

# Unpacking the New

Critical Perspectives  
on Cultural Syncretization  
in Africa and Beyond

edited by

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LIT

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## **Appropriation, Alienation and Syncretization: Lessons from the Field**

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*Die Autorität des Neuen ist die des geschichtlich Unausweichlichen. Insofern impliziert es objektive Kritik am Individuum, seinem Vehikel: ästhetisch schürzt im Neuen sich der Knoten von Individuum und Gesellschaft.*

(Adorno 1955: 38)

We live in a world that submits itself to the logic of infinitely accelerating the consumption of goods and their production. One of the tacit assumptions of this logic is our readiness to alienate our workforce permanently in order to acquire these objects.<sup>1</sup> It is with these thoughts in mind that Dominique Perrot (1979a) introduces a collective volume discussing the significance of objects people call their most appreciated goods. Perrot's point is that anthropological and sociological views of these highly esteemed objects may help to explain the fatal attraction of the material world. Perrot goes on to say that it is not only work and production but the objects themselves that play a crucial role in the diverse processes of alienation in the modern world.

In this chapter, I will basically follow Perrot's thoughts in discussing the role of cherished goods, but I chose my examples from a society which may be correctly described as belonging to the 'Less Affluent World'.<sup>2</sup> The patterns of material possessions in the African society I studied are undergoing rapid change, which makes it possible to gain new insights into the processes of appropriation and alienation.

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<sup>1</sup> This idea has been expressed already by Simmel ([1907] 1989: 620) and others.

<sup>2</sup> I borrow this term from Ger and Belk (1996: 273), who define it as 'societies not fully integrated into mass consumption'. As a matter of fact, in my case study, material possessions do not exceed an average of 120 objects per person.

This chapter also deals with the acquisition and handling of global goods in a rural society in West Africa.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, the global goods in question may be regarded as syncretistic objects, and it is no coincidence that most scholars dealing with globalization regard consumption and the ever-increasing importance of global goods as one of the main appearances of globalization. This chapter will narrow its focus to the consequences of the ubiquitous role of these global goods. As I will show, wherever these consumer goods are appropriated and subsequently become part of the local culture, another change in the significance of everyday things occurs, which is juxtaposed to the process of appropriation.<sup>4</sup>

For this process, I use the term ‘cultural alienation’ in the sense of Georg Simmel and others. The term ‘alienation’ has sometimes been called an ‘old battlefield’ in debates inspired by the Marxian thought of alienated work and modes of production (Israel 1971),<sup>5</sup> even before Israel Plessner (1960: 15f.) showed that Marx had borrowed the term ‘alienation’ from Hegel, who, however, used it in a much larger sense. For Hegel, *Entfremdung* and *Entäußerung* (‘alienation’ and ‘objectification’, but used as synonyms by Hegel) are only consequences of man’s dealing with the material world. After the objects have been made they become autonomous, and there is an

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<sup>3</sup> This is the title of a research project carried out from 2000-2006 by the author, Gerd Spittler and Marcus Verne with support from the DFG through a collaborative research programme at the University of Bayreuth entitled ‘Local Action in Africa in the Context of Global Influences’. I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues for discussing earlier versions of this paper and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for its financial support.

<sup>4</sup> The process of appropriation is part of the theoretical framework of our research project. Remarks on our working definition and its general implications are available in Hahn 2004a.

<sup>5</sup> In the context of a book review of Daniel Miller’s *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Gell (1988) criticizes Miller (1987) for relating alienation and objectification to Hegel. Gell asks for (*ibid.*: 47) a second cultural point of reference that he calls ‘symbolic culture in the mode of imagination’. In defence of Miller, I would stress that the larger sense of Hegel’s *Entfremdung* and *Entäußerung* include these subjective and imaginative aspects.

estrangement between man and things that leads to the freedom of the former from the material conditions. In his discussion of alienation, Plessner stresses that Hegel's view must be related to the epoch's dominant romanticism.<sup>6</sup>

The way Perrot and, much earlier, Simmel use the term goes beyond this meaning when they name the consumption and the allure of certain goods as principal reasons for alienation. As underlined by James Carrier (1994), cultural alienation is not related to work or production, but to distribution and consumption. Moreover, the precise meaning of the term 'cultural alienation' should be understood as being close to 'cultural estrangement', a term suggested in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (N.N. 2001) as one of the meanings of alienation. Based once again on Simmel, the *Encyclopedia* describes this meaning of alienation as 'removal from established values in society'.

Perhaps because the connection between appropriation and cultural alienation is only indirect, in many publications on the topic these two processes have not been related sufficiently to each other. In the context of this common neglect, it seems to me that Adorno is an exception. He has felt very well the relatedness between appropriation (which he calls the authority of the new) and alienation (i.e. the historically inevitable). Thus, in the quotation above Adorno makes the point that the authority of the new imposes itself over the historical process, but also that both processes become reality on the level of the individual, bringing in the new and – at the same time – alienating himself from the old.

My chapter is organized in three parts. The first part explains the process of appropriation with reference to everyday objects. I will use the bicycle as an example and report from my own case study of

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<sup>6</sup> In a similar way, Popitz ([1953] 1967: 123) explains Hegel's use of alienation as a kind of distanciation that happens on different levels: on the levels of the individual, of the society as a whole and of class differences.

a small village called Kollo in the south of Burkina Faso.<sup>7</sup> The term 'appropriation' is used in many different contexts and belongs to a variety of terms which have had a great career in the anthropology of globalization. The creative aspects of the process of appropriation are always being stressed: appropriation produces new meanings of things, it creates specific ways of handling them, and finally it creates new cultural spaces which allow objects that are at first strange or unspecific to become part of the local culture or identity. The second part of this chapter will be dedicated to certain criticisms of these idealistic perspectives on appropriation. The term 'cultural alienation' will be explained with reference to certain observations concerning dealing with locally made objects and their shifting contexts. One of the consequences of these shifting contexts is the uncertainty concerning the evaluation of local goods. Thus, alienation seems to constitute a very seldom reflected and rarely articulated countertendency to appropriation. Subjectively felt, alienation is not so much an orientation to new things, i.e. consumer goods, but rather a question of the perspective on one's own culture. The third part of the chapter deals with the relationship between the two terms 'appropriation' and 'alienation'. Both processes may parallel each other, but they take a different course. They even differ on the level of consciousness. While appropriation is a matter of agency and a topic of negotiation, cultural alienation often occurs unnoticed. I will argue that their relationship is a dialectic one in so far as appropriation initiates alienation, while alienation can be regarded as a countertendency to appropriation and may call the latter into question.

The anthropological observation of syncretisation is not meant to be restricted to the study of more or less syncretistic objects. Here I follow Charles Stewart (1999), who suggests that it is more impor-

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<sup>7</sup> I carried out research from 1993 to 2001 in Kollo, a village in the Province du Nahouri in central south of Burkina Faso. A preliminary version of the findings has been published in Hahn 2004b.

tant to ask who is allowing syncretisation to take place, who is facilitating it and perhaps who is hindering it. As we have seen in the quotation from Adorno, the individual is at the crossroads between appropriation and alienation: how successful the new is is a matter of how individuals act. In the context of Stewart's remarks, we may translate this into some precise research questions: Who are the individuals actively involved in the processes of syncretisation, appropriation and alienation? What are the contexts in which appropriation and alienation are being articulated? The intention of this contribution is to acquire a deeper understanding of the role of consumer goods in the rural milieu in West Africa and thus to be able to explain how these two processes, appropriation and alienation, may interfere with each other.

### **Appropriation**

In the village of Kollo, consisting of about 2,000 people mainly living from agriculture, approximately half the properties in the households we examined may be categorized as global goods.<sup>8</sup> Some global goods have already been introduced to the area some decades ago, while others have only recently become objects of everyday use. Global goods in their entirety allocate an important part of the households' financial resources. Most of these items have been industrially manufactured and make their way into the local society as commodities. In this sense, a fundamental contrast is constituted with locally produced goods to which no important financial resources are dedicated.

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<sup>8</sup> As Markus Verne (2005) has shown, the category of 'global good' is a very problematic one. There is no clear-cut boundary between local and global goods, and the framework of appropriation in particular tends to blur these categories. Nevertheless, for the purposes of our research project we used a working definition, based on the geographical origin of the material object itself. Thus, objects coming from outside of Africa are global goods.

What is the context for the appropriation of global goods? I will illustrate this issue by referring to the bicycle because it stands for a typical global and industrially manufactured good. In West Africa bicycles usually come from China, where British bicycle models are still being produced under license today. Local traders offer them in markets in Ghana and Burkina Faso. From the perspective of potential customers in the West African savannah, purchase one involves making an extraordinary investment, unlike the context of acquisition in Western societies. Usually the purchase requires several years' worth of savings. A frequent and alternative strategy of acquisition is connected to labour migration, which is very common in this region. Either the migrants themselves purchase a bicycle at the time of their permanent return, or else they buy one and give it away to their relatives during a stay at home.

The purchase is the beginning of a multi-faceted process of appropriation. Another important element is the local naming of the bicycle. While in Germany a bike may be called a 'Drahtesel' in a not quite respectful way, and in English equally contemptuously a 'boneshaker', in kasIm, the local language in the region of my case study, it is called an 'iron horse'. Obviously, the local name associates the object with the institution of horse keeping, which is very important to the status of the local chiefs. Donkeys are comparatively common, and many families have one at their disposal, to be used as beast of burden as well as to pull carts or ploughs. Keeping horses, on the other hand, is the privilege of a small number of 'noble' families and the chief himself. Though horses are hardly used in everyday life, the high status of the horse seems to have played a role in giving this name to the bicycle.

As a matter of fact, bicycles too have high status. The high costs of purchase from a local point of view are one indication of this. Another sign is the decoration and alteration of new bikes. Certain things, like a seat cover or new handles, are best understood as obligatory accessories, even though they may be more focused on

aesthetic standards. They are bought right at the time the bicycle is purchased.

Other alterations constitute merely pragmatic adaptations to the local use of bicycles, for example, racks produced by local blacksmiths, which soon replace the original ones. But even more important is the removal of certain parts which are not really necessary, such as the chain box, mudguards, dynamo and front brakes, which are regarded as presenting a hindrance to the frequent and inevitable repairs (for example, of leaking tyres) or – like the front brakes – as an avoidable danger for the cyclist. These changes show the great importance of bicycles as a means of transport. Frequently transporting heavy loads, like large sacks of cereals, they play an important role for farmers in this region. At the same time, the modifications reflect the bad quality of the road surfaces, which is no surprise at the sight of the frequently used ways and paths. The frequency of repairs, ranging from patching tyres to changing the ball bearings and the not uncommon welding of rims and frames – apart from the problem of bad road conditions – also indicates how intensively bicycles are used.

The contrast between the form of the bicycle as a global good and its form as used in West Africa is great, as can readily be seen at first sight. Typically bikes in Kollo which have been used for a number of years consist merely of the frame, the rack and the minimum of indispensable parts. The frames may show traces of welding, usually the original paint is gone, and the tyres have often been sewed or wrapped in cloth in order to extend their use.

Appropriation in this context is to be understood on two levels. On the one hand, bicycles are highly appreciated as shown by the names they are given and their intensive use. The global good 'British-Chinese bicycle' is a model, and its acquisition a goal for many people in the village. On the other hand, bikes are considered imperfect when new and are accordingly materially redesigned in order to improve their functioning. In Kollo I have talked to owners

of bicycles about the differences between new and localized bikes. The farmers confirmed that new bikes were somehow 'nice' in their own way, and that each part and their arrangement as a whole did make sense. This is articulated by seeing the engineer of the bike as a European. The farmers acknowledge that 'Europeans aren't stupid'. – After that, some criticism follows: he is nonetheless not able to understand the daily difficulties in Kollo. Perhaps a 'bike of the Whites' may brake better and, during the rains, one doesn't get dirty thanks to the mudguards. But concerning reliability and the possibility of maintenance, everybody will affirm the advantages of the alterations to the bike which are made in Kollo: the rack, easily carrying 80 kg, the chain being easy to put back in its place when necessary, and wheels which are effortlessly removed and which allow thorns etc. to be discovered easily because of the missing mudguards.

The appropriation of the bicycle has become a local routine and takes place again and again with every new bike that is bought. The routinized appropriation may be identified by what I describe here as 'culturally framed object biographies'. The experiences of handling the object during many decades have been incorporated, and became a cultural standard in the local society. For this reason I speak not only of the appropriation of several bicycles, but of the iron horse as a category of material objects. The appropriated bike is about a mixture, a syncretistic object containing global as well as local aspects. The peoples' initiation and the propagation of this particular process of syncretisation shows that the bicycle owners are proud of their possession and recognize the quality of the global (the origin of the bicycle) and the local (their modifications).<sup>9</sup> It is to be presumed that a successful appropriation always ends in a way in which the mixture is thought of as better, more useful and also more

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<sup>9</sup> In this respect, the local form of the bicycle is close to what Barber and Waterman (1995) describe for particular styles of Yoruba music, which contain references to the local as well as to the global.

meaningful, compared to the unaltered global good. This is the point at which appropriation and syncretism merge and create a common evaluation of the cultural role of the new objects.<sup>10</sup>

In his studies of appropriated goods in Trinidad, Daniel Miller (1992a) states: 'Only imported goods constitute authentic culture'. According to Miller, Trinidadians retrieve their own identities especially through the local interpretation of American soap operas. Nothing produced on Trinidad could be as authentic as these TV programmes (Miller 1992b). Among others, the copying of clothes as seen in the movies and the dialogue of the actors belongs to the acting in respect of this medium. The syncretism thus articulated may, according to Miller, present a more important contribution to the identity of consumers in Trinidad than any other, perhaps locally produced TV programme. In respect to my African case study, one is left with some scepticism as to whether bicycle owners would rate the role of their specific bicycle design that high. Surely, this kind of appropriated bicycle is something new, unique and superior to any other kind of bicycle. But still, it is necessary to ask where the limits of this perspective on appropriation lie, and how they are negotiated.

### **Alienation**

The owners of bicycles mentioned so far have a special, prestigious position in the local society. At the same time, very often they are migrants or ex-migrants. This means that they have been away from home for months or even years. Nonetheless a few bicycle owners are not migrants themselves, but have a brother or a son who is, by whom they were given the bicycle on the occasion of the latter's visit

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<sup>10</sup> As Moser (1994) stresses, appropriation has much to do with recycling. Recycling means reinventing objects and usages from things that have been already considered as waste. Recycling appropriation and syncretization thus opens up new spaces for culturally defined meanings and usages, particularly for the poor and powerless, who do not have the opportunity to participate in the consumption patterns of Western society.

to the village. Thus the bicycles – like a limited number of other things (jeans, wristwatches etc.) – are items which are much more common in the households of migrants than in other households. In the context of those households that count these things among their possessions, one can speak of a particular ‘way of life’. This lifestyle belongs to the migrants and their families, something in which they differ from other households.

This way of life is not just a way of life among others in Kollo, but it stands for rare opportunities to articulate social differentiation and group formation. Visiting or returning migrants always bring with them considerable amounts of global consumer goods, some to keep for themselves, others to give to friends or relatives. Many of these things, such as clothes, are understood instantaneously as a sign of migration and are used conspicuously by the migrants.<sup>11</sup> The events when such behaviour is to be observed include, for example, visits to the local markets, where meeting friends and the exchange of news are especially important. Someone returning from migration or the arrival of a brother is important information on these occasions. New clothes, sunglasses or bicycles conspicuously displayed serve as a kind of proof emphasising such reports.

Other consumer goods are of more everyday use. Enamel bowls, tin buckets, stainless steel dishes and plastic mats count among them. All these things are to be seen in the context of appropriation and belong to the things which are regularly used in the household, the kitchen, at meal-times and in welcoming guests. They show the great importance of the goods that have brought back, even beyond the

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<sup>11</sup> For more details on the art of giving of the returning migrant, see Hahn 2004c. Benfoughal (2002) documented a similar context among the Tuareg in southern Algeria, where labour migration is the starting point for the local appropriation of global goods brought back by returning relatives. Benfoughal further differentiates between the goods themselves and the ideas and concepts of their usage, the latter being of even greater importance.

context of conspicuous consumption observable in the market.<sup>12</sup> Of lesser importance to my argument, but indispensable for a vivid image of the role of the migrants is the fact that the number of the useful items mentioned is exceeded by the number of goods which are useless or rapidly lose their usefulness. The households of migrants are bursting with things like plastic bathtubs, broken tape-recorders, nylon bags and unused foam mattresses.

It is part of the logic of appropriation that neither the new leisure goods nor the novelties of everyday use immediately displace local goods. Women I interviewed said they used all types of goods, plastic bowls next to calabashes, ceramic water pots next to buckets, and so on. The interest in new things is thus based on the idea that one can possess these things too, without having to give anything up. It is this coexistence of local and global goods, resulting in the rapid expansion of material possessions, which I was particularly interested in.<sup>13</sup>

Comparing peoples' ways of dealing with local objects and the new things, there are considerable differences. So far I have discussed mainly the contexts of the new: their acquisition is in most cases connected to migration, and their handling is at least partly moulded by conspicuous consumption. I have stressed the difficulties involved in affording these things, which are much more expensive than the local goods. But what about local goods themselves?

The acquisition of local goods is much less difficult, since all the necessary raw materials are found in the region, and only very few financial means are necessary. In almost all compounds in the village there are artisans who can manufacture these things themselves. Men

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<sup>12</sup> This term refers to Thorstein Veblen's (1899) classical work. More recent studies have shown very well the limits of this approach, particularly when reintegration into a social structure and hedonism collide (Walsh 2003).

<sup>13</sup> According to literature from European anthropology, the increase in material possessions is only one kind of the dynamics of material possessions (Bringéus 1986).

produce calabashes, women collect fibres for brushes and mats, and they also know how to make them. The availability of the materials and the many people who can be considered potential producers are aspects of their effortless availability. Normally all these things can be obtained within the family or through the help of one's neighbours. Thus, for example, straw mats are usually made and given away by old women who have been asked to do so by neighbours without receiving a great deal of material compensation for their effort. The same applies to men who are known to be skilled calabash carvers, who are often invited to split the calabashes for their neighbours, and to clean and prepare them for use. These practices of neighbourly help are based on quite definite rules in the local society. Whoever needs any item from the group of locally made things will not experience any problem in receiving help in manufacturing the object. This is a clear contrast to things brought back by migrants, because nobody can know when an absent member of the household will come back, nor what kind of objects he will bring.

But the differences may be interpreted a step further, when we ask about the perspective of the mat weaver on local and global goods. I know some women who have in their households dozens of ready woven but not yet used mats, as well as bundles of raw materials waiting to be transformed into straw mats. Although these women have hardly any plastic mats, there is no reason to exclude them from the attitude reported earlier towards the increase in material possessions: 'We want all things!' A feeling of ambivalence becomes apparent in these remarks by this woman. She cannot simply give up manufacturing mats because people will continue to ask her for them, but her desire for plastic mats will never be fulfilled in this way. The local goods are there, they are still there, but, speaking metaphorically, they have moved aside, and are no longer any good for fulfilling people's desires.

With the new things, the social order is called into question. Money and, in the sphere of the subsistence economy, the crops in the fields are usually under the control of the elders or the household head.<sup>14</sup> Contrary to this rule, the migrants decide themselves whether to keep the objects they have brought or whether and to whom they give some of them. But it is not only a question of distribution and participation: even more important is the fact that these objects stand for a new world for which the returning migrants are the collectively recognized experts. With this articulation of superiority, which also suggests that those left behind do not even know the right way of handling these new things, the migrants create a distance.<sup>15</sup> Surely this may be interpreted by others as a provocative gesture.

The sphere of local objects, for which neighbourhood and mutual help are sufficient, is separated from the sphere of global goods by limitations of access and knowledge. This separation is sometimes formulated as criticism of the new things: what happens if the plastic mat becomes tattered after a year and the son or the brother doesn't return from labour migration and doesn't bring a replacement? It is better to carry on having some straw mats in store in order to be able to resort to them. This context makes local goods appear in a new light. They are no longer everyday things but have been relegated to being mere substitutes in case the desired new things suddenly become inaccessible. It would be wrong to claim that these things have turned into strange things. In order to stress the shifting of contexts, it would be more appropriate to suggest that these objects are now somehow no longer as close to the everyday routine as they

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<sup>14</sup> A similar process has been documented from a migrant context in Senegal by Michael Lambert (1999).

<sup>15</sup> The unrestrained admiration for plastics and the other typical materials of mass-produced consumer goods is the object of El Maleh's (1997) provocative account of migrants' perspectives on the country of his origin.

were before. Local goods are not valueless or about to be discarded, but their context has become different.<sup>16</sup>

Another example points out even more clearly the shift of contexts. As harvest time comes closer in Kollo, the farmers usually have an idea whether it is going to be a good harvest and whether it should be kept in temporary granaries close to the fields or in the large mud granaries in the compound. One of the proverbial courses of action is the request of a man who, in anticipation of a good harvest, asks his wives to make a large number of baskets. But as I observed several times, the women comply with the request only reluctantly because, after weaving the baskets, the hard work of transporting them when heavy then awaits them. Instead, they expect the man to rent a bicycle or a donkey to transport the crops. However, this is not easy since at harvest time all households need their means of transport for themselves. Incidentally, there are such baskets in most households. During my interviews on objects and meanings, the women did not hesitate to quote the proverb and associate the baskets metaphorically with a good harvest. But the obligation to transport the harvest in locally made baskets is nowadays rarely and only grudgingly performed. The local things are still there, but they are no longer the same.<sup>17</sup>

Yet another change of contexts must be mentioned. In comparison the migrants (and their families) possess fewer things than the inhabitants of other households in which, for instance, older

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<sup>16</sup> In their study of the material culture of a village in Hungary, Edith Fél and Tamas Hofer (1974) distinguish between the things in the 'first line' and other things, kept in reserve, for the case of an eventual use. This distinction is close to what I mean here: local goods move from the first line to the second, without, however, being disapproved as a result.

<sup>17</sup> In northern Côte d'Ivoire, Mona Etienne (1980) reports the same change concerning the locally woven cloth: clothing made from it still exists, but its use is now restricted. In everyday contexts, other kinds of clothing are preferred. Etienne (*ibid.*: 230) calls this 'alienation and the reversal of relationship'. As women's participation is no longer necessary, their interest in this aspect of material culture is no longer important either.

people live. Surveys of households showed that the number of material possessions and the rate of acquisition of global goods are closely connected to age and livelihood strategies. Young people, including migrants, have few things but a larger proportion of global goods; older people and those who depend on their cultivating and their animals have more things in total, but a smaller proportion of global goods. Naturally older men and women often live in such households; they are unable to participate in labour migration because of their age.

The correlation of age and increasing material possessions is universal, as cultural psychology confirms (Dittmar 1991). It would not be worth mentioning at this point if it did not have consequences for how personal property is valued. As an example, I refer to the situation of the two individuals with the largest personal property in my case study. Both of them are widows, one living alone, the other with a child. Although their personal properties are the largest in quantity, they belong to the people with the lowest incomes in the village.<sup>18</sup> While one of them tries to generate a small income by selling firewood in the market in the little town nearby, the other has to rely on food donations from her neighbours. How do these women perceive their own property? At any rate they do not see it as 'wealth'. They know that all these things do not help them cope as widows with the shortcomings of their everyday lives. It is not that they would like to get rid of the things or that they would like to exchange them for a smaller number of global goods. Many objects in their households, though mal-functioning or simply unused, are highly valued and kept for the sake of memories. The silent but painstaking storing of objects is the widows' way of 'dealing with things'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Complete documentation and a statistical analysis of the households can be found in Hahn 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Perrot (1979b) makes the point that speaking about objects always involves interpreting their significance. In order to understand the role of material possession,

The ambivalence between respect for local objects and frustration at the impossibility of acquiring global goods explains the significance of cultural alienation in the context of my case study. Alienation here means not simply dissociation, detachment or getting rid of something. Alienation leaves a space for an irrevocable entanglement with the object of alienation. Even though the value may be contested and usage decreasing, the objects will remain in a relationship with the person on the level of meaning and handling.<sup>20</sup> In this respect, I see alienation as part of a syncretistic process because it relates to a new perspective which evolves due to the presence of the new, i.e. global goods. Alienation is certainly about distance, about the feeling that local things are inappropriate or even unpractical. Ger and Belk (1996: 283) refer to a very similar process when they describe 'the loss of confidence and pride in local goods and material culture' in the context of the appearance of new goods.

A third example may explain even better the fact that although alienation certainly implies ambivalence, it goes beyond this in creating a new structure for the assignment of meanings to the object in question. One day in Kollo, I met a young man in the neighbourhood who had been back for several weeks from a long stay in Ghana. He was making a *nayIra tampOgO*, a shepherd's bag, out of grass fibres. Normally he would have been too old for such a thing, for these bags are normally used by 10-15 year-old boys, who, as young cowherds, keep their provisions in them when they are out and about with the cattle all day. In response to my question, he

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Perrot urges us to observe the silent moments involved in dealing with things. This is particularly important in the context of alienation, as this process is seldom made the focus of attention.

<sup>20</sup> Barber and Watermann (1995: 258ff.) describe how, in the creation of a new musical style containing many elements related to the global, something like a consciousness of Yoruba identity emerges at the same time. In the moment of integration into the global world order, local elements are identified as 'Yoruba style'. See also Morgan for the creation of 'being Aborigine' as a new context for urban Aborigines in Australia.

explained that, after his long stay in migration, this activity reminded him of former times, when he had not yet known the douth, the cities in Ghana. Needless to say, he will have no use for the bag, which for him represents just the memory and the articulation of an emotional bond.<sup>21</sup> Both these are aspects found in the concept of cultural alienation.

The presence of the cowherds' bag or the old things in the widows' homes and their valuation on a level that has almost nothing to do with practical usages must be regarded as part of the process of alienation. I know some Kasena living in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, who, upon returning to Kollo on holiday, sometimes take back with them one or several objects of everyday use, even if they have no use for them. This particular kind of reappropriation is at the same time an expression of alienation, because these things express the ambivalence of an indissoluble bond and an insurmountable distance.<sup>22</sup>

### **Appropriation and Alienation: A Dialectic Process**

In the context of the appearance of the new, i.e. of the global goods, appropriation and alienation are relevant processes. As the migrants and their families boost the consumer goods brought back from migration, people develop a feeling of the limited use of locally made things. In a certain sense, alienation is a dialectical counter-

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<sup>21</sup> In an account on the history of material culture studies in European anthropology, Gottfried Korff (2000: 31) questions whether the emotional perspective on things has not been neglected from the social scientists' point of view. What if the local concepts of 'subjective meanings of goods', of the 'holiness of things' and of 'the soul of the objects' had been taken seriously? Is the scientific reduction of man's possessions into the logic of signs and symbols the right way to deal with the material world? Cf. Ritzer 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Cultural alienation never happens in the context of objects with particularly high symbolic meanings. The regalia of lineages, the equipment of fortune-tellers and the altars of the ancestors are not used in everyday life, therefore they are not part of the ambivalent coexistence which causes dissociation.

process to appropriation. In many cases, the popular praise of appropriation as a creative and vital cultural process neglects the fact that the one would not be possible without the other. Whenever we observe appropriation, we should be very sensitive to any alienation that might be involved too. Or, from the perspective of those whose personal property is being subjected to a fundamental change, the experience of a special kind of distance from local things is a precondition for appropriating global goods. Alienation here means the ambivalence that arises from the shifting contexts of the local goods.

This is the first result of my observations. It also sheds fresh light on Daniel Miller's case studies, mentioned above. Miller has certainly correctly identified the ways in which syncretistic objects attain more importance than all the others for one's identity. Transferred to my African example, this could go equally well for the bicycle. However, a question mark might be added to Miller's interpretations. Without knowing the contexts in Trinidad, on the basis of my own case study, I suggest that part of this process is the alienation of certain local things that occurs simultaneously with the gaining of new meanings.

In conclusion, another aspect merits being revealed. Appropriation does not necessarily lead to a loss of social coherence in the local society. I have mentioned that consumer goods brought back by migrants are frequently presented as gifts to members of the family. Thus, giving such objects away is central for the social integration of the objects themselves, as well as for the returning migrant. To a limited extent, the giving away follows the patterns of mutual help in the manufacture of local things. Thus we can suggest that the fact of giving them away and the option to integrate them is more important than what kind or origin they have.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Gertrude Stotz (2001), who discusses how cars are treated by Aborigines in Australia, therefore suggests we speak of the 'socialization of global goods' instead of using the term 'appropriation'.

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