



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Introduction to the Study of Religion

Prof Bettina E. Schmidt

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



www.uwtsd.ac.uk

Materiality and Religion

- Ninian Smart spoke about a “material dimension of religion” and pointed towards houses of worship, statues, shrines, altars and so on
- However, it goes further.

More than belief

- Manuel A. Vásquez published a book with the title “More than belief: A Materialistic Theory of Religion” (OUP, 2011) in which he presents a new way to study religion.
 - It challenges, as a reviewer write, “the traditional idea that religions can be understood primarily as texts to be interpreted, decoded, or translated.”

Material Religion

- Focus on physical aspects of religion such as buildings, art, and so on
- But also on body, body art, body decoration
- and on embodiment and how a body moves, prays, dances and so on

The visual side of religion



Material aspects in the photo are

- Altar and its many items on it
 - Dress code of the participants
 - But also music, singing and dance
-
- And what about the non-verbal information that can be carried via body language?

Body Language

- Non-verbal information can inform us about a hidden agenda
 - people would hesitate to express in words but consciously and deliberately express through body language.
- The problem with such information is the difficulty to record.

“We cannot quote information based on an attitude expressed through body language in the same way as we can quote information given in an interview. Nevertheless body language can carry important information that is otherwise difficult to get. It is possible to hide one’s opinion in an interview but often impossible in body language.” (Schmidt 2008: 21).

Performance

- How can I study something I do not experience and sometimes cannot even observe?
- -> focus on performance
- Seeing (or observing) something is often the first step to understanding.

But can we rely on our sight?

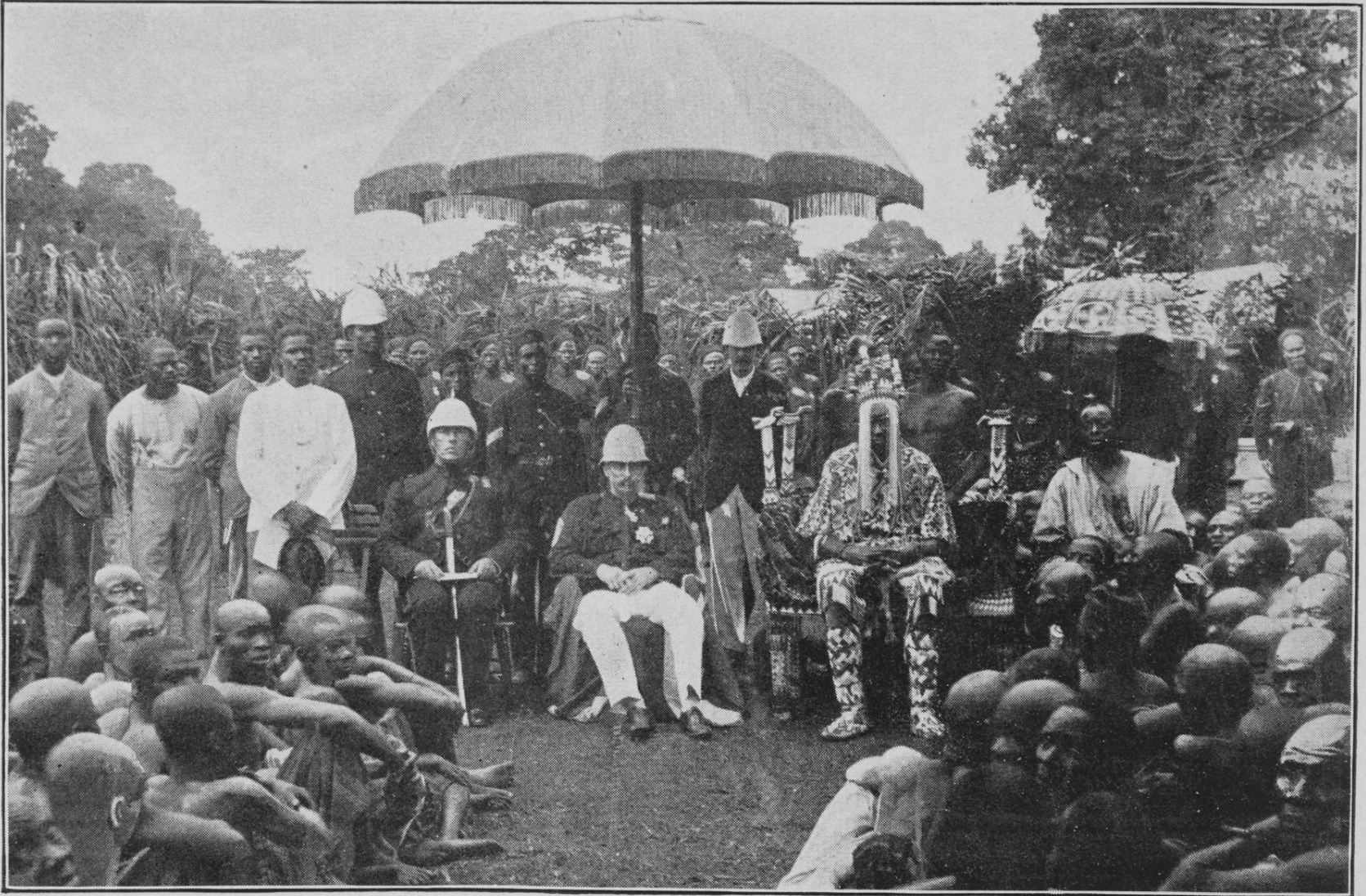


Subjectivity vs Objectivity

- Many argue that scientific analysis is more important than subjective experience
- But others argue that it depends on the understanding of people having the experience and not on the verification of the experience.

Wider Problem with Photos

- Misinterpretation
- Manipulation
- But also sometimes political weapon



A KING OF EJAYBOO.—GOVERNOR OF LAGOS ON RIGHT.

For years the rulers of this fierce tribe made the profession of Christianity a capital crime.

- “The oba wears a beaded crown, but the beads have been parted and his face is visible. This is unusual, for the oba is like a god and must be concealed when in public. The beads over his face, with their interplay of light and shadow, are meant to give him a divine aspect. Why is his face visible in this photograph? Some contravention of customary practice has taken place. The dozens of men seated on the ground in front of him are visibly alarmed. Many have turned their bodies away from the oba, and several are positioned toward the camera, not in order to look at the camera but in order to avoid looking at the exposed radiance of their kin.” (Teje Cole, *When the Camera Was a Weapon of Imperialism*, *New York Times Magazine*, 6 February 2019)
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/magazine/when-the-camera-was-a-weapon-of-imperialism-and-when-it-still-is.html>

Power of Materiality

- Image can convey message often better than words