

YORÙBÁ RELIGIOUS MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE YORÙBÁ DIASPORA

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YORÙBÁ PEOPLE IN BRITAIN AND YORÙBÁ RELIGIOUS MATERIAL DISPLAYED IN BRITISH MUSEUMS

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by

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STATEMENT

This is to certify that this thesis is the result of work done during the period of registration (October 2001 – May 2006).

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Leicester Friday, 12 May 2006

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anna Catalani', with a stylized, cursive script.

**Yorùbá religious material culture and the Yorùbá Diaspora.
An investigation into the relationship between Yorùbá
people in Britain and Yorùbá religious material displayed in
British Museums**

Anna Catalani

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the interpretation and representation of non-Western religious material culture in Western museums. Specifically, it focuses on Yorùbá traditional religious material culture exhibited nowadays in museums in the United Kingdom. The research aimed to investigate how members of the Yorùbá diaspora, living in the United Kingdom, related to their traditional religious heritage, presented in museums. At the same time, the study intended to explore the perspective of museum professionals, involved with the displays exhibiting traditional Yorùbá religious objects.

The thesis counts of two main parts. The first part is concerned with the theoretical framework of the study. After presenting the main issues of the research and the existing literature review, it continues by clarifying the social function of symbols (particularly religious symbols) and by offering an historical excursus of museum displays exhibiting African material culture (from the 19th century until now). The second part is concerned with the description and analysis of four different projects (a temporary exhibition set by the researcher herself; a set of interviews and focus groups with members of the Yorùbá diaspora; a set of interviews with museum professionals and an analysis of ten museum displays exhibiting traditional religious Yorùbá objects) which have been the investigative tool of this research. The research has a qualitative approach and it has been based in the United Kingdom.

The thesis suggests that, notwithstanding the efforts of museum professionals, in museum displays traditional Yorùbá religious material culture loses its distinctiveness and become adsorbed into a global pan-African representation. Additionally, members of the Yorùbá diaspora in Britain seemed to have a conflictual relation towards to traditional Yorùbá religion.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. The rationale of this study.

Contemporary societies are made up of multi-ethnic groups. These have arisen through complex historical processes of migration and diaspora, and are characterised generally (although not universally) as time unfolds, by a constant and often unconscious process of integration and 'normalisation' of different cultural characteristics. This opens up a very large range of related topics, which have a bearing upon the political and practical processes through which individuals and communities achieve (or do not achieve) integration and the renegotiation of a broadly accepted identity. The whole area is immensely rich, with many separate layers, linked by great subtleties and complexities in ways that defy simplistic categorization. The methods of studying this significant aspect of the human condition are many and this research will focus upon one of them. It will explore the relationship between some members of the Yorùbá diaspora in Britain and the British museum displays of their ancestral material culture.

When the material culture of immigrant ethnic groups is moved out of the community context into that of the museum, the cultural differences can be seen in sharp relief. The 'museums effect', to paraphrase Svetlana Alpers, besides turning everything into a work of art, also has the power to provoke personal knowledge, memories and feelings and of reinforcing social assumptions in relation to the objects displayed (Alpers, 1991: 26). Museums, indeed, have to be the cultural spokespeople for different ethnicities and to mediate the communication between them. Consequently, it is clear that museums and their role within societies are constantly shaped and modified according to the time and visitors' needs (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). Indeed, nowadays, one of the primary purposes of the museum is to make the objects displayed accessible (Museums Association, 1997). However, the museum's effect is mainly based on the principle of 'what we want to see' and not on 'what we are looking at'. In other words, the surrounding context helps in stimulating ideas and beliefs among the visitors, which they try to recognise and identify in what they observe. Therefore, these immediate mental associations can be defined as personal and contextualised interpretations (Thomas, 1998).

In parallel with this, since their birth, museums have satisfied an unchanging and primordial need of human beings: the need for remembrance. In museums, people

see collected and re-presented memories and histories, which have been saved from oblivion. In museums, people's knowledge and feelings interlace and every single piece is not just a rarity but it is, principally, a 'palpable' and 'speaking' fragment of the human life and its intangible heritage. Given that, as Miller says, 'the first role of the object [is] to symbolise the people who created it' (Miller, 1994: 13),¹ it is essential to interpret and read these fragments appropriately (Tilley, 1991).² It is not enough to determine the function or assign a specific name to the object, but it is important to define an emotional link between the contemporary public and the past users or owners of the item and its history. Only in this way, can objects be opened to a new and different public and start to tell the people's histories, and reveal their secrets and materialise the character of their intangible inheritance.

This thesis is concerned with investigating the relationship between some members of the Yorùbá diaspora currently in Britain and Yorùbá ceremonial/religious material on display in British museums. The intention is to explore both the nature of this relationship, and its implications for the wider issues of the relationship between migrant communities and museum material, which originates in their own ancestral culture. Historically such material had what may be called its 'first biographical' phase within its original culture, probably during the early nineteenth century; its second phase included its collection, during the middle-later nineteenth century or early twentieth century by British officials and merchants and its donations to, and display within, British museums where it was seen chiefly by English (or Scottish or Welsh) visitors; its third, contemporary, phase comprises the experience of it within the museums, by (among others) people who are broadly descended, both genetically and culturally, from the groups who first made and used the objects. This third phase examines the life of the chosen objects, and the way in which it is, broadly, viewed by the descendants of the originating groups is the focus for this study. Yorùbá society has always been characterised by a holistic attitude to spirituality in which all life and all material culture is informed by the divine. However, during the period c. 1930-1940, British collectors were particularly attracted to material which they believed to be 'religious', in the sense that it was used within what they, and their indigenous guides, saw as specifically religious ceremonies, which were intended to engage the attention of divine powers. As a

¹ Cf. also Lidchi, 1997.

² Cf. also Langer, 1951.

result, the bulk of the objects discussed here are frequently also 'works of art', as Europeans understood this phrase. All these issues require a discussion of religion as a cultural system and the next five sections are devoted to this.

This introductory chapter has been structured in nine main parts. Part one is concerned with definitions of the spiritual-religious heritage of a culture, as an ordered system. The analysis of ceremonial items has a main focus on African material culture in general and specifically on Yorùbá objects, and their primary function as religious symbolic message-bearing entities. Parts two and three discuss the nature of religion and communication styles; part four presents the postcolonial debate, which contextualises this research; part five is a short overview of the concept of 'diaspora', predominantly in relation to Yorùbá individuals, who are living in contemporary Britain. Part six considers the ways in which Western museums represent religion. Part seven relates to issues of interpretation and representation of non-Western religious objects - conceived as the material expression of the intangible heritage of a culture in contemporary European museums. The final two parts discuss the research presented here and set out the research questions.

1.2. Religion as an ordered system within societies.

In order to understand interpretive processes and their influences on the Western way of re-presenting and displaying ceremonial objects (both Western and non-Western) in museums, it is necessary to start this chapter by analysing the concept of 'religion' itself. First of all, 'religion' must be conceived of as a part of the intangible heritage of a culture. Indeed, it is clear that every religion plays a very important role in society even if, nowadays, a universal and absolute definition of that term is not possible. However, the sociological perspective furnishes us with two interesting starting points. Firstly, we should be aware of the fact that by using the word religion, 'we are constructing a category – religion - based upon European languages and cultures and [therefore this] term has not, necessarily, an equivalent in other parts of the world' (Bowie, 2000: 22).³

³ Cf. also Nottingham, 1971; Durrans, 2000.

Secondly, especially if we refer to contemporary societies, it is appropriate to note that nowadays 'what people have, is not religion but rather a particular set of concrete behaviours and beliefs which might be regarded as religion' (Durrans, 2000: 64). In addition, the body of literature concerning the topic of religion in other cultures could appear to be influenced by some colonial and old fashion prejudices. For instance, due to a lack of appropriate knowledge of non-Western societies and traditions, the 'other's' religion and linked ceremonial practices are still easily associated (even if less than in the past) with the adjectives 'primitive' or 'superstitious' (Coombes, 1994). Plainly, such judgements have no place in a sociological perspective, which regards the function of religion as a complex system (Clarke, 1994: 45) and wishes to explore the social role that it plays 'in making moral interpretations of human history and social arrangements' (Nottingham, 1971: 115).⁴

Religion is first of all associated with the individual experience of what is considered by human beings to be sacred, divine and holy (Derrida, 1998: 3). However, by asserting that 'the responses of an organism's to the environment are adaptive and are dictated by that organism needs', religion becomes the only way to react to some precarious and unexpected situations (Langer, 1942: 28). Apropos of this, Clifford Geertz has observed that religion has always helped individuals 'to endure situations of emotional stress by open[ing] up escapes from such situations and such impasses as offers no empirical way out except by ritual and belief into the domain of the supernatural' (Geertz, 1973: 103).⁵

Nevertheless, if we contemplate a more philosophical bias – such as the one suggested by Jacques Derrida - and we reflect on the idea of religion separately from the idea of the practice of the cult itself, we can also start to define the social function of religion as an ordered system (Derrida, 1998). 'Religion is an important [...] part of the complex system by which human beings are enabled to live together in an orderly arrangement of social relations' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952: 154). Indeed, the observance of religion through practice and ceremonies gives a solemn and collective expression to social beliefs. In fact, the beliefs of a determined culture, translated into rites, are both the symbolic expressions of certain sentiments within

⁴ Cf. also Radcliffe-Brown, 1952.

⁵ Cf. also Lewis, 1994; Nottingham, 1971.

the society and 'reaffirm [the] strengthens of those sentiments on which the social solidarity depends' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952: 157, 164).⁶

Regarding religious symbols and the way they work in societies, Goodwin Watson offers an interesting perspective, which has been constituted on a psychological basis. To be precise, for Watson, 'the symbols that embody basic ideas of life and death, of the man and the world, are naturally sacred' (Watson, 1969: 119).⁷ In fact, due to the social nature of humans (and, in consequence to all human activities), an individual feels part of a group when the symbols he/she uses in his/her 'private thinking, have been given their meaning in socially shared experiences' (Watson, 1969: 119). To clarify, it is possible to define the symbols shared by a society as collective symbols (Watson, 1969; Lewis, 1994). Due to their collective nature, these symbols can bring together individuals in social groups, by coding 'customary convention [that] can only be understood if they are familiar' for all the members of the community (Leach, 1976: 11).

Moreover, this assumption implies that, 'at some deeply abstract level, all our different senses are coded in the same way' (Leach, 1976: 11). Therefore, by using a certain set of signs and symbols, human beings are capable of projecting 'mentally generated concepts onto things and actions in the external world' (Leach, 1976: 9). This process of generating and projecting ideas can also be defined as a process of 'symbolisation', that is an unconscious but natural act of the human mind (Langer, 1951; Pearce, 1994). Susan Langer, taking the same line as Goodwin Watson, points out that religious symbolism must not be considered as a discursive process but more as a 'presentational' one (Langer, 1951). Indeed, it does not furnish a sequence of connected, religious events but is more a 'revelation' of the distinct meaning behind them. In fact, the main feature of a symbolist process is the association of some symbols – which are the immediate expressions of the unconscious - not directly with a public object or event but with a social conception (Langer, 1951).

From this starting concept, every thing, every artefact, or every artwork could be turned into a symbol that, consequently, participates meaningfully in a web of

⁶ Cf. also Umeasiegbu, 1982; Watson, 1969.

⁷ Cf. also Langer, 1951.

shared significance called 'culture'. Indeed, culture becomes an elaborate system of classification whose units are symbols (Foster, 1994: 366). Apropos of this, it is interesting to consider Foucault's historical exploration on the processes of knowledge (Foucault, 1970). In *The Order of Things*, Foucault shows how within a community - and in different times - cultural codes are always determined by a basic system of similarities and differences, which help to define, keep and classify the social order (Foucault, 1970). This highlights the impossibility, or at least the obvious difficulty, of a correct interpretation and definition of a broad and unknown category such as the religious one. In other words, by considering the power of objects in comprising the holy, we are trying to answer to the ancient dilemma of Saint Augustine relating to the sand and the sea: how it is possible to represent and contain a mystery or a multifaceted set of beliefs 'in the presence of a thing, even if it is immense?' (Gargani, 1998: 120). On the basis of these observations, the next section will, therefore, deal with the way objects can become symbolic social codes.

1.3. Religious objects as codes of communication within society.

It is useful to understand the general process that gives objects a sacred value. Susan Langer again assists in this endeavour by giving a philosophical/anthropological input to our analysis. Indeed, as Langer explains, 'sacred objects are not intrinsically precious but derive their values from their religious use' (Langer, 1951: 155). Their meaning depends on the context (which could be a shrine or a church or a temple) of a sacred place and for this reason, ritual objects are the material representations of divinity and are pervaded by 'the aura of sanctity' (Leach, 1976: 38).

However, this 'aura of sanctity' – which is initially only a 'metaphorical concept' of the human mind - permeates the same objects 'even when the ritual, which firstly generated their sanctity, is finished' (Leach, 1976: 38). To be more explicit, this assertion, which is based on linguistics, states that objects are the materialisation of a sacred meaning given to them. Indeed, spirituality 'is not a method but a language; it is part of [...] that greater phenomenon, ritual, which is the language of religion' (Langer, 1951: 49). In this way, objects are part of a sentence and allow

the articulation of a social discourse. Objects, as bearing entities of social codes of communication and as physical apparatus of an ideology, determine and permit a process of interaction within the community through shared assumptions (Hall, 1997; Kwane, 1996; Durrans, 2000).

An appropriate example of this is given by the *Gèlèdé* masks from the Yorùbá ethnic group in Nigeria. Indeed, it is possible to consider these masks both as ceremonial objects, characteristic of a local festival, and as sacred objects, that express a specific spirituality (Layiwola, 2000). Actually, considering that the significance of every artefact depends upon its landscape and 'locational relationships' (Pearce, 1994: 130), we can deduce that 'in their original African context most work of art [...] were literally viewed differently from the way we see them' (Vogel, 1989: 11). African masks - that were seen in religious ceremonies being worn by costumed figures moving in performance, or not seen at all because they were such a natural part of the performance - in contemporary Western museums are evaluated and labelled in several ways. They may be described as 'ethnographic items, used during local ceremonies', or as 'inspiring works of art'. Dele Layiwola also helps in defining the original function of the masks, explaining that 'on the African continent, the medium of the mask or the [...] costume of a masquerade is the invention of a spectral medium' (Layiwola, 2000: 3). *Gèlèdé* masks are, for the Yorùbá community, the medium through which they communicate with a god or ancestor but, at the same time, they represent the god and the ancestor. These kinds of objects are the 'message bearing entities' of a religious code within the Yorùbá community (Pearce, 1999: 20). The *Gèlèdé* masks, as with many other objects in Yorùbá culture, materialise a part of the Yorùbá intangible heritage,⁸ which is the basis (cultural, religious and social) for the perpetuation of community's life.

This section has considered the process that gives objects a sacred value and allows them to become social symbols. However, given that this study explores the relationship between some members of the Yorùbá diaspora and their ancestral material displayed in British museums, it will be useful to outline the notion of creolised culture by briefly presenting the postcolonial debate.

⁸ Dawson Munjeri, 'Intangible heritage in Africa: could it be a case of much ado about nothing?', http://www.international.icomos.org/munjeri_eng.htm (21/11/2001).

1.4. The postcolonial debate and its importance in this study.

In order to give a complete view of the historical and theoretical framework of the thesis, it is necessary to present, albeit briefly, the postcolonial debate. The origins of 'postcolonialism' - and therefore of its debate - are diverse and contested (Hill, 2005). Indeed, postcolonialism is not a single theory, as Abrahamsen observes, neither it is a distinct theory, based on a consistent body of thought (Abrahamsen, 2003). On the contrary, postcolonialism is a set of complex and multifaceted ideas and problems, related to the interaction between the Western colonisers and the non-Westerners colonised. Therefore, in the context of this study, postcolonialism will be considered as a complex set of ideas and problems.

There are several definitions of 'postcolonialism'. However, the most appropriate for this study is by Simon During. According to During, postcolonialism 'was (and is) an intellectual effort at managing the aftermath of the colonial past in an era when official political relations of colonialism had all but ended' (During, 2000: 388). Hence, postcolonialism is concerned with the legacy of Colonialism and the interconnectedness of the colonial and postcolonial eras and as such, it has a relatively brief history, in the context of the Western Academy (Hill, 2005). Nevertheless, since postcolonialism is a central study in the Western Academy, one of the major critiques made of it has been the fact that it was envisaged as a theoretical product of the West, with limited and concrete relevance to developing countries (Abrahamsen, 2003). As a consequence, given that there is not a unified school of thought about postcolonialism, and given also that this is not an in-depth analysis of postcolonialism, this section will only briefly present one particularly relevant element among the postcolonial central issues. This is the issue of identity and hybridism, both of the coloniser and of the colonised (Hill, 2005; Abrahamsen, 2003; Childs and Williams, 1997; Ahluwalia 2001).

Numerous thinkers and writers have been concerned about postcolonialism and its critique (Loomba, 1996; Moore-Gilbert, 1997; Yung, 2001). However, this thesis has

been based on Edward Said's work and perspective.⁹ This is because Said started the critical discussion on the differences and oppositions between colonizer and colonised (Childs and Williams, 1997). Additionally, Said has based his work - especially '*Orientalism*' - on Foucault's idea of power and its relationship to knowledge: 'Orientalism represents a form of knowledge and discourse intimately connected to the [Western] structures and practises of power that have prevailed in the world for the past two centuries' (Hill, 2005: 142).¹⁰ The notion of the differences between colonizers and colonised and the Foucauldian idea of power and knowledge are both crucial in the postcolonial debate. Indeed, they have been the basis of the understanding of the postcolonial notion of identity. As During explains, in postcolonialism 'categories like 'primitive', 'residual' and underdeveloped' lost their veneer of political neutrality, everyone become a contemporary, a legitimate citizen of the present' (During, 2000: 388). Therefore, postcolonialism is related to the way the West and the Rest have produced and reinforced their identities and to the fact that postcolonial relations 'cannot be understood in terms of a one-way relationship of domination and power-over' (Abrahamsen, 2003: 207). In terms of identity with, for example, Africa, the notion of African identity cannot be considered as fixed, neither can the understanding of the West only exist from the recognition of its developed and changed relationship with Africa (Abrahamsen, 2003). In postcolonial perspectives, identity is linked to the concept of hybridity (which is the way in which the coloniser and the colonised have forged a relationship to each other) and to the concept of resistance.

Certainly, the postcolonial debate is useful for this study because it provides a constructive perspective on the 'view of power as productive of identities and subjectivities' (Abrahamsen, 2003: 198). This perspective, therefore, offers a historical and social framework for understanding the process of creolisation of cultures, and cultural symbols and traditions, within (as well as outside) the non-Western museum context (Ahluwalia, 2001). To be specific, it is important to consider postcolonialism in the context of the African museum debate. Emmanuel Arinze states: 'the majority of museums in Africa share a common heritage in their

⁹ It is worth mentioning that while Edward Said concentrated his analysis on the differences between the West and the Rest, Homi Bhabha, a critical theorist, (1994) examined their points of similarity in order to define the identities both of the colonisers and of the colonised: in other words, he concentrated more on the process of understanding hybrid identities (Childs and Williams, 1997; Hill, 2005).

¹⁰ Cf. also Childs and Williams, 1997.

history as national institutions: they are the products of the colonial era and are essentially twentieth-century creations' (Arinze, 1998: 31). Therefore, as products of the colonial era, museums in Africa have gone through (and still are) great, challenging changes. More than in other countries, museums in Africa have to face difficult political and economical problems and the African crisis appears not to have spared museums. Arinze points out, that the key problems areas are: an acute shortage of qualified and well-trained personnel; lack of funding; museum security (in relation to the high percentage of theft of museum objects); poor leadership and lack of equipment, materials and patronage (Arinze 1998). During the last couple of years, in particular, African museums have been trying to tackle all these issues, by redefining their missions and their role among local communities. For the biennium 2004-2006, AFRICOM (the International Council of African Museums) has listed the following three points as priorities to work on: the promotion and protection of intangible African cultural heritage; the professional development of African museum professionals, in order to increase their support among local communities; and finally, the establishment of a network of heritage professionals and institutions (concerned with museums and cultural heritage) in Africa.¹¹ These priorities show a change in the orientation of African museums: from the colonial invention to cultural institutions that 'enrich knowledge and integrate urban cultures and contemporary events into [their] spheres of activities' (Arinze, 1998: 36).

In the context of this study, the postcolonial deepens the historical and theoretical framework. Indeed, it helps us to understand how Westerns and non-Westerns have produced and reinforced their new postcolonial identities, through a two-way rather than unilateral process. This has also contributed to the contemporary redefinition of the idea of the museum in Africa.

1.5. Diaspora today and the construction of Yorùbá ethnicity.

The relationship between communities and objects (i.e. cultural, religious, and traditional) is strongly determined by the self-definition of these communities within societies (Parkin, 1999). As initially stated in this chapter, contemporary societies are

¹¹ AFRICOM Program Priorities 2004-2006', <http://www.africom.museum/today/priorities.html> (as 26/04/2006).

made up with different ethnic groups. Many of these ethnic groups are 'diasporic' groups, because they consist of people who live in small communities outside their homeland (Tölöy, 2003; Parkin, 1999). The Yorùbás in Britain, upon whom this thesis concentrates, can be regarded as one such: as a result, it is essential to consider the concept of diaspora and its implications.

After 1965 the term diaspora started to be used to define dispersed ethnic groups (Tölöy, 2003) and became an extensively used term both in the social sciences and humanities, and in the political sphere (Ohliger and Münz, 2003). Nowadays the word diaspora 'survives in the forms of a series of subordinate, hierarchically encapsulated enclaves, within more powerful social and state foundations that function as their host' (Tölöy, 2003: 69). According to Tölöy, diaspora exists in three 'overlapping but distinct forms'.¹² One of these forms, and actually the one most relevant to this study, is the discursive existence of the diaspora, which exists 'as objects of knowledge [and] as concepts and problems for a number of scholarly disciplines', ranging as for example, as in this thesis, from social anthropology to museum studies (Tölöy, 2003: 56).

The notion of 'diaspora', however, is very diverse and also implies ethnicity, identity and cultural traditions. Mason explains that ethnicity, understood as race, is a modern concept resulting from the 'global expansion of European societies' and 'the emergence of new ways of thinking' in relation to human differences (Mason, 2000: 5). A product of the modern world, ethnicity is both instrumental and situational (Mason, 2000; Banks, 1996). Among a diasporic group, the construction of an ethnicity, understood as a communal identity, is essential in order to make the diasporic group a recognised and defined social constituent of the hosting community. Among diasporic groups, therefore, the notions of culture and traditions are fluid and constructed, and a process of continual redefinition of their ethnicity is implied as well as 'self-conscious appropriations and rejections of elements of traditions' (Dudley, 2002: 143). This is done in order both to strengthen the sense of identity among people with the same ethnicity and to make the differences with

¹² 'First [diasporas] are actual social formations made up of individuals, extended families, small groups and the relations conducted between them, within a partially closed communal field. [...] Second, diasporas exist as multiple imagined communities. That is to say, they are constantly articulated by their own individuals and institutions members, who construct and disseminate numerous representations of what they are, what their diasporic experience feels like and what it means or it should mean. [...]; the third form of diasporic existence is wholly discursive' (Tölöy, 2003: 56).

people outside the diasporic groups more evident. Indeed, once the diasporic group has been socially recognised among the hosting society, the maintenance of the communal identity is crucial to keeping the cultural distinctiveness of the diasporic group. For instance, in relation to the Yorùbá members of the Yorùbá diaspora living in Britain, traditional religion acts are a pivotal component in the social definition and maintenance of Yorùbá ethnicity. Traditional Yorùbá religion, in fact, becomes a distinctive feature that characterises Yorùbá ethnic groups among British societies and differentiates them from other African ethnic groups. It helps, in other words, what Cohen calls 'the process of re-tribalisation', which implies the struggle for privilege of an ethnic group within a formal political system (Cohen, 1969: 2). This process takes advantage of 'the manipulation of customs, myths, symbols and ceremonials from cultural tradition in order to articulate an informal political organisation' (Banks, 1996: 42). It is worth saying that this cultural manipulation becomes possible because it is based on changeable objects (such as customs, symbols and ceremonial), which originated from cultural traditions that are, on the contrary, unchanging as in the case of traditional religions (Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1992).

Regarding this, David Parkin (1999) and Sandra Dudley (2002) offer an interesting perspective. It is essential to note that Parkin bases his argument exclusively on an anthropological point of view. However, in the context of the diaspora, Parkin usefully highlights the value of considering the problems relating to human population movement and therefore to the conditions of 'vulnerability and uncertainty', which affect both refugees and people who have spontaneously moved away from their original country (Parkin, 1999; Dudley 2002). Parkin focuses mostly on refugees and explains how 'under the conditions of rapid [...] dispersal [as, for example, in the diaspora], private mementoes may take the place of interpersonal relations as a depository of sentiment and cultural knowledge' (Parkin, 1999: 317). Indeed he points out the necessity (on behalf of displaced groups) to recreate 'viable societies' in the new hosting context, by embodying and encoding memories, across generations, and by independently fixed territorial reference points. In the context of this study, the importance played by this concept is evident, because it argues that objects, once moved from their original place to a new environment, might assume new meanings and values, which tend to strengthen the sense of identity and ethnicity of the displaced group.

Among diasporic groups, the notions of culture and tradition are fluid and changeable. They are crucial for the process of redefinition or re-tribalisation, which reinforce cultural and political identities. As objects, symbols, customs, myths and ceremonials all perceived as deriving from cultural traditions, they are all part of this ongoing diasporic forging process.

1.6. Western museums and the representation of religion.

Due to their various meanings, the value and significance of objects inevitably changes when they are moved from their original place to a new environment. This is the case, for example, with religious objects (i.e. used in rituals and ceremonies), which 'have been physically detached, carried away and installed for viewing' in a profane context such as the museums' one (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991: 394). Therefore, the 'intangible and ephemeral essence' of this kind of object could not be moved with them (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991: 394). Consequently, these objects - once used in religious rituals - 'may have become obsolete and gone to [...] museums acquiring different significance and meaning' (Revenhill, 1996: 266). Their original spiritual and social function is interpreted and labelled according to Western social conventions and museum classifications.¹³ Actually, Mark O'Neill perceptively states that 'religious meanings in the mind and heart of the believer are very different from those in the mind and heart of the scholar' (O'Neill, 1996: 192). In regard to this, for instance, traditional Yorùbá religious objects are not sacred or religious objects in themselves, but become sacred through a set of ritual actions, as in the case of carved wooden figures.¹⁴ These types of figures are, in fact, meaningless and powerless pieces of carved wood, until they are placed in a shrine. In the shrine, a place special because it is distinct from anywhere else (Paine, 2004), the wooden figure becomes the 'hosting house', the physical body that has to host the god to whom the shrine is dedicated.¹⁵

At this point, it is also legitimate to ask how it is possible to exhibit the 'holy' (or what Otto calls the 'numinous') appropriately in museums and, at the same time

¹³ Cf. Chapter 7, p.172.

¹⁴ See Chapter 5, Fig. p. 118.

¹⁵ Cf. Chapter 2, p.49.

satisfy the reverence, respect and tradition of believers, with sufficient sensitivity (Arthur, 2000). Undoubtedly, one of the primary issues that curators have to face in exhibiting the sacred is related to an effective exhibition of ceremonial objects, especially from a non-Western culture. Museum displays should neither be limited to a scholarly transmission of 'religious traditions from which they stem' nor to a well-documented, ethnographic presentation of interesting and exotic items (Arthur, 2000). When the problem of exhibiting the sacred is related to ceremonial African items, the challenges seem to be multiplied. The vast majority of African religious objects have always been either aestheticised as art icons or 'treated by curators as evidence of the exotic beliefs of people remote in time, place and culture or as local history objects like any others' (O'Neill, 1996: 189). To clarify, African ceremonial objects - indeed African material culture in general - had (and still have) to deal with many European prejudices, a heritage of the past Colonialism that classifies and labels them more often as tribal fetishes than as sacred tools (Coombes, 1994; Shelton, 1995).

Regarding this, an ironic but truthful assertion from an expert connoisseur of African art seems appropriate. William Fagg, indeed, affirms that in relation to Africa and its culture, many mistakes have been made since European artists and curators 'first discovered how to misunderstand African art' (Fagg, 1982: 5). The words 'Africa' and 'Africans' have for a long time, been 'synonymous with irrational, depraved and different while European people have been regarded as rational, virtuous, mature and normal' (Said, 1995: 40). Since the Black Continent was discovered, Europeans have devoted their lives to the 'noble attempt' of the 'domestication of the exotic' (Said, 1995: 60). The same process of 'creating knowledge' - that Edmund Said has observed for the Orient - was also unconsciously utilised by Europeans for Africa: indeed, the Western knowledge of Africa created 'Africa', its inhabitants and its culture (Said, 1995).

Museums, as the products of this imperialist history, have experimented with different ways of displaying the 'Others', whose material culture has been mainly interpreted as ethnographic specimens¹⁶ or as a fascinating new art. Consequently,

¹⁶ Ethnography is a word that has had a complex history in English. Among several others, one of its key uses has been in the traditional language of museums, where in 'Curators of Ethnography', 'Ethnographic collections' or 'Ethnographic Gallery', the word simply means 'Material not from Europe or (usually) the East and far East. It is in this sense that the word 'ethnography' is used in this thesis.

the taxonomic impulse of the past 'to classify nature and man into types' (Said, 1995: 199) has long been the basis for the 'binary organisation' (Foucault, 1970), which identifies and defines things according to the principle of 'what they are not'. However, when certain categories are also utilised to organise an entire culture, the result is usually to oppose and polarise distinctions between different societies. For instance, in relation to Africa, an inappropriate use of the word 'tribe' has 'led to the presumption of discontinuities in both the production and the use of material objects, whether 'sacred' or 'profane' (Revenhill, 1996). In fact, Edmund Said observes that by using categories such as Western and non-Western, we 'limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions and societies' (Said, 1995: 46). In other words, we set up symbolic (but difficult to break) frontiers between what it is considered usual and unusual, normal and different (Hall, 1997).

Indeed, it is indisputable that the concept of Africa in museums has been shaped according to European terms and that African people have been forced to 'assimilate and take somebody else's history and life' (Nzegwu, 2000: 13). In fact, 'the politics of defining or representing African objects often has more to do with the interests of those with the power to represent than it does with understanding those being represented' (Hardin and Arnoldi, 1996: 2). On the basis of this assumption, African objects (and in specific religious and ceremonial ones) have been interpreted in museums through a strategy defined by Ivan Karp as 'exoticizing' (Karp, 1991). According to this process, objects from a non-Western culture are presented in museums through a strong emphasis on their differences from the host displays. However, what is different from our own culture is found to be also very charming: in fact, the Western construction of the 'Other' has been built on the desire of encountering and recognising these alternative and exotic societies that have kept their original 'pureness', because they are excluded from the capitalist process. The basic mistake is indeed evident: 'the Western connoisseurs assign themselves the job of interpreting the meaning and significance of artistic objects produced by people who are, they argue, less well equipped to perform this task' (Price, 1989: 120).

In the contemporary scene, Western museums have still been able to identify and classify objects from other material cultures 'principally according to style and function, employing analogy' (Musonda, 1996: 168). However, despite the past, a

manifold approach (anthropological and artistic) seems to be more appropriate and more sensitive to the issues of suitable identification, definition and interpretation of this kind of item. In other words, 'there is not [a museum] without a place of configuration; without a technique of repetition or without a certain exteriority' (Derrida, 1995: 11). It is, therefore, possible to affirm that in considering African material culture, Western people behave as the madman described by Foucault, that 'groups all signs together and leads them with a resemblance that never ceases to proliferate' (Foucault, 1970:49). This kind of behaviour is due to the necessity of explaining and fitting into our Western canons (or orders) everything that does not look similar to that which we are used to.

It could be more useful to act as the Foucauldian poet that 'brings similitude to the sign that speaks it' (Foucault, 1970: 50). Notwithstanding its several definitions (inclusive of art objects, ethnographic specimens or even tribal fetishes), African material culture is first of all, the 'speaking' manifestation of another culture, outside its original environment. Consequently, its objects (like every other object from another culture) 'will speak to you and what they say, will be shaped by what you are as well by what they are' (Kwane, 1996: 26). From this perspective, the use of ceremonial/religious objects in African societies appears clearer: these objects symbolically mediate 'the relationship of human souls to fate and destiny' (Morton, 2000: 8). Indeed in African groups, symbolism involves all the aspects of social life and, for this reason, the community regards the creation of every artefact, as art. However, this 'artistic symbolism' – very refined in some groups, such as the Yorùbá one - must be considered as the basic reason for the West identifying and classifying religious objects as art (Chuang, 2000). Therefore, for a better interpretation of African religious and ceremonial material in museums, we should be aware that this culture is a 'mixture' of different religious and social arts (Umeasiegbu, 1982), which can include everything, from the *oriki*¹⁷ to the most elegant stool.

At this point it is legitimate to ask how to read, interpret and keep in Western museums the metaphysical essence of religious and ceremonial non-Western objects, and also, what are the standard Western interpretative criteria that define objects as religious objects, fetishes or as art. It is probable that Western

¹⁷ The *oriki*, the praise poetry, is a central component of almost every significant ceremony. Its function is essential because the *oriki* 'makes' relationships inside the local community by a fabulous sequence of the present through the past. Cf. Umeasiegbu, 1982; cf. also Barber, 1990.

interpretative canons are strongly influenced by that social attitude that award something with a symbol and definite meaning – or trait – only when it is differentiated from some other contrary signs or symbols (Leach, 1976; Le Cron Foster, 1994). In brief, we are dealing once more with the Foucauldian principle of order or Derrida's system of the archive. Indeed, it could seem easier to relate these questions to what we are more used to looking at, for example, Christian objects. These kinds of objects – inside or outside the museum's environment – reflect more than non-Western ceremonial objects 'what we are used to', both in terms of aesthetics and social codes. For example, the Italian treasures of Cathedrals¹⁸ are kept in institutions (the dioceses), which are very similar to museums that aim both to preserve such items considered refined works of art and at the same time, present expressions of the believers' devotion (Santi, 1997: 16). Thus, the attempts of fitting non-Western material within Western canons risk guiding us to the creation of museum displays without a real theme: to a 'soko risina musoro', a 'tale without a theme'. Dawson Munjeri, former vice-president of the ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), has observed that 'the tangible can only be interpreted through the intangible'¹⁹ and especially in the case of African societies, cultural heritage is more about values, feelings and beliefs than edifices. For instance, the introduction by Rowland Abíódún to the catalogue of African art *What Follows Six is More than Seven* is a very useful tool in realising how the *àse*, 'the creative power in the verbal and visual [African] arts' is strictly linked to African spirituality (Abíódún, 1995: 2). Guided by the awareness that, without this *àse*, every 'attractive artefact would fail to make an appreciable religio-aesthetic impact' (Abíódún, 1995: 5), this catalogue is a mixture of African popular wisdom, prayers and art notions explained to Western people through certain objects. Therefore, this catalogue offers an assorted view of African culture from different aspects.

This thesis is concerned with the investigation of the relationship between some members of the Yorùbá diaspora (currently in Britain) and Yorùbá ceremonial/religious material on display in British museums and thus for, this chapter has presented an overview of the main, relevant issues. Based on the

¹⁸ The term 'treasure' refers literally to very precious (for the material) and unique (for the manufacture) objects related to catholic liturgy and created, during the past, by selected and named local artists.

¹⁹ Dawson Munjeri, 'Intangible heritage in Africa: could it be a case of much ado about nothing?', http://www.international.icomos.org/munjeri_eng.htm (21/11/2001).

presented literature review, the final section of the chapter will briefly state the need for this research and the research questions.

1.7. 'This is not a place of worship': some conclusions.

Given the ambiguity, which can permeate religious places as well as religious objects in a non-religious context, Chris Arthur provides a useful and significant example for this discussion. (Arthur, 2000). Arthur says that, at the entrance to Cologne Cathedral, it is possible to read a sign warning visitors/believers that: 'This is not a museum'. Provocatively, but astutely, Arthur replies in the same article that the opposite message ('This is not a place of worship') should be placed in all museums that display religious objects (Arthur, 2000). In fact, a basic problem with interpreting and representing religious objects (and in particular those from a non-Western culture) in European museums, relates to the obstinate pretension of representing and 'keeping' the holy and so inevitably, the mass of visitors becomes the mass of 'tourist pilgrims'. Notwithstanding the fact that curators try, with many and sterling efforts to display the faiths of others in the most understandable, respectful and artistic way, museums are not – and obviously will never be - places of worship.

Once these kinds of objects have left their original context, they have irremediably lost their sacred character. Therefore, it might be better to try, as Mark O'Neill suggests, to communicate to visitors the complex range of feelings associated with materials at the time of their creation (O'Neill, 1996). One of the starting points of this chapter has been the awareness that 'societies or cultures differ in the substance of the knowledge they maintain and transmit, in their interests, in the scope of their accumulated ideas' (Lewis, 1994: 566), and that objects (religious or not) contribute to the construction of the identity (Buckley, 2000; Rea, 1997). In fact, objects, and particularly the ones connected with spirituality, are the materialisation of social codes and of the most sacred concepts, which can, therefore be *re-presented* only by several alternative standardised symbols (Leach, 1976).

During the examination of the body of literature relevant to this topic, it has also become evident that in displaying non-Western religious objects, museums end up

both with crude ethnically based generalisations or with more art-centred, conjectural frameworks (Rea, 1997). In fact, in relation to this, William Fagg and Margaret Plass suggest a new way of looking at African art: it is possible to disengage oneself from the traditional Western understanding and move to another point of view, which stems from understanding that 'art', especially in the African continent, is the way in which a group differentiates itself (Fagg and Plass, 1964).

However, this persistent comparison/opposition (between Western and non-Western worlds) can be very restrictive for museums in the representation of non-Western ceremonial items. First of all, African material culture has been (and still is) examined mainly in relation to the European canons of art (Vogel, 1991). Secondly, we Westerners should be aware, as Susan Vogel has observed, that Western classificatory categories do not reflect African ones. In fact, 'if we take [African objects] out of the dark, [and we put them in the museums' context, we] steal their movement, quit the music, and strip them of additions' (Vogel, 1989: 14). In other words, 'we make them accessible to our visual culture but we render them unrecognisable or meaningless to the cultures they come from' (Vogel, 1989: 14).

Therefore, in understanding and interpreting non-Western ceremonial artefacts, it seems crucial for museums to consider the intersection between the way the West sees them literally and the metaphorical view European culture has of them. 'Everything can be sacred or profane, full of meaning or perfectly senseless, seems [...] to be the simple consequence of what will look like the most mundane evidence and the most problematic of mysteries: the passage from the sensible to the intelligible by the way of the inscription of the trace' (Ferraris, 1998: 196). Consequently, in order to display and to transmit (in the most understandable and verisimilar way) the apparently incommunicable core of the holy (Arthur, 2000) we should try to possess that sacred knowledge that, as Foucault explained, resides in 'the opening up of a discovered, affirmed or secretly transmitted sign' of the culture of the others (Foucault, 1970: 59).

1.8. The need for this research.

In the previous section, it transpires that there have been studies on non-Western religious objects displayed in museums. However, these studies have predominantly presented the Western curatorial perspective, which has enhanced and reinforced the colonial stereotype of the exotic art object or of the mysterious ethnographic item. In addition, it is interesting to note that the existing literature (related to the Yorùbá ethnic group and its material culture) tends to diverge in two main directions. The first is a contrasting comparison between two different - and apparently antithetical - kinds of art, such as African and Western. The second literary tendency offers a 'ransoming' perspective of African art and culture from the colonial stereotype of the primitives. However, although both these biases consider the Western stereotypes in relation to African culture, they do not investigate the African stereotypes in relation to African culture and to Western culture. Specifically, the interpretative processes that from the distinction, which is commonly employed in museums, between sacred objects and fetishes or between religious art and broad cultural materials, seems to be analysed only from a Western, academic point of view.

Therefore, in terms of a contribution to knowledge in the field of museum studies, the present research will bring new and distinctive evidence, on a partially investigated issue, to the representation of traditional Yorùbá religious material culture in museums in Britain. The research will present both the museum professional's perspective and the contemporary Yorùbá point of view,²⁰ towards a shared and exhibited religious heritage. In this way, the research and the approach proposed will contribute to a wider understanding of traditional Yorùbá religious material culture in Western museums, with all the extended implications, which this embodies.

²⁰ The Yorùbá point of view involves members of the Yorùbá diaspora living in Britain.

1.9. The research questions and the structure of the thesis.

Since this research is concerned with the interpretation and representation of traditional Yorùbá religious objects in Western museums, its aim has been to investigate and identify the interpretive criteria both of Yorùbá immigrants (living in Britain) and of museum professionals (working in Britain) towards a historically (but not religiously or symbolically) common heritage - such as traditional African religious objects. Therefore, the main questions of this study are as follows:

- To what extent, are Western museums a neutral environment where all the religions can be presented as cultural truths?
- How do Western museums' curators approach the topic of sub-Saharan African religion in museums?
- Is it possible to represent a culture or only to display specific objects that mirror one aspect of that culture?
- How do Yorùbá immigrants relate to their traditional religious objects displayed in museums?
- What are the stereotypes of potential Yorùbá museum visitors in relation to their religious objects?

The thesis has been organised into the following seven chapters (Chapters 2-8), in order to develop a view of the topic and to investigate the subject. A selected range of projects has been employed: a temporary exhibition, analyses of major museum exhibitions, and structured discussions with museum professionals and members of the Yorùbá diaspora in Britain. The study is framed within a broad symbolic conceptual approach and applies fieldwork methodologies. Chapter Two will be concerned with symbols and the way they work within societies, concentrating on religious symbols. In order to frame the context and to present a conceptual and historical review of museum displays, Chapter Three will give a historical excursus (c. 1890 - c. 2005) into the museum exhibits, which have presented Yorùbá material culture. Chapter Four will be concerned with methodology and the use of semiotics as an analytical tool. The following three chapters will be concerned with the four different projects, which form the basis of this research. Specifically, Chapter Five will discuss the fieldwork conducted among Yorùbá members of the Yorùbá diaspora

living in Leicester and Nottingham; Chapter Six will be concerned with the analysis of the ten interviews with museum professionals working in ten museum in the United Kingdom and finally Chapter Seven will be concerned with ten museum displays in the United Kingdom exhibiting traditional Yorùbá religious objects. The final Chapter (Eight) will offer some concluding remarks. Specifically, it will present the observations relating to the data analysis and will summarise the main points discussed in this thesis. The discussion will be supported and complemented by sets of illustrations, figures, and tables, which have been pivotal in effectively carrying out the analysis.

Chapter 2: Symbol: an expression of thought and social behaviour

2.1. Introduction: introducing the notion of symbols.

It should be stated from the outset, that the notion of 'symbols' as a concept which can organize human thinking and work as an analytical tool in areas such as those addressed by this thesis, is fundamental to this study. Accordingly, the following chapter examines and draws upon some aspects of this concept. Images, symbols, dreams and myths have been studied in relation to the human psyche, as the results or manifestations of the deepest needs and fantasies of human beings. By researching their basic meanings, it is believed that is possible to reach 'a better understanding of man [...] as he is, before he has come to terms with the conditions of History' (Eliade, 1961: 12). Specifically, by disclosing the secret or hidden meanings of symbols, the memories, the hopes, the fears, or even the whole structure of a culture, can be interpreted and revealed. Indeed, symbols are a kind of 'meta-language' of a communicative code, where human fantasy and knowledge are knowingly interlaced in order to explain the surrounding world. The duration of symbols can be endless, because they depend on the culture, which created them. Symbols are part of the symbolic heritage of a society, because, as the time elapses and the society evolves, they represent the primary feelings of that society.

Moreover, within a set of symbols, there are different categories. The aim of this chapter is to consider and examine the category of religious symbols as a mode of human thought, as well as the symbolic expression of the intangible heritage of a culture. Therefore, after a general introduction about the social characteristics of symbols and their way of working within societies, this chapter will consider religious symbols and their socially dominant and adjustive function. Since almost all the presented examples will refer to traditional African beliefs, the final section of this chapter will offer an overview of traditional African religion and religious symbolism in the Yorùbá culture.

2.2. The social characteristics of symbols.

In as much as we are talking about symbols and symbolism, it might be convenient to start this chapter by trying to answer the following question: 'what is a symbol?' A way of answering may be to look at the etymological root of the word, or by perhaps taking a look at some past, technical definitions given by eminent social anthropologists. As a result of following these lines of investigation we would probably end up defining the term 'symbol' in a way that is common knowledge and that has been probably been used by the majority of every eminent scholar: a 'symbol' is something that stands for something and represents - or expresses - something (Eliade, 1961; Lewis, 1977; Duncan, 1968); it is something that alludes to something else, perhaps different from it and often not known anymore. In fact, a symbol is definitely something mysterious that can connect the unknown and forgotten with the known (Turner, 1970) and that, to quote Victor Turner, is 'always the best possible expression of a relatively unknown fact' or things 'which is none the less recognised or postulated as existing' (Turner, 1970: 26). Thus, in order to answer the question: 'what is a symbol?' appropriately, it seems more useful to firstly identify the social characteristics of a symbol.

Symbols mirror perceptions of the surrounding world. By using symbols, people can find a way to give a special meaning to everything and, as Malcolm Hamilton has pointed out, 'nothing is arbitrary and accidental', because everything fits into a specific place (Hamilton, 2001: 69). It is also important to note that, notwithstanding beliefs, customs and values differ (and sometimes, are even antithetical) between different societies, and the process of symbolism – and particularly religious symbolism - is still a common feature everywhere. This is because symbolism is (as are beliefs and customs) part of living cultures (Hamilton, 2001). In fact, it is the presence of symbols, which keep a culture open to growth and to development, because symbolic images constitute part of a cultural heritage that can be shared and transmitted (Eliade, 1961). It is precisely through this use of symbols that people are able to materialise abstract concepts and to communicate with each other, because symbols are, if nothing else, 'social modes of thought' (Hall, 1997: 2).

Human beings are, to use a technical expression, 'cognitive agents', with 'a representational system that allows him or her to think about the [surrounding] world' (Hoselager, 1997: 29). To better explain this sentence it is useful to refer to the example of the Christian Cross, a common, but pertinent example. Generally, a Cross consists of two wooden axis (depending on the dimensions of the cross) nailed together. However, if we look at the Christian Cross with the eyes of a Christian believer, the Cross symbolises or stands for a wide set of concepts, specifically relating to the crucifixion of Jesus and also in general about the Christian faith. All these concepts, since they belong to a definite set (or representational system) can be 'represented' into words or pictures as official social symbols.

However, in order to make these 'representational systems' work, people as 'organisms capable of cognitive behaviour' (Hoselager, 1997: 29) must understand what they mean, by sharing a common code of communication, or common natural language. In particular, this is possible when people (or a group of people) belong to the same culture, because they give the same meaning to the same things, call the same things in the same way and adopt the same system of representation (Hall, 1997) to 'visualise' their ideas. Indeed, as Edmund Leach says, human communication is achieved by using the same expressive actions (signals, signs, and symbols) and by projecting concepts into things and actions in the external world (Leach, 1976).

This process of generating and projecting ideas, through some images that remain always active but unattainable, is what we call 'symbolism' and the projected ideas are the 'symbols'. The process of symbolism can turn everything that participates in the web of shared and classified significances of a culture, into a symbol. In fact, every culture elaborates a system of classification (whose units are the symbols), which works on the principle of 'what is not'. This principle, which Foucault calls 'the logic of the binary opposition' (Foucault, 1970: 52) allows people to define, arrange and classify things into a social order, through their similarities or differences. Indeed, it is strictly linked to the issue of the construction of meaning, which is personal and unique, since it depends on the personal 'opposition' of 'pairs' and on the prior knowledge, beliefs and values of every individual (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). And therefore, by giving 'meanings to things and by giving meanings to symbols, people are able to translate and fit these things and these symbols into their

personal environment, both practically and imaginatively. It is a fact that each of us understands and interprets the world in a unique and individual way. However, we are able to communicate with each other and understand each other because we share the 'same conceptual maps and thus make sense of, or interpret the world, in roughly similar ways' (Hall, 1997: 3, 18). In this way, people are able to 'map' and make sense of their surrounding world, but they can also underline the differences between social groups. In fact, symbols must be considered as parts of 'a code, which is only intelligible once you have discovered the key' (Lewis, 1977: 1).²¹ For instance within the African group of Booran Oromo a wooden stick (**Fig.1**) is classified as a 'thing of tradition' and it embodies a strong social and personal value (Kassam and Megerssa, 1996).²² Indeed, 'through the acquisition of these sticks an Oromo man gains the prerogative to find a home and family, to own and administer a herd and to participate in the production and reproductive process of the society' (Kassam and Megerssa, 1996: 150).

²¹ Cf. also Duncan, 1968:45.

²² The ethnic group of the Booran 'Oromo (erroneously known sometimes in literature as 'Galla') [...] are an Eastern-Cushitic people composed of a large number of named groups. [...] It is believed that their original homeland [...] was in the highlands of southern Ethiopia' (Kassam and Megerssa, 1996: 147).



Figure 1: Oromo stick, from Kassam and Megerssa, 1996: 161.

According to the local tradition, these wooden sticks – collectively known as *ulee* - are considered as an 'extension of the right hand of the man' and the sense of identification between man and stick is absolute (Kassam and Megerssa, 1996). When an Oromo man is alive, 'a man's personal stick is the concrete and visible manifestation of his life, just like when he dies, its breaking and placement on his grave are the representation of the death' (Kassam and Megerssa, 1996: 151). Therefore a person, not belonging to the Oromo culture, might define it simply as a 'wooden stick' (according to his/her personal representational system), while this is an item that for an Oromo person is 'an insignia of the person a [distinctive] symbol of the self' in the society (Kassam and Megerssa, 1996: 152).

The example of the Oromo stick has been useful, in particular to explain how, by 'verbalising' concepts and actions through symbols, human beings organise their

surrounding world into symbolic categories and how the same people define themselves within these ordered sets (Lonner and Malpas, 1994; Duncan, 1968). However, the uniqueness of these categories becomes clear when we meet with people from a different culture, as in the case of the Oromo wooden stick. Indeed, 'it is only when we meet with strangers that we suddenly become aware that, because all customary behaviours (and not just acts of speech) convey information, we cannot understand what it is going on until we know the [symbolic] code' (Leach, 1976: 9). In every culture, there is already a great diversity of symbolic meanings about any topic (or things) and 'more than one way of interpreting or representing it' (Hall, 1997: 2). This is because, as Mircea Eliade says, 'images, archetypes and symbols are variously lived and valued; and the product of these multiple realisations of them is largely constitutive of the different cultural styles' (Eliade, 1961: 172). Hence, when we try to detect this figural code, the multi-vocal nature of symbols is 'apparent' because it is mainly due to the criteria with which we look at the symbol. In fact, within a society, symbols can be often be changed and their meanings rearranged. The reason for this is simple, 'because the symbols do not purport to mean anything except the structural whole, they have no individual meaning beyond the structural whole. When symbols purport to do more, a different set of rules is required' (Macgregor, 1973: 89).

In relation to this, it is useful to refer to the classification made by Victor Turner about symbols and their associated meanings (Turner, 1970). Turner has identified three distinctive levels of symbols, which change mainly on the basis of the system of representation we refer to. And precisely, in studying the symbols of a society, we should be aware that those symbols could belong to:

1. the level of indigenous interpretation, or 'exegetical' meaning, which is given by the native commentary (in the case of the Oromo group, the wooden sticks are recognized by the whole of the community as the insignia of every reputable Oromo man);

or to the level of

2. the 'operational' meaning, which refers to the symbol's use and effective qualities (in our case, the wooden stick, the *u/ee*, gives the possibility to the Oromo men for defying and establishing their role within the community);

or possibly to one aspect of

3. the positional meaning, which derives from the structural relationships that symbols have among themselves (in the Oromo society, not every wooden stick can be considered as *u/ee* even if there are different kinds of 'ulee', grouped according to the size, shape/form).

By combining these three levels of meanings, it is possible to reconstruct the context in which the symbol has been created, to make meaning of it and to access to a 'meta-encyclopaedia' of symbols. In fact, the knowledge of symbols is 'neither about semantically understood categories, nor about the world but about the encyclopaedic entries of categories' (Sperber, 1982: 108). It is a kind of condensed knowledge that it is more about the memories that people have of words and things than about the words and things themselves. This is because symbolism is a sort of missing link in the human memory, between the known, the unknown and forgotten. Every symbol, by visually focusing on a specific thing or word, helps people in evoking, in recalling to their memory some forgotten concepts. Indeed, Sigmund Freud explained that through symbols 'we are recognising the co-existence of perception and memory, or [...] the existence of unconscious mental process alongside the conscious ones' (Freud, 1950: 94).

Therefore, symbolic thinking is a social assumption of a shared evocative process, 'which is not the exclusive privilege of the child, of the poet or of the unbalanced mind but it is substantial with human experience' (Eliade, 1961: 12). For instance, in Italy, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in particular, the use of a technique called 'mnemotecnica',²³ or 'mnemonics', the 'art of the memory', was the constant and widespread application of this symbolic thinking in the society: through the association and correlation of different images and concepts, people could learn

²³ Mario Turello, *Mnemotecnica o arte della memoria*, <http://fermi.univr.it/iperstoria/scaffali19.htm> (as 7/6/2002): The mnemotecnica was a sub-discipline of the rhetoric and it a technique useful in order to memorise the part of a speech: it was suggested that the speaker mentally to 'build' some places, in association with impressive symbols, in which to locate the parts of the speech.

and remember even the most complicated concepts. The *Divine Comedy*, the famous Dantean poem, and all the frescos (famous and anonymous) that represent Dante's journey through the worlds of the afterlife, provide us with a good example.²⁴ The images of the frescos made accessible to every individual (even to the illiterate) the content of the poem because they were visualising the presented notions of faith, history, theology, and philosophy. Exactly like symbols, these frescos are a sort of conceptual representation, ascribing objects or acts to specific concepts.

In a previous paragraph it has been said that everything can be turned into a symbol but can everything be turned into a 'social' symbol? The answer is yes. Indeed, if we consider that the process of symbolism strongly depends on the individual interpretation and that is a way of saying something important (Beattie, 1964), then symbolic thinking is an ongoing social process. Symbolism becomes social, when individuals, from the same culture need to communicate a set of ideas (i.e. power, group solidarity, group identity, familiar or political authority, etc.). For instance, the difference between the public of a mime and the public of a religious officiant will consist in the way the public looks at the performance. In particular, while the public of the mime knows that what is watching is something that does not correspond to the reality, the public of the religious officiant considers the rite 'effective, through specific gestures, images and objects' (Sperber, 1982: 111).²⁵

However, the social character of symbols is subordinated to different societies and times. As time goes by, people's experiences and needs change, as well as their ways of realising and re-ordering their world. In particular a symbol can become 'secularised', be less used, but it will definitely never disappear. Instead, it will become part of the social heritage of that culture. This is because symbols are adjusted and moulded by individuals to their society and to their communicative needs.

²⁴ Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) is generally considered one of the greatest Italian poets. His reputation is primarily due to *The Divine Comedy*, an allegoric poem in three parts (titled *Hell*, *Purgatory* and *Heaven*), which describes his journey through the three worlds of the afterlife. The poem was written during Dante's exile, under the patronage of the Ghibelline leaders.

²⁵ Cf. also Duncan, 1968.

2.3. Function of religious symbols.

In every society there are symbols that are more popular or simply better known than other symbols. These symbols are what Victor Turner calls 'dominant', because of their large use and polarisation of the meanings into the society (Turner, 1970). Within the category of 'dominant' symbols, it is definitely appropriate to include religious symbols, which are the visual representations of religious beliefs and values. Actually, the concept of religious symbols is subordinated to the concept of religion. Due to different beliefs, practices and forms, religion has been the centre of study for many renowned scholars (Hamilton, 2001). However, the general basic explanation, which does not necessarily imply a dogma of faith, predominantly defines 'religion' as a set of concepts that gives an order to the surrounding world and helps people to face the difficult situations of everyday life (Geertz, 1973). Indeed, religion and religious beliefs give meaning 'to [the human] existence and suggests the path for adaptation for the future' (Hamilton, 2001: 77). This kind of adaptation is obviously possible through the practice of some main principles, which can be cemented in some symbolic images. In this way, religious symbols become, as Mircea Eliade says, 'the very substance of spiritual life that may become disguised, mutilated or degraded but never extirpated' (Eliade, 1961: 11). Religious symbols, like every other kind of symbol, operate through the analogical process that stimulates the memories and the feelings of individuals. In fact, religious symbols stand for ideas of strong social value. However, quite often, the same object or the same image can be used as a different symbol in different societies.

Shells provide an interesting example. The symbolism of shells and the belief in their magical power is evident all over the world, from prehistoric to modern times. However, in the context of this chapter it would be interesting to consider the symbolism of shells in African society. Among some West African groups, cowry shells have many functions and symbolic meanings. For the people of some Nigerian tribes, knotted cowry shells such as those illustrated (**Fig.2**) symbolise the treasure and the power of the male members of society. When the shells have this function, the owner usually carries them in order to show his wealth to the other members of the community. Moreover, among some Nigerian tribes, the shells have an important religious meaning. Actually, within the Yorùbás, the shells are called 'the money for Ifa' and they symbolise the mouth of god, probably because of their shape, which

resembles a mouth with teeth. According to Yorùbá beliefs, the shells are used during some divination practices, because they can give voices to the spirits called.



Figure 2: Cowry shells, Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham.
© Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.

At the beginning of this section,²⁶ religious symbols were defined as dominant, because they are generally widespread within societies. However, religious symbols not only visually cement religious beliefs and values but also 'exorcise' human fears. That is, if religion helps people to cope with personal difficulties and brings 'anomalous events and experiences within the sphere of, at least, potentially explicable' (Hamilton, 2001: 178), then religious symbols have the same function. To be precise, religious symbols stand for something (an idea or an object) that makes the believer feel 'safe'. For instance, in the Christian religion, the bread used during the mass is also a symbol of the new alliance made between God and human beings. It is the product of human work, blessed by God and shared in His name. Every time this ritual is performed, the covenant of peace between men and God is renewed and believers are reassured of God's assistance/presence in their lives. Another similar example is provided again by Yorùbá symbolism and religious ceremonies. During some festivals, the members of the Gèlèdé Society wear typical masks, which represent the spirits of their ancestors (**Fig.3**). In this way, the people of the community renew their access to the benevolence of the spirits, just as the masks tangibly represent the presence of the spirits themselves.

²⁶ Cf. in this Chapter 'Function of religious symbols', p.42.

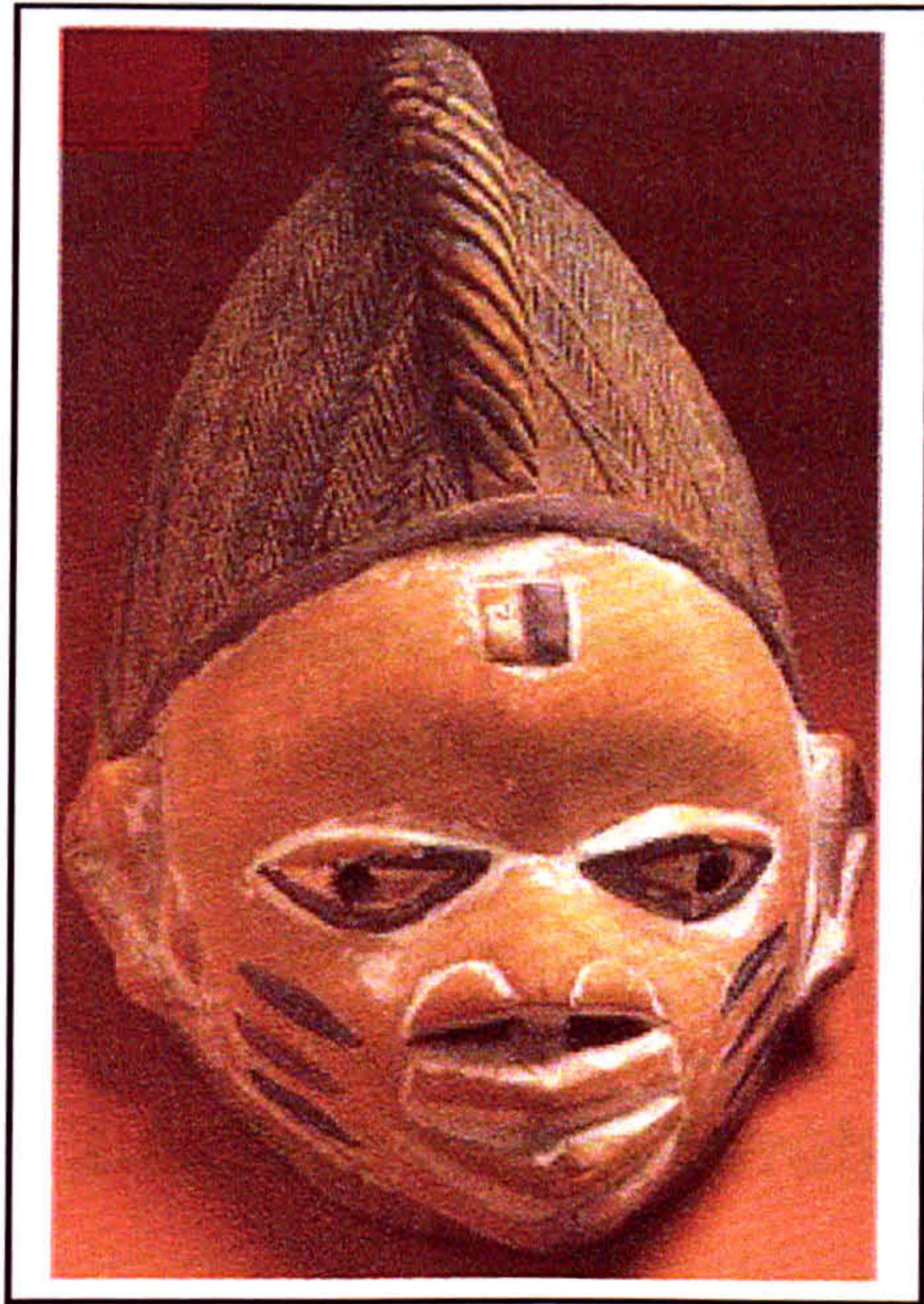


Figure 3: Gèlèdè Mask, from Pole 1999:43.
© Royal Albert Memorial Museum Exeter.

The two examples given above (the Christian bread and the Gèlèdè mask) have raised another issue, related to ritual/symbolic behaviour. Indeed, religious symbols and ritual behaviour are deeply linked (Barley, 1983; Turner, 1970). This is probably because religious symbols are a part of a code of communication and they need to be first shared, in order to be communicated to other members of the same society. In other words, if religious symbols operate as the 'words' of the religious language, the ritual behaviour is the action, which articulates the sounds. Indeed, without a performative ceremony, religious symbols would not exist as symbols but only as an explicatory, temporary image. On the contrary, it is the context and the atmosphere that confers the religiousness to the image.

In order to substantiate what has been said, it will again be useful to refer to African culture and particularly to the rites of passage. According to traditional African religion, every individual (as the whole community) marks each stage of life with a religious/symbolic rite. The symbolic nature of the rite of passage is remarkable. Indeed, 'it creates a bond between temporal processes and archetypal patterns in order to give form and meaning to human events' (Imasogie, 1985: 52). The rites of passage generally concern birth and child naming (which symbolises initiation into the community), the rite of puberty (which symbolises the initiation to the

adulthood), marriage and death (which symbolises the initiation into the ancestral-world spirits). Among some Nigerian tribes, the ceremony of child naming involves a specific procedure, which consists in dropping a coin into water. In this way, the person who gives the name to the child is expressing his spiritual and economic solidarity (symbolised respectively by the water and by the coin) with the family of the child and he is also establishing hierarchical rank towards the child, because in the future, he will have the right to send the child on errands (Imasogie, 1985).²⁷ This is a helpful stepping-off point from which to further investigate African religions and its traditions.

2.4. Traditional Yorùbá religion: a brief overview.

In studying traditional African religion and religious symbolism, we should be aware of some difficulties that can influence our understanding. Scholars have summarised several practical and theoretical 'obstacles' in the following main categories: a lack of religious scriptures;²⁸ the high number of African ethnic groups (each one with its own traditional religion and language); the risk of misinterpretation and mistranslation of African concepts into Western concepts and language (Landau 1999). The latter is perhaps the most important. Therefore, in order of providing this thesis with a more comprehensive, non-Westernised view of Yorùbá culture and religion, a brief account of what is meant by the expression 'traditional Yorùbá religion' will be given. This will be accomplished by considering traditional Yorùbá religion as an 'attitude that explains human experience' and by interpreting it 'as a coherent system of beliefs' (Oladipo, 2003: 202, 204). In this endeavour, the concepts of Yorùbá cosmology are pivotal, that is the concept of the Supreme Being, the concept of the spirits and the way human beings relate to them. However, before explaining traditional Yorùbá religion through its beliefs and cosmology, it is necessary to provide some information about the geographical location of Yorùbás and about the way traditional Yorùbá society is organised.

²⁷ The action of giving the coin establishes in fact, the social rank of the individual.

²⁸ This is a problem concerning only the Sub-Saharan Africa cultures, which are the subjects of this study.

2.4.1. The Yorùbás and traditional society.

Peel explains that the Yorùbás 'are one of the 'mega-tribal' groupings particularly characteristic of Nigeria' (Peel, 1989: 200). Yorùbá people originated probably from Sudan, but according to the legend, they are the direct descendents of a mysterious and divine figure, named Oduduwa. The word 'Yorùbá' describes both the language and the tribe living across Nigeria and the Republic of Benin (Bacquart, 2000; Olupona, 1991).²⁹ Yorùbá culture can be divided into several cultural subgroups, or clans, recognised as such by the groups themselves. Before the colonial era, each of the Yorùbá groups was ruled by kings and local chiefs and during the nineteenth century they were known for intertribal wars, which lead to the selling of war captives as slaves to the Europeans (Olowola, 1985). Notwithstanding many tribal differences, 'the literature on religion has mainly treated Yorùbá culture as homogeneous and monolithic' (Olupona, 1991: 14). Therefore, this discussion will not be centred on a specific Yorùbá subgroup but it will refer to Yorùbá culture and Yorùbá religious traditions in a broad and general sense.

Traditional Yorùbá society, like the majority of African societies, has a hierarchical structure: 'it begins with a patriarchal unit and stretches, through a large array of elders and officials, to the king at the top', called 'Oba' (Imasogie, 1985: 12). Indeed, in Yorùbá communities, the elder is both the head and the priest of the family (Olowola, 1985). This socio-political arrangement is also reflected in religious traditions. For instance, among the Yorùbás, the cult of Ifa has pervaded everyday life and even matters of state. The elder members of the society resort to divination practices every time 'affairs crucial to the welfare or power of [the] society are to be settled' (Fortes, 1987: 9).

During the pre-colonial era, the Yorùbás were very wealthy and controlled the trade routes between the coasts and the hinterland. This is also reflected in their artistic production. By tradition, Yorùbás are productive artists and craftsmen. Indeed in the past, in Yorùbáland, the creation of craft and art items seem to have been quite prolific and wide-ranging (Olowola, 1985). For example, it included a range of

²⁹ Cf. 'The Yorùbás, who number more than 40 million people, inhabit mainly the Western part of Nigeria (the Lagos, Ogun, Oyo and Ondo states). They are probably the most researched ethnic group in Africa south of the Sahara. The Yorùbá also form part of the population of the Republic of Benin [...] and Togo in West Africa' (Olupona, 1991: 13).

objects from bracelets to headdresses and ceremonial masks to elaborate standing figures. Additionally, Yorùbá sculptors were commissioned to decorate palaces, shrines doors and verandas (Bacquart, 2000). Ceremonial, religious and divination objects constitute a consistent part of Yorùbá production.

2.4.2. Traditional Yorùbá religion: an overview.

Very often, the meaning of religious African traditions has been interpreted and transmitted in the light of Christian evangelical views (Landau 1999: 8). Indeed, the Western idea of Africa and its traditions has been strongly influenced by Christian missionaries and pioneer writers, who reinvented Africa, according to the white Colonisers. Actually, 'the Africa that existed in the popular imagination was an ideological space, at once savage, threatening, exotic and productive, inhabited by a population assigned a similarly despaired and ultimately a range of racial traits.' (Coombes, 1994: 3).³⁰

Consequently, African concepts and the symbols of God, souls, sacrifices, taboos, prayers, etc. have been (and probably still are, in part) misunderstood by Westerners. We have only to repeat that, when Westerners look at Africans worshipping at their shrines, they probably equate the object itself with the object of worship. The result is the simplistic view that Africans worship stones, trees or animals. In addition, it is worth adding that, most probably, African symbols are also interpreted through Western eyes: what we see is Western symbolism applied to African societies. In general terms, African religion has been defined in many different ways. It has been defined as an 'animist' religion, but also as a 'fetishist' and 'polytheistic' religion. African religion probably includes these definitions, but it is also true that it is the duty of scholars to find a standard and objective terminology. However, in order to focus on the topic of this study, a brief account of traditional Yorùbá religion is hereby given.

Traditional Yorùbá religion is rich and varied. Its great complexity has been obscured by Christian and Islamic theological biases that have tried to equate Yorùbá traditional beliefs with their doctrines. Traditional Yorùbá religion could be

³⁰ Cf. also Maxwell, 2000.

defined as a set of beliefs in a Supreme Being and spirits, in order to explain the condition of the man. In it, the 'human and natural world have always been inseparably infused with the sacred' (Landau, 1999: 14). Therefore, the sacred is conceived as one of the components of people's everyday life and activities. This interrelation is evident in the basic principles of traditional Yorùbá beliefs.

Awolalu identifies six main principles of traditional Yorùbá religion (Awolalu, 1976). These principles and beliefs are transmitted orally from generation to generation through myths, praise songs and traditional sayings (Olowola, 1985). According to these principles the world has been created by a Supreme Being; the Supreme Being has created several divinities and spirits that will act as his functionaries to maintain the order of the world; life continues after death; although divinities and spirits live in the supernatural world, they are interested in human beings' life; the existence of mysterious forces brings fear to human life; for human beings it is possible to live peacefully only by following the directions of the Supreme Being and his functionaries (Awolalu, 1976). Therefore, to summarise, the principles are concerned with the:

- a. belief in the Supreme Being (the Creator);
- b. belief in the spirits (the functionaries on earth of the Supreme Being);
- c. ways human beings relate to and get guidance from the Supreme Being and the spirits in order to live peacefully.

2.4.2.a. Belief in the Supreme Being.

As opposed to Christianity and Islam, in traditional Yorùbá religion, the Supreme Being, the Creator God, is perceived as an ineffable superior entity.³¹ According to the myth of the creation, Olorun (or Olodumare), the Supreme Being, the 'never dead' created the earth and the man and rules the world (Imasogie, 1985). As Creator, Olorun is responsible for the human beings and is arbiter of the life of every man and every living thing. Olorun is not revered directly but relations with him are

³¹ Cf. Ade Dopamu 'The popular use of Olorun for the Supreme Being made it attractive and acceptable to Islam and Christianity, and the name has been used successfully in evangelism. It is wrong to suggest that 'this idea of God was borrowed from Muslims or Christians' In 'The Yorùbá Religious System' (<http://www.ccsu.edu/Afstudy/supdt99.htm> as 20/02/2006).

mediated by a pantheon of spirits (deities and messengers), who speak through mediums in the context of religious practices.

2.4.2.b. *Beliefs in the spirits.*

These spirits have special attributes and can strongly affect human lives. They are called 'Orishas' or 'Orisas' and are the intermediaries between God and human beings. Their number cannot be estimated, although it seems that it varies between 201, 401, 600, and 1,700. According to Olowola, the Orisha can be grouped as major, minor, environmental and ancestral spirits (Olowola, 1985). The major Orishas are worshipped everywhere in Yorùbáland and the most popular is Ifa, associated with the cult of divination.³² In contrast, the minor Orishas are those who are not worshipped nationally but are still known in Yorùbáland. The minor Orishas are human beings who have become divinities.³³ Each Orisha has its own shrine, temple, worshipper and priests and it is offered worship and receives day-to-day sacrifices.

Yorùbás also believe in spirits who are associated with the environment and are believed to be living in mountains, rivers, trees, stones or even in animals (mostly birds or snakes).³⁴ Spirits are believed to be almost abstract entities that can assume human shapes or inhabit objects, which in turn are then regarded as having mysterious powers and can become the emblems of the spirits. When the objects are believed to be inhabited by the spirits, they can then be used in the preparation of medicine.

Within these categories of messengers and spirits the ancestors are a very important group and some cults are also attributed to them. The cult of the ancestral spirits is strongly linked with the Yorùbá idea of after-life. The experience of the after-life depends on the way the person has lived and 'the biggest benefit for those who have led a good life is the chance to be remembered by the living' because to be remembered, in traditional Yorùbá religion, means to be kept alive (Fortes, 1987).³⁵

³² The major Orishas are: Obatala, Orunmila, Ifa, Esu, Oduduwa and Ogun.

³³ The minor Orishas are: Ogun (the Orisha of iron and war), Sopono (the Orisha of the smallpox), Shango (the Orisha of the thunder); Orisa Oko (the Orisha of the farm, agriculture and harvest).

³⁴ In relation to this, please see Chapter 5: for the objects used during the discussion groups with the Yorùbá.

³⁵ Laura Strong, 'Egungun: The Masked Ancestors of the Yorùbá' in <http://www.mythicarts.com/writing/Egungun.htm> (as 15/02/06).

Furthermore, the ancestors 'stand for a high moral code of behaviour and seem to impose sanctions' (McClelland, 1982: 33). From their graves, the ancestors are believed to exercise control over their descendants. For this reason, the Yorùbás 'are conscious of them always and invoke them in every session of domestic worship, at public services and festivals' (Imasogie, 1985: 41). The ancestors' worship assumes a public form with the Egungun and Gèlèdé masquerades. During the Egungun masquerades, the spirits of the ancestors are believed to come back from the after-life to bless their relatives and to solve their problems.³⁶ Additionally, the Gèlèdé masquerades are the celebration of women, both elders and ancestors, 'who hold power in the Yorùbá universe due to their ability to create life', which makes them 'similar to the creator of the universe and gives them a power almost equal to the gods' (Groucer, 2003: 4). The social and religious importance of masquerades is made clear by Meyer Fortes, who states that: 'religious [...] ritual is concerned with pretending the unconscious [...] forces of individual action and existence and their social equivalents. [...] By bringing them, suitably disguised or symbolised in tangible material objects and actions, into the open of the social life, ritual binds them and makes them manageable' (Fortes, 1987: 7).

2.4.2 c. *The ways human beings relate to and get guidance from the Supreme Being and to the spirits.*

Fortes observes that 'a great deal of ritual symbolism is to present the occult as located in the natural environment' (Fortes, 1987: 5). Therefore, Yorùbás conceive life as something mysterious, ruled by good and evil forces and each man has a destiny to fulfil. The divination practice, which has to function to symbolically 'connect particular persons and occasion with the omnipresent occult', fits into this context (Fortes, 1987: 10). Through the divination, the diviners can decipher the symbolic code of the past, the present and the future, as well 'as uncover the human and the spiritual causes of events and the possible solutions to the problems of life' (Imasogie, 1985: 67). Each one of the objects used and the gestures employed in divination have a fixed, symbolic 'meaning attached to it by a simple rule of association or metaphorical extension, which most men can interpret' (Fortes, 1987: 19).

³⁶ Cf. Laura Strong, <http://www.mythicarts.com/writing/Egungun.htm>.

The best-known modes of divination consist of concave-shaped nuts strung on a string, on the divination basket, and on the divination board with sixteen palm nuts. A sacrifice follows every divination and protective charms or amulets can be given to people to protect themselves from witches and evil forces. The Ifa priest, called *babaláwo*, uses a range of symbolic objects (the '*ibò*') to clarify the messages received during the divinations (McClelland, 1982). For instance, the astragal bone of a sheep, goat or cow symbolises a male progenitor, or the head of a calabash ladle must be interpreted as the request of attention of an ancestress. The range of the code symbols is broad and it varies according to the diviner. Generally, the most frequent symbols are: stones, two cowries tied together, the tip of a snail shell, a small bone and a piece of broken pot. Apart from the 4,096 stories or couplets that a diviner has to memorise, there are several divination tools to catch and explain the symbols of an individual life (Imasogie, 1985). According to the ceremony of divination and according to the interpretation of the priest, the aforesaid objects can be signs of good things to come - generally long life, wealth, wives, children and triumph over enemies - or future bad events, death, disease, defeat by enemies, poverty and loss (Fortes, 1987: 19). Indeed, the Ifa priest is not supposed to invent the meaning of the symbols he uses or comes across, but 'he claims that he responds to the disclosure that is given to him through them' (Macgregor, 1982: 50).

As mentioned above, the *babaláwo* is the traditional priest, devoted to the cult of Ifa. However, traditional Yorùbá religion includes four orders, or cults, of priesthood: the order of Ifa (the priest is called '*babaláwo*', which means the 'father of all secrets'); the order of Shango (the priest is called '*magba*', which means the 'Chief priest and twelve assistants'), the order of Oko (the Orisha of agriculture) and the orders of the remaining Orishas and deified ancestors. The orders are hierarchical and hereditary and each one of them has got its own priest, although the cult of Ifa is pre-eminent. This is due mostly to the social function of the divination: actually, through divination people seek the solution for their problems and get a divine guidance and protection to overcome them. In traditional Yorùbá religion, priests are the intermediaries between the people and the Orishas, they provide guidance as diviners and, being also medicine men, they are highly regarded by the people, whose lives they can influence politically and socially. For instance, each Yorùbá

family has a family priest, who is directly responsible for the family's daily sacrifices and prayers (Olowola, 1985).

Before concluding this section about traditional Yorùbá religion, it is important to refer briefly to the traditional forms of worship. The worship involves singing and dancing and it can consist of prayers, praise, adoration and sacrifice. The content of the prayers very much reflect the whole Yorùbá religious philosophy: prayers are very petitionary; with people asking, for example, for protection from sickness, or for prosperity. The prayers are made to the Orishas, in a specific assigned day of worship.³⁷ Prayers can be carried out daily, weekly and annually, as in the case of the masquerades (Olowola, 1985).

The sacrifice is the centre of the worship and it is conceived of as an offer, as a gift made by the worshipper to the Orisha in order to appease the divinities and to obtain their favour. As each family has its own priest, it also has its own place of worship in the household. In this space, there is usually a block of clay on which the image of the family god is posed. On the same block are made the offers (e.g. palm oil, kola nuts) together with prayers. It is, however, also common to have small altars or temples next to the household. Anything can be used for sacrifices but usually worshipers offer things which are used by human beings during their daily life, or the materials prescribed by the diviner (Imasogie, 1985; Olowola, 1985).

We have considered traditional Yorùbá religion, through its principles and cosmology. In order to give a non-Westernised and unbiased account of it, in this context traditional Yorùbá religion has been defined and presented as a set of beliefs (related to a Supreme Being and his messengers). These beliefs explain the condition of human beings as worshippers, as spokespeople of the divine guidance (in case of the diviners) and as divinised individuals. Therefore it is possible to suggest that traditional Yorùbá religion expresses mostly the need to solve human problems and cater for human needs and that its characteristics are manifested through 'the order[s] of priesthood, prayers, songs adoration, and places and symbols to mark out and present the Orishas' (Olowola, 1985:158).

³⁷ This has helped them as basis for the calculation of the week and rotation of the market days.

2.5. Concluding observations.

Some interesting conclusions have arisen from this discussion and therefore it is necessary to briefly summarise them. First of all, it must be repeated that symbols are the 'tangible formulation of notion, abstractions from experiences fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, longings and beliefs' (Geertz, 1973: 91). Indeed, through symbols people reflect and reinforce their feelings as well as being able to 'categorise' their emotions and to transmit them to individuals of the same society and over different times. In Freudian terms, we could say that 'when we [...] project something into external reality [...] we are recognising the existence of two states - one in which something is directly given to the senses and to the consciousness (that is, is present to them) and alongside it another, in which the same thing is latent but capable of reappearing' (Freud, 1950: 93).

When a symbol, or a set of symbols, is shared and recognised by individuals of the same culture, the symbolic images act as an encoded language. This depends, as we have seen, primarily on human beings' ability and need to rationalise, and adapt themselves to the surrounding world and it is something that happens regularly in Western and non-Western societies. Furthermore, given that religion or at least religious beliefs are present in every culture, the widespread and dominant characteristic of religious symbols has been also analysed. This is in order to explain that religious symbols give a concrete and visual form to the spiritual life and, as religion, they indicate an adjustive path for the inexplicable future. Indeed, the example of the rites of passage has underlined the remarkable, psychological influence that symbols have on people and on their behaviour. This discussion also considered the social characteristics of symbols, their communicative 'power' and the dominant function that religious symbols have in every society. Examples particularly from the Nigerian tribes of Yorùbá have been drawn on to support the statement that, notwithstanding different cultures, different religious beliefs and different times, symbolic thinking is a common cultural feature.

It has been stressed that there is a Western understanding of African culture, which is still strongly conditioned by past colonial ideas. The consequence of this conceptual betrayal is a permanent misunderstanding as well as a mistranslation of African concepts and religious terms in Western societies. For instance, for a long

time, Africans have been considered (and may still be considered) as people who worship things or animals only because of a wrong and simplistic Western interpretation of African rites. African symbolism has often been ignored and misinterpreted because the whole African culture has been measured within Western parameters. Religious African symbols, as with every religious symbol, makes concrete the notions of God, souls, sacrifice, prayers. What changes is only the society and its context. Consequently, if we want to understand the symbolic thinking of a culture, we should try to learn and apply the communicative code of that culture. Bearing this last sentence in mind, it would be useful to reconsider the initial question 'what is a symbol?' The answer to it could be a quotation from Roy Willis: 'suppose a world in which every object is unique. Besides totally incomprehensible, such a world would be entirely devoid of symbols and symbolism' (Willis, 1975: 45). But, obviously, it would be impossible to think of a society without thinking of symbols: a world without symbols would be a world ended, without memories and communication.

This chapter has been an essential prelude to what follows, especially to the chapters concerned with the interpretation of Yorùbá religious codes inside and outside a museum context (particularly Chapter Five, Chapter Six and Chapter Seven). The next chapter, which will be an historical excursus of museum displays that have exhibited Yorùbá material culture, is an equally essential part to the context of this study.

Chapter 3: African material in museums c. 1890-c. 2005: a critical review

3.1. Introduction.

This chapter aims to be a historical excursus into the representation of African material culture in Western museums. It intends to show how the museum interpretation of African objects has changed over the last two centuries, especially in relation to Postcolonialism: from curiosities which enhanced colonialist politics, to scientific specimens useful for educational purposes; and from artistic pieces to three-dimensional cultural links. Where possible, this chapter will provide detailed references to projects or museum exhibitions (both within Britain and elsewhere), which will be discussed in the context of representation in museums and of the postcolonial debate. Yorùbá objects will provide useful examples in most of the cases. However, it is essential to mention that the use of such sources has been strongly conditioned by the availability of documents. Although the chapter has a historical framework, it does not involve the assumption of historical progress or regress. On the contrary, the chapter will look at the historical contingencies, which have contributed to the creation of specific social tendencies, museum representations, and the ways 'the contemporary world and [...] the relations between, Europeans and others' have been shaped (Cummins and Arinze, 1996: 2).

The chapter has been organised in two main parts, which present how interpretations of African material culture have been shaped by different social needs, ideologies and beliefs. Fundamental for this chapter is the acknowledgment of the fact that 'material culture [is] an indicator of historical [and social] changes' and perceptions (Gosden and Knowles, 2001:49) and that material culture, exists in different ways, according to the different 'relationships and transactions in which [it is] involved, for these entail different meanings and identities' (Carrier, 1991: 133). The first part is concerned with the period between the end of the nineteenth century (1890) and the beginning of the twentieth century. After a short historical introduction, which briefly states the political situation of Britain at the time, the chapter will discuss examples of museums in Britain, which reflected the principles and tendencies of the time. The second part of the chapter is concerned with the period 1900-2005 and will focus on the change in museum approach towards African material culture, 'in raising the cross-cultural awareness of the wider society' (Galla,

1996: 86).³⁸ It will also highlight how the role of African descendents has increased in the process consultation for museum interpretation.

3.2. Museums 1890-1914: ideals of power and possession.

According to an old traditional Yorùbá custom, every time a new king was elected, he was requested to open one of the carved gourds, presented to him during the ceremony of the coronation. On the basis of the ingredients (e.g. salt, sugar, nuts, pepper) contained in the chosen gourd, the community could have prior knowledge of what the new reign was likely to be like. Usually, the gourds used for this kind of ceremony were finely carved with symbolic geometric designs which defined - in conformity with the Yorùbá cosmology and religious beliefs - the boundaries and the indissoluble bonds between the world of the spirits and the world of the livings.

During the age of high imperialism (1850-1914), in order to satisfy the desire of possession of many politicians, scholars, and missionaries, thousands of non-Western objects -like the gourd referred to above- were brought to Europe and started to fill the glass cases of public museums and the stores of private collectors. As a consequence, non-Western material culture (and the people who produced it) became the symbols of the Western social and economical ideologies. The public image of the uncivilized 'Other', who did not fit into the social and aesthetic Western canon, was a necessary persona needed to justify colonialist wars. The complex cultural system behind non-Western societies was totally ignored: in this nineteenth century marketing-strategy, cultural diversity was superficially extrapolated, exotically flatted and reshaped, in order to feed the Western imagination and to strengthen the Western identity (Said, 1993).³⁹

As public institutions, museums did not escape this propaganda: on the contrary, they became very important centres of this colonial policy. 'Within the museum's walls the other [...] serve[d] to reflect the self's glory' and [...] the museum fed the

³⁸ Cf. also Abrahamsen, 2003; During, 2000; Ahluwalia, 2001.

³⁹ Cf. also Bennet, 2004. It is important specify that later in the nineteenth century there were also anthropologists like Marcell Mauss (1872-1950) who focussed his work on the idea of the exchange as a key aspect of life and who argued that people, objects, and social relations 'create and recreate each other in transactions overtime' (Carrier, 1991:133).

curiosity of its visitors [...] and could satisfy the appetite for novelty as well as for nostalgia' (Black, 2000: 26). From intellectual cabinets of curiosities, museums became worlds of curious mysteries, where academic science and popular fantasy were married perfectly. There was a clear ambition to surprise and imperialistically instruct the visitors- 'by mapping out the world museums became synonymous with culture' and education (Black, 2000: 26). For instance, in June 1904, Henry Balfour, the first curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, speaking of museums in Britain, said 'I believe that [...] will arise institutions, which, even though they may be small, will take a definitive place among the teaching units of our countries' (Balfour, 1904: 398).

As mentioned in the introduction, the year 1890 is the chronological starting point of this chapter: it marks the beginning of the last decennium of the nineteenth century, which saw both the acme of the 'British imperial and colonial expansion in Africa' (Coombes, 1994: 2) and a period of major interest in ethnographic collections. The reasons for British interest in the African continent can be principally grouped under four headings. First of all, Africa offered strategic ports and routes to Asian countries. Secondly, the African continent supported British trade interests, which were principally spices, sugar, slaves, rubber, cotton, opium, tin, gold, silver and palm oil (Said, 1993). Thirdly, Africa was where most of the political objectives, and the reason for the French/British rivalry, were concentrated. Finally, the African continent represented a very convenient place for the process of Christianisation to occur (Oduyoye, 1969; Sanneh, 1983).

In the early nineteenth century, Britain had already accomplished significant political and expansionistic successes. These achievements included the capture of the Cape of South Africa and the control of different ports along the West African Coast (Asiwajiu, 1976). However, it was only with the completion of the Suez Canal (1869) that the British Empire started to expand its supremacy in other states of the African continent effectively. A particular example being Yorùbáland, where by the year 1875, Britain had 'taken practical steps to establish [and reinforce her] hold' (Asiwajiu, 1976: 52) after realising the importance of this territory as a 'hinterland common both to Lagos and Porto-Novo' (Asiwajiu, 1976: 52). In the late 1880s, the British Empire acted as mediator between the Fulani (who had forced many Yorùbás to the south of Nigeria) and the Yorùbás; as a consequence, strategic inter-colonial

boundaries were fixed. Finally in 1901, Nigeria became a British protectorate and Yorùbá people were officially colonized by the British Empire. However, a system of indirect rule was established in Yorùbáland but it was only a structure, mimicking the original Yorùbá authority (Asiwajiu, 1976).

While the British colonisers were occupied in securing the different African territories and controlling the populations within these territories, the situation back in Britain was different (Danaher, 2000). Tony Hopkins has defined British Imperialism 'as an attempt to shape a world system which both expressed and reinforced the gentlemanly order at home' (Hopkins, 1988: 6). Indeed, the British government was focused on the construction and the propagation of the idea of the 'Africans', ghettoised into the negative category of 'the Others'. Without any doubt, in the last decade of the nineteenth century the idea of the non-Western Other, as different, unusual and uncivilised, started to be more consistently formed and publicized, as well as the conviction that the Western race was superior (Danaher, Schirato and Webb, 2000; Said, 1995). Edward Said has observed that 'neither imperialism nor colonialism [have been] a simple act of accumulation and acquisition [...] out of imperialism, notions about culture were classified, reinforced, criticised and rejected' (Said, 1995:12). This stereotypical distinction between Western and non-Western, British and African, could be appropriately seen in the Foucault's perspective of *Madness and Civilization*: the Africans are like the men on the ship of the fools, who wandered in the waterways of Europe and were associated with dark secrets and characteristic attributes (Foucault, 1967). Madness, as the idea of the colonial 'Otherness', was born as a social statement, made by the stronger and healthier society in order to preserve, define and distinguish herself from the weak and ill one. As a result of this stereotyping, however, the weakest society also temporary suffered a kind of de-personalisation and de-individualisation: Africans, as the fools in the ship, lost (in the popular, colonialist imagination) their human connotation and became part of the Western propaganda.

In this historical and social context, museums and museum exhibitions played a pivotal role, mainly as agents of colonial propaganda. Due to their public nature, they became powerful means to implement imperialistic interests and colonial responsibilities. Specifically, when it came to imperialistic interests, museums helped to redefine and reinforce the idea of the Western race as superior. The concept of

racial purity and civilized societies were two constant preoccupations of the Empire's propaganda. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith has observed, 'the discoveries about the form of the New World expanded and challenged ideas that the West had about itself' (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999: 59). In this period a mass process started that, for several decades, would have ranked and re-presented non-Western Cultures as sub-cultures that needed to be subjugated and civilized: non-Western people become the target for anthropological research, as well as a social panacea to reinforce the Western status (Bennet, 2002). For instance, H. Huxley and J. H. Lamprey, the inventors of the standard measuring-grid, were recommending that 'all aboriginal subjects [should] be photographed naked, their bodies posed in such a way that the viewer could make unimpeded cross-comparison with the anatomy of other racial groups' (Maxwell, 1999: ix). In addition, with reference to colonial responsibilities, museums started to be conceived more as 'instructive amusements', necessary for the 'mental and moral health of the [Western] citizens' (Bennet, 1995: 19). As a consequence, by 1890 the Empire museum scene flourished with national and international exhibitions that, beside the educational and power-image advantages, raised the perspective of commercial benefits and recreational environments.

Certainly over the last two centuries, museums have made significant endeavours to review their social role and to remarkably change their attitude towards non-Western cultures and their objects. Indeed, if in the past ethnographic museum collections have been conceived and represented as the material culture of disappearing societies, mainly preserved for the benefit and education of Western generations, today the scene is changed (Peers and Brown, 2003). Museums have made remarkable efforts to actively involve the source communities,⁴⁰ after recognizing them as the direct heirs of ethnographic collections. In fact, museum professionals are more aware of the fact that ethnographic objects play a crucial role in redefining the identity and the sense of cultural belonging of the descendents. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said has observed that 'one of imperialism's achievements was to bring the world close together' (Said, 1993: xxiv). And it seems clear that museums have definitely enhanced these cultural contacts.

⁴⁰ According to Laura Peers and Allison K. Brown 'source communities [...] refers both to these groups in the past when these artefacts were collected, as well as to their descendants today' and again 'source communities have come to be defined as authorities on their own cultures and material heritage' (Peers and Brown, 2003: 2, 1).

Since the British colonial expansion was mainly concentrated in the territories of the sub-Saharan Africa, the populations of this part of the Black Continent were most frequently subjected to the British ethnographic and exhibitionary gaze (Maxwell, 1999: ix). Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the exhibitions were predominantly thematic. At the same time, exhibitions were furnishing numerous, detailed information concerning African people. In this way, exhibitions became a means to increase 'the sense of controllability [of the British Empire] over such vast terrain [via] knowability' (Coombes, 1994: 68). However, the originality of the displays and the support of Africa-interested academic, philanthropic or scientific bodies were two essential requisites for successful exhibitions (Coombes, 1994).

For instance, the *Stanley and African exhibition*, set in the Victoria Gallery in London in 1890 by Henry Morgan Stanley,⁴¹ combined the colonial norms of scientific investigation and entertainment (Coombes, 1994: 66). Stanley brought back from his journey throughout Africa 'a powerful and intoxicating vision of Africa' [...] he defined Africa through his weaponry' (Casely-Hayford, 20002: 114). The exhibition very much benefited from the cooperation of the Royal Geographical Society and several missionary societies (Coombes, 1994). In this exhibition every visitor was becoming an explorer, who had to make his path through the jungle of objects, portraits, and collectors (Coombes, 1994). The exhibition was arranged in five main sections, enriched by maps and detailed charts, geographical information, rainfall, population, religions, minerals distribution. The exhibition was provided with a catalogue, on sale, in which the items were ranked according to the geographical classification. The main focus was on decorative carving and metalworking, and according to Annie Coombes, it seems that aesthetics was an important criteria to fulfil.⁴²

⁴¹ Henry Morgan Stanley (1841-1904) brought up in a Welsh workhouse. He became a foreign correspondent for the New York Herald, and in 1871 he was sent to organize an expedition to Central Africa to find the Scottish missionary David Livingstone.

⁴² Some Yorùbá material was present in the exhibition, although there is no reference in the exhibition's catalogue. However, from the notes of William Stein, we know that case number 16 contained a display entitled 'West Coast of Africa (Yorùbá)'. Mr Stein's notes document that the main emphasis of this display laid in the Yorùbá figures and carvings, which were distinctively described as non - fetishist or idols, probably because of their artistic appeal (Combes, 1994).

3.3. Museum ethnography as education.

Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea of ethnology as the branch of anthropology that deals with the division of humankind into races, with their origins and distribution and distinctive characteristics, started to be more consistent and to have a recognized impact on the museum scene. For instance, with the 'professionalization of ethnology [...] exhibitions [themselves] became more scientific, introducing an educational dimension, in order to make the sheer diversity of cultures more widely known' (Grognet, 2004:175).⁴³ An important catalyst in this change was the Educational Act, in 1902, which declared the policy of 'Education for all' (Coombes, 1994). The Act contemplated the educational potential of museums (by soliciting school visits to museums) and generated debates concerning ethnographic collections as educational resources. As a consequence, most museums considered it convenient to adapt and redefine 'their public image, in terms of an educational prerogative' (Coombes 1994: 112). For this reason, ethnographic collections started to be displayed on the basis of the comparative approach that could serve the didactics, through a prompt assessment of objects' similarities and differences. Generally, the specimens in museums were organised according to a geographical or typological criteria. Some appropriate examples of this change are given by the ethnographic collections in the Liverpool Museum, the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter, the Horniman Museum in London and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.

The African collection at the Liverpool Museum is mainly associated with the figure of Arnold Ridyard (1853-1924), a shipping engineer from Liverpool, although several traders, missionaries, ships officers, administrators and African kings have also contributed to the collection.⁴⁴ Between 1895 and 1916, the Ridyard collection included around 6,500 items, most of them from West and Central Africa (Tythacott, 2001). The collection included obviously a remarkable variety of objects, although Ridyard seemed to have a particular interest for Central African fetishes, or better said power figures. The collection included, for example, several Yorùbá carvings and genre figures. From being exotic and bizarre curiosities, ethnographic collections started to become scientific specimens; and the museum started to assume, more

⁴³ Cf. also Bennet, 2004.

⁴⁴ <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/livmus/humanities/ethnology.asp> (accessed 17/06/04).

manifestly, a pedagogic function and to arrange objects in fixed categories and systems (Tythacott, 2001; Bennet, 2004). Initially, the museum tended to follow taxonomic and organisational principles. However, due to the continuous and conspicuous donations of Ryniard, by 1900 the African material increased so dramatically that the ethnographic collection needed a rearrangement of the displays, which were then ordered by ethnographic group. Ridyrd focused his collector interests, mainly on powerful and singular objects (like jujus and masks and the Central African Minkisi). Around 1910, the museum curator requested him to apply a more appropriate focus to his collecting practice. Actually, the director of the museum required him to address his collection 'on representative examples of arts and industries that were thought to be dying out, in particularly the primitive potter's art' (Tythacott, 2001). It was at this moment that the Ridyrd collection started to be 'filtered through the gaze of a scientific natural historian and the lens of an increasingly pedagogical institution' (Tythacott, 2001: 158).

Pedagogic issues have played an important role in the organisation of the displays of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum. The museum was founded in 1865 and initially, the majority of the collections included mainly natural history objects. The ethnographic objects were collected through the museum's relationship with colonial officers, missionaries, traders and explorers. However, there was no fixed criterion for this collection and, as Len Pole points out, none of the initial ethnographic collections were 'made with the intention of representing the range of cultures contacted' (Pole, 1999: 32). For example, in relation to Yorùbá objects, it seems that they belonged to eight main categories and that they were collected between 1868 and 1922.⁴⁶ Among the collectors, the name Francis Pinkett appears quite frequently. Pinkett was a colonial Administrator in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, who collected several Ifa cups, king's regalia and Edan Ogboni figures. The Royal Albert Memorial Museum fitted completely into the Victorian ideology and was conceived as a pivotal organization in terms of national education. The museum was also considered to have a 'beneficial [and didactic] influence all over the West of England' (Levell, 2001: 181). In terms of the displays, the ethnographic objects were

⁴⁶ 'Beaded items associated with royalty and priests, cult objects, including figures and masks, costume and cloth, personal ornaments, domestic objects, musical instruments, weapons and items associated with conflict, items connected with European contact' (Pole, 1999: 39).

arranged geographically and presented together with archaeological items, in order to tell the story of the human beings (Levell, 2001).

The notion of museums as beneficial 'institution[s] that transcended class barriers' (Coombes, 1994: 240) became more popular, in parallel with the public acknowledgment of their role as popular educators. For example, by 1904, the Horniman Museum was proudly declaring the presence of school groups and working-class people among its visitors (Coombes, 1994). The Horniman Museum was founded by Frederick Horniman (1835-1906), a tea trader who, during the Victorian age, 'harbour[ed] a fascination for things Oriental, antiquities, bygones, curiosities, and natural history specimens' (Shelton, 2001: 206). In 1898, the Horniman's collection consisted of almost 8,000 objects, of which 13% were African.⁴⁷ Since its creation, the museum was devoted to the educational purpose for the people of London, by providing a 'practical illustration of the working of the evolution [...] among the different human races that early anthropological theory had distinguished' (Shelton, 2001: 211). By the end of the nineteenth century, the museum was organised into twenty-two displays areas, and room No. 19 was reserved to Ethnography (Teague, 2001). In 1901 the Horniman Museum was handed over to the London County Council and since then, the museum had a more systematic and typological approach (Coombes, 1994). The new arrangement and the increased number of African material culture amplified also the number of students, and especially art students. In fact, by 1907, the Horniman Museum opened a section called 'African Art' and by 1912 the section 'Decorative art of selected regions' was added. In cases displaying African objects, the Nigerian section was quite vast and included, for example, also several Yorùbá objects, which were mainly concerned with religion and metal works.⁴⁸ In 1936, the guide to the museum's collections clearly stated that the objects had been displayed according to the availability of the specimens and the character of decorative art.⁴⁹ It was explaining that 'the arrangement of the [...] museum collections [was] designed to throw light upon the evolutionary steps by which the changing present has been derived from the unstable past'.⁵⁰ A perspective this, shared with many other museums, principally the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.

⁴⁷ Of these 13%, 111 objects were from West Africa. Officially the museum opened in 1901, under the administration of the London County Council and with Alfred Cort Haddon and H. S. Harrison as advisory curators (Teague, 2001).

⁴⁸ A divination board, Yorùbá spears and an Ifa board appear in the guide of the Museum of 1836.

⁴⁹ *Guide to the collections in the Horniman Museum and Library*, 1936, p.13

⁵⁰ See Note above, p.11.

Fabrice Grognet has pointed out that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, museum practice meant to present and display artefacts that could give 'prominence to arrays of particular objects' (Grognet, 2004:176). Such presentation, continues Grognet, 'intended to be exhaustive, and followed a classification based on the level of industry of cultures. The halls and the rooms [of museums] thus became repositories for objects as much as places for their display like in a library' (Grognet, 2004:176). Concerning this, an appropriate example is given by the Pitt Rivers Museum, which takes its name from the Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers (1827-1900), the 'father of scientific archaeology'.⁵¹ General Pitt Rivers has been, indeed, a very influential figure in the development of archaeology and evolutionary anthropology. His collection, which consisted of more than 18,000 objects, followed a typological arrangement and the objects included were, according to him, ordinary and typical (Blackwood, 1970). This was due to the educational purpose of the displays. According to it, displays had to present the evolution of human history and trace 'the gradual growth of [the human] complex systems and customs from the primitive ways of our progenitors, through the use of material culture from extant [colonised] people' (Coombes, 2004: 235).

In order to facilitate the vision and to enhance the didactic purpose of the displays, the objects were exhibited in four-sided glass cases. From the annual reports, it seems that the African material started to increase only after 1890, through several donations and purchases (Coombes, 1994). Between the years 1894 and 1895, in the main court of the museum, the exhibition *Representation of human forms in savage art* was set up. In this exhibition, African examples predominated. It is interesting to underline that the exhibition was supported by a series of lectures (inspired by the displays), which aimed to analyse the African colonised body, criticize it and present the African forms of body decoration as deformation, in order to demonstrate again the primitive stereotype in relation to Africans. Another category of exhibition that was very popular during this time was the one of missionary exhibitions. During the colonial age, it was not only military and political authorities that marked the African territory but also 'troops' of missionaries invaded the continent. In Nigeria, and most of West Africa, these were mainly Methodist missions, while Catholic and Muslim missions were spread over the rest of the continent. Although it is evident that there was 'a sharp difference of aim and

⁵¹ The Pitt Rivers Museum. *A souvenir guide to the collections*, p.5.

method between the proud imperialist from Britain and the missionary from the same country' (Oduyoye, 1969: 68) evangelical Christian missions became an active means in promoting the colonial policy in West Africa (Coombes, 1994). In fact, evangelical missions played a decisive role in the process of the stereotyping the idea of the African, which was associated with new and sinister meanings (Ajayi, 1965). The native Africans were considered immoral primitives, who needed to be converted, civilised and educated. The European missionaries were, in other words, acting more as colonial rulers than as messengers of the word of God and bringers of education. The aforementioned, in their hands, became not only an instrument of conversion and nurture but also an instrument of social control (Sanneh, 1983).

Back to Britain, the missionary's exhibitions and collections became a way to support the colonialist ambition of power by stimulating pitiful feelings toward the uncivilized Africans. The missionary exhibitions indeed informed about the progresses of the missions and 'show[ed] the [constant] necessity of missionary [and educational] work' in Africa (Ajayi, 1965: 261). Concerning the relation between missionaries and ethnographic museums, their cooperation was immediate. This cooperation allowed mainly a reciprocal exchange of information and at the end of the twentieth century 'the picture of the African that came to prevail [...] was cross-breed between the missionary's and the physical anthropologist' (Ajayi, 1965: 263). In terms of ethnographic documentation (by defining the boundaries of different tribes) and of classification of objects (identified by origins and by regions), religious missionaries had undoubtedly given a remarkable contribution (Wastiau, 2000). However, because the primary purpose of missionaries was to convert the native savages to Christianity, many traditional religious objects, considered idols and evil fetishes, were promptly substituted by Christian images, after being destroyed or collected in order to be donated to museums for the progress of the knowledge or exhibited in rooms of the missionary societies. For instance, in 1902 the Church Missionary Society, which was active mainly in West and North Africa, donated a remarkable amount of African religious traditional figures to the Pitt Rivers Museum. On the other hand, the missionaries could have donated the objects collected even to their own societies like, for example, the Wesleyan Missionary Society, which set up many missionary exhibitions and displayed a conspicuous amount of West African material, mostly from Yorùbáland (Coombes, 1994). In the catalogue entries, the objects of this specific collection were grouped in four categories (domestic, utensils, and

weapons, textiles and costumes) but unfortunately are no further information about the displays of the items.

A remarkable number of Yorùbá religious objects were also present in the exhibitions held in the museum of the Church Missionary Society. Annie Coombes observes that before the 1906, the museum of the Church Missionary Society was mainly used as a 'temporary repository for curios' (Coombes, 1994: 171) apart from the times when the room was used for exhibitions or missionary events. By 1906, the displays aimed to compare different African religious practices. The merit of the Church Missionary Society exhibitions seems to lay in the fact that the objects were interpreted in a twofold way: the items in fact, were definitely exhibited as symbolic trophies, which testified the success of the mission. Nevertheless, at the same time, the material was accompanied by detailed information, concerning the social context of the objects and the society in which they were produced. In this way, the pieces were assuming a more cultural interpretative dimension.

3.4. Ethnographic museums' representations: 1950-2005.

So far, this chapter has considered the ways in which African material culture has been stereotypically represented in British museums over the last two centuries. It has also underlined how these museum representations have been used to serve political and scientific purposes. This second part of the chapter is however concerned with the post-1950 changes of perception of African material culture in Western museums and it will use Yorùbá objects and collections as examples. It will consider the period up to 2005, especially the later phase of this time. This section has therefore a broader approach to the topic and it can help in understanding the contemporary Western attitude in terms of museum representation, which tells 'the story of how the present came to be' (Preziosi, 2004: 77). Indeed, it looks at the way 'postcolonialist societies have been built [and redefined] by both sides', through museum exhibitions (During, 2000:386).

After the ages of voracious collecting, one of the most evident changes was that ethnographic collections 'have continued to grow but much more slowly than in the colonial era' (Simpson, 1996: 248). This was due to a deeper understanding and a

different Western attitude towards the objects and towards the people who made such objects. Additionally, this transformation in the perception of non-Western material culture has also determined new ways to perceive and represent ethnographic collection and non-Westerners, within the Western museum context. It is as well to state at the outset that ethnographic collections are no longer interpreted as past colonial trophies - although museums acknowledge that they are the result of the 'great age of museums collecting' (Peers and Brown, 2003: 1) - and they are no longer conceived as tangible proof of disappearing and lost societies, like in the past (Simpson, 1996). Apropos of this, Susan Pearce observes that 'the difficult legacy of the past, for museums as for the community in general, has been the extent to which those ethnic group, which have produced 'high culture' often associated with political power, have been privileged over those which apparently have not' (Pearce, 1990: 59). Ethnographic objects in the contemporary museum scene are, on the other hand, conceived as tangible pieces of people's ideas and feelings. They are cross-cultural bridges that can offer a considerable amount of information concerning individuals and their traditions, past and present.

Therefore, if we try to step back from the museum professional's perspective and we look at ethnographic objects from a more detached and impartial way, we could ask if they are the 'real things' (Pearce, 1992: 17). Possibly, the answer to this question will be no, if we consider, first of all, that 'objects are meaningless without a social context' (Pearce, 1992: 21), which is their natural environment. And certainly, museums are not natural social contexts: they are constructed public places where cultural statements are made and people's stories represented. For that reason, objects in museums are like the shadows of the Greek philosopher Plato, in the myth of the cave. The museum, in fact, is a very unusual context, where in the myth, individuals, chained within the recesses of a cave, have a restricted vision of the wall of the cave upon which appear shadows, cast by models or statues of animals and objects that are passed before a burning fire. In the same way, objects displayed in museums become only the appearances of the real things. As a result, being the projections of the real things, objects in museums do not represent the thoughts and feelings of people who have created them, but risk continuing to be mainly the symbols of the unstoppable colonial desire of possession. As at the beginning of the twentieth century 1914 was a crucial year in terms of museum representation, 1960 was equally a crossroads for the second half of the century. The main question that

museum professionals had to face then were: 'how do [museum displays] illuminate [...] visitors without killing [ethnographic] objects?' (Casely-Hayford, 2002: 114). During these years, the focus of museum interpretation and representation of non-Western cultures started to move towards a more perceptive interpretation of objects: 'as a window to a better understanding of [non-Western] culture[s] and [their] people in today's society' (Eldridge, 1996: 20).

The years between the 1960s and the 1970s have been, therefore, years of interesting changes. Many museums started to arrange their ethnographic collections according to the functionalist approach, by geography, country or continent 'and material culture was used to differentiate between different societies' (Levell, 2001: 198). In functionalist exhibitions, material culture is used 'to provide an overall description of different societies or focused on a particular aspect that was contextualised in the wider social whole' (Levell, 2001: 198). As a consequence, with the functionalist approach, museum displays were completely detached from the idea of representing the history of man's progress. On the contrary, they moved toward a more material culture focus intended to enhance and celebrate the cultural diversities. Two interesting examples that have been the results of this change, were the exhibitions *Yorùbá Religious Cults* (displayed in the Museum of the Mankind, in London) and the *Masks of Africa* (displayed in the in the Gallery of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter).

The *Yorùbá Religious Cults* exhibition was set in the Museum of Mankind in the 1970s and 1980s. The exhibition followed a monographic approach, typical of functionalist exhibitions (Shelton, 1992). In the case of the *Yorùbá Religious Cults* exhibition, the curator had used 'elaborate reconstructions of environments, dwellings, markets, religious buildings etc.' which gave a sense of realism and authenticity (Shelton, 1992). The exhibition had a section for the objects associated with the main Yorùbá divinities, a section in for the main Yorùbá masquerades and masquerade, a section for the Ibeji figures and a section for Yorùbá regalia. The reconstruction of the houses and buildings contributed to the idea of authenticity as well as of the enhancement of the uniqueness of Yorùbá culture. Another example of a functionalist exhibition, with Yorùbá objects on display, was *Masks of Africa*. The exhibition was set in 1965 in the Gallery of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter and was organised by Susan Pearce. The displays were 'predominantly

classified and organised along geographical lines' (Levell, 2001: 198) and described the use of masks in African societies as well as the role of missionaries and of collectors in relation to the ethnographic collection (Levell, 2001). In the section reserved for the Yorùbá ethnic group, there were cases 'Yorùbá woodcarvings' and 'Masks from Yorùbáland'.

Nevertheless, as Alissandra Cummins and Emmanuel Arinze state, if contemporary museums 'are to begin to assess the legacy of indigenous cultures, [they] must first appreciate that the collective memories of these events of indigenous people and their descendants are vastly different from that of European peoples and their descendants' (Cummins and Arinze, 1996: 3). And in fact, Western museum professionals are trying to be more aware of the different perceptions and sense of identities of non-Western people, in relation to their material culture (Szekeres, 2002). Especially when their traditional objects are displayed in an unusual context, such as the museum: a context where objects were never meant to be displayed (Vogel, 1989). Therefore, museums aim constantly to provide more interactive and cooperative dialogues, between museums and the people (to whom these objects belong): only in this way could the relationships between the host country, the adoptive people and the original heirs be a feasible cultural transmission of shared histories and traditions. Contemporary 'museums have an urgent responsibility to collect and show the lessons we need to learn from history' (Spalding, 2002: 43), and this it implies not only the recognition of the colonialist mistakes but also a constant commitment to cooperate and partially step back in the process of interpreting ethnographic collections.

However, it is undeniable that museums are complex institutions and, furthermore, they are a very intricate and 'contested terrain for interpretation and ideological assertion' (Casely-Hayford, 2002: 118). Possibly, in order to be effective cultural spokespersons, contemporary museums should look more critically to the non-Western notion of identity, from the non-Western perspective. In fact, it is essential to point out that the source communities, direct heirs of ethnographic collections, have a different idea, or perception of their identity and their heritage. When it comes to African people in particular, Augustus Casely-Hayford has pointed out that 'many people of African descendent feel a genealogical and cultural claim to the

contents of our galleries, but find their relationship to typical exhibition conventions to be problematic' (Casely-Hayford, 2002: 116).

Indeed, the African descendents are generally people who have moved to a different country for study reasons or work opportunities. They are people who were obliged or wanted, to leave their original country and who had to adopt a new cultural identity as ethnic group (Parkin, 1999). Concerning this, Susan Pearce observes: 'today an ethnic group would mean a group of people who recognise themselves as distinct, who have their own name for themselves, and who can point to a particular complex of artefacts, customs and language - that is culture - as the precious mark of their distinctiveness' (Pearce, 1990: 59). However, to this definition, it is useful to add also religion and politics, which emerge quite strongly in African ethnic groups. Museum exhibitions can greatly enhance this sense of belonging and can play a pivotal role in conserving the 'true cultural traditions', separated from the oblivious cultural syncretism.

Once an ethnic group has moved into another country, an entire context changes and also the way people relate to their own traditional objects (which then become tangible pieces of their original culture) changes as well as the way in which they try to make these objects accepted into the hosting culture (Dudley, 2002). Considering African material culture, it is interesting to note that past Western stereotypes have produced today a unique way to make African objects culturally accepted. African objects have mainly shifted from the socially recognised category of 'ethnographic specimens' to the one of 'artistic pieces'. For example, at the Horniman Museum, in the *African Worlds Gallery*, it is possible to find contemporary art objects, displayed close to the ethnographic objects that have been the source of the artistic inspiration. And indeed exhibited in one of the displays, is a painting by the Yorùbá artist Ademola Akintola, which represents an Ifa divination tray. In this specific museum case, the Yorùbá divination tray has become a colourful piece of African art and as such, it has become probably more intellectually accessible to the Western public.

Actually African scholars like Augustus Casely-Hayford,⁵² believe that 'by exhibiting African art just as Western art is exhibited in museums can encourage respect and

⁵² Augustus Casely-Hayford was born in Ghana but grew up in Britain.

admiration, which will in turn increase respect for Africans and people of African descent' (Casely-Hayford, 2002: 120), like for example, in the case of a temporary exhibition, held three years ago in the Art Exchange Gallery, Nottingham. The exhibition was called 'Sixteen Pieces' and was part of one of the events for the Black History Month.⁵³ As explained in the leaflet, the displays aimed to celebrate 'the Yorùbá sensibility through art in the twenty-first century'.⁵⁴ The exhibition presented seventeen paintings of sixteen different Yorùbá artists originating from Nigeria, Ghana, Brazil, Cuba and Trinidad, the United States and the United Kingdom. All the paintings were a personal interpretation of Yorùbá philosophy and symbolism imbedded in the Ifa divination system. And as explained by Olalekan Babalola (the Curator) and by Akinbowale Sankofa (the general manager of the centre) the exhibition 'was curated with the aim of generating debate and understanding of Yorùbá culture and its role in contemporary society as Yorùbá descendents and practitioners migrate around the world, influencing the aspects of modern life'.⁵⁵

However, the artistic interpretation of African objects does not seem to be the key to the full understanding of the complexity of African culture: first of all because, as Susan Vogel sustains, our vision and opinion are strictly conditioned by our Western culture, which induces people to rigidly classify or stereotype things (Vogel, 1989). The struggle of past centuries that has seen African material culture moving from the class of fetishist objects and primitive specimens to that of art, has probably affected the way in which the source communities feel part of Western communities and can cooperate with Western museums. This has determined the way in which they are involved in the exhibitions, as academic authorities or experts. It seems, in fact, that there are very few African academics or museum staff directly involved in the development of museum exhibitions. Specifically, concerning contemporary interpretation and representation of Yorùbá culture in British museums, it seems that no Yorùbá curator is actually involved in the setting of the displays, although museums appear to benefit, occasionally, from some cooperation with members of Yorùbá communities. For instance, the involvement of a Yorùbá scholar in the preparation of an exhibition catalogue is quite a unique event. In this research, the catalogue titled *Yorùbá: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* has emerged as a unique example. The exhibition, organised by Ramona Austin, was on display at the

⁵³ The exhibition was on display between the 1st of October and the 31st of October 2002.

⁵⁴ Quoted from original the leaflet of the exhibition.

⁵⁵ See Note 40.

Art Institute of Chicago between September 1989 and January 1990 and its catalogue aimed to be a 'document on the study of African history as it chronicles the very rich art and traditions of the Yorùbás'.⁵⁶ Henry John Drewal and John Pemberton III were the authors of catalogue, together with Rowland Abiodun, Yorùbá Professor of Fine Arts and Black Studies at Amherst College in Massachusetts, USA.

It is possible to find more examples that refer to cooperation between museum practitioners and Yorùbá members of the communities. Moira Simpson points out that the cooperation with local communities 'enable[s] those represented to contribute information which reflects their perspective and concerns and demonstrates their survival as unique cultural groups, within a society which often shows little regard for the distinctiveness of cultural identity' (Simpson, 1996: 51). For instance, in 1986, Lucy Mackeith set up a summer exhibition in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (Exeter), as part of a bigger program that was trying to involve the local communities of Exeter, by using ethnographic exhibitions. The program reflected clearly the nature of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum that 'still perceives itself as both a purveyor of objective scientific knowledge and as a potential resource centre for a broad-based multicultural education' (Levell, 2001: 201). Specifically, the project centred on Yorùbá culture was called *Tradition and the Yorùbá artists*. Two women from Bristol were directly involved in its organisation.⁵⁷ According to Lucy Mackeith the exhibition 'was of indigo-dyed clothes and other objects collected in the Western part of Nigeria in 1985 and objects from the same geographical area in the museum's ethnography department collected over a long period of time' (Mackeith, 2001: 6). Two communities were directly involved in the projects, which included three Yorùbá artists and young people from two middle schools in Exeter.

When considering Yorùbá material culture as an example of ethnographic objects, it seems that the uniqueness of the different African groups has been progressively absorbed within a sort of pan-Africanism. This is, obviously, a consequence of the colonial period and of the Western approach used in relation to non-Western countries: a sort of flattening categorization that, for instance, has opposed the West to Africa, India or China. Bearing this in mind, if we tailor this idea of categorization

⁵⁶ http://www.africanart.org/html/body_publications.htm (accessed 20/06/04).

⁵⁷ One of the two women was Yorùbá.

to the Yorùbá group, a good example is provided by the Sainsbury Galleries, in the British Museum. Since its creation, the British Museum has always aimed to 'hold for the benefit and education of humanity a collection representative of world cultures and to ensure that the Collection is housed in safety, conserved, curated, researched and exhibited'.⁵⁸ Notwithstanding these noble aims, the displays on the British Museum can be misleading in terms of cultural distinctiveness and can run the risk of being too artistic, like for instance, in the case of the African Galleries. Before being displayed in the British Museum, the African collection had been housed for thirty years in the Museum of Mankind. Today, the collection is exhibited in the Sainsbury galleries built for the purpose and sponsored by the Sainsbury Trust and Henry Moore foundation (Spring, Barely and Hudson, 2001). According to the curators, the change of the building had been a very important step, because it has 'not only recontextualise[d] African material by moving it from a self-contained ethnographic institution into one that features major collections, [but it has] also change[d] the museum into something notably less Western focused' (Spring, Barely and Hudson, 2001: 18).

Indeed, when entering the Sainsbury Galleries 'there is no doubt that Africa has been celebrated' (Pole, 2001: 48): more than six hundred objects from Africa are exhibited here, in an eye-catching and aesthetic way. The collection is organised in seven main categories (woodcarving, pottery, forged metal, masquerade, brass casting, personal adornment and textiles), which have the purpose of highlighting the cultural, geographical, ethnic and artistic diversity of Africa. However, as Len Pole has observed, these galleries are 'more a denial of African cultural distinctiveness [than] a celebration of Pan-Africanism' (Pole, 2001: 48). In fact, ceremonial masks, pottery, religious objects of different African regions and groups are mixed in the galleries. A high level of knowledge is assumed on the behalf of the visitors, who must be expert connoisseurs of African culture and art, in order to appreciate this impressive and visual interpretation. Yorùbá objects are immersed in this jungle of concepts, images and geometries, while their cultural uniqueness is as a result absorbed into these 'highly decorative and aesthetized installations' (Phillips, 2003: 760). The Sainsbury Galleries reflect clearly the tendency of postcolonial representation of non-Western cultures that, as observed by Berlo and Phillips, tend to 'flatten out the distinction between art and artefact' (Berlo and Phillips, 1995: 6).

⁵⁸ <http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/corporate/> (accessed 14/06/04).

In the twenty-first century, concerning the issues of interpretation and representation of ethnographic collections, it seems that the challenge museums have to face is linked to a clear distinction between art and material culture (Berlo and Phillips, 1995). In fact, nowadays, museums are more 'concerned with the political control of discourse and the changing meanings imposed on objects and their roles in defining Euro-American culture' (Shelton, 1992: 15). Apropos of this, the exhibition *Art/Artefact* offers a good example: the exhibition was set at the end of the 1980s, in the Centre for African Art (New York) and was 'about the ways Western outsiders have regarded African art and material culture over the past century' (Vogel, 1989: 11). Through this exhibition Susan Vogel wanted to effectively reiterate that in the museum context, African objects have been always considered as art or artefacts (Vogel, 1989: 12). The exhibition was not organised in a chronological way, but it was structured around six main themes, which aimed to express this interpretative dichotomy: it started with the 'Art Gallery', a room where African objects were 'displayed for their formal qualities only' (Vogel, 1989: 12), it continued with 'The Original African Context', with the reconstruction of Hampton's 'Curiosity Room'; it followed with the 'Natural History Museum displays', explained in which was the use of African objects as more scientific sources of information about Africans. The exhibition was finally closing with the 'Art Museum Displays', which was obviously referring to artistic conceptualisation of African material culture in museums. Among the objects displayed, the exhibition presented, for example, some Yorùbá objects, mainly from North Nigeria (with the Nok terracotta heads, most of them fragments of the figures) and of South Nigeria (i.e. the Ife portrait heads in bronze and terracotta).⁵⁹ The value of this exhibition was in the fact that it was a critical review of the different perceptions and definitions of Western communities in relation to African material culture. By examining 'the historical construction of [Western] self-images' (Shelton, 1992: 15) through African objects, the displays have offered significant and unique examples of museum representations.

⁵⁹ http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/Africana_Nigeria.asp (accessed 16/06/2004).

3.5. Concluding observations.

To conclude, this chapter has been a critical excursus of the representation of African material culture in Western museums. The time period considered has been that of 1890 to 2005. The chapter has mainly focused on African displays including also Yorùbá objects in their collections. The chapter aimed to underline how, during the last century or so, the perception of African material culture has changed, and as a consequence, also the representation of this material in museums. Postcolonialism has been the conceptual framework of this study. In fact, the chapter has taken in consideration the fact that both Western and non-Western cultures cultural histories and societies have been defined and built by their encounter and interaction. The chapter has been a historical review of perceptions-rather than a history of the museum displays. It has acknowledged that these changes were due to political, social and cultural ideologies, reflected into the museum environment. Four main tendencies, in terms of museum interpretation and representation have been identified. African objects have been considered and then represented as tangible evidence of primitive peoples; as scientific specimens; as artistic pieces and finally as cultural bridges between past and the present.

Although it seems that contemporary museums recognise the importance of non-Western objects, understood as cultural bridges, connecting African source communities with their past, the chapter has emphasised several new and different issues. These issues were mainly concerned with a sort of levelling Panafricanism (which flattens the distinctiveness of the African ethnic groups in favour of a more global idea of Africa), the artistic perception of the African people themselves (towards their traditional objects displayed in museum) and the limited participation of African museum professionals and academics in the setting of the displays. The chapter has therefore tried to suggest that museums should address their representation towards a more African-centred perspective. This also implies a more clear identification and definition of the contemporary African Identity adopted to investigate and answer the research questions of the study. Western museums need to gain a better understanding of what African objects mean for their descendants today.

The next chapter signals a turning point for this thesis. This chapter and the previous two chapters have provided the theoretical and historical framework for the research. The next part of the thesis relates to the methodology adopted to investigate and answer to the research questions of this study.

Chapter 4: Theory and methodology

4.1. Introduction: aims and structure of the chapter.

The fieldwork undertaken for this research investigated the interpretation and representation of traditional Yorùbá religious heritage in museums in Britain. This chapter provides a discussion of the research methods, terms and approaches used to study the topic. It also considers the challenges and issues faced during the fieldwork.

The chapter has been organised into three main parts. The first part is concerned with the research objectives and with the shaping of the research approach on the basis of the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter One. The second part explains the research design and the methods used for the data collection. Within this section, the pilot studies that have informed the research methods will be outlined. The design of the questions and the focus groups procedure will be discussed, along with the design of the interviews and the selection of ten different museums as case studies.⁶⁰ Finally, the third part will present a short description of the semiotic approach chosen as the analytical tool for the work. An overview and explanation of the relevant semiotics theory and of the diagram created by Susan Pearce (based on the Saussurean model) will be provided and explained in the context of this thesis.

4.2. Research objectives and the shaping of the research approach.

As has been already mentioned in the previous chapters, this study is rooted in the idea that the intangible aspects of a non-Western culture (i.e. oral traditions, ceremonies, values, and languages) can be valuably considered in relation to tangible resources such as, for instance, objects (Galla, 1996). The research therefore aimed to understand how people perceive and combine these two aspects (the intangible and tangible) by looking at ethnographic objects and ethnographic museum displays. Furthermore, since the making-meaning process is influenced by cultural contexts, personal knowledge and experiences (Clarfield, 1996), the research aimed to investigate both the perspectives of Yorùbá members of the diaspora (as potential museum visitors, living in Britain) and museum professionals

⁶⁰ A full list of the museum displays analysed is provided in the following pages.

(working in Britain) in relation to a common historic, but not religious, heritage. It has been possible to frame the research within a socio-cultural perspective, which defines the way religious symbols and religious objects are used to convey and preserve cultural information. The literature review has been pivotal in framing the rationale of the research and in setting the basis for the methodological approach.⁶¹ Special attention has been paid to theories relating to semiotics and the use of symbols in cultural communication.⁶² From the theoretical investigation, it emerged that both these areas (ethnographic displays of Yorùbá culture and Yorùbá perspective towards their traditional religious heritage in museums) have not yet been fully explored. Moreover, in order to provide a comprehensive view of museum displays in Britain (which were structured around or included traditional Yorùbá religious objects) and in order to acknowledge and define the perspectives of Yorùbá people - as members of the diaspora - of their traditional religious heritage, this research has benefited from a qualitative, interpretive approach. As Bill Gillham points out, the qualitative approach allows us to 'investigate situations where little is known about [as well as] to get under the skin of a group or organisation to find out what really happens [and] to view the case from the inside out' (Gillham, 2001:11).

Various methods of data collection were needed to investigate the topic. Firstly, to contextualise the research questions, both a pilot focus group with Yorùbá people and a temporary exhibition were organised and utilized.⁶³ Secondly, three focus groups and three interviews with Yorùbás were undertaken between August 2002 and December 2003. Thirdly, ten interviews with museum professionals and analysis of displays were carried out between July 2002 and July 2004. It is important to emphasise that the list of questions for the focus groups and all the interviews were based on the themes and issues raised and identified through the pilot focus group and the temporary exhibition.

⁶¹ Discussed in Chapter 1.

⁶² Discussed in Chapter 'The social characteristics of symbols', pp.35-42.

⁶³ The exhibition, entitled *Objects of religion: Yorùbá beliefs displayed*, was on display between the 1st of July 2003 and 31st of August 2003. The objects on display had been previously researched between March and May 2003. A focus group for the exhibition took part in September 2003.

4.3. The pilot focus group.

As far as the Yorùbá perspective is considered, before investigating the perceptions of Yorùbá people concerning their traditional religious heritage displayed in museums, it was essential to gather some primary background information. This was necessary for the identification of the themes to be explored during the actual research fieldwork and for the framing of specific questions. Therefore, a pilot focus group was conducted in April 2002, in Leicester, in the house of one of the participants.⁶⁴ The discussion group aimed to examine the way Yorùbá people relate to religious objects - in terms of historical and traditional knowledge, including the local name and the function - outside their original cultural context. All four members of this pilot focus group belonged to the Yorùbá ethnic group and were aged between 23 and 42 years old. They were all residents in Leicester and were all occasional museum and gallery visitors. Participants were contacted through a local Church attended mainly by Nigerians and they were all Born-Again-Christians.

Questions for the preliminary focus group were organised around their knowledge of traditional Yorùbá beliefs and their knowledge of traditional ceremonial and Yorùbá objects. Due to the number of the participants (only four), the focus group had a 'less structured' format (Morgan, 1998). In this way, the group's interests and personal experiences were emphasised and encouraged. The number of questions (five in all) was determined by the size of the group - which however demonstrated a high level of compatibility and interest concerning the topic - and by the progress of the discussion. During the discussion, several pictures of Yorùbá religious objects were showed to the participants.⁶⁵ The focus group was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the consensus of participants.⁶⁶ The recording and transcription formed the primary data and provided background knowledge towards an understanding of the way members of the Yorùbá diaspora relate to their traditional religious heritage and museum displays.

⁶⁴ The private house was chosen as meeting place because the members of the group found it more familiar and comfortable.

⁶⁵ The researcher showed pictures of the objects and not the objects themselves because the participants agreed to take part to the focus group only if they did not have to see the objects themselves. Indeed, it seemed that participants considered the photographs as not the real thing. For discussion of the reasons and their significance, please see this Chapter, 'Focus groups with Yorùbá people: design, procedure and issues', pp.86-98.

⁶⁶ See Appendix I: 'The consent form', p.206.

From this preliminary discussion group and from the analysis of the data collected, it was possible to identify three main leading themes: definition of Yorùbáness; knowledge and understanding of traditional Yorùbá religion; and religious objects and the museum experience. The Yorùbá participants were all immigrants and refugees, who had kept a strong sense of their Yorùbá identity. They were willing to discuss the past use of traditional objects without, however, having to deal directly with them.

Following analysis of the data of the preliminary study, the researcher consequently found that the way members of the Yorùbá diaspora - living in Britain - interpret and relate to their traditional heritage interested her most. Indeed, this interpretative process of their traditional religious heritage is a key element in the way Yorùbás, living outside their homeland, construct and redefine their diasporic identity in the new hosting social context. Additionally, the researcher found that, in order to balance the research, she needed to consider and present the viewpoint of Western museum professionals in displaying traditional religious Yorùbá items. Hence there was clearly the need to investigate the topic from different perspectives.

4.4. The temporary exhibition as a complementary pilot study: reflexivity applied.

Given that the research aimed both to investigate the perspectives of Yorùbás towards their traditional religious heritage and that of contemporary Western museum interpretation, the researcher decided to explore the implications of the objectification of Yorùbá religion in museum displays. Therefore, a temporary exhibition (*Objects of religion: Yorùbá beliefs displayed*) was set up in the Community Show Room of the Brewhouse Yard Museum (Nottingham) as part of the fieldwork for this research.⁶⁷ The exhibition was a useful study that assisted the researcher in defining her investigative approach. During the setting up of the exhibition the researcher kept a diary with notes and comments relating to the whole process. The notes were useful because the researcher could go through

⁶⁷ The exhibition was on display between the 1st of July 2003 and 31st of August 2003.

them and make any necessary observations about any issues raised and about which terminology to use in relation to traditional religious objects.

The Brewhouse Yard Museum was chosen according to three factors: first because of its location. Indeed, being based in Nottingham, the museum could be easily approached by the local Yorùbá communities of Nottingham and Leicester. Secondly the museum hosts a Nigerian collection of 200 items. This collection includes a large group of traditional Yorùbá religious objects and it therefore offered a wide range of choice in the items that could be selected and displayed.⁶⁸ Thirdly, the museum was keen to offer the Community Show Room for the exhibition, as the researcher had worked there as a volunteer during the past year.

By setting up the exhibition, the researcher acted as an interpreter between the Yorùbá diasporic community and the museum environment. She tried to understand the contemporary challenges faced by museum professionals in displaying non-Western religious objects, by respecting the views of the people to whom these objects belonged. It is important to explain that the setting up of an exhibition as a methodological tool was a new investigative process. To the researcher's knowledge, there are no records in the literature sources concerning similar techniques employed for doctoral research. Therefore, the researcher had to face both original advantages and limitations.

In terms of advantages, the exhibition allowed the researcher to be directly involved both in a curatorial process and in constant cooperation with members of the Yorùbá diaspora. This was very important because it helped the researcher to establish a trusting relationship with local Yorùbá people.⁶⁹ At the same time, this cooperation allowed the researcher to understand better the meaning that traditional Yorùbá religious objects had for the members of the Yorùbá diaspora and to use an appropriate terminology in defining the items and the practices associated with them. In terms of limitations, the setting up of a temporary exhibition as a methodological tool was predominantly affected by the availability of items to be put

⁶⁸ Cf. Nottingham Museum and Art Gallery, *Collecting Policy*, 1998: 36. The collection includes three main categories of artefacts: jewels, work tools and religious objects. They became part of the museum's collections between 1878 and 1879. However, in the accessions books of the museum there is no mention of their accession but it seems that many different local collectors donated the items to the museum.

⁶⁹ These people would help later in finding other participants for interviews and focus groups.

on display; by limited resources of the hosting museum; and by the difficulty in evaluating the exhibition. The choice of the objects was subject to their conservation status and to the typology of artefacts selected by the Yorùbá people, which were considered as 'displayable'. In addition, the room provided was quite small, with only two, unmovable cases. Moreover, the museum had a limited budget for the exhibition and this restricted the choice of supportive material.⁷⁰ Finally, in terms of evaluation, the exhibition was provided with feedback cards. The cards were used to obtain an initial understanding of the visitors' interpretation and to establish contact with people who were willing to take part in a follow-up discussion group. Between July and August 2003, only ten cards were filled in and only four people agreed to take part to the focus group.⁷¹

The exhibition profited from the notion of reflexivity. In this research context, reflexivity is understood as a turning-back of one's experience upon oneself in a circular, socially constructed process: as Frederick Steier explains, reflexivity

'is a way in which circularity and self-reference appear in inquiry, as we contextually recognize the various mutual relationships in which our knowing activities are embedded. These include, for example, a relationship between language and experience that allows us to see 'individual' experience as socially constructed, rooted in languaging activities whose possibilities for becoming our experience provides' (Steier, 1991: 163).

Indeed, given that researcher's 'expectations and feelings [together with the personal cultural background] affect the research and become part of the process itself' (Kleinman, 1991: 184), the exhibition allowed the researcher, a European woman and Catholic museum professional, to investigate and express interpretive criteria in relation to a non-Western material culture. Additionally, through the displays, the researcher tried to interpret, decode and communicate the religious/symbolic language shared by every religious language, by using Yorùbá religious material culture. Fifteen Yorùbá traditional religious objects were selected

⁷⁰ The overall budget for the exhibition was £300 and in terms of supportive material it was possible to only provide additional written information as laminated papers and an exhibition catalogue.

⁷¹ On these cards, visitors could write their personal details on one side and on the back, their impressions, feelings, information, or comments about the displays.

and exhibited. The items were selected on the basis of their nature (religious or ceremonial) and according to the information gathered about them.⁷²

The exhibition significantly informed the research questions and methodology, and the data gathered from it determined the formulation of questions to museum professionals and Yorùbá people, as well as how the questions for the focus groups were structured and the way in which the museums displays were examined. Each of these points will be developed and explained in detail in the related sections. The following sections of this chapter will therefore discuss the design of the interviews, and the design of the focus groups, as well as the method of selecting the research participants and of contacting the interview and focus groups.

4.5. The main research methods: focus groups, museum displays and interviews.

The initial findings helped the researcher to design the subsequent research methods. Consequently, the research focussed on three main, consecutive projects, which were used to answer to the main research questions, listed in the introductory chapter. Apart from the literature review, the projects included: three focus groups and three interviews with Yorùbá immigrants, ten interviews with museums curators and ten exhibition analyses.

In order to create an innovative way of understanding the research topic and to prove a clearer understanding of the issued discussed (Thurmond, 2001) the study made use of the methodological triangulation. According to Maggs-Rapport, methodological triangulation is the use of more than one methodology in the study of a single research problem. The advantage of using the methodological triangulation is to facilitate the analysis of a 'phenomenon more fully whilst

⁷² The researcher, helped by three Yorùbás from Nottingham, had selected the objects to be displayed. The objects chosen were all indigenous religious Yorùbá objects and not Muslim Yorùbá or Christian Yorùbá: indeed, the display of the latter in a public and non-sacred context (such as the museum) could have created tensions among the Yorùbá Muslim communities. In addition, the conservation status of the selected items needed to be high as well as the existence of a good amount of information gathered about their religious function or purpose. For the list of the objects see Appendix XI, List of the objects for the temporary exhibition 'Objects of religion: Yoruba beliefs displayed' p.217.

facilitating a variety of methods to encourage comprehensive understanding and explanation' of it (Maggs-Rapport, 2000: 222).

The research tends to have an 'interpretivist approach' which, according to Jennifer Mason, considers 'people, and their interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings as the primary data sources' (Mason, 1996: 56). Indeed, the design of the interviews and of the focus groups predominantly aimed to understand how people with different backgrounds and from different cultures relate to religious objects in museums and how they interpret and interact with them. In addition, the analysis of museum displays and the setting of the temporary exhibition aimed to understand further the museum interpretation and classification, by a more direct perspective. The following sections of the chapter will explain and clarify each method and the rationale behind it.

4.5.1. Focus groups with Yorùbá people: design, procedure and issues.

Overall, sixteen Yorùbá people, members of the Yorùbá diaspora, living in Leicester and Nottingham took part in this research. The original intention of the researcher was to involve a larger and more assorted sample of Yorùbá people. However, several difficulties were encountered. These difficulties need to be explained here, since they have influenced and changed the intention of the focus groups. In total, three focus groups with Yorùbá people were carried out.

Selecting the participants.

People were contacted through word of mouth, through the Brewhouse Yard Museum and via a local Church attended by Nigerians (located in Leicester).⁷³ Initially, the researcher contacted the Leicester Afro-Caribbean Centre, based in Leicester. However, one of the members of the centre told the researcher that there were no Nigerians and definitely no Yorùbá attending the centre. He then suggested

⁷³ The museum had an ongoing cooperation with an African artist of the art centre 'Emaca' (Nottingham) who suggested that the researcher contact a Yorùbá person, who is the owner of an African Shop.

the researcher get in touch with the pastor of a Christian Church (which had always been based in Leicester), attended by Nigerians.

Therefore, the researcher approached the pastor of this Church in person, who then agreed to have a meeting with her. During this meeting, the researcher explained the purpose of her visit (recruiting Yorùbá people for her focus groups), the purpose of her research (investigating how members of the Yorùbá diaspora living in Britain related to their traditional religious objects) and the way she intended to organise and carry out the discussion groups. The researcher also brought a portfolio with some pictures of the objects she intended to consider during the discussions. However, the pastor was not at all pleased with the topic of the research (Yorùbá traditional religious objects). After seeing the pictures, the pastor told the researcher not to come back to the church and not to display such items to his church's members. Indeed, he explained that they should not have been involved with such objects, even through images. The pastor gave the researcher the name and the telephone number of another Christian minister (based in a Church in Nottingham) who might possibly be willing to help her.

The researcher contacted the new minister by phone and arranged a meeting with him in Leicester. Again during this meeting, the researcher explained the purpose of the meeting, the topic of her research and the way she intended to carry out the discussion groups. She also explained during the discussion, that it was essential to show some pictures of traditional Yorùbá objects. The pastor agreed to help the researcher in recruiting the participants, after having been assured that the researcher would have use only photographs, and not the actual objects, for the discussions.

Other names and addresses of potential Yorùbá participants were gathered through the assistance (word of mouth) of the owner of an African shop, in Nottingham. This Yorùbá person gave the researcher a list with the names of Yorùbá people she knew, mostly because they were regular customers at her shop. It is worth mentioning that this person assisted the researcher during the setting-up of the temporary exhibition. Therefore, she knew the research topic in advance and the kinds of objects involved. This was very useful because she was able to explain

beforehand to the potential Yorùbá participants what their participation in the research would mean and how the discussion group would be carried out.

The majority of the Yorùbá participants were Christians, of the Born Again Christian Community. Therefore, their faith influenced strongly their attitude towards the traditional religious objects.⁷⁴ However, instead of being a limitation that could have changed the intention of the focus groups, their religious orientation became a strength for it. Actually, it helped to show how much Christian faith influenced the way Yorùbá people related to traditional religious objects and how they still kept considering such objects as powerful artefacts. As a consequence, people agreed to take part in the research, provided that they did not have to see or to deal directly with the objects. Consequently, they agreed to take part in the discussion groups or the interviews only if images of the objects, and not the objects themselves, were used. In fact, participants considered that the photographs were not as real or harmful as the objects themselves. It is fair to say that the sample of Yorùbá people interviewed for this research does not claim to represent the whole diasporic Yorùbá population. However, these Yorùbá do give a 'close-up, detailed [and] meticulous view of particular units, which may constitute processes, types, categories, cases or examples which are relevant to or appear within the wider universe' (Mason, 1996: 92).

Once a list of possible Yorùbá participants was identified, an introductory phone call was made to the people selected. In the phone call, the purpose of the research and the way it would be carried out was explained. The discussion groups were carried out between July 2002 and December 2003 and thirteen Yorùbá people agreed to take part in the focus groups, and three agreed to be interviewed.⁷⁵ The sequence of the focus groups was determined by the availability of the individuals. However, it is important to specify that the researcher organised and carried out the focus groups with Yorùbá people prior to the interviews with the museum professionals. This arrangement was made in order to tailor the questions on the basis of a more in-depth knowledge of traditional Yorùbá religious objects and beliefs. During the focus

⁷⁴ Apart from a Muslim participant, a traditional believer participant and a non-specified religion participant.

⁷⁵ The size recommended for focus groups suggests that they should include between four and twelve participants (Morgan, 1998). All the focus groups organised for this research included the minimum required amount of participants. For the details about the interviews with Yorùbá people, please see this chapter, 'Interviews with Yorùbá people', pp.97-98.

groups and during the interviews, participants were asked to complete a consent form. Therefore, three focus groups with Yorùbá immigrants were carried out between July 2002 and December 2003.

Participants had been chosen according to their ethnicity (they had to belong to the ethnic group 'Yorùbá') and to their residence (they had to be resident either in Leicester or in Nottingham). Participants did not have to be necessarily habitual museum visitors. Both men and women were included. People with different educational backgrounds were selected. Prior to each interview and focus group, the researcher asked the participants to fill a form in order to provide basic information about themselves (name, age, education, nationality and religion).⁷⁶ The form also included the heading: 'religion', so participants could write down their religion. They were also asked about how long they had been a convert to a new religion, but this information was not forthcoming at the moment of the research. The profile of the Yorùbá participants has been summarised in Table 5 and discussed in Chapter Five. Since participants have been listed anonymously in the thesis, in order to facilitate the discussion, each participant's name (both for focus groups and interviews) has been replaced with the initial 'Y', followed by an Arabic number.

At the beginning of the research, a major difficulty was the reticence and mistrust of Yorùbá people in taking part in the research. It was evident, indeed, that having converted to Christianity or Islam, their attitude towards traditional religious objects was uneasy and uncomfortable. During the first contact with the researcher they explained that they did not want to be contaminated by such items and therefore they were willing to participate only if the researcher would use the photographs and not the actual objects. In addition, some of the participants required a cash compensation for their collaboration. Considering the limited finances of the researcher, it was not possible to provide any cash compensation to the participants. However, this obstacle was successfully overcome, mostly with the help of the Born Again Christian reverend and of the owner of the African shop. Indeed, they explained to the participants that the researcher was a non-funded student.

⁷⁶ See Appendix VIII: 'Form to be filled in during each focus group and interview', p.214.

Purpose of the focus groups, organisation and location.

The purpose of the three focus groups was to examine the way Yorùbá members of the diaspora, living in Britain, would relate to their traditional religious objects (in terms of historical and traditional knowledge) outside their original context and how they would interpret them in the contemporary Western museum context. Therefore, at the beginning of the discussion, the researcher clarified the main purpose of the focus group and laid out a set of the issues to be discussed. The discussion was organised around five main themes: definition of being Yorùbá, knowledge of traditional histories, knowledge of the purpose of traditional religion, knowledge of traditional religious objects and museum experience. The questions were open-ended and unstructured. In order to emphasise the single group's interests and reflect individuals' perspectives and experiences, all three focus groups had a 'less structured' format (Morgan, 1998: 47). The exact number of questions was determined by each group's size and by the dynamics of the discussion. To facilitate the discussion, the pictures of some traditional religious objects were shown to the participants, for them to comment on.⁷⁷

The focus groups were conducted either in the house of the researcher or in the house of one of the participants. The location was always chosen by the participants. Indeed, the location was a very important factor: participants had to reach it easily and had to feel comfortable in it. Each focus group lasted for about one and half hours. All the focus groups were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, the researcher took notes progressively. The notes were useful because the researcher could go through them before transcribing the tapes and make any necessary modifications or adjustments to the questions' style or order. Through the process of interviewing and conducting focus groups, the participants' opinions were fully respected: the researcher let the participants know that she did not have any kind of presuppositions or biases and that their opinions were extremely valuable for the research.

⁷⁷ See Appendix IX: 'List of questions for the focus groups with Yorùbá people' (p.213) and Appendix X: 'List of the figures shown during the focus groups and interviews with Yorùbá people' (p.216).

Moderating the focus groups.

It is important to draw attention to the fact that the researcher acted as moderator in all focus groups. This was due to the limited finances of the researcher in being able to pay an external moderator and it is not the usual focus group praxis. However, in this case it became an advantage, especially in regard to knowledge of the topic. Before the start of each focus group, the researcher/moderator introduced herself and again explained the purpose of the discussion group. This introduction served the purpose of a warm-up session, in which the researcher explained her role in the discussion, the procedure, and the structure of the discussion (warm-up, questions and photographs, and closure of the group), making the members of the group familiar with the situation. In the context of this study, the researcher acted as moderator during each discussion group. Her involvement in asking questions allowed for a more structured approach to the discussion. This constituted an advantage because the more structured approach meant both that the researcher could impose 'the researcher's interests, as embodied in the questions that guide the discussion' and that she could 'encourage those who might otherwise say little and limit those who might otherwise dominate the discussion' (Morgan, 1996: 144-145). In all the cases the researcher tried to create 'an open and permissive atmosphere', which would allow each person to feel free to speak and share his/her own point of view (Frey and Fontana, 1993). In addition, the researcher had an active role in the discussion groups, by listening carefully to the participants' answers, by not being judgmental, by keeping the discussion on track and by being sensitive to the group dynamic, as, for instance, in the case of reticent speakers (Frey and Fontana, 1993). It is worth noting that in all focus groups, participants knew each other. However, in all three cases this proved to be a positive catalyst for the groups, because it strengthened cooperation during the discussion.

Immediately after each focus group, the researcher wrote a brief report based on the discussion. In this report, the researcher listed the main points raised, the difficulties encountered, the different ways participants acted during the discussion and the points or questions to be improved. On the basis of the report and on the basis of the notes taken during the discussion, the researcher was able to identify, from the beginning, the most significant participants' comments and themes.

Analysis of the data.

All the focus groups were fully transcribed by the researcher herself. The notes were concerned with the verbal discussion as well as with the non-verbal responses (e.g. body language and facial expressions). In analysing the data, the researcher considered both the verbal and non-verbal responses. The fact that the researcher transcribed the focus groups herself and took notes during the groups, was an advantage. Indeed, she had the opportunity to think of the data analysis as she was transcribing the discussions. The transcripts do not simply provide a record of the discussion, therefore, they also allow for a more intimate understanding of the content of the talk, the flow of discussion and the group dynamics (Litoselliti, 2003).

The analysis of the data was subsequent to the transcriptions of each focus group. Firstly, the notes taken by the researcher during the discussion and the transcripts of the discussion were checked. Secondly, a summary for each focus group was made. Initially, the researcher looked at the substantive parts in the transcripts that related to the research questions as well as new issues. Consequently, the researcher aimed to identify how the key themes were defined by the three groups. In order to make the data more manageable for interpretation, the researcher coded the extracts of data which were relevant to a specific theme. The parts were coded with words that described the essence of what the participants were talking about. The codes were the result of categories 'assumed by the researcher at the planning of the focus groups, categories which have become evident as key during the discussions, and categories coming up during the actual analysis of the discussions' (Litoselliti, 2003: 88).

It is important to specify that, since the focus groups are group discussions, they might contain chaotic and impulsive answers. Therefore, although the researcher always respected the participants' views, in some cases it was necessary to correct the grammar of the quotes. However, this editing of the grammar was minimal and did not at all change the meaning of the comments.

4.5.2. The museum displays.

As mentioned previously, the research was conducted in ten museums in the United Kingdom. The purpose of using these case studies was predominantly related to the possibility of 'produc[ing] explanations which are generalizable in some way or which have a wider resonance' (Steier, 1991: 172). Therefore, these case studies are purposive samplings, (illustrating some features or processes of interest for this research) and theoretical sampling, 'selected on the basis of the relevance to the research questions, theoretical position and explanation of what the research is developing' (Silverman, 1998: 104).⁷⁸ The fieldwork was conducted in Great Britain and the choice of ten museums as case studies was a crucial part of it. The ten museums were: the British Museum, London (the Sainsbury Galleries), the Horniman Museum, London (the African Worlds Gallery), the World Museum Liverpool Merseyside, Liverpool (the World Cultures Gallery),⁷⁹ the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford (the Court), the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology of Cambridge (Cambridge), the Manchester Museum, Manchester (the Living Cultures Gallery), the Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Nottingham (the temporary Exhibition 125), Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter (the Ethnography Galleries), the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham (Gallery 36) and the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, Glasgow (the Gallery of Religious Life). These museums were chosen because they house major displays, which include traditional Yorùbá religious and ceremonial objects. In addition, due to their different interpretative approaches, these displays could offer a comprehensive scenario of different ways of exhibiting religious and ceremonial non-Western items.

Selecting the museum displays.

Three criteria were used to select the museums displays: first of all, the displays should contain traditional Yorùbá religious or ceremonial objects; secondly, the displays should be located in different museums in Britain in order to give a wide perspective and different 'relationship[s] between material objects and different systems of interpretation' (Deliss, 1996: 276), and finally the museum professionals

⁷⁸ Cf. Mason, 1996.

⁷⁹ The museum opened only in April 2005.

in charge should have agreed to be interviewed and to comment on the displays as well as allowing the researcher to carry out the research in the chosen exhibition or gallery.⁸⁰ In analysing the displays, the first step was the examination of the layout and the content of the displays.⁸¹ Each display case containing Yorùbá religious and ceremonial traditional objects was analysed and documented in the researcher's diary, as well as each interpretative panel of the exhibition room. The readability of the interpretative panels was evaluated according to the Fry test and according to the Ekarv method.⁸² Where possible, photographs of the displays were taken, together with notes, which documented spontaneous impressions about the displays. Museum leaflets, with the floor plan of the exhibition were collected, in order to provide the researcher with a comprehensive view of the museum's layout and collections. The basic information about the museum displays are listed in **Table 1**, although the details of the museum displays as well as the profile of the museum professionals have been discussed in the chapter concerned with the data analysis.

Purpose of the analysis of museum displays and analysis of the data.

The analysis of the displays was grounded in the themes and issues, which originated in the temporary exhibition. The studies aimed to consider the approach of Western museums towards Sub-Saharan African religious objects and the representation and interpretation of non-Western religious and cultural heritage. Specifically, during the analysis the researcher paid attention to the use of the words chosen to define such objects and to the way they were contextualised in relation to the other items in the galleries or displays. However, it is useful to point out that the analysis of the displays has been thematic and has been carried out according to the morphology of the exhibits, in order to understand how traditional religious Yorùbá objects have been displayed and what was the message being communicated about the items. Details of the museum displays analysed will be presented in a table in Chapter Seven.

⁸⁰ It was not necessary that the museum professionals interviewed had taken part in the setting up of the displays analysed. However, it was crucial that, at the time of the interview, they were in charge of the ethnographic collections, including traditional Yorùbá religious objects.

⁸¹ Please see Appendix V 'List of questions for the researcher', p.210.

⁸² Please, for the Fry test see Appendix III, p.208 and for the Ekarv Method see Appendix IV, p.209.

4.5.3. Interviews with museum professionals.

'Interviewing [...] is a basic mode of inquiry', which investigates the experience of other people (Seidman, 1998: 2). The interview covers a broad range of definitions and practices. However, it is the qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interview,⁸³ which has been employed in this study, because 'qualitative interviewing tends to be flexible, responding to the directions in which interviewees take the interviewer and [...] adjusting the emphasis in the research as a result of significant issues that emerge in the course of the interview' (Bryman, 2001:313).

Qualitative interviews are very useful when rich and detailed answers are needed, because the main aim of the in-depth qualitative interview is to move from a general, public account and description to a more personal and private story. As Wengraf has observed, the in-depth interview becomes a kind of 'special type of conversational interaction' between the interviewer and the interviewee (Wengraf, 2001). This conversational interaction is achieved by structuring and building up the interview, through different kinds of questions, such as: introductory questions, follow-up questions (to get the interviewee to elaborate his/her answers), probing questions (used to encourage participants to expand upon an idea); specific and direct questions, indirect questions; structuring questions and interpreting questions (Bryman, 2001).

Selecting the participants.

Following the design of the case studies and the selection of the displays, ten museum professionals were contacted for in-depth-qualitative interviews. Museum professionals were contacted and interviewed between July 2002 and July 2004 and the sequence of the interviews was determined by the availability of the museum professional contacted. Following an Internet search about the museum, the exhibition, the ethnographic collection and the museum professional in charge of the ethnographic collection, an email was sent both to the general contact and to the

⁸³ A semi-structured interview is an interview where 'the researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply' (Bryman, 2001: 314).

museum professional identified. Overall twelve museum professionals were interviewed. Their detailed profiles are discussed in Chapter 7.

After receiving the first reply, which confirmed the availability of the professional, a second email was sent to the same individual. In the email, the museum professional was asked to take part to a face-to-face interview. The email explained that the interview would be conducted in the museum (if agreeable to the professional) and that it was part of a Ph.D. research project and a short outline of the research was included. The full set of questions and images was sent together with the email, as a Word Document attachment.

Purpose of the interviews with museum professionals and procedure.

In order to keep the interview at a conversational level, the in-depth interviews had a semi-structured format. Specifically, although questions were carefully planned and prepared, the protocol was not rigid and left space for additional and spontaneous questions. The questions were short and precise, made in a clear and understandable language, in order to not intimidate the interviewee (Bryman, 2001). Questions did not have any embedded parenthetical phrases. Where possible, the researcher asked one question at a time and avoided questions with implied or given answer and avoided questions starting with 'why', because they could be perceived as potentially threatening by informants.⁸⁴ Each interview paper included an initial set of questions concerning the individual's details (full name, age, education, nationality, and location). The questions were based on the main themes and issues, which originated with the temporary exhibition, and were mostly concerned with the approach of Western museums and museum professionals towards Sub-Saharan African religious objects and the representation and interpretation of non-Western religious and cultural heritage.

⁸⁴ Indeed, by posing a question, starting with 'why', interviewees could feel the pressure of answering necessary to it, even if they could not provide real or appropriate information. See Appendix VI for the 'List of questions for the interviews with museum professionals', p.212.

Analysis of the data.

All the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher herself. During the interviews, the researcher took notes, which supplemented the transcripts. The analysis of the data was subsequent to the transcriptions of each interview. Since the interviews were organised according to themes, the analysis of the transcripts was eased by the sequence of the questions.

Each museum professional was asked to sign a consent form, which allowed the researcher to use the data gathered from the interview for research purposes. The consent form defined the identity of the researcher and the nature of the research.⁸⁵ It also explained the purpose of the interview and granted permission by the participant to use the data gathered from the interview as data in the thesis. Participants could choose to be called by their given name or to be referred to by a pseudonym.

For ethical issues and for consistency with the focus groups, the name of each museum professional has been replaced with the initial 'M', accompanied by an Arabic number (between 1 and 12) according to the case study.⁸⁶ A table with the profile of each museum professional has been inserted in the chapter concerned with the analysis of museum displays.

4.5.4. Interviews with Yorùbá people.

The initial intention of the researcher was to conduct only focus groups among the communities of Yorùbá immigrants in Britain. However, due to an initial mistrust on behalf of the Yorùbá community and due to the limited availability of several individuals,⁸⁷ it was necessary to circumscribe the research to the area of Leicester and Nottingham and to conduct some additional individual interviews. The interviews with Yorùbá people included those individuals who were not available on the day of

⁸⁵ See Appendix I: 'The consent form, p.206.

⁸⁶ Although there were ten interviews, because there were ten case studies, on two occasions (St Mungo Museum in Glasgow and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in Birmingham), two museum professionals – per each case - took part in the interview.

⁸⁷ For details about the recruitment and cooperation with Yorùbá individuals, please see in this chapter the section 'Focus groups with Yorùbá people: design, procedure and issues', pp.86-98.

the focus groups but who wanted to contribute to the research. Therefore, the people who took part in the interviews were selected according to the same criteria used to select the focus group participants.⁸⁸

The qualitative interviews carried out with Yorùbá people were different from those of the museum professionals. Indeed, overall, the interviews with museum professionals comprise ten and were concerned with the direct experience of the professional in relation to the collection displayed. In contrast, only three Yorùbás were selected for a face-to-face qualitative interview. The interviews were concerned with the way Yorùbá people felt towards their religious heritage, displayed in Western museums.⁸⁹ People were identified mainly through the suggestions of two senior Yorùbá participants and they had been initially contacted via email. The first email briefly explained the research topic and the purpose of the interview. A second email was sent after ten days and it was accompanied by a phone call in which the terms of the interview and the location were defined and arranged.

The interview had a semi-structured format, which allowed the researcher to change its structure and shape the questions according to the responses of the person interviewed. The interview was organised around five main themes: definition of being Yorùbá, knowledge of traditional histories, knowledge of the purpose of traditional religion, knowledge of traditional religious objects and museum experience. During the interview, as with the focus groups, several pictures of traditional Yorùbá religious objects were shown to participants to facilitate the discussion. In each interview, an initial set of questions was concerned with the individual's details (name, age, education, nationality, location and religion). As with the focus groups with Yorùbá people, the interviews participants were required to examine photographs of the objects and not the artefacts themselves.

The interviews were conducted at the house of the researcher or at the house of the participant. This choice was made because the setting played an important role in this research. Indeed, the interviewees had to feel comfortable in order to answer to

⁸⁸ Please see previous note.

⁸⁹ The questions developed for individual interviews with Yorùbá people were similar to the ones used in the focus groups with Yorùbá people. See Appendix VII: 'List of questions for the interviews with Yorùbá people' (p. 213) and Appendix X 'List of the figures shown during the focus groups and interviews with Yorùbá people' (p.216). The shown photographs of the objects shown belonged to a Nigerian collection, stored in the Brewhouse Yard.

the questions. All the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. However, during each interview the researcher took several notes, which were read and used to improve the questions' style or order.

Information Museums	Yorùbá religious objects	Location	Museum Professionals Interviewed and involvement in the displays settings
British Museum (London)	13	Sainsbury Galleries	Not directly involved in the displays settings
Horniman Museum (London)	39	African Worlds Gallery	Not directly involved in the displays settings
World Museum Liverpool (Liverpool)	26	The World Cultures Gallery was not opened yet at the time of the interview	Involved in the displays settings
Manchester Museum (Manchester)	25	Living Cultures Gallery	Not directly involved in the displays settings
Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery (Nottingham)	2	125 Exhibition	Not directly involved in the displays settings
Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford)	41	The Court	Not directly involved in the displays settings
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Cambridge)	5	Anthropology Gallery	Not directly involved in the displays settings
St. Mungo Museum (Glasgow)	4	The Gallery of Religious Life	Not directly involved in the displays settings
Royal Albert Memorial Museum (Exeter)	42	Ethnography Galleries	Involved in the displays settings
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (Birmingham)	2	Gallery 36	Not directly involved in the displays settings

Table 1: Museum displays and museum professionals.

4.6. Semiotics and its use in the thesis.

As previously mentioned, this research concerns the interpretation and representation of the religious heritage of non-Western cultures (and in specific of the West African group of the Yorùbás) in museums in the United Kingdom. It aims

therefore, to understand how people perceive,⁹⁰ combine and convey the religious, intangible gist of traditional Yorùbá religious objects through museum displays. Additionally, the rationale of the whole thesis is based on the concept that the meaning-making process is strongly conditioned by individuals' contexts, personal knowledge and experiences. As a consequence, the thesis is very much concerned with the issues of interpretation and representation and therefore with the issues of non-verbal and symbolic communication in the museum context.

The aim of this section is to explain the semiotic perspective and, specifically, linguistics, as the analytical tool for the data collected. The section is organised in three main parts: in the first and second part, the definition of semiotics and its link with communication are presented together with an overview of the main scholars in the field. The third part will briefly define the reasons for the use of semiotic theory and of the linguistic model of the langue-parole as analytical tools in this research context. In this section a diagram by Pearce (Pearce, 1994), which is based on the Saussurean pair langue-parole and which has been crucial for this study, will be also presented and explained.

In his *New Science*, the eighteenth century Italian jurist Giambattista Vico anticipated: 'there must, in the nature of human institutions, be a mental language common to all nations which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects' (Vico, 1968: 161). By philosophically dwelling upon the idea of the existence of a common mental language, which could assume different expressions, Vico was posing, almost two centuries in advance, a linguistic question: a question which will be posed and investigated again at the beginning of the twentieth century by Ferdinand de Saussure.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a linguist from Switzerland, recognised the need 'for a field to study the meaning conveyed through signs and symbols' (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993: 4). Saussure's contribution to the understanding of social codes has been pivotal not only in terms of languages and linguistics but also in terms of a systematic study and 'exploration of pattern of belief and behaviour [which needed

⁹⁰ With the term 'people', the researcher refers to Yorùbá members of the diaspora, living in Britain, potential museum visitors and museum professionals.

to be considered also] in an intellectual borderland where the interest of humanities and social sciences merged' (Prown, 1999: 133).

Actually Saussure's studies of signs, symbols and meaning were not isolated. In fact, Charles Sanders Peirce, a philosopher in the United States during the same period, posed independently, the same question and acknowledged the need for investigation. However, as Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz has pointed out, Saussure's investigation was more concerned with human behaviour, while Pierce was more strictly concerned with the logic of signs (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993; Hawkes, 1983). Consequently, since this study aims to investigate a certain human behaviour and interpretation in the museum context, the Saussure's approach and the application of its linguistic model of the *langue* and *parole* seemed the most appropriate for this research. It is important to emphasise that the researcher is aware of other scholars who have developed further the discipline of semiotics (e.g. Sebeok, 1994; Barthes, 1998; Eco, 1984). However, although in the thesis there might be references to these authors, their research and profiles will not be developed, due the subject and objectives of this research.

The study of logic, which gives meaning and connects signs and symbols, constitutes one of the basic principles of human communication. Indeed, communication presupposes a source (or producer of the message/meaning) and somebody who will receive the message - a message receiver: in other words it is a process of encoding and decoding information according to conventional and culturally accepted forms. Concerning this, semiotics is related to the exchange of information, since the surrounding world is full of different, informative signs (natural and socially created). Therefore as Thomas Sebeok emphasizes, semiotics 'never reveals what the world is but circumscribes what we can know about it' (Sebeok, 1994: 4), first of all, through the processes of analogy, differences and equivalences (Barthes, 1988).

On the basis of semiotic theory, it is possible to state that the emphasis of this research is on (non-Western religious) symbols, (social and museum) codes and (contemporary, post-colonial British) culture and that this theoretical assumption can profitably be applied to the museum context in order to explain ethnographic representation as meaningful, symbolic communications. The tool used to analyse

these symbolic communication has been the linguistic model of the langue-parole, created by Saussure. Before explaining the model, it is important to consider three crucial points. First of all meanings are phenomena and products of culture (Barthes, 1988); secondly cultural symbols and signs convey short and immediate meanings; finally both signs and symbols obey specific rules or conventions and these rules and conventions change according to the context, space and time (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993).

In applying semiotics and the model of the langue and parole, it is important to consider the langue (or signified) as 'the system of codes, rules and norms structuring any particular language' (Tilley, 1994: 67). Conversely, the parole (or signifier) represents the individual use of the langue by society and 'refers to the situated act of utilisation of this system by an individual speaker' (Tilley, 1994: 67). The union of 'signified' and 'signifier' represents a 'sign', a social construct recognised and understood by the society. The langue-parole model defines objects both as word (their name) and as thing, as material items. Therefore, to be clearer, the word 'bottle' is the visual and written phonetic sign, used to call a plastic or glass container, having an oblong shape, in which drinkable liquids are usually contained. At the same time, 'bottle' is the thing, a container itself. Furthermore, within the langue - parole model, things are organised in sets, and they are always understood according to selective parameters (i.e. iconographical, religious, functional, or artistic). Therefore, although the word and sign 'bottle' define a specific container, within the set 'bottle', there are different kinds of bottles, from the bottle for oil to the bottle of perfume. In the langue-parole system, a final but essential point has to be presented. Since societies are subject to the changes of time and space, 'signs' can change their meaning and can become symbols, that is to say, allegoric social constructions recognised but not understood or shared by the same society or cultural group.

Additionally, the '*langue – parole*' model becomes the essential premise to the diagram created by Susan Pearce in relation to material culture (Pearce, 1990) and applied to this thesis as an analytical tool. The first part of the diagram (**Fig.4**) considers the synchronic relationship between Yorùbá religious/ceremonial objects and their original contexts. Specifically, the initial section includes the range of possible choices related to objects, relevant to the Yorùbá community, living in Yorùbáland, during the nineteenth century. The range of choices is limited, as well

as the selection that Yorùbá people in the nineteenth century could have made in relation to these objects. The cluster of alternatives could include artefacts or natural things (i.e. cups, stools, spoons, cowry shells, kola nuts, bottles, or masks). Once Yorùbá society has selected the objects according to specific rules (behavioural, religious or iconographical), these same objects have acquired the distinctive nature of 'religious objects'. These objects have become the tangible expressions and symbols of the feelings and needs of a specific Yorùbá society of the nineteenth century. In addition, the religious meaning of the objects is understood and communicated among the whole Yorùbá community of that specific time. To use a semiotic expression: these indigenous Yorùbá religious objects have become the (religious) parole. However societies change during time and as a consequence, the selection made by the Yorùbá community of the nineteenth century is not static and absolute: on the contrary, the selection will change according to historical events and social attitudes. In terms of our example, as a result of Western colonisation, different individuals have brought a selection of Yorùbá objects to the United Kingdom and donated them to museum curators or private collectors.

The cluster of items has been inserted in a new cultural, geographical, social and religious context. Therefore, to be understood and recognised by the new community, Yorùbá indigenous religious objects had to fall within new intelligible selection parameters (Pearce, 1999). In Imperial Britain, Yorùbá objects became the matter of study for ethnographers and curators. Consequently, the same objects embodied a new set of beliefs, academic and scientific, rather than religious. In the Western world of the Colonial Era, those objects have become the symbols of a new category (ethnography) and their new meanings have been shaped according to the ethnographic knowledge and contemporary museum theories.

The final part of the diagram is concerned with the data gathered from the different research methods (focus groups and interviews with Yorùbá people; interviews with museum professionals and analysis of the museum displays). Therefore, it presents two different kinds of interpretation: the interpretation of contemporary Yorùbás living in the United Kingdom today and the interpretation of contemporary museum professionals, working and living in Britain. Additionally, the different interpretations (or the parole of Yorùbá immigrants and the parole of museum professionals) change according to their languages, which are the sets of rules applied both by

Yorùbá individuals and by museum professionals, in order to identify and relate to traditional Yorùbá religious objects.

Shanks and Hodder state that 'to interpret something is to figure out what it means' (Shanks and Hodder, 1997: 6). Indeed, in this thesis the use of semiotics as a methodological tool has been used to comprehend the different meanings of traditional religious Yorùbá objects, nowadays displayed in museums in Britain. In this endeavour, the acknowledgement of the complexity of the colonial experience and cultural processes has been crucial, especially in terms of the data analysis (Gosden, 2001).

4.7. Concluding observations.

This chapter has been concerned with the methodology employed in this research. It has presented and explained the different projects utilised (a temporary exhibition, analysis of ten museum displays, in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups). All the projects used were intended to contribute to the gathering of data that can help in defining different people's interpretative processes and representations of museum displays. In addition, the final section of the chapter has presented and explained the semiotic approach and the linguistic analytical tool, which will be employed for the analysis of the data collected by the fieldwork. It has been highlighted that the relations between different individuals and different social systems happen mostly on the basis of a dialectical level (codification-decodification) and that the connection between them is symbolic. Furthermore, since every social practise (including, for instance, museum representation) is articulated like a language, with its rules and changes, the use of Saussure's linguistic model and the use of Pearce's diagram proved to be the most appropriate for the data analysis.

The next three chapters will be concerned with the application of these four different projects (an exhibition organised by the researcher; a set of focus groups and interviews with Yorùbá immigrants; analysis of ten displays analysis and interviews with museum professionals) and with the analysis of the data collected.

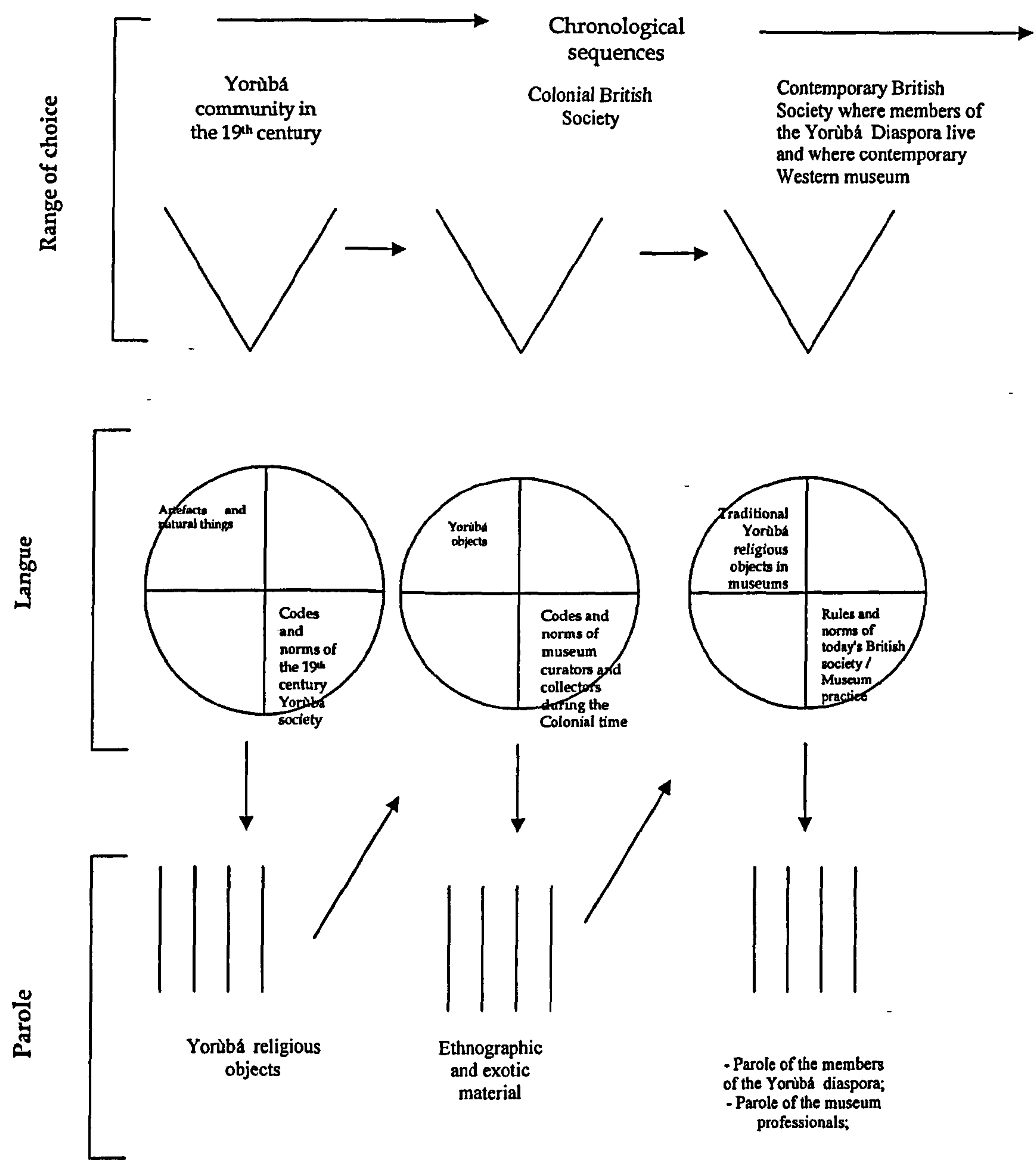


Fig.4 Diagram showing the change of meaning that has affected traditional religious Yorùbá objects, from the nineteenth century to contemporary times. The diagram has been based on the original diagram of Pearce, 1994.

Chapter 5: Analysis of the interviews and focus groups with Yorùbás

5.1. Introduction: aims and structure of the chapter.

This chapter is concerned with data gathered through interviews and focus groups, embracing Yorùbá members of the Yorùbá diaspora living in the United Kingdom. The analysis concentrated on investigating the re-contextualisation of personal stories and cultural politics of identity of the Yorùbás, through their traditional religious heritage. Therefore, the chapter aims to answer the following research questions: 'How do Yorùbá immigrants relate to their traditional religious objects displayed in museums?' and 'What are the stereotypes of potential Yorùbá museum visitors in relation to their religious objects?' These questions reflect the main theme of the thesis, which is concerned with the change to the meaning attributed to traditional religious Yorùbá objects as their use (from religious to museum items), contexts (from private shrines to museum displays) and interlocutors (from Yorùbá traditional religion practitioners/believers to museum professionals) change. Consequently, this part of the thesis focuses on a new cultural definition of Yorùbá identity within contemporary British society and on the way traditional religious Yorùbá material culture is considered and stereotyped by the members of the Yorùbá diaspora.

The chapter has been organised in three main parts. The first part is concerned with the nature of the research itself among Yorùbá members of the Yorùbá diaspora and the profile of the research's participants. The second part of the chapter looks at the procedure of the interviews and focus groups carried out with the Yorùbá participants. The final section is concerned with the analysis of the data collected. This chapter will use semiotics as an analytical tool. Indeed, the semiotic approach employed has been crucial in defining the problematic process relating to the re-engagement and re-experiencing of traditional religion in a different context (Geertz, 1983). A table, concerned with the profile of the participants, supplements this chapter.

5.2. Christianity and traditional African religion.

As the result of rapid changes (i.e. historical, political and religious) occurring in contemporary societies, the definition and understanding of contemporary cultures is problematical. A culture, and therefore its definition, implies an identification of specific values, beliefs and communication codes, shared by the people who belong to it. Unlike society, a culture can transcend a strict 'time – space' collocation: a culture can have a life span much longer than a society and it can involve the social life, history and traditions of people who have been part of different societies. This does not mean that a culture can be static, on the contrary, one of its main features is its fluid arbitrariness, which is predominantly reflected in the voluntary selection of symbols and communication codes.

The arbitrary choice of certain symbols helps people, who belong to the same culture, to reinforce their own identify (i.e. political, racial, religious, geographical, etc.) and to communicate between the members of the same culture in an unequivocal way within the same community or across different communities. Moreover, as a result of this, as John R. Hall and Mary Jo Neitz have pointed out 'all culture is not equally accessible [even] to all individuals in a society' (Hall and Neits, 1994: 18). This could depend on historical and social circumstances that might have affected the transmission and understanding of cultural traditions and symbols. For instance, in the context of this study and in the context of African culture, although traditional African religious beliefs are still practised, not all Africans are familiar with them or recognise them as religious, traditional symbols or beliefs. This is due to the historical, social and religious changes that have affected African culture since the Colonization.

Since the Colonization, Christian religion has been taught and transmitted to Africans through the Missionary schools, hospitals, dispensaries or clinics (Muga, 1975).⁹¹ The initial Western attitude towards African culture and traditional African religion had presented the European civilization as superior to the African one. Actually, 'the ethnocentrism made the Western Christian missionaries opposed to certain aspects of African culture as uncivilised, and this attitude has been concomitant with the

⁹¹ Cf. Also Taryor, 1984.

devaluation and denigration of all things African' (Muga, 1975: 100). This was due to the inability of missionaries to incorporate elements of traditional African religion and practices into Christian rituals. As a consequence, any African who wanted to become Christian had to renounce the traditional religious practises and beliefs, while traditional gods and spirits continued existing as demons under the power of the devil (Meyer, 2004: 455). This attitude has been transmitted and retained by the contemporary Independent African Christian Churches and Christian movements.

The Independent African Christian Churches are the African response to Western Christian religion. Indeed, Christianity and Christian missionaries did not offer, as expected, a prompt and effective solution to the discrepancies of power, income and prestige existing between Westerners and Africans. Therefore, Christian Africans started their own autonomous religious movements and churches (Muga, 1975; Taryor, 1984). However, in this research context, the independent African Christian Churches will not be examined:⁹² conversely, a concise overview of their attitude towards traditional African beliefs will be presented.

African Christian Churches and autonomous African religious movements firmly dissent from traditional religion and its beliefs – as, for example with the Yorùbá Born-Again-Christians who took part in this research. The term 'Born-Again-Christian'⁹³ is used in branches of Protestant Christianity and is associated with a powerful conversion experience and an encounter of the individual with God: 'the idea of being born again carries with it, the theological idea that a Christian is a new creation, given a fresh start by the action of God, freed from a sinful past life and able to begin a new life in relationship with Christ via the Holy Spirit.'⁹⁴ As a consequence, African Born-Again-Christians have an unsympathetic attitude toward African traditional religion and beliefs. As Meyer observes: 'being Born - Again is perceived as a radical rupture not only from one's personal sinful past, but also from the wider family and village of origin' (Meyer, 2004: 457). It is very important, however, to emphasise that, while Born-Again-Christians (and more broadly Pentecostal Charismatic Christians) tend to shun their extended families, they broadly develop their new family community. They appear to have conceived an idea of community that goes beyond any notion of ethnic group or nations and that has a

⁹² Independent African Churches include Pentecostals and therefore also Born-Again-Christians.

⁹³ The Christian use of the term is derived from the third chapter of the Gospel of John.

⁹⁴ In Wikipedia, 'Born-Again': http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Born_again (as 21/02/06).

strong global outlook. The idea of belonging to this Christian community has become extremely important in the context of the diaspora and diasporic identities: 'charismatic Christianity is the portable identity of people in diaspora' (Martin, 2002: 145). In fact, for diasporic groups, religion turns into both a pivotal means of self-definition and, at the same time, it provides 'an effective compensatory status [...] by offering support, protection, a moral code, self-esteem and a positive self – image in alien surroundings' (Dumont, 2003: 369-370).

In the context of this thesis, the importance of Christian religion (as a cohesive element for the Yorùbá diasporic groups of Leicester and Nottingham) emerged, almost in opposition to the knowledge and transmission of traditional Yorùbá religious beliefs. The next section will provide an overview of the profile of the Yorùbá participants in order to frame the context for the discussion of the analysed data.

5.2.1. Framing the context: the profile of the participants (Table 2).

Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz has stated: 'the social world is a rich and complex place, with frequent subtleties of implication' and also that 'people are ultimately responsible for creating the meaning they use [meaning, which is] often conveyed through minor details of everyday [verbal and non-verbal] behaviour' (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993: xvi). Indeed, people of different societies (for instance British and African), but belonging to a same culture (Yorùbá), and as a consequence sharing the same communication code (Yorùbá traditions), can change the meanings of their traditional symbols and objects according to the frequency and usage. This is due to the fact that a tradition is kept alive by actual and repetitive performances, which give a social and renovated dimension to the tradition (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993; Geertz, 1983). In fact, the renovated, social feature of traditions allows them to be sufficiently flexible and adaptable to time changes, in order to not be eliminated but kept alive and transmitted through generations (Hobsbawm, 1992).

This part of the data analysis has therefore been concerned with the study and investigation of the social dimension of the traditional Yorùbá religion, among Yorùbás living nowadays in Britain. Their profile has been summarised in the

following table, which is based on a form each participant had to fill at the beginning of the focus groups or interviews.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Please see Appendix VIII. 'Form to be filled during each focus group and interview', p.214.

Participant	Age	Gender M/F	Nationality	Education Level/Occupation	Religion	Residence
Y1	34	M	Nigerian (Yorùbá)	Journalist	Muslim	Nigeria
Y2	26	M	Nigerian (Yorùbá)	Ph.D. student in engineering	Christian (Pentecostal)	Nigeria
Y3	25	M	Nigerian (Yorùbá)	Employee/Unspecified	Christian (Anglican)	Leicester
Y4	39	F	Nigerian (Yorùbá)	BA in education/M.Ed in Adult Education	Born again Christian	Lagos (Nigeria)
Y5	28	F	French (Yorùbá)	Leicester College	Born again Christian	Leicester
Y6	60	M	Nigerian (Yorùbá)	Engineer Industry	Born again Christian	Leicester
Y7	46	F	Nigerian (Yorùbá)	HMD (Secretarial studies)	Born again Christian	Lagos (Nigeria)
Y8	40	M	British (Yorùbá)	Institute of Marketing	Born again Christian	Leicester
Y9	38	F	Yorùbá	Employee/Unspecified	Born again Christian	Nottingham
Y10	43	M	Yorùbá	Employee/Unspecified	Born again Christian	Nottingham
Y11	21	M	Nigerian (Yorùbá)	Undergraduate	Born again Christian	Nottingham
Y12	39	M	Nigerian (Yorùbá)	MA sociology	Born again Christian	Nottingham
Y13	30	M	Nigerian (Yorùbá)	Computer programmer	Unspecified	Beeston (Nottingham)
Y14	45	M	Yorùbá	Mechanical Engineer	Traditional believer	London
Y15	35	F	Yorùbá	Business woman/ BA	Born Again Christian	Beeston (Nottingham)
Y16	32	F	Nigerian (Yorùbá)	Nursing	Born Again Christian	Beeston (Nottingham)

Table 2: Profile of Yoruba Participants. In this table are reported those words and expressions provided by Yoruba participants in answering the introductory questions of the interviews and/or focus groups.

Overall, sixteen Yorùbá people took part in the research: the age range was 21 to 60 years old.⁹⁶ At the time of the research, most of the participants were resident in the United Kingdom, where they had moved either as refugees or in order to find a job. All the people belonged to the 'Yorùbá' ethnic group and only a few participants had been educated to tertiary level. As explained in the previous chapter, participants were recruited via local Churches (attended by Nigerians) and through the help of the owner of an African shop based in Nottingham.⁹⁷ The majority of the participants were Born-Again-Christians. Consequently their attitude towards the topic of the research (traditional religious Yorùbá objects and beliefs) was strongly affected by their Christian faith. Indeed, participants agreed to take part in the discussion groups once they had been assured of the use of photographs of the objects rather than the real objects. This was because the photographs were considered less harmful and dangerous than the real artefacts. Initially the researcher had not intended to carry out the research among predominantly Christian Yorùbás. However, the large component of Born-Again-Christians became an advantage for this research in that it allowed the researcher to understand more deeply the Christian nature of the stereotypes that the members of the Yorùbá diaspora in Britain have towards their traditional religious objects.

It is important to mention that all the participants were non-museum visitors. This was mostly due to the fact that they perceived the museum to be a Western invention. As a consequence, it was difficult for them to understand the museum dimension and the possibility of museums dealing publicly with the sacred and religious objects.

5.2.2. Purposes of the focus groups and interviews with Yorùbá people in the context of this research.

Focus groups and in-depth interviews are advantageous methodological tools to gain information about participants' views, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions on specific topics (Litosseliti, 2003). Therefore, in the context of this research, they have been undoubtedly useful as their main purpose was to understand how Yorùbá members

⁹⁶ Six women and ten men.

⁹⁷ See Chapter Four, p.89.

of the Yorùbá diaspora would relate to their traditional religious objects (in terms of historical and traditional knowledge) outside their original context and how they would interpret them in the contemporary Western museum context.

Participants were asked to identify the objects in the photographs and to discuss them. The questions were open ended and organised according to the following key themes: definition of being Yorùbá, knowledge of traditional histories, knowledge of the purpose of traditional religion, knowledge of traditional religious objects and museum experience.⁹⁸ The photographs, twelve in total, included various types of traditional religious Yorùbá objects. They all belonged to a Nigerian collection kept in the Brewhouse Yard Museum (Nottingham). The collection includes three main categories of artefacts: jewels, work tools and religious objects, which became part of the museum's collections between 1878 and 1879. It is almost impossible to determine their provenance since the accession books of the museum do not mention their entry. It seems, in fact, that several local collectors donated the items to the museum. Four labels (dating from 1878 and reporting a brief description of the objects and the name of the donors) are the only proof of entry for some of the items.⁹⁹ The objects for the research were selected according to their religious or ceremonial value. The researcher tried to include and show the participants different types of artefacts: from objects used for divination to amulets, from ceremonial containers to wooden figures representing small gods. The following is a short description of the objects themselves. This description is an essential complement to the follow up analysis of the focus groups and discussion with Yorùbá participants. The information detailed here is based on the answers that different Yorùbá individuals had given to the researcher. The objects have been listed in alphabetical order.

- **Carved calabash (lid) (Fig.5):** Used as container for different ceremonies, including weddings and the election of the new kings;

⁹⁸ Please see Appendix VII. 'List of questions for the interviews with Yoruba people', p.213 and Appendix IX. 'List of questions for the focus groups with Yoruba people', p.215.

⁹⁹ Through the labels it has been possible to name three donors: a Methodist minister (who donated a Gèlèdé mask and some pottery pieces to the museum), John Augustus Otonba Payne, a Sierra Leonean recorder of Lagos (who donated another Gèlèdé mask) and finally, a certain Sancho Martinez. Augustus Otonba Payne has documented his interest and involvement with the Yorùbá culture in a book entitled 'Table of principal events in Yorùbá history with certain other matters of general interest compiled for use in the courts within the British colony of Lagos '(1893) and in an yearly almanac 'Payne's Lagos almanac and diary for 1878-1894' (ed. by J. O. Payne, 1877-1894). Concerning Sancho Martinez, nothing is known except its name.

- **Ceremonial stool (Fig.6):** The cycle of life is carved on this stool. One of the principles of traditional Yorùbá religion is the reincarnation, which is represented here as a continuous line. The stool probably belonged to some elder member of the local community;
- **Crested crane amulet (Fig.7):** The function of this amulet is uncertain. However, it is clear that it was a very powerful and intimidating object for all the Yorùbá participants;
- **Decorated calabash representing the cosmos (Fig.8):** The upper part of this calabash represents the kingdom of the spirits. The lower part of it represents the human world (symbolised by the carved animals). As with the previous calabash, this one could also have been used as container for ceremonies;
- **Diviner's sandals and bag (Fig.9):** This bag and the matching sandals probably belonged to a diviner. Indeed, the beads on the sandals are symbols of a person who is expert in divination. The bag was used to contain the divination tools;
- **Ifa bowl (Fig. 10):** This bowl was used for divination. It should usually have contained the cowry shells used during the divination practice;
- **Knotted cowry shells (Fig.11):** Un-knotted cowry shells are used for the divination. However, in the past cowry shells were also used as money. When this was the case, they were knotted together to represent the whole possession of an individual;
- **Leather bottle (Fig. 12):** This object was also used for divination and it contains crystals;
- **Muslim Amulet (Fig.13):** This is a Muslim amulet, which combines both elements of traditional Yoruba religion and Islam. Attached to the amulets are the pages from the Koran, which could have been eaten as protection;
- **Painted Wooden Figure (Fig.14):** Due to the colour used, this figure represents a Yorùbá traditionalist. The function of the figure was not identified;
- **Walking stick (Fig.15):** This probably belonged to an important member of the local village or to a traditionalist. Indeed, the hand carved on the top of it signifies the high status of the individual who owned it;
- **Wooden Figure (Fig.16):** This figure represented a Yorùbá divinity and was probably displayed in a private shrine.



Fig.5 Carved calabash (lid). Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham. ©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Fig.6 Ceremonial stool. Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham. ©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Fig.7 Crested crane amulet. Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham. ©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Fig.8 Decorated calabash. Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham. ©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Fig.9 : Diviner's sandals and bag. Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham.
©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Fig.10: Ifa bowl.

Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham.

©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Fig.11: Knotted cowry shells.

Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham.

©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.

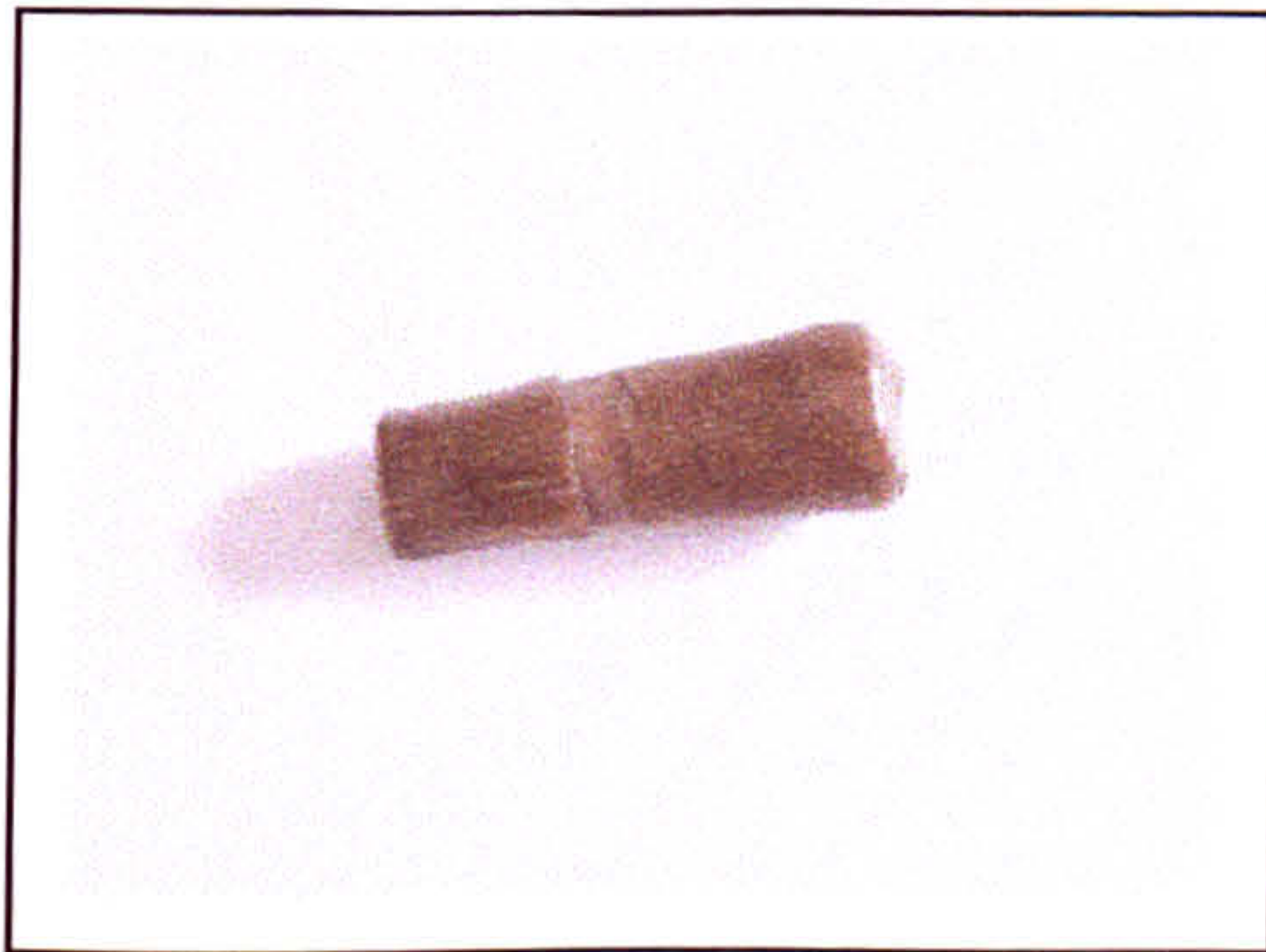


Fig.12: Leather Bottle.

Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham.

©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Fig.13: Muslim Amulet.

Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham.

©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Fig.14: Painted wooden figure.

Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham.

©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Fig.15 : Walking stick.

Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham.

©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.



Fig.16: Wooden figure.

Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham.

©Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery.

5.3. A semiotic frame of Yorùbá culture.

The semiotic system employed by Susan Pearce provides the framework for the data analysis (Pearce, 1990).¹⁰⁰ The system has been considered very useful for this kind of investigation because it has helped to highlight how the process of change in the meaning attributed to these objects does not happen according to predictable steps, but is the result of complex historical, social and religious processes.

The semiotic system employed was deliberately kept simple in order to bring the inter-relationship into sharp focus; indeed, its simplicity and flexibility are the two key traits, which make this type of analysis so useful. According to the system, postcolonial British society, as the language's system, has been considered the context of the study (**Fig.17**). In this system, Yorùbá traditions have been understood as the spoken word, the selected speech, which allows people of the same linguistic community (Yorùbá members of the Yorùbá diaspora living in Britain) to communicate with each other, in order to identify and redefine themselves in a new context, through a selection of signs and symbols.

¹⁰⁰ For the diagram, please see Chapter Four, p.105.

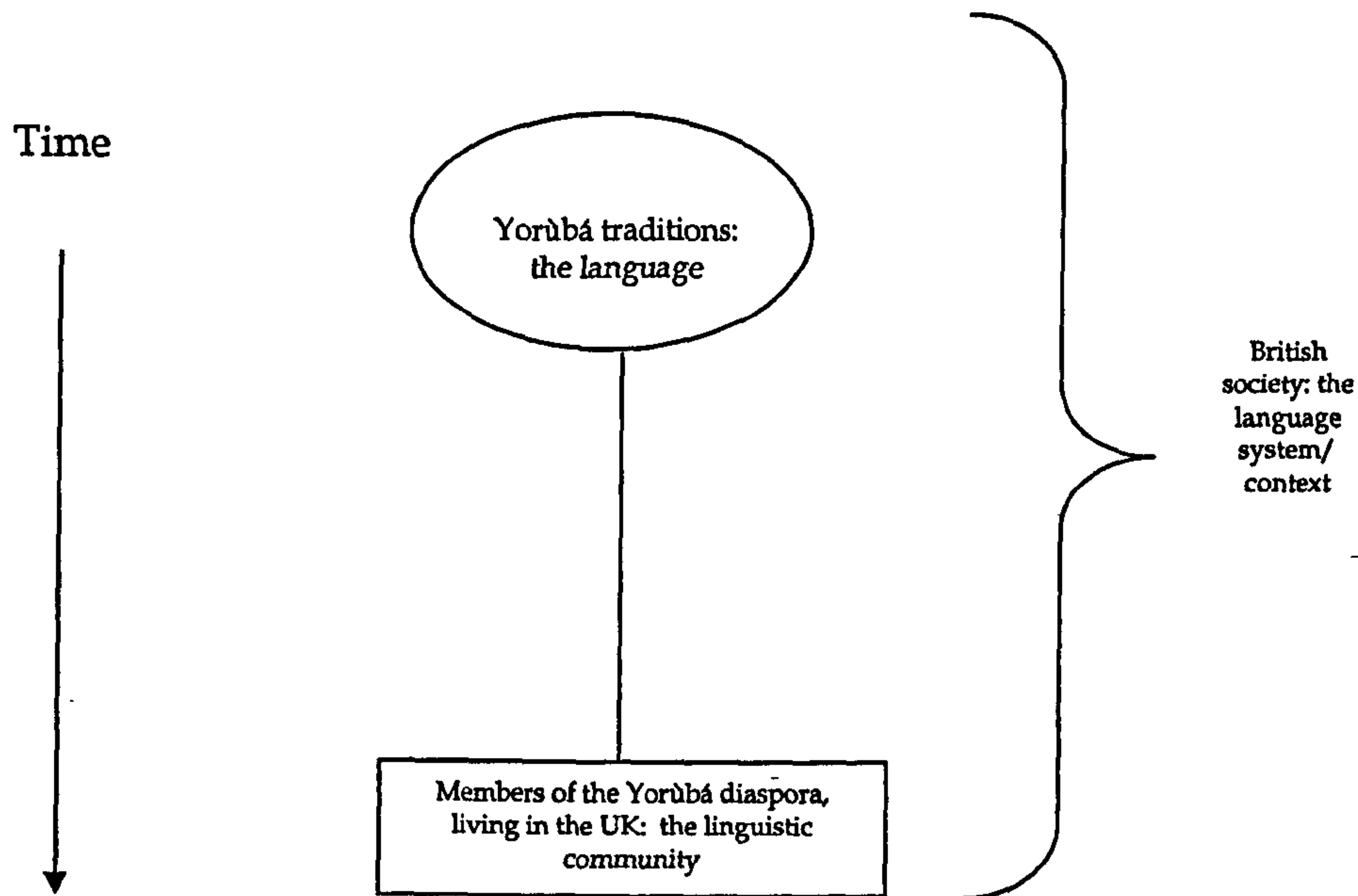


Fig. 17: Figure adapted from Ferdinand de Saussure (Saussure, 1960: 78).

However, every language is affected by time and space, two parameters that determine the re-shaping and re-definition of a community: in this case, Yorùbá religious traditions have been exposed to the biases of Christianity as well as the social changes and rules of contemporary British culture. In considering this language system, it is essential to bear in mind that the language of different cultures is based on the pair: 'identity and power' and that 'all power implies resistance, [and] therefore particular languages of power imply particular resistance to that power' (Kahn, 1995: 9). In applying this statement to our case, it is clear that the power is represented by British contemporary society, and resistance to it is represented by Yorùbá traditions. Consequently, surviving Yorùbá religious traditions, symbols or practice are the result of this resistance to the power of the new society, in which the Yorùbás frame themselves, and the meaningfulness of a symbol is based on 'the sharing of a common stock of knowledge for the conveyance of meaning' (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993: 43).

The semiotic analysis has considered the change of attributed meanings. The change has been concerned with traditional Yorùbá religious/ceremonial objects. In particular, it highlights how, since the nineteenth century, such items have been

understood differently, according to the hosting society: from ceremonial/religious items (symbols of the feelings and needs of a specific Yorùbá society of the nineteenth century), to curiosities and ethnographic items, they are the result of Western Colonisation. It is important to specify, however, that this is a simplification of the change of meaning process and it does not intend to be a generalisation of it. Indeed, at the time there were probably also knowledgeable Western individuals who could appreciate the religious gist of the items. However, once traditional Yorùbá religious/ceremonial objects were inserted into the new cultural, geographical, social and religious context of the colonial Britain, to be understood and recognised by the new community, they had to fall within new broad intelligible parameters (Pearce, 1999). In Imperial Britain, Yorùbá objects became the matter of study for ethnographers and curators. Consequently, the same objects embodied a new set of beliefs, academic and scientific, rather than religious. In the Western world of the Colonial Era, those objects have become the symbols of new categories (for example 'ethnography') and their new meanings have been shaped according to the ethnographic knowledge and contemporary museum theories.

This part of the analysis deals with the data gathered from the focus groups and interviews carried out with the Yorùbás: it considers the interpretation of traditional religious objects and beliefs by contemporary Yorùbás living today in the United Kingdom. It takes into account the context in which the Yorùbá members of the Yorùbá diaspora, living in the contemporary post-colonial British context, interpret these objects. Additionally, it considers the set of rules applied by Yorùbá individuals in order to identify the objects (the language) and relate them to their religious heritage. However, their original social, religious and educational background, now transmuted to a new identity (the Immigrant in Britain), has determined how their new 'traditional' objects may be understood and defined. As a consequence, the *parole* of this particular culture has been summarised in three main, common themes:¹⁰¹

- *Yorùbá distinctiveness;*
- *The culture of traditional religion;*

¹⁰¹ Although it is important to specify that there were other themes emerging during the different interviews and focus groups, which did not appear to be common.

- *Museums and Yorùbás: suggestions to improve the misrepresentation of the cultural heritage.*

The following part of the chapter has been divided into an analysis of the individual interviews, analysis of the discussion groups and concluding remarks.

5.4. Analysis of the interviews with Yorùbá people.

Three Yorùbá individuals were selected for a face-to-face interview. They were: a Nigerian journalist (Y1), a Ph.D. student of Engineering (Y2) and an unspecified employee (Y3). The first interview took place in Nottingham, while the other two interviews took place in Leicester.¹⁰² As mentioned in the Chapter 4, due to personal commitments, these people could only take part in the interviews and not in the focus groups.

5.4.1. Interview with Y1.

On the 9th of September 2003, the first interview took place in Nottingham, in the Kunmoji African Store, a shop selling African food, objects, clothes and movies. Two themes were identified during the interview:

- *Yorùbá distinctiveness and the culture of religion;*
- *Museums and Yorùbás: personal experience;*

Y1 (Male/Age:34/Journalist/Muslim) defined the Yorùbás as *'a distinct ethnic group in southwest Nigeria'* counting *'almost 25 million people all over the world'*. According to Y1, it is difficult to define religion because it depends on the individual's perception of it: *'for some people religion is a sort of joy, a sort of inner peace; for some people religion is just part of life, which is reflected in your character, [and] behaviour; [and even] in the [style of] dressing!'* Concerning traditional Yorùbá religion, Y1 added that it *'is something that you cannot really classify, you cannot overlook traditional religion, because is part of an entire culture'*. However, according

¹⁰² The interviewees, according to their availability, decided the location. The first interview took place in an African shop (*Kunmoji African Shop*), in Nottingham. The second interview took place in the house of the interviewee and the third interview took place in the house of the researcher. See, *Transcriptions* pp.220-225.

to him, one of the main features of traditional Yorùbá beliefs is *'to show love and peace'* and the *'belief in that particular religion helps you in a long way, in their entire life'*.

Y1 continued by explaining that, notwithstanding Yorùbá people today are mostly Muslim or Christian, they still believe that *'traditional beliefs must be respected, above all'*. Indeed, according to his personal family experience, his *'people back home in Ile Ife practise a kind of religion'* and although *'they are doing it [and he] might be there, [he is] not participating in it'*. He also pointed out a sort of religious syncretism between traditional beliefs and Christianity or Islam. For instance, some aspects of Ifa divination (*'a religion on its own'*) *'have been borrowed by Islam'*. Regarding this, he referred to the practise of fortune telling and to the use of gourds in making medicines. This confirmed Taryor's explanation on African traditional customs borrowed by Christianity (Taryor, 1984).

Y1 explained that he had visited the temporary exhibition put up by the researcher and his viewpoint on the displays was positive. Actually, according to him, the existence of those objects outside their original context enhances the appreciation of Yorùbá *'traditional religion here in the West'*, since *'traditional African religion is still part of the cultural heritage of the entire world'*. At the same time, the exhibition could be a *'reminder, for some [Yorùbás] who are here, of the traditional beliefs back home in Nigeria'*.

Y1 defined the exhibition as *'quite interesting'*. He was pleased to see that *'people give value to traditional African religion'*. However, initially Y1 admitted he was *'shocked to see [that] some of those objects [that were] presented in the exhibition'* were objects that were *'very meaningful to the Yorùbá traditional beliefs'*. Y1 said he had looked at the items from two perspectives. Firstly, as a Yorùbá person he was *'quite happy to see some of these objects on display [because they gave] a good reflection of the African traditional religion'*. Secondly, Y1 looked at the displays from his professional point of view. Indeed, being a journalist he was curious to find out more details about when and how those artefacts came to the United Kingdom.

Y1 acknowledged the intrinsic sacredness as well as the metonymic values of traditional Yorùbá religious objects. *'Some of these objects serve the purpose of god,*

the purpose of religion, religious purposes, they serve the purpose of something they can represent aesthetics in some homes' or they are even 'a symbol that reminds us of that African traditional culture, of the Yorùbá traditional belief'. In other words, according to Y1, the same objects could represent a number of things, 'that depends on the way you are looking at [them]'.

Notwithstanding his faith, Y1 believes in the effectiveness of amulets, both positive and evil. According to him, in fact, amulets are a sort of 'African insurance' and as such, they were not meant to be seen. Therefore, if he had been involved in the setting of an exhibition, he would never have displayed Yorùbá amulets. At the time of Y1's visit, there was some music in the exhibition room. Y1 was pleased by it because it was the music of Ogundi (a traditional drama in Nigeria) and because it echoed 'the purpose and the meaning of those objects now on display'.

5.4.2. Interview with Y2.

This interview took place in Leicester, in the house of the interviewee, on the 12th of December 2003.¹⁰³ Three themes were identified:

- *Yorùbá distinctiveness: Yorùbá pride;*
- *The culture of traditional religion. Yorùbá beliefs and culture: a difficult definition;*
- *Museums and Yorùbás: suggestions to improve the misrepresented cultural heritage.*

Y2 (Male/Age: 26/Student/Christian) showed a remarkable pride in his ethnic origins. Indeed, according to him it is 'a great thing to be Yorùbá [and] it is something to be proud of, because Yorùbá is a rich culture'. However, Y2 seemed to have a standard knowledge concerning Yorùbá traditions and the origins of the Yorùbá group. Y2 stated that it was difficult to give a personal definition of religion, since 'it is very difficult to draw a line between religion and any religious beliefs, because the two are embedded together'. However, he continued, 'belief is actually under religion because each religion has its own beliefs'.

¹⁰³ See *Transcriptions*, pp.226-230.

According to Y2 there are different traditional religions in Yorùbáland. For instance, Ogun, the god of iron, *'is worshipped by those who use iron, by the hunters, by the farmers' [and] their belief is that if they worship him, they will be successful in their professions'*. However, Y2 zealously underlined his Christian faith, the fact that he did not believe in traditional Yorùbá beliefs and the fact that traditional religious objects did not have any significance to him. He explained that he is *'trying to stay in a very neutral ground'*. Notwithstanding his faith, he can still say something about traditional Yorùbá religion: *'it is part of our culture and I appreciate very much every aspect of our culture'*. During the interview, the researcher showed him several pictures of traditional Yorùbá religious and ceremonial objects. Initially, Y2 was unwilling to speak about the objects. However, after this initial reluctance, Y2 explained that, according to him, there was no difference between a religious object, a sacred object and an amulet because *'any religious object is a sacred object'*. He also added that, by worshipping some traditional objects, people *'can actually get access to whatever they want: they get protection, they get position, they can solve their problems'*. In other words, Y2 continued, those objects *'are used by people as a way of approaching God, as a medium of getting anything they want from God'*.

From the interview, it emerged that Y2 had never visited an exhibition in Europe, with traditional Yorùbá religious objects. The only museum experience he had had was a visit to one of the Oxford museums and the British Museum in London.¹⁰⁴ Y2 was however pleased of have seen those objects displayed, because *'those objects make people to get aware of the cultural heritage of the Yorùbás. It's a way of promoting our culture to the outside world'*. He also continued by saying that:

'what Westerner visitors can understand of those objects is actually that Yorùbás have got a very rich religion and beliefs, very rich religious objects and are very committed to their religion and that some of the Yorùbás will find it very very difficult to let go their religion for the Western religion'.

Y2 stated that if he could have been involved in the setting up of an exhibition concerned with traditional Yorùbá religion, he would not take part in it, because his religion would not allow it and he does not practise traditional religion. It was Y2's

¹⁰⁴ Concerning the British Museum, Y2 referred to the Benin bronzes.

opinion that, at the moment *'Western curators that display these objects are trying to promote the cultural heritage of the Yorùbás [and] are doing a good job'*. However, Y2 believed that Western curators *'could buy and add more objects from Africa, so that they can have wider exhibitions and collections of these objects, for people who are interested in seeing these objects'*.

5.4.3. Interview with Y3.

The interview took place on the 4th of January 2003 in the house of the researcher. However, due to the limited knowledge of the participant (in relation to the topic), it has been difficult to identify precise themes. Y3 (Male/Age: 25/ Employee/ Christian) showed a limited knowledge of the historical background of Yorùbá history and culture. Although he explained that in Nigeria, from primary school, people are instructed about their historical roots, Y3 could only answer in a limited way. In addition, when asked about any traditional Yorùbá myths or songs related to mythological events, Y3 was not able to provide any specific examples.¹⁰⁵ Concerning his personal definition of traditional Yorùbá religion, Y3 explained that it is not possible to speak of a traditional Yorùbá religion, because the term Yorùbá defines an ethnic group. However, he continued, it is legitimate to speak of *'a sort of oracle we believe in, as an intermediary, before the Christianity comes'*.¹⁰⁶

Y3's definition and explanation of traditional religious objects was quite basic. According to Y3, traditional Yorùbá religious objects have *'spirits that have been invoked in these things; some they carve an object [so] that [it] will look like the head of a human being'*. In Y3's opinion, objects used for religious purposes or for consultations, are impossible to be seen in public. If this is the case, they are not sacred, because *'there are some sacrifices you have to pass through'* and which are associated with the objects.

According to the protocol of the interviews, Y3 was shown a set of pictures of traditional Yorùbá objects. Y3 seemed hesitant in speaking about the objects, which he considered *'very effective'*. However, Y3 was quite keen to tell some stories about

¹⁰⁵ Y3 was only able to refer to and sing a song related to the wedding occasion. See *Transcriptions*, pp. 231-236.

¹⁰⁶ Y3 is referring to the Ifa oracle. According to Yorùbá tradition, the Ifa is the oracle of the divination.

Yorùbá gods, like, for instance, about Shango.¹⁰⁷ In addition, even if Y3 defined himself a Christian, during the interview he also claimed to believe in one of the traditional Yorùbá gods. From the questions, it emerged that Y3 had been in only one African museum.¹⁰⁸ Y3 believed that *'only the pottery should be displayed [in a museum], except if you have drama involved, because you don't have to confuse religion with the tradition'*.

The next section of this chapter is concerned with the analysis of the focus groups carried out with members of the Yorùbá diaspora living in Britain at the time of the research.

5. 5. Analysis of the focus groups.

All the focus groups followed the same structure. The discussions opened with broad questions about their own definition of being Yorùbá and about any traditional myth or stories related to the creation of the Yorùbás as ethnic group. The questions then honed in on the major concepts relevant to this research: 'traditional religion' and 'traditional religious object'. In relation to photographic images of artefacts, participants were asked to define the objects and to give any details about the traditions related to them. Finally, participants were also asked to comment on their museum experience, or on their lack of museum experience and on the idea of displaying traditional Yoruba religion in western museums.

5.5.1. Analysis of the focus group no.1.

The relationship between Christianity and traditional African religion is complex, especially since Christianity in Africa and among African diasporic groups has entered a new phase with the creation of the Independent Churches (Meyer, 2004: 448). In the context of this research, this discussion presents a strong focus on the

¹⁰⁷ According to Yorùbá mythology, Shango is the god of thunder and his symbol is the double-headed axe.

¹⁰⁸ The Ese museum, Nigeria.

contradictory relation between traditional Yorùbá religious beliefs and objects and the belonging to Christian faith.

The discussion group was held on the 22nd of July 2002, in Leicester, in the house of two of the participants.¹⁰⁹ There were five participants: three females and two males. All of them were Yorùbá. The age range was 28 to 60 years. The nationality of all but two of them was Nigerian, (one of British nationality and one of French nationality). At the time of the discussion, all the participants were living in Leicester and all of them were Born-Again-Christians.

The discussion group was organised on the basis of a list of twelve open-ended questions. In addition, a set of thirteen pictures of traditional Yorùbá religious objects were shown to the participants.¹¹⁰ The pictures of the objects shown were: the ceremonial gourd, the crested crane necklace, the leather bottle with crystals inside, a painted wooden figure and a wooden figure representing a spirit. The pictures of the objects were randomly chosen according to the themes developed during the discussion. The key questions were concerned with: knowledge of Yorùbá oral tradition, knowledge of Yorùbá religious beliefs, identification of traditional Yorùbá religious objects and experience of Western museums (in relation to Yorùbá religious objects).

During the focus group three main themes were identified:

- *Yorùbá distinctiveness: The children of Oduduwa;*
- *The culture of traditional religion. A religion of the past or a living religion?*
- *Museums and Yorùbás: suggestions to improve the misrepresented cultural heritage.*

Yorùbá distinctiveness: The children of Oduduwa.

The researcher/moderator began by asking a general question, concerned with the individuals' definition of 'being Yorùbá'. This was an introductory question and was very important as an introduction to the discussion (Krueger 1994; Litosseliti 2003). In

¹⁰⁹ See *Transcriptions*, pp.237-243.

¹¹⁰ The pictures of the objects were randomly chosen according to the themes developed during the discussion. However, they were based on the selected list of Yorùbá religious objects, provided in the Appendix X 'List of the figures shown during the focus groups and interview with Yorùbá people', p.216.

answering this question, participants referred primarily to the geographical provenance of the Yorùbá group and then to its divine origin. The group, in fact, defined Yorùbá culture as a *'tribe'* and specifically, Y4 (Female/Age: 39/Postgraduate Level Education/Christian) stated *'a tribe of the Indigenous Africans of Nigeria [which] originated in Egypt and Sudar'*. Participants did not have any biases or issues towards the term tribe, and when asked by the moderator/researcher, about their feelings towards it, the general sense was that the term was not considered offensive anymore, having assumed a Christian dignity. Concerning this, Y6 (Male/Age: 60/ Professional/ Christian) also added that the term is used in the Bible to indicate *'a group of people [...] where you live'*. To explain the origin of Yorùbá culture, participants referred also to the myth of Oduduwa, the legendary founder of the Yorùbá nation and therefore the father of all Yorùbás. Participants proved to be very proud of their connection with Oduduwa and, as a consequence, of their ethnic origin.

The culture of traditional religion. A religion of the past or a living religion?

By asking about the group's ideas on traditional beliefs, the researcher introduced a key question. In general, the group defined traditional Yorùbá religious beliefs as superstitions and as a religion of the past. Indeed, as van Dijk points out, 'by becoming 'born-again [Christian] the individual is believed to be liberated from the ties that bind him or her to the past and tradition' (van Dijk, 2001: 109). However, notwithstanding this, it was evident that participants still believed in Yorùbá religious practices and in the power of traditional religious objects. All participants acknowledged the fact that Yorùbá traditional beliefs are still practised in Nigeria. Concerning this Y7 (Male/Female: 46/ Undergraduate Study/ Christian) made it clear that:

'in the earlier days, they were worshipping different gods [...] but nowadays, you know, people are [...] Christians or Muslims but I think you must find few who still worshipping [like] my grand mother, she has a shrine for these gods'

In addition, Y8 (Male/Age: 40/Tertiary Education Level/ Christian) explained that during his last visit to Lagos, he saw local people celebrating Oya, the wife of Shango, the goddess of the river Niger. However, the general opinion of the group

was that nowadays traditional religious beliefs are less practised than in the past and this is due to the spread of Christianity and Islam.

As Meyer (2004), van Dijk (2001) and Fisher (1973) suggest, the influence of Christianity over traditional African religion has resulted in a rigorous and unsympathetic attitude towards indigenous beliefs, practices and objects. However, this attitude does not exclude the fact that Africans who converted to Christianity acknowledge the power of traditional religious objects. Indeed, although this group tried to distance themselves from traditional beliefs, and although all participants were Born-Again-Christians, they admitted that they still believe in some of the traditional beliefs. For instance, participants referred to the beliefs in reincarnation and asserted a belief in it. Regarding this, two members of the group brought examples from their own experience. The first individual, Y4, explained about the Yorùbá custom of giving the name of the dead grandfather to the newborn child:

'when somebody is pregnant, and if the father [of the woman who is pregnant] just died, when the baby is born, the baby will have the name of the father, because he came back in the baby'

This is in order for the grand-father to come back to live again through the baby. In relation to this, another participant, Y7 (Female/Age: 46/Secondary Education Level/Christian) explained how one of her cousins gave birth to a child with the same tribal marks of her dead grandmother.

In discussing reincarnation, participants also referred to the secret societies and their rites, considered very powerful and mysterious. The moderator/researcher was interested in investigating in more in depth the participants' attitude towards the secret societies and their rites. Therefore, she asked for more details about the topic. This question served the purpose of a transition question, before starting to comment on the pictures of traditional objects (Litosseliti, 2003). However participants explained that it was impossible to know the content of the celebrations of the secret societies, a part from the fact that before the colonization their role was linked to the cult of the ancestors.

As previously mentioned, the researcher showed some pictures of traditional religious objects and asked participants to comment on them. After an initial hesitancy, participants started to make comments on those objects, which they considered of little harm. The group's attitude towards the photographs was quite diffident: some members were more willing to speak than others. However, the whole group was very concerned with the possible consequences or revenge of the spirits, after certain objects had been photographed or publicly presented. This behaviour confirms van Dijk's view: according to Pentecostal ideology, occult forces (manifestation of satanic powers) are part of everyday African life and can be present in any kind of object, especially those associated with traditional practises (van Dijk, 2001). Therefore, it was evident that the members of the discussion did not feel comfortable in talking about specific items but they explained that this was because they did not want to provide the researcher with the wrong information. Participants talked extensively about the use of the carved gourd during public ceremonies and about the power of the crested crane necklace. Regarding the crested crane necklace, the group defined it as effectively '*bullet proof*', as a very powerful amulet. The necklace was probably regarded as very powerful because it was associated, as Parish points out, with some spiritual forces found in animals (Parish, 2001).¹¹¹ However, although participants explained the general purposes of it, they were not willing to give more details about it. They retained a kind of secrecy in relation to the necklace, emphasising only the power of the object and the fact that they were not happy to be involved with such objects, because of their nature. In addition participants were quite reticent in talking about a wooden figure (painted with colours associated with evil spirits) and about a leather bottle containing crystals, used for divination purposes.

Although all the photographs showed only traditional religious and ceremonial objects, the reaction of the participants was very different according to the item. This was due to the fact that some objects were considered more sacred or powerful than others and therefore implied more silent respect. In addition, participants claimed to not be afraid of such objects because the participants now belonged to the Christian faith. However, they acknowledged the importance of respecting the authority embodied in such items and of people who still believed in them.

¹¹¹ As Parish notes: 'powerful talismans are associated with spiritual sources found in the bush such as plants and bits of animal horn' (Parish, 2001: 131).

Museums and Yorùbás: suggestions to improve the misrepresented cultural heritage.

Murphy has argued that it is an implacable imperative for contemporary museums to deal with the challenge of cultural diversity and of 'such fragmenting objects, detached and recomposed as collections' (Murphy, 2005: 72). Drawing from the data gathered during this focus group, it becomes evident that the contemporary museum display of traditional Yorùbá objects was a delicate topic.

The final part of the discussion was concerned with the participants' experience of museums and Western displays of Yorùbá religious objects. It emerged that only Y4 had visited a museum, back in Nigeria. Therefore, none of them had seen a Western exhibition of Yorùbá objects. Actually, the participants were none too pleased to see traditional objects in museums, because they felt deprived of their heritage. Concerning this, Y7 raised the issue of people back in Nigeria who do not have many opportunities to see their traditional objects because they have been brought to the West. People back in Nigeria:

'have been deprived of the objects and these objects have been brought here, to Europe, while they have a place where they belong, Africa, and they are supposed to be there. When you are here, you can just go and see them in a museum but [for those] people who are there back home, don't have many opportunities to see them'

At the same time, participants felt that Westerners could not fully understand the spiritual value of such items, because of the two different symbolic and 'representational systems' - the Western and the African- (Hoselager, 1997). In fact, as Njami points out, 'today's [perception and understanding] of Africa is the fruit of a history altered by others' (Njami, 2005:55). In conclusion, participants suggested that, before displaying such items in museums, it would be better for Western curators to study this kind of artefacts in their own original context, in order to get the correct name and information. This would be helpful in making people realising the complexity and beauty of Yorùbá culture and religion. However, concerning religious traditional objects, since Western museums are not their original and appropriate place, these items have become meaningless and powerless.

5.5.2. Analysis of the focus group no.2.

Despite the popularity of the term 'identity', its definition is difficult and ambiguous because identity can refer both to individual identity and to groups' identity (Diaz-Andreu and Lucy, 2006:1). Although people move out from their original country, the sense of identity can be extremely strong. This was evident in this discussion group, which highlighted the idea of Yorùbá identity and the pride associated with it.

The discussion group was held on the 6th of December 2003, in Nottingham, in the house of one of the participants. There were four participants: three men and one woman. The age range was 21 to 43 years. The participants were all Yorùbás: all of them were Born-Again-Christians and they were all living in Nottingham at the time of the focus group.¹¹²

The focus group followed the same protocol of the previous discussion and as for the previous one the key questions were concerned with: knowledge of Yorùbá oral tradition, knowledge of Yorùbá religious beliefs, identification of traditional Yorùbá religious objects and personal experience of Western museums.

During this discussion group, four main themes were identified:

- *Yorùbá distinctiveness: the concept of Yorùbá nationality;*
- *The culture of traditional religion. Traditional religion in Yorùbá terms;*
- *A Yorùbá view of Western museums;*
- *Museums and Yorùbás: suggestions to improve the misrepresented cultural heritage.*

Yorùbá distinctiveness: the concept of Yorùbá nationality.

The researcher/moderator started the discussion with the introductory question relating to the personal definition of 'being Yorùbá'. Participants made reference mention both the geographical provenance of the group (probably from Saudi Arabia and Egypt) and the mythological origins -as descendents of Oduduwa. The initial part of the discussion was indeed, centred on the definition of Yorùbá identity, on the identification 'with a whole of which [they feel to be] on of the elements' (Njami,

¹¹² See *Transcriptions*, pp.244-249.

2005: 54). Participants explained that it was difficult to define the term 'Yorùbá': in fact it is a complex concept indicating a culture, a nationality, a country within a country and a religion. By referring to their mythical origins, participants proved what Aremu has pointed out: 'Yorùbá people believe deeply in the mythical, as well as in the realities of lives' (Aremu, 1991: 6).

The culture of traditional religion. Traditional religion in Yorùbá terms.

As Muga notes, African traditional religion considers the supernatural and the natural world as interconnected (Muga, 1975). This is a remarkable difference with the Western religious thought that, on the contrary, regards the supernatural world as opposite of the natural. This research has acknowledged that the investigation of the concept of religion is strongly affected by the personal background and individual knowledge. Actually, the researcher asked the participants to provide first their own general definition of 'religion' and then of traditional Yorùbá religion. The latter proved to be a complex issue. Regarding the general definition of religion, participants agreed to define religion as a way of worshipping. However, the group pointed out the difference between the Western and Yorùbá definition of religion: actually, according to the participants it is not possible to refer to traditional Yorùbá beliefs as a 'religion'. In fact, concerning this Y12 pointed out that the researcher was *'talking of religion in Western terms'*.

From the discussion it emerged that it is not feasible to speak of a traditional Yorùbá religion, but only of different religions associated with different Yorùbá gods. Participants described the impossibility of classifying traditional Yorùbá beliefs as a religion, since traditional beliefs are a way of living. For instance Y12 explained that it was more appropriate to speak of a traditional *'belief linked to trust and this is linked to costume, based on our origins'* than of traditional religion. In addition Y11 (Male/Age: 21/ Student/ Christian) made clear that for some people traditional religion is a way of consulting the oracle, as in the Ifa oracle, for example. Therefore, in order to understand traditional Yorùbá beliefs, the group pointed out that it would be useful to make a distinction between the Western idea of religion (*'a belief linked to trust'*) and traditional African religion (a belief *'linked to costume'* and based on different ethnic origins). Participants also acknowledged that traditional beliefs are still practised, especially back in Yorùbáland: indeed, although Christianity

and Islam have spread more widely than traditional beliefs, people still go back to the roots of traditional religions, which are interwoven with Yorùbá culture itself.

The discussion included the presentation of some pictures of traditional objects. The pictures selected were the same as for the previous focus group. However, participants were very reluctant to speak of such artefacts, because of their Christian faith. Nevertheless, the members of the group appeared to still believe in the power of the items and on the possible consequences that they could have incurred by having to deal with such items. Specifically, Y10 said that he did not want to get involved with the objects, while Y9 (Female/Age: 38/ Employee/ Christian) and Y10 (Male/Age: 43/ Employee/ Christian) explained that this was because there was some '*power behind them*' and because of a spirit that was going through them. Therefore, after an initial reticence on behalf of the participants and after several attempts by the researcher to stimulate the discussion, participants provided the researcher with very limited information about the items. The only object identified and discussed by all participants was the crested crane necklace: all of them defined it as '*bullet proof*' and as '*an amulet*' against misfortune.

It is important to point out that participants did not consider the objects in the photographs to be the real ones, used in traditional ceremonies. For example, Y9 explained that the real objects were extremely frightening so that people would not have dared even to touch them.

A Yorùbá view of Western museums and suggestions.

From the discussion it emerged that only Y9 and Y11 had visited Western museums, which displayed Yorùbá objects. Y11 explained to be generally pleased with the exhibits but Y9 defined them as '*all crap*'. He explained, indeed, that if he could have been involved in the setting of the displays, he would never have displayed the real objects, used for religious ceremonies. Y10 expressed also his discontent in relation to Western displays: this was due to the fact that those objects were not meant to be in museums and that they had been taken away by foreigners: '*they took our land, they took our objects*'.

Hallen underlines the difficulty of fully understanding African culture and African thought (Hallen, 1997). Furthermore she explains that the African point of view is

underestimated and under-represented because of the difficulty of Western society in understanding African traditional symbols and meanings associated with them. This misinterpretation and misunderstanding of African thought emerged during this part of the discussion. All participants agreed that Western visitors are not able to understand the complexity of Yorùbá culture and beliefs by visiting museums. Therefore, it is not possible to improve Western displays, unless museum professionals rely on the help and knowledge of Yorùbá people.

5.5.3. Analysis of the focus group no. 3.

In order to understand traditional religious African objects and their meanings, there is a crescent need to pay attention to 'the shifting role and place of religion in Africa' (Meyer, 2004: 476). The data gathered from this discussion group highlight the controversial relationship between members of the Yorùbá diaspora and traditional religious objects and emphasise the influence played by Pentecostal ideology.

The discussion group was held on the 21st of December 2003, in Beeston, in the house of one of the participants.¹¹³ There were four participants: two men and two women. The age range was between 30 and 45 years. The participants were all Yorùbás and at the time of the research, they were all resident in Beeston. Two of the participants were Born-Again-Christians, one was a traditional believer and another did not specify his religion.

The focus group followed the same protocol of the first two discussion groups.

During this discussion group, four main themes were identified:

- *Yorùbá distinctiveness: ethnic pride;*
- *The culture of traditional religion. A living religion or a religion of the past?*
- *Western museums and the misinterpreted Yorùbá heritage;*
- *Suggestions to improve museums displays.*

¹¹³ See *Transcriptions*, pp.250-255.

Yorùbá distinctiveness: ethnic pride.

As in the previous two cases, the researcher began the discussion by posing the introductory question concerned with the individual definition of 'being Yorùbá'. Participants demonstrated a strong attachment and pride towards their 'Yorùbáness'. When asked to explain what it meant to them to be a Yorùbá person, they concordantly answered that they were 'proud' and 'very happy' of being Yorùbá. Indeed, participants related their ethnicity to a divine and mythical origin. Concerning this for instance, Y13 said: *'we Yorùbá people, we are the people of Oduduwa, we are descendents of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yorùbás'*. Furthermore, participant Y14 explained that, to her, being a Yorùbá is like being the *'daughter of a king, somebody victorious'*, while participant Y15 added that *'being a Yorùbá is something like if you are a pillar somewhere'* and explained that back in Nigeria, people are respectful of individuals with Yorùbá origins.

The culture of traditional religion. A living religion.

Moore and Sanders (Moore and Sanders, 2001) and Dianteill (Dianteill, 2002) point out that among contemporary African groups, different types of religions (e.g. Christianity, Islam and traditional religions) might coexist, as parts of a syncretistic religious reality. This was evident from the data gathered from this part of the discussion. The researcher then addressed the discussion towards the relationship between the individuals and traditional religion. From the group's answers, it was evident that two of the participants still believed and openly practised traditional beliefs. In particular, participants Y13 and Y12 (Male/Age: 39/ Postgraduate Study/ Christian) showed a deep knowledge and trust in those beliefs. For instance, Y13, being a traditional believer, defined himself as a *'traditional teacher [who is] proud of traditional religion'*. Participants also raised the point that traditional Yorùbá religious beliefs cannot be classified under the label of a single religion. This is because Yorùbás do not believe in one religion and Yorùbá traditional beliefs are inclusive of different gods. As a consequence, participants explained that there are different traditional religions associated with those gods: all the gods are involved in different activities and occasions of the everyday life of Yorùbá people and they can be consulted when people are confused about something. Regarding the ways of worshipping and its purposes, the members of the group referred to personal examples. For instance, Y14 associated her knowledge of traditional religions to her

childhood memories, when her ancestral father was worshipping the Orisha Ogun in his family shrine. She specified that in traditional beliefs to worship means to praise somebody for protection. She also clarified the religious origin of her surname. According to Yorùbá tradition, every Yorùbá household *'worshipped one of these gods', because in the past this was the way people would 'identify their [own] compound'*. This was also supported by Y15, who described how each Yorùbá family, back in Yorùbáland, had its own god to praise.

According to the participants, in fact, Christianity and Islam have not yet replaced Yorùbá traditional religion and practices. Indeed, the number of Yorùbás outside of Africa that still practise traditional religion seems quite high, as is the number of anonymous babaláwos in the United Kingdom.¹¹⁴ For instance, Y13 referred to the Yorùbá festival held yearly in Atlanta (USA). Y12 and Y13 agreed on the importance and power of *'the objects of worship'* and of the amulets. Actually Y12 explained that *'the amulet is very special'* as an object and Y13 added that through it, *'the god protects, in many other ways, it is not like the witchcraft'* because *'Yorùbá are spiritual people'*. Of all the members, Y13 seemed to be the only one to recall and be willing to sing a traditional Yorùbá song: this was probably due to his strong traditionalist education. He explained that for non-Yorùbá speaking people it is easy to mistake the songs for evil incantations: *'traditional songs are philosophically rich'* and when non-Yorùbá people listen to them without understanding they *'think that you are now calling evil spirits or that you are doing some incantations'*.

Participants were asked to comment on the photographs of the objects. However, the group commented only on the crested crane amulet. Regarding this, the comments were different and probably influenced by the different religious background of the participants. The discussion made it clear that those Yorùbás who had converted to Christianity, considered traditional beliefs only as a part of their past. In fact, Y14 pointed out that Yorùbá *'people are changing, societies are changing; generations are changing'* and *'nowadays, Christianity and Islam are taking over some of these gods'*. Since Y14 and Y15 converted to Christianity, they affirmed that their perception and attitude towards religious objects (including amulets) was changed, confirming what van Dijk had pointed out: *'Pentecostalism creates a critical view of cultural heritage'* (van Dijk, 2001: 107). Additionally, Y14

¹¹⁴ The babaláwo is a Yorùbá title for the Priest of Orunmila, the god of divination.

and Y15 explained that traditional religious objects had become meaningless to them, although Y15 stated that it would have been dangerous just showing the pictures of traditional objects. This was due to the fact that these objects were not meant for display, but for worshipping: by violating this principle, objects could work like a curse against them. To prove how the perception had changed towards these items, Y14 gave the example of an amulet she had found in London and how she reacted to it. She stated that her initial fear was replaced by her Christian belief and confidence that such objects did not have power over her any more. Y12 and Y13 (Male/Age: 30/ Computer programmer/ Christian) agreed on the importance and power of *'the objects of worship'* and of the amulets. Actually Y12 explained that *'the amulet is [a] very special'* object used for protection.

Western museums and the misinterpreted Yorùbá heritage.

As Eyo had pointed out, 'the problem of repatriation of cultural heritage to its country of origin is an old [but always topical] one' (Eyo, 1994: 330). Concerns for traditional objects and modern identities can have implications, related also to the ownership and control of the heritage. Indeed, once the cultural patrimony of non-local people is appropriate, it becomes 'embedded in the very artistic, literary, and intellectual life of its new owners' (Lyons, 1998: 130). And indeed, although traditional Yorùbá religious objects displayed in British museums have become part of the British heritage, the members of the Yorùbá diaspora (living in the United Kingdom) have highlighted their displeasure towards museum exhibiting their traditional heritage.

From the discussion it emerged that out of four participants only two had been in a museum in Britain. In addition, only one of the participants had visited a museum, which was displaying traditional religious Yorùbá objects. However, all members felt a strong attachment to their tangible heritage: they defined themselves as *'pitiful'* and *'sad'* because those objects had been moved from the original places into a foreign and inappropriate context.

Participants had a conflicting understanding of museums. Specifically, Y13 labelled Western displays as *'a major problem'* because they exhibit artefacts that belonged to her ancestors *'somebody who would not allow anybody to take them, from their*

own place' and who would have understood their cultural importance: all these artefacts *'represent what we are, as Yorùbás, as descendents'*. She also pointed out that bring the objects outside their original context had made them meaningless, since they were not supposed to be shown in public spaces. In accordance with this, Y14 (Male/ Age: 45/ Mechanical Engineer/ Traditional believer) stated that, during her visit to the Brewhouse Yard Museum, she was not happy to see Yorùbá religious objects exhibited and she defined the displays as mockeries of traditional religion. This is because such objects did not have a religious meaning for the people who brought them to Europe. Participants agreed that for the Yorùbá descendents such objects have a sacred value and they respect them, notwithstanding the fact that people might have converted to another faith. This is because these artefacts have become rare in their own country. Furthermore, Y13 said that: *'you cannot quantify all these artefacts in monetary value, there are very precious to us [and] bringing them here [in Europe], away from their home, they have lost their meaning [and] they are something else that cannot be seen outside'*.

In accordance with this, Y14 explained that, during her visit to the Brewhouse Yard Museum,¹¹⁵ she was not happy to see Yorùbá religious objects exhibited. According to her, in fact:

'the people who brought them here, these objects did not mean anything to them, they don't have value to them. I am sure some the local people must have trade them, because of the poverty [but] to the people who got them, they just got them, for artistic display or money value, and it is not actually of any value to them. But for us, the objects have a value, they are sacred, we respect them, they need to be cherished, they are very rare and to have in a country or in a context that is not their own, does not make any sense, because the people who got them, they don't care about the context, or the history'.

Suggestions to improve museums displays.

All the participants made it clear that they would like those objects to be repatriated back to Yorùbáland, mainly because, as Y15 (Female/Age: 35/ professional/

¹¹⁵ Y14 is referring to the Yoruba collection of the Brewhouse Yard Museum (Nottingham).

Christian) stated, Western visitors and museum professionals '*can't really know what they really mean and they will just see them as a form*'. During the discussion, the participants were asked to present some suggestions to improve Western displays. All members agreed that, in order to not misrepresent their spiritual and cultural heritage, it would be helpful to gather more accurate information about the items. This would imply a direct field research in Ife (Nigeria).

5.6. Answering the research questions.

The intention of this chapter was to answer the following research questions: 'How do Yorùbá immigrants relate to their traditional religious objects displayed in museums?' and 'What are the stereotypes of potential Yorùbá museum visitors in relation to their religious objects?' Its starting point has been the acknowledgement of the fact that 'the connection between past and future may be more fragile than is generally assumed [and] it [definitely] it requires deliberate actions to maintain social organisations' and cultural traditions (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993: xxii). The clash between different cultures, indeed, is always problematic, especially if it happens during post-colonial times, when specific stereotypes have deepened within religious constructions and social assumptions. In addition, the postcolonial encounter between two different cultures, can lead to a redefinition of the adopted culture as well as to a loss of traditional religions. The data gathered from this analysis has shown how the unbalanced relation between 'power' (of the adoptive society) and 'resistance' (of the immigrant society) might lead to a stereotypical re-definition of identity and to a conflicting relationship with traditional religion. Therefore, specifically in relation to the first question ('How do Yorùbá immigrants relate to their traditional religious objects displayed in museums?'), it is possible to state that contemporary Yorùbá diasporic groups (converted to Christianity) tend to have unsympathetic attitudes towards their traditional religious objects: this attitude is due both to the new faith precepts as well as to the need to adapt to the social rules of the hosting societies (rules that may labels such items as 'ethnographic' or 'artistic' specimens).

During the discussions, several points were raised and three main common themes were identified, specifically 'Yorùbá distinctiveness: a national pride', 'The culture of

traditional religion', 'Museums and Yorùbás: suggestions to improve the misrepresented cultural heritage'. Their identification has allowed the researcher to make a contemporary 'refiguration of the [Yorùbá] social [and traditional] thought' in contemporary British society (Geertz, 1983: 28) and to answer the second research question, 'What are the stereotypes of potential Yorùbá museum visitors in relation to their religious objects?'. It emerged that the perception and understanding of being Yorùbá today in a Western society (as well as the understanding of Yorùbá traditional religious heritage) have been affected by implicit, rooted, Christian and postcolonial stereotypes. To the adoptive British culture, Yorùbá members of the Yorùbá diaspora have reacted by strengthening their tribal pride, and by feeling special pride in the name of their ethnic origins. In a new society, diasporic Yorùbá groups have tried to re-define themselves by underlining their divine origins and by even calling themselves 'the children of Oduduwa'. At the same time, however, the Yorùbá members of the diaspora appear to have the need to conceal their religious African traditions, from the others, the Westerners.

However, the same ethnic pride was not always manifest in relation to traditional religion and religious objects. On the contrary, Western stereotypes as well as religious stereotypes had affected the contemporary Yorùbá understanding of traditional religions.¹¹⁶ From the research, it was evident that Yorùbá people, although converted to Christianity, still felt the power of traditional objects, which had become the embodiment of evil spirits. The meaning of specific traditional religious objects and symbols was still shared by Yorùbá diasporic groups, although this attitude proved what Joel Kahn has pointed out: 'post-colonialism has become more than a critique of the existing [Western knowledge]. Instead it sees itself increasingly as a counter (postcolonial) discourse that is able to destabilise existing systems of signification of othernesses' (Kahn, 1995: 8).

Finally, the display of Yorùbá material in Western museums emerged as a sensitive issue. Most of the participants were not museum visitors and therefore it can be surmised that they could not fully understand the museum reality. This was also due to the fact that the museum was conceived as a Western invention. Additionally, although Yorùbá seemed to be generally pleased with the exhibition of their culture, at the same time they felt deprived of a past and heritage that had been brought to

¹¹⁶ For example, the standard 'Christian' and 'Muslims' classifications.

West as exchange merchandise or as trophies. All participants suggested the repatriation of the items or a more evident and constant involvement of Yorùbás in the setting and presentation of the displays.

5.7. Concluding observations.

This chapter has analysed the data gathered by the focus groups and the interview with sixteen Yorùbá people, members of the Yorùbá diaspora, living in Nottingham, Beeston and Leicester. The analysis of the data has showed that among the members of Yorùbá diaspora, the contemporary perception of Yorùbá identity is strongly linked both to the geographical provenance and the myth of their creation. The latter is extremely important because it conveys a sort of divine connotation to their identity. Indeed, as Margarita Diaz-Andreu and Sam Lucy have stated, the idea of identity 'is inextricably linked to the sense of belonging' (Diaz-Andreu and Lucy, 2005: 1). Through 'identity', people define themselves as belonging to a specific group and at the same time determine the way people (outside their own group) can perceive them. However, identities are not static but constantly developing. Therefore, due to interaction with other cultures and other societies, people re-shape and alter some aspects of their identity: these aspects might include traditional religion, practises and symbols.

Although traditional beliefs for example, are a strong component of Yorùbá society, contemporary Yorùbá diasporic groups (who have converted to Christianity) tend to have unsympathetic attitudes towards them and - as Meyer (2004) and Martin (2002) have observed - they tend to distance themselves from practises and objects that they consider evil although powerful. This is done in order to reinforce their new Christian identity as well as their new social identity (Western in this case). This 'unsympathetic' attitude towards their traditional religious heritage also explains the uneasy relationship between Yorùbá diasporic groups and their traditional religious heritage displayed in British museums. Indeed, the members of the Yorùbá diaspora interviewed demonstrated a conflicting relationship towards museums. According to them, the museum is a Western invention, where their traditional religious objects were never meant to be exhibited.

The following chapters are concerned with the final element of data gathered for this research. They will focus on the museum professional interviews and on the analysis of the museum displays.

Chapter 6: Analysis of the interviews with museum professionals

6.1. Introduction: aims and structure of the chapter.

This chapter looks at the role of contemporary museum professionals in relation to ethnographic items. Specifically, it examines the way museum professionals in the United Kingdom interpret and represent traditional religious and ceremonial Yorùbá objects. Overall twelve museum professionals have been interviewed for this research:¹¹⁷ the age range was between 20 and 70 years. All participants held a postgraduate degree and five out of the twelve were non-British. At the time of the research, all the museum professionals were resident in the United Kingdom and the majority of them had been either only partially involved, or completely uninvolved, in the display settings – including those of traditional Yorùbá religious objects.

This chapter aims to answer the following research questions: 'How do Western museums' curators approach the topic of sub-Saharan African religion in museums?' and 'is it possible to represent a culture or only to display specific objects that mirror one aspect of that culture?' As previously mentioned, this thesis explores the change in the meaning process that has affected traditional religious Yorùbá objects today: from religious and ceremonial tools these objects have become museum items, displayed in a public space. Consequently, this part of the thesis focuses on the Western museum professionals' *langue*,¹¹⁸ that is say the way these non-Western objects are interpreted and represented by contemporary museum professionals (according to the social rules and museum practice of the Western contemporary society).

The chapter has been organised in three sections, which reflect the themes (or museum professionals' parole) of the analysis. The first part is concerned with the role of the museum professionals interviewed in relation to ethnographic items and specifically to Yorùbá artefacts. The second section focuses on the actual displays of traditional religious Yorùbá objects. Finally, the third section deals with the absence (or the presence) of Yorùbá people involved in researching and interpreting Yorùbá traditional religious objects. Two tables complement the chapter. The first table

¹¹⁷ Of these professionals, six of them were female and six male. In two cases (St Mungo Museum and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), two museums professionals took part in the interviews. This was due to the expertise and directed involvement in the setting of the ethnographic items. For the transcriptions of the individual interviews, please see *Transcriptions*, pp.244-304.

¹¹⁸ Please, see diagram in Chapter 4, p.105.

Chapter 6: Analysis of the interviews with museum professionals

(**Table 3**) is concerned with the profile of the museum professionals; and the second table (**Table 4**) provides an overview of the answers of the museum professionals.

Name	Museum/Location	Education	Age	Gender M/F	Nationality	Duties
M1	Museum of Mankind, London	Ph.D.	40-50	M	British	Contributed to the Sainsbury Galleries from an educational perspective
M2	Horniman Museum/London	Ph.D.	30-40	M	Kenyan	Objects research and interpretation
M3	World Museum Liverpool /Liverpool	Ph.D.	30-40	M	British (Born in Uganda)	To take care, research, exhibit and make accessible African collections
M4	Pitt Rivers Museum/Oxford	P. G. Degree	40-50	M	British	Maintaining the record, dealing with loans, dealing with researchers, working with conservation and technical services
M5	Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology/Cambridge	Ph.D.	30-40	F	Australian	Setting up temporary exhibitions related to anthropology
M6	Manchester Museum/ Manchester	M.A.	20-30	F	British (Welsh)	Care of collections, re-storage, docum., access
M7	St Mungo Museum/Glasgow	Ph.D.	20-30	F	British (Scottish)	Maintenance and interpretation of displays
M8	St Mungo Museum/Glasgow	P. G. Degree	40-50	F	Brazilian/ British *	Maintenance and interpretation of displays
M9	Brewhouse Yard Museum/ Nottingham	M.A.	60-70	F	American/ British*	Care, access of the objects, cataloguing and documentation
M10	The Royal Albert Memorial Museum/ Exeter	P. G. Degree	50-60	M	British	Responsible for all the collection within Exeter
M11	Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery/Birmingham	P. G. Degree	20-30	M	Irish	In charge of the maintenance of the collections /any future projects
M12	Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery/Birmingham	M.A.	20-30	F	British	Community developer

Table 3: Profile of the museum professionals. Please note that the asterisk * indicates that the museum professional has double nationality.

6.2. The role of the museum professional in relation to ethnographic items.

Museums are social and educational institutions that reflect, to a certain extent and in a distinctive way, the needs and tendencies of the societies that host them. Therefore, as societies change, so do museums. Keene points out that 'museum professionals have been coping during the last twenty-five years or so with quite a few fundamental changes to their roles and organizations and to the museums in which they work' (Keene, 2005:2). In line with this, Shelton suggests that the rise of managerial dominance has contributed to the implementation of policies, which aimed to 'introduce greater accountability and supposed transparency into institutions, while making them more responsive to the majority population that funds them' (Shelton, 2005: 76). This has been decisive in the relationship between the museum itself as an institution, the figure of the museum professional, the use of the collections and the relationship with local communities. Although the tradition and nature of each museum can influence the approach towards the collections and their way of using them as resources, the profile of the professional is very much determined by personal interests, background and the expertise of the museum professional in charge. Indeed, Ormond states that 'managing and developing collections calls for many skills apart from those of knowledge and research' (Ormond, 1999: 130). Therefore, this part of the data analysis looks at the different expertises and the roles played by contemporary museum professionals (working in the United Kingdom) in relation to the management and development of ethnographic collections and specifically in relation to traditional Yorùbá religious objects. It is based on the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with the museum professionals working in ten museums that contain and display and contain traditional Yorùbá religious objects in their collections.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ The museum professionals interviewed were M1 from the British Museum (London); M2 from the Horniman Museum (London); M3 from the World Museum Liverpool (Liverpool); M4 from the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford); M5 from the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Cambridge); M6 from the Manchester Museum (Manchester); M7 and M8 from St Mungo Museum (Glasgow); M9 from the Brewhouse Yard Museum (Nottingham); M10 from the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (Exeter); M11 and M12 from the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (Birmingham). For the questions, please see Appendix VI, 'List of questions for the interviews with museum professionals', p. 212. Chapter 7 will be concerned with the analysis of the displays containing traditional religious Yorùbá objects.

Chapter 6: Analysis of the interviews with museum professionals

The topic the researcher sought to open up in all the interviews with the museum professionals related to their duties towards the museum ethnographic collections, containing traditional religious Yorùbá objects. Nowadays, ethnographic items are considered as resources for academic teaching and research and, also, more broadly as resources to establish links with local communities. Although the traditional attitude of museum professionals as gatekeepers to the collection and to information relating to it seems slow to change, 'museum professionals are coming to recognize that they need to be less exclusive about expertise and information' (Keene, 2005: 22). In fact, while museum staff might be very academically knowledgeable about objects and their collections, 'others may know more about objects' real world meaning' (Keene, 2005: 23). The cooperation between these two different sets of expertise appears to be the key for more appropriate interpretations and representations, especially of non-western collections. During the interviews, two distinctive profiles of museum professionals and two distinctive approaches towards the ethnographic collections were identified: the 'the scholar-curator', with a more academic and object-centred approach and the 'community-curator', with a focus more on the relationship between local communities and objects.

The first profile of museum professional identified was the one that Boylan calls 'the scholar-curators'. The 'scholar-curators' have an academic, object centred approach and are museum professionals who have 'modelled their work very much on the activities [...] of the traditional connoisseur private collector or a specialist academic researcher in their chosen academic disciplines' (Boylan, 2005: 418). In this category it has been possible to include M4 (Male/Age range: 40-50/ Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford/ British) and M5 (Female/Age range: 30-40/ Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge/ Australian). Indeed, the duties of these museum professionals emerged as related mostly to academic knowledge and peer discourse in relation to the collections. Museum professionals belonging to this category are very few and seem to have an academic background in anthropology. Specifically, their duties included the maintenance of the records for the collections, dealing with loans, setting up of temporary exhibitions, academic cooperation with researchers, students and people who have been collecting for the museums and working with conservation and technical services. In addition, M4 pointed out the importance of the '*particular specialist role as well as a general role, with regard to*

the collections as a whole'. Both of these two professionals (although in two different interviews) showed that their approach to the ethnographic collections was strongly influenced by the academic nature of the museum in which they were working.

The second and more prevalent profile of museum professionals, which was identified, was the one of the 'community-curators'. The museum professionals included in this category were M1 (Male/Age range:40-50/ British Museum, London/ British), M2 (Male/ Age range:30-40/ Horniman Museum, London/ Kenyan), M3 (Male/ Age range: 30-40/ Liverpool Museum, Liverpool/ British), M6 (Female/ Age range: 20-30/ Manchester Museum, Manchester/ British), M7 (Female/ Age range: 20-30/ St Mungo Museum, Glasgow/ British) and M8 (Female/ Age range: 30-40/ St Mungo Museum, Glasgow/ Brazilian-British), M9 (Female/Age range: 60-70/ Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham: American-British), M10 (Male/ Age range: 60-70/Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter/ British), M11 (Male/ Age range: 20-30/ Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham/ Irish), and M12 (Female/ Age Range: 20-30/ Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham/ British). The 'community-curator' profile turned out to be predominant and the museum professionals interviewed had various and dissimilar backgrounds: from psychology to media studies. All the professionals appeared to be more concerned with, and focused on, local communities and their involvement in the museum activities. In relation to the duties towards the ethnographic collections, the professionals included the care of collections, re-storage, documentation, and access to a different kind of public. Furthermore, these museum professionals could be seen to be extremely aware of the changing nature of their role, which is also reflected in the title. For instance, M6 highlighted the transformation that is driving the museum (as an institution) away from the *'old-fashioned museums of ethnology and keepership'* and is raising more *'public awareness and outreach'*.

Two distinctive profiles of museum professionals (the 'scholar-curator' and the 'community-curator') have, therefore, been identified. While the 'the scholar-

curators' reflect the traditional Western model of museum professionals, focused mostly on the knowledge of the collections, the 'community-curators' appear to concentrate more on the importance of links and cooperation with the local communities.

6.3. Displaying traditional Yorùbá religious objects.

In their interview with Isabelle Vinson, Sidney Littlefield Kasfir and Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yai observe that 'the quantitative importance of diasporas [...] is one of the most significant factors in social and cultural transformations that are currently taking place' (Kasfir and Yai, 2004: 190).¹²³ Indeed, the study of diasporic identities and diasporic material culture is crucial to understanding the current cultural pluralism (Rectanus, 2005). In this social framework, the role of museums is essential in order to reinforce and - in some cases - re-establish cultural links between diasporic communities and their traditional material culture. Therefore, this section of the data analysis is concerned with the involvement of the museum professionals interviewed and the Yorùbá material displayed in the museum: their knowledge on Yorùbá culture, traditional Yorùbá religion and religious objects.

Although, in the previous section it was possible to identify two different attitudes of museum professionals in relation to ethnographic collections, this part of the analysis presents a consistent and homogeneous museum professional attitude towards the display of traditional Yorùbá religious objects. Actually, few of the professionals interviewed described themselves as extensively knowledgeable about Yorùbá culture, traditional Yorùbá religion and Yorùbá objects.¹²⁴ For example M1, Education Curator at the British Museum, explained that he had a broad knowledge of Yorùbá culture and traditional religion Yorùbá only because, during the late 70s, he had been involved in the setting up of an exhibition entitled: *Yorùbá Religious Cults*. The exhibition was concerned with '*objects used from different religious societies or*

¹²³ Sidney Littlefield Kasfir is associate professor of African Art History at Emory University (Atlanta, USA) and Olabiyi Babalola Joseph Yai is currently ambassador of Benin to Unesco.

¹²⁴ The museum professionals who had a background on or were more knowledgeable about Yorùbá culture, traditional religion and religious objects were: M1, M2, M3, M10 and M11.

religious sets in Yorùbáland.¹²⁴ In contrast, other museum professionals (M2, M4, M5, M10, M11) explained that they had an academic and professional background in different areas other than Yorùbá culture and traditions. In addition, they had had a limited involvement in the actual setting up of the displays exhibiting traditional religious Yorùbá objects. Indeed, in all ten of the museum case studies, either traditional religious Yorùbá objects belonged to displays that had been rarely changed over the last few decades¹²⁵ or the professionals interviewed had just started working in the museum.

From the interviews, it emerged that due to the different nature of the museums and the different approaches, museum professionals were keen on displaying Yorùbá objects (to be specific) in a generalised and globalised way: as artistic non-Western collections, and examples of non-Western cultures. This confirms what Moira Simpson has pointed out: 'the appropriation of non-Western cultural objects and their redefinition in the western museums as artefacts or works of art divorces them from the reality of their original context and alters their meaning and significance' (Simpson, 2005: 154). In line with this, some of the professionals interviewed (M2, M10) clearly explained that they were aware of the fact that, in Western museums, Africa is still mainly understood as black Africa and it is mostly ghettoised, and that museums should provide more than simple images and texts to interpret non-Western objects. For example M2, from the Horniman Museum, stated that the 'African Worlds' Gallery was set up initially '*to capture that aspect of multicultural representation*' and to motivate the African community and the non-African community to understand more about African cultures. Nowadays, the main purpose of the Gallery is '*to show that African culture and arts are complex and are part of world civilisations*'. Therefore, the museum's approach to displaying African religious objects was prioritised the presenting of '*both ethnographic and contemporary objects within the same space*'.

Regarding the choice and type of traditional religious Yorùbá objects displayed, it seemed that all the museums had an assorted range of typology. Their number

¹²⁴ The exhibition made use of a reconstruction of a traditional Yorùbá house, with a central courtyard. Around the house, shrines-alcoves for the different Yorùbá gods had been built.

¹²⁵ As for example in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, where the displays had been changed twenty-five years before.

ranged quite considerably from two to forty-one and, according to the museum professionals, in all cases they had been chosen both in order to give an indication of the diversity and complexity of Yorùbá material culture but also simply because, as M6 (Living Cultures Gallery, Manchester Museum) observes *'they were in the collection and there was a large amount of them and basically they were very good examples'*. The research carried out on the objects was either thematic and or object based.

'It is now well known that the removal of certain objects from their source communities has lead to the demise of related cultural traditions, particularly those concerning spiritual beliefs and religious practices' (Kreps, 2005: 458):¹²⁷ therefore, museum professionals were also asked about their personal perspective on displaying traditional African religious objects (with specific reference to traditional religious Yorùbá objects) in a non-sacred environment such as the museum. It emerged that there is a uniform and consistent perception on the topic: all professionals considered categorising and defining African religious objects as difficult, because, as M1 pointed out , *'there are things which are made specifically for particular religious purposes and there are other things that are used incidentally [and may] become consecrated objects'*. However, in relation to the sanctity of the displayed objects, M11 described the impossibility of exhibiting a non-Western item without displaying something of its sanctity. He stated:

'what people make of [religious objects and of the religious ideas] will very often come from what people bring to the viewing experience. So, someone who is informed, knowledgeable about objects will have a kind of religious experience and will interpret Shiva in a different way from someone who is not and who will see it as an example of carving'.

Additionally, concerning the sanctity of Yorùbá objects on display, M3 (Liverpool Museum) clearly explained the risk in creating *'an idealised idea of Yorùbá sacred culture'* which might not relate to contemporary religious practices. Indeed,

¹²⁷ Cf. also Peers and Brown, 2003.

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traditional Yorùbá religion has to operate in the contemporary Yorùbá context of Christianity and Islam that tend both to alienate and reject it and he emphasised the difficulty of comparing traditional Yorùbá objects to Christian or Islamic religious objects. This is due to the fact that Yorùbá religious objects become active only through specific sacrifices. For instance, while a Yorùbá shrine figure is not a sacred object in itself (because it becomes sacred through some ritual actions), Christian relics have an intrinsic sacredness, being directly connected to the saint they belonged to. As a consequence, M3 observes: *'objects used in Yorùbá religion [possibly] do not have the metonymical, spiritual connection to the gods they are simply points of collections, activations produced through sacrifices, [which are the] focus of communications, with the gods, the Orishas'*.

Furthermore, several museum professionals (M1, M3, M10, M11) also pointed out that, although African religious objects (including Yorùbá) must to be treated with respect, they were not meant to be viewed. Indeed, these objects, explained M7 from the Gallery of Religious Life, St Mungo Museum, keep *'the pride of the maker/carver and there are identifiable systems of aesthetics at work'*. Concerning this M8 (also from St Mungo Museum) acknowledged that, due to the unusual nature of the museum they were working for, *'all the objects have a religious focus [but they also] have a lot of different meanings for different communities of people'*. As observed by Kreps, *'we should not assume that [these meanings] remain stable in their source community and always continue to be used for their original purpose'* (Kreps, 2005: 463).

This section examined the involvement of the museum professionals interviewed and with the Yorùbá material displayed in the museum. It was related to their knowledge of Yorùbá culture, traditional Yorùbá religion and religious objects. From the analysis of this data, it emerged that most of the professionals interviewed did not have a background in Yorùbá culture and that their way of dealing, interpreting and representing Yorùbá religious objects, as part of a broad pan-African perspective, was strongly influenced by the museum needs and personal knowledge.

6.4. The absence of Yorùbá people in researching and interpreting Yorùbá traditional religious objects.

Professional museology and cultural heritage preservation are deeply rooted in the Western knowledge system, which 'has dictated why and how non-Western cultural materials have been collected as well as the ways in which they have been perceived, curated and represented' (Kreps, 2005: 459). However, especially during the last two decades, remarkable efforts have been made (on behalf of Western museums) to involve more non-Western communities, to whom those objects belonged. This change has been encouraged by the increasing acknowledgment that the support of non-Western communities 'is an essential component of a successful and culturally dynamic community museum' (Simpson, 2005: 154).

Therefore, in order to understand the way contemporary museum professionals in the United Kingdom investigate the contemporary meaning of African/Yorùbá religious objects, the researcher asked the museum professionals about any cooperation, in terms of research, with African or Yorùbá individuals. It emerged that, in most of cases, the research on Yorùbá objects was still carried out by Western curators and researchers, with limited involvement by the local African community or African researchers. Actually, to the knowledge of the museum professionals, African or Yorùbá professionals and researchers had occasionally been involved in and cooperated with the research on Yorùbá objects. This happened, for instance, in the case of traditional Yorùbá objects exhibited at the Horniman Museum: according to M2, the previous Curator and Keeper of Anthropology had '*consulted specialists in Yorùbá arts and culture who wrote the labels for the items. These specialists also contributed articles in [the museum's publications] that had come out with the exhibition*'.¹²⁹

Professionals were also interviewed about any activities or event set up by the museums, in order to involve the African / Yorùbá community. It appears that museum events are very much dictated by the nature of the museum as well by the interests of the curators and that there have been very few events set up for the

¹²⁹ The publication is known as *Re-Visions* and is part of the Horniman Museum Material Culture Series.

local African / Yorùbá communities.¹³⁰ For instance, in the Cambridge Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, M6 (Assistant Curator for Anthropology) explained that since her expertise lay in New Zealand and Mali culture, she was more concerned with establishing links and organizing programs with Mali people than with African communities. However, in the multicultural contemporary museum scene, as pointed out by M10 (from the Gallery 36, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), this lack of events and involvement with local African / Yorùbá communities, brought with in an unavoidable risk of misinterpretation on the part of visitors, towards African religious objects. M10 explained that even though the museum can present the material, Yorùbá or not,

'in a way that helps visitors to understand why it was made, what significance it had, how it was used, what his meaning was for its originating culture [it does not have] control over what they do with this information, what attitude they bring in with them, when they come to the museum or what attitude they leave with, and they may be different but they may be full of prejudice, [...] they may [have] more prejudices'.

This misinterpretation by the visitors could be reduced through stronger cooperation more strongly with the communities that the objects belong to. In addition, as M12 explained, *'knowing [that] there were people of African descent who would be may be interested in seeing them'* the objects could provide and reinforce the link between the home nations and local people. Indeed, traditional religious objects do potentially provide a 'rich source of meaning about the religious traditions from which they stem' and about the societies that have created and used them (Arthur 2001: 4).

¹³⁰ In terms of projects with local communities, it is worth mentioning the project titled *'Rethinking voices'*, set in the Manchester Museum, which aimed to underline the existing connection between the cultures on display and the diverse cultural life of the people of North West England. The project was produced by the digital video artist Kuljit Kooj Chuhan. The people selected for the project belonged all to those local communities in Manchester less engaged with the museum's activity. Each person had to select an item from the displays and give his/her own interpretation. However, no one from the Yorùbá community took part in the project.

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The researcher was interested to know whether any of the museums had received negative comments from the African / Yorùbá community related to the kinds of objects displayed. From the different interviews, it emerged that only two of the ten museums had received negative comments from the local African communities. The examples presented were predominantly related to a problematic relationship with people who had converted to a different religion from the traditional one. For instance, M8 explained that *'either you get objections or acceptance or it is just trying to balance different groups of people'*. The two examples brought to the attention of the researcher, were concerned with the community of Benin people and with a Yorùbá woman, involved to in some Yorùbá story telling at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (Exeter).¹³¹ If on the one hand, the limited amount of negative comments or suggestions on behalf of the local African communities could indicate a positive attitude towards Western displays, on the other hand it could also indicate a lack of active participation on the part of African people going to the museum. The latter would prove that 'to many indigenous people, Western-style museums are laden with associations of colonialism, cultural repression, loss or heritage, and death' (Simpson, 2005: 153). Interviews with museum professionals also highlighted the museums' efforts in making the collections more accessible to a wider public. In the different cases, this has been attempted through the use of gallery videos (showing the purpose of objects), interactive devices (such as touch screens); online collections catalogues,¹³² additional written information and, in some cases, also through some replicas.¹³³

This section has been concerned with the data gathered from the investigation relating to the involvement (or the absence) of Yorùbá people in the setting up of the displays. From it, it emerged that no African / Yorùbá people (as researchers or even as volunteers) were involved with the setting up of the displays and that

¹³¹ The woman was a Christian and at the time of the event, she required from the museum an indication that the Yorùbá objects on display both exemplified traditional Yorùbá religious beliefs and that many Yorùbás do not believe in these things nowadays.

¹³² For example, the Cambridge Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology does not provide a collections catalogue that people could check during their visit. However, visitors or researcher can publicly consult the online website. Furthermore, the Royal Albert Memorial Museum provides information about the collections, through a website called Moli (Museum Open Learning initiative). The website provides a section about Yorùbá Culture, including some information about Yorùbá history and politics, the objects displayed in the Community Gallery and contemporary Yorùbá poetry.

¹³³ In Gallery 36, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, there were some replicas of the objects displayed: in this way visitors could touch and see closer some of the objects presented.

museum events and activities for African local communities were quite rare, because they strongly depend on the nature of the museum and on the interests of the museum professional.

6.5. Answering the research questions.

This chapter aimed to look at the role of contemporary museum professionals in the United Kingdom, in relation to ethnographic items and specifically in relation to the display of traditional religious Yorùbá objects. Moreover, the chapter intended to answer the following research questions: 'How do Western museums' curators approach the topic of sub-Saharan African religion in museums?' and 'Is it possible to represent a culture or only to display specific objects that mirror one aspect of that culture?'

The data gathered from this analysis allowed the researcher to answer the research questions in the following way. First of all, in relation to the first question ('How do Western museums' curators approach the topic of sub-Saharan African religion in museums?') it is possible to state that contemporary Western museum professionals still have an artistic or academic-based approach towards non-Western objects (in general) and towards sub-Saharan religion (in specific). Indeed, from the interviews, it appeared that, the duties of museum professionals working with ethnographic collections are mainly related to the creation of educational resources for the public, to the research and interpretation of the collection, to the promotion of a more comprehensive understanding of the collections, to curatorial expertises, to the use of the collections as academic teaching resources, to the maintenance of the objects and to their documentation and cataloguing. However, in relation to the expertise of Yorùbá traditional religion, or more generically African traditional religion, it seemed that only a limited amount of museum professionals (three out of twelve) had an adequate knowledge of it. It is also necessary to emphasize that the majority of the museum professionals interviewed were not involved with the displays, which were often very old and had not been changed since they were first arranged.

Accordingly, in relation to the second research question ('Is it possible to represent a culture or only to display specific objects that mirror one aspect of that culture?') it is possible to state that contemporary museums in Britain still mirror a stereotyped and typecast aspect of non-Western cultures, through their traditional religious objects. This stereotyped aspect exhibited in museum representation is linked, again, to the artistic perception or ethnographic value of the items. Actually, from the data gathered, it was clear that the displays were Yorùbá traditional religious objects were very much oriented towards a pan - Africanist visual experience. The visual experience worked to blend together the artistic value and the cultural or religious significance, so that the visually attractive pan - Africanist representation was preferred, to the detriment of the objects' cultural and religious individuality. Unquestionably, museum displays of African objects deal, explicitly or implicitly, with the issues and consequences of colonialism: as a result the interpretation of the items deals with colonialism and it determines their representation, and so non-Western material culture is fitted into the known and socially accepted universal criteria of art.

In addition, through the interviews, it emerged that there was a lack of cooperation and involvement with local African / Yorùbá people in terms of research and interpretation of the items. Indeed, in the majority of the cases, the museum professional in charge was primarily concerned with the representation. However, when the question of cooperation with African or Yorùbá individuals was mentioned, it appeared that it was predominantly participation with artists or performers, rather than academics or community members. Therefore, it is possible to state that, in contemporary museums in Britain, the 'discourse about others is a function of difference and uneven development. The power of representation is anchored in discursive practises and taxonomic conventions' (Pieterse, 2005: 178).

6.6. Concluding observations.

This chapter has analysed and presented the data gathered through ten interviews with museum professionals working in the United Kingdom who are in charge of displays that include traditional religious and ceremonial Yorùbá objects. Edward Said's work offers a useful theoretical framework for this thesis: 'Orientalism [which

in this context should be changed into Africanism] is not an airy European fantasy about [Africa], but a created body of theory and practice' (Said, 1995: 6) and has one of its most profitable applications in the museum field. Indeed, the chapter has emphasised how static contemporary interpretation and museum representation of non-Western religious heritage can be. In addition, it has questioned whether, notwithstanding all the purposes and idealised aims, the relationship between the Western self and the non-Western other, has really undergone profound transformations and to what extent it has combined the voices of Yorùbá people together with Western museum professionals (Pieterse, 2005).

The chapter has demonstrated that museum displays are still very much affected by both the personal interests of museum professionals and Western, post-colonial, artistic stereotypes. This stereotyping justifies, absorbs and turns non-Western material culture into art. At the same time, it considers religious significance only as an additional, supplementary feature of the items. Moreover, museums, a Western invention, seem to be looking at non-Western material culture through Western lenses and subordinating its religious essence and sanctity to artistic value and ethnographic interest. In this way, the distinctive features of African cultures are incorporated and flatten within the general, wide-ranging label 'Africa': in the case of traditional Yorùbá religious material culture, such objects are considered mainly, as African artistic objects or as old-style African ethnographic specimens. The data analysis of the museum professionals' interviews has also been examined in this chapter. During the discussions, several points were raised and three main common themes, or the museum professional parole to use a semiotic expression, were identified: *The role of the museum professionals in relation to ethnographic items; Displaying traditional Yorùbá religious objects; The absence (or the presence) of Yorùbá people in researching and interpreting Yorùbá traditional religious objects.* The museum professionals' parole, in relation to the display of traditional Yorùbá religious objects (to be specific) and non-Western material culture (in general) mainly indicates an education-oriented or artistic-oriented purposes and limited expertise and knowledge of individual non-Western ethnic groups. Indeed, the Yorùbá or African contribution in the setting up of the displays is generally absent or extremely limited, as in the case of supplementary events to the displays. In this way, contemporary displays tend to 'plunder' traditional religious items once again

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and strip the originating population where they came from of their sanctity and religious purpose.¹³⁴

The following chapter will consist of a final summary of the data analysis collected on the basis of three different research methods. It will, in fact, comment on the key findings and on the way the three identified paroles interlace. The next chapter will, therefore, provide a final perspective on the processes of museum interpretation and of self-definition (on behalf of the members of the Yorùbá diaspora), through traditional religious Yorùbá material.

¹³⁴ By displaying them in a non religious context and by insisting in interpreting and displaying them according to a Western academic postcolonial perspective.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CURATORS	SAINSBURY GALLERIES (M1)	AFRICAN WORLDS GALLERY (M2)	DISCOVERY GALLERY (M3)	THE COURT (M4)	ANTHROPOLOGY GALLERY (M5)	LIVING CULTURES GALLERY (M6)	THE GALLERY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE (M7, M8)	125 EXHIBITION (M9)	AFRICAN GALLERIES (M10)	GALLERY 36 (M11, M12)
No of Yoruba objects on display	Too big collection to give a number	Approximately 30	26 Yoruba objects						Around 30	
How did they become part of the collection		Acquired by museum curators especially in the post-war period 1950s and 1960s	Main collections were donated by a man called Arnold Ridyard, a shipping engineer						through an number of donations over a long period of time	
Kind of research carried out on them		Consulted specialist in Yoruba arts and culture who wrote the labels for the items		all sorts of research going on all the time					related to the local communities and to elements in the catalogues	
Kind of research carried out on traditional Yoruba religion		Fieldwork in Nigeria and Brazil (San Salvador)	Anthropological research, in the village of Kole Kiti							
Africans or Yorubas involved in the settings of the displays		Africans from Nigeria and Caribbean Curators. Africans from Diaspora (London)	A musician, son of a chief, Kondo state in Nigeria and a volunteer	Yoruba academics involved in researching individual pieces						
Purpose of the displays and of the whole gallery		To show that African culture and arts are complex and are part of world civilisations	Gallery is linked to Liverpool and his history							
Sanctity displayed	Very difficult but it depends on the religion								Aspects of Yoruba religion, which are distinctive to the Yoruba themselves	
Negative comments from the African/Yoruba community		General feedback is good							Nothing specific	
Activities involving the African/Yoruba community	public events, organised in the Great Court	Drama, music and other activities for people of different ages and backgrounds		not a large African community in Oxford	no with the African community, no. We have relationships with the community from Melanesia				yes	
Public catalogue of the ethnographic collection		A nearly complete catalogue entry and visitors can access this with appointment		Not at the moment	on line catalogue				Museum On Line Learning Initiatives	
Interactive media in the gallery/exhibition		videos showing different techniques and activities			No for the displays analysed					

Table 4: Table summarising the answers of the museum professionals interviewed.

Chapter 7: Museum displays analysis

7.1. Introduction: aims and structure of the chapter.

This chapter aims to look at the way traditional Yorùbá religious and ceremonial objects are displayed in British museums and the message that the displays communicate about these items. The intention on this chapter, therefore, is to answer the following research questions: 'to what extent are Western museums a neutral environment where all the religions can be presented as cultural truths?' and 'is it possible to represent a culture or only to display specific objects that mirror one aspect of that culture?' As already mentioned, the thesis has a semiotic approach, which seeks to 'reveal the cultural assumptions [...] that [museum displays] may contain' (MacDonald 1996: 6). The thesis is concerned with the change in the meaning attributed to traditional religious Yorùbá objects as their use (from religious to museum items), contexts (from private shrines to museum displays) and interlocutors (from Yorùbá traditional religion practitioners/believers to museum professionals) change. Consequently, this part of the thesis focuses on the Western museums *langue*,¹³⁵ that is say the way these non-Western artefacts (once considered only for religious purposes) are defined in the museum, a non sacred context and the way their intimate sacredness is interpreted in a public Western space (according to the social rules and museum practice of the Western contemporary society).

In order to understand those issues, the chapter will analyse ten museums (in the United Kingdom), which include traditional religious and ceremonial Yorùbá objects in their displays. The museums considered were: the British Museum (London); the Horniman Museum (London); the World Museum Liverpool (Liverpool); the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford); the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Cambridge); the Manchester Museum (Manchester); the St Mungo Museum, part of the City Museums (Glasgow); the Brewhouse Yard Museum part of the City Museums (Nottingham); the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (Exeter) and the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (Birmingham).

The chapter has been organised in three sections: the first one outlines a brief and general description of the history of Yorùbá material in museums outside Britain, in

¹³⁵ See the diagram in Chapter 4, p.105.

order to give a context for the analysis of British museums. The second section concentrates on the thematic analysis of British displays (which have been organised in artistic displays; ethnographic displays and religious displays); finally, the third part is concerned with the interpretation of the data gathered from the analysis.

7.2. African collections outside Britain.

The most important collections of Yorùbá material outside Britain are in the USA. Of particular importance are the American Museum of Natural History (New York, USA), the museum at Hampton University (Hampton, USA) and the Buffalo Museum of Science (Buffalo, USA). All these museums contain traditional Yorùbá objects in their collections. The museums have been chosen in order to provide a general description of the history of their displays, which include Yorùbá material. They have been selected as emblematic of different display approaches, which range from the ethnographic scientific approach, to inside-Africa perspective, to the artistic view.

The American Museum of Natural History owns over 35,000 African artefacts, which nowadays are part of one of the largest and most important ethnographic collections in America. However, initially ethnographic objects were mostly 'souvenirs brought back from expeditions, whose main focus was on the natural world, and only tangentially on peoples or cultures' (Schildkrout, 1989: 154). Nevertheless, things were soon to change and between 1888 and 1920, the Museum promoted several expeditions in Africa.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ The Akeley African expeditions.

From 1869, the anthropology collections included conspicuous African accessions. In 1894, the African collections were reorganised by Frederick Ward Putnam and in 1895 they were considered significant by Franz Boas, who considered the collections to be an opportunity to 'record the lives of primitive peoples' and establish new standards of ethnological collecting (Schildkrout, 1989: 154). From being useful comparative specimens, ethnographic objects started to be considered as illustrations of ideas, as keys to understand mental processes and therefore the minds of the people who made the artefacts. Exhibitions also started to emphasise the aesthetic qualities of African material, which was usually presented according to a geographical arrangement (West Africa, Congo and East Africa). The years between 1910 and the 1930s saw many changes in relation to the African collections: ethnographic items were presented separately from the zoological ones, an emphasis was put on the technological processes and the idea of African cultures as the survival of man's primitive state started to disappear (Schildkrout, 1989). Almost thirty years later African exhibitions started to be organised around ecology and social organisation and a new inventory of the collection was started. Nowadays, the approach of the American Museum of Natural History towards African material culture is to consider such artefacts as the access to cultures, 'which ultimately exist on the level of abstract ideas' (Schildkrout, 1989: 152).

Another useful but quite different example is provided by the Hampton University Museum. The Museum at Hampton University is an important educational and cultural resource. Nowadays, the Museum hosts a collection of over 2,500 objects, representative of eighty-seven ethnic groups and geographic areas of Africa (Zeidler and Hultgre, 1989: 110). Its collections represent different non-western heritage and traditions, although African pieces are a large part of it. Its first significant collection of African Art was acquired back in 1911 by William H. Sheppard, an African American who collected African objects between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Since the early 1920s, African collections were considered 'both as valued works of art and as cultural artefacts with important associations for the individual students' (Zeidler and Hultgre, 1989: 106).

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, objects were exhibited in Marshall Hall and they were displayed in 'cabinet-style cases with glass doors', which students could open in order to pick up the objects, while the curator gave an explanation

(Zeidler and Hultgre, 1989).¹³⁷ Between the 1910s and late 1930s, the collections at Hampton were still used for academic lectures on African culture but the Trade School also benefited from classes on artistic traditions, based on the objects displayed. In the history of the Museum, a crucial role was played by individual African students, who donated several African collections to the Museum. For instance, two students, Qandiyane Cele and Columbus Kamba Simango, contributed strongly to the knowledge about African culture and to the growing of African collections.¹³⁸ Following a hiatus during World War II, the museum reopened as a museum of Art and the African collections were expanded. Nowadays the focus of the Museum is related to the meaning, use and aesthetic values of the items and the collections continue to be a cultural source of inspiration and research (Zeidler and Hultgre, 1989).

The Buffalo Museum of Science provides us with another example. Initially the collections were limited to the artefacts of Native American cultures. However, since the late nineteenth century the museum started to acquire collections from other cultures. Nowadays the Society holds more than 300,000 items: of those, 3,000 are from Africa (Gramly, 1989). African objects were purchased mostly via European dealers and collectors and it was only in the 1940s that they were properly displayed. Indeed, until the late 1930s, the Museum had organised its displays according to material and technology, with no geographical division. This was because the museum aimed principally to 'instruct visitors about human technology [and] to document its evolution' (Gramly, 1989: 38). In 1941, following a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Museum reopened the Hall of Primitive Art and the rationale of the whole exhibition area was the display of world arts, in order to enhance the relationships between different cultures and races: in this Hall, an entire section was reserved for Sub-Saharan Africa (Gramly, 1989). Although the Buffalo Museum no longer hosts the Hall of Primitive Art, its focus remains on the technology, art and experiences of past cultures and the people who have made the story of Buffalo.

¹³⁷ The Academic Hall, the original location of the museum, does not exist anymore, since it was destroyed by a fire in 1879, together with large part of the earliest collections.

¹³⁸ Qandiyane Cele was the son of a Zulu Chief while Columbus Kamba Simango was the grand son of a Ndaou traditional diviner.

This section has been a short historical excursus of museum displays, outside Britain, which exhibit African objects, including traditional Yorùbá artefacts. Four different typologies of exhibits, and therefore four different approaches, have been presented in order to offer a more comprehensive and international view of museum interpretative stages. The next section of the chapter will be concerned with a thematic and detailed analysis of museum displays in the United Kingdom, presenting traditional Yorùbá religious objects.

7.3. Analysis of the Yorùbá displays in British museums.

In order to analyse the displays in the most comprehensive way, the researcher had a list of questions and key-points related to the circulation pattern of the exhibition-display area, the use of the colours in the displays, the use of the light (artificial and natural), the arrangements of the objects, the style and topics of the display, the narrative voice of the displays and the use (or non-use) of Information and Communication Technology devices in that specific display area. Additional questions were related to the number and typology of Yorùbá objects on display and the interpretation given to them. The researcher also analysed the text of the interpretive panels and the caption labels. First, the content of the texts was evaluated, in terms of reference to African culture, traditional African religion or Yorùbá traditional religion, symbolism and Colonialism. Second, the texts were analysed according to the Fry test, the Cloze procedure and the Ekarv's method.¹³⁹ The final questions were concerned with the target audience that the displays were aimed at and whether and how the African/Yorùbá view was presented at all. All these elements have been summarised in a table. The displays have been principally studied according to the morphology of the gallery, the arrangement of the objects and the texts.¹⁴⁰ The analysis of the ten museums suggests that they can be divided into three groups: artistic displays, ethnographic displays and religious displays.

¹³⁹ Details of the Cloze Procedure, Fry test and Ekarv's method are given in the Appendices II, III and IV (p.207, 208, 209), together with the list of questions and key-points used by the researcher to analyse the displays (Appendix V: 'List of questions for the researcher' p.210).

¹⁴⁰ See Appendix V, 'List of questions for the researcher', p.210.

7.3.1. Artistic displays.

The category 'artistic displays' indicates those displays that present their exhibits in an artistic way. Indeed, in these displays, the artistic nature of the items has been prioritised, while the religious nature of the artefacts has been subordinated. These displays do not appear to have a specific focus on any African ethnic group or cultural distinctiveness. On the contrary, they risk being 'more a denial of African cultural distinctiveness [than] a celebration of the Panafricanism' (Pole, 2001: 48). Museums which focus on artistic displays include: the Sainsbury African Galleries (British Museum, London), the African Worlds Gallery (Horniman Museum, London), Gallery 36 (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham), the World Cultures Gallery (Manchester Museum, Manchester) and 125 Exhibition (Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Nottingham). Apart from the 125 Exhibition (Nottingham), all the displays analysed were permanent.

The arrangement and style of the displays exhibiting traditional religious and ceremonial Yorùbá objects, the typology of the objects, the interpretation given, and the text of the panels related to the items, will be considered first. From the analysis, it appears that both the horizontal and vertical arrangements were predominant. The arrangements strongly depended on the shape of the items and undoubtedly emphasised an impressive and artistic visual interpretation of the displays, as in the Sainsbury Galleries (British Museum, **Fig. 18**) and in Gallery 36 (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, **Fig.19**). In most of the display cases, the viewing height was uncomfortable (Dean, 1994). Often the objects were placed at a level too low, and therefore arduous, to be properly valued. This was, for instance, the case of the Ibeji figures in the World Cultures Gallery (Manchester Museum, **Fig.20**): indeed the figures, exhibited in the same case with Gèlèdè masks and other non-Yorùbá religious figures, were displayed at such a very low level that the public was forced to lean down to be able to see them or to read the text accompanying them. Conversely, in other exhibitions, artefacts were displayed high up, making it difficult for them to be seen or appreciated by visitors. An example of this can be seen in the display of Gèlèdè masks in the African Worlds Gallery (Horniman Museum). The concentration of the objects was quite high, and consequently some of the glass cases were too crowded for the items to be appreciated on an individual basis (Maximea, 2002). This was especially the case in

the World Cultures Gallery (Manchester Museum) and the Sainsbury Galleries (British Museum), where objects appeared to be presented predominantly for their impressive, visual impact. In order to emphasise this artistic presentation, the displays' use of the light was very important. Most of the displays employed artificial lighting in order to illumine individual objects and this contributed to the artistic approach of the exhibits.

In all the displays analysed, the exhibits did not follow a storyline but were arranged according to typological criteria or themes: for examples in the case of the African World Gallery (Horniman Museum), the displays were related to different typologies of African objects: from altars to Egypt sarcophagi; from Benin plaques to different kinds of masks and masquerades; from stools and headrests to ceremonial items. In contrast, the displays were organised in themes in the Sainsbury Galleries (British Museum), in the Living Cultures Gallery (Manchester Museum) and in Gallery 36 (Birmingham Museum).¹⁴¹ This typological arrangement offered static and sometimes puzzling representations (Pearce, 1990). In fact, the displays generally tended to freeze the items and the cultures they belonged to, without making a strong and evident link with the existing Yorùbá local communities. Indeed, the displays of the African World Gallery, for example, included the views of African people in the object labels and panels, but these people were not necessarily Yorùbá and, for the main part, were artists.

The number of traditional religious Yorùbá objects displayed varied from two (in the 125 Exhibition, Nottingham Castle Museum) to a maximum of thirty-nine (in the African Worlds Gallery, Horniman Museum). The majority of traditional Yorùbá religious objects on display were Gèlèdé masks, Ibeji figures and Shango staffs, although they also included: crowns, beaded boots; Epa masks; carved doors; cut lasses; Ifa divination boards, Ifa oracles, Otsro mask; Egungun mask; amulets and ceremonial bowls. In all cases, the objects have been presented as artistic pieces, displayed to be appreciated either as individual items or as part of a broader display.

¹⁴¹ The themes of the displays in Gallery 36 were: Ways of seeing; Victorian views; Stereotypes and individual styles; Art and artefact; Documentary perspective and the camera never lies; archaeological evidence and decorative display; the human image; the masquerade figure; contemporary symbols: what do we use to define our culture today; recycled work; Influence and Inspiration: what is authentic?/Native American beadwork. Concerning the 125 Exhibition in Nottingham, it was not possible to say clearly which criterion was used by the curators in displaying the artefacts. The objects were not organised according a typological, historical or functional norm.

However, in all cases their religious essence and purpose had become a secondary attribute. Indeed, the displays analysed are all appealing and impressive exhibits, which celebrate the beauty and exotic diversity of Africa, either as pieces of an African mosaic or as complex and artistic pan-African representations.

This artistic and pan-Africanist nature of the displays was also reflected in the labels that accompany the items and the displays. All the displays analysed were supported by interpretative panels and information related to individual objects. The panels aimed, in general, to define the themes of display they were related to. In addition, the exhibitions provided individual or group objects labels: the labels gave detailed information about the typology and function of the objects presented. In general, the labels included the traditional name of the item, the geographical provenance, the material, the ethnic group the object belongs to, and the period of the object. The content of the panels was predominantly related to the function of the objects, and possibly the collection that they belonged to, but there was no mention of Yorùbá religious beliefs or symbolism and iconography. The text of the panels and the labels was examined according to the Fry test, the Cloze procedure and the Ekarv's method.¹⁴² In all cases, the text was far too long, with the result that it was difficult to read and was addressed to an audience who had prior knowledge of African culture, African groups and African history. In addition, some of the panels presented technical terminology (as in the World Cultures Gallery in Manchester) with the intention of explaining the use of the objects and the way they were made. Unfortunately, the frequent use of cultural or academic words affected the understanding of the texts, with the result that they were aimed at a knowledgeable and academic public.

¹⁴² Details of the Cloze procedure (Appendix II), of the Fry test (Appendix III) and of the Ekarv's method (Appendix IV) are given at pp.207, 208,209.



Fig. 18: View of one of the Sainsbury Galleries, British Museum, London. ©British Museum

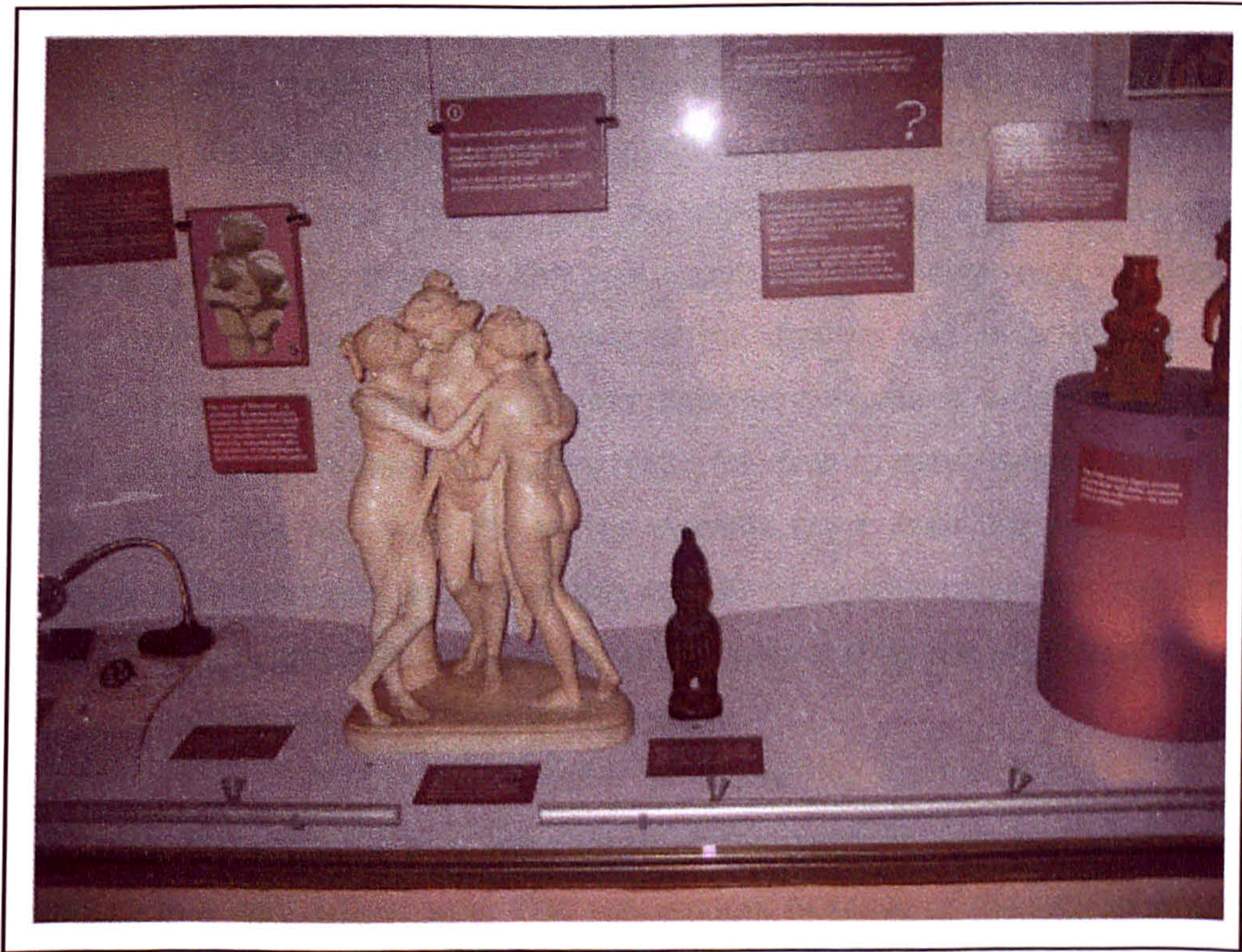


Figure 19: Display exhibiting an Ibeji figure, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham.
© Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery



Figure 20: Display containing Yorùbá religious/ceremonial objects, Living Cultures Gallery, Manchester Museum, Manchester. © Manchester Museum.

The study of the circulation patterns of the exhibition rooms, the narrative voice of the displays, the target audience and supportive material provided in the exhibitions will now be considered. First of all, the researcher has analysed the displays according to the layout theories. This was accomplished by examining the floor plan of each exhibition area. It emerged that all the displays had an arterial circulation pattern, typical of art galleries and object oriented exhibitions, where there is not a specific storyline and where the visitors might feel free to move around as they wish (Dean, 1994). This was valid for all the displays apart from the ones in the 125 Exhibition in Nottingham: indeed in this specific case, the circulation pattern was strongly limited by the small dimensions of the room and by the position of the room itself (between the stairs and another exhibition).

In all cases, the voices at play were those of the curators, who had organised the exhibitions in a very artistic way. This was evident because of the way in which the items were presented and because of the language used in the interpretative panels. Rarely there was reference to, or any link with, the local African or Yorùbá

community. Apart from the aforementioned example of African Worlds Gallery (Horniman Museum), it is worth citing the case of the Living Cultures Gallery (Manchester Museum). In Manchester, the Museum made use of seven touch screens, which showed local people speaking about some of the objects in the collections.¹⁴³ This was a part of a project organised to underline the existing connection between the cultures on display and the diverse cultural life of the people of North-West England. However, there are no Yorùbá people discussing the objects and there was no reference to Yorùbá religious objects or traditions.

Finally, concerning the supportive materials and ICT, all the displays analysed (apart from the ones in Nottingham) were provided with videos or touch screens. However, it is worth mentioning that such videos or touch screens were related to different African objects and techniques and not necessarily to traditional Yorùbá items or traditional Yorùbá practises.

This section has presented a thematic analysis of five British museum displays, classified as 'artistic'. It has put forward the view that traditional religious Yorùbá objects are absorbed into pan-Africanist impressive representations, a situation which might reinforce the stereotypes of exotic art and dislocation that museum professionals have struggled to destroy (Elliott, 2005). These artistic representations confirm that museum depictions of African material culture are still affected by Western classifications (Vogel, 1991). Additionally, this section has also highlighted the fact that the voices at play are the ones of the curator and that there is little involvement of the African/ Yorùbá local community. The displays seemed, therefore, to mirror specific but broad aspects of African cultures.

7.3.2. Ethnographic displays.

This categorization has been determined by the strong ethnographic nature of the exhibits. Indeed, these displays are predominantly organised according to typologies and analogical criteria, which defines the objects on the basis of their similarities and

¹⁴³ The screens were part of the project called *Rethinking Voices*. The project was produced by the digital video artist Kuljit Kooj Chuhan. The people selected for the project all belonged to those local communities in Manchester less engaged with the museum's activity. Each person had to select an item from the displays and had to give his/her own interpretation.

differences (Catalani, 2005). Museums that focus on ethnographic displays include: the World Cultures Gallery (The World Museum, Liverpool), the Court (Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford), the Anthropology Gallery (The Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge) and the Ethnography Galleries (The Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter). All the displays analysed were permanent.¹⁴⁴ It is important to specify that at the time of the research, the World Cultures Gallery (World Museum Liverpool, Liverpool) was closed for redevelopment until the 29th of April 2005. Therefore, it was not possible to analyse the displays, in terms of layout theories and display settings. However, the researcher was provided with several documents concerned with Yorùbá displays and text and caption labels.¹⁴⁵

Firstly the arrangement and style of the exhibitions displaying traditional religious and ceremonial Yorùbá objects, the typology of the objects, the interpretation given and the text of the panels related to the items, will be discussed. As with the artistic displays, the horizontal and vertical arrangements were both predominant in the ethnographic exhibits. This was due to the shape of the objects but also to the space available for the displays as, for example, in the case of the Court, in the Pitt Rivers Museum (**Fig. 21**). In any of the displays examined, the arrangements did not have a comfortable viewing height. Indeed, objects were placed either at a level too low for a standard adult view or too high. The arrangement of the objects also affected the display density and the vista distance, which was quite low: the cases were often too crowded (as in the case of the Court) or were combining too many different shapes and typologies of objects (as in the cases of Ethnography Gallery, in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum) which made the displays too confusing to look at. In terms of lighting, the displays were lit in all cases both by natural light (coming from the ceiling and windows) and by artificial light. In contrast to the artistic displays (where the artificial light was used to emphasise the creative representation of the items), in the ethnographic displays the artificial light did not have any artistic purpose.

¹⁴⁴ Although in the Exeter displays are changed on a regular basis to bring out items that are not in the display area.

¹⁴⁵ The documents were: a bubble diagram for a Yorùbá case, a figure (in section) of one of the Yorùbá cases (with the list of the objects), a complete list of the Yorùbá artefacts in the World Cultures Gallery, a copy of the texts of the panels and of the caption labels for the Yorùbá objects, a photocopy of the image of the Babaláwo and the text of a talk given by M3 in the Lady Lever Gallery for the 'Object of the month' talk.

None of the displays presented a continuous story line. On the contrary, they were organised through themes and typology. In the cases of the Court (Pitt Rivers Museum) the themes were related to 'the successions of ideas by which the minds of men [...] have progressed';¹⁴⁶ conversely in the Anthropology Gallery (Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology) the exhibits were organised according to the geographical location of the items.¹⁴⁷ This was also the case with the Ethnography Gallery (Royal Albert Memorial Museum), where the themes were predominantly concerned with the geographical provenance of the artefacts, but also with religion,¹⁴⁸ the main local collectors and collections and with issues relating to conservation cleaning methods for ethnographic items.

All the displays were static representations: indeed, the different ethnic groups and material cultures were displayed, side-by-side, in a sort of continuous and puzzling presentation of colonial sets, with no distinctiveness for Yorùbá culture or traditional religion. Concerning the Ethnography Galleries (Exeter), there was an attempt to underline the link between the objects and the original living cultures and to frame them in a historical context. This was achieved by presenting the objects as 'evidence of the life of people in different communities'.¹⁴⁹ However, the presentations were still portraying the items as artefacts out of time and space.

The number of traditional religious Yorùbá objects displayed varied from five (in the Anthropology Gallery) to forty-one (in the Court); they were presented together with other African objects. The typology of traditional Yorùbá religious objects was various and included mostly masks, a robe, amulets, personal ornaments, wooden figures, crowns, Ifa trays, Ogun staffs, headdresses, Ibeji figures, stools, cloths and shrine figures. In all cases, traditional religious Yorùbá objects were incorporated into very broad categories (e.g. 'West Africa'; 'Nigeria', 'Amulets and Charms'), while their sacredness was neglected, in favour of their practical function (Catalani, 2005) there were cases concerned with religious and ceremonial objects (as for examples

¹⁴⁶ General Pitt Rivers, quoted in Blackwood, 1991:2. The themes were: 'Basketry and String Work', 'Chinese Ceramics', 'Dwellings, Egypt and Peru'; 'Firearms'; 'Firemaking'; 'Funerary Practices'; 'Hawaiian Feather Cloaks'; 'Head Hunting Trophies'; 'Ivory Horn and Bone'; 'Lacemaking and Embroidery'; 'Lamps and Lanterns'; 'Magic Ritual and Belief'; 'Masks'; 'Musical Instruments'; 'North American and Siberian Clothing'; 'Sculpture and Carving'; 'Smoking, Narcotics and Stimulants'; 'Styles and Forms in Art'; 'Textiles'; 'Transport and Writing Material'.

¹⁴⁷ 'Early Collections', 'Arctic', 'Amazonia', 'Northwest Coast', 'North America', 'Papua New Guinea', 'Fiji', 'New Zealand', 'Manchuria', 'Africa', 'Mongolia', 'Asia', 'Mexico', 'Lapland', 'Indonesia' and 'South Sea'.

¹⁴⁸ Buddhism and Hinduism.

¹⁴⁹ This is a direct quote from the exhibition text.

the cases: 'Masks and Carvings,' 'Amulets and Charms' and 'Magic, Witchcraft and Shamanism' in the Court of the Pitt Rivers Museum),¹⁵⁰ in all the different displays analysed there was no mention of Yorùbá religion and religious beliefs. None of the panels or label captions referred to or explained Yorùbá religion. In general, the object labels provided information related to the place of origin of the item, the iconography and the function. All the displays were also provided with interpretative panels. However, the text on the panels was written in a formal and academic style, containing some sensitive and technical words. From the Fry test, the Cloze procedure and the Ekarv's method, it emerged that the text was aiming at highly-educated public, with prior knowledge on the topic. The only exceptions to this were the text panels in Liverpool: the amount of words had been kept between 90 and 100 words, with quite a high reading age, in order to be accessible to a wider public.

¹⁵⁰ The Yorùbá objects visible on display were in a case, containing an amulet (in the amulet and charms display), a Yorùbá veranda post (photography; in the West African sculpture); a lidded bowl of storing equipment for divination; a carved wooden female figure with offering bowl; two Epa Masks and an Ivory Figure.



Figure 21: Picture of the Court, from *The Pitt Rivers Museum*, 1993: 22. ©Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

The second section of this analysis is based on the study of the circulation patterns of the exhibition rooms, the narrative voice of the displays, the target audience and supportive material provided in the exhibitions. All the displays have been analysed according to the layout theories. The floor plan of each exhibition was examined, with the result that the displays were found to occupy 60% of the space of the floors. Consequently, only the remaining 40% was reserved for visitors' movement. The application of the layout theories has showed that the exhibition areas are quite unstructured and present different circulation patterns.

As in the case of artistic displays, the voices at play here were also the ones of the curators. This was evident mostly through the display approach and the style and content used in the interpretative panels. Additionally, in the case of the Court (Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford) and of the Anthropology Gallery (Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge), all the collections are used as educational resource material for researchers, academics and schools. Finally, concerning the supportive materials and ICT, none of the displays was provided with it and the exhibitions seemed to be aimed at a very highly educated and knowledgeable public.

This section has presented a thematic analysis of four British museum displays, classified as 'ethnographic'. It has put forward the view that traditional religious Yorùbá objects are framed into static, often typological representations, as the 'material culture of people who have been considered [an] appropriate target for anthropological research' (Lidchi, 1997: 161). In addition, the analysis has emphasized the fact that the voices at play are the ones of the curators, again, with little involvement from the African/ Yorùbá local community. As in the previous case of the artistic displays, the ethnographic ones also seemed to reflect very broad aspects of African cultures, with limited reference and emphasis on the importance of traditional Yorùbá religion for the local contemporary Yorùbá communities.

7.3.3. Religious display.

The category of religious displays comprises those displays that aim to represent different religious experiences through traditional religious ceremonial objects. In this category only the Gallery of the Religious Life, St Mungo Museum, Glasgow has been included. As a consequence, the analysis of these displays has been presented in a more discursive way. The displays in this gallery are permanent and constitute a unique example of museum displays concerned with religious material. In them, the religious essence is regarded as central to all the items. The displays follow a continuous storyline, which contributes to the dynamic aspect of the exhibition. By presenting the human experience of religion, the exhibition actualised the crucial aspects of human life and underlined their cultural distinctiveness.

Individual works, cases and other exhibition components have been illuminated by exhibition lights and top lights. As with other exhibitions, the objects in this Gallery were organised according to horizontal and vertical arrangements. Additionally, almost all the cases do not have a comfortable viewing height because some of the objects are placed in a low level. In terms of display density, the vista distance was acceptable: therefore, it was possible to appreciate the religious individuality and artistic distinctiveness of the objects.

The four Yorùbá objects displayed in the Gallery comprise: a wooden statue of the spirit of smallpox, an *iroke* (an ivory tapper), beadwork regalia, and a flywhisk. The Gallery was provided with interpretative panels, which explained the themes of the displays.¹⁵¹ The texts of the panels and those of the caption labels associated with the Yorùbá objects were short, with a conversational but quite academic style. In addition, both the panels and caption labels made use of cultural words, which often remained unexplained. The aim of the panels was to explain how people - belonging to different faiths - react and cope on similar occasions. The religious objects on display, therefore, were used as proof of this distinctiveness and their meaning and purpose was elucidated in the light of a common religious experience.

The gallery was provided with some supportive material. Indeed, a video and four headsets facilitated the interaction between the objects and the memories of local people. The headsets were playing sections of oral history interviews. The people interviewed belonged to different religious communities and were speaking about their own experiences and memories related to some of the themes or objects.¹⁵² Additionally, the video entitled 'Ways of worship' illustrated how people from different religions communicated with the sacred.¹⁵³ In terms of visitor movement, the Gallery of Religious Life presents an arterial circulation pattern (Communications Designs Team, 1999). The target audience seemed to be mainly adults and teenagers. The different religious views (Westerners and non-Westerners) were all fairly represented, but with not specific reference to local Yorùbá people.

This section has presented the analysis of religious displays. In this category only the Gallery of Religious Life (St Mungo Museum, Glasgow) has been included. This display presents a rare museum approach: religious objects (Western and non-Western) are interpreted as unique expressions of the universal religious experience, as a material way to explore other faiths and beliefs. This section has proved that, although the museum display of religion or religious objects is challenging, it is however, achievable to a certain extent. This confirms what Arthur has stated: 'key

¹⁵¹ The interpretive panels were inserted in the display cases and were: Birthhood and childhood, Coming of age, sex and marriage, religion as profession, divine ruler, spreading the word, persecuting war and peace, death, after life, go between, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Sikhism.

¹⁵² The objects were also accompanied by some quotations from the memories of the people from the local communities.

¹⁵³ The video showed seven different religious worships: the recitation of the Koran in Cairo, the singing of the Christian 'Sanctus', a Jewish prayer, an Hindu ceremony, a Raven Mask dance (from Canada), a Buddhist meditation and a procession in Benin for the Oba.

areas of religion are elusive when it comes to museum displays' (Arthur, 2000: 24). On the other hand, contemporary museums can successfully aim to illustrate 'religious diversity' as well as 'to foster respect for the different elements which constitute that diversity', as in the case of the Gallery of Religious Life (Arthur, 2000: 24).

7.4. Answering the research questions.

In researching material culture, it is possible to make infinite observations about objects. These observations might be different and possibly antithetical according to the perspective adopted (Gramly, 1989). Throughout history, museums have reflected these discordant and sometimes contradictory viewpoints. The museum examples provided in this chapter aimed to show the change of 'attitudes and aspirations of the museum world and the sciences', since the nineteenth century and in different geographical and cultural contexts (Gramly, 1989).

This chapter intended to answer two research questions: 'to what extent are Western museums a neutral environment where all the religions can be presented as cultural truths?' and 'is it possible to represent a culture or only to display specific objects that mirror one aspect of that culture?' From the study, it seemed that the museum displays analysed failed in acknowledging and representing traditional Yorùbá religion as a contemporary cultural truth. Museums do not emphasize the religious distinctiveness of traditional Yorùbá objects and practices. On the contrary, it appeared that the religious aspect of the artefacts was rather subordinated to and absorbed into pan-African representations, prioritising the artistic value or the ethnographic appeal of the items. In museums, religion (and especially traditional non-Western religion) becomes 'a thing of the past', understood more easily when elevated to the state of art or of ethnography (O'Neill, 1996; Vogel, 1991).

Specifically, ten museum displays were examined and all contained traditional religious Yorùbá objects. However, only one of displays aimed to show religion (including traditional Yorùbá religion), as a social component of contemporary cultures. In the other exhibitions, the religious aspect of traditional religious African

objects was seen as a secondary feature. Indeed, the items were primarily considered for their evident Western characteristics: they were appreciated and presented as pieces of art or of ethnography. Therefore, it is possible to state that the role of British contemporary museums as neutral environments for the display of religions as cultural truths is limited, since the religious feature of traditional non-Western items is acknowledged only in a historical context. O'Neill argues that

'for museums, religion scarcely exists as a category. The vast majority of religious objects are either aestheticised as art icons or treated by curators as evidence of exotic beliefs of peoples remote in time, place and culture, or as local history objects like any others' (O'Neill, 1996:189).

The analysis of the ten museum displays has proved so and in addition has highlighted the fact that, in relation to traditional non-Western religion, there are multiple challenges. This is because traditional non-Western beliefs are flattened and incorporated into broader and more manageable geographical or cultural classifications. In addition, their representation seemed conditioned by the individual interests and interpretation of curators or by the museums agendas. In relation to the second question, the museums analysed seemed to concentrate on representing separated aspects of cultures. Concerning Yorùbá culture, besides being absorbed into the pan-African interpretation, museums seem to mirror aspects of that culture, mainly through thematic representations. Therefore, the religious feature of the items is again incorporated into broad, flattening cultural definitions.

It is important to emphasize that this study considers that traditional Yorùbá religious objects have been exposed to the changes and rules of contemporary British society and specifically to those changes happening within the contemporary museum context. Therefore, the analysis of the displays was intended to elucidate how certain symbols and objects, (such as traditional Yorùbá religious symbols and objects) might 'maintain [or adapt] their constant capacity to mean' (Sebeok, 1994: 19) according to different societies and different contexts. In the framework of this research, although traditional religious Yorùbá objects have kept their connotation of 'religious artefacts', once moved into the museum environment, they have been 'adapted' to the new, non-sacred context and have been given meanings that reflect

the needs and understanding of the hosting society ('artistic items' and 'ethnographic artefacts').

7.5. Concluding observations.

Museum displays are concerned with the representation and visual expressions of individuals, cultures or societies. They are three-dimensional, tangible forms of human communication and as such, they include 'all manner [and aspects] of representation, including misrepresentation' (Manning, 2004: 568). This intention of this chapter was to concentrate on the concepts of 'interpretation' and 'representation' and analyse them in relation to British contemporary, postcolonial museum displays and traditional Yorùbá religious objects in Britain. The chapter has been built around the Saidean perspective, according to which non-Western societies have been conceived and reinvented on the basis of the nineteenth century stereotypes of European intellectuals (Said, 1995; Kahan, 1995). This orientation has been crucial in order to frame the conceptual context of the analysis.

This chapter has analysed and presented the data gathered by ten museum displays. All the displays considered were in the United Kingdom and included traditional religious and ceremonial Yorùbá objects. Edward Said's work has offered a useful theoretical framework for this thesis: 'Orientalism [which in this context should be changed into Africanism] is not an airy European fantasy about [Africa] but a created body of theory and practice' (Said, 1995: 6), which has one of its most profitable applications in the museum field. In the analysis, it has also been argued that contemporary interpretation and museum representation of non-Western religious heritage are static. In addition, by presenting a variety of displays inclusive of Yorùbá traditional religious objects, it has questioned whether, notwithstanding all the purposes and idealised aims, the relationship between the Western self and the non-Western other, has really undergone profound transformations and to what extent it has combined the voices of Yorùbá people together with Western museum professionals (Pieterse, 2005).

The chapter has therefore presented both the scene of museum displays (containing Yorùbá material) both outside and inside Britain. The museums considered outside

Britain have been mostly based in the USA. Their mention in the thesis has been a historical excursus, which has described the situation outside the United Kingdom during the nineteenth century, when museums were the arenas of evolutionary and sociological theories. Unlike the eighteenth century cabinets of curiosities, in the nineteenth century museum 'exhibits were expected to reflect some clear rational: museums of natural history presented instructive exhibits; museums of art presented things of beauty' (Williams, 1985:146). However, in this context, ethnographic displays and material did not have a clear and defined place and the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) was crucial for them. With this publication, the study of a species was based on a comparative criterion and non-Western artefacts became examples of the work of primitive people and therefore important for the evolutionary theory of the relationship between the races.

As a contrast, the chapter continued by focusing on the thematic analysis of ten contemporary museum displays in the United Kingdom. It has demonstrated that museum displays are still very much affected by Western, artistic stereotypes. This stereotyping justifies, absorbs and turns non-Western material culture into art. At the same time, it considers the religious aspect only as an additional, supplementary feature of the items. Moreover, museums, a Western invention, seem to be looking at non-Western material culture through Western lenses and subordinate its religious essence and sanctity to the artistic value and ethnographic interest. In this way, the distinctive features of African cultures are incorporated and flattened within the general, wide-ranging label 'Africa': in the case of traditional Yorùbá religious material culture, such objects are considered, mainly as African artistic objects or as old-style African ethnographic specimens. The chapter presented this duality of museum misinterpretations and misrepresentations: it has analysed both artistic displays (such as the Sainsbury Galleries, British Museum; the African World Gallery, Horniman Museum; the Living Cultures Gallery, Manchester Museum; the 125 Exhibition, Nottingham Castle Museum; and Gallery 36, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery) and ethnographic displays (Great Court, Pitt River Museum; Archaeology, the Ethnography Galleries, the Royal Albert Museum and Anthropology Gallery, Cambridge). However, the chapter has acknowledged the existence of a unique museum display (the Gallery of Religious Life, St Mungo Museum, Glasgow), which aimed to define the religious essence of the exhibited items and their cultural individuality.

The following chapter will consist of a final summary of the data analysis collected on the basis of the different research methods. It will, in fact, comment on the key findings. The next chapter, therefore, will provide a final perspective on the processes of museum interpretation and of self-definition (on behalf of the members of the Yorùbá diaspora), through traditional religious Yorùbá material.

Chapter 8: Some conclusions

8.1 Introduction: aims and structure of the chapter.

This chapter is concerned with the final thoughts on the data gathered in the three different projects in relation to this thesis. The projects were conceived as an integrated mainstream scheme of fieldwork. Therefore, this chapter will be divided in two main sections. The first part will briefly summarise the findings collected from the data analysis. It will discuss the differences and similarities, which have emerged, through two different identified attitudes and perspectives towards traditional Yorùbá religious objects and the British museums that display them. This section will also emphasize the strong sense of 'Yorùbáness', as ethnicity, inclusive of the sense of religious traditions (among the members of the Yorùbá diaspora in Britain) and their rejection of postcolonial Western museum representations. Finally the second part of this chapter will present the closing observations of this research. These observations will include: the theoretical approach of the thesis; the implications for practice; the limitations of the research and the recommendations for future studies.

8.2 Traditional Yorùbá religious objects: a common langue of different *paroles*.

As already discussed in a previous chapter,¹⁵⁴ various methods of data collection have been employed to investigate the topic. These methods included: a set of three interviews and three focus groups with Yorùbá immigrants and a set of ten museum displays exhibiting traditional religious Yorùbá objects and the interviews with the relevant museum professionals. As also previously mentioned, the analysis of the data has been based on the semiotic system of the *langue - parole*. This system was originally developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (Saussure, 1983) and employed by Susan Pearce (Pearce, 1994) in relation to objects. The application of this investigative tool in relation to material culture and the museum context has proved to be essential for this study. Indeed, it has facilitated the analysis of the means by which a specific category of objects and symbols – in this case 'traditional religious Yorùbá objects and symbols' – has changed its meaning, according to the different

¹⁵⁴ See Chapter 4, 'Research objectives and the shaping of the research approach', p.79.

societies (pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial societies) and contexts (the religious original context and the artificial museum context) in which it appears. The application of the *langue* - *parole* system has helped to expound and apply a kind of conceptual grammar of social signs (the *langue*, according to the definition of Saussure)¹⁵⁵ to the museum environment. Two different applications of this grammar (or in other words, what Saussure calls the '*parole*') have been defined and presented during the analysis. The two applications, or *paroles*, have been characteristic of two different perspectives. It was possible to identify two diverse *paroles*, according to the use of the *langue* made by two categories of people: Yorùbá immigrants (members of the Yorùbá diaspora) and museum professionals, both living in the United Kingdom. As a consequence, the two *paroles* or, in other words, the 'spoken' language used in relation to traditional Yorùbá religious objects have been: the Yorùbá immigrants' *parole* and the museum professionals' *parole*.

The two *paroles* have been presented as the results of the semiotic analysis. In both cases, this analysis has started by considering the processes that have brought Yorùbá traditional material culture from being everyday objects used for religious and ceremonial purposes according to the occasion, to being mysterious curiosities, evil fetishes, sets of scientific ethnographic items and exotic art, until they have become what Arjun Appadurai calls 'extremely complex blends of plunder, sale, and inheritance, combined with the Western taste for the things of the past and of the others' (Appadurai, 1999: 27).

8.3 Evaluation of the methods used.

The research of a topic is always based on a set of questions, and these questions are related to defining the object of enquiry, the basis of the interest and how, when and where can it be enquired into (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). However, if the topic of the research concerns the study of 'things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998: 3), qualitative research usually

¹⁵⁵ The grammar of social signs, in fact, could be defined as the set of rules that makes a social communication work and that, therefore, links the different meanings given to objects, in different times and social or cultural frameworks.

turns out to be the most appropriate procedure. Indeed, 'qualitative research is multi-method in focus involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998: 3). Within qualitative research a range of interconnected methods can be used, including case studies, personal experience, reflection, life stories, interviews, observational, historical, interactional and visuals texts. Like a '*bricolage*', the qualitative research offers 'a complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like creation that represents the researcher's images, understandings and interpretations of the world or phenomenon under analysis' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998: 3). Therefore, since the qualitative research is a set of interpretive practices and since the aim of this research was to investigate what the interpretative criteria are in relation to traditional Yorùbá religious objects in museums in the United Kingdom, the approach of the study has been qualitative. It has involved two different methods: a set of three interviews and a set of three focus groups with Yorùbá immigrants, and a set of ten interviews with museum professionals, complemented by the analysis of ten museum displays (containing traditional religious Yorùbá objects). This research has targeted both Yorùbá members of the Yorùbá diaspora and museum professionals, both based in the United Kingdom, and they way each of these target groups approached the theme of 'traditional Yorùbá religious objects in museums'.

Both of the research methods were informed by a temporary exhibition (*Objects of religion: Yorùbá beliefs displayed*), set up by the researcher herself as a pilot study. The temporary exhibition was useful in order to make the researcher more familiar with traditional Yorùbá culture and religious symbols and to inform the research questions and methodology. It proved to be an important research tool, which assisted in considering and attempting to overcome the difficulty of displaying religious non-Western material culture in a appropriately sensitive way in a Western museum context. One of the main starting points of the exhibition was the awareness that religious objects are 'cultural objects [and as such they can] present considerable methodological difficulties' (Slater, 2002: 233). These difficulties are due to the fact that religious objects, as cultural objects, permeate through to very inner essence of a culture and therefore symbolise an entire set of historical and social values. Therefore, instead of emphasising and defining the religious essence of the items on display, the exhibition aimed to extrapolate the religious symbolism of traditional Yorùbá objects and tried to both compare and associate it with every

other religious representation. In this way, the exhibition did not present the exotic or the artistic 'Other,' but instead it presented another expression (Yorùbá traditional objects) of universal religious symbolism.

The interviews and the questions for the focus groups all had a semi-structured format, in order to be 'a [comfortable] conversation with a purpose' (Mason, 1996: 43). The intention was to investigate the interpretative criteria of the participants and to decode their symbolic metaphors, in relation to a shared religious heritage. However, it is essential to underline that the researcher had to face some issues of cooperation with the Yorùbá participants. This obstacle has already been discussed in an earlier chapter.¹⁵⁶ The initial stage of the fieldwork with the Yorùbás was affected by both mistrust and suspicion, because, according to Yorùbá participants, the research was concerned with a suspicious topic: traditional Yorùbá beliefs. This in itself suggests that the relationship between people's behaviour and the interpretation of material culture depends on 'the actions of individuals within particular culture-historical contexts [therefore] there is no direct, universal cross-cultural relationship between behaviour and material culture' (Hodder, 1991: 13, 14). The help and collaboration of two Yorùbá individuals was crucial, in establishing a trustworthy cooperation.¹⁵⁷ In fact, they, helped the researcher to overcome the mistrust, and they encouraged the Yorùbá participants to speak freely during the discussions. In addition to the interviews and the focus groups with Yorùbá people, a set of ten interviews with museum professionals and the analysis of ten displays were also carried out. The interviews with the museum professionals were crucial in order to identify the current museum professional perspective on non-Western religious traditional material culture. Finally, the analysis of the museum displays was a useful tool to corroborate those perspectives.

These three different projects (focus groups/interviews with Yorùbá people, interviews with museum professionals and analysis of the displays) aimed to establish a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the issues presented in the thesis, in regard to different people's interpretative processes and representations of museum displays. In fact, the projects allowed the researcher to consider the issues from three different perspectives and angles. The interviews and

¹⁵⁶ Please, see Chapter 4, 'Focus groups with Yorùbá people: design, procedure and issues', pp.86-92.

¹⁵⁷ These individuals were the owner of an African shop in Nottingham and a Yorùbá Reverend based in Leicester.

the focus groups were actually carried out with the intention of understanding the way that people with different backgrounds (museum professionals and potential museum visitors) and from different cultures (Western and non-Western), would relate to traditional, religious, non-Western objects displayed in museums and how they would interpret and interact with them. Furthermore, the analysis of museum displays was intended to provide a more complete understanding of the museum interpretation and classification, via a more direct perspective. As mentioned previously, it was possible to identify two *paroles* from the data analysis: 'the *parole* of Yorùbá immigrants: the pride of being Yorùbá' and 'the *parole* of museum professionals: redefining the role in relation to ethnographic collections'. The two *paroles* will be briefly summarised and explained in the following sections.

8.4. The parole of Yorùbá immigrants: the pride of being Yorùbá.

The first methodological tool was composed of a set of three interviews¹⁵⁹ and three focus groups with Yorùbá people based in the United Kingdom. All Yorùbá participants were immigrants living in Leicester and Nottingham and they were therefore all members of the Yorùbá diaspora and they were all Christians (mostly Born-Again-Christians), apart from an individual who was Muslim and another individual who was a traditional believer. Both the interviews and the focus groups followed a similar protocol. The questions were centred on the individual definition of Yorùbáness; personal knowledge of traditional Yorùbá religion; and perspectives on Yorùbá traditional religious objects displayed in museums. Their aim was to investigate an aspect of Yorùbá culture such as traditional religion and identify the current perspectives or possible stereotypes of Yorùbá immigrants towards their traditional religious heritage, as it was displayed in Western museums. Indeed, the aim was to stimulate the sense of the 'collective memories' in relation to traditional religious items (Halbwachs, 1950). The group discussion appeared to be a feasible way of evoking and discussing the collective memories of a topic (their traditional Yorùbá religion) that would otherwise have been voluntarily forgotten and put aside, because of postcolonial and Christian stereotypes. Therefore, the group discussion

¹⁵⁹ Only those Yorùbá people who could not take part in the focus groups, took part to the interviews.

was used as the catalyst for forgotten memories and as Halbwachs observes, human 'memories remain collective [...] and are recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events or we saw things concerned' (Halbwachs, 1950: 78). The discussion was facilitated by the use of some pictures of traditional religious Yorùbá objects.

From the analysis, the contemporary Yorùbá *parole* (that is to say the way contemporary members of the Yorùbá diaspora relate to their traditional religious heritage displayed in museums in Britain) appears to imply a strong sense of Yorùbáness and a strong need for distinctiveness from the hosting society; a living sense and understanding of traditional religion, conceived more as a cultural trait than a religious legacy, and finally, the awareness of contemporary museums misrepresentations and misinterpretations of traditional religious objects. In addition, the Yorùbá *parole* denoted a tendency on behalf of the members of the Yorùbá diaspora in Britain to construct a social ethnicity. An important aspect of this crucial ethnicity seems to be traditional religion. Indeed, through it Yorùbá people, outside their homeland, can establish and redefine themselves inside a new social context, where they need to be accepted, but at the same time where they have to find a way to stand out from other African groups (Parkin, 1999; Dudley, 2002).

8.5 The *parole* of museum professionals: redefining the role in relation to ethnographic collections.

Finally the second *parole* identified was the one of the museum professionals. The methodological tool consisted of a set of ten interviews to twelve museum professionals. The interviews were supplemented by a detailed analysis of ten museum displays, exhibiting traditional Yorùbá religious material culture.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, their aim was to present the existing contemporary museum scene and the current interpretation of Yorùbá religious material culture. Conversely, the interviews aimed to identify the perspectives of museum professionals in relation to the selected displays. In addition, they intention was to highlight the involvement or

¹⁶⁰ The analysis of the museum displays comprised a study of the exhibition space (circulation patterns) and of the morphology of the exhibition itself, as well as a detailed analysis of the texts of the panels in relation to the displays or objects.

the absence of cooperation with Yorùbá or African experts in the research and setting up of the displays.

The parole of museum professionals confirmed that 'certain things [such as museum objects] are seen moving in and out of the commodity state' (Appadurai, 1999: 13). In fact, if 'a commodity is any thing intended for exchange' (Appadurai, 1999: 9), museum objects are still considered unconsciously – by society – as commodities. However, in contemporary societies, the exchange has more a conceptual value, in terms of a cultural and official recognition. To be more specific, the contemporary official museum recognition and appreciation of a particular category of objects (such as non-Western religious objects) also implies the recognition of that particular culture as being of equal value to Western culture. Therefore, this tacit exchange of information (from the culture) and the equal cultural recognition (on behalf of museums) suggests a sort of redemptive ransom from the colonial denigrating stereotypes. As a consequence, the museum professional *parole* appeared to be more concerned with the effective roles of the museum professionals themselves in relation to ethnographic collections, with the actual displays of the items and with an existent or absent cooperation between the museum and Yorùbá people. It is, however, evident that there is very little, or no reference at all, to the acknowledgement of the religious essence of the objects.

As previously mentioned,¹⁶¹ one of the aims of the research was to challenge and re-evaluate the understanding and interpretation of non-Western religious material culture 'by recognition of the importance of cultural meaning, the active individual and history' (Hodder, 1991: 13). Two different kinds of paroles, that is to say two different ways of defining traditional Yorùbá religious heritage in museums, have identified two diverse perspectives and expectations, strongly influenced by individual backgrounds and social needs. Yorùbá immigrants predominantly showed a strong sense of pride in relation to their ethnic origin, as a means of redefining and establishing themselves in a new society; while museum professionals appeared to be more concerned with a quest for a more appropriate definition of their professional individual roles, within the museum context.

¹⁶¹ See Chapter 1, 'The rationale of this study', p.11.

However, if we consider that one of the purposes of contemporary museums in relation to non-Western material culture, is to 'bridge the gap between [a misinterpreted] past and [a misrepresented present by] restoring this ruptured continuity' (Halbwachs, 1950: 79), it also becomes essential to give a more definite and leading voice to the represented cultures. Maurice Bloch suggests that, when talking of another culture (and this also includes the narrative of the museum exhibitions) and the other's everyday expressions, we should consider what goes without saying. In other words, it is essential to understand that what people say is based on cultural, reconstructed models, which 'integrates visual imagery, other sensory cognition, the cognitive aspects of learned practises, evaluations, memories of sensations and memories of typical examples' (Bloch, 1998: 25). Therefore, the two different paroles identified here could be defined together with the results of a re-habilitating interpretation attempt of the 'other's' material culture, on behalf of a postcolonial society. In this context, notwithstanding its anachronism, the term 'postcolonial' is preferred to any other term (such as 'post-modern') because it is indicative of the effort that a society makes in an attempt to forget and perhaps expiate the interpretative stereotypes, which are still evident and which are still reflected in museum mis-representations.

The two different paroles not only illustrate a change in relation to the meaning of a specific category of objects according to the different societies, contexts and social rules, they also identify a contemporary social tendency that is affecting the members of the Yorùbá diaspora living in Britain, in relation to their traditional religious heritage and the way it is used to define themselves among the hosting society. As mentioned in the introductory Chapter, the thesis has considered the notions of ethnicity, traditions and diaspora.¹⁶² The two paroles are, indeed, the contemporary expression of the creation of the Yorùbá ethnicity, presented according to two different perspectives. However, it is important to underline that there is a remarkable difference between the notion of Yorùbá ethnicity among the members of the Yorùbá diaspora in Britain and their way of perceiving Yorùbá religious ethnicity displayed in museums. The Yorùbá parole has showed that Yorùbá members of the diaspora can have a strong attachment to their own cultural and religious traditions, which they use 'to construct invented traditions of a novel type per quite novel purposes' (Hobsbawm, 1992: 6) in order to have a defined identity in

¹⁶² See Chapter 1, 'Diaspora today and the construction of Yorùbá ethnicity', pp.20-13.

the hosting society. These invented traditions also include traditional religious beliefs that Yorùbá people refuse or adopt by mixing together with other faiths (such as Christianity or Islam). In both of the cases, Yorùbás acknowledge the existences of traditional religious beliefs that help them to define their Yorùbáness outside their homeland.

8.6 The theoretical approach.

We must now turn to some final thoughts and suggestions. Human beings define themselves and their identities through the creation and the use of objects: objects that help individuals to perform everyday actions; objects that are employed as tools to accomplish some solemn and religious rituals; or objects that are studied as scientific samples for educational purposes. In fact 'material culture does not just exist. It is made by someone. It is produced to do something. Therefore it does not passively reproduce society – rather it creates society through the actions of individuals' (Hodder, 1991: 6). This thesis has been concerned with sub-Saharan traditional religious objects and the people who have both created them and interacted with them for different purposes. Specifically, the thesis has focused on traditional Yorùbá religious objects and their different ways and uses according, to different societies and cultural environments. It has shown that the meaning and emotional values of objects can change and this change depends strongly on the contemporary and social need for self-reference, within the culture we live in.

The study has benefited from the semiotic perspective, which considers 'material culture, as an indicator of historical change throughout the world' (Godsen and Knowles, 2001: 49). Moreover, the work has been concerned with conceptual colonial consequences, in relation to traditional religious Yorùbá material culture; it has been explained the way that objects and symbols can change their meanings according to different societies; it has presented a broad view of contemporary museum displays in the United Kingdom and the way the topic of religious sub-Saharan material culture has been approached in the displays by museum professionals. Additionally, it has highlighted the fact that, although Africa and African material culture have been of interest for the study of museum collections (Godsen and Knowles, 2001), the characteristic features of different African groups

have been flattened in broad definitions, expressed in museum labels of 'African Art' or of 'Ethnography'. This was probably due to the post-colonial necessity and willingness of overcoming colonial stereotypes. In fact, these stereotypes had long labelled religious sub-Saharan African material culture as primitive, fetishist or a hideous cluster of curious objects. This attitude appeared to be mainly due to the difficulty of fitting these items into the socially accepted artistic canons of the civilised West.

The analysis of the displays has indicated a museum tendency in presenting the items of sub-Saharan Africa as artistic and valued pieces, but there are some problems to be faced in representing religious items. This is due to the fact that the notion of religion is very different in different societies. It is possible that in non-Western societies most of the museum items labelled as 'religious' or 'ceremonial' were not necessarily created with a specific religious purpose, but might have become such through use. To be more specific, what we call 'traditional Yorùbá religious objects' may well have been created for a functional everyday purpose and upgraded to the level of the 'religious' and 'ceremonial', on the basis of necessity. This contrasts with the notion of religion in Western societies, in which religious objects are conceived of as religious from the beginning. In addition, in Western countries, religious objects are often very artistic because they are considered special items, to be used outside the quotidian practise and context.

Based on this premise, the research has also acknowledged that theoretical social abstractions could be based upon those 'links between artefacts and identity as an intrinsic property of social existence' (Hides, 1997: 11). Therefore this study has recognized the fact that, nowadays, museums do not just keep memories nor are they limited to science and education: they link, as bridges, the past and the present of cultures and, by giving a free flow of information, they have an essential role in defining people's identity.

8.7 Implications for practice: answering the research questions.

This thesis was structured around four main questions,¹⁶³ which aimed to investigate the interpretive approach both of contemporary museum curators and of the members of the Yorùbá diaspora living in the United Kingdom, towards traditional religious Yorùbá objects displayed in museums. Therefore, before to conclude this work and in order to define the research's implications for practice, it is useful to consider how this research has answered the leading questions.

The first, the second and third research questions ('To what extent, are Western museums a neutral environment where all the religions can be presented as cultural truths? 'How do Western museums' curators approach the topic of sub-Saharan African religion in museums?' and 'Is it possible to represent a culture or only to display specific objects that mirror one aspect of that culture?') were predominantly aimed at considering the Western museum professional perspective. They were based on the acknowledgement of the fact that it is mainly through the management of their collections that museums become the symbol of a cultural heritage, common to a whole community. One of the main collections management issues is the display of those collections. In exhibiting collections, museums do not only have to deal with the most visible and practical way of exhibiting items but also with the theoretical presentation of the ideas and values of the people who produced the objects, of those who possessed them in the past and of the society in which these objects are now housed.

Indeed, once objects have been moved from their original context and relocated for centuries in a new environment (like the museum), they have unquestionably become part of the cultural heritage of the new society. This is also because of the changeable nature of the cultural heritage. An object, which initially belonged to a specific culture, can become part of the heritage of another one, through various historical processes and through the acquisition of new cultural meanings. For instance, museum ethnographic collections are the result of political campaigns and religious mission but at the same time they are part of the heritage of the

¹⁶³ See Chapter 1, 'The research questions and the structure of the thesis', p.31.

conquering society, because of the link created between the hosting culture and a specific part of its past (Pinna, 2002: 1).

Nevertheless, this cultural acquisition should not justify the hosting culture in exhibiting the hosted collections exclusively on the basis of its own criteria of classification and representation. Actually, the answer to the questions indicates an urgent need for a strong co-operation between museum curators and non-Western anthropologists. Additionally, it implies a need for an in-depth study of the cultural differences, understood not just in terms of material culture production but also in terms of the social communication codes.¹⁶⁴ The representation of a specific culture in museums should not aim only at producing the most artistic or impressive display. On the contrary, it should aim to offer a full knowledge of how the people represented were communicating with each other in ordinary, quotidian issues. If we consider the typologies of exhibition, today, these appear to be more sensitive to these issues. Displays in Western museums generally presuppose the interpretation of exhibited material culture in terms of the production of those people who have been considered as targets for the anthropological research (Lidchi, 1997). Accordingly Bloch has observed that 'the essential aims of ethnography is to produce representations of the knowledge of the people we study even if this knowledge can only be reached implicitly by observing practices and imagining their interpretations' (Bloch, 1998: 43).

Furthermore, the focus on traditional sub-Saharan African religious objects, has posed a very challenging example. Traditional sub-Saharan African religious objects were made by specific people for specific ritual purposes and to us, who are non-African, they often seem difficult to identify and decode. In conformity with traditional Africans beliefs, some objects were considered to be possessed by spirits (Freud, 1950) and to have the power of joining the human and the supernatural spheres. Very often, most of these objects were thought to have an immense, harmful power and for this reason they could only be handled (or even seen) by a few initiated individuals. Unfortunately, most of the meaning of this symbolism, as well as the circumstances surrounding the use of these objects, has been partially lost. Therefore, the other two research questions (How do Yorùbá immigrants relate

¹⁶⁴In this context 'codes of communication' means the connections made within the community through shared social assumptions (Hall, 1996: 21). See Chapter 2, 'The social characteristics of symbols', p.35.

to their traditional religious objects displayed in museums? and 'What are the stereotypes of potential Yorùbá museum visitors in relation to their religious objects?') aimed to describe the interpretation of the traditional Yorùbá religious heritage, through traditional religious objects among the members of the Yorùbá diaspora living in the United Kingdom.

From the research, it emerged that at the present time most of members of the African / Yorùbá diaspora, living in the Western society, belong to a generation that is 'hiding' its past. This attitude seems due to the fact that their local traditions have been too often misunderstood by Westerners and have been associated with the stereotypes of primitive and uncivilised. Nowadays, in Europe, sub-Saharan African religious objects belong mainly within the context of museums and galleries and it is still quite difficult to make sense of the whole. Museum and gallery professionals can only attempt to guess the meaning on the basis of descriptive, but often not objective accounts of local authors and foreign observers (Vansina, 1988).¹⁶⁵ The result of this attitude can lead to an exhibition that is too artistic (where the main focus is the artistic purpose of objects rather than the purpose for which they were created) or where only small and isolated parts of a culture are presented. In both cases, the different perception of the 'holy' that Africans have, as well as other non-Western people, are mostly neglected.

Indeed, considering that what makes every African object sacred is mainly the meaning and the power conferred to it by its users, and that some religious objects could only have been seen by certain people, in certain places, the difficulties of Western museums in representing the sacred whole are evident. It is not possible, in fact, to reproduce the atmosphere of the religious ceremony – e.g. the music, the rhythms, the prayers and the dances - to fully contextualize these objects. In museums, we can grasp only a superficial and factual knowledge, without actually feeling the real essence of this material culture (Hudson, 1991). In representing religious beliefs, it should be considered that ritual items have been detached from their original sacred context to be exhibited in a new, non-religious context, such as the museum. Therefore, the religious essence of these objects (an essence made

¹⁶⁵ Concerning the accounts of local authors and of foreign observers, it seemed more appropriate, for this context, to call them 'non objective' because they are the accounts of people who do not belong to the culture that they are studying or seeing. Therefore, their approach can only be scientific and based on the necessity of analysing more than understanding.

even more evident by the sacred environment) is lost, along with their physical detachment and displacement.

For example, by considering the Ibeji figures that are often displayed in the museum exhibitions analysed in this thesis, these little wooden figures acquire a new and totally different meaning in museums: their original cultural meaning (the representation of children's souls trapped in wood; the personification of dead children) changes in museums, where they become ethnographic objects, classified and studied for their fascinating diversity. These ethnographic items will now be at the disposal of public knowledge: they will be displayed in the section designated 'religious objects', or more broadly, in the section called 'West-Africa'; they will be accompanied by a label explaining the cult of the ancestors, with a brief information on the geographical provenance and possibly their use, but without any, or little mention of, and respect for, the real religious meaning. The whole poetic meaning and the 'pathos' associated with the creation of this kind of objects is almost neglected in favour of the new museum effect. As a result, for museum professionals the ethnographic object (religious or not) becomes an item that needs to be resolutely classified in order to be promptly identified in the displays. At the same time, for Western visitors, the same objects are rarities, often mysterious and with an evident artistic and cultural content, which needs to be preserved and displayed for the benefit of the whole community.

The intention of this thesis, however, was to take into account the direct voice of African people who see their mystic secrets at the disposal of everybody. It aimed to investigate their opinion on the effect of the museum. For African people, and specifically in this thesis for the members of the Yorùbá community living in Britain, these displayed objects are powerless. These are items that do not belong to the museum's context and that can remind Africans of a religious past (possibly voluntarily forgotten), left behind in their own country. Therefore, before questioning whether or not Western museums are representing African culture, or only a specific aspect (the religious one) of it, the thesis has broadly investigated the general concept of religion within a culture, and has analysed the way religious symbols work in a society.

From this investigation it was evident that what is common to all religions is the fact that religion belongs to the intangible heritage of a culture, because the religion is a complex set of beliefs, symbols and ritual behaviours. It should be also added that religion is something associated with the sacred and the holy. Finally religion is a kind of a code, which enables individuals to explain life's unexpected situations rationally, and helps human beings in defining themselves within their own community, by giving a sense of belonging to a specific group. Additionally, in the thesis, religious beliefs and traditional Yorùbá religious objects have been considered from a semiotic perspective. On the basis of this, it is possible to say that, within the religion set (made by the categories of beliefs, symbols and ritual behaviours), individuals choose and use the signs regarded by them as the most appropriate, to communicate between each other. In fact, people who belong to the same society are able to communicate their intangible religious heritage through the use of symbolic language. The tools of this language, the religious symbols, are materialised in some specific ritual objects, which then become a sort of 'visual speech', and museum exhibitions become a sort of narrative of people's interpretations: 'narratives talk in different ways about what is [partially] known. They are not knowledge itself' (Bloch, 1998: 110). Consequently, it is only when people do not belong to the same ethnic group and do not share the same symbolic language that they do not understand how and what can be said through objects. Especially in European museums, the re-presentation of the holy is a very challenging issue, firstly because museums are not places of multi-religious worship. Secondly, religious objects on display, like every other kind of object, contribute to the construction of the meaning of a culture and museums should be clear in their purpose: is it a culture or the ritual tools of a culture that they are presenting?

This thesis has emphasised the concept of Yorùbá ethnicity (Yorùbáness) among the members of the Yorùbá diaspora. Contemporary Yorùbáness is, thus, their own invention. As a result, Western museums that display traditional Yorùbá material aim to explain the purpose of traditional Yorùbá objects and end up giving a typical image of Yorùbá population, which does not reflect the contemporary notion of Yorùbáness. Additionally, museum displays seem to know very little of this contemporary Yorùbáness, while Yorùbá culture outside its homeland is trying to reinvent itself, taking into account Western stereotypes and reusing old traditions. This reinvention, however, is carried out that maintains, intact and protected from

the Western 'eye', the very essence of their traditional religion. Westerners have brought in their own country's non-Western objects and have presented them in museums but they have not been able to catch the inner sacred essence of the objects, because they are not in the sacred and original place. Although museums have religious and ceremonial objects they lack the context, the acknowledgement and 'realisation that this place is very special by [performing] some forms of rituals' (Paine, 2004: 12). Indeed the only aspects that museums seem to identify and express, in relation to these objects are their ethnographic and artistic ones. Moreover, since these objects do not have their religious power anymore, they 'act as the symbol [of] a community' (Paine, 2004: 26) and of its new identity. Obviously Yorùbá people cannot identify themselves with the idea of their culture that is presented in museums by Westerners.

If, as Maurizio Ferraris says, 'everything can be sacred or profane, full of meaning or perfectly senseless' (Ferraris, 1998: 196), the main concern of this study has been predominantly related to what exactly do contemporary museums in Britain want to make of traditional Yorùbá religious objects. Actually, it is impossible to transmit the real meaning and feelings related to these objects, especially to those of a non-Western culture. However, on the basis of what we can learn and of what we can present, it would be more appropriate to let the people who possessed and used these objects speak and to listen to their voices. In order to make proper use of the acquired heritage (if it is possible to speak of a proper use), museum professionals should discover the mystic secrets behind these sacred things, in terms of a broader knowledge of the religious language and of religious behaviour.

8.8. Recommendations for future study.

Donald Preziosi has characteristically described the process of museum interpretation. Indeed, he has explained how people (non-Western and Western, African or European) might feel when their cultural objects are on display: 'You are standing in the middle of a small room. The wall ahead of you is all mirror. That behind you is also mirrored. Where you are standing, is where the object in a museum is located; where your reflections are, is where you, as a subject, as a

museum user, are. Once outside the museum, all this is reversed' (Preziosi, 2004: 71).

This research has been only an initial effort in presenting, understanding and interpreting the way traditional Yorùbá religious material culture is defined and perceived both by Yorùbá people and by museum professionals at the present time here in Britain. The strength of this research has been the intention to decode the symbols and the meanings behind a shared heritage. It has sought the identification of a common language, between two very different communities (Yorùbá immigrants and museum professionals) that 'meet' ideally in the museum context. The research has highlighted the meaning of traditional Yorùbá religious objects for Yorùbá people, who have converted to a new religion (Christianity or Islam) and have now moved to another country and it has declared a sort of mistrust and rejection for a Westernised and stereotyped aspect of their original religious traditions. In addition, from the research it has been evident that Yorùbá immigrants still nourish mistrust for the museum, as colonial institutions, because of the colonial past and because of the Western idea itself of the display. Indeed, in the opinion of Yorùbá immigrants, museums are conceived more as 'static, monolithic institution[s] at the centre of the power' (Witcomb, 2003: 89) than open and interactive spaces for debate and cultural exchange. Therefore, the thesis highlighted the fact that it is not Yorùbá identity or traditional Yorùbá religious objects that are present in museum, but what museum professionals and Western visitors need and want to be displayed. As a consequence, it just so happens that the 'interests of the community should coincide with those of government' (Witcomb, 2003: 85), rather than the opposite.

In this way, the material culture of the 'other' has been elevated to a different level and understanding from the past, because an artistic and equally beautiful value has been acknowledged, as with any other kind of Western art. This public artistic acknowledgment, however, of the traditional non-Western religious objects implies a flattened representation of the typology and provenance of the items that have become clustered under the label 'Africa'. In addition, museum representations obviously seem very much influenced by the internal politics and personal interests of the museum professionals who are in charge of the collection. As a consequence, 'these representations [...] like the museum that houses them do not exist in a sanctified space removed from political processes' (Riegel, 1999: 83).

To conclude, it is suggested that in this challenging and complex scenario, a further and more extensive examination of contemporary Yorùbá thought is needed. This examination should include a larger number of members of the Yorùbá diaspora as participants: however, this would imply a longer-term project than a Ph.D. research. Additionally, this research would point to a broader investigation of the nature of museum activities involving local Yorùbá communities as well as a deeper study of African museum professional perspectives towards traditional religious African objects.

Appendices and Transcriptions

Appendices

Appendix I. The consent form.

I Anna Catalani, PhD student at the Department of Museum Studies (University of Leicester) am asking from.....the permission of using the data collected during this interview/focus group (held on the) for the proposal of my academic research. The participation of Mr/Mrs..... in the research is voluntary and the use of the name or of the pseudonymous of the participant will depend on the participant his/herself.

Signature of the researcher

.....

I give the permission to Anna Catalani, PhD student at the Department of Museum Studies (University of Leicester), to use the data collected during this interview/focus group (held on the) for the proposal of her academic research. I hereby testify that my participation in this research is voluntary and I authorise Anna Catalani to use my name/my pseudonymous.

Signature of the participant

.....

Appendix II. The Cloze procedure.

The Cloze Procedure was applied to all the texts of the panels of the temporary exhibition 'Objects of religion: Yorùbá beliefs on display'. A minimum sample of five individuals took part in the text.

The Cloze Procedure is useful in order to know how much readers understand a text. The Cloze Procedure implies:

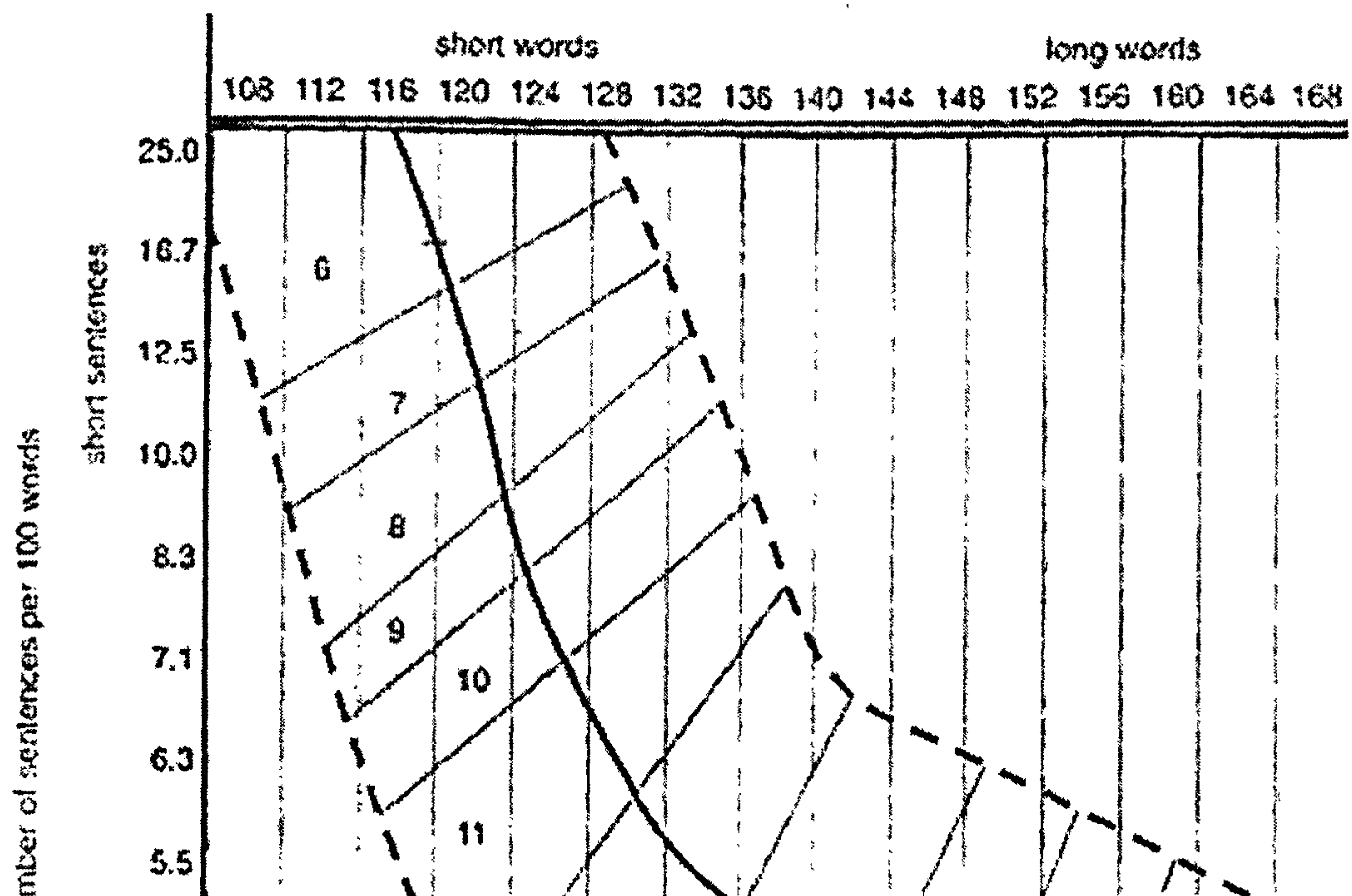
- Select a passage of 250 words (or less);
- Every 5th word of the passage should be replaced by an equal-seized blank space (this should not be applied to the word starting a paragraph);
- The first and last sentence should be left intact;
- Ask to participants to guess the missing words;
- An answer is correct only if the participant has guessed exactly the same word as in the original piece;
- Calculate the score as percentage and plot it in the grid;

Comprehension Level	Frustration	Instructional	Independent
Cloze Score	0.....	40.....	60.....100

Appendix III. The Fry test.

The Fry test measures the readability of a text. According to the Fry test, it is necessary to:

- Select a 100 word piece. Count exactly 100 words (omit headings);
- Count the number of sentences in the 100 words passage, estimating the fractional length of the last sentence to the nearest 1/10; for instance, if the 100th word is 5 words into a 15 words sentence, the fraction of the sentence is 5/15 or 1/3;
- Count the total number of syllables;
- Insert the scores in the graphic to see the readability level.



Appendix IV. The Ekarv method.

Margareta Ekarv, a Swedish writer, developed a method to write easy-to-read exhibition texts. The main principles of the Ekarv method include:

- The use of simple language for complex concepts;
- The use of spoken word sequence;
- One main concept per line and possibly, the end of the line should coincide with the end of the sentence;
- Each line should count around 45 letters and the text divided into short paragraphs of four/five line each;
- The use of the active form of the verb;
- If possible, avoid subordinate phrases and adverbs;
- The text should be aligned and not justified;
- The text should be divided in three main chunks of text;

Appendix V. List of questions for the researcher.

Layout

1. Analyse the flow of visitors, on the basis of the map of the exhibition space;
2. Which colours are used for the exhibition space and the displays themselves?
3. Which kind of light (natural light provided through windows or skylights or artificial lighting. Remember that the top-lighting strikes vertically usually from a skylight or roof-light are the ones recommended);
4. Shelves for the objects: how are the objects presented in the displays?
5. Conservation issues;
6. What is the style of the collection and of the whole exhibition: permanent or temporary, static or dynamic, educational?
7. Which are the themes and topics of the exhibition? How the themes related to each other? What is the storyline of the exhibition? What the core ideas of it? Which is the narrative voice?
8. Analysis of labels: are they easy to read? About the content: is it clear the distinction between religion and belief? Are they enough close to the objects? Are inserted as well the original names?
9. Media in the exhibition room: yes/no and which ones.

Contents of the displays in relation to Yorùbá/African traditional religion and culture

1. Does the exhibition give some information about African culture and African religion? And About Yorùbá culture and religion?
2. Is somehow the general concept of religion explained? And the one of traditional African religion?
3. Is African religion presented as part of the cultural world heritage?
4. Is there any reference to the history of the collection (how it became part of the museum display)?
5. Is there any distinction between Yorùbá culture or religion before and after the colonial time?
6. Is there any information or explanation about Yorùbá /African traditional myths, symbolism or Ichnography?
7. Does it appear that the Yorùbá or African view is presented? If yes, how?

8. How many and which Yorùbá religious objects are on display?
9. Are there any references to the meaning of religious practices, the role of the objects, the location and time?
10. How are the objects arranged in the displays: geography, time, typology, and purpose?
11. Have the objects been put in a contemporary context? (i.e. in relation to the same kind of contemporary objects?)
12. Are the objects displayed/ considered as artefacts, symbols, or proofs?
13. Does the exhibition have a static approach? Does it freeze the moment?
14. Or does it have a dynamic approach? (History as linear approach).
15. Does it seem that visitors should have a prior knowledge of the topic? If yes: which level?
16. Which seems to be the target audience for this exhibition area?
17. Are visitors stimulated enough?
18. Are there any feedback forms?
19. Is there any traditional music in the background?

Appendix VI. List of questions for the interviews with museum professionals.

NAME:

EDUCATION:

NATIONALITY:

LOCATION:

DATE:

OCCUPATION:

1. Which are your duties in the museum in relation to the ethnographic exhibition/gallery.
2. How long have you been in charge of the ethnographic collection/display?
3. According to you what is the main purpose of the exhibition/gallery/displays?
4. How many Yorùbá objects are on display?
5. Which kind of objects are they (typology)?
6. How did they become part of the collection?
7. Which criteria have you used for the display of these objects? (were they chosen because outstanding samples, most representative, or the displays have been based on systematic representation?)
8. Which kind of research has been carried out for this display? (Thematic or object based?)
9. Which kind of research was carried out concerning Yorùbá traditional religion?
10. Which has been your approach in displaying such objects?
11. Could you please tell me what is your view on displaying traditional African/Yorùbá religious objects in a non sacred environment as the museum?
12. Were any Africans involved in the research or the setting of the display?
13. Did you have any feedback/responses/ suggestions or complains from the African community concerning the display or a specific object? If yes, why?
14. Do you have any activities to involve directly the African community (i.e. hands-on activities, drama, story telling? If yes, which kind of response did you get?
15. Do you have a complete catalogue entry for the objects that visitors can use?
16. Why there are/not media in the gallery/displays?

Appendix VII. List of questions for the interviews with Yorùbá people.

1. What does it mean to you to be Yorùbá?
2. Which myths, traditional stories could you recall about the origins of the Yorùbá group?
3. What is your definition of religion?
4. I would like to know more about traditional Yorùbá religion: what is it?
5. How would you define a religious object?
6. How would you define a sacred object?
7. What is an amulet?
8. What do you think/know of this object (Fig)?
9. Which kind of memories or stories can you recall in relation to it?
10. What does it symbolise to you?
11. Have you ever been in a museum, which displayed African/Yorùbá objects? if yes, where? If not, what were your reasons to not go?
12. What do you think museums can communicate to visitors through the display of traditional Yorùbá objects?
13. What do you think Westerners can understand of such objects?
14. How would you improve museum displays?

Appendix VIII. Form to be filled during each focus group and interview.

Discussion Group No./ Interview

Location:

Date:

Name	Age or Age range	Gender (M/F)	Nationality	Location	Education	Religion (does not apply to interviews with museum professionals)

Appendix IX. List of questions for the focus groups with Yorùbá people.

- Welcome the participants and introduction of the researcher;
- Brief reminder of the topic of the focus group; of the purpose of the research; of the use of the data gathered from the focus group;
- Guidelines: there are not wrong answers, only different points of views; the focus group will be tape recorded, so please one person per time in speaking; please, if it is possible, turn off your mobile phones;

Questions:

1. What does it mean to you to be Yorùbá?
2. Which myths, traditional stories could you recall about the origins of the Yorùbá group?
3. What is your definition of religion?
4. I would like to know more about traditional Yorùbá religion: what is it?
5. How would you define a religious object?
6. How would you define a sacred object?
7. What is an amulet?
8. What do you think/know of this object (Fig)?
9. Which kind of memories or stories can you recall in relation to it?
10. What does it symbolise to you?
11. Have you ever been in a museum, which displayed African/Yorùbá objects? if yes, where? If not, what were your reasons to not go?
12. What do you think museums can communicate to visitors through the display of traditional Yorùbá objects?
13. What do you think Westerners can understand of such objects?
14. How would you improve museum displays?

Summary of the main points of the discussion.

Appendix X. List of the figures shown during the focus groups and interviews with Yorùbá people

- Carved calabash (lid);
- Ceremonial ;
- Crested crane amulet ;
- Decorated calabash representing the cosmos ;
- Diviner's sandals and bag ;
- Ifa bowl;
- Knotted cowry shells ;
- Leather bottle ;
- Muslim Amulet;
- Painted Wooden Figure;
- Walking stick ;
- Wooden Figure ;

Appendix XI. List of the objects for the temporary exhibition 'Objects of religion: Yorùbá beliefs displayed'.

1. Baboon carrying a duck;
2. Crested Crane Amulet;
3. Minor Yorùbá Deity;
4. Gourd with drawings;
5. Gèlèdé mask;
6. Cowry shells;
7. Kola nuts;
8. Leather bottle with crystals;
9. Bowl in wood, painted and carved;
10. Bowl in wood, painted and carved with female figure;
11. Sandals of the Babaláwo;
12. Bag of the Babaláwo;
13. Ceremonial Stool;
14. Ceremonial Spoon;

Transcriptions

Interviews and focus groups with Yorùbá people

Interview with Y1

Interview with Y1

Nottingham, 9/9/03

R: Could you please tell me your name and where are you from, please?

Y1: My name is Y1, I am a journalist from Nigeria and I am a Yorùbá man from the South West of Nigeria.

R: How did you come to know about the exhibition?

Y1: well I came to know about the exhibition, I was informed of your project by Moji, who is in charge of AFRIK, an international organisation; since she has been involved in African projects, she actually talked to me about you, I am a journalist, and told me to ask you or two things about that program; and later I was introduced to Suella, that is the curator of the Nottingham Museum where actually I had the opportunity to see you your exhibition, that was the Yorùbá exhibition in Nottingham Museum, the 1st of June 2003. I had an opportunity of having a look at your project and some of the objects displayed on the Yorùbá traditional religion and I used the opportunity to do an interview to you and to introduce a piece in the program on that particular project, because in line with it the focus on the direction of *The voice of Nigeria*, this is the organisation I work for, back home in Nigeria.

R: I am sorry, what is the name again of this organisation?

Y1: The voice of Nigeria, the Nigerian national broadcasting station.

R: What was your impression of the exhibition?

Y1: well, the exhibition, honestly, is, was quite interesting, and at first I was actually shocked to see some of those objects, you know, were presented in the exhibition because I was not thinking I could come across to such area of religion of the African culture and those objects that are very, very meaningful to the Yorùbá traditional beliefs. Most of the objects I saw there were quite, you know, traditional of those traditional beliefs at home: Ifa divination, gourds, cowry shells, you know, these are parts of past core, personal values of Yorùbá traditional religion back home in Nigeria.

R: What do you think was the main message of the exhibition?

Y1: well the main message of that exhibition was to let people, here in UK, in England to know that for over the ages, there have been a sort of traditional values cherished by Yorùbá people of south west of Nigeria and then to let them know that those objects are not just in the exhibition: they represent part of the past of traditional Yorùbá beliefs of their religion. Ifa has a religion in Yorùbáland, as a god of divinity and the use of cowry shell is very, very appreciated back home in Nigeria. A part from being a means of exchange, you know, on those days, it was one way which we used a part from Ifa divination, back home. And the gourd itself is used for so many things. A part from that we used it to drink water, we used it to drink palm wine, we usually used the gourd, you know, to put in some concoctions which we had at home, because there are various sizes of gourds, that you can use for a particular focus, so it is quite a reflection of the culture of the Yorùbás. A reflection of the values in

which the Yorùbá people started to make change for a while, because Yorúbás are a distinct ethnic group in south west Nigeria, represent almost 25 million people all over the world, Yorùbá people who are in Brazil, Yorúbás who are in Jamaica, Yorúbás who are in Ecuador, Yorùbá people are scattered all over the world and it is just a reminder, for some of them who are here, and see these objects, it is a reminder of the traditional beliefs back home in Nigeria.

R: what do you think then of the representation of religion in museums? Which was your perspective when were you looking at these objects?

Y1: well my personal perspective about those objects is that our traditional religion can be more appreciated here in the West, despite the fact that we have the most dominant religions in the world, Islam and Christianity, no matter the fact that there are people who believe in them, traditional African religion is still part of the cultural heritage of the entire world, you know, it gives the impression that our culture, our religion are really appreciated. An interesting aspect of that exhibition is the fact that there is music, music of Ogundi, a traditional drama in Nigeria, parts of Nigeria, you know, echoes in the background telling you the purpose and the meaning of those objects now on display, you know, and the fact that it gives me some information about those objects, is quite revealing and quite interesting, a part the fact that they are presented, and the fact that you can listen to the Ogundi music in the background, it gives me a sense of joy, a sense of appreciation of Yorùbá culture.

R: so, when you were looking at these objects in the exhibition, how were you looking at them, I mean, from the perspective of the journalist, of the believer or of the visitor? How did you related to these objects?

Y1: obviously I looked at it from various perspectives. One thing, the Yorùbá person: I am quite happy to see some of these objects on display; it gives me a good reflection of the African traditional religion. Right! Secondly, as a journalist there is a sort of curiosity for me to know more: how did they come there? For how long have they been here? Are they part of the objects that were stolen from our museums back in Nigeria? That's is a sort of curiosity of the journalist but then most important is the fact that here you are seeing some of these objects on display, the meaning which is useful, from which perspective people here can really appreciate African culture and tradition, that's the meaning of the exhibition. And so, if I look at it as a Yorùbá person, I look at it as journalist, I look at it as Nigerian, at something here hiding in East Midland, Nottingham, you know what I mean, is quite amazing.

R: and what do you think of the representation of African religion or religious objects in Western museums?

The displays are quite interesting and quite important and actually it tells you that people give value to traditional African religion and it reinforces, you know, the stories that it has been going on, on African religion, over the years, now, despite the fact that there are dominant religions, Islam and Christianity, all over the world. Traditional religion is something that you cannot really classify, you cannot overlook traditional religion, because it is part of an entire culture and society. Yorùbá people, despite the fact that they are Muslim or Christian, they believe that traditional religion, traditional beliefs must be respected, above all. So, even I am a Muslim now, I still know that my people back home in Ile Ife practise, you know, a kind of religion, I do not have any choice, they are doing it, I might be there but I am not participating in it, but the sense of joy, the excitement, the Egun festival, for example, is quite popular in Yorùbáland, it is a religion on its own: Ifa divination is a religion on its own, it is used for so many things, they call spell, tell you your fortune, what is going to happen to you the next day, you know; so even if I am a Muslim, some aspects of that have been borrowed by Islam; for example now, we have a group of Muslims that use Ifa divination to try to know, to tell the fortune, and despite the fact that have Ifa origins, in Egypt there are a lot of stories on specific aspects of Ifa divination, Islam borrowed quite a lot from African traditional religion, Ifa religion on its own, so for some of us, in South West Yorùbáland, we

believe that Islam itself and traditional religion, are they together. So, if we are looking at it from different perspective: we are here, we like these things, so lets go along with it; so its quite logic, and the objects that are on display here, there are people who can really appreciate that.

R: Could you give me on the basis of your own experience and religion, a definition of religion and of religious objects?

Y1: Well, religion is, to define religion it depends on the individual perception of religion, on the individual idea, how you are going to define it. For some people religion is a sort of joy, a sort of inner peace; for some people religion is just part of life, which is reflected in your character, which is reflected in your behaviour; people reflected in their dressing! So, it depends on you as a person and what you believe in. So, those objects that are represented at the Nottingham museum and that reflect African traditional religion, part of them can be explained, and can be seen in Islam, you know, the divination, Ifa divination, because there are divination bowls and Muslims do often use gourds, to do some of these things, and I told you, the gourds can be used for different things, we call *agbi* in Yorùbáland, *agbi*: something you can you to throw water, something you can use to, a container, you know, so in Yorùbáland, they use the container to put so many concoctions into to the gourd and you can hang the gourd in house, for example, if you look at that gourd (*he is indicating me a gourd hanged in the shop*), that gourd it has been used not only as an ornament for religion, right, but at the same time it has been used for artistic purpose. You can just hang it in you house and you have the feeling that it is respected. But in religion it has been used for different purposes entirely and people in Yorùbáland people use gourds to drink palm wine, you use to drink fresh palm wine, you use the gourd, *agbi*, they use the gourd for different purposes.

R: which do you think is the religious purpose, sacredness of the objects displayed?

Y1: Yea, sacredness, this is the word! Sacredness is the word! Because most of these things you don't just hang around in your room, for example, a gourd or *agbi* where do you keep it? You keep it somewhere that is safe, because if by accident, you just happen to robbed, they will break! this is for the gourd. And if it has been hanged somewhere because there are some concoctions there, it must not just be there, it must have a purpose to be there; at the same time, Ifa divination, the divination gourd, represents an aspect of Ifa traditional religion. Divination too represents an aspect of Islamic beliefs, in fortune telling. Do you know what am I am saying now? Cowry shells represent a number of things: cowry shells can be hanged, cowry shells can carried like necklaces, represent your deep believe in that religion; cowry shells can be used as a medium of exchange. Do you get it now? So, in other way, some of these objects serve the purpose of god, the purpose of religion, religious purposes, they serve the purpose of something they can represent aesthetics in some homes, so that depends on they way you are looking at it.

R: What do you think this kind of objects can tell us in a museum?

Y1: What they can tell is that basically that these are religious objects, these are used for African traditional religion and most importantly, Yorùbá traditional beliefs and religion: Ogun, Obatala; there are many beliefs of Yorùbás, anyway, and represent that aspect. In the western part of the world, here, a part of this African shop, where you can a have a gourd hanged as a symbol of aesthetics, you know, back home in Nigeria, the gourds have been used, they have been carved, in various forms, hanged in the house, for aesthetic too, but most importantly the religious aspect, the religious connotation of the object is far more important than the aesthetic value.

R: let me get this right: can you find a religious object in a shop like this in Nigeria?

Y1: Yes, yea, shops like this one, like Moji's shop, the African shop here, back home in Nigeria that represent an aspect of religion; as I told you. If you go in some places in Yorùbáland, Ile Ife, for example, is the centre of African culture, is the centre of Yorùbá civilization, objects of this nature are hanged specifically in some specific areas, and give the impression as well of what we believe in; in some area in Lagos, people will use it as an aesthetic ornament: people can buy it and just hang it in the house, just for the fun of it, you know. Gourds, in the traditional Yorùbá area, are used to drink, they are used for drinking to drink concoctions, concoctions that you put together for certain uses, you can use to drink palm wine, you can use to drink water, so it depends on the use you think you can make of these objects, for. But if you are using it for traditional Yorùbá beliefs, you must not use it just anyhow; there is a purpose a way in which you can use those objects, which serve the purpose of that African belief.

R: thank you. The final question now: if you were directly involved with the setting of an exhibition of traditional Yorùbá objects, what would you never out on display and why?

Y1: Things that I can never display are amulets, I would not display anyhow. The amulet is something that we call *African insurance*, we call. That amulet is used against evil things, it protects you against attacks, you know. So you cannot display amulets anywhere, just like in a museum; you cannot display a gourd that has been filled with different concoctions, for a particular purpose, you cannot display it, but display an ordinary gourd, you can display a carved gourd, you can display that. You can display divination, you can display Ifa divination, you can display the Muslim divination but what you cannot display is this specific belief, people had in that particular object that cannot be seen. Right? So those are the things that you can never display. People use these objects in different part of the world, for different purposes, so you will find out that some of these objects on display are a symbol that reminds us of that African traditional culture, of the Yorùbá traditional belief, it is just a reminder for some of us. But this symbol does not mean that it can sting or harm the human existence.

R: sorry, what's your religion?

Y1: I am a Muslim, eh, I told you, my fathers is a Muslim, I am Muslim, my entire family is Muslim, but this does not mean that they do not believe in traditional believe itself, as I said. My family believe in Islam, but I can tell you that the other part of my extended family, they have a different religion. There if free for them to do it, well, I will not contribute, but if I am invited, I will go there, right, but this does not mean that this aspect of my culture, I don't have respect for it. I do have respect for it and the person, but I do not do it; and I am not so sceptic in the way is used, but even if they are using it, fine, they can do that!

R: but do you think that the amulets can really work?

Y1: They do! They do work! People who believe in it, they can use in various form, they can use to harm anyone they like; they can use it positively, they can use it negatively, right. That's why we believe that is the twist: those who believe in it, know that definitely it will work. Some of these objects as I have said, have attached certain names: Obatala, Obatola; so you have names called Obatola, that happen to be related to that kind of Obatola worshipping. Ifatola: I-fa-to-la: 'that believe in Ifa divination'. Do you get it now? So different, certain names in Yorùbáland have different meanings, and believe in those objects and traditional African religion, but some of us, because of the Western civilisation, we either dropped that name or you change to different names, you know. If you happen to be a very prominent person, say you are a preacher or a reverend, you must try to hide that name or you may try to change it. Back in Nigeria, there is a guy, his name is Alaba Ogun Jupibe: now as a Christian, born again he now changed meaning. Do you get what I am saying now?! So it shows that his father believed in Ogun worshipping, so Olua, meaning that God, means God : believe Ifa is a god, Shango is a god, Obatala is a god, so those names were attached with it, for some of us today we believe in a different God, you don't want to attack

more importance. So if you see Yorùbá names now, if you see my name, Y1, the first name, the middle name, the first name is the name that shows that I am Muslim, it means 'the shadow of God'; Olarare means, is an aspect of Yorùbá culture, names, with a particular importance, attached to the middle names; Ifatola, you know, I am using Ifa because is more prominent in the objects for the work you are doing. There are various names in Yorùbá culture that have different meanings related to African traditional religion.

R: so do you think it would be better to know the Yorùbá names in order to understand the traditional religion?

Y1: Yea, obviously it is, it will help. There is a particular book here, I told you about, about Yorùbá names and meanings. As a matter of fact, if somebody, in our culture, if somebody has a certain name...

R: Ok Y1, thank you very much, that's it.

Y1: I hope you will get along with for you to really understand African culture, appreciate Yorùbá traditional beliefs; part of traditional religion is to show love and peace wherever we are; if we do divination for a new born baby, we are not doing negatively; people who have problems, Ifa Etutu 'solution to a particular problem that the new born is going to face in the life'. So you can see that belief in that particular religion helps you in a long way, in their entire life. That is the peace of Yorùbá traditional religion.

R: I think I am understanding it a bit more. Thank you very much.

Y1: ok, my pleasure.

Interview with Y2

Interview with Y2

Leicester, 04/01/04

R: Could you please tell me your name and where are you from?

Y2: Y2, I am from Nigeria.

R: And, how old are you?

Y2: I am 26.

R: Could you be more specific: from Nigeria, but do you belong to a specific group?

Y2: I am a Yorùbá by tribe.

R: Could you please tell me what does it mean for you to be Yorùbá?

Y2: It is actually a great thing to be Yorùbá, something great. It is something to be proud of, because Yorùbá is a rich culture; it is all over the world, so I think it is a great thing to be Yorùbá.

R: Based on your personal memories, could please tell me any traditional stories, memories related to Yorùbá culture?

Y2: Any stories? Ok, there is one story I can remember and it is how human beings... there is one story about Yorùbá I can remember, there is one story about the origin of Yorùbá. I was told that Yorùbá people actually originated from Mecca; there are so many stories: they originated from Mecca and then migrated to somewhere called Ife. Ife is a town in Nigeria. So, from there they spread, I mean, across all Yorùbáland and that the father of Yorùbás is Oduduwa. Oduduwa is the father of all Yorùbás and he was, he actually settled down in Ife; he settled down in Ife and he had several children. He had so many children and those they were kings. One of these children was Alafi, he was the king of Y2; there was another one who was the king of Abekuta. There are many of them, like that... So, Yorùbá people, so actually they spread across Nigeria from Ife, according to the story that I told you, but there are so many other stories but I cannot remember.

R: Could you give me your personal definition of religion?

Y2: My personal definition of religion. Actually you can define religion as a medium of communication with God, as a medium of getting to know God. Yea, that is my personal definition of religion.

R: And which do you think is the difference between religion and religious beliefs?

Y2: Actually, it is very difficult to draw a line between religion and any religious beliefs, because the two are embedded together. But what I can say is that belief is actually under religion because each religion has its own beliefs. Christians beliefs is different from Muslim beliefs, so religious beliefs are basically under religion, is a kind of subset, that is under religion, and you find beliefs under religion... Every religion has its own beliefs.

R: What about traditional Yorùbá religion?

Y2: Alright, there are some many different religions in Yorùbáland, so many of them. There is one that is called Ogun. Ogun is regarded as the god of Iron and Ogun is worshiped by those who use iron, by the hunters, by the farmers, because they use iron. And their belief is that if they worship him, they will be successful in their professions.

R: What is your religion?

Y2: My religion is Christianity, I am a Pentecostal.

R: how is your relation towards traditional Yorùbá religion, what do you think of it?

Y2: I do not believe it at all in traditional religion.

R: Could you give me a definition of traditional religious objects?

Y2: Any traditional religious objects; ok, one of them is iron, the metal. And there some people who worship it. There is a river in Yorùbáland, that river is called river Osun, spelt o-s-u-n. So, those people, their object of religion is water they actually worship the river and they actually believe that if they worship the river, the river will give them children.

R: Which do you think there is the difference between a religious object, a sacred object and an amulet?

Y2: sacred objects; well there is no difference because any religious object is a sacred object, it's actually [inaudible] sacred objects and religious objects are the same thing.

R: And what about the amulet?

Y2: the amulet is also sacred.

R: which do you think is the difference between an amulet and a religious object?

Y2: I do not think there is one. I really do not think so.

R: Now, if you could have a look at these photographs could you tell me anything you know about them? any stories, any personal memories, songs...

Y2: Actually they all look strange to me, they really look strange to me because I don't really have any significance, I do not really have any idea, so much idea about these objects. I was born in a Christian family so I do not really know much about these objects. But, what I can say. Like this object (*the traditionalist figure*) some people worship it and their belief is that by worshipping this object they can actually to get access to whatever they want: they get protection, they get position, and they can solve their problems by actually worshipping this woody object. I don't have a good traditional background because I don't practise traditional religion.

R: Is anybody in your family who practises traditional religion?

Y2: No, we don't. So I cannot say too much about these objects, but what I can say is that, eh, they actually are used by people as a way of approaching God, as a medium of getting anything they want from God.

R: Have you ever visited an African exhibition, either in Nigeria or here in UK?

Y2: Not really, not really... I just have been in the museum of Natural Science and History in Oxford and I was there and over there I saw some objects from some objects from Nigeria. I saw Benin bronzes. Actually I have the photographs; I took some photographs of the Benin bronzes. I saw Benin bronzes and other objects brought from Nigeria, so I was very surprised when I saw them.

R: And what did do think when you saw them displayed?

Y2: of those objects? Those objects make people to get aware of the cultural heritage of the Yorùbás. It's a way of promoting our culture to the outside world.

R: what do you think Yorùbá traditional religious objects can tell to visitors, both Yorùbá and non-Yorùbá?

Y2: They can actually tell people that Yorùbá people are very religious people and they value their religion so much.

R: What do you think Westerners can understand of those objects?

Y2: What Westerners can understand of those objects is actually that Yorùbás have got a very rich religion and beliefs, very rich religious objects and are very committed to their religion and that some of the Yorùbás will find very very difficult to let go their religion for the Western religion, they will find very difficult to lose their religion In order to accept western religions.

R: what do you think of the information provided by the museum you went and concerning Yorùbá objects?

Y2: They were actually very accurate, to a very reasonably extent. They are actually accurate, it is quite accurate, quite informative, it carries a lot of information. A lot of those objects they actually represent...

R: What do these objects represent to you, since you are Christian and you do not practise the traditional religion?

Y2: to me... I am trying to stay in a very neutral ground. Even if I am Christian, I can say something about our traditional religion, even if I don't believe in it. But it is part of our culture and I appreciate very much every aspect of our culture.

R: going back for a moment to the objects: how these objects can be powerful?

Y2: it depends on what you mean by power [inaudible] is it power of blow Iraq, which kind of power?

R: how can these objects help people to get what they want by using them?

Y2: from my personal point of view, to me as a person, they are not effective but for the people who are using them, they see them as very powerful, they can get what they want but I as a person, I don't think that these are powerful objects. I would not go for it. And my religion does not allow me as a Christian.

R: If you were a curator and you had to organise an exhibition with religious Yorùbá objects, what would you never put on display?

Y2: what I would never put on display.... I would never display religious objects.

R: But if the exhibition was about Yorùbá traditional religious objects?

Y2: then, I would not go for it.

R: could you explain me your reasons for not go to far?

Y2: because I don't practise traditional religion, so I am not the person, I mean, I am not the right person to do it.

R: what about then the western curators who display these objects?

Y2: ok, the western curators that display these objects are trying to promote the cultural heritage of the Yorùbás. But as a person I would not do it.

R: do you have any ideas or suggestions to improve the displays of traditional religious Yorùbá objects?

Y2: right, how do I put it... ok, actually I think that they are doing a good job at the moment. They could buy and add more objects from Africa, so that they can have wider exhibitions and collections of these objects, for people who are interested in seeing these objects.

R: ok, that's it. Thank you very much.

Y2: You are welcome, thank you too.

Interview with Y3

Interview with Y3

Leicester, 12/12/03

R: Can you tell me your name, please, your age and nationality?

Y3: Y3 is my name, from Nigerian parents and I am 25 years old.

R: Could you please tell me what does it mean for you to be Yorùbá and to be part of Yorùbá culture?

Y3: it depends on the area where you come from. Yorùbás generally have a specific culture which is common among to all Yorùbáland, no matter, because Yorùbá have different, different, different, different languages that still Yorùbá. So, all Yorùbás in general we have a common culture, a common way of doing traditional things.

R: do you remember any traditional story related to the Yorùbá culture?

Y3: humm, in Nigeria the educational context, we learn from the primary school. No way, there is no Yorùbá that will never be trained or who will never pass through the history of Yorùbás: how Yorùbás exist, how they believe in objects and what events have happened in the past.

R: so, what did you learn about the creation of Yorùbás?

Y3: t is a very long story, anyway, it a very long story. That's why I say the institution will be able to explain something about Yorùbá, activities, culture, how they come to exist, how they migrate from a place to another, how they got under Yorùbá language and under Yorùbáland; Yorùbá is a large community and under this community is like from they are from the descendants, called Odudua; Odudua had children and all his children he had, have spread to become in the world to become the heads, like the kings, the chiefs...

R: ok. Do you know any songs related to the myth of the creation?

Y3: Humm, songs; there are different songs; Songs are related to events, you get what I mean? When you talk of song, that was related to the creation of Yorùbá, there was, nobody has said that a specific song, but the song does a road along the way, depends on the event that occur us', you know, that originates. You know what I mean? Nobody has said, In the establishment of the Yorùbá kingdom that may be there is a specific song. Not, but as the generation continues, the events that occur insinuate a song of a specific type, a specific situation.

R: And can toy remember any song related to a specific event?

Y3: Like, when there is a marriage event in Yorùbáland, you know, they use to be some songs that used to be like that. A woman who is going to the husband house, and she is crying, why she is crying; then the mother starts to pray now: that's ok, you are going to the husband's house, it is going to be peaceful, you will be a mother of children, you know, different different.

R: Would you mind to sing it a bit?

Y3: No (*he sung*), that is, the interpretation is: 'What are you doing here, while we are gathering? we are giving our daughter in marriage to someone. And this daughter we are

giving out, has around her waist a lot of beads, not bees, the insects, it's like, it is a sort of culture that is part of the dressing, more elegant because makes the shape of the woman to look more attractive.

R: At this point, Y3, I would like to have your personal definition of Yorùbá religion.

Y3: no, no Yorùbá religion. Yorùbá is an ethnic group, Yorùbá is an ethl..., ethnic group. It's like: where you come from, you also have different ethnic groups there; this is the Y3e thing in every country. So Yorùbá is an ethnic group, Ibo is an ethnic group. But when we are talking about Yorùbá, Yorùbá is not a religion.

R: And what is it?

Y3: Humm, it is not a religion. It is like when they say America; They are talking about America, Canada, this, this, this. When you get there, you discover that even in Canada there are Buddhism, Christians, Muslim, those are religions. But North America, West Indies, this, this, these those are ethnics. Yeah! But Yorùbá is an ethnic group name. When you talk of religion, it might be spiritual [inaudible] When I say spiritual, either being Christians, either being Muslims, either being Buddhism either being [inaudible] there are some ancestor's, sort of worshipping; Shango worshipping [inaudible] They call it the god of thunder, Ayon worshiper, you know; there are different kinds of fetishes, it depends on the individual's moral, where we belong to, and it not everybody.

R: Would you speak then of Yorùbá beliefs? Would it be more appropriate?

Y3: Yorùbá [inaudible] God the creator, or superior, is like in Indians; I am just trying to set out. Do you think is recording?

R: Yes, it is going to record it.

Y3: It is like the Indians: they have their own gods, they don't eat cow, they regard cow as a god; we eat cows. You see there is a difference in that. But, we, when we talk of a sort of oracle we believe in, as in intermediary, before the Christianity comes, it is called Ifa oracle. They will through on the ground; it has a spiritual incantation you have to say before comprehensive with the spirits. To find out whatever you want to find out. May be like, I decide I want to take you as a wife, but I cannot take you as a wife and I go to my parents but I don't know if they will accept you. So, in Yorùbá context, the oracle can help. And I go to those who are in charge: 'O so, so, so that's why, I can see, troubles';¹ if there are some troubles, they can tell you sacrifice! But what sort of sacrifices? Those sacrifice do not involve women's blood but they have to present some fruits, some cooked fruits and you have to present to the god, before the god has to appease the god that you want to pose the problem. Yorùbás respect each others, it is not like every other culture. So, let's say we get married and in Yorùbáland, for instance, we just know each other, so you have a different culture, I have a different culture but we will respect each other because everything, as I say, we respect everything in Yorùbáland. So, in the area of respect, this is how we enjoy the consultation of the Ifa oracle, Shango, whatever, whatever, and we believe in, because there are a lot; do you understand that? And under the tradition of the Yorùbás is the man that has to take every responsibility of the woman.

¹ Y3 performed a sort of response of the oracle who has been informed about a problem.

R: Could you please raise a bit your voice? So, you would not speak of a Yorùbá religion but of Yorùbá beliefs or worshipping. But what about the object used for religious purposes: would define them as religious?

Y3: Yes, yes. I told you once, already. You know I told you, it is like the *scalet*², that it what they consult, but, you know, before you can do anything of sort, they have been spirits that have been invoked in these things; some they carve an object that will look like the head of a human being; they may be spirits invoked in it. But if you see the one that they are used in the old days, it cannot be new. There are some places where they worship it, and they pour poison on it, some put salt on it, whatever the gods have asked. So, if they put liquids on in for 20 or 40 years, by the time you see them, it must have been in bad conditions. Like this object is new, it's an empty *scalet*. But the ones that have been used for the consultations, you will never see, I can tell you, whatever, but the one you just see may be in the shop, they are empty. Do you get what I mean? They are empty, because, you know, when you are worshipping a sacred *scalet* or you believe in a sacred *scalet*, to find things about the future or about the past, there are some sacrifices you have to pass through. So it can never be new and for the fact that they invoked spirits, it can never be new. Do you get what I mean? I hope I am satisfying you.

R: Yes, no problem. Now, could you tell me what's the difference for you between an amulet and a sacred object?

Y3: An amulet? What do you mean by an amulet? Because this is going to determine how I am going to you the right answer.

R: Ok, could you please tell me what is an amulet for you?

Y3: By contents of our own interpretation, an amulet could be a short iron object, in form of a... it is very short. It could not be more than this, more that this height; do you get what I mean? Secondly, you can call the spirits in an amulet.

R: How come? How is this possible?

Y3: In religion, in rural beliefs, there is an amulet over there, because there is respect for English in Africa, for those who are not educated, that they call *pigenglish*. Have you heard of it?

R: No, never heard it...

Y3: So, when you talk of an amulet or of a *scalet* object [inaudible] when you talk of an amulet, that is what I am trying to say, an amulet can be a small iron or glass. If it is *scalet*, that's what I am trying to say to you, it could be in form of anything. It could be in form of, like the Ifa oracle I am talking of, it could be in form of a *scalet*: they have been tithed together with small irons. I think you understand now what is an amulet: a *scalet* object. So a *scalet* object could be in a form of you will be able to carry, made of what ever you want, or it could be in form of objects hanged in a place that is stable which cannot be worn. Do you understand what I am saying? Like the Ifa's oracles I am talking about, the *scalets* they use to carry all around wherever they go. But, the other one, could be in form of a carved ball, what ever! That is why I am saying that some people are trying of stilling these kinds of objects!

R: Ok, I understand. What about these objects: could you tell me any personal memories, any thing you can remember about or any stories?

Y3: Who gave you these?

² He meant: sacred.

R: These are the photographs of the objects of a Nigerian collection in Nottingham that I am using as my case study.

Y3: You know I told you that we are different cultures, like this one: this one has been used by the Muslims. Because if you look at it, you can see these Arabic Incantations on it from the Koran, this is not the way of the Yorùbás. You just see this is their way of doing their own way of practising, their own way of life. This is an Arabic incantation.

R: What is your religion?

Y3: I am Christian, by baptism and incarnation I am an Anglican.

R: Ok, now what I would like to know is if you have any specific memories, from your childhood or later, related to these objects, if you saw people using these objects, if you think that they are sacred, with a specific power.

Y3: Power ... you see, what actually happens is that all these ones I have seen here (*he checks again the photographs of the objects I gave him to look at*). I cannot define what it is specifically; and the reason why I cannot define what it is, it's because I am not involved with such things... Let me explain something to you. It is like you are a spiritualist, I am a spiritualist, let's assume that coffee is used may be to cure cough. There are ways I can prepare my own coffee, the way you prepare yours, it might be different, but we still arriving at the Y3e conclusion. The reason why I cannot say what it is for, those who presented this, it is because I don't know anything about them. But it would be better if I talk of what I really know. Who has these objects?

R: These objects belong to a collection of the 19th century and they are stored in a museum in Nottingham.

Y3: This bag is could be a bag of a spiritualist, we call them *babaláwo*. Have you heard of that? We call them *babaláwo*. All the *scalets*, we are talking of, that you have you have to carry, and then you put in the ground and oh, oh [inaudible] this, this and this; you get what I mean? He keeps in this kind of bag. This one, the way I know it, the way they used it, it can be used by the Muslims, you get what I mean. This is what we call *thira*, so you know the, it is our own way to do religion: they will combine, like in Christianity you cannot say something like this. So, this one, I cannot say. But I want talk of what I really know, I will mention something and I will describe how it looks like. When I talk of Ifa oracle, there are different cups, some can be gold, carved, the design of human beings on it, either the head of the man, the head of the woman, whatever. Some could be calabashes, some could be something like this, some could be even just ordinary: look at that bag, look at the design of that bag, it depends on the way the individual acts in his own way, you know, of his spiritual heart. That is in respect of Ifa. And there in another one we call Shango: have you heard of it? Shango is the god of thunder. There are different ways of worshipping Shango. Can you tell me... have heard anything of Shango, so I don't take a lot of your time? May be you are not interested in Shango.

R: No, it is ok if you tell me about the gods, but I would prefer if you could tell me anything related in specific to these objects, the ones of the photographs.

Y3: You see Shango, who will worship Shango, they'll call them 'the worshippers of the thunder'. In a situation where there is something that is confusing, they invoke the spirit of Shango, may be some came to your room now and has stolen a possession of yours; I don't know who has done that, by the time you go to the Shango worshiper and tell him this is what happened, I want to find out who has done this, he may not even collect money from you, what they will do people who do not really worship Shango, they will collect money from you, they will buy it and it is going to be a shower of flame *trrrwha* (*Ye made the sound of the fire coming out from the mouth*) ! The possessions that belong to you, the spirit of

Shango will put in on the shelf of that person, so everybody come to see it: oh! Nobody has a doubt!

R: So, do you think these kinds of objects can they really work?

Y3: They are very effective, very, very effective. I believe in Shango.

R: Even if you are a Christian?

Y3: Oh, you see?! I want tell you one thing. I have witnessed an event which is real, and not a part from a story. When I say that I spent a lot years of Nigeria, I happened to go to the core of the land, in rural area and I saw things.

R: The last question now: have you ever been in a museum either in Nigeria or in UK?

Y3: Only in Kwara state, in the Ede museum, you see people practise the traditional religion here.

R: And what do you think of displaying traditional religious objects in museums?

Y3: I would change them. I would change probably the use of the objects in museum. I think only the pottery should be displayed except if you have drama involved, because you see, you don't have to confuse religion with the tradition.

R. ok, Y3, I think we have finished, unless there is something more you would like to add, about any particular thing?

Y3: Humm, no, I really should go now.

R: ok: thank you very much for your help!

Y3: you're welcome.

Focus Group no. 1

Focus Group 1 with Yorùbá people
Leicester 22/07/02

R: I would like to know what does it mean to you to be Yorùbá, everything you can tell me and you think it is relevant.

Y4: Yorùbá, Yorùbá is a tribe, it is said that it a tribe of indigenous Africans of Nigeria, part originated in Egypt and part in Sudan.

Y5: It is a group, descending from Oduduwa. Let me tell you just a short story. There is a man called Oduduwa, Oduduwa had a brother called Obatala. There some versions concerned with Oduduwa, his worshipping and idols. Anyway, Obatala was given the task of building the Earth by Sky God Olorun, but he got drunk and Oduduwa, who was waiting, took his chance and when Olorun came back he was angry and promoted Oduduwa to God of the Earth. Oduduwa gave birth to another child, called Okobí. Okobí was said to be the only child but there is another version who said that he was not, and that's how that there are different tribes of Yorùbás.

Y6: Yorùbá, it is a tribe, we are the children of Oduduwa (*laughs*).

Y7: Yorùbá, I mean Yorùbá is one of the Indigenous Africans of Nigeria, so, it is a tribe. You see these marks are tribal mark.

Y8: it is a tribe.

R: what do you think of me using the term tribe in relation to Yorùbá?

Y7: some people find it offensive, but to me, when you talk of tribe is, you know tribe is also in the Bible, is a group of people, where you live, in the Bible you have so many tribes, so to me it is not offensive but some people they might take it wrong.

R: what can you tell me about traditional Yorùbá beliefs?

Y7: they are all superstitions! In the earlier days, they were worshipping different gods: the god of thunder, which is Shango, you know, the god of iron Ogun, Oya, the god of the see. They worshipped all those, all sort of different gods, but nowadays, you know people are Christians, either are Christians or are Muslims but I think you must find few who still worshipping, I mean my grand mother she had a shrine for those gods, but nowadays, because of Christianity, because we are Christians we don't believe in such things anymore.

Y8: I went last year in Lagos and they still celebrate this Oya, is the wife of Shango, the goddess of the river. They still are worshipping the wife of Shango!

Y5: in traditional religion, there are small gods, there are some people who believe in reincarnation, yes, there are some that they believe that if you die, you can come back again.

Y4: In Lagos, for example, they still worshipping Shango and all these small gods and when somebody is pregnant and if the father just died, when the baby is born, they name the boy with the name of her father.

Y7: I think I can give you a good example about that. My grandmother died at the time she had these tribal marks and one of my cousins gave birth to another girl with the same type of marks.

Y6: oh, yes, people can reincarnate!

Y5: There are so many things that people do because they believe in the reincarnation! So, for example, they have this plane tree, they called *omimo*, they believe in, and they believe in sacred places. White, for example, is regarded as holy, any white things. People from secret societies have special, a particular area, they go early in the morning to the trees, and they have things, those are things we use for shrines, they call them *oboule*. Then like Obatala, they wear white clothes all the time.

R: what does it mean Obatala?

Y5: it means white; Oba means king, yea, the king. A part from the small gods, there is the supreme god, and there are a lot of songs about him. They are called Ijala songs.

R: do you remember any of the songs?

Y5: sure! (*laughs*).

R: can you sing one and can I record it?

Y5: yes.

Y5 sang the song

Y5: that's an example of Ijala song.

R: thanks a lot. And how do you consider all these traditional beliefs and secret societies, since you are all Christians? It seems that they are very rooted in the culture even now[inaudible]

Y7: all these traditions are a religion, they were religion, but nowadays, as I said, it is gone down, very hard to find them.

Y4: in Lagos they still are practising them!

R: could you tell me a bit about the secret societies?

Y8: there are a lot of secret societies, but you cannot know them where they meet, what they do: you have to be part of them and you have to go through an initiation before, to be part of them (*laughs*).

Y7: you see, they pass the information from one area to another, they don't want other people to know about them.

Y4: they speak their language, we speak our language: but we can understand them, and they understand us.

Y7: in traditional religion, you have to know, that all these small gods are our ancestors, they were all real people that look now after their descendents. Before the modern coloniser, I mean, before we were not ruled by a foreigners, they were ruling Yorùbáland. And now, people worship their ancestors, because their ancestors can help them. You see, all these traditions, traditional cults are like the mafia for you! (*laughs*). These cults and societies are similar to mafia but they don't have, they don't do things like mafia: they protect each other and the area where they are. People, who come from a different area, fear them. They control the area, they have their own territory: they have their members, not everybody can become a member. You must have somebody to introduce you.

Y8: they have to initiate you.

R: and do you know any procedure for the initiation?

Y5: we are not members (general *laughs*), it is a ritual!

Y7: eh, if you know anything about mafia, you will understand, I mean, it is similar to mafia: not everybody can become member; there must be somebody who introduce the brother.

Y5: the only thing I was told was that they do not to show who is a member: there are some rules that he has to follow. He must not tell the secret to other people, especially if you reach the highest rank, and for example, he must not share the room with anybody, he must not speak with any woman at all; he must not eat meat, at all.

R: ok, thank you very much, it is all very interesting. Now, I will pass around some photographs of traditional objects and I would like you to tell me anything you know about them.

Y8: where did you get these pictures?

R: in the museum where I was working as volunteer.

Y8: all right[inaudible].

R: what could you tell me about this object? (*the wooden figure*)

Y5: it is linked to some bad spirit: because it has a black colour and people may through different things at it to see if it is a bad spirit.

Y6: it is linked to a bad spirit.

Y8: yes, probably it is linked to a bad spirit.
(*Second object: bottle with crystal*)

Y5: have you opened it?

R: yes, I did.

Y8: What did you opened? If there were bad spirits now they can come after!

R: tried to open it to see what was inside.

Y4: what do you have to do with these objects?

R: I am organising an exhibition about.

Y7: with the pictures now, I cannot say exactly, but if I see the objects themselves, clean, I might be able to say[inaudible] because there are different names for the objects.

Y5: we don't want you to say he wrong think now, so it is better to tell you the right thing. We can, but we are not sure. This one is very simple: we call it calabash (*pointing at the photograph of the carved gourd*). It was used for decoration or in ceremonies.

R: and this? (*the crested crane*) Which kind of power has it got?

Y7: well people say it is effective, but, I really don't know.

Y5: they can't be effective, they are.

Y7: I think it is your belief[inaudible].

Y5: when I was in school, there was a colleague who did something wrong to another man, who went to the babaláwo who told him everything and then gave him a medicine, juju, so he went for researching the man who did the wrong thing to him. When he got the man, he gave him the juju and showed him everything and proved him guilty. So this is the power of the juju.

Y7: I mean in those days I never seen to happen, but before, during the tribal wars, not matter how sharp your knife was, if somebody was using the juju, it would have been dangerous. So you would have need something like this, you would have need an amulet.

R: and what exactly is an amulet?

Y7: they call it a 'bullet proof'.

Y5: an amulet is a fetish!

Y4: yes an amulet is something like a fetish, it is a fetish.

Y8: an amulet has got magical powers! It is very powerful!

Y7: but it is not sacred is just a kind of, it's like a magical power.

R: could you give me an example of sacred traditional religious object?

Y7: sacred?

Y5: white cloth and red cloth.

Y4: a red cloth.

Y5: white and red but not black, black is for the devil. Anywhere you see black and red, the devil is around there; anywhere you see white one of the goddess is there, especially the goddess of the river, Yemoya.

R: and another example of sacred object?

Y7: it depends on the shrine; sometimes, ordinary shoes will be sacred! (*laughs*)

Y4: there are some objects that are sacred and that forbidden to women. Especially during some festivals, there are some objects, that when come out, they cannot be seen by women.

R: and which kinds of festivals are where women cannot see the objects?

Y8: it is a festival for men.

Y4: you know when they have these festivals, there is a man naked and they may calabashes that look like this one of the photograph. Then, they put palm oil in it and they make their own lantern. In some other, they will put the blood of an animal and they will drink it. But if a woman sees all this, the woman will die, and you don't want die, so you won't go there.

R: but are you really afraid of these kinds of festivals and rituals?

Y5: we are not afraid, because we are children of God but you respect, what the Bible says is that you should respect the authority. There are some festivals in Lagos, where no woman,

of not kind can go. These festivals are for 2/3 days. You don't put yourself in danger. But there are some places you can go and pray and you know your father is with you.

R: have you ever been in an African exhibition here in UK or in a museum?

Y7: I don't think I have ever been there, but back at home; I used to go to museums. In those days, you know, I collected a lot of things and gave to the museums, because you know, back home, I was a teacher so I used to go to museums.

R: and what about you?

Y4: I have not been in a museum here but I have been back at home. Buy, it has been long time, so I cannot remember too much.

Y5: I have not been in a museum here in the UK.

Y6: me too, I haven't been in a museum here in Britain.

Y8: same with me!

R: what would be your reaction in seeing Yorùbá objects in Western museums?

Y7: they are a lot, there are a lot! I think where I have been in a museum here; there were a lot of Yorùbá objects.

R: and what was your reaction?

Y7: well, my reaction will be that, although it is there for us, and for other people to see, we are not happy that we have been deprived of the objects and these objects have been brought here, to Europe, while, they have a place where they belong to Africa and they supposed to be there. When you are there, you can just go and see, but taken it from there, they were not supposed to be here. People who are there, back at home, don't have many opportunities to see them. So, that's why I am not too happy to see them here, I would prefer to see them where they belong.

R: what do you think Western people can understand of Yorùbá spirituality?

Y6: they cannot understand it.

Y4: they cannot understand Yorùbá spirituality, because they are provided with the wrong information because they don't know.

Y8: Westerners cannot understand our spirituality!

Y5: they cannot understand it. Like who collected the objects, they don't know the name of the objects. So there are people who are doing these studies but they get the wrong. So, it is better to go to Nigeria. Back at home, they are so sensible for money and they can give the right information: let's these things go back home and people who go here will know the right way to call them and when you will go there for study and you will get the correct thing, the correct information and names about all those things. In Nigeria there are people who know everything, especially people in the museums. We like that people are interested in our culture. We are so proud of what we are doing now, because we want to spread our culture, we are so happy now. There is a woman, who came to study Oshun festival and eventually she decided to stay in Nigeria, she speak Yorùbá, she wears white clothes.

R: would you like to add any suggestion in relation to the display of Yorùbá religious objects in museums?

Y8: museums should make people realising how complex and beautiful is Yorùbá culture and religion.

Focus Group no. 2

Focus Group 2 with Yorùbá people

Nottingham 6/12/04

Preliminary introduction and explanation of the focus group and guidelines.

Y9: My name is Y9 and I am a Yorùbá;

Y10: My name is Y10 and I am from Egba tribe.

Y11: My name is Y11 and I am Yorùbá.

Y12: My name is Y12 and I am from Nigeria.

R: I would you like to explain me what does it mean to be Yorùbá: is it something more related to the Nationality, it is something that has to do more with your culture.

Y9: Yorùbá is a concept, some people says that [inaudible] however we cannot define our origins [inaudible] we originated from Saudi Arabia, some [inaudible] so we cannot define precisely [inaudible] it is more related to the nationality than to the culture. It is a country within a country. *General Laughs*

Y10: we come from Saudi Arabia and Egypt and some traditions say that Oludumare sent Odudua (*she spelt the name*) to the earth and Odudua had sons and these children, they like you have the king, they went in different parts of the earth and there were 7, I don't know if you would put all the names but they were seven and they settled in different parts, at the time war broke out and at the time, when the war broke out, the place was too small for them and they were warriors because Yorùbás we have a culture of being warriors and when we [inaudible] other people are slaves, there were into trade too, so if the place gets too small for you [inaudible] then the [inaudible] Oludumare sent the [inaudible] to create the world, and there was just water. Have you heard that before? And the head [inaudible] the [inaudible] on the sea, like in the Bible and he sent Ornumila, which was [inaudible] the Yorùbá still very [inaudible] we believe we are the descendents of Odudua, that's one, not matter the tribe, not matter the pattern you came from, the east, the west; we also have a culture of respecting the elders, it is a very powerful in our culture [inaudible] not like here [inaudible]; we also have the culture of taking our children very seriously. We believe that children are the future, so you have to take care of them, we also believe in the law [inaudible] we believe [inaudible] dancing feasting [inaudible] basically Yorùbá are a very proud tribe.

R: so, are you ok with the term tribe in relation to Yorùbá?

Y10: oh, I wouldn't say so; since you are doing something for your PhD we have to go to an advanced stage. We can't quite say tribe, the reason we can't say tribe is because Yorùbás [inaudible] named by themselves. But then you have this [inaudible] long the line, like the dialects [inaudible] and then you had [inaudible] Yorùbá, do you understand, so that's why I would say that is a tribe [inaudible]

General laugh

Y12: you can say Yorùbá is a religion, is a culture, is a tribe.

R: according to your experience I would like to have your own definition of religion.

Y11: a way of worshipping.

Y9: when you say religion you are not worshipping [inaudible]. We have Shango, we have Obatala, you know what I mean, we have a lot of gods. In those days [inaudible] but nowadays, the modern religions, Christianity and Islam have overshadowed traditional religions.

General laughs

Y12: you are talking in terms of religion, in western terms.

R: so, how is it in Yorùbá culture?

Y12: it is different; you see, it is a belief, is a belief linked to trust and this is linked to costume, based on our origins. And that's how you decide what to worship, so if you want to worship Shango, you go into Shango shrine, but if want to follow the Obatala way of worshipping, that is [inaudible]. Who is going to be the leader, like a pastor and than you have other people, like the oyas, [inaudible] societies, you can consult an oracle, but if you lie, whatever you say, or you don't say the truth, whatever you say, it will follow on you. So, it is our belief [inaudible] there are some people that have got power, and they can do, and that's why some people can; a group of believers come together to worship [inaudible] some people we believe [inaudible] together and they can see things that are far beyond. Yorùbá [inaudible] so, that's why you cannot categorize or classify it as a religion, but it is a way of life, sometimes. I can say. All right?

Y11: from what I know, from my father some people say that traditional religion is a way of consulting the oracle. How it is done, you go to the Ifa priest, to the shrine and the priest will consult the oracle, the Ifa priest will consult the oracle about the child, future, what is going to happen to the child [inaudible]

R: so, if I have understood correctly, you do not speak about a Yorùbá religion but about Yorùbá beliefs.

Y12: it is not like that, the way people look at it is different. When you look at religion is a culture [inaudible] because of the cultural heritage you can perceive as religion, the way you want to worship it but you cannot say Yorùbá is a religion.

Y11: you cannot say Yorùbá is a religion [inaudible].

Y9: Obatala is the leader of a religion, he is not a priest. All these Yorùbás are priests.

Y10: and the Yorùbás, they had a traditional race religion; the traditional race is interwoven with the culture. Like each household has its own gods, yes, you might be say like you say Indians, I don't know if you are familiar with Indian Culture, where each person, each household will have their own particular god that they worship. Now, In Yorùbáland, let me explain, just to find the point to explain, it could be that in a whole family the father worships Obatala, it could be Osun, the goddess of water, it could be, all together is traditional religion, but under traditional race of Yorùbá. But in the modern days, now, people still go back to the roots of traditional religion, but they have the dominant religions, which are Christians and Muslims, that's are the modern days Yorùbá, but the traditions, the ones that are interwoven in the customs and in the culture of the Yorùbás, are these ones that he (*she pointed to the old Yorùbá man*) has just explained you, they are all under the umbrella of beliefs, that is the religion of Yorùbá, not that you will find some that is the religion.

Y12: did you get the point now?

R: yes, yes. Now I have understood it better: and would not even you speak of Yorùbá religious objects?

Y12: Yorùbá is not a religion. We just sorted.

R: and how would you refer to the objects, for exampled, used for Obatala's ceremonies?

Y10: what do you mean by subjects?

R: objects, objects.

Y9: No, no, no, what is she trying to say about objects is to say about [inaudible] let's speak about traditional stories [inaudible]

Y12: we don't want get any involved with those objects [inaudible]

Y9: there was a war, then some of the leaders [inaudible] they are well organised in Yorùbáland and in line with that[inaudible]

R: what do you think of museums?

Nobody answered

R: which difference would you make between a religious object, an amulet and a sacred object?

Y9: all right, this is great. What I can say there, in may own, I can only give you an example of my own tradition.

R: this would be perfect.

Y9: people can go and consult the oracle [inaudible].

R: could you please have a look at these objects and tell me anything you know about them, from your personal knowledge or memories.

Y10: there is power behind them.

Y9: these are not the real ones. If you were seeing the real ones, you would be scared. Why, what the real ones have to make people scared to touch them.

R: why, what would be so scary of them?

Y9: what?

Y10: if you really don't know the power, you [inaudible] This object shows that it was used to pour human blood.

R: but do people keep doing this now?

Y9, Y12 and Y10 (together and laugh): of course, yes, they do it!

Y10: they used to poor the blood of animals

Y12: there is a kind of spirit that goes trough them.

R: so, they can very powerful?

Y12 and Y9: oh, yes, they are powerful, they are very powerful.

Y10: expect the ordinary one.

Y9: I can get a couple of them from you from Nigeria, from my own place.

Y12: these objects were brought here in the 19th century.

Y9: this is an amulet (the crested crane)

R: how would this used?

Y12: it is like bullet!

R: have you heard of anybody you know you was protected by an amulet?

Y9: oh yes! Off course they really protect certain amulets!

R: I would like to have an example.

Laugh

Y12: they are magical objects!

R: could you refer to any of your personal experiences or experiences of anybody you know?

Y12: they are true! They work!

Y11: in the real world, is happening.

R: have you all been in museums which display Yorùbá sacred or religious objects?

Y9: I have been there, they are all crap (*general laughs*)

R: In Nigeria or here?

Y9: here, they are all crap!

R: what about you: have you ever been?

Y11: I have been there once, I saw one or two pieces from Nigeria, brought from Nigeria.

Y9: I can give you one example of the procedure of a sacrifice [inaudible] if you want I tell you. You pour some libations to the spirit.

R: like?

Y9: it could be anything: palm oil, anything, just to please the god, for whatever you want to achieve.

Y12: this is happening, I am saying the truth.

R: what would you never display in a museum?

Y9: I would never display the real ones.

R: let's say that in Nottingham there is an exhibition of Yorùbá culture and let's say that the exhibition presents some of these objects or replicas, whatever you want call them, what do you think visitors will be able to understand of them?

Y12: they would not understand anything.

Y9: they would not understand anything.

Y11: not, they cannot, they can have an idea, but they cannot understand the culture. Unless they ask.

Y12: African objects in museums here are not real: they took our land, they took our objects.

R: and which one do you think would be a way to improve museum displays?

Y9: improve? there is no way to improve.

Y12: my father, is an Ifa priest; people you practise these beliefs tell you the truth[inaudible] and you cannot use these objects in a museum and you cannot improve the displays.

R: ok, thank you very much to you all, I think there is not much more to add.

At the end of the discussion, there was a brief summary of the main points raised.

Focus Group no. 3

Focus Group 3 with Yorùbá people

Beeston, 21/12/ 2003

Preliminary introduction and explanation of the focus group and guidelines

R: I would like of you could introduce yourself and after it, I would like to know what it means to you to be Yorùbá.

Y13: we Yorùbá people, we are the people of Oduduwa. The second answer is that to be a Yorùbá man is for somebody who has tried to come from the Western part of where you now call Nigeria and from Benin down to down to the last bit of the Republic of Benin. If you come from that part, you can consider yourself to be a Yorùbá man.

R: thank you, also I would like to know, from you as well.

Y14: for me, to be a descendant of Oduduwa so this is like asking: 'how do you feel to be the daughter of a king, somebody victorious?' do you get me? And how do I feel, I feel very happy.

R: what about you?

Y15: for me, I believe that the name of my grand father is Odode, which originated from Ife, and Ife is the town of the Yorùbás. According to the history, so, I can say that being a Yorùbá is something like if you are a pillar somewhere, if I tell people that I am a Yorùbá, people give me respect in Nigeria. You know there are some parts in Nigeria like Oduwio, Odu, say that you are from one of those parts and say that you are from Yorùbáland, you are from one of the pillars of the country.

R: and for you?

Y16: I feel very proud of it.

R: now, I would like to know what Yorùbá traditional religion is and what does it mean to you Yorùbá traditional religion.

Y13: are you putting this question to me next?

R: yes.

Y13: well, you see, traditional religion, we are so proud of that, because that gives us the spirits for everybody to pray, because we don't believe in one religion, a religion or another, because you know we have one god called Olodumare [inaudible]. There are four gods; all of them are involved with the activities of the Yorùbás. We so much believe in them that we cannot stop to pour libation to each one of them, according to individual belief, every day of our live.

R: I would like to know also from you too as well, what do you mean for traditional Yorùbá belief?

Y14: my memories in relation to Yorùbá traditional beliefs are as a child, you have to remember that people are changing, societies are changing; generations are changing, year by year. So, I will talk more of my memories as a child. So for instance, my ancestral father worshipped Ogun, so my family name, because I am Yorùbá, is Ogundipé. For every Yorùbá household, the ancestors father most have worshipped one of these gods, so, they may be named as such. So my compound name is Ogundipé. So in these days, that's how you

identify the compound, you don't really have addresses as such, like you have today, it is the compound name and when you go to an area you say: "I am looking for Y14, from the family of Ogundipé", and that is how you identify. So my family name is Ogundipé and I remember when I was a young child, when you went to my grand father, on entering the house, outside, by the three, there was a three around there was some sort of iron, there was like a, I thought it was an engine from the cars, placed outside. On the top of it there was oil, there was oil, palm oil, and there was some feathers sometimes, there was some bold, because he killed some animals on it, for sacrifice, there were cowry shells and many things. What I am telling you is dating back to 20/30 years ago. So it was like a shrine. I remember that my grand father had a particular period that he will appeal the gods or a festival period, or some prayers. So he will kill a goat or a chicken and put the bold there and roast the animal. He would pour some palm wine, like the one I have on the shop, like libations and pray and some incantation in terms of worshipping, like saying: "oh, you are excellent, you this, you are that..." when you are worshipping somebody you are praising the person, so that was what he was used to do. That's was for protection and many prayers things. Sometimes he would pour the local hot drink called shinap, he would pour it there and give the rest to us to drink and also the kola nuts. After putting them there, you share the remaining among the people. It was a strong belief. That's is my area I know, that's my authority, that's how I have been grown and what I know about Yorùbá traditional religion: it is what we are made of.

R: and what about you?

Y15: *(laugh)* you know in Yorùbáland there are so many religions *(laughs)*, then you should go over there to know more[inaudible]there is Obatala, Shango, and if you want, you can worship them. Like in my family, the god of our family house is [inaudible] and they have like a shrine, where they would be worshipping our god. That's what they believe in. In some families, they believe in Shango, in some families they believe in Obatala, that's their own god, that's is their own religion. But nowadays, Christianity and Islam are taking over some of these gods, and myself, I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

R: yes, this is back in Yorùbáland but could you tell me anything about here: do Yorùbás away from Nigeria, in Great Britain, for instance, do they still practise traditional Yorùbá religion?

Y13: I told you about my name, that I am a teacher, a traditional teacher. Like I told you earlier on, as a matter of fact, I would believe in Oludumare, the Supreme Being, who what want do at different times and in different circumstances. You see, when ever somebody is in confusion, he can consult the Ifa oracle. And for my experience, I have seen so many things that if I tell them to you, you might not believe them but I know, they have happened also in our society, here.

Y14: no, sorry, what she wants to know is if people from your area, of your generation, who live in the United Kingdom practice Yorùbá traditional religion now, this is what she is trying to ask.

Y13: All right. What I want to say is that somebody from my generation, in England, you would not know if he is worshipping Shango or Ogun or Obatala. There are some many Yorùbás in England that worship Shango or Ogun, because our culture has not been substituted by Christianity or Islam. Our people still worshipping Ogun or Shango.

Y14: In England there are babaláwos, but they are anonymous.

Y13: Let me tell you this. Every year, there is a festival in Atlanta, in America, it is a wonderful festival every year and they sing all the songs of Oduduwa. People come from all over the world to attend the festival.

R: could you give me a definition of traditional Yorùbá religious object?

Y13: In Yorùbá traditional religion, the objects of worship are very very important, they are very very powerful. We have (name of the objects) some of these we use for Ifa divination; there is another one that for divination [inaudible] and there is another one that is called runi, and this runi is made of stones, that have been marked with specific sings on them. In Ogun worshipping, in Ogun worshipping we use blood. They kill chicken and the pour this blood. This is not peculiar to the law, in Nigeria. That's our traditional religion. We also believe that when we pour these libations that are real, there some other gods, we worship, like Ornumila. There are some other, other divinities, like Osun, Osun it signifies, it is an Aquarian god; and when you want to worship this god, you have to put water and in bowl. Are you following me? You put water in a bowl and because water is seen as an emblem of purity, so you believe that everything that you are now trying to ask to Oludumare is going to be answered if you are purified like water. So, the bowl where you are going to put the water in should be clean, very very clean as well. Shango too. Shango has got a [unclear], a that none of us can see, except when he is [inaudible]. Those who worship Shango, you can see them.

Y14: the objects I know, the objects I know, the palm wine, the shenaps, the calabashes, sometimes people put them close to the shrines.

R: now, I will show you some objects, from the Yorùbá collection in the Brewhouse Yard museum, here in Nottingham and I would like to know, from you, anything you know or remember about them. Please, pass them around. (*first object: the amulet, with the crested crane*). What I would like to know is how you, today, living in Nottingham and not anymore in Nigeria, consider this object.

Y13: you see the amulet is very special. In certain communities in Nigeria, we believe that the god protects, in many other ways, it is not like the witchcraft. In Yorùbá communities, when a chicken is killed, the blood, we believe it can be used as a sort of protection and we believe that and people would actually put them on, do you know what am I saying?

R: yes.

Y14: on my experience, as a child, I remember some objects that my father was using as amulets, but my perception is changed because I believe in Lord Jesus Christ. So, because of my strong spiritual beliefs in Christianity, I believe that these objects they don't mean anything to me, but when I saw them in those days, I was in London and I was going to work at 6 o'clock in the morning and I saw a calabash, a calabash and in the calabash there were some kola nuts and some palm oil. Now, what happens is that when you see that in Yorùbáland, is that the person who sees it, takes all that problems. So, my first reaction when I saw that object was to be worried but then, my belief in Jesus Christ made me realising that it did not have any power over me. But if somebody with a strong faith in traditional beliefs had seen that object, she or he would have gone to a priest. But, because I am Christian I was not scared and I knew that I did not need to go to any traditional priest.

R: ok, and what about for you two?

Y15: for me, all these objects don't mean anything, because I would not be able to worship all these gods. You know, in some, some people believe in some objects like that, let's say okra, they believe that okra is their god, so in their house, they will not be eating okra, because okra is their god. But to me all this (she calls it also with the Yorùbá name) palm oil, all this palm wine, I did not believe in them because I am not, I didn't worship all these ancestral gods, so I did not have any belief in all those objects.

R: and what about you?

Y16: those objects, all those objects represent various gods, like Shango, Ogun, so, they are used to worship the ancestral gods...

R: have you ever seen any museum exhibition here in Britain, with Yorùbá traditional religious object and, if yes what do you think of it?

Y13: I have actually, the one, the one I have see is actually the one that represents the, Oduduwa; I consider that one to be one of our artefacts, because I consider that people to be Yorùbá and that's the only one I have seen but in the place, not visiting the British Museum, I am afraid.

R: ah, ok but if you had in a museum a traditional Yorùbá object, what do you think Westerner visitors could understand of Yorùbá religious traditions?

Y13: you see, this is a major problem, my sister, you see, the only all these artefacts, all these objects we are talking about belonged to my ancestors, somebody who would not allow anybody to take them, from their won place. You see my reaction would be so pitiful, because you cannot quantify all these artefacts in monete value, there are very precious to us, they represent what we are, as Yorùbás, as descendents. And bringing them here, away from their home, they have lost, they have lost, they are something, particularly from my own place, that cannot be seen outside. So, my reaction is seeing these objects in the British Museum or in some other museums would be not happy at all: I would think that these objects should be repatriated back at home. That's my opinion.

R: ok, thank you very much.

Y14: when I saw those artefacts in the museum,³ even though I was not from that generation, my father was not from that generation I felt sad, because I don't think anybody should take your own things, because it is only African themselves that can deal with their own things and problems, other may try, but nobody cannot take your things. So, I am not really happy, it is just a mockery of our traditional religion, I think the people who brought them here, these objects did not mean anything to them, they don't have value to them. I am sure some the local people must have trade them, because of the poverty or[inaudible]but to the people who got them, they just got them, for artistic display or money value, and it is not actually of any value to them. But for us, the objects have a value, they are sacred, we respect them, they need to be cherished, they are very rare and to have in a country or in a context that is not their own, does not make any sense, because the people who got them, they don't care about the context, or the history.

R: And what is your opinion: have you ever been in a museum displaying such objects?

Y15: I am not been to any museum really, so I cannot say anything.

R: but what do you think westerners can understand of your culture by seeing your objects exhibited?

Y15: I think they cannot understand what it means to us, if they see these objects exhibited in a museum or anywhere. They can't really know what they really mean and they will just see them as a form.

R: which suggestions would you give to improve, eventually, museum displays, which present these objects?

Y14: I was looking at your exhibition, just like I said, these objects, when they came to England, they have gone in the wrong hands and these objects they haven't got even their authenticated name, but they have just been connoted or given a fake name to fit. But if you could go to Ife, you could learn not only the proper names but also you could get the whole picture, but you could also learn the history behind them and you could appreciate them

³ Y14 is referring to the Yorùbá collection of the Brewhouse Yard Museum.

more. So, when you present like you presented, you have some much more to write, when you present yourself, even from a culture which is not your own, you could appreciate them more, because you have been there, you have seen them, you have the history behind the history, so people will know that this person has done her work well, has done her research', you should travel to Africa.

Y15: but I would like to add something: by showing us these pictures, don't you think that you are working against them?

R: what do you mean?

Y15: because it is meant for something not for display, it is meant to worship: don't you think that you are working against them, here? Like a curse.

Y14: just like, if you are going Italy and you are going to Rome now, you are going to the Vatican city, and you go to the Pope, where he prays every time and you take that shrine with you.

R: yes, I understood.

Y14: so, what I am saying is that if you were travelling to Africa yourself [inaudible].

Y15: they will tell you the meaning, they [inaudible]

Y14: they will tell you what these mean.

R: do you recall any traditional songs, or incantation related to any object?

Y13: there are a lot of traditional songs, that I can recall but if I sing them for you, but I could write and translate them for you so you could understand them and you could see how rich they are, they are philosophically rich. Do you want give me some of it?

R: yes, if you do not mind to sing.

Y13: I actually said 'Ashente' dumali' (Yorùbá) what I am saying is that 'It is God, the Almighty that says amen to everything that we'll say'. At the beginning of that song, I said 'olufulami...', which was 'woman that is beautiful and when she is mannered...'. That's is the meaning and philosophy of that song. When you say this to people who do not understand or philosophy Yorùbá culture, they will think that you are now calling evil spirits or that you are doing some incantations. But they don't understand our philosophy and our symbols. Symbols are very important to us, in our culture, to spiritual people.

Y14: do you think she should travel for her research?

Y13: if she has funding, she should go to Nigeria, to Ife.

R: ok, has anybody got something else to say or would like to add anything else? If this is not the case, I we have finished and I think this is enough. Thank you very very much.

A short summary of the main points of the discussion.

Interviews with museum professionals

**Interview with M1,
Sainsbury Galleries
British Museum
London, 08/07/02**

Interview with M1

R: could you tell me your name, education, age, nationality...

M1: my name is M1, I am 54 years old, I am Education Curator at the BM, I have a PhD, my ethnicity is British and we are at the Museum of the Mankind, in London.

R: Which are your duties as Education Curator? And which are the main programs of the British Museum (in relation to African Gallery)?

M1: It is quite complicated. The Educational department of the British Museum is based at the British Museum. I work as an Education Curator within the Ethnography department and when this department had a separate museum, which was the Museum of the Mankind, I was the Head of Education Officer of this museum. Since the museum closed and our exhibitions are being moved down to the British Museum, I'm still working with the directions of this department, and so I have special responsibilities for African educational events and resources. But also I have colleagues in the Education Department of the British Museum, who work with the African collection too, as teachers or others as educators and they don't have a specific regional or subject responsibility, you know, like secondary school teachers, primary school teachers, special needs teachers and they work all with the African gallery and some of the programs are organised by them rather than by me. The work I do is particularly like... I produce the resource to go with the gallery.

R: Which kind of resources?

M1: Teacher resources. I can give you a copy of the catalogue "Africa in the British Museum". Now, if you look at this, you can see that this is my perspective on the African collections in the British Museum. It has been produced for teachers to help teachers in including African subjects within different aspects of the curriculum using British Museum exhibitions. So, it is not just confined to the African gallery but it goes all across the all the museum. That is my work to do: also organising public events, African events.

R: which are the activities that involve the local African community?

M1: Well, for many years in the Museum of the Mankind we worked with African educators, in particular there is a groups called "Heritage Ceramics", Nigerian and Ghanaian. And also there are other individuals or small groups. And we booked them both for "school programs" and also for public, well not, usually called "family programs". Families come with children and mostly, these sorts of things, you drop in on. The British Museum facilities for these kinds of events are not as good as we had here. We had here an activity room, which was very flexible, dedicated to educational events. In the British Museum we have to use rather badly designed seminar rooms and theatres. But, for public events, we have several times organised events in the Great Court, you know the big space there, which I think have been quite successful, but these are like dance and music events: so you can get a group of musicians to perform and also invite the audience to join in one of workshops bases. And it works. The main problem I see it is that, apart from that, it seems to work pretty well. We have done that for the last three months and we will be doing it again, I hope, for the next three months.

R: which kind of Yorùbá objects are on displays and in the museum's collection?

M1: We have very big Yorùbá collection. I don't know the details but it is one of the major collections. We did a very big exhibition in the Mankind Museum about Yorùbá many years ago, in about 1974, 1975.

R: Is it possible to have a copy of the catalogue of this exhibition?

M1: You may be. Try the students' room, the study room. They should have a copy catalogue of the exhibition, on record somewhere. I can give you probably a couple of postcards that show how it looked like. But, you know, the fact that they are in the shrines doesn't mean that they were only used in the shrines. So you cannot be sure, because some of the things you have there, were used for ritual purposes but they could also have been used for domestic purposes. Do you want me to talk about this exhibition a bit?

R: Yes, please!

M1: This exhibition was called "Yorùbá religious Cults" and it has been set up to exhibit objects used from different religious societies or religious sets in Yorùbáland. What it was: it was built as an old style Yorùbá house, with a central courtyard with pots supporting the roof, which are the ones of our collection and which are not from the same place, necessarily. And around that, it was built this building with alcoves as shrines for the different gods. Now you wouldn't find all those in the same house but the idea was that, this is a shrine for the god Shango, and in there are all rich paraphernalia things you would use for the worship of the god Shango. I don't think it was they were used so much as repository for these old rich equipment. You know, there was a different alcove for a different god. It was one of the first exhibition, which tried to reconstruct the appearance of the objects in situ as they would have been in before to come to the museum. Which I thought it was excellent because it really to help you to understand the role of those objects into the society itself but a lot of the art historians they didn't like very much, because you could not see things very clearly, because the light was very dim and you could see things on the top of each other. Now this is a very interesting contrast and, to me, talking about our present African Gallery, this is one alternative, one way of presenting an African or an ethnographic exhibition and our African gallery is a very different one, is a much more artistic approach.

R: Yes, I have noticed that!

M1: You can say that about all religious objects in the world, I suppose, you could even say about Christian objects in the other galleries in other museums. I think... I don't know the circumstances in which these objects were collected but if the followers of Shango really wanted continue to use these things, probably they would not have sold them, I don't know, or may be they just have made new ones. From the educational point of view, from the museum point of view, I feel that objects like these should be used like window into another culture, as a way of introducing another culture, as a hole. They should be shown in their context, so we can understand what they mean, otherwise they really become colonised objects which are put into museums glass cases and in a different context and they become art objects rather than records of culture. And as art objects they are, like, I suppose, you may say that they were colonised objects.

R: oh, yes, I do agree with this!

M1: Well it depends, this is another big subject, I don't know if you want stick on your agenda or not.

R: would be possible to know how many Yorùbá objects are displayed in the Sainsbury Galleries?

M1: Well, I don't know but we got a lot of them in different collections they came with, they have to be checked with the curators. I mean, I don't know, we've got a lot of them, we've got thousands. The African gallery, my impression is that the objects they have been chosen to illustrate certain technical category, which in a gallery you will see include textiles, brace works, which is mostly Benin bronzes and things like that, blacksmiths work, which is mostly

weapons, pottery and there is a category, a sort of modern gallery art, which introduces the gallery. And those set the criteria, of that choice. So we find, for instance, that there is any object or cultures or object of collections from Africa which are not really very well represented under those categories or admitted. For instance, Zimbabwe is an important, historical place, historical culture in Africa, which we have, I think one or may be two stone carvings. And I would have thought that to represent Africa we should have include even or of tow objects of a historically very important culture like Zimbabwe but it not made on stone and there was no a place for stone objects. So, that is one of the kinds of problems. I think to be cruel, to be frank about it, personally, I think it is intellectual rather than easy way of displaying the collections. And in fact, the gallery represents several previous galleries that had here in the museum of the Mankind. We had very good pottery exhibition, we had a very good weapons exhibition, we had Benin and Benin exhibitions, and yes, we had several textiles exhibitions. What happened in fact was that it was the curator reproduced those exhibitions in another form, that form of the new gallery. Well, they were self-contained and informative exhibitions here under technical themes, and some very good, I don't think they work very well in that gallery and I think the fact is that is a big gallery and it limits the all African collection, it would be better to try to provide an integrated view, an introduction into African history and culture instead of a serious of technologic and artistic studies.

R: I remember to have seen some videos in the galleries and I found them interesting but I am not sure if many people, families would stop there and watch it.

M1: I think people probably do. They prefer videos rather than photos. In our old exhibition here, we preferred to have a lot of big photos, sometime bigger then wall rooms, coloured photos, which are very good for presenting the context, also the historical context. They decided to not use any photographs in that gallery mostly about tow, three inches away, so that I you can see, when you are in there. So, there isn't much context, visual context provided or also historical context. This is my critique to the gallery. For instance, just to give you an example. There are several pieces of a battle objects, which is when the British came to Sudan in a big battle against the Sudanese troops, which were the followers of these maddest Islamic anti-colonial movements. And there is a magnificent piece of horse armour, at the end of the gallery, do you remember it? It is, big like a horse, a bit of big horse armour, next to it there is quoted "armour", for a cavalry rider. So this is like a Sudanese armour, of 19th century and earlier. And there other pieces like that, and that's from the armour to the armour section. You go right to the other end of the gallery to the textile section, you will see two of shirts, were worn by our warriors, which were the patriot shirts. One is the tied old, just made on patches and the other one is the more decorative one, which is delighted from me. So, if you want to look at the references of the battle Sudanese army or Sudanese culture of the XIX century or at the colonial conquest of the area at the time, the material is scatted opposite at the end of the gallery into totally different endings. So in illustrating the theme textiles, the theme weaponry, ignoring the public, they're totally making impossible to actually have an historical or geographical or cultural approach. So I regard it as a big problem. To my mind, the gallery is visually very attractive, but intellectually, specially historically, is Incoherent.

R: yes, I agree with this as well.

M1: I am glad I am not the only one who thinks like this.

R: it is a very artistic gallery, I was very impressed by the pottery section, but it's the same thing that I will probably expect to see for the Greek or Roman pottery.

M1: The question is whether you should display Greek or Roman pottery rather of other kinds. But, anyway, my critic to the gallery is that, really, there was a debate about the content of the gallery earlier on, and I was asked to contribute from and educational perspective. Now, in British Museum, the education department or the educators are consulted during the creation of some galleries but they don't have their voices not very

authoritative. The curators will listen, if they want to, but if they don't want to, there is no obligation. So, they disagreed with my prospective. My idea was to try to use our collection to illustrate the history of the culture of Africa in a global way and also the relationship of Africa to another continent of the world, because I think in Britain that is a subject very poorly understood. We tend to think of Africa as black Africa, mostly, we tend to ghettoised it anyway, we tend to look at it historically, without considering the impact of the long term relationship with European and American, the slave trade, the colonial period, and also the previous relationships to the Mediterranean, and to Asia, south Asia, especially Arabia and areas like that. So I made some suggestions, which the curators did not agree with them. But on the basis of that, I decided 'well I'll do the resource pack teachers', which tries to cut across that uses of the African gallery that is not a gallery, isn't a museum. So, if I had been doing an exhibition, it would have been conceptually rather than one like this. And this is actually for teachers, but it could be for everybody else (*Dr. Burt at this point gives me a copy of 'Africa in the British Museum', the teachers package*). I just go through quickly. Egypt is very important, as it is part of Africa. So, we start with ancient Egypt, with a particular focus on Egypt's relationship with North Africa. Africa, and the ancient Mediterranean, Greeks and Romans, and North Africa was very much culture related with Romans. All these illustrations are from our museum collections. And there is some information of South Sahara Africa during the colonisation period but it is not clear. But this map is arranged by sides to commute information. There is a lot of evidence for these things in Greek and Roman gallery, in the Mediterranean Gallery. Medieval Africa well, there is evidence of connection between Europe and Africa in medieval period. We don't have archaeological material. The most of these are recent stuff, mostly from these kingdom's groups, a sort of Western style. They could have been on gold collections of the 19th century from Ghana to illustrate that, if you want to be clear. Then there is the Islamic influence: that's is the Islamic gallery. Then there is a link to Asia and the Ocean trade. Then there is why we call the beginning of globalisation, which is like the 16th century, when the European turn to Africa, the Benin bronzes, the slave trade. And that is very poorly represented in any of our galleries. In the European galleries may have hardly some reverences to relationships to the Africans or Americans. But there are one or two, like the blacksmith. But there are other museums, which provide much better resources, like the Slave Museum. But, then, the Money gallery actually is very good for illustrating these relationships; it is better than the African gallery. Then, there is the imperial period, which is the one from when most of our collections were collected. And I conclude with Africa in Britain and these shots about the locality. They are just shots to make the point that Africans reside in Britain. And these are some of the African connections with the British Museum, included the curator, who is married to a part African. White South African, North African, Afro-Caribbean, Nigerian, East African, Asian, they all work in the British Museum. That is my prospective, personal, from the educational point of view, on the African gallery.

R: could you tell me what exactly is your background on Yorùbá culture?

M1: All I know about Yorùbá is having worked with a Yorùbá exhibition, years ago and with Yorùbá related things in our African exhibitions. So I have read a bit about it and I have written a little book once upon long time ago. So, I have a sort of sufficient general knowledge to work with curators on that subject, if necessary.

R: and what do you know about religious beliefs?

M1: Well, I understand that they have these, lots of different small gods, which I equate with the Christian saints, my self, because I was once living in a convent. And of course in Brazil and other places they are quite equated with particular Christian saints.

R: Yes, but isn't this santeria?

M1: Yes, it is a combination of Yorùbá and Christian religion but the fact that these people make an equation it seems to me that they are pretty much like the saints in Catholicism. I did this so once in a Catholic schools teacher and he accused me of superstition. You know,

probably dogmatic Yorùbás may be the same. That seems to be the way it is. People belong to religious societies, according either to occupation, or to their particular needs, curing or helping, some sort of things like these. And there is a lots of other complicated cult societies which like the Ghanaian societies and all the ritual shrines kingships. But now, the most of Yorùbá are Christians or Muslims. The two religions, or the three religions, do a sort of courses so I have a sort of general understanding of it.

R: and how big was the section of religion, of Yorùbá religious objects in the exhibition you organised?

M1: Yes, that exhibition I mentioned was specifically about Yorùbá religious cults. So, it had, I don't know how many gods the Yorùbás have, but it had about thousands of different shrines or collections of things of particular gods, so it is very rich collection.

R: if you could define African religious object, how would you (a part the similarities you have identified with Christianity)?

M1: Well, I don't know if a use the category, really. If I had to, I would say that it could happened to be dedicated to a cult to worship or ritual activities, symbolic obviously, but in the other hand, you could include also incidental things like those gourds. So, I would say that there are things which are made specifically for particularly religious purposes and there are other things that are used incidentally, and that I suppose, may become consecrated processes, I am not certain.

R: for example, how would you define a Yorùbá divination cup, like this one in the picture?

M1: Well, I am trying to 'post' something of detailed to say, It is used for religious purposes and because it is important (that's way it is decorated): whether or not the figure on the top is related to Ifa, I am not certain, I cannot remember too much about Ifa to say that, but I suppose I will cline to describe in terms of its function and appearance related to that, rather that 'This is a piece of Yorùbá art', for instance. It doesn't seem to me a good piece of carving, anyway. It's evident the fact that Yorùbás did carving, decorated carving and things that were important for religious purposes, I suppose, that's all of I would say. Somebody who knew enough about art ethnography, will probably identify things like that, but I don't know for certain. I wouldn't be able go that deep. I would have do a lot of research before I could comment on to that.

R: how much could this object be labelled as art and how much as religious?

M1: I don't know enough about Yorùbá religion to say how far ritual objects are regarded as sacred or sacrosanto, holy, to be treated in a special way. I am sure some of them are, but some of them perhaps aren't. So I probably do an analogy with Christian objects, such crucifies, something like these, and these things in churches are used for ritual purposes but they can be quite easily de-consecrated and put in museums; so even they are used in people houses, I suppose, I imagine Catholics candles and stick and things like these. So, I don't know whether is inherently, so that the symbolism of it means that, but again, going by Christian analogy, you put the crucifixes in your house, it doesn't have to be dedicated only to a church or a shrine.

R: how much of the sanctity of these objects is represented in museums?

M1: It is very difficult but it depends on the religion, really. Because, for Instance, Australian aborigines ritual objects, which are many in museums, if you want to really to convey the sanctity of them, you have to make sure that women never see them.

R: like in Yorùbá society?

M1: Well, I don't know about Yorùbá but, that's the kind of the problem: how far do you respect the religion restrictions of these societies they come from? That may depends also on a sort of considerations, for instance, whether there are people who still following that religion. And if there are not, it doesn't matter too much, but if they are, they may be a great deal, whether they expect their religion to flight in far away country. But I think that probably people tend to change. I mean, hundreds of years ago, not many Yorùbás came to London, few Australian aborigines. But now, there are a lots of them, the most probably Christians or Muslims, and they probably don't care anymore. It is not easy to give a categorised answer to that. I think the all I would say is that museums displays should try to respect the cultural preferences of people they're representing. But even then, it depends on what those cultural preferences are, because if the cult preference is to be racist or genocide, then I don't think I would want to respect them. It is very difficult subject and in the end, I think, there is a basic question, of having respect for people and cultures and also having the clear ideas of your own values. You can't just hide behind the respect for other people values, if you really feel that these values are wrong. I find this subject very interesting to negotiate in practice without politics and culture. I don't think there is an easy answer to this. But proving clearly some basic guiding principles in judging how respect and carefully thinking of those values.

R: I have noticed that in the African gallery there is a section for some objects called 'fetishes': how do you consider the use of the term 'fetish' for these kinds of objects?

M1: Well, this is a difficult question as well, because, let me think, I am trying to find an analogy. In Salomon Island, the island where I did my research, in the local lingua franca is Pigi, which is like African, and the kind of terms use by Pigi are, like for the child is 'pikineni'. Now, the term 'pikineni' is an English term for black child and it is very patronising, colonial kind of term. So if you would call in English, an African child 'pikineni', probably it would be regarded as a racist and offensive term. But, in another hand, it is in their own language that they use and they give different meaning. As I understand, in calabashes, in the 19th century and before, when they had an upper class in relation to different classes, for the slave trade. I cannot remember which were these different classes but there were gentlemen and there were Negroes. Now, the Negroes, was one of the lower grades and obviously it was part of the old, abusive attitude but now the term is not offensive as it was in the XIX century. It is like for the term tribe.

R: What do you think visitors can get of a religion by seeing traditional objects displayed?

M1: Well you, need more then just three images to understand the religion of a country. You need to interpret these objects, because they can mediate the meanings between different times and people; but obviously, you need to mediate these meanings through the contextualisation of the displays and through the written information. Labels are very important and it depends how you write them. In the African gallery, for instance, texts presume too much prior knowledge and not all the visitors can have a specific knowledge about Africa. I think, the best way to do would be to simplify the information but not only by using panels.

R: how could events for African community could be improved to make people to interact more with the objects?

M1: They have already in the British Museum handling collections and play activities, but I think it would be better also to facilitate the access to the study centre of the museum.

R: what is your view of having a Yorùbá native explaining about the objects displayed?

M1: It would be very useful and interesting but I think that the first step should be to reassess the attitude that people still having with to black people.

R: Well, Dr. M1, I think that's it. Thanks a lot for your help and kindness.

M1: You are welcome. This is a very interesting topic, but as you probably know, is very sensitive. I hope I have been helpful with my answers and if you need any help, don't hesitate to contact me again.

**Interview with M2
African Worlds Galleries
Horniman Museum
London 12/08/02**

Interview with M2.

R: could you tell me your name, education, age, nationality...

M2: my name is M2, I am 31 years old, I have a PhD in Anthropology, I am Keeper of Anthropology in the Horniman Museum and my ethnicity is African, Kenyan.

R: As keeper of anthropology, which are exactly your duties in the Horniman Museum?

M2: I am in charge of all the ethnic collections, the collections from Africa, and I am also in charge of research on the collections, why do we need to collect objects. But I am also involved in interpreting the objects in terms of exhibitions and writing about the objects.

R: during your career did you have ever to deal with traditional religious objects as museum collections pieces or as subjects of study?

M2: Not now, I am very new here, I arrived here just a moth ago.

R: And what about before to come here?

M2: In Africa we had to deal with other different issues, very different from here. I'm coming from an African Museum, the National Museum of Kenya. And there, during our exhibitions we had different problems. It was ethnic problems, very big. People will look at the provenance: "where these objects are from? Why we are not in? Why we don't have our objects here?" So these were some big problems in exhibiting. How can we represent all the different African groups?

R: And what about the language used to define the items? You have hundreds of different dialects in Africa... Could you please tell me a bit more?

M2: Yes, it is a big problem because but people themselves they know that they are different. So, for example we have people called "Swahili", and we had several problems with that, because there are Swahili speakers, but they are not Swahili.

R: could you speak about any similar problems related to traditional religions?

M2: We had some problems with that. Our major problem in museum is to deal with the notion of religion and witchcraft. So, we had a feeling that many Africans were not comfortable with things that they believe are charms. So, even if I wanted to present that, many people would say me "we don't want that, this is witchcraft! We are Christians, why are you putting this? This belongs to a primitive past?" So it is a big problem, first of all, to make people appreciate their own culture, they must understand their own culture and how to present it. People often don't go to museum because it is a Western place, it is a colonial space. It is a different way of understanding museums.

R: How is it organised the Educational department of the Horniman Museum (in relation to African Galleries and obviously if you have to deal with the Educational Department)?

M2: We have an educational department which has its own collection and it is called "Educational handling collection" and they have a teaching space, where children come in and they are taught and they are shown objects, they are told about the origin and the use of the objects, which is specifically one aspect of the children curriculum on the areas which

teachers are interested in. The collection of the Education Department also reflects our collection, it is almost a copy of what we have in displays. We do have education programs that in a way, tie in our collection. So, when we talk about Benin, African civilisation, we know that we have Benin African bronzes in our exhibition. So, at the end of the day, the students will come around our exhibition and understand the inter-link. So we are trying to come up with something, which talks about something, that it is in our gallery. But we also have talks for special groups of people and they don't have to be children. So, for example, now we are planning a talk for adults, during the black history month, in October, and it is going to be about African world, African cultures in the world; it will be a specialised way to talk but within the exhibition.

R: could you tell me a bit about the Museum events which target the local African community?

M2: We do express to have different perspectives, because our community is multicultural, but "African worlds" was put there initially to capture that aspect of multicultural representation, because this museum has a big collection of African art, it has a big African community around, who never has been motivated to come to the museum. So, having something like that, it would help people to understand more about African cultures.

R: how would you describe, or, summarise, the African gallery?

M2: I think this is an exhibition that celebrates Africa as a global culture. Africa goes beyond the country: it's an experience, it is a shared understanding.

R: Are any aspects or, better to say, sections of the gallery that you prefer or that you would like to improve in the exhibition?

M2: Yes, all the main strengths of the African gallery were in the representation of the Egypt as part of Africa. Egypt has been considered before, as somewhere away from Africa but this exhibition tries to show that it is Africa. So I would like to develop better this link to understand better the time and to see how Egyptian civilisations has some kind influences of Sub Saharan culture.

R: And what about religious objects on display?

M2: Those things were presented to my knowledge, not necessary for the religious section. They were presented as examples of African cultures abroad, so having the Haitian, the Voodoo shrine, having the African shrines next to it was a way of showing the aspects of African shrines, how aspects of African religion, culture came across the Ocean, until Brazil. But it was not presented as a real shrine. They tried to represent African culture in the world.

R: what do you think visitors can understand of the main message of the African gallery?

M2: well, we are not very keen to teach things, but we are trying to display, to celebrate what was in our collection, that's important. I think that, at some level, some people, at intellectual level, go to museums to understand what we reveal. But, for the people I have seen, they really like this exhibition of African masks. That was not our aim: our aim was to represent Africa, not African masks. So, it is very hard, I cannot say that everybody can understand what we display in the museum, unless you are an expert, with a specific historical background.

R: which are the traditional religious Yorùbá objects displayed in the gallery? (except for the Gèlèdé masks)?

M2: We have the divination bowl; we have the twins figures, which I think you have seen in the display. But we have to go and see.

R: How did they become part of the African collection of the Horniman museum?

M2: Most of them were bought by the curators who were here and others were bought from shops and others were sent to the Horniman museum by the traders and they used to come in the ships, in the past two centuries.

R: What is it exactly you background about Yorùbá culture and traditional Yorùbá religious beliefs?

M2: I come from Kenya and Kenya and Nigeria are very different. I don't have a good background on Yorùbá, although I have studied African art. So, I cannot say too much about Yorùbá. I know the rough outlines.

R: I think it still be useful if you could tell me anything you know, about Yorùbá culture and its beliefs, especially if you find similarities between Kenyan and Nigerian beliefs?

M2: I know that Yorùbás believe that women have *ase*, they have spiritual power, that is celebrated during the Gèlèdé masquerades. That is a concept which is wide spread in Africa: women having special power, in many societies, women have *ajana*, and this is a special power. And women are always addressed as "our mothers", because to be a mother is something special, it is almost a secret. So, the representations of the mothers-figures, in Yorùbá religions, almost have correlation with that thing in common "mother being an important thing". And the Yorùbás also have the belief in twins, that's why they have the Ibeji figures. Twins are not a normal path; one child is normal, two of them to come out, is not normal. In African traditions, religions those are very precise issues: death, birth and initiations, those are main ritual stages. Whatever happened at that time, is an indication of what will happen to the society, because people believe that all these things are interlinked. In many African societies the birth was really a crucial time, because it is a stage between the continuity of live and the end of life, so, they say that about the 40% of births among Yorùbá people were twins, which was a very special thing. And may be because of the high death rate, during at that time, one of the twins could die or even both of the twins died, people tried to come up with the images of the twins as alternatives and which the mother carries with her everywhere. So, when the spirit comes to take one of the twins, he sees the wrong image, and doesn't take the real child. It is a way of protecting, it's like a charm to protect the child. The figures are representations: when the spirit comes, will get the representation, not the real twin. It is a practice also among the Ibo, but usually they have problems with children. When a woman has miscarriages, they say that is the child who doesn't want to come in this world and they call him *ogbange*. So, they have special rituals that are to call that child to come. For instance, a woman can have several miscarriages, when eventually she has a child, they say "he eventually decided to come"; they treat that child as the same who was miscarried. The concept is: "you have to capture it, you have to pray, you have to have rituals during births, because they are very important stages of life".

R: what do you know about these rituals?

M2: I cannot remember, I have read, but I cannot remember. And also about the name: such child is given a fake name, so when the spirit comes, he misses the child. It is a way of protecting the child, so, he will grow. If you look at the psychological context, there are several issues: many few children could grow up, because there were many diseases that were not treatable, and there was a such desperation to keep the child; that's way so many initiations, so many rituals were concentrated at the child's birth. The birth is a very critical point: the child can either grow or die.

R: Do you remember any kind of initiation ceremony?

M2: I cannot remember now, but it is a common thing in Africa that wooden figures are given the most important things: like milk, which is related to couples, to fertility; blood, it is very important; you give it the kola nuts and we also decorate this kind of figures. Kola nuts are very important in Africa: they were used to exchange or the cowries shells, because they are very important. So you could see these kinds of figures always decorated. Continued decoration and feeding keep the ancestors alive. If you forget him: may be some day you forget to bring that, you don't cut the throat of a chicken or you don't shed the blood of the chicken, things may start going wrong. And people will say that it is because we forgot to take care our ancestors and the spirits now are becoming angry and they are causing diseases. Diseases are not caused by bacteria but they are caused by spirits.

R: Are the ancestors only male or can they be also female?

M2: The strongest ancestors in African religion were female, because they are linked to fertility, they are linked to production, but people will not tell you that. In most of the African figures you can see breasts being prominent. They are proportioned, they are prominent, they are exaggerated, because you exaggerate productivity, you believe that God will be too generous to us. It is not because the artist cannot make a human figure in the right way but it is because he is projecting the productivity. If you look at some Yorùbá figures you can see the children sucking from the mother. The mother is the earth, we depend on the earth and the mother can carry so many people. So God has been so generous with the mother, he has been so kind, so you have to celebrate that, we have to offer.

R: what do you know about the Gèlèdè masquerade?

M2: That is interesting. In Africa women have ambivalent position. They are productive, they are good but they are also dangerous. It is that ambivalence that the Gèlèdè masquerade celebrates. But it celebrates by men, because the anxiety of African society, which is obviously related to men, is about life, is about continuity. The rain can fall, the crop can fail, you can be attacked, the children can die, you can be infertile, as a man. Those are the main fears that the men try to dispel with the Gèlèdè masquerade. The Gèlèdè is the mother, is the celebration of the women spirits, which have to be controlled, to be productive. The Ase, that special spirit of women, has to be controlled; but it also has to be celebrated. Masquerade is actually a way of showing the gods that will acknowledge you, if you celebrate. And if you don't do that, the female spirit, which is the most powerful spirit, will turn against the society. So, you will have in the society children who are born with deformations, or you will have diseases, which nobody knew about. That is why Gèlèdè is about women, spirits of women, but it is celebrated by men, who are the head of the society, who are the ones who will be accountable for the success or the failure of the society.

R: How would display a ceremonial gourd in a museum display?

M2: One way is if you can reconstruct the shrine. Another way is to put it in a container, cup and you could say only "Yorùbá. Divination cup, container". This other way is wrong, because it is not how they exist. That's is the problem with this kind of objects: you should try almost to reflect how it was preserved in the society. But in museums we tend to look for a way, which is the most convenient for us, based on displays, based on the objects' conservation, based on the light. If you have good money, then you can bring things very low and cover to don't let people step on it. So, the best way I would have displayed, it would have been to put in the context where it was used: in a shrine, because these objects were not objects used as art.

R: How would you differentiate it from "art"?

M2: We consider it now as art. In Africa now we put them in our sitting rooms and you admire it. But this is not how it was used. The owner may be will never saw it clearly. It is like when you go to the church: you are focusing on praying, you are not focusing on what

the priest is wearing. So, when Africans are in the shrine, they are focused on praying the gods and not in the object.

R: OK, Dr M2, I think this is enough, for this time. Than you a lot for your helpfulness and I will contact you in the future.

M2: I hope I have been useful. Carry on with your research and good luck.

**Interview with M3
Liverpool Museum
Liverpool 22/01/04**

Interview with M3.

M3: My name is M3.

R: and your education?

M3: well, my university education four-year course then I did a MA at the university of East Anglia and in the same place I did the PhD on Maconde sculpture. If you are interested this was the product, this is not my thesis but that was the book I made after my thesis. So essentially I'm an east African specialist.

R: and your nationality?

M3: my passport is British but I was born in Uganda. And, I am 41 years old.

R: Which are duties in the museum in relation to the ethnographic collection?

M3: Well I am the curator of the African collections, so I have responsibilities for both for collections management, of collections displays, I developed the concept of, because I came in 1999 in the museum, I took on the gallery, and took it forward and develop the concept of a story line; I have also been involved in the discovery centre, another gallery which is linked to the World Cultures gallery, but it is an hands on gallery where people can find out things in the hands on way, play games and etcetera.

R: how long have you been in charge of the collection?

M3:- I arrived in June 1999, and at that point the museum had already got a lottery grant to redevelop the museum. The world cultures gallery which was the, it is a large gallery, which will be essentially Africa, America and Asia, but it will be open only next year, in April.

R: concerning the African objects, how many Yorùbá objects will you have on display?

M3: on display we will have 26 Yorùbá objects; obviously the gallery want not open until 2005; and now those 26 artefacts, are split in 2 displays: one is the Yorùbá section in the gallery, but the other five are in another case of the gallery, which shows European figures. I can show you the pictures if you like.

R: and will you have any traditional Yorùbá religious items?

M3:- the main Yorùbá section, which is one of the smallest I am afraid in the gallery, it is not very ambitious, but we have masks, we have few religious items: one Shango stuff, two Shango stuff, 1 Esu masks, 2 Ibeji figures, a figurative offering bowl from Lagos, 2 figurative offering bowls, a beautiful double, ivory, a bracelet form Jebo ode, all from the site, a bronze shire group, a sword, which is inserted in a political context, and a male shrine figure, a divination Shango, finally a figure of Queen Victoria. In the other case that I mentioned at the beginning of the interview, we have (check this in the photocopies he gave me), a European on the bicycle, another figure of Queen Victoria.

R: the Yorùbá section, how will it be called?

M3: it is titled Nigeria, Yorùbá, because essentially I should explain the gallery, the concept of the gallery is very much... because the main collections were donated by a man called Arnold Ridyard,

who was a shipping engineer, with the shipping line. He was a shipping engineer and he donated almost everything he collected between 1895 and 1916, so the main concept of the gallery involves this period, so in a sense you could say that it's mainly historical, and what we have done with the layout of the cases is to follow the traders which travelled down along the coast. So we start with Sierra Leone and then with Ghana of course it is called Ghana in these days but the collection was collected at that time. And we travel down the coast to the South west of Nigeria.

R: Is in the exhibition any explicit mention to the Colonial time?

M3: yes, in fact, it's the period, and the very start of the colonial period. It is very much that period.

R: sorry, may be I didn't understand well, the objects that you are going to display, are all belonging to the collection of Arnold Ridyard?

M3: not all of them, I am afraid, no.

R: and which will be your criteria to display them?

M3: yeas, ok. As I said it is one of the smallest cases in the gallery and this is because we don't have a big Yorùbá collection, and the criteria is, I mean, the main thing, because of the way the gallery is set up, for the Yorùbá the main thing was to show the, because it is dispose in a small case, and also a very important part of Africa, the thing was to select a group of artefacts and display the diversity of Yorùbá material culture. It is one of the biggest groups, in Africa and diverse materials from bronze to... and also the styles vary from region to region. And also we could not do any kind of systematic displays of any kind and the collections are not all outstanding a couple of outstanding pieces. But within that I haven't chosen only from and amount of most outstanding pieces because, Queen Victoria figure, and also loaded with collections collected by Ridyard.

R: and will the exhibition be permanent?

M3: yes, it will be.

R: concerning the Yorùbá traditional beliefs, there was any kind of research about the objects?

M3: first of all the display is not a display about traditional Yorùbá religion, first thing to mention. The person, who because I didn't do all the research and all the texts of the gallery, over half, for the Yorùbá, had a consultant to write the texts. And he had done research in Nigeria, in the village of Kole Kiti. He has done anthropological research, mainly he has done masquerade but the life of the town of Kole Kiti. So, he was given the task of researching the objects and writing the texts. His name is William Reed, Dr William Reed, he has a position as lecturer in sculpture at the University of Leeds, and if you want to contact him. So, I mean, that's it, he has long familiarity with Yorùbá culture, he has been doing research all over the country for many years. We didn't have a budget to consult widely among the Yorùbá community. The Yorùbá texts were given to a, a Yorùbá man, who is volunteering in the museum. He is called Bajio, and he read the labels and texts and he didn't really have any comments on that.

R: is he a Yorùbá born in Britain?

M3: no he has born in Africa, in Nigeria. We don't have a big Yorùbá community in Liverpool but in terms of Yorùbá people involved in the gallery, they are more involved in the music side, because we have computers interactive in the gallery.

The musician himself he is called, he likes to call himself: 'Prince', he is the son of a chief, Kondo state in Nigeria, because he was born in Britain, he does this but his family still in Nigeria and he has a band called: 'The River Niger orchestra' and they play Nigerian music and he like to play music from the river Niger area, from Mali trough to Niger delta, but mainly Yorùbá influences because that's his origin. So, he, we had him involved in developing part of the music interactive, African music interactive, which will be in the gallery, there is a small section interactive.

R: which will be the link of the music with the display?

M3: there will not be a direct link. Sorry, we do have another section of interactive, which is Yorùbá Masquerades, I was going to bring the interactive later but there is a section, which is organised, and that interactive has been put together with the video footage shot by William Reeve.

R: if you could summarise the main themes of the displays, which ones will they be?

M3: right, ok, well, the thing was that this particular gallery, when the lottery heritage, lottery fund, produced the money, develop the gallery they specify that first of all we had a poor collection, nationally and internationally, the collection was very poor. Very few of them were ever on display, most of the objects were stored in very poor conditions, in very unsuitable environmental conditions, so the main concern of the heritage lottery fund when they gave us the grant was to bring the collections out of the storage and put it on display, to make them more accessible. So that was the original rationale, but then we entered a number of stages, even before I arrived, they did a kind of evaluation survey, and there were produced documents like this and they came to a number of conclusions about what that local communities and the people in the research would be interested in... Issues that really attracted them were things like, where the objects came from, why they brought them here, so those issues. Yea, so why and how the objects came to Liverpool, they were interested in the account of 2 different cultures, 2 different cultures, the links between countries the idea of trade. Of course, since we took this on, we also tried to do with colonialism. But in terms of the themes of the gallery, there is one main theme... the African gallery, because they are all different, slidly different, was a major port, was the biggest port in the world at the time, so that was a major fact that the African gallery starts of with some displays that put Africa in a context and not historical isolated. So the cult, the figure of Madonna, the Islamic writing, so these objects make the point that Africa has not historically isolated.

R: what about the displays?

M3: well, as I said the gallery is linked to Liverpool and his history, as I mentioned in the introduction about West Africa, you can take these if you like (*photocopies of the new display cases*), displays created are mostly about Liverpool and West African trade, and the objects have been arranged so they can follow the shipping rotes down the West coast of Africa from Sierra Leone and Angola; and together present African culture in the context of 3 main themes: the links between African people, also the effects of the European trade and intervention, changing European perception of African, so there is section in the gallery that deals with European Artists of the XIX and to African sculpture. So that is the main theme. In so far as we do with Yorùbá religion, it is dealt with the labels of the objects and a little bit in the introduction panel, I can give you a copy of that (*he gave me a copy of the texts of the labels*).

R: yes, please.

M3: it mentions that among many Yorùbá Christians, the worshipping of the Orishas still is strong, so that's mentioned in the introduction panel, and then the individual labels deal with individual objects. But the text of the gallery has been cut down quite substantially since it

was written, because we had a new keeper in the museum who came and enjoyed last year; and he decided that the gallery had too much text and it was written for an audience too high educated. The reading age was 7, for 12 years old but we were asked to cut the texts by half, which was very frustrating. And anyway, of course, we could do that, because it would have ruined the gallery, but we did cut of a quarter and we had to reduced the reading age to a reading age of 9 years old, which of course, we did not achieve that because we could not have explained some of the concepts; but we had reduce the reading age. That's to make it more accessible.

R: how did you deal with objects: were they considered more as artefacts, symbols or historical proves?

M3: I suppose you can say that it is a compromise; it is a bit of both, it's, because the Yorùbá case it's quite small, and it is not as consistent, in the actual objects, relating to, you know, the main message of that case, the way it links to the neighbourhood cases is in the all context of the gallery. As I said the main rationale, the idea was to put things on displays this was the main rational. As I mention in the introduction, to put Yorùbá culture within a context of links, between African people, and is also a mention of the reinvention of Yorùbá culture is santeria in Caribbean Brazil and of course, with the objects, the parallel, so looking at these connections, the effects of the European trade and colonialism and I should mention that the idea with of the first case, with the figure of Europeans, it is very much to present in a quite humorous way, because they are quite humorous figures, this clear manifestation of Europeans in Africa, because there are figures like the minister commissioner, a man in the motorbike. It is also in that first case we also like to confront the idea that in Africa the Europeans are the exotic ones. That display is really the display of the European exoticism. But as I said this are the Yorùbá cases. It is quite an eclectic collection as well, it is quite difficult to produce a kind of typological it is very difficult, it is very difficult to do any kind historical display, it is quite difficult to do an aesthetic display, because there are some wonderful pieces, but they are not particularly aesthetic. So, may be you could criticise it from an historical, anthropological and aesthetic point of view, whatever, so it is perfect to just fill, if you like, the Yorùbá gap, in this story. The trade and those stories are developed much more in the gallery. There are study benches, 3 study benches, where people can sit down and read up more details. With a flipbook on the table, stand and the benches and I can show you a plan of the gallery.

R: which kind of information will visitors get about African masquerades?

M3: there are captions for those, they are not very long because we have been pressured to cut down the texts as short as possible. For all of these, there is an introduction text that introduce and then there are captions and it is the same with the making things introductions. And finally we have a section called music, which will involve, initially we had the idea of having background sound in the gallery to provide some sound to the gallery, but the new keeper of decided that... So, I but those are now gone interactive. So, we had various performances.

R: which kind of activities do you have that target specifically the African community?

M3: Yes, I mean, there it will be a program, a public program, but obviously, because the gallery is not yet ready, we had being doing a number of things, like the Discovery centre. But yes, there are Africans, not very many. There is a large community of people who came originally at the end of the American War of Independence. It's a complex situation of the African community.

R: before the opening of the gallery, where were these objects displayed?

M3: well as I said, very few of them were displayed at all. We had one small gallery but it was a small one.

R: could you tell me your view on the holiness or sanctity of traditional African religious objects on display?

M3: Well, I was a bit worried about that because there is a risk of creating an idealised idea of Yorùbá secret culture, which might not relate to the religious practices. I don't know how much you know about Yorùbá religious practices, how much have you read about it, but, for example, a shrine figure, is not a sacred object in itself, it becomes sacred through actions, and of course, especially among Yorùbá Christians, in Nigeria today, tend to be an idealised vision of Yorùbá secret culture. So, these issues are the ones I am a bit worried about, because you can do a gallery on Yorùbá religion, how could you assemble and represent the different visions of Yorùbá religion? There must be somebody who is not a Christian and still practising traditional religion. So, it is a very complex thing if you are trying to deal with an idealised version of traditional Yorùbá religion, you have to put in the context of Christianity and Islam and of course the Born Again Christian vision of Yorùbá religion is the religion of the devil, while the Catholic vision is a colonial vision so what do you do with the objects used in of Yorùbá religion that are not relics, in the sense of Christian relics, which have a sacredness themselves being directly connected to the saint himself. Yorùbá carvings or figures they are not directly connected, they do not have the metonymical, spiritual connection to the gods they are simply points of collections, activations produced through sacrifices, if you like, focus of communications, really, with the gods, the Orishas.

R: is this explained in the labels?

M3: not, because I am not doing a gallery about Yorùbá religion.

R: but it has also religious objects.

M3: yes, but our labels are so small, you can read, I can give you a copy of them. I am just saying the complexity of the issue, which you can't do in a gallery that is devoted to something else. So, I mean, you can have it in the labels: ESU... (example related to the function of the item: i.e. to be carried by the believer) that's all we have to say, a part from the introductory panel which introduces very briefly the pantheon of Yorùbá religion. That's all there is room for. And a part from the masquerade, unless we produce a catalogue, and I hope we will. What ever you do in gallery you can't make everything and you have to make a choices. And we made our choice. The African gallery does not have to be only a gallery about Africa, in this case West African but it also has to fit with the other galleries, Asia, America, so the themes, at least they have to link up a bit, so there are all these restrictions, choices to make and we made our own. Although in the case we show Yorùbá religious objects, we do not presenting a discussion about Yorùbá religion. Of course, we are trying to make justice to the objects by displaying their cultural context. The image that goes on the Yorùbá panel is a babalawo with a Shango stuff, so I guess, I suppose you get an idea of human dimension of the sacred in that dimension of sacred performance and there is a caption that explains who he is, and what he is doing. There are graphic images on, all through out the gallery, this happens to be Yorùbá but of course, we have a panel per section. Shango is a good idea because we have 2 Shango stuff in the display. From another point of view, Yorùbá artefacts are made by sculptures not by priests. You know, if you talk to a priest, about one of our carved objects in the gallery, without sacrificing, he says that it is just wood; it would not have the sanctity of Christian relics. But if the sacrifice was made, it would become sacred. But again, don't forget that's a all gallery that does not have to do with Yorùbá religion.

R: and the guy you mentioned before, did he have anything to do with Yorùbá religion?

M3: no as I said he was a volunteer in the museum; off course I talked to Prince allow but he had very much his own concerns about. So, I mean, if you get well with the people of the community, off course he was very positive about the gallery itself, he was very positive in being involved in the music. But as I said, this is a big gallery I am the curator and we run under a lot of pressure to finish. So there wasn't a budged to get Yorùbá consultants. At a stage we had a project called the 'voices projects ' and we had brought here, we interviewed people of the community to look at the objects, key objects, and tell us, there were a serious of questions, but we asked them to look at the objects and tell us what they felt, what they know about. Do you have any other questions?

R: no, I think that's enough, that you very much.

**Interview with M4
The Court
Pitt Rivers Museum
Oxford 04/02/04**

Interview with M4.

R: could you tell me your name, your age, education, nationality?

M4: Oh right. M4. I am 49, how much of my education do you want?

R: if you could tell me what is you academic background...

M4: I did an undergraduate degree in social studies at the University of East Anglia, then came here and did postgraduate work in anthropology – In social anthropology. British, live in Oxford and my post here is - it's a job share post, so I share with my wife and we are called, jointly, Head of Collections or Head of Collections Management depending on which form we're in.

R: Yeah, and how long have you been working in this museum?

M4 Just about 10 years. It'll be 10 years next month.

R: And which exactly are you duties in relation to the ethnography to the collections?

M4: Our job is called Head of Collections or Head of Collections Management and we are, what in most other museums would be, the curators of the collections. There are other people on the staff who have joint teaching and curatorial roles, but we are the day to day curators of the collections, so we are responsible for maintaining the records for the collection, dealing with loans, dealing with visiting researchers and all that side of things, and working with conservation and technical services. Plus, we have our own curatorial expertise so I am curatorially responsible for the African and Pacific collections, so where African or Pacific material is being considered for display, I have a particular specialist role as well as a general role, with regard to the collections as a whole. Does that make sense?

R: Yeah it does. How many Yorùbá objects do you have in the museum?

M4: How many? I don't know! I was going to check on the computer because everything downstairs, everything on the ground floor, all the locations for all that material is now on the computer, so I could tell you, but I'll have to send you an email. I could tell you exactly how many Yorùbá pieces are on display downstairs.

R: Also, how many religious or ceremonial Yorùbá objects do you have in the museum?

M4: Yes, yep. I mean there's probably – in the museum as a whole it's probably 60, 70, something like that, altogether. Spread around all the different displays – of the Yorùbá pieces (AC: Yeah, yeah Yorùbá), and then, but then you also have a problem with this museum of having material in the drawers (AC: Yeah), which is also – you could regard as display, or you could regard it as storage.

R: Yeah, it's not very easy to find them.

M4: No. I mean, that's really storage rather than display. It's nice for people to be open – to be able to open them.

R: People, if they want to see the objects from the store, can't they ask for somebody to show them?

M4: No. Not just... no. Anybody can make an appointment to come and look at material as a researcher but no, you can't just do it when you like. OK? (R: Yes) But I will try and give you more accurate figures if I can.

R: Thank you very much, you've been very helpful

M4: I mean, I should tell you that all the records are available online.

R: All the records?

M4: Yeah.

R: OK.

M4: So you can go online, to museum studies debates, put in Yorùbá, and you can get all the records of all the collections.

R: Also how they were collected?

M4: Yes, it will tell you who collected it, what we know about when they collected it and where and how, how it came to the museum, so it's, yeah, it's a big task!

R: Maybe it's better speak about your own experiences in relation to these objects, because at least I can get this kind of information from the Internet. (M4: Yeah) So...

M4: I mean, I'm not quite sure how many Yorùbá pieces there are altogether, but like the other collections, it will be a mixture of material that was collected by trained academic anthropologists in the field, and then material that was collected by district commissioners and other political officers and missionaries. I think it's quite a lot of additional material to... So it's going to be a good mixture of that sort of range of material. There's certainly Yorùbá material in the funding collection of Pitt Rivers himself, including one or two important masks, which is down there, and when did we most recently get the Yorùbá material? Not sure. But there are, there are some particularly interesting pieces, like a sculpture of Queen Victoria which is downstairs, the figure of the district commissioner, which is a good example of sort of, the colonial presence, and then one or two very special pieces like the piece by Allaway Veseng.

R: where exactly?

M4: the very tall piece? (AC: Yeah) Which was in the – there was a show devoted to him at the Museum of African Art in Washington two years ago. That piece was there.

R: OK, is there any specific kind of research going on in relation to the objects or these specific objects? I mean how do you carry on the research in Pitt Rivers? Because they have so many objects...

M4: There's all sorts of research going on all the time. Loads by museum staff and by students and by visiting researchers, so at any one moment, there are any number of research projects focused on the collections. There hasn't been any – I'm just trying to think when there's last been somebody focused specifically on the Yorùbá collections. There's nobody at present working on the Yorùbá collections. I did a bit of work on the Allaway Veseng figure when it was going to be lent to white. Working with Rosalind Walker at the museum in Washington, and also we lent them the mask from a Collection to the National Gallery of Australia for an exhibition a couple of years ago, so I did what I could to research that then. So, it's - a lot of what I do – and I do have my own research projects – but recently I've been focused on the Pacific, but a lot of what I and my colleagues do, is to research original pieces and their history in particular, when they are requested for loan, or

when we are mounting a new display or when a visiting researcher is coming and wants to see those pieces. So that's sort of – there's a lot of day-to-day targeted research on specific pieces, particularly on their history and what we know about them, from within the museum's own records. That's... I've done quite a bit of work on the Benin collection. I've never – even though I'm a sort of an Africanist, as an East Africanist, I've always thought of the Yorùbá as something else, and there are so many people that work on Yorùbá that I – it's never been a priority for me. Having said that, there's a lot of material here which has never been published, never been researched, never been exhibited, and, you know, it'd be nice one day if somebody did pay it a bit more attention. So there are particular pieces that are known about and get repeated over and over again, like the figure of Queen Victoria, like the Allawaya Veseng, like the mask I told you about, the figure of the colonial officer that – they sort of become part of a canon that people know about, but there's a lot of other material that's not really been researched or published. And including a lot of – certainly a lot of figurative material, and, you know schools and researchers. This is a museum of ethnography that has so much material on display, doesn't have more Yorùbá material prominently on display because almost anywhere else, Yorùbá is such an important...- but it is because, I think the answer to that is, that this is not an art museum, so in any museum, and even somewhere like the Horniman, it's an art exhibition really, they want an art exhibition – or the British Museum – then you could it as an art...Yorùbá come to the fore in any discussion about art, but if you're looking at the whole range of human activity in Yorùbá culture, then Yorùbá don't necessarily come to the fore, I mean they could do, there's lots of other cultures that get a look-in as well, so I think the fact that it's less prominent than other phases is because it's not – there isn't so much of a figurative art in the decision about what goes on display.

R: Yeah but I find it quite strange. In the display downstairs where they say in religion – this one, yeah, where they have...- I didn't see any elements from other countries apart from Asia.

M4: Yes, no that's right. Yeah, I mean, if we... I mean those displays have been – they change – but they've been like that for a very long time and if we were to re-do those displays, they'd certainly – there would be, there's a lot of other material that could be brought out. Because a lot of the material that's in the case that's called Human Form in Art could be Human Form in Religious Art, easily.

R: I was noticing about the labels in the charms and amulets display, there is no a label about African charms and amulets...

M4: Yeah, those are – those are sort of the text labels?

R: Yeah yeah the one that explains.

M4: They are new. This is a new thing that we're only doing now. This is absolutely brand new and yeah, I think there is, there certainly is material on West Africa which is meant to go in those cases. The next time you come you can probably read them!

R: OK. And what about your – have you had any specific response from the local African community? Did anybody have a negative comment about religious items on display?

M4: There is not a large African community in Oxford. There's an Afro-Caribbean community. There are –so the – the only way I can really answer that is sort of anecdotal, having spoken to, with individuals rather than the community, and generally speaking, the reaction has been, always been, very positive. It's always been a reaction of interest and surprise and discovery to find pieces related to their own experience on this museum, and generally speaking that's the, that's the response one gets because the displays are so cross-cultural, because there isn't a sort of apartheid between the West and Africa or Australia or whatever, that – most people from 3rd or 1st world communities tend to

enjoy discovering pieces that they know about or are from their own society, on display. They just enjoy it and are not aware of anybody from Yorùbá or any other West African background, being at all perturbed about the way any of the material is displayed, and have had that reaction from Native American groups in particular, not really even from Australian Aboriginal groups – it's not really happened. There are questions about some of the – there's the repatriation question which is a different one – but generally speaking, there's not been a problem with cultural material on display. That's a very long answer to a very simple question!

R: No, thank you. So, was any Yorùbá person involved in any of the research or any label writing of the items?

R: I think the answer to that, is no. I mean, there have, there have been Yorùbá academics involved in researching individual pieces here and there, and their research gets fed back into the ongoing research, but in just the same way as every researcher from anywhere else. There have been a number of Yorùbá researchers.

R: Where was this, here in Oxford?

R: No, no, mostly based in America. So these are academics that happen to be Yorùbá and are working on Yorùbá but no, there's not been any proactive attempts on our part to involve Yorùbá - Yorùbá individuals in deciding what goes on display or providing labels etc. It's happened in some other areas – it's happened, certainly with North American collections, it's happened with Maori collections where we redid the space on body arts. We consulted with, again, academics, on how this material should be talked about, partly because there's so much material and it is from everywhere, that we tend to work through, – and, because it's a university museum – we tend to work through the academic community, because nowadays there are a number of people in the academic community who have contacts with source communities. That tends to be the way we work. There are individual members of staff who have particular relationships with source communities, who are working more closely in discussing how material should be stored and how it should be displayed and what should be done with it. So there again, particularly with North America and with Tibet. At the moment there is nobody with – working closely with – African communities or Africa.

R: And any activities related to the African community? Do you have any future plans?

M4: Well, not really, I mean we do, we occasionally have events, either aimed at school children or the wider community based on the African collections or African cultures. We always try and do something for Africa Week, which is – Oxford has an Africa Week like London has an Africa Week. We did – a couple of years ago – we did a project called Objects Talk, where the education staff worked closely with members of different communities in Oxford, both artistic groups and ethnically defined groups like the Asian Arty club, things like that. And there were certainly some African groups involved in that, but generally speaking, it's not a very strong focus of what we're doing at the moment – our sort of, outreach and access work is focused upon areas of Oxford, but that's not necessarily absolutely targeted at the African community. I don't know whether there is a strong Yorùbá community. But if we were doing, I mean as you know, most of the displays are typological, so each time we do a typological display, we could consult with representatives of 200 communities. If we were doing a new display focused on a particular culture, then we would take steps to consult in a way that we just, at the moment, can't do. I mean, I was responsible for the new displays on body arts, and we have material from, I don't know – 150 cultures there? I mean, to consult with representatives from all those cultures would be an impossible task.

R: where were these objects actually stored? I mean, these objects, where are they stored before to be displayed?

M4: Well, some were on display already. Yeah, that area was sort of, devoted to Body Arts anyway, so some were on display, some were in the drawers in store, some were stored off-site and we acquired a few specifically for the display, maybe, 20 we acquired specifically for the display, so this is only – what's on display is only a part of what's in the collections, so in doing a new display, it's a matter of really looking at what we have and thinking about using that material and occasionally I want to make a specific acquisition to fill a gap that you think is important.

R: And what about the first section up the stairs? What is going to happen to it?

M4: Eventually, there's – downstairs, there's a display of firearms, which was very important for Pitt Rivers, that's what he started with and in the long term plan, the far – the wall cases at the far end, which are currently blocked off, they will – both those and the desk tops that we've been talking about – will have a new firearm display, but that's quite a long way down the line 'cos that's a major task. And in the interim, we are planning to have a temporary display of research projects – the current, recent and current research projects in the museum that are focused on what museum staff and visiting researchers have been working on.

R: can you actually change the displays?

M4: no, no, no, this is a complete misconception. The terms of the gift were that a building be erected to house the collection, which is where we are, that somebody be appointed to lecture in anthropology, and that the mode of display, the type that we mentioned there, should be maintained until science determines otherwise. So in other words, until, well, understanding of material culture can change because Pitt Rivers was a man of science – he recognised that his ideas wouldn't last forever, so we could completely change. We could have - we could just do cultural displays and nothing else if we wanted, but for various reasons, and I think because doing things typologically is a very valid, important way of doing things and allows you to do your sculpture in a way, we maintain a typological... - but the way I see it, it's a conscious, deliberate decision that we decide to do, so when we did the Body Art – when we wanted to display that area, we chose a theme that was already represented there and we followed it through and tried to do the temporary displays that look more up to date than the old ones, but are typological and they've got lots of material and they're very dense and they're typologically organised and I put .. up to date .. in. That certainly I think, what we are all committed to – when we have time and the opportunity, to redo a display, then it really is the typological that we want to maintain. And part of the problem is that there is so much, and people think it's easy to redisplay but it isn't. That display is 1300 objects and it's not a big space but it's a lot of work. I mean, in some other museum that would be 4 rooms or 5 rooms.

R: which kind of public services are offered to the public to check the collections? (apart from the internet)

M4: at the moment nothing. Not at the moment, no. There are – what we try to do – there's information provided on the labels in every case and that has to be limited because of the number of objects. We are trying different ways of providing more information out of the case – you would've seen there's an information sheet. Downstairs, those new text labels, our new attempt to try and provide more information, we have an audio guide. There are a number of publications, museum publications available in the shop, which also has quite a good selection of anthropological and art historical works that are available to understand the collections as a whole. We are also trying to develop material on the web about things that we know people want more information about, like masks, body art and we provide full access to museum studies basis, so what we try to do is – because there is a huge demand from a whole different range of people, for information about all aspects of all societies all over the world, it's difficult to meet it all and we try to attempt to meet some of that in those different ways. And certain, I think we all see, for visitors who actually come here, the audio guide as being something to develop and because it doesn't disturb other people. If you

have lots of computers and things, you disturb other people, but if you just walk around with an audio guide then you don't – not disturb other people. And so the audio guide is a prime thing and providing more information at different levels on the web as our prime – providing more information. In the longer term, we're hoping to have a new facility – build a new facility – where we will be able to do more with visitors to the museum, so we'll get a seminar room, and a lecture room, where we'll be able to show films. We'll be able to have computer terminals and do all sorts of other things but that's a little way off.

R: what would describe being the target audience of the Pitt Rivers museums?

M4: And we have a wide ranging set of visitors, probably through the university and through the wider community, tourists etc. our priorities are to – we can't prioritise increasing visitor numbers – it's already 140,000 a year, and it's difficult to actually have more visitors than that. Sometimes the place is really cramped so we're not really interested in increasing the number of visitors – we're interested in improving the quality of the visit by providing more information and generally upgrading the displays, providing better lighting, things like that. We are interested in trying to widen the type of people from the local community, so there are certain parts of Oxford with certain socio-economic groups within the local community that don't use the museum, that don't come. And we're certainly trying to encourage that. When we do new displays like the Body Arts displays, which were quite consciously targeted at the sort of teenage, college, art, design-oriented group of people because that's a major component of our visitors. We get a lot of secondary school, college students coming to do work in relation to art and design and other things, so that was quite consciously done with those people in mind, but trying to appeal to a wide audience as well.

R: Ok, I think you have answered to all my questions...

M4: ok, and I will email you the exact number of Yorùbá objects.

R: ok, thank you very much.

**Interview with M5
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology
Cambridge,
26/02/04**

Interview with M5.

M5: my name is M5 and I did my undergraduate education in New Zealand and that was in social and anthropology and then I came to Cambridge to do master and MPhil in social anthropology and then I went for a PhD here and then I stayed here. I am from New Zealand, I think I told you.

R: a PhD in?

M5: in Social Anthropology, and I am from New Zealand.

R: and your occupation?

M5: my title is Assistant Curator for Anthropology.

R: I am not sure which are the questions you can answer to me, so if you can just go through the list and tell me whatever you can answer to...

M5: ok, yeah. Yes, well I can tell you my duties in the museum, in relation to the ethnographic exhibitions and gallery. We do a lot of temporary exhibitions, and one or two a year, in anthropology but not much in archaeology. This usually involves work with people who are recently returned from the field, a lot of students often people who collected for us. So this is a very good opportunity for us to you know to help people... connections with the material they have collected.... One is the ... just outside the door. And this was done by Andrew... who is the guy who opens the door.... And the other exhibition... now the temporary exhibitions are the first thing; the second thing will be the gallery tours. We do a lot of gallery tours, with students and visitors, groups of people. Often people come with the university, as Leicester, for example, and others, and members of the public. The other thing we do, a lot of our responsibility is teaching to university students, and we try to teach as much as with the gallery in mind, as possible, and you know, put things out of the gallery, things that are important to the kind of the kind of material that we teach.

R: how long have you been in charge of the collection?

M5: basically we have divided the work between us, me and Tabita.

R: yeah, but how long have you worked?

M5: how long have I worked here? For 2 years in this capacity, before that I was a curatorial assistant, which is a bit different. And, you wrote about objects, but you would have been able to establish by yourself.

R: yea, I have a question about the labels. How long did you check on them or do you change them? Because I think the one close the Egungun mask, speaks about the Gèlèdè masquerade.

M5: well, as I said, the permanent galleries were put up in the early 90s. At that time, I believe, they got in people with original specializations, for each part, but because it deals with the whole world, obviously nobody is an expert with the whole world, so, we try to keep the labels in the part which we do know about them today, which is not very difficult. Because doing permanent displays is very expensive and time consuming and all our resources go into temporary exhibitions, but for example, at the moment, in the Indian case... part of the material on display was considered culturally sensitive, and we also in the process of changing some of the aboriginals Australia on display, because we think that some of the labels, we don't think that they are permanent... sometimes it comes down, you know, to the personal knowledge of the curator, on that particular region, ... I am not an Africa specialist, although I am technically responsible for Africa. And you will be able to tell what kind of objects are on the collection and how did they become part, from the online catalogue. Did you find, were you able to access that?

R: yes, I had sometimes problems in seeing the page, but then, it was ok.

M5: yes, we had some technical problems, which had always been worked on. I don't use any criteria for the displays of the objects.

R: yes, but which are the criteria used to arrange them; under which themes are they grouped?

M5: I wouldn't be able to tell you because I don't deal with them. I don't have any idea, really. Permanent galleries are redisplayed on average, well the sort of recommended by the Museums Associations guidelines, as far as I know, is 25 year period, so, it does not happen very often and it happened long time ago, before I was here, I don't know what criteria they used or, any of that kind of stuff. I don't what they did.

R: yes, but since you said that you are in charge of the Africa section, which kind of criteria do you think have been used to display the items.

M5: oh the galleries are absolutely just a tiny, tiny part of our job; we have to get material out from the store for the researchers. I mean, you have to understand that only 5% of our collection is on display, so it is a very small, small part. So most of the curatorial aspect of my job, the vast majority of my job is like university lecturer, so basically I teach and I write articles, and publish books and things like that.

R: on?

M5: indigene anthropology. I mean my specialization is on New Zealand; my work is about Mali issues and Mali culture. So, we do have curatorial responsibilities, which include welcoming the visiting researchers to conduct specialised research on part of the collections for that, we would get thing out from the store or we would get thing... here, but we also have Tabita Cadbury who generally deals with it unless it is somebody who has to add something to my specialised knowledge. But, as I said, we are not experts in all the world!

R: sure!

M5: I mean, if you are in the British Museum, you have a huge amount of staff; we only have here 2 people in anthropology, and there is a very limited amount of things that we can do each. So I don't' know if any Africans were involved in the actual settings of the displays, and the main purpose of the exhibition gallery displays in general or in particular the African one?

R: anything you can tell me.

M5: *Laughs.* Well the main purpose of the gallery in display is really to, I mean, the special thing about this museum is that is a university museum, so... responsibility ... teaching as teachers, we have, I mean the university and the local council gives us resources to be open to the public half day, for 5 days per week, so we try to do what most of museums do, in the sense of bringing in school groups, and various part of the community and showing them what the material in here is and it comes from.

R: do you have any activities that involve directly the local African community?

M5: no with the African community, no. We have relationships with the community from Melanesia, so far example ... has done a lot of work. And they had a centenary exhibition But my work is with Maori people, so I had a lot of people from the New Zealand community but also from the Mali community based in London, so we had a lot of people. But it's just because we... we don't have many African contacts, but if people would approach us we would be of course happy to help. Also Cambridge does not have a massive African population. Right, so I didn't have any approach in displaying the objects, I don't know about, have any knowledge on African religion. Of course we would like to have more

material off display. Any feedback, no we haven't had any kind of complaints and we do not have any activities that specifically target African communities; we have had a number of events, which involved Mali and Pacific people.

R: do you have any public catalogue about the anthropological collection that visitors can check?

M5: well we have them on line, but we don't provide so if people can access to Internet, but, no we don't have any catalogue in the museum. Unless they have made an appointment.

R: I saw no media in the gallery, for Africa...

M5: there is a video up there.

R: in the gallery in the middle floor, in the far corner?

M5: no, upstairs, it is also an anthropology gallery.

R: I thought it was a space for temporary exhibition.

M5: yes, well it is but now there are 2 anthropology exhibitions up there. And probably because in the early 90s technology they were not so ... I am sorry I didn't help you much as hoped but unfortunately with the interview.

R: no, thank you very much anyway.

**Interview with M6,
Living Cultures Gallery
Manchester Museum
Manchester 11/02/04**

Interview with M6.

M6: This is all I have, which isn't very much because obviously I didn't do the display, I wasn't here when it was put up, so any sort of in depth questions, I'm not sure I can really answer.

R: Ok, no problem. If you can tell me just, you know, the initial things.

M6: you mean mine or of the person who was responsible for...

R: No no yours.

M6: Right.

R: if it ok with you we could start with introductory details...

M6: I did BA in archaeology at Durham University, and an MA in Museum Studies at Newcastle University. I'm Welsh - British. Our location is Manchester Museum, and my title is Curator of Anthropology. The previous- before the restructuring – the person who was responsible for the gallery – his title was Keeper of Ethnology. So, it's quite a dramatic change but it's also quite important, sort of, not theoretical, it's a kind of change which means that we're moving away from old-fashioned museums of ethnology and keepership to a curator who sort of, cares for a collection, but hasn't actually kind of kept it in an active way – it's much more focused on public awareness and outreach.

R: and your age?

M6: My age? 30.

R: So, what are your duties in the museum, in relation to the ethnographic collection?

M6: Right well, like I said, I'm curator, and basically that means caring for the collections, so on a basic level it's re-storage, documentation, giving access to the public – all different kinds of publics, the university, which is very much of an audience that we have to make strong links with and that's students and departments, lecturers and researchers. There's public, and obviously there's a million different types of public, there's community groups, who might have, sort of, a link to our collections through their heritage, their own personal heritage. There's school groups, there's adult groups, there's people who come to research, academics, there's people who just come for a day out, family groups. Or there's people who would have access to the collections, either physically with the objects, or through family fun days or through an art movement and draw objects. Basically all kinds of access at all levels.

R: And how long have you been in charge of the collections?

M6: I started on January 11th.

R: How many Yorùbá objects are on display in the Living Cultures Gallery?

M6: Roughly... I would say about 40 objects. Possibly more, because there's the large display of Ibeji figures and Gelede masks, which are on their own in a big case. And then there's the old piece in some of the other galleries. Must be about 40 – could be less.

R: What's the typology of these Yorùbá objects?

M6: What's the typology?

R: Yeah. Which kind of objects are they?

R: Oh, right. There's the Ibeji figures, and the Gelede Masks, I think there might be a couple of sort of, fetish power figures, they might be Yorùbá, I'll check that out. I'll take you to the gallery, and we can go around.

R: To which aspect of everyday life are related? For example, religious...

M6: Yeah, when you say religious, it's a really hard word to define in relation to some of the Yorùbá belief systems. If you want to call Ibeji figures religious, because they took the body spirits and that kind of thing, well, then they're religious, but I'd call them more, sort of spiritual, social, not religious as such.

R: how many more spiritual objects around in the museum?

M6: How many are there in the museum or just what's on display?

R: Well, if you could tell me both...

M6: Right, well, I have no idea what's in the museum collection, what's in store because basically there's – a lot of the material that was moved off store, and has now been moved back and the tracking system for the objects has gone a bit hay-wire so I know roughly where the objects are but it would literally be a case of opening drawers and finding them... there is a card index so it's possible to look through that by – it was indexed by geography and then by the travel group within that. It's possible to look through that and read what's on the card but then it's very hard to then go find where that object is to actually look at the object; so we could go down and have a look at that card index if you wanted to.

R: How did they become part of the collection?

M6: Again, I'm not sure specifically but just a normal way, through trusts who run the museums, from donations, I think some them came through either curators in this museum or researchers related to the museum actually making field collections and I think the Ibeji figures and the Gelede masks would definitely be part of the field collections.

R: Which have been the criteria used for the displays of the African or the world cultural gallery?

M6: Well, what George⁴ told me, the reason he chose those figures and those masks were because they were in the collection and there was a large amount of them and basically they were very very good examples so he wanted to use them.

R: Which kind of research has been carried out for the displays?

M6: Again George, he said mainly object based which means you know, we had Ibeji figures and Gelede masks and he basically read around the subject trying to find out what Ibeji figures are about, what Gelede masks are about.

R: yeah, which kind of research was carried out concerning the Yorùbá religion?

M6: And he didn't actually mention with the Ibeji figures which books he used but I guess it would be that the main text in all that most people find. He mentioned that the designer also had done some research and the designer Ivor Heel, but he didn't tell me how much input he had in here.

⁴ George was the previous curator who retired just before M6 arrived to the museum.

R: And what about any Africans involved – which kind of research was carried out with the African community?

M6: No, there was never any sort of formal research. What he did do was he – the community action panel – no, community conversation panel here at the museum and there were quite a few – I don't know whether they are Yorùbá, but there's quite a few West African people on that, and he did sort of ask for opinion.

R: is it run by the museum?

M6: Yeah, the education department basically runs it – it could be every couple of months.

R: What is the main purpose of the display, according to you?

M6: What he said to me was to put as many objects as possible in a comparative range of styles – typological, kind of way.

R: Concerning Yorùbá objects, the religious ones, I would you like to tell me what do you think of the sanctity of these kinds of objects, once they are displayed.

M6: Well if you look at the displays, I mean it very much is an aesthetic way of displaying the objects and you just look at them as beautiful things in themselves but the information that goes with it on the panel tells you about their spiritual meaning and the contexts in which they are used but that isn't the first thing that hits you when you see the display.

R: which kind of comments has the local African community has expressed, in relation to the ethnological display?

M6: there was one comment that George told me about -I think it was just – I think yeah it was actually one of the CAP people, one of the Community Advisory Panel people, said he'd gone to the display and he felt very very proud to be Nigerian with all the fantastic Nigerian objects that he saw, in that gallery, making him feel proud of his heritage.

R: would you mind to tell me some things more about this CAP?

M6: Yeah, Community Advisory Panel. It was kind of set up about two years ago now through the education department and just basically trying to get together as many different types of individuals, representatives from local communities, representatives from local societies or department agencies, health or education, university groups – a whole kind of range of people representing different communities within Manchester, and basically, it, kind of, their sounding board for the direction the museum should going and what exhibitions we're having, what we should be doing to include people that are excluded – it's a sounding board really and they do, they are proactively involved in events. There was at one time, I think it might have stopped now, but a Sudanese cultural group used to meet here quite regularly and used the facilities, they said they needed the space and we provided them with space and lots of events for wider community groups came out of that, but if you're, if you're trying to find out more about the CAP you should speak to the head of public programming.

R: Could I have her email later?

M6: yes, off course.

R: how much is the African community involved with museum's events?

M6: Yeah, again, Bernadette would be the best person to talk to about this because she's the one person that, sort of, organises and sets up these things with her kind of, department and they just draw on me when it's particularly related to the objects or if there's any

background information they need to be got, but the actual events programme is organised by Lauren.

R Do you have any complete catalogue entries for the objects? I mean a catalogue that people can use freely, when they come to the museum.

M6: The objects on display, every object is, has a number and a description of it so, I mean, people could write down the information but there isn't like a handout to take away. There isn't a complete catalogue for the collections full stop, it's not computerised, it's not all card indexed so it would be a huge...a couple of years worth of work to actually get a whole catalogue for everything.

R: could you tell me more about those videos in the Living Cultures Gallery?

M6: I think I heard somebody say that that again, was a something that came from the CAP because a lot of people in that, in those videos are CAP members I think it was an idea that Bernadette had about just getting other people's voices into the gallery – a non-authoritative, curatorial body – just having a range of different people's attitudes and opinions in there.

R: will the ethnographic gallery have ever some music?

M6: At the moment there is no music and I have no idea why not. I guess I mean, when you've got the touch screens- they're quite loud because it could be a matter of – it's just not a big enough space to have that and music, although there is the point that you have headphones. It could be as simple as financially it wasn't viable or just kind of, a designer might have decided that didn't sink in with the feel of the gallery.

R: Is it... all the collections, are they displayed in a permanent way?

M6: There's... a debate on what permanent means at the moment. It's permanent in the sense that there's only a small amount of money available for exhibitions and they get kind of moved around department to department and the ethnography gallery which opened...last year, the year before? so next year, another part of the museum will get the money – we'll just have to wait our turn so however long it takes for the money to get back round is when that will be changed really. So permanent can mean 2 years, it can mean ten years or you know, suddenly we'll get a huge lottery bid and the whole thing will be redone, you know, whenever money turns up.

R: OK, I'm finished: I think I have asked you every thing I needed.

M6: Have you seen the gallery?

R: Yeah, I looked a bit around before, but only downstairs.

M6: Yeah, you didn't go upstairs.

R: No I didn't go upstairs.

M6: Shall we go?

**Interview with M7 and M8
Gallery of Religious Life,
St Mungo Museum
Glasgow 04/03/04**

Interview with M7 and M8.

R: could you tell me your names, your nationality and occupation in the museum?

M7: I am M7, I have a BA in Hebrew and I have a PhD in Hebrew and Bible Studies and nearly have a MA in Museum Studies from Leicester, they haven't marked my dissertation yet! They had it for 9 months and I am from Northern Ireland and I am curator of World Religions, Glasgow Museum.

M8: And I am M8, I have a Bsc in biology from Aberdeen University, an MA in Archaeology and Anthropology from Sheffield. I've got a postgraduate teaching qualification. My nationality is Brazilian but I am a British citizen now. I work here at Glasgow Museums Resource Centre and I am the curator of World Cultures, formerly the curator of ethnography.

R: what are your duties in the museum?

M7: OK, if it okay, I answer first. Regarding the displays downstairs I would be looking at the general maintenance and interpretation of those displays but I would liaise with M8 and other curators regarding interpretation of further development of the displays, they would not be something that I would have a sole remit for at all. I am responsible for what happens in St Mungo regarding religion but regarding these collections it would be, people like M8 would have a curatorial remit for those actual objects themselves, but we would, we would work together.

M8: As M7 said, I look after the actual collections material elements which are spread also in the resource centre. I have less to do with actual ongoing exhibitions and workshops and outreach than say someone like M7 would have, we've got a more sort of direct relationship with the museum going public at the moment because our own venue is closed until 2006 and most of the, in terms of exhibitions I do sometimes put things on but we're still working on the larger refurbishment, so I do maintain the collections and their documentation.

R: how often are the displays of the gallery changed?

M7: this is something that happens very very rarely; it would only really be changed at the moment if there was a particular problem with some object or interpretation. At the moment those displays in the religions of life gallery have been like that as they are since the beginning of 1993 and there are no major plans afoot to redevelop those displays, they are permanent displays. There is in other parts of the museum a plan to redevelop, the Scottish gallery on the top floor because there has been a lot of problems and issues with that gallery that we feel as a museum we have to address and therefore a full evaluation, to be involved in that there, but other galleries there's no immediate plan to change things and we know that that wouldn't happen both time wise and financially for a while because of the other commitments the Glasgow Museum has at the moment especially regarding so that we displays are permanent exhibitions in museums such as ourselves would only happen if there was a major issue or problem with something.

R: which kind of problems did you have to face with this kind of displays?

M7: I mean, I don't know. Nothing has come up yet, I'm only envisaging if, if something, if something happens regarding, I mean I'm not, I'm not even, I mean I'm not even one to try and create a situation of problem but you know I can only envisage, I mean today for example, somebody came in and said that they had been interviewed as part of the oral testimony that you see, on some of the permanent displays you see a bit of oral testimony of the person and this gentleman's name has now changed and he wants his name changed on that bit of oral testimony which is absolutely, you know it, it's no longer his, his name and he

feels that he wants to be recognised by his, his real name. He wants to be recognised by that name so I feel that that's something that we really want to strive to, to make, to change that in the displays but again that, that will take a long process because these displays you know, have been created for long term value. So I mean, but things like that can, can be changed so.

R: may be, it would be helpful if both of you could tell me something about your own experiences in relation to religious objects, if you have been involved directly in the setting of the displays?

M8: Actually, I haven't worked directly with religious objects. I've only been in post since April 2003 and during that time I came into post about 2 months after the Kelvin Grove stores began to be decanted and the gallery was closed in June, so apart from a non-religious display I haven't been involved with any display since I came into this post because there isn't anything at the moment that I'm responsible for at all.

M7: Well obviously working in a museum of religion I mean all the objects have a religious focus and have meaning for, have lots of different meanings for different communities of people. I mean I have been involved, since I've arrived here last year I mean I've been obviously directly involved in the outreach work of the Museum itself because as much as museum displays may seem static, that they may seem that they are kind of permanent and unchanging, we are trying to, to make the museum space dynamic by introducing other ways of exploring religion in museums such as having workshops, events, like we have an annual meet your neighbour event in the museum that looks at, that invites all the various religious communities into the museum to have workshops, to have ceremonies, calligraphy, just you know it's a week of celebration going to visit different places of worship. Then we have an annual, we have a face to face workshop series that is currently we're halfway through this year's and this year we've kind of been looking at religious groups that have, that are not represented in the permanent displays because they're not permanent displays through space and objects etc, you know you cannot include everybody and it's something that we're so conscious of, that that you know there are religious groups present in Glasgow that are not represented within this museum, and in order to try and readdress that balance in some small way, you know it's not, it's not perfect but in some way to try and invite different groups into the Museum to talk about their particular faith and community so we've had, the first one we had this year was a pagan community who came in to do a workshop on paganism, we've had Chinese religions, people coming and talking Chinese religions, although we do have Chinese objects on display, the next we had Scottish folklore, then the next one is traditional African religions. There's a professor coming in to speak about traditional African religions at the end of March, 27th March, he's a professor at the University of Zimbabwe, professor of religions, because again that's something, we do have African objects on display but we don't have a larger like, of course we do Sikhism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, six of the major world religions they have cases of own but other religions are just kind of mentioned within our themed gallery downstairs so it's kind of, I think it's good to have workshops that are, that are focused on one of these religious traditions that we don't concentrate on in the museum just to try and make sure that, that people have a voice in the museums and people don't feel that we're not represented in the museums, we're trying to extend ourselves out to, to welcome as many people into the museum space as possible, but also you're always, always going to be restricted by time and space so nothing is perfect, nothing will ever be ideal and you can only just keep trying to be dynamic and keep just trying to, to move and to push forward, so that, that's what we aim for in the Museum and that's how, how we've, we've worked and I've worked since I started here.

R: When did you start?

M7: I started in the very end of July 2003, and my first exhibition that I put on myself was the staff exhibition that you see on the, the temporary exhibition space on the second floor.

The calligraphy artwork. So that was working with communities looking at Islamic art and Islamic ideas approaching to art but also Western ideas of art, Western ideas of Islam, what does the Western eye expect from Islamic art so looking at those sort of questions which were very very interesting. I mean the Open Museum also works with Sikh communities, they're working on a display in the mosque at the moment but they also work with other, other communities, and I'm just trying to think what there has been in the past, the recent past. There's a very large south Asian population in Glasgow so the non-Christian religions are primarily Islam and Hinduism and Sikhism. We had a Visakhi exhibition to celebrate the 500th anniversary of one of the gurus and that was a really huge event of quite national importance and they also had a sort of community exhibition at Scotland Street School Museum for children. But because our focus is on working with communities in terms of West Africa we have, there's a very small community, so it's not terribly well represented, in fact in terms of art objects that's how it's normally displayed, rather than working with the community from the community's point of view, approach there is always one person or has been traditionally it's one person who's consulted if any African material comes on display. We had a display of [...] coffins from Ghana a few years ago, that was curated by the curator at the People's Palace, you know he, and there's a Ghanaian artist, a resident here called Gift Amodogotse, don't ask me to spell that, Gift is like the present and Amodogotse's his other name and he's usually consulted when these things come around.

M8: I think, that's kind of how we are as well. Because we work an awful lot, that is our *raison d'être* really is to work with them. We do find because of, like Africa and West African, you know, the population of communities in Glasgow is really very very small, you do find it is like one person that you, you liaise with which is not, is not a representative sample of the whole in which it's always the same person that you kind of deal with is, but you know you want to deal with people but you know it does tend to always be the same, it's always the problem with working with communities, you do tend to, certain people will always come forward no matter how large the community. With Visakhi it was very much the leaders of the Sikh community, all the communities are much larger than one individual you get the same kind of person coming forward, people who have got interests in the arts and are possibly quite well connected or, you don't tend to get people sort of from the streets if you like. I've just done this little sort of community exhibition, Southern African paintings, and we put it into a library and we did, although we didn't consult the community the community came forward but it was teenagers came forward and, you know they were really interested and we started putting on workshops and basically had these kind of sessions with local teenagers who said nothing was ever put on for them and even though they were maybe 100 yards away from the main museum; not one of them had ever been into the Museum. This wasn't religious, it was very political though, and they really took it on board that, you know the messages of the actual exhibition, and became very very involved and quite, actually they were crying when, when we told them it had to close. So, that was very interesting and I quite, I have, I am trying to be the other side, the secular side. You know, because, because our community outreach does tend to be like, even through the Open Museum we tend to focus on people who have got something to say and have a message and it tends to be through faith, but there are other communities within that, people who don't really have a, a direction or you know, but are still part of those communities, people who are slightly secular and might even feel, you know excluded, and I'm quite interested in reaching those especially after I had this experience. The, the Chinese exhibition we had last year, the community representation, she's a very nice woman but she's an artist from the Chinese community and her mother came to do the object selection for the Open Museum and I just, you know, which is fine but you feel that where are the people who work in, you know, who might be doing, sort of, other jobs, who might even be working in the Chinese supermarket or something, why could they not be brought in or involved more? They have, they'll have different ideas and they're just as valid, but it's difficult to reach them. They're not going to automatically step forward and come in, and come in to the Museum. It just never occurs to them. These kids didn't, it never occurred to them that the Museum had anything for them. We had to go to them really and I would, you know, either they would just walk away and forget about it or else it might, one of them would think could we take the exhibition into her school library which is, which is a possibility, you know, and it's not

something we're discounting, but really there was nothing, you know, it's difficult to know how to develop it on their terms, you know without being patronising or just boring them, you know, take it so far, the next stage of possibilities could, is quite dull, because we have a certain way of operating because we're used to dealing with certain, you know sort of social groupings I suppose. I mean what's going on downstairs with the banner ?? is lovely but I couldn't imagine any of those kids coming and, and wanting to fill banners. I'm not sure exactly, what, they came in every day to that exhibition apparently and I don't know what they did when we weren't there but they they really, they came very, sort of emotionally involved.

R: how big is the Yorùbá community here Glasgow and was any African involved in the setting of the displays?

M8: Here, in Glasgow? (*nodding of the researcher*) As far as I know, no, we haven't really come across anyone who's stepped forward and said that they are, the only thing I've done which is by extension is work with Cubans. Harry's been involved in that, Harry Dunlop. There isn't, nobody's ever come forward and said 'I am a Yorùbá', I don't think, I mean, whenever I was talking to Harry about the initials setting up the Museum and regarding your questions that, that you forwarded to me before that, I mean, no, there did not seem to be any involvement with Africans in the initial setting up of the Museum which is something that is, is quite, which was lacking I think and, because even if people are not here in Glasgow I think it should, there should be an active sense of going to such people even somewhere in the UK. What we're doing now is that we're actively liaising with, through an intermediary. I have actually spent a long time trying to find the original notes, display notes, and, and conceptual ideas behind the display downstairs and I did find an enormous box of files but, which just didn't give me any clue as to why the objects were, were chosen. I have pretty, you can look through what I brought. I photocopied everything I could find for you and you will find that it doesn't really give you an idea as to what, how the decisions were made.

R: Thank you very much. Could you tell me anything about the criteria used to select and display the items?

M8: The criteria were based on the objects fitting into the theme of the gallery because you will the four objects were chosen but in fact they're quite, it's not a huge collection particularly but there's quite a large collection of material that they could have, you know chosen from, and they could have themed it. We have narratives, story displays, you know M7 is doing one on Benin...

M7: you might just be living in Glasgow and not, and not be aware of what's going on. It depends on your sense of identity, and if you're very very kind of, have a very strong need to continue to maintain very strong links with a particular cultural group then you might be encompassed in our net but if not, you'll be missed out.

M8: The majority of people are Christians and they will just feel alienated by this. I mean I had, all I could see was the religious side of these objects, I'm trying to re-empower the people you know, kind of, and make, bring back their religions, you know the significance of these objects.

M7: I think that's something that, I mean superstition, because I mean we call it that as if we are downgrading it, they can assume that you have a value judgement against it.

M8: But I mean in some cases of charms and healing there are some things that, objects I'm using which are actually are, representative of people's sort of fundamental beliefs and faiths

M7: I think religion in museums it's a dilemma that, that we must kind of look into. I think you either get objections or acceptance and it's just trying to constantly balance different groups of people. I mean I just, I was just saying that we've lost the Gaelic speakers and that community which I'm, I'm doing some interviews on the ?? history and there were one,

there were reasons but one of the reasons that's relevant to this is that they felt that they were worried that they might be allied with new age pagans as opposed to being, they themselves felt that they were traditional healers with some more credentials if you like, so there's this you know, they would, they couldn't sit, feel physically happy sitting next to what they regarded as superstition whereas in fact a sort of bona fide pagan is regarded, has a religion revolving around paganism which they feel, you know, they're just as entitled to their belief if you like, but to the, the people of the Gaeltacht the traditional Scottish Gaelic community they felt that they, they were kind of interlopers, so they didn't, so I gave up in the end actually on that one. I resolved this by saying, Fine, we will not have the Gaeltacht representative if you feel uncomfortable, and I just left it at that, because I felt I just, I didn't want to act as a mediator and a curator, I felt I couldn't, there was only so much I could say really and if they felt unhappy I couldn't, you know because the, the pagans themselves had never expressed any problems with being, having their material displayed alongside whatever. Anyway I took the easy way out in the end

M8: you know religion has changed development society is changing development and that today but you know that, that religion does not, is not static as society is not static as things change.

M7: No, I think people have to constantly be just learning and often if you don't have, you don't have the space, you know, with my charms and healing story I don't have the space to explore all of the issues that I'm presented with, there isn't space. We've got a 30 word text limit and I have a 100 word text limit in the graphics panel so I cannot explore this. I think the Islamic curator felt that was better to, to display and work on the Islamic material and she wanted to have a dialogue somehow, you know as part of a graphic representation between old and new Islam, if you like the young and the old. I don't know what's happened with that idea, whether we could expand it, make it a general discussion about it and I have thought to have a talking message board but have actual questions as opposed to just making it a, you know free for all like downstairs you'd have specific questions and places to put your answers to those questions, about the display and the issues raised by the display. The fact that we have what some people regard as core belief and faith, or you'd have the objects being you know sort of superstition, or some people who regard that, you know, for instance the pagans will often think what we regard as superstition as being important and having fundamental spiritual meaning and resonance, you know the same ritual can be dismissed by one group or one set of individuals and embraced by another so we've got lots of issues coming out of the display which I cannot explore within, in detail because of the word limitation and the space limitation.

R: **Is there any object that you have problem in displaying and that could raise complains from the local groups you have been working with? Or did you have already some complaints?**

M8: Some of it yes, some of them are. Nobody's said anything but if they do, like the Gaelic speaker which isn't the charms and such, it's the individuals and the healers, if people really object then I have no objections to taking the material out. I have taken out some, quite a lot of material at various times, but I don't want it to become too, you know, sort of nothing in it. But if people have really powerful objections it is only an exhibition and I would not like to do it if I was causing extreme offence for, you know as opposed to, as opposed to debate, then I, I have, I take the objects out. Yes a lot of objects come out, I'm, I've thrown it open, I've had quite a lot of consultation and objects are constantly going out and being replaced by others, but I don't want it to be all good luck charms, I've made a point, I'm always rejecting objects. Everybody has very strong opinions about, about this topic, we get a lot of suggestions, so you know, but I'm always patient and I'm always open to suggestions and there's a lot of debate around it, so I do consult as widely as possible and there's an enormous, I think I'm supposed to have about 30 objects? The actual objects, I've got something like 170 objects, as a bank of objects to choose from, so there are lots of different reasons for not putting things in. Well some, people really, you know, because I've picked 170 objects that could be used on research some were unsuitable, some were too sensitive,

you know, some were, it was like unethical to put some things on some of the categories, some didn't fit into the category or the over action theme which is in fact the sort of, the idea that people used objects like these as part of their everyday life in most of parts of the world, and in our culture we used it sort of, it's just there, we call it superstition, sometimes, sometimes a part of your belief . I've removed the things from cultures which don't have a market tradition which is in fact a third objection the Gaelic speakers have that they didn't have a market tradition, in fact they have a peddler tradition, peddlers that go round selling things. So I've taken things out in some cultures where there's no market tradition, I've taken things out if things are too sensitive, or I did have at one point where I thought I had infinite space, I had you know in markets you get shrines, so I had some actual religious little sort of deities in their own, on a plinth, on their own little shrine but I had to take those out because it was taking up too much space but that, so all major religions apart from, it's not really Islam really, it's sort of pre the Middle Eastern material which is linked to Islam, so you know in cultures where there is a dominant religion, that's all kind of come out .

M7: We've had this main theme, the stalls if you like, we have, there is divination because there's a healing element that's running through it, there's a divination that is, because quite often a healing is also a diviner, that use of it.

R: interesting. And did you have any kind of interactive activities, based on religious objects, I mean, using religious objects?

M8: about my own experience, I was told to have some interactive activities but it wasn't, you know, so the suggestions were that we could sell charms in the shop, it wasn't acceptable and finally the only one, the only thing was a slot machine dispensing, a kind of fortune telling machine. But there could be different ways of doing it and again, you know, about the Maypole tree, you must have seen it in the Zen Garden, there are objections because it is a Gaelic tradition and normally these trees were very very very interesting, in fact they came, they sprung up from wells, sacred wells. According to the tradition, throughout the 17th and 18th Century people were incredibly impoverished and they would just tear bits off their clothing and hang that up. I mean the Museum of Witchcraft in Cornwall.

M7: The other issue is conservation. A lot of these things are very fragile and so a lot of things were not designed to last long, so not everything can survive. In displaying certain objects I have to be careful that there's not going to be any deterioration of material. There's quite a lot of considerations in selecting the objects beyond just the ethical.

R: and do you have any kind of public catalogue that people can access, when coming to see the museum?

M7: We have got the big computerised documentation assistant; actually I've written it all down here.

R: That's not on-line yet?

M7: no yet, but it will be. You can have this, what I've written.

M8: I've written mine too. There's lots of things you can read yeah. I'm not sure we haven't actually written our labels yet so I don't know whether, we have various sort of, different approaches. Sometimes, we don't have accession numbers in which case you won't be able to look it up, but some day, I don't know whether we're going to do that. I want, I want there to be a publication and I've kind of proposed that but I'm a bit behind with my proposals but it would be more useful to have a catalogue as a publication on wider issues of belief of the symbolism of objects within our collections because as I say I've got 170 which is only a fraction to choose from as we have a huge number of these objects in the collection so it would be nice to have them documented and to maybe do a collaborative piece of work and have certain elements to examine and we haven't got any textiles for instance. But yeah

that was perhaps my plan and it, I mean I think that there are negotiations at the moments. But it obviously this area has quite a lot of interest I think.

M8: and it would be good to have story telling, not necessarily something that is part of permanent displays but something that is kind of different, and workshops that will be available in Kelvingrove Gallery. I mean I think story time is a very important element for lots of different stories anyway so I think that, that is, an essential.

M7: Well yeah, the whole of the Gaelic community would relate better to the folklore story which isn't there than the charms. We are interviewing their community and we've got fisherman and World War II veterans, we're trying to establish contact with women's groups and with gipsy travellers so hopefully, there are plenty of opportunities for story telling and workshops, sort of workshops of a sort you know, I'm not really there, it's not written in as such but I was told that there would certainly be some ad hoc depending on who was available but it would be more likely be story telling to do with charms and healing

M8: We do have story time sessions here. Normally it's people that come highly recommended from, I mean I have been involved directly myself and I know Kieran who is our education curator who is in a meeting at the moment. I mean all the education curators for Glasgow Museum kind of liaise together and venue to venue, people who know of good storytellers, for us ourselves I know we've had storytellers from Bahai, they come in do storytelling sessions here and there's also some of the workshops that we've tried the Jewish story time, that was the thing for Hannika; we've had, you know some different things, I mean, you know I couldn't say how exactly people were chosen to do storytelling, just that you know. When we had that display on the temporary display, we had the artist who made the [??], did workshops and got people to make *papier mache*. That was a really popular display. I would really like to do more like these workshops. We've got 10 pairs and I'm putting maybe 4 or 2 pairs in charms and healing but you could do a whole, I mean I would really like to display the whole lot, maybe explore what he started to explore as a temporary exhibition that he got and explore the links, the cultural links that Latin America does offer us. We're actually going to, yeah it might come up in the Latin America exhibition that we're planning in a few years time, that he could do something on that sort of melting pot from South America, but we've got you know. I would like to do much more on that and explore that.

R: and what is the target audience for all these activities: I mean, which religious communities would you specifically target?

M8: we have a variety of target audiences. I mean it's not, we wouldn't have just one specific audience for all our displays. I mean we tend, I know for the exhibitions the temporary exhibitions we tend to think, to have a particular target, and this could exclude everybody else that you can really kind of focus on, you have one target audience and the rest kind of are also included, I mean, we thought that the community of Glasgow was our target audience. For the stories that we were involved in, some of them have the same target audiences, some of them different.

M7: the target audience is kind of just general, general adults, general and we have, we each have categorised it in certain categories of target audience and you take one audience and that would be your audience that you target the story at.

M8: but the chance of hearing stories related to the displays, I thought it would interest teenagers, it's an age when people question, I meant over 14 not the 5 to 14, 14 to 18 when people question things and they're interested in questioning things and they're also not averse to exploring what they would consider are sort of things outside their own boundaries; so it varies and there's supposed to be within each gallery a spread of target audiences but each story is given a paintings, paintings that turn into ?? actually, this week targeted this temporary one I've just done it for the children. I thought it would be, because it was in a children's library I thought it, I targeted it at families with young children and in

fact the main audience were 14 year olds which we then had to rush in and do workshops to encourage them so we then had to kind of construct these, this workshop, ad hoc workshop, for 14 year olds so that they could have, to give them something you know, so that was, so quite often, maybe you know, you can have a target audience but the material might dictate or might draw in another one that you weren't expecting.

R: on the basis of my questions and on the basis of your own experience, is anything else that you would like to add or any other example that you would like to refer?

M7: We've talked about what the Museum is basically about. I've written, you've got the mission statement here, I've written it down there, but it should be on all the different publicity material that you picked up from the Museum: that's really kind of what the Museum's about so anything displayed within that is part of that general mission statement.

M8: I've got a list of the objects. This is the entire African collection but the searches are quite, I have to put in, I put in Nigeria, I don't know, there are different ways I had to search so as far as I know it isn't a multi faceted sort of search and I ended up with this: so that's everything, it's a gift pack. Then there's this which is the written response to your questionnaire, and these are things, this is what I, sort of give you all of these documents, everything I found on the objects.

R: thank you very much. It is very helpful and very kind of you.

M8: This is the report. This one is the original file from archive, you can compare the two. This one is the, these are the original exhibition with information sheets for the material for the fly whisk. There were two but this is the only one I could find, that's the only one of the four objects that had any information in the file. I photocopied them while you were still talking.

M7: do you have an article on the Museum? I can photocopy it now and give it to you.

R: really? Thank you so much!

M7: We had a display with Yorùbá material in the Kelvin Grove Gallery which is closed but I thought, I thought you'd be interested in knowing about it. It's actually changed but I'm not sure, I couldn't find out when it changed so this is called Power and Thunder, Power, Thunder and Trade. This is obviously before 1993, so it must have been set up in the late 1980s.

R: thanks a lot, it is all very helpful. I just summarise the main points of this interview and if you do not have anything to add we can finish it.

After the summary of the main points, M7 and M8 did not have anything else to add.

**Interview with M9
Exhibition 125, Nottingham Castle Museum
Nottingham, 06/03/04**

Interview with M9.

R: Could you tell me your name, age, education and nationality, please?

M9: Right, my name is M9, I am 58 years of age, my education was mostly in the United States, I had the equivalent of PPE and first degree, includes a Museum Studies certificate that I took back in 1971 and Master in the department of English Local History.

R: In Leicester?

M9: at the University of Leicester so both these are from the University of Leicester; and then I am about to engage in a Doctorate but it will be here, in Nottingham. My nationality is, I am a citizen of United States but I also am getting the British Citizenship. And we are here at the BHV, Museum of Nottingham life at Castle Boulevard Nottingham. Today is the 6th of February 2004 and my occupation is Museum curator and the title is Community Historian, and it combines the disciplines of social history and what was called ethnography but it is now called world cultures.

R: which are your duties in the museum in relation to the ethnographic collection?

M9: Right, what sort of duties, I will have general curatorial duties, which will be the same for every curator in Nottingham on job descriptions which is responsibility for the care and access, cataloguing, making sure that these are correctly stored and hopefully as well as documented as possible. But it is not been treated as an ethnographic collection but it has been used more as a collection, which will focus on the parts of the materials which link up with the home nations and all our local people.

R: How long have you been in charge of the ethnographic collection?

M9: since the retirement of the previous curator, who was responsible for archaeology and what was called ethnography.

R: and this was back to?

M9: October 1998.

R: how many Yorùbá objects do you have in the collection?

M9: In the collection itself, without actually going to the computer, I don't know, I don't know to work how many have been truly identified and this will be working very much from the information we have got from Mojí. I can tell you we have about 5 or 6 on display now, and all up the castle museum as part of an exhibition related to the fact that the castle has been up for 125 years and some the African material came in very soon after we opened, just to make the point that it is important for. In other words by the counsellors and by the curator but it was important for local people to be able to see material from other cultures and to be inspired perhaps to do better layers patterns... Inspiration they will draw.

R: and what is the title of this exhibition?

M9: the exhibition is called '125' and it is for the 125th birthday or anniversary of the castle museum opening.

R: is it a temporary exhibition?

M9: it will be up for another 3 or 4 years, so not short but not permanent, a permanent display. We also have material on, in what's called 'Every object tells a story' and some of

them could be African, sorry it is African but from the West African but it hasn't been identified yet as Yorùbá.

R: and for the exhibition '125', which Yorùbá object exactly, are on display?

M9: Right, there are again some objects of spirituality, and, because we thought these were the most important to be on display, so there will be the crane's head, there will be a, divination bowl, let's see what else, we had in the list, cowries, some kola nuts, there is a Gèlèdé mask up there as well. On the top of my head, this is what I can remember, but I should have a look at the list again.

R: is it already on the exhibition?

M9: oh yes, so it has been on since last July as soon as your material came off displays because some of them have been packed and ready to go back to the store while some of them went up to the castle. We don't like to do things just ones, you know.

R: how the Yorùbá objects became part of the ethnographic collection?

M9: right, that is a very interesting question, as you know, we haven't got yet actually all the answers. We know that the material was in the museum in 1878 and because it has the 1878 accession numbers on it but it never got an appropriate accession register in a proper list, we only know that there were 2 or 3 donors associated with the material that came from Nigeria. And we can't yet ascribe most of the things to an individual donor; there were 3 lads. One was the Rev. William Jones, the other was the, a Majesty Commissioner, Secretary of the Commissioner and donated some of the few things and there was another donor.

R: Sancho Martinez.

M9: oh yea, that's right, yea. But we know as yet, nothing more about it, a part that a part that the Rev. Jones must have been a Welsh missionary.

R: which have been the criteria to select the objects to be displayed in the '125' exhibition?

M9: we chose them for several reasons. They were material we knew quite a bit about, things and work that your team did, and the work you did with Moji, etcetera. So, they were objects that had enough information to go with them, story to go with them that made them interesting and were also objects we chose because we knew there were people of African descendents who would be may be interested in seeing them.

R: which kind of research has been carried out for these objects now on display?

M9: well I think both thematic, if you think the work you have done about spirituality and we looked up to individual objects to see parallels to find more may be about the type of carving, the type of wood used, perhaps the datation.

R: and which kind of further research has been carried out to find out more about Yorùbá traditional religion?

M9: well it was done primarily with you, and we talked to people from Nigeria, from Africa and focused on to people from Nigeria who had Yorùbá background, which was Moji and her friends, and we visited her personal house and looked at videos and learned a great deal. We also bough some books from her and some videos, which can be used for some exhibitions in the future.

R: what is the main point, idea of the exhibition '125'?

M9: 125 actually show to celebrate the caste's birthday the 125th birthday and to show the types of material that were collected and the richness of the collection that was shared with the people of Nottingham, because we have a sizeable group of people who have African roots and we wanted make sure that we had their material as well as material from the Indian group, etcetera.

R: and how come did you come with the title 125?

M9: well we thought of all sort of things, the curator in charge, which is Pamela Wood, working with the design team came up with it.

R: which are the advantages and disadvantages of an open storage?

M9: well, right an advantage of a visible storage it is supposed to just be an open storage with the material, with the visible material and you could have some small groups' coming talk about bearing in mind... and I can't see any disadvantages except for the fact that you have make sure that your light levels all are correct; but if you had an open storage, just with open shelves where you get dust and what ever, you have to be careful about your, your cleaning etcetera as well as temperature and humidity, so I much prefer the on glass in store because it makes not just a safe store but also it makes much quicker for people to be able to get to and we hope to use this technique, this concept when we have our museum store, museum centre where most people's museum material will go to and people will be able to see behind the scenes.

R: and where will the collections be moved?

M9: we don't know yet, we have being finding different people for different building places so we just; the costumes museums has recently shot and this has to go some other places.

R: what has been the approach in the exhibition '125'?

M9: very didactic, and it has been done very inexpensive, like all our exhibitions, so it will be very didactic with some objects with some information.

R: what do you mean with more information?

M9: more information, more reading, yea.

R: you said that in the exhibition 125 there are some spiritual objects on display, but what do you think is their spirituality it really displayed?

M9: the moment we are displaying the objects themselves and hopefully in a way they are honoured but I don't think that much material that is considered decorative art but it happens to be religious as well is always displayed when you think about the sanctity of the objects. So, it is something you have to be well in mind that you cannot display certain material together or you can turn your back on all complications, different people, different religion. So, we will have actually need to work probably with a priest, to find out more about the sanctity of the objects; so our is a very Western approach, I suppose.

R: have you ever contacted any of these priests?

M9: no, not but we should.

R: did you have any complains or suggestions about the objects on display from the African community?

M9: no, we didn't, I think and because se worked with Moji this particularly helped us otherwise she would have told us this, in mixing material that we shouldn't. This makes me more confident.

R: Do you have any activities with the museum that involve directly the African community?

M9: no, no from 125 alone. We don't have good enough links, although we talked to a lot of people who did know what we had here, I don't fell we have good enough links to tap in to different groups of people who may want to come and see. I am doing an African history course, with George Benasfield, from Sheffield, which is very much looking at reclaiming our lack pride and it is very much Afro-Caribbean people than African people themselves and it is addressing to Egyptian culture etcetera and I am hoping to use my being part of that group to one lean more and two also have them come at the end of the course and see what we have and perhaps I will be more pressured to get that stuff out of there. That's what we need, that's what we need.

R: do you have a complete catalogue entry for the people who would be interested in the Yorùbá/African collection?

M9: you mean on line?

R: no, not necessary.

M9: if people are interested, they can get in touch here with the museum. There would not be a problem.

R: so it is something that they would have to know they can do.

M9: people would have to ask, I think the only touch screen we have in the museum is a fine art one, but we are hoping to do, just waiting until our marketing section can actually produce it. We are actually waiting to have a web site, soon, so then that, from a distance learning point of view, will be accessible to all people al over, not just local. We are also working with, what is called, e-learning, which is an education, the Nottingham City Education Section, that are doing this distance learning web site and they were very interested in those George Africanus and in the Yorùbá exhibition panels.

R: the ones of the last year, the ones I did write?

M9: yea, that's right, the ones you did. That and they may use that for their educational web site.

R: you mentioned the touch screen but are there any other kinds of media in the gallery?

M9: no, because of the low budget, otherwise we could have videos.

R: is there any music in the exhibition?

M9: no, there is no music.

R: ok, M9, I think that is enough and thank you very much for your help.

**Interview with M10,
Ethnography Gallery Royal Albert Memorial
Museum Exeter 19/03/04**

Interview with M10.

R: could you please tell me your name, education, occupation...

M10: right, yes, my name is M10, I studied at Bristol University, psychology, and University College of London, anthropology. I am British and I am 60, I live in Exeter and work here at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Art gallery. It is the 19th of March and I am both Curator of Ethnography and Collections and Interpretation Officer..

R: which are your duties exactly in relation to the ethnographic collections?

M10: which are my duties? Right, I was project manager of the project of putting the galleries together and responsible for the collections within Exeter.

R: and how long have you been in charge of the collections?

M10: since, well of the collections, since I started working here, in Sept. 1996 and of the gallery since it was opened in June 1999, yeah.

R: How many Yorùbá objects are on display?

M10: I am supposed to count them?... (*Laughs*) I suppose, I would say around 30, but we might have to go and actually count them.

R: how would you define the typology of the Yorùbá objects on displays?

M10: how would I characterise them, do you mean?

R: yes.

M10: I mean, they do not come under a particular typology, but we, as you saw, we do have costumes, including clothing and headdress; we have beaded items associated with particular cultural objects, and flywhisk and a fan; we have masks, we have other textiles, we have wooden carvings, we have brass castings, we have good containers, we have one spear associated.

R: is it like an arrow?

M10: not really, an arrow is shorter with bow; a spear is hold like this.

R: how did they become part of the collection?

M10: they became part of the collection through a number of donations over a long period of time. The earliest which was under completed I think in 1865 but the most important collection is that of Henry Townsend, an Exeter man, and he went out to West Africa as a missionary, a Christian Missionary, Church of England, and he set up a mission station in the town of Abeokuta, it is in the book here; and there are a number of other collections from different collectors but the point about, the criteria, which is your question next, is that, they are significant objects within the collection they come from, they are associated with local people in a sense that Henry .. was a local person and items were either collected by him or given to him or bought by him in the Yorùbá area and he brought back, he was in Abeokuta for at least 35 years, so he was there for very long time; and, other people whether they were colonials, those colonial officers. The earliest accession, which was 1865, was from William Rober Benton: he was a naval officer, in Lagos. So there are a number of different categories of people but the collection and the exhibition, the display I should say, we

wanted to emphasize both the quality of the material, the range of it in terms of the development we can demonstrate in changes, in various aspects of Yorùbá culture, over 100 years period, because the most recent items were from, are from, is from the 1980s.

R: which kind of research has been carried out for these displays?

M10: you see, mostly, you mention thematic or research based objects, research based on objects and collected based research, it is most important to emphasise it, because since this, I don't know if I am jumping to another question but the important thing that you should be aware of in relation to this museum is that it is funded by the city council, the Exeter city council and therefore they are very concerned to maximise any display that is put on the relevance of the material for people of Exeter. And from my point of view, as curator of ethnography, clearly the importance is that these items manifest relationships between people from Exeter and Devon and other parts of the south west of England from one hand and cultures from, other parts of the world, on the other.

R: did you write the labels in the gallery?

M10: yes. I wrote the labels relating to Yorùbá displays and too many of the other parts but it was a collaborative exercise between myself and the assistant curator, Jean, she wrote the material related to the Americas section.

R: which kind of research was carried out concerning Yorùbá traditional religion?

M10: well that related to elements in the catalogues, as much to anything else, focusing on deities, Yorùbá deities and mainly to the extent that they were represented in through some of the objects that are on display.

R: which kind of cooperation was established with Africans? How many African were involved in research or in the setting of the display?

M10: yes, we contacted a man called Ayo Akindele, who is in here...

R: is he a Yorùbá?

M10: yes, he, at that time he was living here in Exeter and there were also other experts that we could contact in this country, such as John Picton, for instance and professor Peild, who was a former colleague of mine and who has done a lot of work in Ibadan, in the Institute of African Studies, at the university of Ibadan.

R: how would you define the main purpose of the gallery as a whole?

M10: I expect the main purpose of it in relation to showing the connections that had been exploited or developed by a huge range of different people associated with Exeter, Devon and the South West and other cultures, over 200 years period, I mean it goes back further than the earliest material of the Yorùbás, for instance, into the 18th century with the Pacific explorations evidence and also to emphasise the quality of the range of the material we have got, as result of those contents. We might do efforts in order to be comprehensive in relation to any particular expositions of cultural evidence in any part of the world. But I think we have a great range of material from, of Yorùbá nation and from the North-West Coast of North America and which is why we concentrate on those two, in our 2 catalogues. For historical reasons that are mostly accidental in the sense that quite number of people that are from Exeter and around here went out in different times to different parts of the world and brought material back and in very different circumstances. And this is another element we wish to concentrate on, is to examine the ways in which the items were collected.

R: what do you think is really displayed in relation to non-Western religious objects and in particular to Yorùbá?

M10: I suppose we're very concentrating on the aspects of Yorùbá religion, which are distinctive to the Yorùbá themselves. Because elsewhere we have looked at the major tenancy of religions that impinge on our collections and people can be demonstrated through our collections, principally Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. But we have been criticized and this I think is something that we need to address is the influence of Christianity, specifically in relation to the ways in which choices were made about what was to be collected and what the attitude then on the part of most collectors who by a large had been brought up by a large Christian way and were acting as Christians themselves, of course, Henry was.

R: On behalf of the African community, or from the Yorùbá community, did you have any specific complaints for any specific object?

M10: Nothing specific, in terms of objects but there was a person who was here to take part in children's activities, which involves story telling and included Yorùbá story telling, that's where her ancestors were from. And she herself was, is a Christian and she was not happy that we haven't made clear that Yorùbá objects that were on display exemplified Yorùbá religious beliefs and characteristics, without indicating that a lot of Yorùbás now, do not believe in these things, but we felt that, if we had done that, we would be downgrading the characteristics of those objects and the reasons why they were manufactured and used in those places, which was what we wanted to concentrate on. But it was something that she registered at the time. They had not meaning for her, even though she was a Yorùbá person, because she was a Christian. I mean, this person seemed to be very precise and narrow in her range of her beliefs, in the kind of things she could admit to, even, she appeared not only not knowing what the traditional religious significance the Gelede masks were or other masking we have on display out, but also not to wish to that. In a sense, she cut herself off what I would have imagined to be her own traditions. But she didn't see like that, you see, in a sense she said she had born again, as a Christian and that was it. It was a cut off point; she did not acknowledge anything before that period having been born again.

R: which kind of misinterpretation can affect the display of African objects?

M10: I feel sometimes, often that there is a risk of misinterpretation, but I don't know if there is much we can do about that. I mean, we can present the material, whether if it is Yorùbá or from somewhere else, in a way that helps visitors to understand why it was made, what significance it had, how it was used, what its meaning was for its originating culture. But we have not control over of what they do of this information, what attitude they bring in with them, when they come to the museum or what attitude they leave with, and they may differ but they may be full of prejudice, they may be more, they may have more prejudices. I mean, I heard people saying: 'That mask is horrible, very much representing a primitive view of mankind'. It is not what it was there for, it is not what we have said about it but it, nevertheless, is what they take away of it, which is a sense, a negation of what the display is for; we haven't change their world view, in the direction of the greater degree of understanding, it has been changed by their association with the object but in a negative way, as far I can see. So, we, have not control over there.

R: do you have any activities that involve directly the African community or the Yorùbá community?

M10: yes, we don't, I mean, it would be an over-representation to suggest that we have an African community in Exeter. We have a number of families, we have a number of, you know, one or two Yorùbá families, people of East Africa that have been associated with or come to the museum as part their knowledge but I don't think any of them see themselves as the Yorùbá community or the Uganda community. They are people from Uganda, people from Nigeria, who happen to live here but there is not enough. They see themselves as Yorùbá or Uganda, but they see themselves as individuals, rather than part of a community,

which is not the same as the situation, say the Sikh community in Exeter. Small that might be, there are representatives, there is an organisation and when we put on an exhibition related to Sikh traditions, we were able to make contact with them and have their input, as a community, or various individuals who were seen as representatives of that community and that, therefore, represented the community's view. It wasn't possible to have anything like that in relation to the Yorùbá because they were, because the people we contacted were a number of individuals who from that part of the world.

R: and did you have any story telling?

M10: yes, we did have when the gallery opened we had Yorùbá story telling and as I mentioned we had some activities that involved most particularly a Yorùbá from London who we contacted and he came down here. He is a carver and a storyteller and poet and we had an exhibition, a short term, and special exhibition about Yorùbá culture.

R: for how long these displays will be unchanged? I read it in one of the labels that the objects will be changed...

M10: yes, the exhibition is permanent but what you mean, you read, is that some objects are changed by time to time, we have a sort of a number of programs of change and one is the Batik exhibition. This will give us the opportunity to bring on display, items that are on the store area, items which are on display for 3 months. In addition to this, we have one case in the Worlds Culture Gallery a display, which changes on a similar kind of rate and includes material from again either from our own collections or in some cases the collection from other people, as for instance from the Sikh collection, because most of the material came from the Sikh community in Exeter. And then thirdly, there are some items that we need to change, in order to rest them. So that, some of the most sensitive textiles, we would want to have them on display for 5 years, we would change them with others. But, even if we change some of the material in the Yorùbá display, and it is time we did, there will always be a Yorùbá display, some of the masks, of the textile.

R: do you have a catalogue of the objects that visitors could use?

M10: well that is (*M10 indicated the book about Yorùbá material in the museum*). Now, obviously it is available in hard copy and we have the one in the website, which you have looked it? Is it good?

R: yes, yes, but why is it called MOLLI?

M10: that's short for Museum On Line Learning Initiatives. But it is something we have to do, at least to say something more about it, because other people have asked the question you just asked. And we recently have registered our domain name 'world Cultures' at RAM at Museum, but it is not alive yet.

R: any special reasons to not have interactive media in the gallery?

M10: There was a matter of cost, I mean there are some, I have to rephrase that. There were some, they are not long just taken off display, and because of problems with maintenance which related to give people more information about certain items, within the gallery, not Yorùbá items, unfortunately but some material from Tahiti and Pacific. Because the World Cultures includes also Mediterranean activities and Egypt there are interactive elements in both of those areas but we are also in the process of putting a version of the website in a kiosk with a computer terminal, so we are improving that but it is unfortunately at a low head, at the moment.

R- Ok, I don't have any more questions. Thank you very much.

M10: Right, that's ok, that's a pleasure.

**Interview with M11 and M12
Gallery 36
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery
Birmingham, 23/07/04**

Interview with M11 and M12.

R: could you tell me your name, education, age, nationality...

M11: yes, I am M11, what do you mean education, the degree?

R: yes.

M11: I studied archaeology and anthropology, and I have a postgraduate degree in Material Anthropology and Museum ethnography. So, Birmingham, Museum, and what's the day today? 26th of July and I am Curator of Human History.

M12: I am M12, I got a BA in media studies and, PGD in Museum Studies. I am British, and we are in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and I am Community Developer Officer, Museum Service.

M11: I did not give my nationality, I am Irish.

R: which are your duties in the Museum in relation to the ethnographic gallery?

M11: I suppose, I am in charge of the maintenance of the collections and then I am involved in any future projects that it will come up.

M12: my, I don't have duties directly related to ethnography, it is more a kind of interest and also my role as community developer obviously we have some communities in Birmingham, that some of the objects, you know, come from, so in that respect, that's a kind of I interact with and I have worked on what we call the 'community case' in the Gallery 33, where the community groups did the display and the most recent exhibition I worked on is related to music and that has community music instruments on display.

R: how long have you been in charge of the exhibition?

M11: two months, for me.

M12: I have been in post since December 2003 and my post is funded on under Renaissance and the region.

R: how many Yorùbá objects are on display in Gallery 33?

M11: In gallery 33, well, there are 5 Nigerian objects but they are organised more accordingly to the country of origin rather than to the ethnic group;

R: and in this gallery here on the top?

M11: there are 2 Yorùbá objects and then there are 9 Nigerian objects on display here on the gallery.

M12: In the exhibition that I have curated, there is an Ifa divination chain on display and talking drum, possibly Yorùbá.

M11: the major, the major collection which is represented here in this gallery is from Almuay Talbot, who was a collector and an administrator and donated the collection in the 20s to the museum; so it is a large collection of Nigerian objects. This collection is split between Birmingham and Imperial War Museum and the British Museum.

R: how Yorùbá objects became part of the collection?

M11: Yorùbá? This object in particular became part, was acquired as part of the collection, in the 1980s.

R: what about the Ifa divination chain?

M12: the divination chain, it is slightly more complex, because it was donated in the 1960s probably 1965; and it very important section, I am not sure who, across by Nigeria, because the information change. But

R: do you know which criteria had been used to display the objects in the gallery?

M12: criteria? I was not involved in the displays, so, I mean in the Gallery.

R: I am sorry I meant your exhibition.

M12: my criteria were that I had to choose West-African musical instruments and with spirituality within West African Music Culture; also to what extent this spirituality can be transported to new worlds, you know, like during the slavery, that's why the Ifa chain is that display there. The talking drums, they kind illustrate this duality. And we did touch on Yorùbá spirituality, we talked about babalawos. One of our workshop leaders is a Yorùbá percussionist and he is also a babalawo. You might contact him: Olalekon Babalola. He lives in Birmingham but he works in London. He runs the Ifa Yorùbá contemporary Art Trust and that is based in London, he does a lot of work down there. I can give you his details.

R: yes, please. And do you know which criteria have been used to display the objects in this gallery (to M11)?

M11: well, I guess visual impact. I mean this exhibition is about breaking down the distinction between African art objects and western art objects and it is about sharing the kind of the visual experience.

R: which research has been carried out with the objects?

M11: Thematic or object base. I mean, I think there is probably both carried out. I was not here so, I was not involved, but I would say that while the overarching gallery is based around the themes, I think the objects have been deeply investigated and this links.

R: and which is the main purpose of this Gallery?

M11: this Gallery, the Gallery 36 is about Christian Ideas of Art and created links with the Art collection, which obviously Birmingham has a lot of art gallery, western art gallery collections.

R: and what about you exhibition?

M12: the purpose, it was a kind of, it aimed to historicised temporary black culture, taking music as starting point and exploring the traditions in West Africa and how they have these traditions embedded with music.

M11: downstairs there is an exhibition, which represents very much the idea of multiculturalism and trying to illustrate things parallel between different societies.

R: concerning traditional religious or ceremonial African objects, what do you think it is really displayed?

M11: I am not sure that you can, unless you display objects, and what people make of them will very often come from what people bring to the viewing experience. So, someone who is informed, knowledgeable about objects and then a kind of religious experience will interpret Shiva, and someone who is not, will see it as an example of carving and so on, so you can fill out and contextualise it, but I think any object has all different series of features, but I wouldn't say that you can exhibit one thing and not another thing and I would say that many objects which are displayed in the museums, art objects which are from Christian

tradition and obviously which have a sacred aspect, a religious aspect but which may be displayed as a painting, for example, but obviously people from that tradition will look at them and understand the religious aspect, and the aspect of the religious practice, which they are related to. So I think I wouldn't want distinguish one aspect from another also because it may be vary from viewer to viewer.

R: and concerning the Ifa chain, do you think is its sanctity displayed as well?

M12: no, sure no. I mean, the label explains what is used for and who did use it and so on, but it is not a kind of display, it is a sacred object, so.

R: and did you receive any negative responses or complain from the African community towards any of the objects displayed?

M11: no

M12: no

R: do you have activities involving directly the African community?

M11: we had a workshop...

M12: yea, we have a week of workshop in schools, in the city area, teaching them a week, poetry and drumming. That's was that. They seemed to have had an exhibition in the 90s and they seemed to have had a lot of activities back then.

M11: there was something in the 80s. There is a file of 1984, on African art. I mean we are working on some ideas at the moment. I am trying to bring some members of the African community, the refugee community to talk about some temporary displays of the gallery 33. They are meant to be rotating very six months. We are focusing on Sudan on Susan at the moment; we have a number of Sudanese objects in the collection as also people ideas and how they would like to see displayed their objects.

R: do you have a public catalogue of the ethnographic collection?

M11: there is something on the web; not many, but I think this is an ongoing program to have thing on the web database. We need to get funding to put this collection on the web; the other collections are slightly ahead, but it is something that would be desirable.

R: and what about the use of media in the gallery?

M11: yes, there are 2 videos; and there is an interactive that sadly is not working at the moment. It is about black pioneers and Asian. There are kinds of 2 sections: one is About Afro-Caribbean and one is about Asian and they are contemporary issues. This, the statue on the end, it meant to be animating and should move, but it is not at the moment; and the sounds (music around the worlds) which are not working at the moment.

M12: we got some audio recorded; one has got two African artists, 2 or 3 Jamaican, and the rest is like Black British. We also have Ghanaian Music; and a video DVD playing reggae, a kind of African Culture in the New World.

R: ok, I think this is enough, unless, you would like to add anything else? OK, then it is enough and thank you very much!

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