1955, Ajayi 1963, Ajayi 1977) in his town of Ogbolomabiri in 1867, a 'comparatively austere okpu [was erected] indicating the conflicting demands of the king's traditional office, and his new role as patron of an alien religion' (Alagoa 2001, 55). Things for ancestral worship such as libation holes and bottles of gin sit next to Christian symbols such as a wreath of flowers in a glass casing and a Christian cross adorning the *Apụụn* (worm) or flag which trailed the Amanyanabo's war canoe. Moreover, Alagoa sees in the ritual things used for the upkeep of the *Opu Ọsaịn* shrine, which protected the populace from epidemics,

> material evidence of the hard decisions the king had to take to continue to serve the people through a time of transition, so that he […] himself could only take the final step of participation in the full sacraments of Christianity on his death bed. (53-55)

The navigating of changing alliances also manifested in the repainting of murals depicting flags which adorn the walls of several *Okpu*. The emblem of King Boy Amain's flag, for example, which celebrated his 'friendship' (46) with the Niger explorers John and Richard Lander in 1830 (cf. Apter 2005, 122-166) with the image of a crown over crossed Union Jacks, was changed into Nigerian flags once the country gained independence in 1960. Another 'innovation in tradition' (Alagoa 2001, 79) was the *Okpu* dedicated to a woman. In nineteenth-century Bassimbiri, Lady Owoiḅọ-Saịfịgha (date of birth and death not recorded), whose name meant 'a man does not commit adultery', gained enough wealth and enslaved people to launch a war canoe. Though the day she sought to put the war canoe into the water, the chiefs dragged it ashore, 'since it was anathema for a woman to become a war-canoe chief, *Ọmụngụ-arụ-alaḅọ'* (ibid.). In the end, she was permitted to feast the chiefs and launch the war canoe in the name of her brothers Iga and Opuene. Accordingly, her *Okpu* houses not only her grave but also those of her male siblings. A goat's skull on her *Ikpa* commemorates the ceremonies of launching the war canoe, *Ọmụngụ-arụ-saị*, and the hosting and feasting of chiefs, *Fịaịdẹ.* Yet, her *Ikpa* is dedicated to her and 'Mothers' more generally, emphasising

her female, reproductive qualities. Lady Saịfịgha's life and commemoration, thus, echo the limits to political power experienced by economically successful women in the nineteenth-century Niger Delta, similar to Princess Iye's impeded attempt to ascend the throne of Warri (chapter 4).

Hence, the display of things in the *Okpu* gives testimony to the successful self-realisation of male leaders and the ways in which they navigated the 'conflicting demands' (Alagoa 2001, 55) of imperial contact zones at the West African coast, particularly with regard to religious affiliation. Moreover, the condition of the building and its contents as well as the bottles of gin next to the *Ikpa*, understood as sign of recent communions with the ancestors, show not only the continued wealth of but also the amount of care by their descendants. While there are ritual specialists who guide the communication between the living and the dead, men and women of the extended family are equally allowed to give thanks to the ancestors or ask for their support in the present. Yet, there are rules of conduct with respect to female bodies which ban women from mounting the *Tanda* and prescribe the abstaining from sex for men. Caring for the dead and their things is thus a highly gendered process.

This also holds true for the care of ancestors and their things in the neighbouring Kingdom of New Calabar in the south of the delta where ancestral houses called *Ikpu* host not only items connected to the life of the ancestors but also an artistic representation of them called *ḍụẹịn fụḅara* or 'foreheads of the dead' (Barley 1988). The *ḍụẹịn fụḅara* consist of a rectangular screen with carved wooden figures depicting a leading merchant of the kingdom either in their cosmopolitan dress or their *Ekine* masquerade (a society, inter alia, regulating trade at the coast, see Horton 1963) with their retinue (see Fig. 6.6). While women perform annual ceremonies of care for the deceased (Daly 1990), it is men who tend to the displays more regularly. In 1916, chiefs of the Kalabari towns of Abonema and Bakana gave eleven *ḍụẹịn fụḅara* to the colonial officer and ethnographer P. Amaury Talbot (1916). This form of

disposal was an alternative way to destroying them, signalling their conversion to Christianity (Horton 1970, Barley 1987).[62] Yet, rivalling chiefs of the Kalabari city of Buguma retained their 'foreheads of the ancestors' (Jones 2000) and *ḍụẹịn fụḅara* are being created to this day (Cosgrove 2019), commemorating the life and achievement of prominent leaders. It is this continued care for the ancestors, in the form of displaying their collection of things and translocal relationships, or, in the case of *ḍụẹịn fụḅara*, creating images of their cosmopolitan success, as well as ritual forms of communicating with them, that make the *Ikpu* in New Calabar and the *Okpu* in Nembe-Brass 'living institutions' (Alagoa 2001, 2).



Figure 6.6: One of the ḍụẹịn fụḅara *that chiefs of Abonema and Bakana gave to P. Amaury Talbot in 1915/16. It shows an eminent merchant as member of the Ekine society, wearing the headdress of the* Alagba *masquerade and holding a paddle and carved tusk as emblems of his office. He is flanked by his retinue who wear European top hats with the feather of the vulturine fish eagle, signifying membership of the* Ekine *society. The figures in the back probably depict bonded men. Moreover, the screen is framed with stylised cowrie shells, adding to the symbolic display of wealth. The ancestral screen was created by artists of the Pokia family of Ifoko (Fouché, Fouchea) at New Calabar before 1915 (Barley 1988, 70). Inventory number: 1916.45.184. Photo: Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford. http://objects.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/PRMUID23218.html*

The title of the Nanna Living History Museum also hints at this form of care, acknowledging the ongoing tending to Nanna as ancestor and to his material legacy. Before its conversion into a national monument, this care included not only the performance of *ukueke* and its

[62] Another reading of Talbot's accounts suggest that people adhering to ancestral faith sought to rescue the ancestral screens from the attempted iconoclasm of the Kalabari Christian priest Garrick Braide (Kreamer 1989).

transformation into *Okparan* or, in other words, the material and performative celebration of Nanna's cosmopolitan achievements and his invitation into the midst of his descendants, but also the renovation of the building. In 1949, Nanna's first-born son and successor Chief Johnson Nanna replaced the inner mud-built wall with burnt bricks and mortar and repainted it, rebuilt the courtyard pavement with concrete cement and added a porch at the entrance of the house. In 1974, after the chief's death, another renovation took place funded by his surviving children and grandchildren who exchanged the windows and substituted the thatched roof with corrugated iron sheets, thus showcasing the family's ability to preserve and enhance Nanna's material legacy according to the architectural trends of the time (Akinsete, Akanbiemu, and Eboreime 1981, 24-25). A similar notion of transgenerationally accumulated wealth as form of care can be found in the Nanna family's continued collecting efforts. International luxury goods such as half-moon-shaped bowls adorned with flower patterns from the centenary edition (1814–1914) of Hutschenreuther, a porcelain manufacturer from Bavaria, Germany, hint at the growth of the collection in the twentieth century. Though, the collection was neither accessible nor handled by all members of the household. As Johnson's son Olayemi Johnson Nanna explained to me, Nanna's collection of translocal things was not used for daily life, but stored in cupboards, only to be taken out to be cleaned and displayed when receiving important guests. Moreover, additions to the collection were used during the annual performance of *Okparan*, showcasing the family's continued material success to the living and the dead. Thus, renovating, collecting and communicating with the ancestor were intrinsically intertwined forms of care.

Another aspect that Niger Delta examples of doing museums such as the *Okpu*, the *Ikpu* and the Nanna family compound (before its conversion into a national monument) share is their limited access. As Kristina Kreps (2003a, b, 2006) has highlighted for shrines and other buildings for housing treasured possessions, such as rice barns in Indonesia, the restricted

access to museum-like buildings according to gender, age, kin and class is a central characteristic that differentiates them from the European idea of public museums.[63] The sacred potential of things necessitates forms of care which restrict not only the access to but also the representation of them. Accordingly, Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa (2001) did not use photographs of the interior of the *Okpu* for his publication but used drawings by his research assistants instead, thereby denying the reader the indexical effect of photography as realistic window or access to the ancestral displays (for a discussion of the 'reality effect' of photography see Barthes 1993, Gunning 2004). Similar deliberations might have also accompanied the discussions amongst members of the Nanna family before they handed the building and its contents over to the NCMM in the late 1970s. J.O.S. Ayomike, married to one of Nanna Olomu's granddaughters, Utsaghan Ayomike, and Commissioner for Information, Culture and Sports in Bendel State (since 1991 Delta and Edo States) answered a call of the NCMM to identify sites of national cultural interest by nominating the Nanna family compound. Yet, according to Olayemi Johnson Nanna, the family was divided about making their private collection public. This not only meant surrendering their principal role as caretakers of Nanna's material legacy to the federal government. What if the sacred potential of the family compound was no longer cared for? Finally, the visit of a high-ranking representative of the Bendel State military government to Koko removed the family's doubts. He saluted in front of Nanna's grave, acknowledging the sanctity of the building as ancestral site. As a result, the heritagisation or canonising (Assmann 2008, Meyer and de Witte 2013) of Nanna's family compound by the Nigerian state was able to begin.

[63] That is not to say that Western-type museums, although thought of as public institutions, do not have access restrictions. European forms of conservation and entry fees *de facto* circumscribe the access to collections and their displays. (see Karp et al. 2006)



Figure 6.7: Onime Wilson, Curator of the Nanna Living History Museum, holding Nanna's hat in front of his throne which his Accra-trained children manufactured for him. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.

Can(n)onising. Negotiating Distance and Proximity in the Nigerian Postcolony

The conversion of Nanna's palace into a national monument in 1979 and into a national museum in 1996 was accompanied by intense negotiations about the prerogative of interpretation and care of things past. It necessitated various strategies of navigating distance and proximity between the Nanna family, the changing regional and federal governments and the Itsekiri royal court. Initially, J.O.S. Ayomike's advocacy from within the Bendel State Government speeded up the heritagisation, understood as the aesthetic and politically charged 'selection of certain cultural forms' (Meyer and de Witte 2013, 276) to 'keep the past present' (Assmann 2008, 98). Though, it was not only the state but also the Nanna family who decided on the selection of cultural forms. Two years after the official acknowledgement of the family compound as national heritage, the Benin National Museum (then part of Bendel State) published a catalogue of *The Treasures of Chief Nanna of Itsekiri* (Akinsete, Akanbiemu, and

Eboreime 1981), which, at this point in time, were displayed in Nanna's former reception hall. The curators Bayo Akinsete, Martins Akanbiemu and Joe Eboreime condensed the oral histories of members of the Nanna family to narrate the history of the town, the building and its collection. Despite the family's close collaboration and the NCMM's expressed aim to shed colonial ways of doing museums, the book heavily borrowed from early twentieth-century ethnographic writing. Beginning with a section on 'Ethnography', the curators explained who the Itsekiri and, particularly, the Nanna family, were, where they were located and what their current economic occupation was, i.e. hosting the Total Oil Company and the National Fishing Company. Besides, they deviated from the NCMM's goal to desacralise material and performative forms of heritage. In 'Religious Beliefs', they outlined the sacred landscape that Nanna had erected after his return from exile, including a shrine set up for the supreme deity *Oritse* in the form of an over four meter high, chalked staff on top of which was a wooden cross decorated with strings of cowries. Nanna had also set up shrines to the water goddess *Umale Okun* (called *Oriomi* in Koko) to fend off war, disease and epidemics as well as to the water spirit *Baba Omi* ('father in water') to pray for rain and his servant *Osan Yiromi*, a 'war god, repellent of evil spirits, means of social control' (9). He had also translated two central deities from Ebrohimi to Koko, *Oghoyebite*, a 'powerful oracle where evil, witchcraft and any form of negative influence are detected even before they are hatched' and *Arunbalahun*, 'another powerful oracle introduced by Abiwenanye, one of Olomu's sisters' (ibid.). What the catalogue did not expressly mention (besides the description of the *Oritse* staff's shape of a cross) was the fact that Nanna had converted to Christianity during his time in exile. The reasons for the conversion were not related to me. Had it been a strategy to gain access to the Basel Mission's schools for his children, like other people at the Gold Coast, today's Ghana, had done (see Meyer 1999b)? Or had it been an acknowledgement that Ebrohimi's deities had not been able to protect Nanna and his family from the invading Royal

Navy? The deities' re-installation at Koko gives reason to doubt the latter interpretation. Moreover, the catalogue did not depict Nanna's bible that today lies next to his gravesite, accompanied by an Ifa divination device, reconciling Nanna's religious affiliations. The initial omission of the bible might have been a decision made not only by the NCMM's curators but also by the family caretakers. They retained things of highly personal significance with respect to religious practice, like the bible, and with respect to translocal relationships, like Nanna Neville's necklace, while accepting the heritagisation of their compound as sign of national recognition. The surrendering of things into the care of the government as well as their retention were, thus, a finely balanced way of managing relationships with the state.

These negotiations of proximity and distance took place on both sides, particularly since Nanna Olomu's cosmopolitan legacy posed interpretative challenges with regard to Nigeria's cultural politics in the post-civil-war, oil boom era. On the one hand, the family compound offered the opportunity to hark back to a time prior to or during early colonisation, highlighting Nanna's anticolonial fight against the British and regained wealth after his return from exile. On the other hand, Nanna's cosmopolitan way of life, which embraced international goods, ideas and technologies, ran counter to the NCMM's policy of 'indigenisation', which favoured local, 'African' cultural forms over international products (Plankensteiner and Adediran 2010). One of the fashion items which materialised the ideal of indigenisation was the *Agbada* (in Yorùbá) or *Asu Etu* (in Itsekiri), a richly embroidered, hand-woven, wide-sleeved robe, originating from the Hausa in the North of the country, which was worn by male elites of every major ethnic group of the young nation-state (Apter 2005, 102-3). Accordingly, for the catalogue, the curators picked Nanna's 'highly treasured' (26) *Asu Etu* from the merchant's extensive collection of cosmopolitan dress to showcase his taste in fashion and, I would argue, to tie it in with the national dress of their time. Ironically,

they used the British banker George Neville to convey the message of indigenisation connected to the *Asu Etu*:

> Neville, Nanna's friend considered the traditional costume beautiful and encouraged Africans to use them because 'all European ideas and customs are not good for the African'. Nevertheless there were certain goods that were good and Nanna, because of his unique position imported a number of these. (ibid.)

Hence, Nanna Olomu's collection of translocal things defied dichotomous categorisation of 'African' and 'European' not only during colonisation but also in the early postcolony. During colonisation, African cosmopolitan elites could not be 'clean' (Newell 2008) enough, that is consume enough Western goods, in the eyes of many colonisers. Looking back on African cosmopolitan lifestyles from the vantage point of postcolonial cultural politics, they were considered too 'clean', defying notions of a proto-African, precolonial past untouched by international influences (see also the revaluation of African cosmopolitan fashion in John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's *All for Oil* (2000), chapter 4).

Andrew Apter (2005) has explicated the deeply ambivalent relationship of Nigerian heritage practitioners to colonial and precolonial pasts at the height of Nigeria's oil boom. Even though the organisers of FESTAC'77 sought to 'exorcise the ghosts of colonial domination' (16), they employed colonial ways of categorising and displaying things and choreographing people to do so. This ambivalence was also reflected in the curatorial choices of *The Treasures of Chief Nanna of Itsekiri* (Akinsete, Akanbiemu, and Eboreime 1981). Despite the non-binary and transgressive quality of Nanna's cosmopolitan collection, the curators sought to establish a categorising system, grouping things according to types such as 'furniture', 'regalia', 'lamps', 'swords', 'kitchen utensils', 'documents' and, finally, 'women'. The list reads like an inventory of Nanna's and, consequently, the NCMM's possessions, mirroring the need of the museum – in its European understanding – to categorise and fix their meaning (Gosden and Knowles 2001, Bennett 2004) and, thus, to transform things from manifestations

of dynamic relationships to objects. Such objectifying tendencies also characterised the curators' portrayal of 'women'. In three lines, they were described as having 'practiced weaving, trading and farming. They were very industrious and were of immense assistance to their husbands. Nanna's wives, however, had servants who administered to them' (Akinsete, Akanbiemu, and Eboreime 1981, 33). A half-length portrait of 'Nanna's Last Wife', whose caption omitted her name, underlined the de-individualising and objectifying process.

The NCMM's unease with Nanna's cosmopolitan lifestyle sheds light on a fundamental challenge of re-narrating precolonial pasts in early postcolonial Nigeria. What concepts and methodologies did it take to narrate the past not from colonial or European but from African viewpoints? And how could precolonial pasts be reconciled with the politics of postcolonial nation-building? Methodologically, scholars of the Ibadan School of History like Obaro Ikime (1968, 1969), who authored two in-depth studies of Nanna's life and time, challenged written sources of colonial archives by 'reading them against and along the grain'(Stoler 2009) and matching them up with oral histories. This approach helped to highlight the correspondences between late pre-colonial and early postcolonial times on a political and economic level. The anti-colonial 'resistance movement against European economic exploitation and political domination' in the nineteenth century was construed as 'the beginnings of nationalist struggles in Africa' (Ikime 1968, vii). Yet, on a cultural level, the material traces of anti-colonial fighters in the Niger Delta such as Nanna Olomu and Jaja of Opobo defied binary categories. What might have looked European and, according to the nationalist rhetoric of the 1970s, colonial, might in fact have been precolonial and connected to anti-colonial struggles.



Figure 6.8: The Old Residency in Old Calabar, renovated from 1981 to 1986 and opened as a museum for 'colonial history' in the same year. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.

The aesthetic proximity between African cosmopolitan and colonial material culture also posed challenges to a museum project at the other end of the Niger Delta, the Old Residency in Old Calabar, initiated by the NCMM in the year of the publication of *The Treasures of Chief Nanna of Itsekiri* (1981). While the building looked very much like the prefabricated houses that Efik merchants had imported from Liverpool since the beginning of the nineteenth century (see Fig. 6.9), it had been built as colonial administrative headquarters in 1884 (see Fig. 6.8). Although the exhibition was based on the close collaboration with prominent Efik families and comprised some of their family heirlooms such as bells and cannons, it did not manage to overcome Eurocentric approaches to narrating precolonial and colonial pasts as well as the struggle for independence. Not only did the exhibition use early twentieth-century ethnographic categories such as 'Education and Literacy', 'Efik Costume and Manners' and 'Traditional Paraphernalia and Objects of Prestige' (Eyo 1986) to give insights into the time before direct colonisation, thus reiterating the museum's need of categorisation and objectification. It also narrated Old Calabar's 'colonial history' within the very halls which testified to Britain's colonial success, making colonisation into an inevitable, teleological

process. Most importantly with respect to the cultural politics of nation-building in the 1970s and early 1980s, it highlighted the proximity between African cosmopolitan and European colonial things and, particularly, architectural styles. The Old Residency housed etchings of mansions of Efik elites, such as King Eyamba's 'Iron Palace', a steel-frame construction imported from Liverpool in 1843 incorporating neo-classicist castellations, or the architectural model of Chief Ekpo Bassey's likewise imported residency from 1898 (see Fig. 6.9). It was not only the spatial but also the temporal arrangement of the presentation that created an uncomfortable closeness between African cosmopolitan and colonial architectures. Subsuming the former within the colonial building of the Old Residency collapsed precolonial, African wealth and sovereignty and colonial, administrative subjugation into one. Hence, without knowing the history of a building in Old Calabar, a prefabricated, imported house could reference both, precolonial and colonial times, and thus, play havoc with the temporality-emplacement (or chronotope) of the beholder.



Figure 6.9: Residence of Chief Ekpo Bassey in Old Calabar, imported from Liverpool in the late nineteenth century. Photo: Muyiwa Osifuye, National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 2003.

Another uncomfortably close relationship between African cosmopolitanism and the globalising and imperialising world did not manifested in the Old Residency but in the Calabar Slave History Museum. The museum was established at Marina Beach in three hundred metres distance from the Old Residency in 2007, the year of the two hundredth anniversary of Britain's abolition of the transatlantic trade in enslaved people (Richardson, Tibbles, and Schwarz 2007, Sherwood 2007, McAleer 2013). Trying to tap into the growing 'roots-tourism' of African-American and Afro-Caribbean people in West Africa, particularly in Ghana (Schramm 2007, 2010), the NCMM opened a museum destined to be included in UNESCO's *Slave Routes Project*. As 'museum of conscience' (Imbua 2013), its aim was to convey the traumatic experiences of enslavement from the hinterland to a warehouse at Marina Beach, a 'point of no return' at the Calabar River which served as the museum building, to the exploitation in the Americas and enslaved people's resistance to it. The displays consisted of contemporary murals depicting the route of enslavement as well as historical documents and the material culture of the trade, such as chains, currencies and goods exchanged for enslaved people. The exhibition texts framed these goods either as 'frivolous' and 'worthless', in the case of beads and mirrors, or socially and culturally 'destructive' (in Imbua 2013, 127-8), in the case of gin, firearms, pewter basins and clothes, thus using the rhetoric of cultural imperialism to discredit the material culture on which African cosmopolitanism in Old Calabar and throughout the Niger Delta had been founded on. However, the exhibition's narrative failed to identify the people who consumed these goods and thus created what David Lishilinimle Imbua (2013) has identified as the 'conspicuous gap in the role played by the Efik chiefs, kings and other members of the indigenous ruling houses in the slave trade' (131). Imbua has raised awareness of the Efik elites' repeated attempts to resume the trade in enslaved people long after its official abolition in 1807 and the establishment of extensive palm plantations where bonded men and women

toiled to fuel the growing palm oil trade. He severely criticised the NCMM's curators responsible for the Calabar Slave History Museum for 'externalising [enslavement] as only a European enterprise' (134) and raised the 'moral question about the Efik agency' (113) within the transatlantic trade. In other words, the displays of material culture of transatlantic encounters at the Old Residency and the Calabar Slave History Museum revealed its deeply unstable meanings, despite the museums' attempts to fix them. Material remnants of African cosmopolitan lifestyles had been either framed as 'objects of prestige' and precolonial wealth or as 'worthless' and 'destructive' gimmicks. Neither of the exhibitions, though, fulfilled the potential that David Imbua has seen in them, that is telling a story which 'could serve as a deterrent to greed and mischief in [past] and […] present time[s]' (134).

In 1979, the meaning of Nanna's cosmopolitan collection oscillated between ancestral heirlooms and evidence of anti-colonial struggle. Though, by nationalising the Nanna family compound, the NCMM stopped short of framing Nanna as 'male patriarchal leader of legendary renown' (Jeyifo 2004, xvi), as did the theatre plays at the time of the oil boom (see chapter 4). He was more humbly presented as an 'eminent Nigerian of the nineteenth century, manifest[ing] … the ability of [male] Africans to organize their commercial and political lives' (Akinsete, Akanbiemu, and Eboreime 1981, 15). The notion of leadership would become more pronounced fifteen years later at the occasion of the centenary of the British/Ebrohimi War.



Figure 6.40: Photo taken by S. S. Classical Fotos, Koko. Flag mounted on one of the closed windows of The Nanna Living History Museum, welcoming Group Captain Ibrahim Kefas, Military Administrator of Delta State, to the centenary celebrations of the Ebrohimi War, 1996. Photo: Nanna Living History Museum, Koko.

The centenary put the Nanna family compound not only in the focus of the national government, at this point in time Sani Abacha's military regime, but also of the Itsekiri royal house, necessitating new strategies of negotiating proximity and distance by all interest groups involved. Until 1994, the royal court of Warri had shown conspicuously little interest in the Nanna family compound despite its potential national reach. One reason could have been that the celebration of Nanna as anti-colonial hero and leader of the Itsekiri at the brink of colonisation inadvertently highlighted the period of the interregnum and hence undermined the sacred royal lineage that the royal family had re-established in 1936. Another reason could have been a political strife within the kingdom. In 1964, Festus Okotie-Eboh, Minister of Finance in the Federal Cabinet of Nigeria's First Republic and Itsekiri Chief, had led a movement to depose Olu Erejuwa II, who had been sitting on the throne of Warri since 1951. Amongst Chief Okotie-Eboh's supporters was Newton Nanna, then head of the Nanna family

and Itsekiri Divisional Council leader of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). Consequently, Newton Nanna was appointed as one of the four Regents over Itsekiriland until Erejuwa II's rival, Akengbuwa II, was installed in late 1965. The military government which ended Nigeria's First Republic by assassinating, amongst other members of Cabinet, Chief Okotie-Eboh, brought Olu Erejuwa II back from exile and onto the throne of Warri in 1966 (Ikime 1968, 184). Hence, there was a split in the political landscape of Itsekiriland and both divisions had been flexing their muscles. By taking on the position of Regent, Newton Nanna and, by extension, the Nanna and, thus, Ologbotsere (Itsekiri Prime Minister) family had proven, once more, their interest in and capability of leading the political affairs in the Itsekiri Kingdom. By taking on the support of the military government to secure his position, Olu Erejuwa II and, by extension, the royal family had proven their skills in managing relationship with Nigeria's military regime.

Despite this internal strife, Olu Erejuwa II's successor, Olu Atuwatse II, supported the centenary commemoration at Koko not only in cash and kind but also with his presence. To understand the king's possible interest in participating in the commemoration, it is necessary to understand the political upheavals which had been shaking the country from 1993 onwards. Major-General Sani Abacha had toppled the democratically elected government and established a brutal military rule under which large parts of the population, in particular in the east of the Niger Delta, suffered. There, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), who had been fighting against environmental destruction and landgrabs by international oil companies, had been violently crushed. In 1994, the year of the Ebrohimi War centenary, their intellectual leader Ken Saro-Wiwa (1992) and eight other environmental and pro-democratic activities had been executed by the military regime (Watts 2003, Apter 2005). With their 'necropolitics', understood as 'subjugation of life to the power of death' (Mbembe 2003) or, in other words, the brutal force with which the military imposed the

interests of the national government and of international oil companies like Shell in the Niger Delta, the government had forfeited its legitimacy. But it was not only the state who had an image problem. Even though allegations that international oil companies had supported, if not ordered the clampdown of environmental activists in Ogoniland had not been proven, journalists and activists around the world called for a global boycott of Shell (Kupfer 1996). In the eyes of the Olu of Warri, this political economic situation might have not only threatened his relationship with the national government. It also endangered the extraction of Itsekiriland's main source of revenue, oil. Hence, the centenary commemoration of Nanna's fight against the British was a welcome opportunity to manage those relationships.



Figure 6.51: Photo taken by S. S. Classical Fotos, Koko. Ogiame Atuwatse II in conversation with Captain Ibrahim Kefas, military administrator of Delta State, at the Commemoration of British/Nanna War Centenary, 1996. Photo: Nanna Living History Museum.

Two years after the actual date, Olu Atuwatse II and his retinue visited Koko to officially host the *Centenary Commemoration of the British/Nanna Ebrohimi War 1894* (Ayomike 2007 [1996]-a). The Olu, sitting in Nanna Olomu's reception hall on the royal throne which he had

brought with him from Warri, officially welcomed national and international guests, foremost among them the representative of Nigeria's military Head of State to the commemorative festivities. Once Group Captain Ibrahim Kefas, Military Administrator of Delta State, took a seat next to him, the governmental and royal heads looked on as the commemorations unfolded (see Fig. 6.11). There was not only the performance of *ukueke* and of dance groups 'immortalising' (Ayomike 2007 [1996]-b) Nanna with their songs. There was also the unveiling of a more than life-size bronze statue of Nanna in front of the family compound, sponsored by Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd (see Fig. 6.12), and the opening of a new exhibition, sponsored by Chevron Nigeria Ltd. Moreover, Elf Nigeria Ltd had supported that year's 'Neville's Day' and Total Nigeria Ltd 'had also given money' (Ayomike 1995, 4). While the oil companies probably sought to use the cultural sponsorship to 'greenwash' (Miller 2017) their image of blood and pollution they were associated with, the commemorative event gave the Olu of Warri the opportunity to showcase his good relationships with both, the oil companies and the national government. The choreography that the king had set up not only allowed him to associate himself with the new military regime, similar to the way in which Nanna had taken the signing of Protection Treaties with neighbouring Ijo communities as an opportunity to physically side with the British and thus claim political power in 1884 (see chapter 2). By officially welcoming the national and international guests within Nanna's compound, Atuwatse II had also taken over the role of cosmopolitan host from the Nanna family, relegating them to the margins within their own house and thus demonstrating his supremacy in the kingdom.



Figure 6.12; Bronze statue of Nanna Olomu in front of the Nanna Living History Museum. Photo: Muyiwa Osifuye, National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 2003.

Or was it the opposite? Did the centenary commemoration rather demonstrate the Nanna family's ability to establish translocal relationships to great economic and political effect? For example, the Koko Patriotic Club had designed a flag to welcome the military administrator of Delta State, Captain Kefas, featuring a sparkling red heart in the upper left-hand corner (see Fig. 6.10). The display of the flag on the outside wall of the Nanna family compound could have been an attempt to attract and bind people similar to the ways in which Olu Erejuwa I had used flags to reel in Jean-François Landolphe, the French trader in enslaved people, into his sphere of influence two hundred years earlier (see chapter 2). Besides, was it not the ancestral founder of Koko who had gained another layer of 'immortality' with his more than life-size portrayal in bronze? At the very least, the statue materialised the Nanna family's ongoing ability to manage successful relationships with the foremost trading partners in Nigeria's political economy of oil.

And what could the military government have gained from supporting the centenary commemoration? The bloody suppression of environmental and pro-democratic movements in Nigeria had not only damaged the reputation of international oil companies active in the Niger Delta. It had also tarnished the military government's image within the country and Nigeria's international political standing, leading, amongst other things, the Commonwealth of Nations, consisting of the United Kingdom and its former colonies, to suspend Nigeria's membership (Falola and Heaton 2008, 229-235). The government's op-ed column in the newspaper *The Pointer* got straight to the heart of the matter.

> The centenary was itself a celebration of patriotism and came at a time when Nigerians needed more doses of that potent political injection to rekindle the love for their country [and] to re-register the unalloyed loyalty and support of the people of Delta State. […] The Head of State, Gen. Sani Abacha […] said Nanna was a reminder to the need for loyality (sic) and patriotism […] In the same vein Government House Diary recommends the bravery, patriotism and sacrifice made by […] Gen. Sani Abacha for doggedly nurturing and preserving the Nigerian nation and insisting that Nigerians, nay Africans have the capacity for taking their economic and political destiny in their own hands. (Nwabueze 1996)

The military regime not only equalled Nanna's and Abacha's 'brands of patriotism'. It also emphasised Nanna's willingness to use military force to protect his economic and political interests, quoting, at length, George Neville's account of Nanna's fight against the British.

> Nanna could put into the field 20,000 war-boys and equip and despatch 100 war-canoes at the shortest notice. Each of those canoes had 36 paddlers, five coxswains and a crew of 38. It carried two large cannons, on at each end, 24 blunderbusses, besides a large number of flint-lock guns and machetes. (ibid.)

This account of Nanna's military might was mirrored in the catalogue that J.O.S. Ayomike, backed by a 43-member-strong British/Ebrohimi War 1894 Planning Committee, had published on the occasion.

> The war dragged on for three months. Ebrohimi fell to the invading British forces on September 25th, 1894, at 9,00 a.m., but not before the fiercest resistance two days earlier from Nanna's strongly determined men, who fired back 90 cannon shots in 55 minutes. (Omatsola 2007 [1996], 13)

The Nanna family's and the military regime's common emphasis on Nanna Olomu's military strength could have pointed to a meeting of minds. However, J.O.S. Ayomike's curatorial choices for the exhibition catalogue suggested otherwise. He had announced a competition for best newspaper article on the topic of the centenary and had awarded the winner a prominent spot in the first pages of the catalogue. Following portraits of General Sani Abacha, Captain Ibrahim Kefas and Olu Atuwatse II, the reprint of an anonymised article in the Port Harcourt-based *Daily Sunray*, outlined the reasons why Nigerians should 'celebrate […] those persons who stood between colonial forces and the defence of inherited political and socio-cultural systems' (N. N. 2007 [1996]). The anti-colonial struggle of Nanna Olomu and his contemporaries such as Jaja of Opobo and Oba Ovonramwen of Benin

> invited the present generation of leaders to a reappraisal of the extent they have followed the trail blazed by these past heroes and probably how much they have added to or diminished the quality of leadership. […] Nobody claims that the past heroes had no blemishes. They had. But they also had certain qualities that recommend them to prosperity. The present generation of leadership has a duty to demonstrate through their official policies and especially, in their lifestyle, that they can be heroes. So far there is nothing on ground [sic] that tends toward that direction. Still, it is never too late to learn the lessons of history. (ibid.)

In the light of this harsh verdict on governmental and traditional leadership, it is hard to ascertain who of the interest groups – the military regime, the Itsekiri royal house or the Nanna family – was able to pull the meshwork of political-economic relationships in mid-1990s Nigeria in their favour. The choreography of bodies (the military administrator's, the Olu's and Nanna's – as ancestor merged with the building and as part of *ukueke*) and things (the royal throne, the flag welcoming the military administrator and the bronze statue) at the Nanna family compound became a powerful display of and tussle over translocal relationships. By relating to Nanna either as 'patriotic' anti-colonial hero, representative of Itsekiri perseverance or ancestor, they all sought to stake a claim not only on the past but also in the present.



Figure 6.63: Photo probably taken by J.A. Green Chief. Nanna Olomu, his wife Meme and his sons Johnson and John Spiff, surrounded by colonial officers on deck of SS Batana*, Bonny River, 1894. Inventory number: UAC/1/11/10/3/2/1. Photo: Unilever Collections, Unilever Art, Archives and Records Management, Port Sunlight.*

The year after this elaborate tussle over the authority of relating to the past, interethnic conflicts, sparked by the military government's support of Itsekiri claims on the location of the governmental headquarters in Warri (the so called 'Warri Crisis', see chapter 3), spread from the capital of Delta State to the creeks. As a consequence, Nanna's collection was moved to the Benin National Museum into safety, lingering there for six years before they were able to return to Koko. The reopening of the museum in 2006 was accompanied by a new name – The Nanna Living History Museum – and was again curated by J.O.S. Ayomike. Since his retirement from governmental service in 1985, Ayomike had dedicated his work to the historiography of the Itsekiri Kingdom and the care of Nanna Olomu's legacy. He had travelled to The National Archives in London to look through and copy the records that the colonial administration had cumulated about the fight against and trial of the last Governor of the Benin River and had ceremonially handed the copies over to Joe Eboreime, curator at the

Benin National Museum and representative of the NCMM, in the 1990s. Ayomike had also extended his collecting activities to local forms of storing past experiences, such as songs commemorating pivotal events in Nanna's life, starting with the intrigues that led to Consular Annesley breaking Nanna's staff of office in 1891 (Ayomike 2007 [1996]-b, 37).

Eye guo, eye guo Oluwa! Oyibo dede gba wa, oko uwa waghan gba wa; Beresibe gba wa, oko uja won gba wa. Eye guo, eye guo, Oluwa!	The world is finished, O ye wealthy! When all Europeans came, they brought boats full of wealth, but when Bleasby came, he brought war boats. The world is finished, O ye wealthy!

As Ayomike explained in the exhibition catalogue, Prince Ugbonna of Usele composed this *Eguen* dance to mark the beginning of the end of Itsekiri sovereignty. Mr. Bleasby, the agent of the trading factory Fort Douglas at the Benin River, had pressed Consul Annesley to break Nanna's monopoly in trade and open the hinterland markets, an accusation, as Ayomike pointed out, that Nanna vehemently denied in a letter to The Marquis of Salisbury at the Foreign Office – to no avail. Another crucial and crushing moment was immortalised by Mr. Ogbugbu, the husband of Nanna's half-sister Egho, who composed the lines below 'on the moment's impulse' (36) when he spotted the last Governor of the Benin River on board SS *Batana* in 1894. Having given himself up to the colonial authorities in Lagos, Nanna was being shipped for trial to Old Calabar. On its way there, the ship travelled upstream the Benin River to parade Nanna in front of the gathering crowds to not only verify the identity of the deposed Governor but also to showcase Nanna's allies their ultimate defeat (see Fig. 6.13).

E ja ghi gho! Owo to re okun E ja ghi gho! Eje emi ghi gho! Ejelegboman! Eja ghi gho, E je emi ghi gho; do!	He can't be looked at! The setting sun can no longer be looked at. Ejelegboman (Nanna's appellation) can no longer be looked at!

On his return from exile, Nanna himself made sure that people did not forget who assisted the British in conquering him. His *Oluomi* dance song most probably addressed Dogho Numa and served as a warning about Itsekiri collaboration with the colonial state (37).

Aghan gba Oyibo wa, Aghan gba Oyibo wa teri emi; Otsemi, Otse aghan Itsekiri gba Oyibo wa teri emi	You brought the British, you brought the British because of me. It has affected me adversely and it has affected you adversely, Itsekiri brought the British because of me.

Finally, in the *Ukpukpe* martial funerary dance, Nanna was 'immortalised' (36) for his anti-colonial struggle. The song has been danced throughout Itsekiriland and parts of Urhoboland to this day and, thus, also resounded on the first day of Olu Atuwatse II's funeral.

Nanna O, Nanna! Nanna ghele agbamudu gbe Oyibo.	Nanna, oh Nanna! Nanna, You were stout-hearted against the British.

Hence, by bringing together colonial archival and African performative material to 'idolise and immortalise' (ibid.) Nanna, Ayomike had considerably contributed to the collection and care of Nanna's material legacy.

When our film team approached the eminent octogenarian in 2015, Ayomike supported our interest in the Nanna Living History Museum and organised a guided tour by the current family custodian of the museum, Anthony Nanna. According to Ayomike, the exhibition had not undergone changes since its reopening in 2006 and Anthony Nanna's tour highlighted not only the indexical and symbolic means by which the exhibition celebrated Nanna's cosmopolitan life but also the multisensory ways in which the family still related to Nanna's collection.



Figure 6.74: Anthony Nanna explaining to me the friendship between Nanna Olomu and George Neville at Neville's Hall, the Nanna Living History Museum, Koko. Nanna's portrait and the group portrait of his sons and nephews were probably taken by Albert Lutterodt, Accra, today's Ghana, before 1906 (see Figure 6.4). Photo: Rex Clarke and Jakpa Gbubemi, 2015.

First, Anthony Nanna drew our attention to Nanna's mastering of translocal relationships. He introduced us to Nanna's former reception hall, named after his 'bosom friend' George Neville. *Neville's Hall* housed the museum library, photo albums of past events such as the centenary commemoration and the archival copies from The National Archives in London. Neville's profile portrait prominently adored the main wall. It was linked via a green, yellow and red striped flag with the portrait of Nanna, clad in a long white, black-rimmed robe and lacquered shoes. Nanna probably had this photo taken in Accra and sent to his British friend as a sign of gratitude upon his release from exile in 1906. Above the two men hung a group portrait of Nanna's ten sons and nephews who were educated at the Basel Mission in Accra, wearing their best three-piece suits. Underneath them, a more than five-meter-long bench invited visitors to take a rest. It was the bench that Nanna's Accra-trained sons manufactured out of the Iroko tree that Nanna had been sitting under surveying the construction of the building. The display physically tied Neville and Nanna together and showcased the outcome

of Nanna's years in exile: a mission-trained generation ready to employ their new skills to the construction of the house and the establishment of a new business. Anthony Nanna's smile only faded when he started talking about the family's hard decision to not accept George Neville's offer to educate his namesake Neville Nanna in the UK. 'There was just too much suspicion against the British,' pointing to the risks involved in navigating proximity and distance in the new-founded colony and the British Empire.

Next, the family custodian led us into the gallery *Nanna as Merchant and Governor*, where an elaborately lathed throne greeted us when he entered the room. On the walls next to and above the throne hung Nanna's regalia as materialised cosmopolitan relationships: his customised, feathered hat (see Fig. 6.7), his broken staff of office (that Neville had procured from Consul-General MacDonald's wife), an imported silver version of a Benin sword and his many prestation swords, 'manufactured in London and sent to Nanna personally by Queen Victoria', as Anthony proudly explained (see Fig. 6.15). The composition of things conveyed Nanna's charisma as sovereign, cosmopolitan leader or, as Ayomike (2006) put it in a special leaflet published for the United Nations World Tourism Day in 2006, 'Nanna's Glory, Glamour and Greatness'.



Figure 6.15: Nanna's throne and regalia in the gallery Nanna as Merchant and Governor. *The broken staff of office can be seen hanging on the left-hand side, nearest to the throne. Nanna's hat, a sign of authority and respect, as Anthony Nanna explained to me, hangs right above it. Photo: Julia Binter, 2015.*

My excitement upon seeing prestation swords that I had read about (in the context of Jaja of Opobo's 'peace keeping mission' to Ghana in 1873, see chapter 2) moved not only Anthony Nanna but also Onime Wilson, the NCMM's, Lagos-based curator of the Nanna Living History Museum, who stood by and watched the scene unfold. Before I knew it, I held a sword in each hand, grinning blissfully into the camera. Though what I felt was not only excitement but fear. How much would my sweaty palms affect the metal of the hilts? I learned quickly to shed my European notions of conservation as our guide repeatedly taught me about the past by inviting me to handle things. For instance, standing in front of two versions of an iron, a pre-industrial Itsekiri version made of a wooden block with a handle that was dipped into boiling water, using its steam to straighten cloth, and an imported European version, in the form a metal iron which was filled with hot coal, Anthony sought to demonstrate its weight by thrusting the European iron in my hand. Startled by its heaviness I swiftly returned it to its plinth. Hence, at the Nanna Living History Museum things were still touched, and, in

the case of the annual *ukueke* and *Okparan*, worn as 'an essential – and expected – means of acquiring knowledge' (Classen and Howes 2006, 201).

The museum could thus be seen as what Nadia Seremetakis (1996, 7) has called a 'sensory landscape' where 'its meaning-endowed objects bear within them emotional and historical sedimentation that can provoke and ignite gestures, discourses and acts'. The curation of the exhibition, understood as the grouping of things according to themes, their relational positioning to each other and the written commentary added next to them, was an attempt to channel the manifold, sensory potential of things towards intended messages. For example, in the gallery dedicated to *The Ebrohimi War 1894*, the exhibition design made sure that we first gaped into the shaft of an iron cannon pointed towards the entry. It was not only the label but also the physical experience of being confronted by a weapon measuring the length of my body that conveyed Nanna's military might. Moreover, the narrowing of the things' multisensory and polysemic potential also included their symbolic manipulation. On the wall next to the cannon hung one of Nanna's wall clocks with a finely chiselled dial (see Fig. 6.16). While a photo in the 1981 catalogue had shown the hands pointing at one o'clock, in 2015 the clock face showed nine (a.m.), the time that the colonial troops had entered Ebrohimi. 'This was when time as the Itsekiri knew it stopped,' commented Anthony Nanna. The wooden-framed glass casing, in which the clock was entrapped, further emphasised the stoppage of time or, in other words, the closure of an era of sovereignty.

Another of J.O.S. Ayomike's curatorial choices was the use of audio recordings. In Nanna's funerary room, he had set up a cassette player to play the *Ukukpe* funeral song, celebrating the last Governor of the Benin River's 'stout-heartedness against the British'. When Anthony Nanna ushered our film team into the windowless room in 2015, the cassette recorder had long stopped working. The camera's gaze thus glided over Nanna's tombstone and four-poster

bed, which had formed the catafalque at his funeral, in silence. On one of my follow-up visits, I accompanied Anthony Nanna and a prestigious Itsekiri visitor, who had come all the way from Lagos to visit the museum, into Nanna's funerary room. Standing in the pitch-dark room (the generator had stopped working), his grandson sang the *Ukpukpe* tune. Although I knew that the song also necessitated a libation to ask for the presence of the ancestor, the solemn notes that echoed in the dark room and the slight shiver that took over my body testified to the fine line that lay between a referential narration of the past and the performance of an ancestral chronotope.



Figure 6.16: Anthony Nanna touching the case of the clock that indicates the time that the Royal Navy entered Ebrohimi on 25 September 1894. Photo: Rex Clarke and Jakpa Gbubemi, 2015

My research interest in and presence at the Nanna Living History Museum also left its traces in the museum. At my first visit to Warri and Koko, I had brought photos of the archival and material holdings at the National Maritime Museum, London, with the intention of using them as means to relate to pasts and elicit narratives about them (Binney and Chaplin 2003, Peers and Brown 2009). Yet, as J.O.S. Ayomike made clear by the generosity with which he shared

his knowledge about Nanna, he did not need these materials to excavate past experiences. Rather, he saw in some of the photos proof of narratives which had been handed down through generations but had not yet been visually verified. In this respect, the watercolour painting of Nanna's town Ebrohimi by Admiral Bedford particularly caught his eye (see Fig. 6.1). When I returned to Warri a second time and paid the eminent historian a visit, an enlarged, sumptuously framed version of Bedford's watercolour painting adorned Ayomike's living room wall, visualising the splendour of a former, sovereign time. He had also made a copy, also in a golden-coloured frame, for the museum in Koko and had arranged an official handing-over ceremony which not only the former Governor of Bendel State, two princes of the Kingdom of Benin, a high-ranking chief of the Kingdom of Warri, two chiefs of the Nanna family, a former and the then current president of the NCMM and Obaro Ikime, the eminent scholar of the Ibadan School of History, had attended.[64] In their speeches, Ayomike (2015) and Ikime, who was represented by his wife due to illness, took the event as an occasion to highlight the importance of history as a discipline for creating and shaping society and of museums as multisensory site of relating to the past. Above all, they implored the Director-Generals of the NCMM to maintain their responsibility of care for the museum.

> I wonder, Sir, how often your staff have visited this monument in the last twenty years. I plead with you - passionately – that you ensure that this monument is maintained, and so, preserved for generations to come. Your organization owes Nigeria that duty. (Ikime 2015, 2)

On my last visit to the Nanna Living History Museum in 2016, the golden-framed copy was still leaning in a corner, catching dust. Was this a result of curatorial neglect by the NCMM?

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[64] The honorary guest list included H. E. Dr. Samuel O. Ogbemudia, two-time governor of Bendel State (today's Edo and Delta States), Prince Edun Akenzua, the Enogie of Obazuwa, Benin Kingdom, Chief David Edebiri, the Esogban of Benin Kindgom, Dr. Joe Eboreimi, assistant director of the Benin National Museum and later Director-General of the NCMM, Mallam Yusuf Usman, the then current Director-General of the NCMM, Chief Y. Pessu as presentative of the Olu of Warri, Chief Victor Nanna and Nelson A. Utieyone representing the Nanna family, and Obaro Ikime.

Or a sign that the curatorial care of the museum was not clearly defined? Although the Nanna family had handed over the responsibility for the material preservation of the building to the government in 1979, it had maintained its responsibility to care for the museum as ancestral site. Yet, successive military governments in the 1970s and 1990s had shown keen interest in claiming the family compound as symbol of national patriotism and thus invested in its maintenance. One reason for the government's diminished attention could have been that the democratic government's interest in 'national heroes' had waned by the 2010s. Another reason could have been that, due to the prolonged interethnic conflict in the western Niger Delta, major oil companies had transferred their headquarters from Warri to Port Harcourt, making Warri and environs less interesting for economic as well as for cultural investment. The result of the oil companies' and the government's withdrawal from Koko were in plain sight, manifesting in the museum's crumbling roof and missing electricity. Hence, during the filming in 2015, it was Anthony Nanna who attempted to establish proximity between the government, as representative of the nation, and the museum. Clutching Nanna Olomu's art-deco chair next to his dining table, he recounted Nanna's cosmopolitan hospitality and Lord Lugard's visit and present for his host, a patented water filter from London (see Fig. 2.6, chapter 2). In this moment it did not matter that Nigeria's division into 'the North, the East and the West' had been decided several years before Lord Lugard's visit to Nanna's palace in 1915[65] or that the Nigeria he was speaking of was a colonial one. What mattered was the act of re-inscribing the Last Governor of the Benin River into the narration of the nation, be it the precolonial, colonial or postcolonial one.

[65] According to the diary of Lord Lugard's brother who accompanied him during his travels through the newly amalgamated colony, the visit to Koko took place in February 1915, not 1914. See Edward James Lugard, *Journal Jottings 1912-1915*, p. 162, MSS. Brit.Emp.s.72, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

Conclusion. A Hundred Years of Negotiating Translocal Relationships

In the course of its life, the Nanna Living History Museum has been the site of fierce negotiations of translocal relationships, seeking to accommodate the display of cosmopolitan hospitality, the performative worship of ancestors and the postcolonial museological interests of changing military governments. These different ways of using the building and its contents afforded the performance of different chronotopes. The temporality-emplacement ranged from establishing coevalness between cosmopolitan trade partners at the beginning of the twentieth century to inviting the presence of Nanna as ancestor after his death. It also consisted in the attempt of fixing the polysemic potential of Nanna's translocal collection to reference a proto-African, precolonial past in line with the nationalist cultural politics of the oil boom era. The various, often overlapping forms of curation associated with these temporality-emplacements highlighted the similarities and differences between European and African ways of doing museums.

Nanna designed and built the palace after his return from exile in 1906 with the aim of harking back to precolonial, sovereign times. He fed and housed his family there but carefully collected and displayed translocal things to showcase cosmopolitan hospitality, thus curating translocal relationships. After his death, the building turned into an ancestral site, accommodating not only Nanna's collection but also his human remains. This transformation necessitated new forms of care, such as the display of transgenerationally accumulated wealth in the form of renovating the building, continuing the collecting activities and performing *ukueke* as well as *Okparan*. The display of heirlooms and the communication with the ancestors mirrored similar forms of doing museums in the Niger Delta, such as the *Okpu* in the Kingdom of Brass-Nembe and the *Ikpu* in New Calabar (Alagoa 2001).

With the national heritagisation of the building in the 1970s, European forms of doing museums were introduced. That is to say, despite the declared aim of the NCMM to

decolonise European ways of doing museums, the curators used ways of framing things and narrating pasts which echoed methods of their colonial predecessors. Using early twentieth-century forms of ethnographic categorisation, they sought to get a grip on the translocal and, thus, geographically and conceptually transgressive nature of Nanna's cosmopolitan lifestyle. The curators' struggle to marry the 1970s' cultural politics of 'indigenisation' with Nanna's cosmopolitan collection also pointed to the similarities between colonial and postcolonial imaginaries of precolonial 'Africans'. Nanna's 'thinking and acting beyond local environments' (Prestholdt 2008) in the form of collecting and displaying translocal things and curating cosmopolitan hospitality subverted notions of inward-looking 'Africans' without (transcultural) histories (Wolf 1982, Fabian 1983, Fabian 1991). For Sani Abacha's military regime in the 1990s, it was the weapons in the museum's collection that proved particularly valuable for the state's canonising (Assmann 2008) of Nanna's life story, equalling Nanna's military might with Abacha's use of force. However, what the military's 'necropolitics' (Mbembe 2003) were lacking in comparison to Nanna's show of force was legitimacy (Weber 1965). After the military's massacres in Ogoniland and the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other political rivals, the government supported the centenary commemoration of the British/Ebrohimi War in an attempt to regain the 'unalloyed loyalty and support of the people of Delta State' (Nwabueze 1996).

The Nanna family, in the meantime, employed their own ways of negotiating distance and proximity between the museum and the state. They have retained touching and, in the case of the annual *ukueke* and *Okparan*, wearing things are 'essential – and expected – means of acquiring knowledge' (Classen and Howes 2006, 201) about and from the past. By realising the collection's multisensory potential, the displays not only convey Nanna Olomu's charisma as cosmopolitan host and his economic and cultural perseverance despite colonisation. By

caring for Nanna as ancestor they ensure that the Nanna *Living* History Museum lives up to its name.

7. Conclusion. Ongoing Translations Across the Atlantic

'And you will stand in front of the National Maritime Museum and say: "[…] and now I will go to Nigeria and discover the Itsekiri."'

This was one of the first stage directions that Rex Clarke as director of our film team gave me when we started filming the material traces of Itsekiri pasts in London. Even though I was keen on putting into practice the ethnographic ideal of 'speaking alongside' (Ruby 1992) or 'nearby' (Trinh T. Minh-ha in Chen 1992) my Itsekiri research partners, the stage direction gave me pause. I should 'discover' the Itsekiri? Was this not a colonial trope that I sought to avoid by doing a collaborative film project? In one of our film team's brainstorming sessions I cautiously raised my concerns: 'Should I, as a white woman, be the one "discovering" your history and cultural heritage?.' Rex sighed.

> You know how difficult the relationship between the families [in the Itsekiri Kingdom] is. Whomever we take to be the protagonist of the film, people will think we are biased. You are neutral. You can tell the story.

In the end, we found middle ground between my postcolonial ambitions and the *realpolitik* of the transnational Itsekiri community. I would become one of the protagonists of the film, interviewing experts in London, Liverpool and the Niger Delta. Though I refrained from using phrases that I considered remnants of colonial pasts. Rex and the rest of the film team seemed to be content with this solution. I was not only a 'neutral' researcher bringing together the different strands of Itsekiri pasts. My physical presence in front of the camera and the social and cultural capital that I embodied also gave the film additional credence. 'The Urhobo have someone at the University of Berkley. We have got someone at Oxford now,' the film team explained to me, pointing to the ways in which they sought to draw me into their meshwork of transnational relations.

This concluding chapter recapitulates the insights that the film project provided as a means of showcasing the 'canon' (Assmann 2008) of Itsekiri pasts in 2015. It also discusses those

experiences and events that were not included in the film but nevertheless played a crucial role in how the film team selected the film's themes and interview partners. It, thus, also looks at the 'underneath of things' (Ferme 2001, 2), those 'forces [and social, cultural and political economic entanglements] concealed beneath the surface of discourse, objects, and social relations.' In other words, it puts my translations of the Itsekiri's transatlantic pasts and presents, including its transfers and deferrals (Derrida 1985, Bhabha 1994, Benjamin 2002 [1923]), in dialogue with those of my Itsekiri research partners.

Things Transgressing Boundaries

'Cosmopolitanism' is not only a concept that postcolonial scholars use to describe the active positioning (Mbembe 2005, Prestholdt 2008, Getz 2013) and 'cultural traffic' (Gikandi 2010, 10) of Africans and people of African descent in the globalising world. Also Itsekiri have used the term to describe to me the charisma of past and present leaders such as Nanna Olomu and Olu Atuwatse II. While they might not be familiar with the scholarly debate, they do use it in a way that describes the 'seeing and acting beyond local environments' (Prestholdt 2008) of their political and merchant elites in often volatile and imperialising contexts. It denotes the capacity to establish and care for translocal relationships which materialise not only in the consumption of international things but, in particular, in gifts by international trading partners. The often-performative display of these things, in turn, helps to curate translocal relationships and to form cosmopolitan identities. The charisma that thus accrues to a person, if the person is a man, depends, on the one hand, on his ability to attract and bind people in commercial settings. On the other hand, it depends on his ability to care for relations with the metapersonal or ancestral realm, alluding to charisma 'in the original, god-infused sense' (Graeber and Sahlins 2016, 3).

In other words, African cosmopolitanism past and present is characterised by the ways in which political and economic elites negotiate proximity and distance with the outside and transcendental world. Questions of how best to establish, care for and manage translocal relationships not only informed Dom Domingos educational journeys and conversion in the Portuguese Empire in the early seventeenth century (chapter 3) and Olu Erejuwa I's campaign of attracting and binding the French slaver Jean-François Landolphe at the end of the eighteenth century, but also Jaja of Opobo's self-fashioning campaign as cosmopolitan and spiritual leader in the middle of the nineteenth century (chapter 2) and Nanna Olomu's struggle to maintain sovereignty during British colonial encroachment (chapters 2 and 6). These questions have also been at the heart of discussions of how to relate to cosmopolitan pasts in Nigeria's postcolony.

Relating to the outside and transcendental world as well as relating to cosmopolitan pasts was and is done by mobilising, displaying, wearing and curating things. Just as Olu Erejuwa I hoisted the French flag on his war canoe to signal his burgeoning relationship with the French slaver Landolphe, so Nanna Olomu materialised his alignment with the British by including the Union Jack in his flags a hundred years later (see Figs. 1.2 and 7.1b). In a similar vein, Landolphe gifted the Olu a staff with a silver top with which the king could 'make his will known when he wish[ed] to ask something from' the French merchant (Landolphe and Quesné 1823b, 38). Landolphe, thus, not only used personalised gifts to underpin his commercial alliance with the Itsekiri monarchy but also to acknowledge its sovereignty. Though, by the time of British colonial encroachment and the signing of Protection Treaties in the 1880s, the role of gifting staffs (and other international luxury goods) had changed. While the Itsekiri might have still interpreted the staff that Vice-Consul David Blair gave Nanna in 1885 (Fig. 2.8a, b and c) as a testimony to the Governor of the Benin River's ability to attract and manage relationships with Britain's imperial agents, the latter might have

simply seen the acceptance of the staff as a sign of Nanna's transformation into an imperial agent. Growing out of elaborate trading rituals where European traders bore gifts and paid *comey* (export duties) to coastal African rulers while the latter showcased their wealth in canoe regattas and cosmopolitan hospitality, gift giving had become instrumental in drawing African elites into an imperial meshwork of relationships of dependence. Gifts, thus, played a crucial role in becoming imperial for African political and merchant elites in the Atlantic world (chapter 2).



Figure 7.1a and b: Two of Nanna Olomu's flags in the collection of the National Maritime Museum, materialising Nanna's strategy of positioning himself in the Niger Delta's imperialising meshwork of relations at the end of the nineteenth century. While, at the beginning of his rule, he emphasised the social and economic capital which he had inherited from his father Olomu or Alluma (green flag), he later foregrounded his relationship with the British by including a Union Jack in his (red) flag. Inventory numbers: AAA0455 and AAA0556. Photos: National Maritime Museum, Royal Museums Greenwich.

For the cultural politics of Nigeria's early postcolony, the African cosmopolitan lifestyles of previous centuries presented interpretative challenges. While the nation-building project of the post-civil war, oil boom era sought to hark back to a time and place before colonisation which was untouched by outside influences (Apter 2005), precolonial cosmopolitan material culture spoke of transgressing boundaries and attracting the outside world. Looking back on African cosmopolitan and colonial material culture from the vantage point of independence, cosmopolitan and colonial things looked eerily similar and, thus, entered in an uncomfortable proximity. The unease was tangible, for example, in the ways in which the curators of the NCMM sought to contain the multisensory and polysemic potentials or affordances (Basu 2017a) of Nanna Olomu's cosmopolitan collection at his former palace in the early 1980s (Akinsete, Akanbiemu, and Eboreime 1981). They not only categorised the things according to European ideas of functionality, thus echoing colonial ethnographic ways of objectifying things, but also highlighted those translocal things in his collection that fitted the nationalising politics of 'indigenisation' (Plankensteiner and Adediran 2010). The uncomfortable closeness between cosmopolitan and colonial things became also apparent at the Old Residency in Old Calabar, where the former regional colonial headquarters were transformed into a museum of 'colonial history', which narrated not only precolonial trade and African wealth but also British colonisation, anti-colonial struggle and independence (Eyo 1986). The Old Residency had been prefabricated in Liverpool and shipped to the Niger Delta in the 1880s – like many residencies of Efik merchant elites in the decades prior to colonisation. Consequently, its design and outline were also similar to those of African cosmopolitan mansions (see figs. 6.9 and 6.10). By displaying etchings and architectural models of houses of Efik merchant elites within the walls of the Old Residency, precolonial and colonial house styles collapsed into one. The display pointed to the fact that, without knowing the history of a building in Old

Calabar, a prefabricated, imported house could reference both, precolonial and colonial times, and thus, play havoc with the temporality-emplacement of the beholder.

Also John Pepper Clark-Bedekeremo, in his theatre play *All for Oil* (2000), reflected on the changing parameters of distance and proximity in the colonial state. He critically revaluated the presence of the British in the delta and the changing affordance of things that went along with it. The British were no longer temporary guests but invaders who 'descend[ed]' (ibid., 5) on the Niger Delta. Similarly, international fashion was no longer solely sought-after for its exotic luxuriousness and cosmopolitan flair but began to symbolise the presence of the colonial state.

Hence, for some curators and playwrights in Nigeria's postcolony, the translocal material culture of African cosmopolitanism no longer transgressed geographical, political economic and cultural boundaries, but rather moved 'in-between' them (Basu 2017a). In other words, as the power relations at the coast of West Africa changed, so did the affordance of things. Coastal elites, might, to this day, value transatlantic material legacies for showcasing their past translocal reach, displaying accumulated family wealth and linking up with the ancestral past (or break with it). Yet, cosmopolitan material culture has by now also accrued the potential to reference experiences of colonisation, where boundaries where not transgressed but drawn.

Searching For a Leader

As mentioned above, precolonial African cosmopolitan lifestyles were also revaluated in theatre plays originating in the oil boom era, such as *Akassa You Mi* (Rotimi 2001a), under Nigeria's military regimes in the late 1990s, like *King Jaja* (Bell-Gam 1996a) and *Nanna Olomu* (Umukoro 2001b), and after a recent crisis in leadership, so called 'Ogiamegate'

(Emiko 2015, 9), in the Itsekiri Kingdom, in *Olu Akengbuwa* (Eyengho 2015) (chapter 4). The plays not only pondered the affordance of cosmopolitan things but also staged past experiences of anti-colonial struggle to offer moral lessons of 'purposive leadership' (Rotimi 2001b, viii) in times of perceived perpetual 'crisis' (Vigh 2008). As the male protagonists in their quest of 'self-realisation' (Barber 2000, 430, see also Elliot and Menin 2018) exemplified, this good leadership not only depended on the successful management of translocal relationships in imperialising contact zones but also on the continued care for relationships with the ancestral realm. Religious contact and change, thus, became a focal point around which the successful accruement of charisma in both translocal senses – political economic and spiritual – was negotiated.

The theatrical translations of past experiences onto the stage resulted in a variety of time-space configurations, ranging from palimpsest to nostalgic and mythic and from open-ended to foreclosed. Yet, they all allowed one subjectivity to emerge: the cosmopolitan leader-in-becoming. Besides, the material performances on stage and their subsequent translations by the audiences blurred the lines between past experiences of colonial encounters and contemporary experiences of political and economic encroachment and rivalling faiths. In this sense, they offered what Karin Barber (2000) has identified as a 'modern', or, rather, 'cosmopolitan' editorial stance, understood as being and imagining oneself as being simultaneously inside and outside (of history or, better, evolving time-space). This editorial stance allowed audiences to not only ponder modes of relating to pasts, presents and futures in their plurality (Zeitlyn 2015) but also to scrutinise distance and proximity in past and present imperialising contact zones.

However, distance and proximity in Nigeria's postcolony was no longer solely negotiated between African merchant elites and outside imperial agents. It was also negotiated between communities in the Niger Delta and the postcolonial state. Hence, the playwrights brought to

'bear' (Barber 2000, Lambek 2002) the past in the present according to the needs and interests that they perceived in their society, harnessing the potential of translation, as Walter Benjamin (2002 [1923], 257) has described it, to go beyond 'individual elements of a […] language' or, in this case, past experiences, and to touch on the 'intention' of the original, thereby renewing it and securing its survival (*Fortleben*). Hence, the playwrights' scripts and the theatrical performances allowed for past and present experiences to speak not only to each other but also to their 'intention' or overriding dynamics. Just as 'oil' could stand for red (palm) and black (crude) oil, the 'nation' could be both, a precolonial ethnic as well as a postcolonial interethnic community. Playing on this ambivalence, the playwrights inscribed the male, Niger Delta protagonists, as first anti-colonial heroes of Nigeria, in the national narratives of the postcolonial petro-state and simultaneously reaffirmed the ethnic-national identities of Niger Delta communities.

Similar negotiations about proximity and distance, between the Nanna family, the Itsekiri royal house and the national government, took place at Nanna Olomu's palace in Koko (chapter 6). Nanna built the mansion after his return from exile in 1906 with the aim of harking back to precolonial, sovereign times. In the building, which was inspired by neo-classicist European architecture, he not only fed and housed his family but also collected and displayed translocal things to showcase cosmopolitan hospitality, thus curating translocal relationships. After his death, the building turned into an ancestral site, accommodating not only Nanna's collection but also his human remains. This transformation necessitated new forms of care, such as the display of transgenerationally accumulated wealth in the form of renovating the building, continuing the collecting activities and performing *ukueke*, understood as the performative display of family heirlooms, and *Okparan*, their ritual transformation into ancestral immanence (see also chapter 5). The display of heirlooms and the communication with the ancestors mirrored similar forms of doing museums in the Niger

Delta, such as the *Okpu* in the Kingdom of Brass-Nembe and the *Ikpu* in New Calabar (Alagoa 2001). In Nigeria's oil boom era, the buildings and its contents were nationalised with the aim of telling the story of anti-colonial struggle and regained wealth after colonisation. Though, it was only during General Sani-Abacha's military regime that the question of leadership became a heatedly discussed topic. While the military government sought to draw parallels between Nanna's fight against the British and its own 'necropolitics' (Mbembe 2003), thus equalling Nanna's and Abacha's 'brands of patriotism' (Nwabueze 1996), the Olu of Warri and the Nanna family fought out their own battle of leadership which built on over a century of internal strife. While the Nanna and, thus, Ologbotsere (Itsekiri Prime Minister) family had repeatedly shown its will and capability to lead the Itsekiri people (during the 88-year interregnum in the nineteenth century and a crisis in leadership in the 1960s), Olu Atuwatse II had taken the opportunity of the centenary commemoration of the Ebrohimi/British War of 1894 to reinforce his claim to leadership. He took over as the host of festivities at the Nanna Living History Museum and showcased his ability to manage relationships with the military regime and international oil companies. However, the Nanna family mobilised their own ways of establishing translocal relationships by performing *ukueke* and attracting the investment of international oil companies to sponsor not only an exhibition at the museum but also a new bronze statue of their founding father in front of the building. Thus, gifts, in this case by international oil companies, continued to play an integral role in materialising translocal relationships and remained an 'investment [in the hope of] future gains' (Guyer 2004, 99) in Nigeria's political economy of oil.

Acknowledging the Dialectics of African Cosmopolitanism

In 2013, Olu Atuwatse II (1943–2015), had to face his own crisis in leadership (chapter 3). As Pentecostal Christian, he thought that he could maintain his charisma as cosmopolitan leader of the Itsekiri while shedding his responsibility as custodian of the kingdom's relationship with the ancestral past. Foregrounding his international education as a lawyer and his ability to manage relationships with international oil companies like Chevron, he attempted to 'make a complete break with the [ancestral] past' (Meyer 1998) and 'realign' (Engelke 2011) with another, namely the cosmopolitan experiences of the Itsekiri monarchy within the Portuguese Empire. In particular, he harked back to his predecessors' conversion to Catholicism and international education in the early seventeenth century that were materialised in the royal crown that the Itsekiri Prince Dom Domingos is said to have brought from Portugal in 1610. The Olu mobilised the crown as a symbol for establishing a new, Pentecostal time-space or chronotope which was still cosmopolitan, understood as the ability to 'surpass the limits of locality' (Larkin and Meyer 2006, 297), but stripped of the ancestors' potential to interfere in the present; a potential which ancestral worship intended to harness. However, his subjects, foremost the youth, disabused him from this misconception. They responded to the Olu's Pentecostal 'crusade' by calling for the *Ipi* masquerades to perform the immanence of primordial ancestral beings which threatened to deter the king from his intended iconoclasm by force. With their respective ways of 'temporality-emplacement' (Wirtz 2014), the Olu and the youth not only fought about how to relate to the past but also from what position in society. For young people in Nigeria masking has become a means to 'contest their political marginality' (Pratten 2008a, 46) and to criticise prevailing social, political economic and cultural relationships of power (Pratten 2008b). By intending to destroy shrines and masquerades, the Olu did not only seek to impose a repositioning of the kingdom in time and space, according to his Pentecostal notion of cosmopolitanism, but also threatened to take

away one of the youth's most powerful means of protest and self-affirmation. Moreover, by cutting the cord with the ancestral past, Olu Atuwaste II also imperilled the ancestral link that the monarch and his subjects were able to perform with the land. His intended iconoclasm, thus, also exposed the religious base on which the Itsekiri could stake claims in the Niger Delta's fierce contest over land and, thus, mineral rights.

The Olu's death two years after this crisis in leadership and subsequent burial and transition into ancestorhood reaffirmed the Itsekiri Kingdom's relationship with the land (chapter 5). Itsekiri citizens of Warri used the liminal chronotope (van Gennep 2004 [1909], Turner [1969] 2017) of the mourning period to raise their visibility in the oil city of Warri. Meanwhile, chiefs used the oil wealth of the city to 'undo' (Sarró 2009) the slow iconoclasm at the ancestral island of Ode-Itsekiri that Olu Atuwatse II had implemented by refusing to travel to the island and care for the ancestors residing there. They renovated the family houses on and infrastructure of the island and, thus, established coevalness between the oil city and the hitherto ruinous ancestral town. Moreover, the burial of the king's body at the royal cemetery at Ijala retraced the founding story of the kingdom and demarcated its territorial extent. At the funeral at Ode-Itsekiri, an intricate interplay of bodies, things and performative acts enabled those Itsekiri who had not refrained from participating in the 'aesthetic formation' (Meyer 2009b) of the funeral (due to their Pentecostal beliefs) to reassert their relationship with the monarchy. Their songs and dances linked the royal house back to the settlements which made up the territories of the kingdom and emphasised the contribution of their ancestors in the formation of the kingdom.

In the end, Olu Atuwatse II's funeral, following his failed attempt to reconfigure his charisma by superimposing past and present forms of African cosmopolitanism, not only highlighted the continued role of ancestral beliefs for youths in staking claims in the Niger Delta's political economy of oil. It also pointed to the socio-political limits of the concept. African

cosmopolitanism describes the 'seeing and acting beyond local environments' (Prestholdt 2008) of economic and political elites whose wealth, for more than three centuries, depended on the trade in enslaved people, in the nineteenth century, palm oil, and, today, crude oil. The concept, hence, does not account for the experiences of marginalisation and exploitation which made the wealth and cosmopolitan lifestyles possible in the first place. Consequently, the cosmopolitan pasts that people today can relate to speak mostly of male charisma and anti-colonial resistance and provide few material traces of intersectional experiences of gender, generation and class in transatlantic encounters. Or, rather, these experiences do not form part of or are actively marginalised in the canon of Itsekiri pasts which have been staged, embodied and curated in Nigeria's postcolony.

That is to say, if the concept of African cosmopolitanism is to have validity, it has to embrace its dialectics (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1947]). Like Europe's 'modernity', it was and is not only characterised by cultural innovation, (male bourgeois) emancipation and an active engagement with the globalising world but also by the marginalisation and exploitation of human lives (Saro-Wiwa 1992, Watts 1992, Gilroy 1993, Watts 1994, 2003, 2008b, Gilroy 2010, Brown and Lovejoy 2011, Bellagamba, Greene, and Klein 2013, Imbua 2013). In the era of the transatlantic trade, for instance, trading rituals and African consumerism and collecting highlighted the African agency that shaped West Africa's cultural, political and economic dealings with Europe prior to and during colonisation. The close analysis of Atlantic encounters shows that 'the interaction of the West with West Africa is […] a story of a gradual process which is incomprehensible without reference to African agency' (Rathbone 2002, 21). The material traces of African cosmopolitan lives in museums in Britain and Nigeria as well as in private collections in the Niger Delta help to highlight African agency on the political, economic and cultural level. They enable us to question rigid notions of Empire and colonisation and of static, inward-looking notions of African societies and to refocus the

analysis on the African contribution to and creativity involved in shaping powerfully charged processes of trade, cultural exchange and socio-political transformation in imperialising contact zones. Yet, by understanding the long historical trajectories of these cultural exchanges we must also acknowledge that the exchanges were based on the subjugation and exploitation of African lives. Recognizing these dialectics means recognizing the complexity of West Africa's encounters with the world and the full diversity of African experiences.

Addressing Transatlantic Aphasia

While the cosmopolitan material culture of transatlantic encounters is crucial for the ways in which transatlantic pasts are mobilised, staged, embodied and curated in the Niger Delta today, it does not lend itself to articulating the marginalised experiences of transatlantic trade. It thus hints at a 'colonial' or, rather, transatlantic 'aphasia', defined by Ann Stoler (2011, 124) as the occlusion of knowledge and a difficulty of 'associate[ing] appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things.' A telling example of this 'transatlantic aphasia' is the contrast in the discursive framing of cosmopolitan material culture at the Calabar Slave History Museum and The Old Residency in Old Calabar, west of the Niger Delta (chapter 6). Three hundred metres apart, goods from the era of the trade in enslaved people are either described as 'frivolous' and 'worthless', in the case of beads and mirrors, and socially and culturally 'destructive' (in Imbua 2013, 127-8), in the case of gin, firearms, pewter basins and clothes, or as 'objects of prestige' (Eyo 1986) and testimonies of precolonial wealth. Neither of the exhibitions, though, fulfil the potential that David Imbua (2013, 134) sees in them, that is addressing the African agency in the trade in enslaved people and telling a story which 'could serve as a deterrent to greed and mischief in [past] and […] present time[s].'

Hence, it might not only have been the translocal and, thus, transgressive quality of precolonial material traces (chapters 4 and 6) but also transatlantic aphasia that made it

difficult to relate to precolonial pasts after independence. For instance, the cultural nation-building projects of the post-civil war, oil boom era, epitomised in the organisation of FESTAC'77, sought to showcase the endurance of African cultural practices despite colonisation, though employed colonial ways of categorising and displaying things and choreographing people to do so (Apter 2005). Colonial and early postcolonial visions of precolonial pasts, moreover, shared the idea of a proto-African, static chronotope untouched by outside influences, to which the transgressive quality of cosmopolitan material culture ran counter. However, concerning enslavement and the trade in enslaved people, colonial and precolonial visions deviated. Whereas colonial propaganda had employed anti-slavery rhetoric to legitimise Britain's colonising endeavour (Huzzey 2012), cultural ways of nation-building in Nigeria's postcolony either occluded experiences of enslavement (Apter 2005), naturalised it, as, for example, the majority of theatre plays did (Clark-Bedekeremo 2000, Rotimi 2001a, Umukoro 2001b, Eyengho 2015) or 'externalised [it] as only a European enterprise' (Imbua 2013, 134), in case of the Calabar Slave History Museum.

One prominent example to the contrary is the life of Jaja of Opobo whose rise from enslaved person to king (Alagoa 1970) and anti-colonial struggle speak of the 'extreme and rapid social mobility' (Barber 2013, 113) that the Niger Delta's 'unpredictable, fluctuating and competitive world of individual self-creation' (Barber 1995, 217) afforded. The dramatisation of his life (Bell-Gam 1996a) celebrates his personal social ascent and is a rare example of questioning the 'moral economy' (Bayart 2000, 252) of the transatlantic trade.

At the time of my research, Itsekiri historical experts and laypeople alike 'telescoped' (Vansina 1980) precolonial experiences of transatlantic trade with the Dutch, the French and the Portuguese into one continuous and harmonious era of religious conversion and cultural exchange without referencing the victims of the trade. The emphasis on the contact with the Portuguese was not only an affirmative recourse to a self-determined, though highly stratified

past but also pointed to the politicisation of transatlantic encounters, with regard to land rights and their contestation (Ayomike 1990, Ejobowah 2000, Ekeh 2005, Ayomike 2009, Adrian 2015, Amaize 2015a, Adrian 2016, Okoh 2016, Ogundele 2018, Okafor 2018a, b), in the current political economy of oil (Curnow 2002).

Transatlantic aphasia, thus, helps to understand seemingly paradoxical practices of relating to or 'revealing' while also 'concealing' (Ferme 2001) transatlantic pasts. The canonisation of transatlantic pasts in theatre – with some notable exceptions –, museums and our film project as well as Olu Atuwatse II's failed attempt to establish a Pentecostal chronotope in the kingdom occluded experiences of the enslaved and, thus, stood in contrast to other forms of relating to transatlantic pasts in West Africa which try to account for these experiences, often catering for European and African-American or Afro-Caribbean audiences (Bruner 1996, Schramm 2007, 2010, Warren and MacGonagle 2012, Imbua 2013, Reed 2015). Hence, analysing the canonisation of African cosmopolitan legacies in the Niger Delta and addressing its transatlantic aphasia can yield new insights into past and present engagements of West Africa in the globalising world and, thus, contribute to a growing body of literature on *Africa and the Black Atlantic* (Goyal 2014, see also Hair 1990, Law and Mann 1999, Inikori 2002, Shaw 2002, Morgan and Hawkins 2004, Northrup 2004, Mann 2007, Nwokeji 2010, Osinubi 2016).

Ongoing Translations Across the Atlantic

It is not only the transatlantic aphasia which characterises the canonisation of transatlantic pasts in the Niger Delta which calls for further avenues of research. Also, the ever-dynamic power relations in the delta highlight the processual and, thus, malleable ways in which people relate to pasts and stake claims in their presents, thus rendering my analysis of the

canonisation of Itsekiri pasts into a snap-shot of 'interlocking pasts, presents and futures' (Mbembe 2001, 16) in Nigeria's postcolony.

That is to say, the dialectics of African cosmopolitanism and the transatlantic aphasia with which cosmopolitan pasts are successfully or unsuccessfully canonised point to the occlusion of intersectional experiences of gender, generation and class in Nigeria's postcolony. On stage, women's experiences in precolonial Atlantic Africa have either been silenced (Rotimi 2001a, Umukoro 2001b) or their claims to political power have been violently sanctioned by natural and supranatural forces (Eyengho 2015, chapter 4). Moreover, in African ways of doing museums like the *Okpu* in Nembe-Brass, women's lives have mostly been canonised with regard to their reproductive and not their political economic powers, marginalising their contribution to the political, economic and cultural life at the coast (Alagoa 2001, chapter 6). Challenges to these occlusions have been made not only by economically and politically powerful women, like Chief Rita Lori-Ogbebor, in the Niger Delta, but also by women in the Itsekiri diaspora who decisively shape the organisation of Ugbajo Itsekiri UK but are ultimately excluded from representing the association at large. One possible further strand of research, therefore, is to bring those female experiences of present African cosmopolitanism into dialogue and link them up with a further inquiry into cosmopolitan experiences of women in past transatlantic encounters. How did Meme, Nanna's wife, experience life in exile in Ghana (see Fig. 6.14)? How did Nanna's daughter Maybnee (?) (see Fig. 7.2) shape the Niger Delta's meshwork of relationships under early colonial rule? And what other female experiences remain to be 'activated' (Apter and Derby 2010) in the 'archive' (Assmann 2008) of transatlantic encounters? Besides this gendering of transatlantic pasts (Martin 1988, Chuku 1995, 1999, 2005), another possible avenue of research is locating and translating experiences of enslavement and emancipation, such as the life of Jaja of Opobo (chapter 2 and 4), which decisively shaped life at the Atlantic African coast (Mann 2007).



Figure 7.2: Photographer not recorded, Maybnee [?], Nanna's daughter, 1890–1900. Inventory number: Af,A46.23. Photo: British Museum. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

Moreover, Niger Delta ways of doing museum, which have maintained touching and, in the case of *ukueke*, wearing things as 'essential – and expected – means of acquiring knowledge' (Classen and Howes 2006, 201), could inform ways of doing museums in the UK and Europe. As Laura Peers has shown in her long-term collaborative research on material culture of First Nations in Canada, introducing new forms of care, such as the dancing of ritual shirts at the Pitt Rivers Museum, can start a process of reconnecting with colonial and precolonial pasts and spark cultural revitalisation and 'healing' from colonial trauma (Peers 2013). The need for healing might be different in a former settler colony, like Canada, than in the Niger Delta where, as John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo (2000, vi) has diagnosed it, a chronic crisis (Vigh 2008) of leadership and extraversion, understood as the establishing of translocal relationships of dependence (Bayart 2000), has been destabilising the social meshwork of relations. Whether the cosmopolitan material culture of transatlantic encounters and the elite experiences that they can elicit are apt to address this crisis remains open for discussion. The youth's contestation of Olu Atuwatse II's attempt to mobilise the royal crown for his vision of

a Pentecostal kingdom highlighted not only competing chronotopes in Nigeria's postcolony but also the socio-political limits of African cosmopolitanism. Yet, insights into the material and performative care for ancestors (chapters 5 and 6) and the manifold affordances of things can not only 'liberate [material] culture […] from the management regimes of Eurocentric museology' (Kreps 2006, 459) but also foster new ways of collaboratively researching collections from imperialising contact zones with partners in Europe and on the African continent.

The collaborative film project with Ugbajo Itsekiri UK was one of the affordances that were sparked by Nanna Olomu's collection at the National Maritime Museum in London. However, while the footage of Anthony Nanna's tour through the Nanna Living History Museum as well as numerous oral history interviews with family members still have the potential to reframe and enliven the collection in London, the rest of the film project, particularly with regard to the Itsekiri Kingdom's transatlantic pasts and legacies, has stalled. The reason for this pause can not only be traced back to a lack of funding for the editing process, as the film team rightly points out, but also to changes in the meshwork of 'interlocking presents, pasts, and futures' (Mbembe 2001, 16) in the Itsekiri Kingdom. With the transition of Olu Atuwaste II into ancestorhood and the coronation of the new king, Olu Ikenwoli I, the canonisation of transatlantic pasts has begun to shift. While the educational journeys of Dom Domingos in the seventeenth-century Portuguese Empire are still valued for eliciting narrations of early African cosmopolitanism, it is no longer the central point of reference when talking about Itsekiri transatlantic pasts. Rather, sparked by recent contestations over land at Ugborodo (Amaize 2015a, Atevure 2018, BigPenngr 2018, Ogundele 2018, Okafor 2018a), the focus is shifting to the transatlantic journeys and international education of another Itsekiri Prince. At the annual *Gala Nite* of Ugbajo Itsekiri UK in 2018, held at a Hilton Hotel in London, the exhibition of portraits of eminent Itsekiri

leaders included not only a list of all seventeen Olus of the kingdom. They also included the etching of a portrait of Prince Boudakan (see chapter 2), which was probably done thirty years after his stay in Paris by the engraver Ambroise Tardieu (see Fig. 7.3a and b). The prince's portrait hung next to that of Jean-François Landolphe and was accompanied by the English translation of an expert of the French slaver's memoir, recounting the story of how Prince Boudakan sold the land of Ugborodo to the French merchant (Landolphe and Quesné 1823b, 343). Hence, by showcasing and translating past transatlantic encounters, the display not only referenced past African cosmopolitanism but made a claim on land in the Niger Delta's current political economy of oil.

What do these shifts in the canonisation of transatlantic pasts mean for the film project? On the one hand, the filmed footage so far covers the canon of Itsekiri transatlantic pasts before Olu Atuwatse II's demise and, therefore, does not include Itsekiri experts who recount the story of Prince Boudakan's travels in the French Empire. On the other hand, due to the changing meshwork of power relations within the Itsekiri Kingdom, new experts on Itsekiri history and culture are introduced in the canonisation of Itsekiri pasts who might not necessarily agree with the experts who granted us interviews in 2015. As the diasporic film team seeks to inscribe itself into the ways in which pasts are canonised in the Niger Delta and its transnational community, additional travels and interviews need to be added and, maybe, old footage has to be discarded, thus alluding to the supplemental costs that my film partners raised as concern for continuing our project.



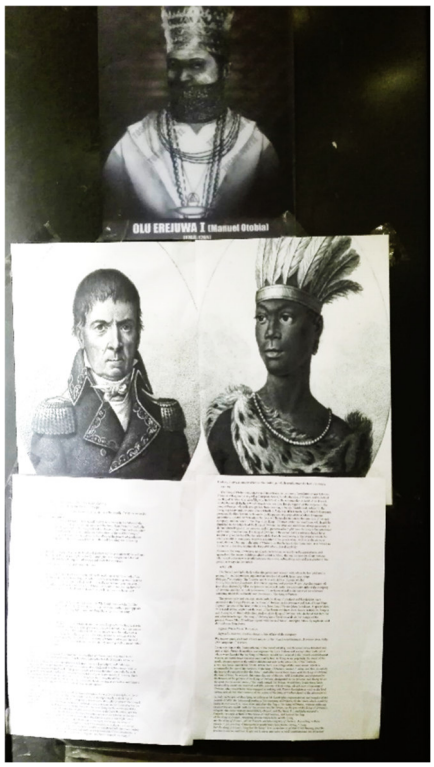


Figure 7.3a and b: Exhibition at the annual Gala Nite *of Ugbajo Itsekiri UK at a Hilton Hotel in London in 2018. The display was installed in front of the events hall where the Gala Nite took place. On the clipboards in the background, portraits of the Olus of Warri, painted from scratch with reference to oral histories by Adrian Edema, as well as portraits of Olu Erejuwa I, Jean-François Landolphe and Prince Boudakan were installed. On the table in front of the display, Itsekiri material culture, most of it bought on international auctions, was showcased, pointing to the self-affirmative collecting of Itsekiri material traces by members of the diaspora. Photos: Julia Binter, 2018.*

Moreover, even if the film project is continued, adding experts, things and sites, the film will still not include any of the internal power struggles that I have discussed in this thesis, be it the rivalry between Nanna Olomu and Dogho Numa at the brink of British colonisation, the crisis in leadership in the 1960s, the power struggles at the Nanna Living History Museum in 1996, the 'Warri Crisis' from 1996 to 2003 or 'Ogiamegate' in 2013. My film partners made these deliberate omissions clear to me early in the project. For instance, once I had read the book (Tedeye 2014) that gathered the main contesting voices of 'Ogiamegate' in 2013, I asked whether we should mention this crisis in leadership in the film to better understand the information that our expert interviewees related to us. Rex laughed in disbelief and answered with one of the Olu's many appellations: 'Afomasin. Nobody contradicts what the king has

spoken.' The film, thus, will not include the destabilising tale of a people defying their king or any other translation of pasts which threaten the often-repeated motto of the Itsekiri Kingdom, 'One People. One Language. One King.' In so doing, the film team's take on internal strife echoes Niger Delta playwrights' calls for 'unity' (Bell-Gam 1996b, i) and 'solidarity' (Green 2001, xi). In the end, the film will include only those voices who are legitimated by one authority or another to relate to the Itsekiri's transatlantic pasts. It will, therefore, create a picture of the Itsekiri pasts and presents that is highly tailored to the different interests involved in the film project. As these interests more often than not contradict each other, it is still possible that these contradictions will chip away at the polished surface of the film and reveal its underlying social, cultural and political economic tensions and frictions. At the very least, the film will contribute to the ongoing translations of transatlantic pasts across the Atlantic.

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