

**ETHNOGRAPHY  
AS COMMENTARY**

Writing  
from  
the  
virtual  
Archive

Johannes FABIAN

## Ethnography as Commentary





# **ETHNOGRAPHY ASCOMMENTARY**

*Writing from the Virtual Archive*

**Johannes Fabian**

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## Preface

This book neither looks nor sounds like a textbook and yet, if an excuse were needed for its having been written, it would be that this book can serve as an example, an illustration of, as well as a model for, writing ethnography “in the presence of texts.” That notion will be explored at length; in essence it is the idea that the possibility to deposit our documents in a virtual archive on the Internet changes the conditions and constraints of presenting knowledge: The anthropologist can now write and his or her readers can read around materials that are no longer limited to short excerpts and quotations. The only limits to making and keeping “ethnographic documents” directly accessible are those of the time and energy it takes to set up, maintain, and consult virtual archives.



## Preface

The approach I take is retrospective: reflecting on times passed and times past, calling up memories, and thinking about the role of memory in the work of ethnography. While such preoccupations may seem to be the privilege, or affliction, of senior practitioners, this study is not offered as a memoir. On the contrary, it is an experiment that looks to the future. It is meant to encourage students who are introduced to anthropology, who prepare themselves for field research, or face the daunting task of earning their professional credentials with a dissertation.

viii Beyond that, I hope to make a contribution to debates about the nature of ethnography in these postcolonial and “global” times. We seem to have overcome anxieties that brought us close to rejecting ethnography as an inherently imperial form of inquiry. Ironically, while we were busy worrying, almost everybody else became enamored of the concept of ethnography and the practices associated with it. Between critical despondency and naive enthusiasm there is a space where ethnography can survive and thrive as the core of anthropology—if the researcher is competent, prepared to work hard, relentless in questioning the legitimacy of his or her claims to knowledge, and, in my experience, plain lucky.

As an experiment in ethnographic writing, *Ethnography as Commentary* could be called an exercise in form. However, the approach I have been advocating in my work has always emphasized substance, the content of experience and communicative interaction. I see our task as (re)presentation and interpretation of historically situated events and practices, based on objectivations, the “documents” we produce or find. In this case I focus on a conversation that followed the performance of a ritual and was recorded before many readers of this book (I hope) were born. The event took place in Lubumbashi, a large town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a world with which they are not likely to be familiar. Because the point of my experiment is to explore an alternative to the monograph with its encyclopedic rubrics, I keep general information about time and place to a minimum. This does not mean that I consider such information unimportant. But, much like the ethnographic text that will be the object of this study, abundant knowledge of its social and cultural context is present and easily accessible on the Internet. For matters that require specific knowledge

beyond what the text itself contains, I provide conventional references to the literature.

By the time one gets around to writing what might be called a “late ethnography” it becomes impossible properly to acknowledge debts to persons and institutions. Therefore I want to mention only those to whom I owe most: Kahenga Mukonkwa Michel was my interlocutor in the conversation that is at the core of this book. All attempts to contact him and involve him in my project proved futile. This makes me sad; it also strengthened my resolve to publish this work.

Next I must acknowledge the work of my colleague at the University of Amsterdam, Vincent de Rooij. As the webmaster, editor, and co-founder of Language and Popular Culture in Africa he assures the presence of documents such as the conversation with Kahenga. Our website exists because of time and energy he puts into it above and beyond his regular obligations.

Field work in Lubumbashi (1972–74) was made possible by support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Rockefeller Foundation program of aid to the National University of Zaire (records of which are by now probably forgotten or buried in their archives).

Finally, I am grateful for a stay at the Stanford Humanities Center (2005–6) and for the intellectual conviviality I enjoyed with my fellow Fellows. All of them participated in my travails as sympathetic and critical listeners to daily progress reports at lunch time. Their own projects widened my horizon; Arnold Zwicky, to name just one of them, was an inexhaustible source of information and guidance in linguistic matters. Conversations with Hayden White allowed us to renew a friendship that goes back almost as far as my meeting with Kahenga, and I would like to take this occasion to join the well-wishers when he celebrates his eightieth birthday.

*Xanten, April 2007*



## **Introduction: Closing House—A Late Ethnography**

### **A Time and a Place: Events and Documents**

In the fall of 1974 I was getting ready to leave Lubumbashi. I had lived there for two and a half years, a stay interrupted only by a few short trips to the United States and Europe. This was my second visit to the mining region of Shaba/Katanga in the southeast of what was then Zaire and is now again the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the first one, in 1966–67, had been my initiatory dissertation fieldwork). I had arrived in the region in 1972 with a project of research titled “Language and Labor among Swahili-Speaking Mine Workers in Katanga.” Fieldwork was carried out first in Kolwezi, where most of the mines and treatment plants were located, and later in Lubumbashi, the capital, in two smaller establishments that made neo-African furniture and other craft items for sale mostly to expatriates.

2      Going on the mass of documentation assembled, mainly in the form of notes and sound recordings made at the workplaces and in the homes of workers, the project was certainly productive. Yet, as the material piled up, it dawned on me that my agenda had been conceived too narrowly as a sociolinguistic and lexical-semantic study. Workers' language, I began to see, could not be isolated from speech and communicative practices that had developed in this urban-industrial region and that, through Swahili as the linguistic medium, had created a lively, multifaceted popular culture. At about that time—the period of funded research was coming to an end—my stay mutated into a stint of teaching and administration at the local campus of the National University, allowing me to bridge a difficult period between losing one job and finding another in the United States.

Work at the university ruled out sustained and focused research. Yet some of the contacts and discoveries made during this period would later become more important than the sociolinguistic project I had started out with. During free time at night or on weekends I kept in touch with members of the religious movement I had studied in the sixties, and I could easily have been drawn once again into their circles of thought and instruction. But I also took the habit of going out for a drink and chat in one of the *cités*, the townships set up for Africans in colonial times. I had become acquainted with the Mufwankolo troupe of actors and enjoyed their company. I also met and had conversations with many of the popular genre painters of Shaba/Katanga. There was so much to be curious about.

During the final months before departure, at a time when it was clear that I would soon leave the university and the country, two chance contacts led me to take up, or rather stumble onto, ethnographic inquiries I had not planned and carried out without the kind of mandate or the obligations that come with being supported by a research grant. One of them was meeting the painter and historian Tshibumba Kanda Matulu. One late afternoon I was driving home from the university when I saw him walking on a street, carrying several paintings. I stopped to take a look at his work and we began to talk, first on the roadside, later at our house. Our conversation encouraged him to take up a project that had been on his mind for some time: a painted and narrated history of Zaire that has by now become a monument to his genius and to the urban popular culture that produced him. It

is fair to say that Tshibumba not only represented history, he made it (Fabian 1996).

On September 30, one week before the first of four sessions with Tshibumba was recorded on October 6, a similarly intensive exchange had taken place in our house on Mpolo Avenue with Kahenga Mukonkwa Michel, by trade a provider of health and protection. It was not the first time we had met. An acquaintance from the Lubumbashi art scene, the painter Mwenze Kibwanga, had recommended Kahenga to us when my then-spouse told him about aches and pains which did not respond to conventional treatment. She became Kahenga's patient during the weeks that followed while I went about my daily work and faced my daily worries, among them the break-ins and thefts all expatriates had come to fear. Either the subject had come up by chance or I brought it up because I wanted to try out a local solution to my problems with safety; Kahenga offered his services and I became his client. He performed a ritual that I was allowed to watch, and when he returned a few days later with some herbal medicine he accepted my invitation to talk about the ritual and about his work in general. That conversation was recorded and then filed away among notes and documents I found interesting but had no concrete plans for.

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## **A Project Emerges:**

### **Ethnography and the Virtual Archive**

Almost exactly thirty years went by before I listened to that memorable conversation again. I transcribed and translated the recording and deposited the text in a virtual archive where it can now be looked at by everyone who has access to the Internet (<http://www2.fmg.uva.nl/lpca>). This book will be “based on” that text, as we say, a convenient expression that allows us to make empirical claims—that what we report is supported by a document of research (data, if you wish)—without having to specify how we get from an “ethnographic text” to a text we then call “an ethnography.” There was a time when it was easier to get away with claims concerning empirical validity and simply go about the business of “writing up” at home what we had noted down and recorded in the field. That time is long gone; when we present knowledge now we are expected to lay open, account for, the processes by

which observations and experiences become documents on which we may base the interpretations and insights we call ethnography.

4 This critical task is not made easier when the interval between the events that were documented and work on these documents has become long enough to accommodate a generation. Such a distance makes questioning the givenness of data even more urgent than it would have been if research and writing had taken place during the more usual period of a few years. When so much time has elapsed, problems with assuming that what we write about is simply *there* are complicated by a heightened awareness of a *then*. While this does not mean that short-term and long-term recourse to data differ in kind—every note, document, recording, every “fact” is *then*, a thing of the past—it may well be that an undertaking such as the one I am embarking on in this book changes the nature of ethnography. What we do becomes historiography as well as autobiography, by necessity rather than as a stylistic choice. There is no alternative to telling a story, or stories, when we go about re-presenting knowledge gained and recorded in the past; it is impossible to make that past present without recourse to the ethnographer’s personal memory or memories.

To realize this predicament of a “late ethnography” and to spell out some of the epistemological conditions of such an enterprise is one thing; to conclude that all the ethnographer can do is tell self-centered stories (because this is all that is left for postcolonial, postmodern, or post-theoretical anthropology) is another. In ways that are not quite clear to us, a decidedly modern technical development, the Internet-connected personal computer, may invigorate our commitment to ethnography. Ethnographic texts can now be consigned to a virtual archive where they are accessible to the writer of ethnographies as well as to his or her readers because, beyond being accessible (which physical archives may also be), texts in a virtual archive take on a kind of presence that even the most skilled ethnographer could not achieve as long as possibilities to refer to, cite, or display documents were severely limited by the conventions of publishing prior to the Internet (or to CDs that could be distributed with the printed book).

I have begun to think about the consequences that virtual presence of texts may have for our writing and will take this up later when I discuss the question of genre; here I limit myself to a point that is relevant to this

introduction: We have become used to opposing virtual to real and tend to forget that “virtual” originally connotes effectiveness, strength rather than weakness. Consigning documents to a virtual archive makes them more real, not in any ontological sense but in terms of their “practicality,” that is, as regards their potential to mediate between the events that were noted or recorded and our efforts to represent the knowledge gained as adequately as possible. This—a heightened presence calling for acknowledgment and response—has been what made me embark on this book. To make it clear, my point of departure has not been to start with a subject matter, a topic, much less a theoretical question and then seek evidence or support in a document. I *began* with the transcription and translation of a recorded conversation and, repeating somehow what happened when I recorded the conversation with Kahenga, I had at first no other plans than to deposit the texts in Archives of Popular Swahili. Only when I had almost completed the task of producing the texts—for reasons that will be discussed later on, this took several months of hard work—the idea of a book emerged.

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### **Crossing Borders: Ethnography as Transgression**

Recalling, as I do now, the story of the project as a series of almost inadvertent steps, I realize, suggests a procedure that may appear to violate principles of scientific inquiry (or the image we have of it). But then, such transgressive behavior echoes the crossing of borders that constituted the object of this study. Not counting linguistic and social barriers that had to be crossed earlier, at least three kinds of transgression led up to this project: The first one occurred when the ethnographer became a patient and client, something that in my mind (and in my memory) was not the same as moving from observation to “participant observation.” There was no “method” involved, no attempt to change roles for ethnographic purposes. Crossing that border implied, second, a transgression of sorts when we left the confines of Western biomedicine to seek treatment by an herbalist and, third, it meant stepping outside the boundaries of rational conduct when I became the client of a practitioner of magic or, perhaps, sorcery, to use labels that are as handy as they are inadequate.

Of course, there would be no document of what happened nor a story to



6 tell if these acts of transgression had been completely unselfconscious and free of the duplicity without which ethnographic research would be impossible—a duplicity that makes us cross borders but not without establishing a record that lets us return to our professional roles and habits. When I speak of the ethnographer's duplicity, this is not to be taken as confessional breast-beating. I want duplicity understood in a sense that Nietzsche, in his essay on truth and lying, called *aussermoralisch*—neither immoral nor amoral but extramoral (1976). Put positively, duplicity is involved in performing, playing roles, which we do when we work “as” ethnographers; in that sense it is an epistemological concept helping us to understand how knowledge is produced. Not being forthright at all times because, without a certain shiftiness, a stranger in a society might not be able to move at all; putting on an act, say, by trying to communicate and interact above one's linguistic and cultural means and competence; assuming multiple roles and guises as serious researcher, disinterested observer or hanger-on, affable conversationalist, convivial companion or friend—to the moralist all this must have something unsavory or outright repulsive. Yet, I would contend, ethnography, much like living our ordinary lives, could not be done in any other way.

So, how straightforward was I when I asked Kahenga to “close” our house in Lubumbashi? As best as I can remember I wanted to have protection. There certainly was no intention on my part to trick Kahenga into giving me an “ethnographic” performance (see also Fabian 1990b). When the day of the house-closing came I did not really know what to expect and had made no preparations for documenting the event. I was curious, of course, and professional habit, or compulsion, made me ask Kahenga whether I could watch him at work. Without hesitating for a moment he agreed and the ritual took its course. What I saw was fascinating. When it was over and Kahenga had left I was unable to resist the temptation to take a few notes on what I had observed—and that, at the latest, was the moment when I crossed the border between client and ethnographer. Or did that happen when I asked him whether we could meet again and talk about the things I had seen and heard? I don't remember; all I can recall is that I wanted to record our conversation.

In fact, as I am writing this I realize just how precarious memories can be because the text, the protocol of our exchange, will show that borders were

crossed even earlier during the days when Kahenga did his work as a healer. He had allowed his patient to accompany him on a search for herbal medicines and to take photographs, and note down the names, of specimens he collected. A botanist at the university examined the photographs and came up with a list of tentative identifications. Specimens and photographs were before us when we talked. They played an important part in structuring our conversation and the text that is before us now.

Perhaps I should leave it at that and get on with formulating thoughts, insights, and findings which, as I announced earlier, will be based on that text, except that I anticipate a question I should answer, at least briefly, right away: What does “based on” mean? In a general way we use this phrase to indicate (show or claim) that the knowledge we present is grounded on evidence. But what does it mean specifically when the evidence is a text? Or worse, from the point of view of the “empirically” minded, when there is seemingly “nothing but” a text—no statistical data generated by surveys or standardized questionnaires, no compilation of facts found in archives or in “the literature”? Does that not make my project vulnerable to accusations of “textual fundamentalism”? This introduction, a circuitous story of how the text was produced, should have shown the contrary. Our document is not a foundation; it is not a ground on which conclusions may rest, if only for the simple reason that the text does not rest or just sit there. Its current state of fixation, I hope to have shown, was but a phase in a series of events. The text is not a depository of facts but a mediator. Its presence makes it a *pièce de résistance* on the road from past experience to future representation.

At this point, the reader hopefully has an idea of the long prehistory of this book; he or she may still wonder what exactly it is about and how I plan to present material and findings. As is customary I should now provide a concise statement of the subject matter, followed by a sketch of the way in which the presentation will be structured in the chapters that follow. Much as I want to respect custom, I find myself compelled to commit yet another transgression by leaving this task in suspense, for reasons I must discuss now.

## Ethnography and Form: The Question of Genre

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Somewhere along the path I have described so far I decided to conduct this project as an experiment in breaking up conventions of ethnography that enjoin us to be clear about what we want to do before we start and to do one thing at a time. The working title of the project was *Closing House: A Late Ethnography*. It gave an indication of what I had in mind: putting an event, the ritual performed by Kahenga, at the center of attention. At the same time the pun on “closing shop” was intended: I undertake this project at a time when I begin to look for some closure in my professional work. Circumstances may see to it that this book will be my last and it is difficult to accept this without at least trying to take stock and coming to some kind of conclusion about matters that have occupied me in my work. How can I do this without making the ethnography of a rite of protection a mere pretext for an intellectual memoir? Either one may be of interest but can they be fitted into a coherent form?

Anthropology and readers of anthropological writing have by now become used to ethnography with a heavy dose of autobiography. That is not really my problem; I never thought it desirable or even possible to keep the author out of accounts based on research requiring his or her active presence. What preoccupies me is to find out what it means to write, as indicated in the provisional subtitle, a “late ethnography,” one that is belated, more than thirty years after the event, late in the ethnographer’s life, and above all late in an historical constellation—something we are trying to grasp with our theorizing about the postmodern, postcolonial condition. Is it not, to put this bluntly, simply too late to be writing ethnography?

True, we all but abandoned the once canonical form of the monograph when we realized how compromised it was by its roots in the imperial gaze of a science of mankind conceived as a branch of natural history. For a while, this made us agonize about, or, as some would prefer to put it, experiment with, genres such as personal or historical narrative, dialogue, poetry, and essay. Yet we still designate as “ethnographies” most dissertations and publications that are not textbooks or purely theoretical treatises. Whatever the outcome of these developments will be, it is difficult to imagine that, given

its growing popularity outside anthropology, the term “ethnography” will be abandoned in the near future (Fabian and de Rooij, in press). In the meantime, any contribution to anthropology will also have to be a contribution to the debate about genre, that is, about the quest for legitimate forms of presenting knowledge of cultures and societies.

Such a conclusion, I think, is inevitable. We are bound to worry about genre, no matter how tired we may be of literary introspection and how much we sympathize with the colleague who exclaimed “genre be damned” (Webster 1986; I think this was before the phrase became a fad). On the other hand, the irreversible turn of attention to literary form is no substitute for continuing to worry about the production, not just the presentation, of knowledge. In fact, I would argue that the only excuse for leading anthropology up the path of literary theory is epistemological; attention to *genre* ultimately means attending to *generation*, that is, to the making of knowledge.

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### Commentary as a Genre

What could be the genre commensurate to the task I set myself in this book? I must admit that it has been tempting to present what I have to say as a collage. Parts written in genres such as dialogue, personal and historical narrative, and interpretive essay could be assembled to form an evocative and coherent picture. In the end I could not envisage such a project. As I understand it, collage is more than juxtaposition of elements. At any rate, when applied to writing, collage is a metaphor and it is successful, rather than confusing, only as a poetic creation. Anthropology has a few masters of poetic collage; I am not one of them. And as to collage in its more literal sense, I am not about to embark on a pictorial mode of representation (ethnography as exhibit or *tableau vivant*) after all the criticism I have heaped on “visualism” in anthropological discourse (Fabian 2001a).

So, for better or worse, the question of genre must be faced and this book will be an occasion further to develop a position I began to formulate some years ago (Fabian 2002b): “Commentary,” I predicted, is likely to emerge as a genre of ethnography. The point of departure of the argument, introduced

above, was the new kind of presence ethnographic texts take when they are deposited in publicly (or at least widely) accessible virtual archives. As briefly as possible I should now spell out what this view entails.

First, to qualify as a genre, commentary must be more than just a gloss on a brief excerpt from a source, or an annotation to, say, a diagram or an illustration. As the form of a piece of ethnography, be it an article or a book, commentary requires the co-presence of a substantial text and the interpretive, analytic, or historical writing based on that text.

10 Second, commentary as a genre not only determines literary form, it defines a practice of writing. Commentary is made “practically” possible by the virtual presence of text(s) and it can be *realized*, practiced, within a community of writers and readers who have access to the Internet. While this may be considered limiting (despite all the talk about globality, access to the Internet remains limited), disadvantages are outweighed by the advantages of freeing ethnographic writing from many constraints inherent in print publication, foremost among them the injunction to keep presentations of ethnographic text (especially in the original language) to a minimum of quotes.

Third, these practical advantages are by no means only practical. They also have theoretical significance: the possibility of a form of ethnography that is not predicated on the absence of its object or, to be more precise, on the object being consumed by devices of presentation such as tabulating quantifications, drawing graphics, figures, and diagrams, or simply by a prose that, being either strictly descriptive or predominantly expository, manages to withhold from (some may say spare) the reader the events and documents on which it must nevertheless ground its authority. When I propose commentary as an alternative, this should not be misunderstood as just another version of recent calls (often long on ethics and short on epistemology) for “giving a voice” to our sources. Nor would I want to advocate burdening our readers with a kind of methodologism that pre-empts critical theoretical reflection by endless accounts of procedure. After all, our task is producing knowledge, and that involves more than either showing how it is done or just writing down what we know.

## Commentary, Comments, and Memoranda

Now that the case is made for commentary as a genre of text-centered ethnography, that is, as a form that informs a piece of writing in its entirety, the question remains of how the general idea is to be realized specifically.

A condition of writing in the mode of commentary is, to repeat this, the presence of an ethnographic text. The awkward attribute “ethnographic” is meant to remind ourselves as well as our readers of the peculiar status of texts such as the one that will occupy us in this book. In a narrow understanding of the term, ethnographic texts are not literature. They are neither found nor written as fiction; they don’t come from, and are not meant to contribute to, a canon of readings. Nor are they, again in a narrow understanding, documents of the kind historians find in archives which they themselves did not set up. Ethnographers, one might say, can deal with their texts without being weighed down by a canon or an archive. Just as well, because the demands of the ethnographic text are heavy enough.

To begin with, the presence of a text puts us in a paradoxical situation. As the protocol of a performance or of a communicative exchange, a text’s presence signals the absence of the event it documents; the text may be present, the event is past. Commentary, therefore, is writing in the face of that tension. One may say this is the case with all narrative and even with descriptive writing (as writing, narrative and description are always “after the fact”) but tension is exacerbated, instead of relieved, by the seemingly nonproblematic presence (givenness, availability) of a text. Hence it would be wrong to think of commentary as a relatively relaxed genre, so to speak, free of the constraints imposed by conventional monographic rubrics that must be filled or analytical schemes that must be completed.

Thinking about this last statement set me off on a metaphorical reverie. Let us say that commentary is made up of many comments and that comments relate to commentary like bricks to a house; you build up a commentary with comments. This sounds plausible but there is something fundamentally wrong with the image (fundamentally: more than what is wrong with every image). Brick construction not only requires elements that are fabricated, made, not found, but also that these elements be identical (if not absolutely then at least “for practical purposes,” the ones a builder

has). The first requirement is met by “comments”; they must be made, formulated. The second one, if fulfilled, would mean that every comment would have to come from the same mold and that would mean that writing commentary consists of filling preexistent rubrics and the result would not be an alternative to, but a kind of, monograph.

12 If the brick doesn't work as an image, what about the stone and stone-construction? A stone is found (or quarried), not made; it gets its shape from being hewn rather than molded and fired. As to the identity of elements, stone masonry has requirements similar to those of brick construction and would be useless as a metaphor, unless we consider building with fieldstones, in which case the elements may be quite dissimilar (big or small, rough or smooth, almost round or almost square, and so forth). That would come much closer to the idea I have of building commentary with comments if it were not for an inconvenient, unacceptable implication: Fieldstones are found in the field. Ethnographic comments, tempting as it may be to latch onto the “field” (as in “fieldwork”) as another metaphor, are definitely not just found.

So, short of declaring this reflection an idle exercise, what can we take away from it? Thinking of writing commentary as building it up from, or out of, comments may be misleading unless we take metaphorization one step further and postulate that when we write comments we *make* stones the are shaped like fieldstones. In plain words, we should not feel compelled to write comments that fit a mold or come out as standardized elements; we should pick them up in whatever shape they come and put them together in a structure that holds up.

What kind of building will be constructed in such a manner? If commentary is realized by writing comments on a text and if we keep in mind what was said about presence and absence, present and past, it follows that such comments may be thought of as *memoranda*: observations, statements, explications, references written down as reminders, anything between what the text reminds us of and what we think should be remembered when we read a text. Remembering and memories are crucial to ethnography, as I have argued with regard to recognition of alterity as anthropology's central theme (Fabian 1999), in a reflection on remembering in ethnographic practice (Fabian 2007: chap. 10), and will show in detail later on when I confront

the conversation with Kahenga. If memory is as important as I think it is in this undertaking, would “memoir” not be a label more appropriate than “commentary,” especially in a project that includes elements of autobiography? There are reasons to reject that option. First, this account will not live up to the expectations raised by calling it a memoir because it will be narrative only in parts and, at any rate, it does not aim to tell a single, coherent story. Second, in another (French) connotation, memoir may designate a thesis or dissertation and that is not what I envisage either.

For better or worse, I made a commitment to commentary as the genre of this book—after trying it out in two earlier, shorter pieces of writing (Fabian 2003 and <http://www2.fmg.uva.nl/lpca/jlpca/vol1/fabian.html>)—only to run into problems that began with deciding on a table of contents. What should be the major divisions, what their order or sequence? I toyed with three or four outlines and began to have serious doubts until I realized that my troubles were caused by a failure to distinguish between commentary as a practice of writing and commentary as a form of representation. I was reminded of the debate concerning dialogue as ethnographic practice and dialogue as a literary form. From the fact that much of our research consists of dialogues with our “informants” it does not follow that dialogue is the most, let alone the only, appropriate genre of ethnographic writing. Similarly, adopting commentary as a practice of dealing with texts does not mean that the presentation of knowledge gained must conform to a genre that exists in our literary canon. All that is required is that the final form of writing a commentary must be such that it can be traced back to commentary as a practice. Even monographs that followed rules of data collection and respected rubrics of presentation that had become established in our discipline came in many different kinds; this will be the case, even more so, with commentaries. Their tasks may ultimately be determined by anthropology’s current agenda but they must meet the exigencies of specific texts.

### **A Text Never Comes Alone: Con-texts**

If relying for evidence almost exclusively on texts makes the ethnographer suspect of textual fundamentalism (see above), working with just *one* text should be even more problematic. It is time, therefore, to spell out what text-



centered approaches assume about texts and, perhaps more importantly, what they don't assume. From the "empirical overkill" of which Franz Boas, one of the founding fathers of anthropology, was accused because of his massive text collecting, through the making of vast bodies of texts ("myths") the grist for structuralist analytical mills, to text(s) as a key metaphor for culture (the latter accompanied by the disappearance of ethnographic texts from writing in the "interpretive" mode), anthropologists have tried out almost every conceivable approach without being able to establish theoretical consensus or at least widely shared habits and conventions in dealing with texts. Such a state of anarchy may be deplored; for me it has made working with ethnographic documents an undiminished pleasure. Of course, it also forces me to rethink theory and method every time I approach a text. Specific issues will be addressed as they come up later on; here I want to make only a few general statements regarding my present views.

Text-centered ethnography has been for me the practical consequence of taking a language-centered approach, which I adopted as the result of a conception of ethnographic inquiry as a (predominantly) communicative undertaking. In much of cultural anthropology knowledge production is interactive. As language and speaking mediate between the ethnographer and the people he studies, texts mediate between communicative events (experience) and the representation of knowledge.

In other words, when ethnography is called text-centered this regards above all its epistemological foundation; it does not mean that collecting texts is the principal purpose of research. A text, to become "collectible," must be relevant to a project that is always wider than what a specific text may document. This also applies to the document selected for interpretation in this book. It is not "unique," no matter how singular its history may appear. Perhaps not when it took place but certainly afterward, the conversation with Kahenga became part of a *corpus* of texts, a term that may have a technical meaning in literary theory but never loses completely its metaphorical connotations. Like a body, a corpus has size, volume, weight, articulation of parts and members; as long as it is alive it grows and changes.

The latter, growth and change, certainly fit the corpus of documents I produced (more often than found) in the course of my work as an ethnogra-

pher. What in the beginning (during dissertation research in the sixties) may have looked like data needed to carry out the proposed study of a religious movement; what I went after when I later worked on language and labor in the seventies; and what I came upon during shorter visits in the eighties—all this turned out to belong to a “body,” something I eventually grasped theoretically with the help of a concept of African popular culture (Fabian 1998). That culture—minimally understood as contemporary practices of survival—was the *context* in which Kahenga worked, and this makes the document of our exchange a *co-text* with many others.

If what I said about the new kind of presence texts acquire on the Internet is true, then the virtual archive should also influence our ways of dealing with a corpus of texts, and this should in turn affect the writing of commentary. For instance, specific issues (semantic, topical) that come up in the commentary on one text can now easily and quickly be searched for in other documents placed in the same archive (in Archives of Popular Swahili some are already cross-referenced; many more links could be established). Conversely, given their connections to one and the same easily accessible corpus, the text-centered ethnographies on popular religion, theater, and historiography which preceded the project introduced here will hopefully gain coherence and grow into a body of writing that has a chance of staying alive when current topical and theoretical interests fade.

What exactly will the commentary on my conversation with Kahenga recorded thirty years ago add to the ethnography of popular culture in Zaire/Congo? An easy answer would be to say that it opens the domain of popular medicine. My dealings with Kahenga might then become a case study in medical anthropology. I have no objection to such a reading as long as it is understood that an interest in medical anthropology was not what brought about the events and their records that will occupy us in this book. At any rate, it would be somewhat anachronistic to project back into the early seventies the image of a subdiscipline that thrives today but was then, as “ethnomedicine,” at its beginnings. These qualifications are important because they let me comment on a conversation about medicine without an obligation to relate my findings to state-of-the-art medical anthropology.

## **Appropriation / Expropriation: The Ethics of Commentary**

16

I have always thought that to practice anthropology reflexively and critically is all that is needed to make our work legitimate. We must be alert to the quandaries we face as members of institutions and as citizens or residents of countries that pursue political and economic interests, more often than not to the detriment of the societies we study. As a scientific discipline, anthropology should be governed by rules and habits of “disciplined inquiry” (not to be equated with “methods”) but I don’t believe that anthropology should be subjected to a code of ethics any more than mathematics or philology. Probably this sounds hopelessly out of tune with developments during the last thirty years that have made “ethics” a central concern. It means that I cling to a notion of my field as an (academically supported) intellectual endeavor rather than a profession whose relations with clients and sponsors require rules similar to those that are devised to guide the conduct of lawyers and physicians. I dread the possibility that, being caught between human-subject regulations and cultural-property exactions, it may become impossible for us to conduct ethnographic inquiries in a manner and for purposes—communicative ethnography producing shared knowledge—that made anthropology a distinctive form of inquiry.

This being said, I want to address, however briefly, questions of legitimacy encountered by text-centered ethnography of the kind I will pursue here. Concerning those that regard legalities of proprietorship and copyright to texts deposited in a virtual archive I refer to a statement on our website. As long as it is not clear what international law will eventually impose on us, we act on the assumption that documents deposited in a (virtual) archive are publicly and globally accessible. We also assume that, with exceptions (we have not made any so far), accessibility means freedom to quote, copy, or work on the texts.

Another issue I want to dispose of right away is usually referred to as the “protection of informants,” a requirement allegedly met by withholding the names of our interlocutors or using pseudonyms. In the past, I have dealt with this by simply not publishing anything that, to the best of my knowledge, could be damaging or dangerous to those with whom I worked. Very

little ever was; a more difficult problem has been to distinguish between damaging and critical statements. I never subscribed to the precept that ethnographers should be neutral toward (the representatives of) cultures they study, if only because I cannot imagine “neutral” communication other than interaction in a clinical setting, which is not my idea of research. If there is a rule about withholding names it should be this: In our accounts ethnographers and interlocutors are both agents; why should the author be named and others remain anonymous?

Another question that has become inescapable in recent years is: Should our interlocutors be listed as coauthors of our writings? My view of the matter is that, yes, contributions should be acknowledged and, if possible, documented but, no, those who worked with us should not be burdened with the responsibility of authorship in a more narrow sense. Did I consult Kahenga about these matters? I did not, though I tried to contact him recently, simply to find out how he is and to inform him of my project. So far, my attempts have not been successful and I don't expect this will change. I fear we must assume, as we do about Tshibumba, that he may no longer be alive.

Finally, there is “appropriation,” a matter that is often discussed as a problem of ethics (or politics) although it regards, in my view, above all questions of theory and epistemology. Does ethnography as a kind of knowledge, does commentary as a specific form of representing knowledge, “appropriate” its contents? And if so, why did appropriation—making something one's own—acquire such an unsavory taste when it is discussed in anthropology? Allegations of appropriation come easy to those who are prepared to reduce anthropology to its colonial-imperial history or to the services it may render to postcolonial interests. While these charges are transparent and may fit transparent crimes of cultural robbery, they depend for effect on the conceptual fog from which they emerge.

A measure of clarity can be achieved when we keep in mind that “property,” the concept that underlies appropriation, is an equivocal, shifty beast. In talk about ideas or about culture and its creations, property/appropriation is capable of changing, within the space of one argument, from its literal meaning to analogy, to metaphor, or rhetorical trope and back. Is it at all possible to speak of ethnography/anthropology as a form of

appropriating other cultures in a way that illuminates our work rather than just denouncing it globally?

18 Answering this troubling question may have to begin by asking a counter-question: Can the stuff we “make our own” when we learn about and understand, say, the imaginary characters of a story, the prescribed actions of a ritual performance, the movements or rhythms of a dance, and so forth be considered objects in an ontological sense? Are they things? Are not even manifest objects—we call them ethnographic or art objects—collected not just as things but as artifacts, culturally or aesthetically speaking? Between cultural diffusionism throwing hoes, myths, and kinship terms into one and the same bag of objects for the purpose of mapping the distribution of things cultural in space, and sociological functionalism-cum-positivism enjoining us to study social relations like things, *comme des choses*, as Durkheim put it, anthropology went through a long history of producing allegedly certain knowledge about objects whose status remained uncertain. Yet, without agreement about what can be considered an object (ontologically, to begin with, but also intellectually and legally), let alone about what kind of object can become property (and whose property it would then be), talk about ethnography as appropriation has no distinct referent.

Matters are made worse when, for ideological rather than logical reasons, appropriation is equated with expropriation. Under such an indictment ethnographers could not make anything their own without taking it away from the people they study. Which brings us back to the “ethics” of my project in this book. I would have had to be a villain or a fool to have undertaken the labors it took to transcribe, translate, annotate, and comment on our text if I had thought my efforts to convey an understanding of what happened when Kahenga closed our house left him or his culture dispossessed. I felt enriched by our conversation and I like to think the feeling was mutual. Kahenga was under no obligation to talk to me after he performed, for a fee, his services as a ritual specialist. Perhaps he was just being polite when he agreed to meet afterward; quite likely he had expectations similar to mine about discussing the nature of his work. At any rate, like all my other interlocutors, he was not offered and did not ask for payment for the conversation we had.

**What We Talked About:****An Overview and Guide to the Text**

This attempt to trace my project back to its remote beginnings and to place it in a context of current concerns with the nature and legitimacy of ethnography may have taxed the reader's patience. That Kahenga and I conversed; why, when, and where our meeting took place; what remained as a document and what I intend to do with it—all this had to be brought up, at least summarily, so as to stake out the arena in which the text will be confronted. It is now time to take a first glance at the content of our exchange and at the succession of topics we covered.

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In the outline that follows, numbers refer to paragraphs of both the Swahili transcript and the translation as they appear on the web site.

- Prelude: Getting started, 1
- Patients/clients and diseases/problems: Classification in context, 2–14
- Diagnosis and treatment, 15
- Etiology: Classification of kinds and causes of illness/problems, 16–23
- Biographic data, 24–26
- Spirits and spirit associations (1), 27–28
- Distinctions of practitioners, terminology in Hembra and Swahili, 29–33
- Spirits and spirit associations (2), 34
- Kahenga teaching his craft, 35–38
- Closing the house: The ritual, 39–41
- Interlude: About great spirits and their territory, 42–43
- Closing the house (continued), 44–50
- God, spirits, ancestors, and Christianity, 51–53
- Kahenga, the Christian, 54–57
- Back to diseases/problems and herbal medicine, 58–59
- Comments and explanations on specimens of plants, 60–69
- Looking at a diviner's calabash from Luba country, 70–71
- Herbal and prescription medicine, 72
- Popular knowledge of herbs, 73
- Coming to an end, 74–76



## An Event: Closing the House

### Remembering What Happened (1): The Event in the Ethnographer's Mind

**1** What we said when Kahenga and I met to talk about the protective ritual he had performed was recorded and is now present as a text. Of the event itself I have vivid but fragmentary memories. When I now set out to tell what happened, my account will be a reconstruction rather than a simple retelling of an experience made or a description of a performance observed. I will assemble my story from three sources: recollections that are present in my mind; some notes, including a rough sketch of the scene, taken down immediately or soon after the ritual; and a review of the procedure that was part of our conversation.

To begin with, I cannot give an exact date for the closing of the house. It took place a few days before September 30,



1974 (a Monday), the date noted on the cassettes used to tape the conversation about the ritual. We had come to Lubumbashi two years earlier and had moved around from one temporary lodging to another for most of the first year. Eventually, when my research grant ran out and I found work at the National University, we settled down in a comfortable house in a residential neighborhood not far from the campus. Life was not bad in the late summer and fall of 1974. The oil crisis was yet to hit the country with its full force. Mobutu's regime was in its golden years. The mines of Shaba/Katanga did well and there was work in the region. Though wages were low by international standards (the equivalent of forty dollars a month was considered a good income), many Lubumbashi urbanites somehow managed to lead a life that was not limited to bare necessities. People furnished their houses and decorated the walls of their living rooms with paintings that reminded them of their colonial past and of urban life in the present. Beer was affordable, at least for a few days every month, bars and dancing places were full, popular music bloomed. Far away in America a president had resigned in disgrace but in Zaire another event caused more excitement. Everybody was looking forward to the "rumble in the jungle," the fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman that was to take place in Kinshasa on October 30.

In late September, the dry season comes to an end. The days turn hot and overcast, fields and gardens are dried out, and food is scarcest in the weeks before the rain arrives. A mood of nervous anticipation spreads even among those who do well enough not to depend on the growing season. It is also a time when residents of comfortable homes get anxious as the young and enterprising among the poor and hungry take to theft and burglary for survival. A season for thieves is also a season for those who can offer protection.

I reported in the introduction how we first came in contact with Kahenga as a healer. It was the anxiousness that was in the air, rather than a specific incident—we had no break-ins—that made me call on his services as a specialist in matters of security. On the appointed day he arrived at the gate on Avenue Mpolo just after sundown (always at 6 pm, give or take half an hour, since Lubumbashi is at some distance from the equator). Baba Marcel, our cook, must have opened the gate for Kahenga and I went to meet

him halfway. To my surprise, he was accompanied by a young man (a relative and apprentice, as it turned out later). Either he or his assistant carried something wrapped in cloth, one or two bundles, which they put down as we exchanged greetings.

Then came an awkward moment. Here he was; what was going to happen next? Kahenga took matters in hand by asking Marcel to return to his quarters in the back of the house. He and his family were to stay inside. When the cook had gone, my wife and I stood there facing Kahenga, still not knowing what to do. He quickly bent down, touched the ground, and then used his thumb to rub some dirt on our foreheads. I am almost sure that he gave an explanation for that gesture right away but it could also have come later. At any rate, it was the sign that he had begun with his work. He could not know that what he had just done to me triggered deep memories of Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, when we went to church to receive the sign of the cross in ash on our foreheads from a priest muttering *memento quia pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris* (remember that you are dust and that you shall return to dust). Though the two rites had little or nothing in common as far as content, or intent, was concerned—Kahenga's gesture, as it turned out later, was one of protection or purification; the ashen cross is a reminder of mortality and perhaps a call for penance—for me they merged as bodily experiences. Kahenga had pulled me back into a realm I had left behind long ago.

I was awed, and stayed awed throughout. Still, professional curiosity made me ask Kahenga whether I could watch him doing whatever he was going to do. He agreed and, without stopping to give explanations from then on, he began undressing under a tree in the right corner of the lot. He stripped down to a loincloth (not the kind of undergarment a young, modern African would wear), started unpacking his bundles near the gate, and told my wife to go into the house, turn the lights off, and stay inside. Outside, it was almost completely dark by now. Observing what happened then was difficult, also because the ritual was all movement, not a tableau holding still.

Trying to sort out my memories I come up with three sets of action. First Kahenga dug, or scraped out, moving counterclockwise, eight shallow holes, four in the corners of our (roughly) square lot and four in the middle

of each side between the corners. Then he went around and placed substances he had brought along in each hole. Finally he made a third round, now crouching over each hole and covering it with dirt which he seemed to move with his buttocks. While doing this, or right after closing a hole, he chanted in kiHemba, his native language. I could not understand these incantations except that I thought I recognized litanies of proper names.

24 When I now make Kahenga's actions, gestures, and calls fit some sort of classification by naming them, I realize how far removed this is from what I experienced following and watching the almost naked man as he moved through the night. "Closing the house" was a ritual that obviously followed a script and rules but there was nothing rigid about it. In fact, the performance had at one point a slight flaw that enhanced its force and made it clear that I had crossed the line between observer and participant. I had watched Kahenga digging eight holes and it did not take much to figure out the logic of their spatial arrangement which made the sequence of some actions predictable. Thus, when Kahenga, after covering the seventh hole (not one of the cardinal points), gave signs that the procedure was complete, I intervened. How about the eighth hole? He took this in stride and went on to finish the course. Had he not done this, he told me, it would not have mattered a bit as far as the efficacy of the closing was concerned. Aside from this brief exchange, the only other time we talked briefly was when we came to the sixth hole (in the lower-right corner of the lot). He asked me whether this was a dangerous point. That is what a short note on the sketch I drew right after the ritual says but I don't remember what prompted the question nor what my answer was.

As I write this I discover another gap in my memory—where were our dog and cat during the ritual? They must have stayed out of sight, either inside the house or somewhere in the yard. Would Kahenga have wanted them out of the way? The reason it occurs to me to note this now may be interference from another layer of recollections from the recent past, those of transcribing and translating our conversation, during which we talked of beliefs about cats in relation to sorcery.

Was there someone watching what went on in our lot? I never gave this a thought at the time. Today I would say whether or not Kahenga had

spectators (other than me) was of no importance but this is an issue that will have to be addressed later.

## Remembering What Happened (2): The Event

### Remembered by the Ethnographer and His Interlocutor

Reflecting the centrality of the ritual, the portion of our exchange during which we discussed the closing of the house occupies the middle of the text (see the outline provided in the introduction, paragraphs 39–41 and 44–50).

We had talked for almost an hour and had covered much ground when a moment came to decide on a new subject. I was about to begin questioning Kahenga about samples of medicinal plants but changed my mind. From some notes I had before me I pulled out the sketch I had drawn after the ritual and suggested we first discuss the “closing of the lot.” I pointed out the enclosure and the location of the house. Then, as is the habit of ethnographers, I first asked whether there was a name for what he had done (39). The response was not what I expected as a description of the ritual: *dawa ya kufunga nyumba*, literally: medicine to close a house, not a single term but a phrase in which a noun, *dawa*, a substance not an action, is foregrounded. The expression he chose put the focus on what he considered essential in all of his work, namely, the use of substances that have the power to influence states or the course of events. In other words, the domain he named in his first response was not ritual but “medicine.”

When I probed further by asking Kahenga for a term in Hemba he again responded with a phrase, *kuzika nzibo*, which I translated as closing a house. Actually, it first came out as *nakuzika nzibo*. If, as I suspect, there was interference from Swahili in the verb form, then the literal translation could be “I close the house for you.” In my translation I took the word I heard as *nzibo* (or *zibo*) to mean house in Hemba. I now think that Kahenga mixed Hemba and Swahili. In Swahili, (*m*)*zibo* means a stopper or plug as well as the action of placing a stopper, closing a hole or passage. So the expression Kahenga offered would be a verb phrase with a (semantically) cognate object (like “to sing a song”). In my Luba dictionary, the verb *-zika* means “barrer” but also “protéger contre qqn. en empêchant le passage” (protect

against someone by impeding passage; Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954: 818). In the same entry I also found “[zika] *bafu*: empêcher les morts de nuire aux vivants. Quand un *nganga* soigne un malade il place des objets (magiques) sur tous les sentiers qui mènent à la hutte du malade pour empêcher les morts d’approcher” (keep the dead from doing harm to the living. When a *nganga* treats a sick person he deposits (magic) object on all the paths that lead to the patient’s hut to keep the dead from getting close).

26 With that oblique remark about a healer (*nganga*) the dictionary gives us a first hint of an issue that will have to be addressed eventually: The context in which Kahenga performed the protective ritual was larger than I had suspected. In the thinking that seemed to guide him, connections might exist between burglars and the spirits of the dead; both could be a threat, not only to security but also to health and well-being.

Then I brought up the eight holes (40). The significance of their placement must have been on my mind at the time; it certainly is now. Was Kahenga drawing on some spatial, perhaps cosmological, symbolism in order to mark the terrain for the ritual operation that was to follow? The intuition that both the number of holes and their location had a special meaning must have made me ask him whether this was “always” done. He confirmed that it was but the explanation he gave was offhand, very short, and difficult to understand on the recording. As best as I can tell, it amounted to saying that the procedure he followed was just a practical, geometrical “method” of placing the holes in the ground where he would deposit the things (objects or substances?) he had brought along. They were not *bizimba*, magic charms, he assured me, just herbs that would stop potential troublemakers. He then told me how he had prepared the herbs and that he had done this before he came to the house to save time—another prosaic remark that left questions I may have had about the secret nature of such preparations unanswered.

When I brought up his stripping down to a loincloth this was met with a similarly laconic response. No explanation was offered for this gesture nor for the necklace I had seen him put on before he started to say, or chant, something that sounded to me like prayers (41). Kahenga agreed when I asked him whether this chanting was what I thought it was. I went on posing questions that were, again, aimed at ascertaining the ritual character

of his incantations, another expectation I had brought along with my anthropological baggage. With a casual finesse I had come to know from many among my interlocutors, he put things right: When we pray to (the spirits) of our ancestors we don't use fixed formulae ("like songs?" I had asked), we just speak to the occasion, "just talking," as he put it. It appears that I was undaunted and asked him whether he could recite such a prayer for me in his native language. Kahenga obliged and composed a kind of generic prayer on the spot, beginning with a sentence that announced why he addressed the spirits: "I close the house for this white man." He now used *kuzibia* instead of the expected *kufunga*. As explained above, the image is one of patching up holes or leaks rather than of closing or locking something. This weakens the literal sense of "closing" and leaves open the possibility that the ritual may be aimed more at protecting integrity than excluding, locking out, threats. Such an interpretation would also fit the prayer asking to give "strength" to the inhabitants rather than to the house or its enclosure.

27

To my request for an example of the prayer in Hembha (the language he had used during the ritual) Kahenga responded in Swahili; multilinguals often "forget" which language they are speaking at a given moment. When I brought this to his attention he obliged with a prayer in his language. Listening to it must have reminded me of an observation I had made when I watched the ritual. I had recognized proper names in his incantations that made them sound at times like litanies. Kahenga confirmed my observation and named four addressees of his prayers: Mukenge Mbuyi, his father; Nyange, whom he called "mother"; Kayembe, a chief; and Yagamino, a "great spirit."

There is something odd about this list. The persons named were spirits except, it seems, Nyange who gave him his medicine, as he said, and whom he called his grandmother and teacher. But by all indications his grandmother was alive when we talked; why pray to her? The solution may have been alluded to elsewhere in our conversation when Kahenga gave her full name as Nyange ya Kahenga. This made me ask whether she got her name (Nyange) from a grandparent. She did and this could mean that the Nyange mentioned in the prayer was (the spirit of) his grandmother's ancestor.

My questioning Kahenga about names led to a lengthy discussion of spirits (42–43), a diversion from reviewing the ritual and a topic to be taken up later. We got back to the closing of the house with a question I had forgotten to ask earlier: What about the preparations he had taken before starting with the ritual (44)? Kahenga first spoke of the herbal medicines he had brought along. We had talked about that earlier and he must have sensed that I had something else on my mind because, rather abruptly, he changed the topic from closing the house to protecting oneself. “I visit those for whom I pray,”<sup>1</sup> he said, and this is dangerous. To avert an “accident” the head (of those involved in the ritual) must be protected, which I take to be a reference to his rubbing my forehead with some substance (dirt he picked up from the ground, in my memory, but possibly a *dawa* he had brought along, according to the text). This precaution must always be taken, he insisted, and the implication is that he had earlier done this for himself without my noticing. Rubbing the forehead with medicine was a fleeting gesture; reflecting on it now makes me stop and face some unexpected complexities: It is dangerous to undertake the work of protecting a house against danger. Caution is called for, not because the substances that figure in the procedure are inherently dangerous and must be “handled with care,” as we know from countless stories about magic, but because danger comes from the very spirits whose help is sought so that the substances may do their job. Venturing into their presence (“visiting” them, as Kahenga put it) calls into question conceptions of magic ritual as an impersonal quasi-mechanical type of action (*ex opere operato*, work that works because it is worked). A mere smudge on the forehead dispenses with such a simple notion. It is not magic that protects one when doing magic (this would call for an infinite regress). The power of that gesture lies in setting up a dialectical tension between the material and the spiritual, the impersonal and the personal, between established routine and precarious happening; it renders any merely “pragmatic” interpretation of the ritual inadequate.

Next we came to another action that had looked peculiar when I observed it: the covering of the holes (45). Kahenga confirmed that he had moved the dirt with his buttocks but offered no comment at first. Unlike stripping, rubbing foreheads, or digging holes, this brought up no associations except a hunch that it was done to avoid using the hands or perhaps

the feet and that it might have something to do with preserving purity. When I asked about it, Kahenga was at a loss with an answer in Swahili and switched to Hemba. I was not able to transcribe what he said; the only word I heard clearly was the verb *kuzinda* (actually the text has the reflexive form, *kuizinda*) meaning, according to the Luba dictionary, to clean oneself by wiping one's behind after defecating (Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954: 827). So I was more or less on track with my hunch but the connection was not what I had expected. It was not about observance of purity by the one who performed the action but about (symbolically) wiping off the "filth" that might soil the house, meaning the intruders, burglars, and all those who came with evil intentions and whom the ritual was to keep out and afflict with a curse.

29

An association between theft and dirt is not only implicit in the ritual butt-wiping. It can apparently also be made explicit, as I found out when I looked in the dictionary for other entries under *kuzinda*. One of them gives an expression, *ube-zinda*, which the authors translate as "tu t'es rendu impossible ici," you made yourself impossible here. They explain this further by giving as an example "a child who, while visiting members of the family, committed theft and will not be allowed to come back. It is considered as someone who has soiled himself and smells bad" (*ibid.*).

We then moved on to another gesture I had observed after the closing of the holes (46): Among the things tied up in a piece of cloth he had brought there was one that contained a seed or pit (not a pebble as I had thought). Kahenga said that it was a *dawa*, medicine, adding an explanation I translated as a statement of purpose: A medicine to "make sure" that the intruder makes his entry from the back of the house, not from the front. What he did with the seed was to throw it back over his shoulder so that anyone entering with force would "have an accident." This he repeated as he went from one hole to another. I wanted to know whether he always used the same incantation. He told me he did but did not dwell on the issue. Rather, with a chuckle, he came up with a surprising image: When he performed the action at each hole he placed guards or "soldiers" (on watch).

This came over like a summing-up, a signal that enough was said about the ritual of closing, and I was ready to go on to a new topic when Kahenga remembered another detail (47). He told me he had forgotten to bring a



“chicken in a basket,” without bothering to explain. Upon reflection he must have meant a live chicken that was to be sacrificed as part of the ritual. Perhaps this was not an obligatory part of the procedure. At any rate, he was so casual about it that I suggested we move on to discussing samples of medicinal plants (48). But then it was my turn to remember something else: Kahenga had also used water. First he had poured some into each hole and then he had made the round of the lot, pouring or sprinkling more. This time he offered an explanation right away, at first hesitantly but ending with a clear statement: “Therefore I pour cold water here, which is to say that in a place that stays calm you are bound to live in comfort.”

30

Did he pray to the ancestors when he made the rounds with the water (49)? He did, he said and volunteered an example of such a prayer, first in Hembra, then in Swahili. As he was reciting this I recalled that he had raised an arm when he prayed. He told me that this gesture signified that he was praying to God (50), and this ended, without an explicit statement to that effect, our conversation about the ritual of closing.

### **Understanding What Happened: Ethnography in the Mode of Remembering**

#### NAMING AND KNOWING

When I first presented Kahenga in the introduction I did my utmost to avoid attaching to him labels that seemed to impose themselves. Only once I indicated that his trade may be said to have been that of a practitioner of magic and sorcery. These terms are handy because they allow one to evoke concepts that are likely to be familiar to most readers. In anthropology, “magic” and “sorcery” have been as current (and often as central) as “culture,” the guiding idea of our discipline. However, the unselfconscious use of these terms (and others such as “tribe” or “myth”), if there ever was one, is a thing of the past. There is hardly anyone left who is prepared to speak of magic, sorcery, or even culture without expressing dissatisfaction, at times to the point of suggesting that we may have to do without these fixtures of anthropological discourse. I have been part of that critical chorus; like most others, however, I have been unable to do without these terms.

This is just by way of prefacing a problem I want to address now. When it

came to labeling what happened when Kahenga closed the house I was much less hesitant than with magic and sorcery. I called it a ritual. Why? I do believe that “ritual” is somehow less troublesome than “magic” or “sorcery” but that does not mean that I am comfortable with the term. To begin with, the casual use of “ritual” up to this point has had its advantages. It made it possible to recall the event as something coherent and distinctive; though the house closing had many discernible parts, calling it a ritual allowed me to present it as a complete happening with a beginning and an end and as recognizably different from other kinds of action and interaction that occurred during the time we were Kahenga’s clients. I am even prepared to acknowledge that calling what Kahenga did a ritual opens a wider, comparative context. But I am bothered by the power such concepts have to make us prejudge what we are trying to understand, especially when they come to us casually. Long ago I argued that such “technical terms” have, in the course of their long history in anthropological discourse, changed from designations that help us to describe certain phenomena or experiences to categories “in terms of” which we approach what we study, categories, moreover, that may determine a priori what counts as an experience, in this case, of a ritual.

31

#### THE BURDEN OF FOREKNOWLEDGE

Of course, one may point out that to formulate theories and concepts that can be tested through empirical study is how science works, hence also scientific inquiry into ritual. But that was not what I set out to do here. Not even the idea of a hermeneutic circle that should be appropriate for the text-centered approach I am taking is of much help. True, understanding based on interpretation only works when we already know what there is to know. But I found that in this late ethnography, burdened as it is with accumulated prescience, knowing already what there is to be known can be a serious impediment. It is commenting on the text of our conversation that allows me to make this point not just whimsically and generally; at least now and then I can show how what I called foreknowledge works specifically.

What are the expectations and assumptions anthropologists (and almost any educated person) are likely to hold about rituals? Here (at the risk of repeating a few remarks made earlier) is a list: More than other kinds of

performance, a ritual follows a script; the practitioner knows exactly what has to be done and when to do it; prescribed actions are carried out quasi-mechanically and tend to be repetitive; failing to carry out everything the script demands, or modifying actions ad hoc, compromises the integrity and efficacy of the ritual. The list is already getting long although it only covers ideas about ritual in general. I should add, therefore, some preconceptions I had about the specific ritual of closing. If it was justified to classify the procedure under “magic” it was a case of protective magic. Its purpose (or intended effect) was to “lock” the house and property in the sense of closing it up against outsiders with evil intentions. In a magic ritual, I expected, Kahenga would work with special substances, magic charms, that were likely to be different from the medicines he used as a healer. Finally, I also had the idea, perhaps supported by the assurance Kahenga had shown when we first discussed the closing, that the effectiveness of magic rituals depended solely on the right charms and a correct procedure.

If these expectations were made criteria by which to judge whether the closing of the house qualified as a magic ritual, it would have to be declared flawed on just about all accounts mentioned. In other words, the actual event thwarted expectations that came from what I thought I knew about rituals. Nothing was really “falsified”—I had not formulated hypotheses to be tested—yet much became uncertain. But then, having preconceived ideas and having to let go of them is what makes interpretation move through the hermeneutic circle.

To show this more concretely we can return to the text and briefly recapitulate some examples of expectations that were wrong, or at least not quite right, as they came up when we reviewed the ritual (see the preceding section):

Regarding the concept that underlay this specific ritual (39), I was in part misled when I translated its designation in Swahili, *kufunga nyumba*, as closing the house. The image I had was one of locking the house as we lock doors to protect ourselves against intruders. But then Kahenga used another phrase which in turn made me consult a corresponding expression; in Luba it turned out that “closing” meant something much more complex than the idea of domestic security I had in my mind.

Next, when the eight holes came up (40) I tried to impose *my* idea that

number and placement may have had a symbolic significance. Kahenga did not deny this so much as brush it off. And what did it say about the “magic” character of the ritual when he explicitly denied using *bizimba*, magic charms, which jibed with his insisting elsewhere that the substances he brought were just herbal medicines, *mizizi* (literally: roots)?

Another inconsistency most likely brought about by a preconceived image I had is recorded toward the end of paragraph 40. When I recalled the ritual from memory I said he stripped down to a loincloth before he started; in our conversation he says that he *put on* a loincloth (as part of the attire required for the procedure) and also a necklace, which I did not remember. The difference looks insignificant until one reflects on it: What I saw as undressing was for Kahenga dressing up. Not quasi-nakedness (and its potential symbolic significance) was at issue but the proper attire for the performance.

33

When I named the oral components of the ritual I called them prayers (in the text) and incantations (in the commentary) because they were delivered in a tone of voice and a manner that met expectations we have of repetitious “magical formulae.” I asked Kahenga about it, suggesting that he may have recited these texts “like songs.” He rejected this and insisted that praying is “just talking” (to a person). Prayers are addressed to spirits; they are not “said over” something, a sacrifice or, in this case, a protective medicine. An attentive reader of the text may point out that he later appears to take this back (end of 46). I was clinging to my idea of incantations and now took a different tack, asking whether what he said was different each time. No, it was the same, he now told me. Perhaps he simply contradicted himself; more likely, given the elliptic nature of our exchange (about which much more will be said in the next chapter), he reasserted that praying was like ordinary speech: it is neither formulaic in a strict sense nor is it made up of uniquely creative utterances.

Kahenga had another surprise for me when we got to the rubbing of some substance on the forehead (44). Only then it became clear to me that he had done this not just to us but also to himself (and presumably his assistant). The substance had not been dirt, which had made me remember taking the ashes, but a medicine prepared for protection. Protection from whom or what? Not from evil persons or influences the ritual was to fend

off but from the spirits he “visits” when he prays to them. Once again, this oblique remark confounded my diffuse ideas about prayer as part of a ritual: You beseech spirits not because you fear them but because you trust them to help you. And about who “visits” whom, I had assumed that prayers were said to summon a spirit to be present where help was needed, sometimes to the point—to note another expectation—where the spirit inhabits or “possesses” the supplicant.

34 I had observed Kahenga covering the holes by moving dirt over them with his (almost bare) behind and thought this was a gesture meant to keep his hands clean, literally or in some symbolic sense (45). Initially he confirmed this but then our conversation was briefly interrupted and when we continued the recording he corrected himself. There was symbolism in the gesture but not the one I had guessed at. He still left room for my first interpretation but what counted was not moving dirt and thereby closing the holes. It was wiping oneself as one does after defecating. Kahenga offered no exegesis and it was only later, when I consulted the Luba dictionary, that the symbolic significance became clear.

As we continued, Kahenga mentioned something that had escaped my attention. He had taken a seed from his medicine bundle and thrown it over his shoulder (46). Had I been left guessing the meaning of this gesture I would probably have taken it as “covering his back,” that is, as a protective act. The explanation he gave was not that simple and made me revise another assumption—that a magic ritual was either defensive or aggressive. He made it clear that it can be both and the closing would not just keep intruders out of the plot but actually put a spell on them and cause them bodily harm (make them have an “accident,” as he put it). In my way of thinking this would have meant that I had engaged his services as a sorcerer. Had this been clear to me, my knowledge, acquired from many instances I had heard of during the years, of the lethal power of certain spells would have given me second thoughts. With the hindsight that I have now I must admit that I failed to realize the ethical consequences of my pragmatic decision to have our house protected. One might say that time has taken care of that problem but this does not close the issue. My bringing up ethics now has also epistemological implications. Does it mean that I share (or shared at time) Kahenga’s beliefs in the efficacy of his work? For the mo-

ment, I let the question stand; about knowledge and belief much more will have to be said later.

### Performance, Conversation, and Commentary

What got me started on this line of thought, remember, were flaws I observed in the actual performance of the ritual. I then looked at different parts and recalled moments when my expectations were deceived. I only discussed examples because any attempt to do this systematically runs into problems. How is one to divide the performance into its parts and how, short of inventing an artificial nomenclature, does one label the divisions? After struggling with this for a while I decided to start with an inventory of discernible elements. While this means setting aside questions of order and structure, the list will bring out the bewildering complexity of the event I remembered and discussed with Kahenga.

35

Let me begin with the four broadest categories allowing us to conceptualize what happened: The ritual required space, time, body, and matter. The *space* that provided the physical as well as the social setting for the event was an urban lot with borders marked by a fence. *Time* was involved not only as duration or time needed for the procedure but also as choice of the day and hour and as the timing of actions during the ritual. A *body* was needed not just in a general, obvious sense—someone had to perform—but also as something that made this performance distinctive (more about that when we get to actions). The same was true of *matter*. Leaving aside whether an immaterial ritual is conceivable, matter in the form of substances had a prominent part in the closing. Kahenga had brought *dawa*, prepared medicines. He poured water and moved dirt.

Within the frame set by these categories the performance consisted of distinct parts. It is easy to name them but difficult to come up with a classification that would keep them neatly apart. Here is, first, a list of designations that come to mind: Perhaps most conspicuous were *movements*. Most of the time Kahenga was busy making the rounds of the lot, first to dig the eight holes, then to fill and cover them and to recite prayers. Another term, already introduced, is *actions*, such as preparing medicines, digging holes, placing medicines, pouring water, covering holes, throwing

seeds, and praying. Finally, I observed certain *gestures*, acts I thought had a special significance. Among them were changing from everyday clothes, rubbing foreheads, moving dirt with one's buttocks, pouring water, raising one's arm.

This is not a very convincing taxonomy by logical standards since there is too much overlap in the properties of the classes. Movements of a person could also be thought of as actions, actions cannot occur without movement, and gestures should probably be a subclass of actions rather than a separate category. Nevertheless these exercises in labeling and classifying provide a few points of orientation for our commentary on the text that should be resumed now.

36

Perhaps most remarkable about our exchange as we have it before us now is its disjointed and incomplete character. Far from going through the event in an orderly manner—something that should have been easy since we both had participated in it recently—we treated topics unevenly; some we took up only to drop them soon after, others made us branch out into discussions of subjects that were not directly related to the ritual. If the somewhat erratic character of our conversation could be attributed solely to my erratic questioning, this would be a trivial observation. More than once Kahenga, too, suddenly introduced new issues, came up with explanations I had not asked for, or took unforeseen directions. These observations bring out complexities in the presentation of ethnographic knowledge which we ordinarily could leave undiscussed but which the resolve to write ethnography as a commentary on texts forces us to address.

It was no accident that two major reorientations in anthropology—the interpretive turn and the acknowledgment that much of ethnography is of a dialogical nature—came, as it were, in tandem. No one has stated this more clearly than Dennis Tedlock (1979, 1983). Nonetheless, debates about dialogue and hermeneutics seem to have moved on separate tracks. My impression has been that advocates of dialogue (except for Tedlock and a few others) did not worry too much about the textual nature of the records ethnographers brought back from the field. Some champions of hermeneutics tended to avoid presenting ethnographic texts altogether. They argued for interpretation as an alternative to explanatory approaches on the

grounds that culture could be conceived according to the “model of the text” (Ricoeur 1971) and text became a metaphor.

Though this was not intended when I proposed commentary as an ethnographic genre, one of the consequences will be to tackle in our theoretical discussion and our writing of ethnography tasks that dialogical and hermeneutic approaches failed to realize. A first step would be to see what happens when in ethnographic accounts dialogue and text are not deployed as metaphors, that is, when they are not figures but actual objects, material records of speech, not something “in terms of which” we talk (or write) but that which we write about.

Take dialogue. It is one thing to say that I entered into a dialogical relation with Kahenga when we conversed, that we engaged in communication and presumably in a reciprocal relationship different from the one implied when we talk about investigators questioning informants. It is another matter to proceed directly from an epistemological position (field research is dialogical) to a genre of presentation (ethnography could or should be written as dialogue) without confronting records of conversation such as our text. As we have seen, presenting our exchange as it was recorded raised as many questions as it gave answers about what had happened when the ritual was performed. The task we had set ourselves—to go once again through the closing ritual—was, as it were, compromised throughout the conversation by conflict and tension: (a) Between dialogue and narrative; recalling the ritual would have required a story but the narrative was constantly interrupted and interfered with by questions. (b) Between describing and remembering; the aim may have been simply to describe the procedure and to state what happened but we had no object before us that could be described, only our memories of an event and our preknowledge of rituals, general and specific. (c) Between information and performance; my questions about the ritual were not only about reconstructing but also about understanding what happened. After all, inasmuch as I acted as an ethnographer I was after cultural knowledge. Some of the things Kahenga could tell me about his culture came as information, that is, as discursive answers to my questions, others just recalled Hembra cultural knowledge as he performed it rather than articulated verbally.



All this goes to say that dialogue “as such” is not the answer to our epistemological problems (how do ethnographers get to know what they know?), it is by confronting *documented* dialogue, texts, that we begin to address them (how can ethnographers come up with trustworthy and believable accounts of what they know?).

38 Moving from dialogical to hermeneutic anthropology, we should now ask how literal texts rather than text as a metaphor influence our understanding of interpretation. In general terms, the answer to this question is implied in the project to write ethnography as commentary, and we have had a glimpse of what this may look like. Giving the portion of the conversation that was about the closing a prominent place in this first chapter was justified. After all, it was the ritual that led to the documented exchange on which this study is based. But if we want to avoid falling into the trap of textual fundamentalism, we must as yet consider how the text we have begun to comment on was actually made. As we will see, both the sometimes insurmountable difficulties and the unexpected insights I came upon during the work of transcribing and translating the recording will dispose of the notion that ethnographic texts are given, “data” to be mined, not to be accounted for beyond relating the kind of story I told in the introduction. The genesis of our text will be the subject of the next chapter.

## A Text: Made, Not Found

**2** The text is there, easily accessible on the Internet. Why not get on with the commentary instead of burdening, as I am about to do, the reader with the story of how the text was made? After all, a scientist who works with a microscope is not expected to include in the report of his or her findings a technical description and history of the microscope. The answer is that ethnographic texts are not instruments of investigation except in a vague, figurative sense. In the introduction I also rejected a notion of texts as depositories of facts and called them mediators. This may be questioned; in my eagerness to avoid an instrumentalist stance, I may seem to assign to texts a quasi-personal role. I chose “mediator” because I don’t think that the more current “medium” reflects what

I have in mind. To be sure, written texts, like sound and visual recordings, are part of “media” whose role in producing ethnographic knowledge has been recognized and critically discussed for a long time—mostly in general terms. Here the task is to explore how the making of a specific text is involved in the process of knowledge production.

40 At this point, a remark is in order about “making” a text, an expression that may sound awkward. One transcribes a recording or writes a text, why insist on calling it making a text? There are two reasons I can think of; both are epistemological. As I have done already several times I find it useful to stipulate that ethnographic texts are *made not found* if only as a reminder of the difference between the ethnographer’s and the literary critic’s texts. This is not to suggest that literary texts are simply given, as if they did not have to be appropriated in various ways before they become objects of interpretation and critique. Still, the literary critic is usually not the author of his or her text, whereas the ethnographer usually is, at least as far as the kind of text we have before us is concerned.

There is another reason to emphasize “making.” It expresses a position according to which knowledge production involves objectivation. Only subjects can know, yet in order to be presented and shared, subjective experiences and insights must become objectified. They must exist materially, be embodied, in the knowing subject, in the kinds of sensual mediations that enable subjects to communicate through language, and in all the other things and practices we usually call culture. Embodied communication always is precarious, all the more so when it occurs between persons who, in order to communicate, must cross cultural boundaries. Ethnography is a transgressive practice (as I argued in the introduction).

Texts are among the objectivations needed for producing ethnographic knowledge. They are crucial in language-centered approaches and they support, not exclusively but crucially, our claims to ethnographic objectivity. This, sparing the reader the details, summarizes the epistemological position I adopted and developed over the years and hope to put to another test in the current project.<sup>1</sup>

These general and sketchy thoughts on texts and ethnography provide the necessary background for a report on the problems and challenges I faced in transposing the recording of the conversation with Kahenga into a

written document. None of the many similar projects I had undertaken previously had been quite as difficult. None had tried my skills as much as this exchange and none had pushed me closer to my limits in struggling with the unforgiving materiality of speech imperfectly articulated and imperfectly recorded. But I am getting ahead of the story.

### Recording a Communicative Event

In our attempts to understand the “ethnography of communication” we aim at discovering the cultural and social specificity of communicative events. Like writing, verbal communication comes in distinctive genres. To gain access to the communicative practices of a society (or “speech community”) the ethnographer must learn to recognize different genres and to act according to the rules that govern local speech. This was an exciting insight thirty years ago; as I see it, it is as important now as it was then.

41

The text before us is the protocol of a communicative event, a conversation, as I have been calling it. With the “components of speech events” distinguished by Dell Hymes (1974: chap. 1) in mind we may summarize the relevant features. In doing this I follow the spirit rather than the letter of Hymes’s lists, the “spirit” being the idea that the features of a text that is a protocol should be interpreted according to our knowledge of the characteristics of the speech event that was recorded.

The *setting* or *scene* of our conversation was the living and dining room in our house (the same that was “closed” in the ritual Kahenga performed). The room, though sparsely furnished, had a fireplace and there were paintings by several Lubumbashi artists of the “academic” school on the walls. As I recall it, they were by Pili Pili and Mwenze Kibwanga (of the Desfossé School) and by Mode Muntu (trained at the local Académie de Beaux Arts). The point of mentioning this is that these pictures contributed to defining the setting as “expatriate”—not as the kind of African *salon*, embellished by popular genre paintings that Kahenga would have been familiar with. We were sitting facing each other at the dining table on which we had laid out some notes, photographs, and samples of medicinal plants. I have no recollection of the exact time of day. Since the meeting took place on a Monday, it was most likely the late afternoon or evening. Neither Kahenga

nor I had other appointments waiting and we could take all the time we needed. Incidentally, as we learn from the text (56), the communicative situation was not new to Kahenga. In his village he had had similar conversations before with a missionary who interrogated him and took notes.

The *participants* or *speakers* were Kahenga and myself. The tape also records sound and noises made by members of the household who went about in the room while we were talking. Once or twice I had to interrupt our conversation to attend to their requests.

42 The *linguistic medium* (or the “channel”) was Shaba/Katanga Swahili as spoken in cities where I had learned it. Although I spoke it fluently my competence was limited, especially as far as the lexicon (words and idiomatic expressions) was concerned. Kahenga helped with terms I was searching for. When I did not pronounce them correctly, he sometimes repeated them in the incorrect form—out of politeness or simply because he wanted to maintain the flow of the conversation—but then corrected me later (see the beginning of 67). Kahenga was at ease in this language but there are indications that he had had to switch to a local variety from the one he had grown up with in his home country in northern Shaba (a dialect considered closer to East Coast Swahili). There was also occasional interference from Hemba, his native language, and closely related Luba. I suspect that a closer analysis of this exchange would show that we met, as it were, halfway in a kind of ad hoc sociolect. I said that Kahenga spoke a, not the, local variety. This observation was prompted by an unusual trait of his speech, a conspicuous absence of French elements. At the time we talked, using French loanwords and phrases, as well as switching from one language to the other for entire sentences or passages, was a stylistic feature of language use among urbanites of Kahenga’s age and level of education.<sup>2</sup> One would need more information than our text provides to explain why he did not follow that practice. It could have been a conscious choice, perhaps a villager’s way of taking his distance from the ways of city people, but this remains a guess.

How to call the *genre* of this speech event as defined by the *purpose* and *topic* of the communicative situation? Conversation is an adequate term, generally speaking, but the text shows that this general frame was filled with a mixture of forms such as interrogation (question and answer), narrative, explanation, and responses elicited with the help of notes and photographs.

This mixed nature is reflected in a lack of discernible order in the sequence of our exchanges. It even shows up in a certain incoherence of speech, the symptoms of which are multiple starts, ellipsis, interruption, incomplete statements, repairs, and corrections. The reason for this may have been that, even though the exchange had focal topics (the ritual and Kahenga's work), it lacked a clear purpose. It was not an interview, even mitigated by the adjective "non-directed," if interview means an instrument or method for obtaining ethnographic data for a pre-established end.<sup>3</sup>

What about the *key* or *register* in which we conducted our talk? That the manner of our speech was informal; that we did not raise our voices since we did not address an audience; that we did not argue, joke, or engage in banter—all this is implicit in the genre of our exchange. Less palpable and predictable (at least for an outsider) is an effect of the linguistic medium we shared. Kahenga was also reasonably fluent in French and we could have chosen to converse in that language. Speaking Swahili meant more than selecting an available linguistic code. As I have explained elsewhere (Fabian 2003), given the history of this language as the medium of a distinctive urban culture, talking Swahili creates a kind of intimacy and complicity. Instead of "we speak in Swahili" people often say *tunasema mu kikwetu*, literally: we speak in our-talk.

Finally, a remark on the technicalities of the recording. I used a UHER tape recorder and a microphone. At the time this was just about the best equipment available. From what I remember and what the text shows, Kahenga accepted the recorder without questions. He gave no signs of discomfort nor did the (visible) microphone make him assume a formal stance (as it had happened sometimes with other interlocutors). If anything, the equipment distracted me more than him. I had to keep an eye on the reel and turn the tape in time (43).

### Listening and Transcribing

When ethnographers discuss the work of transcribing, which they don't do very often, they report on it as a chore (one that, if possible, is given to an assistant who is a native speaker of the language). If they examine problems of transposing the recording of an oral event into a literary document at all

they may talk about difficulties encountered and solutions adopted, especially as regards “orthography” and other matters of graphically representing nonlinguistic features of communication.<sup>4</sup> That transcribing requires listening usually “goes without saying.” This, I think, is quite odd, given the shift of emphasis in our discipline from observing to listening as sources of ethnographic knowledge. This turn occurred in the larger context of a debate about alternatives to “ocularcentrism” in theories of knowledge in general (Rorty 1980) as well as in critical assessments of anthropology’s “visualist” discourse (Fabian 2002a) and what can be described as a recuperation of senses other than vision. However, whereas the closely related literary turn in anthropology caused at least a minor rally toward an ethnography of reading (Boyarin 1993), listening is rarely made the topic of theoretical reflections or stories of auditory experiences—with one notable exception, a seminal essay by Regina Bendix (2000).<sup>5</sup>

But my task here is not to formulate a general program for an ethnography of listening. Instead I want to offer some thoughts, most of them noted when I listened to this particular recording. To set the mood and to give an idea of an “ethnographic listening” to a sound recording I should like to quote from my diary/scrapbook (“field notes,” if you wish, taken when I worked on transcribing and translating our text). The first excerpt is dated October 30, 2004:

Yesterday I began listening to the recording of my conversation with Kahenga. The power that these recordings have to recreate presence never ceases to amaze me. This effect is different from what happens when I remember the event and check my notes to refresh my memory. Notes, dates, do correct ideas that were formed in the course of years. An example is the date of the recording, September 1974. I was sure that our dealings with Kahenga must have occurred earlier; “closing the house” at Avenue Mpolo somehow makes less sense just a few months before our departure. Recordings—they may have this in common with texts—are not like parcels of information, stored away some time earlier for retrieval and use later. The reason is that presence must/can be experienced; it cannot be picked up, handled, or whatever is required to store something. As every reading of a text has been said to be a new creation so is every listening to recorded voices. Of course, to be precise

about the kind of presence that is being created one must note the obvious: it takes its present qualities largely from past experiences and from my having participated in the recorded event. Which brings up the issue of remembering as recognition, in this case perhaps best translated as re-cognition, setting into motion once again acts of cognition. Hence the shading of thinking into remembering and vice versa.

Other entries followed until I came to this sigh of relief on June 1, 2005:

Just finished transcription and translation of my conversation with Kahenga. Must have been the most difficult and challenging job of this kind I've done so far. And what a "text"! Confusing or transgressing whatever distinctions were still left in my mind between sound recording and graphic representation, between transcription and translation, between translation and interpretation . . .

45

These impressions and reflections should prepare the reader for the difficulties, in fact the impossibility, of limiting a report on transcription to the technicalities of graphic representation. Much like the components of speech events that can be distinguished analytically but must be imagined as shaping an event synthetically, that is, by "working together," recording, transcribing, and translating cannot be conceived as mere auxiliary activities in the service of ethnography.<sup>6</sup> I find it impossible, therefore, to keep comments on the transcript and questions on translation separate.

The Swahili transcript as it appears on the web site was not made from the original tape-reels but from cassette copies. This resulted in a certain loss of sound quality, but using cassettes rather than tape-reels had the advantage that they could be listened to on an office-transcriber, a cassette player that makes constant stopping and backtracking as well as slowing down the speed relatively easy. The transcript was directly entered and subsequently edited on a PC. This method suited habits I developed during many years but it is by now outdated. The sound recording could have been digitized and available software would have probably made transcribing a little easier (not much, I think, because the task of "voice recognition" would still have been mine). It is also possible now to key the transcript directly to the sound track but this is beyond the current means of our web site.



The graphic conventions adopted for transcribing recordings in Shaba Swahili can be dealt with here quite briefly and generally; specific problems will be addressed later. The method I follow is best described as a common-sense orthography not unlike the one used by speakers of Shaba/Katanga Swahili who are literate but have not been taught a standardized orthography in that language. I use three signs: colon (:), slash (/), and question mark (?). Roughly these correspond to sustained clause, full clause, and question (or to sustained, falling, rising sentence melody). Incomprehensible phrases are marked . . . ? . . . and brief comments as well as notes on nonverbal signals are enclosed in square brackets.

Concerning the layout of the text on the web site, transcript and translation are presented in columns and numbered paragraphs. The latter make it possible to align Swahili and English versions, at least approximately. The division into paragraphs was of course an imposition after the fact and did not follow rigid criteria. It reflects changes of topic, subdivisions within topics, whether marked by pauses or not, and may at times appear somewhat arbitrary. Its main use is that numbered paragraphs can be referred to more easily in the commentary. Numbering lines would have been another possibility but also an encumbrance I decided to avoid.

On the web site the texts also include notes. These were added to justify or briefly explain certain transcriptions and translations but also to note matters of interpretation. In fact, the accumulation of notes prepared for texts to be deposited in the virtual archive first made me think about commentary as an ethnographic genre. Most of the annotation that accompanies the conversation with Kahenga on the web site has been worked into the current project.

### **Transcribing and Translating the Conversation with Kahenga**

#### **“LOST IN TRANSCRIPTION”**

It was Ray Birdwhistell, I believe, who once called ethnographic recordings “cadavers” of speech. Raising these cadavers from the dead, poetically speaking, is a challenge; the reward is a document that is going to have a life of its own. Another image, that of hidden wealth recovered by transcrip-

tion, however, only partially describes what happens between listening to a recording and writing down what one hears. “Reducing a language to writing” was a phrase common in the nineteenth century. It meant that a language was “described” by means of vocabularies and grammars. In more than one respect, making a text requires reducing a wealth of information and describing rather than just transcribing sound.

Traces of reduction and description can be found in the Swahili text as it appears in our virtual archive. On a first level, reduction is involved in the decision to present a phonological rather than a phonetic transcript. Both modes describe rather than simply reproduce sounds. This inevitably has the effect of making disappear, as it were, variation in speech sounds that does not affect the meaning of words. But in our case it also meant that the great variability of pronunciation that is a characteristic of local Swahili<sup>7</sup> and differences in “accent” between Kahenga and myself were rendered invisible (both have cultural and communicative significance).

47

Reduction is, above all, necessary to separate speech from other sonic information on a recording. Kahenga and I produced many vocal sounds that were not verbal. By far the most frequent example is “mm,” which can express affirmation but mostly just acknowledges a statement as a way of keeping the exchange going. Some vocal expressions are impossible to transcribe and can only be described, among them “chuckle,” or “laughing.” Volume, speed, pitch, timbre, but also pauses, patterns of breathing, clearing one’s throat, and many other audible features were not noted at all, except when they conveyed information I thought was significant.

The recording also preserved much of the sonic environment in which our conversation took place. It caught “noises” outside and inside the house most of which were filtered out of the transcript even though they may be important in triggering memories of the event often needed to recognize what was being said (and what it meant). The same goes for sonic information regarding body posture and proximity, that is, features of communicative interaction.

As often as it seemed useful I included in the transcript information that is audible on the recording but cannot be directly represented graphically. This was done by adding more than two hundred short glosses between square brackets as well as numerous footnotes explaining or justifying a

given transcription. Both the glosses and the footnotes are in English, and that is one of the many ways in which the target of the exercise, a translation into English, affirms its presence in the Swahili text even before a full translation is accomplished.

48 Almost all recorded conversations pose problems when it comes to transcribing overlapping speech. Linguists have devised notations for this (and for many of the other nonverbal features mentioned above) but I think that attempts to reach graphic accuracy are always compromises and most of them are practical only for short passages that one wants to analyze closely. I opted for a successive presentation of overlapping utterances whenever it was possible to separate them. Often only one of them appears in the transcript, the other is marked incomprehensible (. . . ? . . .). Overlap is often caused by one speaker interrupting the other (marked . . .), not necessarily because he disregards rules of (polite) turn-taking but by something one could call “anticipated” responses. Such interruptions need not have a negative effect on the exchange. Close examination, I suspect, would reveal that (much like the “mm”) they are timed and follow a certain rhythm, adding intensity and fluency to the dialogue.

More than sixty times I had to mark passages (words, phrases, seldom entire sentences) as incomprehensible. Many of these gaps are due to the kind of problems I just described, others are caused by the bad quality of (parts of) the recording. Yet others simply reflect a characteristic of our conversation as a whole. Being relaxed and informal about this exchange also made us careless with articulation; often words and phrases came out slurred, too fast, or not loud enough (in some instances I had to leave gaps in transcribing my own questions and remarks!). Kahenga tended to contract and often simply drop syllables/morphemes. Many vowels in unstressed position are scarcely audible so that it becomes difficult, for instance, to decide whether a verb starts with *ana-* or *ina-* and that may pose problems of determining the agent (personal or impersonal).

These observations on careless enunciation do not only apply to the articulation of sounds but also to the formation of words and sentences. There is a lot of—how to call it?—bricolage in the way we speak: starting with a prefix, then stopping briefly to add another morpheme to complete the lexeme or choose a different one. Other “stopping devices,” such as

inserting *nani* (roughly: what was it again?) also belong here. On my side this “piecemeal” way of speaking may have been a sign of hesitation due to limited competence but Kahenga’s recorded speech is not all that different in this respect. Of course, this could be because his command of Shaba Swahili is also somewhat limited (although that does not affect the ease and speed with which he speaks). All in all, I think this characteristic of our exchange should be understood as a matter of register or style, expressive of a certain lack of clear purpose. What made us carefree in this conversation also made us careless about articulation. After the fact I am convinced that these imperfections added to the productivity of our exchange.

49

#### “FOUND IN TRANSLATION”

Taking, as I just did, these observations on the challenges of transcription from the articulation of sounds to the formation of words and sentences brings us back to an insight I stated at the beginning: In the making of a text such as ours it is impossible to keep transcribing and translating completely separate. When I transcribe I must know that what I transcribe is meaningful. When I translate I spell out meanings recognized earlier. And when that proves difficult or impossible I may change the transcript after listening once again to the recording. Sometimes pondering the translation suddenly makes an alternative transcription of a word or phrase plausible.

A transcript is more like a sculpture than a picture in that it is made in three dimensions. Work on (1) a sound recording of speech with the aim of (2) a graphic representation always also requires (3) understanding, however incomplete or provisional, of what is being said. That is as far as the image of a sculpture goes. The next step would be to ask whether making the text is like carving wood or more like modeling clay. After what was said about reduction and poesis the answer could only be “both” and that would not be very illuminating.<sup>8</sup>

I said that I modeled my transcriptions of Swahili texts on grassroots literacy. This needs qualification. In the course of preparing the edition and translation of a typewritten text, a colonial history of Lubumbashi called the *Vocabulary of the Town of Elisabethville*, I encountered major obstacles caused by features of uncontrolled literacy. Above all, the writer showed little respect for exact and consistent segmentation, that is, for word and

sentence boundaries. Spaces, capital letters, and punctuation were used liberally but erratically, as ornaments of literacy rather than as aids for reading. The solution I eventually found for these problems was quite simply to re-orally the text by treating it as it was intended in the first place: as a script for an oral performance. A native speaker and writer of Shaba Swahili read the *Vocabulary* for me, the reading was recorded, and the recording was transcribed. It was this second text that made the translation possible, in fact, quite easy. Most of the work, to repeat my point, had been done by establishing a transcript in which word and sentence boundaries could be recognized.<sup>9</sup>

50

In fact, “recognition” best describes the sensual-intellectual operation that produces a transcript of the kind we call an ethnographic text. Recognition is also a cue to the role of memory in ethnography in general and in the making of ethnographic texts in particular.<sup>10</sup> Transcribing and translating need remembering in that the one who transcribes and translates must have phonetic, lexical, and grammatical competences—a repertoire learned in the past and capable of being activated (remembered) in the present. Such remembering is of course required whenever we speak or write, no matter in what language. Usually it remains, as it were, in the background; remembering is then more a condition than an activity. But in the course of transcribing a recording there are countless moments that make us stop with incomprehension or let us hesitate because we see alternatives that must be weighed. It has been my experience that we resolve most of these problems because the recording makes us remember what we hear. Such memory may be created text-internally, that is, in the course of working on a given text (how did I transcribe/translate a given utterance earlier?). It may also come as remembering a speaker’s attitudes (including bodily postures, changes in directions of gaze, signs of excitement or lagging attention, and so forth) or as realizing the significance of indexical and nonlinguistic information which all sound recordings are full of but which in many cases can only be re-recognized (understood once again) by the ethnographer who was present when the recording was made.

Because of the precarious and often fragmentary makeup of the transcript, the English version does not so much reproduce as reconstruct the meaning of the Swahili text. Constructive creativity is above all required

when it comes to solving problems that are posed, for instance, by specific characteristics of Swahili or by the nondiscursive, performative nature of free conversation. Among the former are problems of reference. In Swahili, nouns, most proper names, pronouns, and verbal forms are not marked for gender.<sup>11</sup> Outside the context of live speech it may be impossible exactly to determine who or what is referred to by a pronoun or demonstrative. To represent the ambiguity of gender every time it could not be resolved with a “he/she,” for instance, would have made the translation even more awkward. So I often opted, as I do in my writing generally, for the gender of the writer (hence, “the spirit, he . . .”). Equally pervasive are questions of tense. Like many speakers of local Swahili, Kahenga only uses three kinds: past, present, and future (marked by the infixes *-li-*, *-na-*, and *-ta-* respectively). Furthermore, the *-na-* tense, strictly speaking, places action not so much in the present as in an unspecified time.<sup>12</sup> Since English has no equivalent, many verbs in the *-na-* tense can, depending on the context, be translated as actions that took place in the past or are going to take place in the future.

51

Another difficulty of translation has been ellipsis, not only in the rhetorical sense of the term in which we may call statements in any language elliptic: We “get the gist” but we sense that much remained unsaid on purpose and we would like more elaboration. Such rhetorical omissions also occurred in our conversation but here I want to point to ellipsis as a characteristic of the Swahili text and as a challenge to the translator. The reasons for this trait (of telling it all without saying everything) are complex and diverse and this commentary is not the place to document and analyze them in detail. Still, I would like to give a summary which will allow me to add some observations on the “ethnography of communication” of our talk.

First there is the social history of Shaba/Katanga Swahili. Ever since the 1920s, when it became the African language shared by local people, most of them recruits to the mines and other immigrants attracted by the growing towns of the region, it was usually described by comparison to Standard Swahili as a vehicular language characterized by a limited lexicon, a reduced grammar, and some peculiar features (mainly morphological and lexical) ascribed to the influence of local Bantu languages. When I say “described” this should be taken in an informal sense: this was how expatriates and educated Africans talked about local Swahili. There were some early at-

tempts but linguistic descriptions proper first appeared only in the seventies and a thorough and definitive study is still not available.<sup>13</sup> More than a million people, many of them residents in the area in the third or fourth generation, speak local Swahili as their first, their principal, and more and more as their only African language. In such a situation the qualification vehicular (often with the *sous-entendu* “merely”) has lost its sense. This variety has emerged and developed as a popular language, that is, as a medium of a popular and “modern” urban culture. Though many, perhaps most, of its speakers are literate, Shaba Swahili is taught and learned informally, outside the educational system. People use it above all in oral communication and when they write it they do this unhampered by formal rules. By now we know it does not make much sense to declare, say, Haitian Creole a reduced or deficient form of French or, for that matter, to describe any language by listing what it lacks in comparison to another, and this goes for Shaba Swahili, too.<sup>14</sup> This being said, it is nevertheless true that documented exchanges in this language, some more than others, have elliptic features in the sense that Shaba Swahili achieves semantic and grammatical precision typically by means that are available only in oral communication—especially all the “nonlinguistic” information from intonation to body language I mentioned earlier. Translating a Swahili transcript like ours is an exercise in the ethnographic description of verbal performance even before one begins with ethnographic comments.

Second, there is a certain propensity for elliptic speech in the way Kahenga and I talk to each other. Especially in the part of our conversation where he comments on plant samples and photographs (starting with paragraph 57) speech is often indexical; brief statements are accompanied by pointing and other gestures, for instance, of assent or negation, often impossible to reconstruct from the audio recording. Indexical communication about objects that are physically present achieves its aims without description or explanation and this further contributes to making the exchange more performative than discursive. At one point (63), one of my glosses to the transcript notes a “sniffing sound.” Here and later, smell is one of the properties Kahenga uses to identify plants. This further complicates the situation: He not only selects samples and puts them before us but also lifts them up to let me smell them and then smells them himself. When he

does this, often the only verbal clues he gives are the Swahili demonstratives *ile, ule, hii, huyu*, whose exact meaning or reference, as I said before, is difficult to determine semantically. In sum, much of what was communicated in these passages was lost in the recording and lacking in the transcript. It had to be restored from nonverbal, contextual information aided by memory if the translation was to make sense.

Third, our exchange can at times become elliptic in ways I encountered in most of the ethnographic texts I recorded during the years. Again, gaps are a characteristic of all verbal communication: When something is told not everything needs to be said (or can be said). When Kahenga seems to assume that something goes without saying, there are several possibilities to account for this. He may not be aware of making such an assumption or, if he is, he may not care to question it. But he may also have reasons to assume that nothing, or not much, is lost on me when he is being elliptic. The assumption, then, is that of a common understanding that does not always need to be articulated.<sup>15</sup>

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Readers of the translation may be surprised at these extensive observations on ellipsis in view of the fact that so much in our exchange appears redundant and repetitive. Repetition of words and phrases, like multiple starts with a word or sentence, are among the trickiest problems of translation. Why does one balk at the simple solution, which would be to transpose the transcript one-to-one? Pondering this made me realize yet another reason why the relationship between transcript and translation should be seen as a process in the course of which understanding emerges (like the text itself, understanding is made, not found). Redundancy, though a feature of all language communication, is more pronounced in oral exchanges and it may be rampant in the kind of informal, roaming conversation I had with Kahenga where we sometimes resorted to repetition just to maintain the flow. More than once, trying to be faithful to the transcript made me stop short of leaving out entire passages because translating them came close to making a caricature of this conversation.

Finally, on the web site, transcript and translation are presented in facing columns. The idea was to make it easier for readers to move between the Swahili and English versions. But a glance at the site shows that the two are less than perfectly aligned. As noted earlier, in the making of an ethno-



graphic text, transcription and, even more so, its translation involve ethnographic description, hence the apparent gaps in the Swahili column. Though the present alignment could be improved by shortening the passages that are juxtaposed, this would hardly improve the overall appearance. In the end, the reasons for having transcript and translation face each other are more symbolic and rhetorical than practical. They typographically express the theoretical argument to which this chapter has been devoted: Much like ethnographic communication itself, the presentation of its documents consists of confrontation. A translation confronts the original, it does not consume it. Making ethnographic knowledge is an always incomplete, unresolved process, even at the level of making the texts we then analyze and interpret.

The principle that follows from such a processual view—no translation is final—will also be applied when I comment on the text in the chapters that follow. When I select expressions or statements for commentary they will rarely be simply copied from the translation on the web site. As a rule I will be working from the Swahili text and translate relevant material anew, often profiting from gains in understanding that result from rereading a passage in its interpretative context. Some discrepancies with the posted English version will be in wording only but others represent alternative translations.

### **Endnote: Learned Ignorance?**

Paradoxically, the narrow focus on one specific text makes one aware of an immense context of technical and scholarly writing about transcription and translation. Because I cannot pretend to be ignorant of its existence, I feel I should justify why I chose to ignore so much relevant literature in this chapter. An excuse could be to point out that every ethnography enters territories staked out and ruled by specialists and that no ethnography could be written if it went off in all the directions opened by the questions our documents make us ask. Of course, not citing or discussing specialized writings may involve a higher cost than I realize. I am willing to pay the price as part of my experiment with writing in the genre of commentary.<sup>16</sup>

## Kahenga's Work

**3** The introduction described how this project originated. The chapters that followed recalled the event that started it all and retraced the “chain of evidence,” connecting the text deposited in a virtual archive to a time, a place, and the speakers/actors whose conversation was recorded. We now have an idea what it takes to make an ethnographic document. We know *how* it was done. The next step will be to remember that “document” is derived from Latin *docere*, to teach, and ask in this and the following chapters *what* it is our text has to teach us.

I resolved to write this ethnography in the genre of commentary, a kind of writing in which priority is given to a text that is virtually present, for the writer as well as the reader. What, if this is to be more than a declaration of

intent, does “giving priority” entail? Answers to this question already given or alluded to came down to the “rule” that the agenda of producing knowledge and the order of presenting information and findings should be derived from the text rather than imposed on it by the kind of scheme that used to guide the writing of monographs in anthropology—at least ideally. This experiment, however, begins to show that it will not be possible strictly to follow such a rule in practice, precisely if presentation is to be guided by respect for the text. Thus, a breach was committed in the first chapter in that our commentary did not begin with the beginning of the text but with a passage from its middle. This was called for because that passage covered the ritual of closing the house, the event and topic that was central to our conversation. Before beginning to “cover” the remainder of the text, the commentary had to be put onto the ground on which this exchange stood (or moved, when topics other than the ritual were discussed). Unlike the classical commentator on authoritative writings, for whom the text itself may be the ground to stand on, the ethnographic commentator is beholden to a world outside the texts he or she produced as mediations of knowledge. The ethnographic commentary must take notice of that world, and that will be the task of this chapter.

In deference to the text, Kahenga, the person, will be introduced later when we get to relevant passages (24–26, also elsewhere, especially 54). We will begin with Kahenga, the practitioner, who worked in a trade that was as common, in demand, and accessible as many others serving the local population in what economists with a top-down perspective usually call the “private” sector or the “informal” economy. If looked at from below, neither adjective makes much sense without numerous qualifications. A healer’s work, for instance, though carried out in the private sector, is in the public eye and there is nothing informal about the competences, procedures, or even the economic transactions that allow him or her to make a living in the informal economy. Furthermore, that informal activities escape state control does not mean that they are ignored. Conflicts, or meeting-points, between professional medicine and the art of the healer have been recognized since colonial times. In the Congo, attempts to bring these relationships under control date back the decades before Independence in 1960 (see Janzen 1978). The meeting with Kahenga may have been a matter of chance

but it is important to keep in mind that it occurred in an existing social and political context.

### **Kahenga Plying His Trade**

It is now time to return to the beginning of our exchange (1), an odd, abrupt beginning. We had already started to talk about plant specimens, medicines, laid out on the table at which we sat down when I pressed the record button and we were off to a running start. "This," Kahenga told me, "is for rubbing in," and went on to talk about a medicine to counteract a "bad medicine." I let Kahenga finish explaining this before I cut this exchange about medicines short by taking a different, indirect tack. Setting aside the samples before us, I asked him to tell me about today's work (2). After that we backed up for a review of last week's cases (3) he dealt with when he stayed in Kenia township at the house of an older relative of the young man who had assisted him during the closing ritual. We embarked on a wide-ranging review of his typical clients and their typical problems (4). Put simply—too simply, as we will see—we sought answers to three questions: Who came to him, what were the complaints, what were the remedies?

57

Within each of the three categories we looked at (patients, ills, remedies) our conversation brought up numerous distinctions of domains and of classes and subclasses. Therefore, what we exchanged discursively could be reduced to, and presented as, taxonomies. If I were to do this now I would follow the classical path taken at the time when medical anthropology was still ethnomedicine, a branch of ethnoscience. Ethnoscience worked with the hypothesis that cultural knowledge is essentially classification and that anthropologists should work out in their study of cultures the distinctive ways in which different societies structure domains of experience in their "dictionaries." These structures, it was maintained, could be read from the logic of taxonomic arrangements (relationships of contrast, opposition, inclusion and exclusion, and so forth).

Ethnoscientific studies were impressive on logic but less so on ideology, rhetoric, and hardly at all on history. Above all, they had no concern for the integrity of ethnographic texts (or the communicative events texts document), and when texts (rather than brief statements, preferably single-word

responses) were used for analysis, and then were only to be mined for nontextual, nondiscursive information. Because respect for the text is the proclaimed ideal of writing in the genre of commentary, I will, by and large, resist the temptation, and deny myself the pleasure, of playing taxonomic games and stick to descriptive summaries and paraphrases until enough is said to support reflections on a theoretical basis broader than that of ethnoscience.

#### CLIENTS, PROBLEMS, REMEDIES

58

The following list of "cases" (in my questions I used the French loan *cas*, plur. *macas*) was compiled from our text. It respects the sequence in which consultations were mentioned and should answer the guiding questions in a straightforward manner—at least until we must face questions that our list raises rather than answers.

Kahenga first mentioned two female clients. "They were women who wanted *dawa*,<sup>1</sup> a medicine that would help them with their work." The problem was not specified in the first case. The second woman feared that she might be fired, as had happened to many others recently. Remedy: A (powdered) herbal medicine (2).

A married couple consulted him about problems of fertility. Remedy: The husband's blood gets "fixed" by drinking a medicine (4).

Frequently women sought help with ailments of the uterus. At this point Kahenga described only symptoms in some detail but said nothing about the treatment. For some reason, perhaps because treating gynecological complaints was a specialty of his and a major source of income, he told me that a woman would pay him "(only) if she is cured" (5).

Then problems at work—labor relations—came up again. When "a person wants to be liked by his superiors" Kahenga had medicine for him (in a bottle) or fitted the client with a kind of belt to wear. Kahenga volunteered a number: During the preceding week twelve persons "wanted to be liked at their workplace." Each client got medicine suited for his or her case (6).

Marital problems came next. As an example he cited the case of his assistant. The latter reported that treatment by an unspecified but probably herbal medicine was successful (10).

People also come to Kahenga with various kinds of abdominal pain,

caused by “bugs” (more about this in the next section when we comment on causation); herbal medicine was the remedy (10).

In one of the most interesting but unfortunately most cryptic passages Kahenga then spoke about being consulted by a thief (or a gang of thieves?) planning to steal an expatriate's car. His client wanted him to “prepare something” to assure the success of the operation. At least, this is a possible reading of the first part of the story which then abruptly switches to the treatment Kahenga had for the thief after he was injured in his chest when the car hit a wall during his getaway. No remedy was mentioned, just the fact that Kahenga was paid (11).

59

Closing a house and bringing peace to it was mentioned next. Kahenga remarked that “even back home in the village it is just the same,” probably because he wanted to make it clear that the particular service that had brought us together was in frequent demand (12).

The association with our case brought us to his treating my spouse for her pains and the children of Mwenze (the painter who had recommended Kahenga to us) for suffering from weight loss and *sungu*, swollen legs (13). Again, the remedies were herbal medicines he also used when he was consulted by women (including prostitutes) who wanted to be loved, by chiefs who wanted to have authority, and by women seeking abortions (14).

The list of ailments continued with pain in the joints and limbs, itching skin, a skin disease called *bukoma*, and headaches (16) and even after we had moved on to other topics Kahenga kept adding to the catalogue: impotence and another kind of abdominal disease (20), swelling of the back, bones bent or broken (22), gonorrhoea (23), and, as a whimsical afterthought toward the end of our conversation, loss of hair (58).

For the sake of completeness it should be mentioned that Kahenga, acting on behalf of his grandmother and teacher, was also involved in procuring medicine for politicians, such as Godefroid Munongo, an important figure during the secession of Katanga (33), and certain unnamed chiefs (38). I would not rule out that putting himself into the role of mere messenger for his grandmother in these cases was his way of avoiding a touchy subject. Having been involved with leaders of secessionist Katanga could have been dangerous under Mobutu's regime. Kahenga had men-

tioned chiefs as his clients earlier (14) and service to politicians may well have been part of his trade at the time when we talked.

At the beginning of our conversation I had asked Kahenga what he had been doing just before we met; at the end I wanted to know what he had lined up for the days to come. Several clients were waiting for him in Musoshi (a mining town about thirty kilometers south of Lubumbashi). After that he was going to "look after this person who has twins," help the relatives celebrate, and "do what needs to be arranged for a mother of twins" (75).

60 In our conversation we then turned from an inventory of specific and typical cases to discussing, in more general terms, Kahenga's approaches to illness as regards diagnosis and treatment, and this will be commented on in the next section. Though it means abandoning the sequence of our exchange, the catalogue of complaints and diseases should be confirmed and completed with information Kahenga provided when we looked at the herbal specimens he had brought back from the collecting expedition he undertook, accompanied by my spouse. He named each of them and told me what it was used for: stomach trouble (60), eye trouble (61), treating children who have digestive troubles or bad dreams (62), stomach trouble (63), problems at work (64), another preparation for treating children (65), one against a bug (66), others for solving problems at work and generally for removing pressure (67), a medicine to enhance virility (68), and one for a swollen neck (69).

#### DIAGNOSES, TREATMENTS, ETIOLOGIES

Kahenga had explained how an abortion is brought about (14) and probably would have added other treatments to the list when I decided to change the approach. I paused and then directed our discussion from compiling cases to taking a closer look at a consultation (15). I asked him to tell me what happens when a sick person comes to see him. First, I used *maladi*, a French gloss current in Shaba Swahili that can mean either illness or a person who is ill.<sup>2</sup> Then I made this less ambiguous with the Swahili synonym *mugonjwa*, a sick person. After the fact, I realize that this was one of the instances of preconceived ideas or expectations guiding my questions.

Unfazed by information suggesting a much wider scope of his activities that had come up in our conversation, I had Kahenga down as a medical practitioner. My mistake was excusable—after all, he had called himself a *munganga*, a term used for “doctor,” be it herbalist or physician—but it gave our exchange an orientation that could have seriously limited its ethnographic value had it become the main line we followed from then on. The corrective came from the kind, or genre, of communication we were engaged in: not an information-centered, topical interview but an event-centered reflexive dialogue.

Kahenga responded to my leading question—what happens when a client comes?—with a sense for the practical. It depends on the complaint, he told me (without saying it) and took as an example a woman who has problems with her uterus. The first step is a physical examination, which in such a case is carried out by his wife.<sup>3</sup> Then he listens at length to “them” (presumably his wife, the patient, and persons close to her). Insisting that he is the one who “knows” what the problem is, he told me that he procures the medicine and gives it directly to the patient. We made another start to clarify this and Kahenga confirmed the basic pattern: To come to a diagnosis in a case where probing and palpating a woman’s body is ruled out, listening to what the patient and the *munganga*’s proxy have to say is essential. Notice also that Kahenga always got to the medicine, *dawa*, when he explained how he worked. He did not mention in this context or elsewhere, as far as I can see, that he might have to revise his diagnosis if a remedy did not help but he repeatedly pointed out, in a way that made this a matter of principle, that the efficacy of a medicine can be determined only by trial and error.

My next move was to steer our discussion to the question of causes. Before I comment on this, however, I should note that the topic had come up earlier in a passage in which I tried to keep the focus on kinds of illness (10). There he had told me that a *kilulu* could cause a sickness of the belly. The term, meaning literally a small insect, a parasite, or a bacterial infection, is difficult to translate. I tried “vermin” when it first occurred; later (63) I used the colloquial “bug,” which may be a better rendition of the non-specific meaning the term has in Katanga Swahili.<sup>4</sup> To a question suggesting



that all pain (meaning here: illness) may be caused by *kilulu*, Kahenga responded by first redirecting me to (illness) of the belly and then specifying that a *kilulu* is responsible for reproductive troubles in men and women.

62 Let me return now to the point in our exchange where I tried to steer the discussion from kinds of illness to causes (16). At first, it appears that the attempt was bungled by both of us. Kahenga took my question for the origins of illness as a prompt to continue the enumeration of kinds of illness we had concluded (or just stopped) earlier. I cut this short but took his reaction as a cue for raising the issue of classification. I suggested that, as there are *kabila*, literally: tribes, of people there must be *kabila*, kinds of, illness. He acknowledged the clumsiness of my comparison with a chuckle but he agreed: There are *kabila*. When I asked him about the kinds he knew he began to show signs of impatience: Isn't that what I have been telling you about? Still, maybe just to humor me, he volunteered a rudimentary classification that should drive an ethnoscientist to despair: There are illnesses "of the uterus" and those where the limbs get thin, the defining traits being an organ in the first and a symptom in the second kind. Then it was his turn to switch abruptly from kind to cause. He brought up the example of a skin disease, *mpesé*, brought on a person by a *dawa* set like a trap (that is the literal meaning of the verb *-tega* he used here).

In our conversation this was an offhand remark that did not break the stride of our struggling, or juggling, with kinds of illness. For the commentary it presents a momentous finding and challenge. There is nothing intrinsically odd about stating that a "medicine" can also cause damage; in television commercials we hear warnings about side effects of medication daily. But this was not implied in what Kahenga told me when he said that a *dawa* can *cause* an illness, and this sets the terms we have been using for his work—healer, illness, patient, medicine, remedy—afloat. We will not be able to do without them and don't have to as long as it is understood that, even more than this is the case with all translation glosses, the English terms cover the semantic space of their Swahili counterparts only partially and often, depending on the context, hardly at all.

Kahenga named another skin condition he "can do"<sup>5</sup> and then picked up the thread of causation again, speaking of an affliction whose symptom is a one-sided headache. One can catch it by contagion, by touching a tree that

was infected, as it were, with the evil intentions of another person. This is one of many moments, some encountered earlier, others still to come, when translation succeeds at a price. It conveys a thought we can understand, yet choosing a word like “infect” transports understanding into the realm of metaphors. By making what Kahenga tells me somehow familiar it lessens the challenge his statement poses for interpretation. The same would have happened had I given in to an even more tempting alternative and paraphrased the etiology of the one-sided headache as catching a “curse” from a tree where someone had put it. This would have placed Kahenga’s ideas altogether in the realm of the irrational, cutting short any attempt at rational comprehension (other, that is, than anthropology’s old tricks of understanding the nonunderstood by placing it somewhere on an evolutionary scale of prerational thought or having it “symbolically” serve social functions).

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Infection by evil intentions was in fact the condition he had diagnosed in my spouse and against which he had prepared a medicine. The text leaves matters unclear. As best I can tell, Kahenga had taken the remedy from an “infected” tree and had thereby removed the “infection” from that tree. The problem of translation here is not only that Kahenga’s remarks were once again elliptic; an even greater difficulty—one we can only signal here but will have to face later—is posed by a term that ranks with *dawa* as a pivot of Kahenga’s discourse: *miti*, the plural form of *muti*, which refers to a tree but also to a plant or vegetal matter in general. What goes for *dawa* also goes for *miti*: It can heal an illness but it can also cause it.

What kind of causation is this? Both the medicine prepared to “entrap” a person in a skin disease and the infected tree that gives a person who touches it a headache are carriers of a person’s evil intentions. Therefore—at least in the cases described—*dawa* and *miti* are presented as links in a chain of causation that leads to a person. What exactly does that mean? Taking a lead from the expression Kahenga used (*kutega dawa*, see above), I understood the act as being intentional, but this raises questions if it is also to apply to the case of the “infected” tree. The way it is depicted here, catching the illness from a tree is a matter of chance. How are we then to understand the causal link between evil intent and bad luck?

Since the passage on which we are commenting offers no help with our queries we may as well move on to the next one where I somewhat abruptly

asked Kahenga whether *Mungu*, God, can “send illness” (17). I don’t think that it was mere logic that made me take this leap (moving from proximate causes to ultimate cause) but rather, once again, knowledge (or memories) I had brought to our conversation. I knew that very old people who died, as we would put it, from natural causes, were said to die *lufu ya Mungu*, God’s death. Could this induce Kahenga to clarify what he told me about illness caused by evil intentions? Unless *Mungu* could be evil, how can God be causing illness? He was unfazed and had an answer ready: God sends illness as punishment, as a “payment” (*malipizi*), to be precise. This response looked innocuous and could have been expected but what happened was that Kahenga switched to a moral or perhaps legal discourse. God is not evil, God adjudicates and imposes illness as a penalty for a sin or transgression (*kosa*). I kept probing for causation and asked whether it is the sin that makes you ill, not paying attention to what he had just explained: God’s role is to “return” to you the sin you committed. A person who does another person wrong may find himself or herself suffering from a stomach-ache or a bad back. In the hypothetical case he then cited he had someone I passed on the road insult me as a “stupid white guy.” This, he suggested, makes me angry and ready to exchange blows with the offender. God steps in, as it were, and makes him pay in the form of a back-ache he is going to feel as soon as he gets home. I wanted to be sure that this counts as an “illness from God,” that is, caused by God, but Kahenga refused to enter a philosophical discussion; he just gave me another example of a woman catching a back-ache from bad company she kept.

Can spirits cause illness (18)? Yes, they can, Kahenga said and gave an example. The spirit of your deceased father may be angry because you failed to make a required offering to him. He can punish you with sterility, for instance. If, after consulting a diviner, the proper sacrifice is made, such a person will be healed.

We were briefly sidetracked by a remark I made at the end of this paragraph and got to discussing questions of race and ethnicity before we returned to our topic, kinds of illness and their causes (20). Kahenga added impotence to the infirmities he knew how to treat but I was now more interested in summarizing what he had told me so far about causes. I proposed a list and he confirmed: Illness can be caused by a bug “in the

belly," by a person's evil intentions, by the spirit of an ancestor who "wants to eat," by God who punishes you for having wronged a fellow human being. He may have sensed that I still had a problem with this last kind of cause and gave another example but was so casual about it that I only now realize its special significance: The wrong he cites is that of a thief who gloats over his haul while the victim "decries" (*kulia*) the loss of his goods. Such "inside" lamenting (literally: saying something to yourself) is crying to God who then punishes the thief by immobilizing him. People will say—and now Kahenga identified the victim—that "this white man" prepared a *dawa* that works as God's punishment. With that Kahenga inserts the closing ritual, the event that brought us together, into his etiology of diseases. This means that the distinction between medicine and magic (perhaps sorcery) which I made as soon as I began thinking about Kahenga, the healer, and Kahenga, the performer of what I took to be a ritual of magic protection, does not, or not accurately, reflect how he conceived his work.

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Because I failed to appreciate the significance of his response at the time, I missed the chance to have the matter clarified or deepened. Instead, I took his mentioning a white person in his example as an occasion to continue with the topic of causation. I asked him whether people think that Europeans "bring disease" (21). Initially, his response was to deny this, possibly because he did not want to implicate the European present (a conjecture based on context and the "tone" of his response). But historical knowledge made me insist and rephrase my question: Didn't people think that way in the old times? Now he agreed and told a complicated story of the arrival of sleeping sickness in Hembra country during colonial times. This was one of the many interludes in our conversation that will be taken up later (in chapter 5). In the two shorter paragraphs that follow (22 and 23) we returned once more to the kinds of diseases he treated before we took up a new topic, Kahenga's biography.

### **Kahenga's Life and Training**

We began with establishing Kahenga's name and that of the village he came from (24) but got sidetracked. He gave his full name later on as Kahenga Mukunkole, adding that people at home sometimes called him by his

Christian name, Michel (37).<sup>6</sup> The brief passage that follows my initial question is a bit confusing, even for someone who is familiar with Luba naming practices (as I was at the time we talked). Though family names have been in use since colonial times (“Tshombe” is a prominent example in Katanga; a more recent one would be “Kabila,” president of the country and his adopted son and successor), they did not displace precolonial customs. In the seventies most individuals had Christian as well as African names, usually two, that were publicly known. Beyond this basic fact matters get too complicated to be discussed here.<sup>7</sup> Relevant to this passage is that a person usually got one of his African names from a grandparent (male or female since few names are gender-specific). Kahenga said that he got his from his grandmother and this was conforming to the rule. The term *nkambo*, which I translated as grandmother, can also mean great-grandparent and any deceased relative in ascending generations. The context suggests that the *nkambo* mentioned by Kahenga was his mother’s mother. Her name was Nyange ya Kahenga and she was called Kahenga after her grandparent. When Kahenga spoke of his grandmother as *mama*, mother, as he almost always did, he used a customary term of address for older females that did not describe his actual kinship relation to her. In sum, establishing Kahenga’s identity through his name placed him in a line of descent that was also the line along which he had acquired his knowledge and skills as a *munganga ya miti* (herbalist).

As we will see, his remarks about the *mama* who taught him still leave us with vexing problems, but before we address them, here is a short curriculum vitae based on Kahenga’s answers to my questions (25). He was born in 1940 in the village of Kihangu, near the Roman Catholic mission post and town of Sola. His parents were peasants and he was their only child. They sent him to the school run by the mission, which he attended until fifth grade, graduating with a *certificat*. Much later (58) he added more information: He was baptized, married, and had children who also went to Catholic school at Sola mission. His house and lot, large enough to accommodate many patients, were close to the residence of the missionaries with whom he had good relations even though at the time we met he was excluded from Holy Communion because he lived in a polygamous marriage.

But back to our conversation. After he had graduated in 1956, the mis-

sionaries<sup>8</sup> selected him for continued secondary studies toward the priesthood at the seminary of Lusaka. But then his father died and his *mama* was not to be persuaded by the missionaries to let Kahenga go (again, it is not clear whether this referred to his mother or to his grandmother; I lean toward the latter given his grandmother's role in his life from then on). She insisted that he had to stay away from the mission and so he went back to his paternal village where he worked in the fields. It was at that time (he was about sixteen) that he began his apprenticeship as a *munganga* with his *mama*.

She took the center of our conversation at this point (27). Going on what I had understood (or thought I had understood) earlier, I started out by saying: "It was this *mama* who is dead who taught you?" Kahenga confirmed this and that poses the problem I alluded to before. Elsewhere in the text or in a conversation I remembered but did not record Kahenga had told me that, if a *dawa* he had prepared or a treatment he had tried did not work, he would go back home to consult with his *mama*. How is this to be interpreted? Did he mean that he could "ask" the spirit of his teacher or was it simply that he did not correct the misunderstanding in my question and that this person was still alive? As I mentioned when I discussed forms of ellipsis in our exchange (in chapter 2), tense in Swahili verbs often is ambiguous. All we can conclude from his way of talking about his mentor is that she was ever-present in his work. The exact nature of that presence remains a riddle, at least for the moment.

Further questions about his teacher steered our conversation toward tutelary spirits and spirit associations, a topic to be commented on in a later chapter. However, interspersed in these long passages, Kahenga offered further information on his life and profession that should be noted now. In the middle of paragraph 28 I tried to clarify terminology, asking him how people back home referred to him (and his trade). He took a moment to think about this and came up with an unexpected appellation (in Hemba): *munganga bwainaye*. He translated this for me as "a *munganga* who has his mother's *dawa*, medicines" and went on to make this more precise by saying that he would describe himself as a *mufumu*, an important person, who got his *bunganga*, his profession of *munganga*, from his *mama*. Why the repeated reference to his "mother"? It could mean that the expression just describes

how he got his training; more likely it should be read as foregrounding his teacher's *dawa*, thus locating his competence or efficacy in the medicines he inherited, in substances rather than skills. The latter took the foreground when I asked how people in Lubumbashi referred to, or called, him. He told me that they consult him as specialist, as *fundi ya dawa* (literally: a craftsman or specialist of medicines). In the city, the proper Swahili term of address was *munganga*; *mufumu* was used only now and then.

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Because I thought that *mufumu*, as a loanword from Luba in Katanga Swahili could be a synonym for *mulozi*, sorcerer,<sup>9</sup> we began a lengthy discussion of sorcery and returned only later to biographical matters when Kahenga described his teacher's methods (33) and revealed that he also had an apprentice, a relative of his (probably a nephew on his father's side) whom he was teaching his craft for a fee of "two, three goats" (35). Such payment "in kind" rather than money is significant, given the fact that Kahenga usually worked for cash. As in the case of bridewealth, at least part of which must consist of gifts prescribed by tradition, the goats paid as "tuition" to a teacher of *bunganga* constituted a bond of obligations rather than a commercial transaction.

Could he teach his craft to a white man (36)? Instead of answering directly he deflected the question, first by telling me that it would be no problem to show me how he collects his medicinal plants, then by beginning to talk about one of them from among the samples before us. After another aside (37), where we talked about the exact location of Sola, I asked, as an afterthought, whether at the very beginning, when he was still working with his teacher, he also visited clients outside his home country. He did, as an emissary of his grandmother, and gave as an example the case of a notable who wanted *kulya busultani*, literally: eat the office of chief (38; see Fabian 1990b on this idiom and metaphor).

### **An Idiosyncratic *munganga*?**

Keeping our attention on the text compels us to raise this question.<sup>10</sup> Kahenga's idiosyncrasies were not a topic we discussed (it could not very well have been the subject of direct questions) yet it came to the surface in the form of two passages, marked "Spirits and spirit associations" in the

outline given at the end of the introduction. They seem to intrude into our exchange, interrupting the section on Kahenga's life and training.

We had come to the point where he had to leave school and return to farm work (26). He mentioned that this was also the time when he began to watch his *mama* and teacher prepare medicines and to run errands for her. I wanted to know more about this person and interrupted his autobiographic narrative with a question that was on that semi-conscious agenda set by prior ethnographic knowledge (27): Did his mother usually work alone or did she have associates (literally: people like her)? I had in mind an association (here and later we used the term *nkundi*, group) of *banganga*, which I knew existed in Luba country. Kahenga denied this (at least for the time being), perhaps because he thought that I was asking about helpers rather than fellow members of an organization, only to affirm later that his *mama* performed with a spirit (society) called *bugembe*. He himself put on a performance when he described to me the nature of that relationship with expressions that beautifully illustrate the meaning of "performing" culture. He imitated the spirit's voice as it comes out of the medium, her chanting, perhaps a kind of glossolalia, and evoked her ecstatic body movements—all this preparatory, as he then added in an everyday voice, to the moment when "she would put on her work clothes and do her work for the people."

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My next question was of course whether he had such a spirit too. No, he did not and he refused to recognize one when his *mama* insisted that he also would have to "put" (*utaweke*) his work together with "this spirit." I was a child then, he told me, was I going to get involved with all this dancing around? No way, he added almost contemptuously. Nor did he inherit his teacher's spirit, as I tried to suggest. I am against (this), he said and, to make his position perfectly clear, he added (though, linguistically, the statement is cryptic and difficult to translate), "working with *dawa*, as I do now [is all I want to do] . . . no spirit [for me]."

We then spent the following paragraph (28) talking about different spirit-associations in his home country. At the end, Kahenga reiterated his refusal to join such groups; in fact, he admitted (with a chuckle) that he had an aversion to the performances spirit-mediums put on. But the topic kept troubling us and we took it up one more time, again interrupting the flow of our conversation, in an attempt to get back on track after a diversion



regarding his dealings with Katanga politicians (end of 33). I wanted to know whether the societies we had named earlier had many members nowadays (as they used to in the old times even though the whites were against them). He confirmed this. Was there no pressure put on him to join? There wasn't. Was there no way he could work together with these ("organized") healers? Again, his answer was categorical: No, I just don't like it.

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When it comes to placing Kahenga's work in a context that includes African as well as Western healing practices we should seek understanding from information that our conversation disclosed. In the passages we just looked at (and elsewhere), Kahenga spoke about his training as a personalized relationship with his *mama*, a close relative. He described the education he received from her as a pragmatic process of gradual learning. He never mentioned any kind of esoteric knowledge that would have required initiation. At the same time, he acknowledged that through his teacher and her membership in a spirit-association he was connected to the core of "traditional" *bunganga*. Even though we talked about these matters only briefly, he showed that he was familiar with these societies, their rituals, and techniques and that he often met *banganga* who were presumably much like his teacher. His refusal to join their organizations must, therefore, be interpreted as a deliberate "career choice." It did not make him idiosyncratic; on the contrary, by detaching himself from a tradition that would have been difficult to keep up outside his rural home region, he became a respected modern practitioner of *bunganga*.

Nor does the label "idiosyncratic" fit what he told me when we continued on the topic of training. Kahenga himself now had an apprentice, a nephew living in Lubumbashi, where he was a university student (35). Teaching him the knowledge of plants required returning to the village, apparently not as an ideological return to tradition but as a matter of practicality (or ecology) because that was where he found most of the plants he needed and he knew where and when to collect them to prepare *dawa*. When, toward the end of that paragraph, I asked him whether he received payment from his apprentice his response was not what I expected. Yes, there was remuneration (see above), however, it did not pass from his nephew to Kahenga but to Kahenga's *mama*, his own teacher.

## Conclusion

A picture of Kahenga's work is beginning to take shape. Remarkable is, first, his mobility. From his base at the village/mission of Sola some six hundred kilometers north of Lubumbashi he had, within a few weeks prior to our meeting, traveled to Lubumbashi, visited Kolwezi more than three hundred kilometers to the west (3), and planned another sixty-to-seventy-kilometer round-trip from Lubumbashi to Musoshi before presumably returning to his home. We did not get around to discussing his travels in any detail; most likely he used available means of transportation. Between Lubumbashi and Kolwezi there was a railway connection; the other places could be reached by riding minibuses or trucks. The region he covered included rural as well as urban areas and a surface comparable to that of the Netherlands. To call him an itinerant *munganga*, however, might be misleading. He did not travel in order to find clients; his services were called upon by people who already knew of him or of his reputation.

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Second, the list of the kinds of Kahenga's "clients" (a term we kept using after I had introduced it at the very beginning) and their "problems" gives us an idea of the scope of his activities. At the same time it can be read as a *Sittengemälde*, a kind of exuberant genre painting peopled by men, women, and children; villagers and townspeople; wives, husbands, and whores; workers and big shots, politicians and chiefs; artists and criminals; Africans and expatriates. True, soldiers, policemen, government clerks, priests, lawyers, physicians, engineers, and businessmen were not mentioned as clients but neither were they explicitly or implicitly excluded by any of Kahenga's statements.

To say that a review of Kahenga's work results in a vivid picture of the society and the historical period in which he practiced should not be misunderstood. There was nothing "picturesque" about life in Katanga during the mid-seventies though it may appear that way compared to the abject misery and political chaos in the present. Kahenga's services were in demand because his clients experienced countless adverse situations and afflictions that needed therapy or "fixing."

The question arises whether the work of the *munganga* was indeed as pivotal as well as diagnostic (that is, socially revealing) as it appears from

our document. Was it perhaps a symptom of the medicalization of physical and social-economic problems of survival, not on the same scale but of the same kind as those rampant processes of medicalizing human life from the cradle to the grave that feed professional practitioners and providers of "care," pharmaceutical industries, and insurance companies in the West? Intuitively one shies away from such a conclusion and it may be possible to reject it with arguments derived from political economy showing that the practices involved are not comparable in kind or scale. But that would not be what ethnographers can contribute to the debate. What we may be able to do is something that anthropology at its best has been capable of: to represent and confront alternative views, concepts, and practices, among them "medicine," for which our own societies claim universal significance and validity. The task of another chapter, therefore, will be to comment on what the text tells us about Kahenga's ideas, his intellectual equipment that allowed him to render the services for which he was consulted by his clients. Before we get to that, however, we need to prepare the ground for confrontation by assembling, beyond what was already presented, information on the historical context in which our meeting took place.

## Kahenga's World

**4** When Kahenga and I met we discussed the ritual he had performed, his profession, and as much of his specialized knowledge as could be covered in the course of our conversation. We shared a language and, at least temporarily, had common interests that made communication possible. But it is also clear that, in the absence of a prepared questionnaire, our conversation would not have progressed beyond some sort of minimal gathering of information, if it had not moved under its own power. That power had among its sources memory and reflection, stories and explanations, in short, comments on the world in which the meeting took place, and that is why the text has much to tell about its social-cultural, political, and historical context.

Giving a coherent account of Kahenga's "world" (an undertaking which does not imply that Kahenga's world is coherent, or that it must be coherent to be intelligible) necessarily entails a certain shift from comments that follow the course of our conversation to a series of synthetic presentations organized around salient topics. Inevitably, this will make the section headings of this chapter of our experiment look embarrassingly conventional. On the other hand, just because there are good reasons for abandoning the monograph as a dominant genre there should be no prohibition against using some of its descriptive rubrics when this comes in handy in writing ethnography as commentary—as long as the selection is inspired by, and stays close to, the text. Realizing that a confrontation with Kahenga's thought, his "worldview," had to be grounded in the "world he viewed" helped to overcome lingering literary scruples.

### Village and City

Kahenga, the up-country practitioner of *bunganga* from Hembra land, was consulted in Lubumbashi and asked to provide housing security, a thoroughly urban service. What he did, what we discussed, information we exchanged, reflections we shared, explanations we considered—all of this happened in a world that, if a propensity to align village and town with tradition and modernity were accepted as a fact, was neither here nor there; or neither now nor then. Still, our conversation gave us many openings for discussing the "versus" between village and city, and we should now take stock of relevant statements.

First of all, though this is easy to forget when attention is concentrated on one ethnographic document of a casual conversation, we met, and Kahenga operated, in a *political* context, the nation-state of Zaire, as it was then called. I worked at the national university and was, at least indirectly, a government employee; Kahenga, as his identity card showed, was in a trade that had some sort of government approval. I don't remember exactly when, but he showed me the card. Apart from a photograph and the usual information on date and place of birth it gave his profession as *docteur du bois*, a phrase that makes little sense unless one recognizes it as a literal

translation of *munganga ya miti*. This must have fascinated me so much that I forgot to note the office or organization that had issued the document.

On the whole the presence of a state and its institutions and agencies is assumed rather than discussed. Occasionally, however, it comes to the surface, to give one example, in paragraphs 37–38 (a section titled in the outline “Kahenga teaching his craft”). At the end of that passage I noted that this part of our conversation, if measured by the ideal of a meaningful exchange, could easily be mistaken as “textual trash,” as something one might be tempted to clean out when presenting the text. But it paid to take a second look. We were discussing the possibility that Kahenga might teach a colleague of mine who was interested in medical anthropology. I assumed that, if this were to happen, it would be in Hembra country rather than in Lubumbashi. When I then asked for directions to his village, Kahenga at first evaded an answer with a hint of impatience: Why this interrogation in the midst of his telling me about his methods of teaching? I insisted and asked for the name of the place where he lived: Sola, not really a “village” but an agglomeration that had grown around an important Catholic mission (population ca. 3,000 according to a recent estimate). I was starting to say, so, that is where your *mama*, your teacher, lives. Without letting me finish the sentence Kahenga informed me that she had her home in Moba. That threw me off because I knew the name as that of a larger town on the shore of Lake Tanganyika (it was called Baudoinville in colonial times). For some reason—maybe he was just associating colonial and postcolonial names—Kahenga brought up Albertville (now Kalemie). At any rate, the Moba he talked about was just a village “back home.” So I made one more start, this time with a question for the “region” or “zone” (two administrative entities at the time) to which Sola belonged. He obliged but his response was vague. Finally, I just asked for his postal address, which (resorting to an administrative gesture) I wrote down as we talked. While we were at it I wanted to make sure that I had his own name down correctly. After another half-hearted attempt at getting the exact location of Sola—it was twenty-two kilometers from Kongolo (the capital of the region), he told me, or was it thirty-two?—we were ready to abandon this line.

Our attempts to locate Kahenga's home geographically and adminis-

tratively lacked exactitude; what they revealed about his world makes labeling him a "rural" practitioner inadequate, certainly if rural also means local, traditional, backward, and so forth. Ever since his school days (when he first faced the prospect of traveling) he had lived in a place that, through state and local bureaucracy and the Catholic missions, was part of a regional and national network of villages and towns, and when he moved between largely rural northern and urban southern Katanga he was not a "migrant."

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One is tempted to refer to such a situation as an urban-rural continuum, and that does catch one of its characteristics, but it would be wrong to equate continuity with homogeneity. Locations where people live may belong to a recognized geographical or political-administrative region (leaving aside in this argument ethnic distinctions and divisions) but this does not mean that such entities always create feelings of belonging together. The situation in Katanga is too complex, its history has been too troubled, for "primordial ties" to be formed. For instance, when it comes to terminology, there is ample linguistic evidence in our text of the reverberations of colonization and industrialization. In a long note to the English version (paragraph 48, note 77) I gave a summary of usages prompted by an explanation Kahenga had given of the purpose of one of the actions during the closing ritual, saying that it was to give "coolness" to the people living in (this) *mukini*. *Mukini*? I asked because one of the meanings of the term, "village," was foremost on my mind and it seemed odd that he should refer to the place the ritual was to protect—a lot in a large city—as a "village." What caused this double-take was not a linguistic problem. I knew that *mukini* was also the general term for a "settled place" of any size.<sup>1</sup> As such it was opposed to *pori*, "unsettled country," "wilderness." The problem was one of those intrusions, noted earlier, of sociological preconceptions (expressed in discursive habits) under which African ethnography has always labored, a sort of axiomatic opposition between rural and urban going together with and equating rural with traditional and urban with modern. After the fact, I realize that this was on my mind, not Kahenga's.

These observations are not to deny the fact, documented in our text, that *mukini* can also have the restricted meaning in expressions such as *kule ku mukini*, (back) there in the village (e.g., 35), *ku mukini: kwetu*, in the village back home (12). Added to this should be *kule kwetu*, there back home, and

other circumlocutions that suggest a sense of “home” not as in opposition to, but as part of, Kahenga’s larger world.

There was one striking passage early on in our conversation (7) that is worthy of closer examination as an example of confrontation between the ethnographer’s expectations and the interlocutor’s views. We had talked about one of the problems Kahenga routinely “arranged” with the help of *dawa*: labor conflicts in an urban-industrial setting. I told him that I was a little surprised by this. Is what you are doing not the work of a *munganga*? Yes, it is. But, I continued (without actually saying “but”), this is work you learned from your ancestors. Yes, it is. But, and now I said *alafu*, the ancestors lived in a village. Kahenga grants that, too. They didn’t know, I continued, about labor problems like getting fired or not promoted, right? At that point he must have run out of patience with my line of questioning or, rather, arguing, and stopped me dead with a laconic “no.” Appealing to my intelligence or imagination he reminds me that the basic issue he deals with as a *munganga*—in a factory as well as in a village—is trouble among people. In both cases, *dawa* can be prepared to resolve such problems. I wanted to be sure and asked again: As you see it, then, there is no difference between a factory and a village? Of course not, he replied, laughing, people in a factory are people. Still clinging to my preconception, I took what I now recognize as anthropology’s last stand in a situation like this: I gave a temporal twist to the opposition between village and factory by placing the village in the past (*zamani*). A few years later, in *Time and the Other*, I criticized this as temporal distancing, a device we use in our discourse to place our interlocutors in a time other than ours. This example from our text shows how discursive habits, that is, the ways we write ethnography “later,” intrude in our conversations “in the field.” This is how conventions of writing may influence how we formulate our questions and what we think we want to find out.

When Kahenga reacted with a noncommittal “mm” to my invoking the past, I tried another approach (8). *Zamani*, in the old times, elders and chief had sought *dawa* (understood but not said: to sustain their power). As soon as Kahenga had confirmed this I switched to the present (“now, here and now”) and asked whether he, too, had clients among the *bakubwa*, the big shots? Yes he did have such clients, not here (in Lubumbashi) but “in the



village," patiently explaining to me that his expertise would be called upon by persons who wanted to maintain their position or were about to *kulya busultani*, "eat the office of chief." Clinging to my allochronic perspective, I failed to appreciate that he had brought up the village in response to my querying him about "here and now," that is, where and when the village was for him. I took him through a series of further questions intended to clarify whether *bakubwa ya sasa*, modern big shots, sought his services. No, he had "not yet" been consulted by such persons, he told me, but, of course, he knew that they often went "to the bush" in search of *dawa*. At any rate, he insisted that the problems chiefs in the village had to resolve were of the same kind as those posed by a domestic conflict or those the heads of a big business or factory and the supervisors or foremen in the mining company may have in maintaining their authority. In all these cases *dawa* may be needed.

### Kinship and Family

Generally, an allochronic perspective has been operative in setting village against town, tradition (then) against modernity (now). Among the more specific ways to maintain such a perspective has been anthropology's preoccupation with "kinship." Therefore, another expectation the ethnographer brings to the presentation of a *munganga's* world is that he lives, like everybody else in "traditional society," in a network of family and kinship relations that structure interaction and determine status. At a first glance, our text confirms that expectation. But in several respects, Kahenga's kinship relations or, at any rate, what he chose to tell me about them (explicitly but also by implication) do not fit the typical picture one may have of a traditional situation.

First some of the basics: In the passages that contain information on his biography (24, 25), Kahenga mentioned his immediate family, his father and mother but no siblings. This was highly unusual but I let it go until we came to a point where the episode about the missionaries trying to recruit him as a seminarian made him mention that he "was born alone." To make sure that I had this right I asked again whether his mother had not given birth to other children. No, she had no other children. Not only that, she

herself was an only child. About his own family we did not talk at any length. At the time, Kahenga was thirty-four, lived in a polygamous marriage, and had children who attended the same mission school in Sola he had gone to when he was young (54). All this remained general and even the few facts just mentioned leave questions open: Who were his relatives by marriage and where did they live? With links established through two wives there may have been many. How many children did he have and what were their ages?

Apart from gaps of information that would be interesting to fill now but were not talked about then, there are other problems with reconstructing Kahenga's kinship relations. Kin were mentioned frequently, but in the text before us the exact relations are often not clear because the terms he used are polysemic and remained ambiguous even when Kahenga offered descriptions of a relationship. Take my attempts to understand how exactly he was related to his apprentice and the young man who assisted in the ritual (35). In fact, looking at this passage now I am not even absolutely sure that we were talking about two different persons. When I asked Kahenga whether he had an apprentice his answer was yes, my *muyomba*, a reciprocal term that designates the relation between a person and his or her mother's or father's brother.<sup>2</sup> I translated it as "my nephew." But how could he have had a nephew—in the common understanding of the English term—if he was an only child? Assuming that the relationship was reckoned through an ascending generation, it would have to be on his father's side, since his mother was also an only child. In that case, the young man was his father's brother's (i.e., Kahenga's *muyomba's*) child and that would make him his cousin rather than nephew. Confusion deepened when we moved on to his young assistant. He was the *muloko*, usually "younger sibling," of "the *mama* of that *mama* who gave me the medicine," that is, his teacher. If at all, this is translatable only if the first *mama* does not mean "mother" but simply female relative; hence all we get to know about the assistant is that he was a relation on "mother's side."

Who exactly was "mother," the appellation Kahenga always used for his teacher? In the biographic passage (24) we clarified this: she was the person who gave birth to Kahenga's mother, therefore his grandmother, *nkambo* (see also 33, 35). This was my term, not his, and it could have remained an

outsider's gloss if it were not for the fact that it served to trace Kahenga's name-line to the *nkambo* of his *nkambo*, a grandparent of his grandmother (24), a common practice (see above). In our conversation *nkambo* occurred most of the time in the plural, *bankambo* (and once in the collective, *man-kambo*) and referred to "ancestors" generally, not to specific relatives. When we later talked about prayers that were recited during the closing ritual and I asked Kahenga to whom he prayed, his answer was *baba yangu*, my father (41). Did he mean his own deceased father? Impossible to tell because a little later he mentions *baba* together with *nkambo* and *muzimu* (spirit, especially of a deceased person) as addressees of prayers (see also 51 where *baba* and *muzimu* are used interchangeably).

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What is the point of dwelling on ill-understood detail regarding kinship relations when all this seems to do is to produce more questions and little that would help us to give this part of Kahenga's world a distinctive shape? The answer could be twofold: Our exercise demonstrates limits of commentary as ethnography. The vexing ambiguities that kinship terms leave in our text are, as it were, artifacts of documentation. The text is all we have before us now. Thirty years ago it would have been possible to remove ambiguity by asking Kahenga to be more precise. But that would have worked only to a certain degree, which brings us to the second part of the answer: The point of commenting on terminological ambiguity was that it helps to appreciate the fluidity of social relations, including kinship, the one category that has often been regarded the most manifest and fixed of social relations, so much so that studies of kinship *terms* could be mistaken, perhaps with the connivance of their authors, for studies of kinship *relations*. Kin were important to Kahenga; even in the limited space of our conversation he revealed how firmly linked his personal and professional identity, his name and his *dawa*, were to his "mother." Family obligations at one point may have changed the course of his life when he had to forgo secondary education. He gave no indication that he felt constrained or limited in his mobility by kinship obligations. What I knew about Luba society could have led me to inquire about other levels of kin-relations, such as clan and lineage. But this never came up and it is idle to speculate how to interpret absence of reference to clan or lineage in this text.

## Race, Ethnicity, Politics

Moving on to another aspect of Kahenga's world, what does our text tell us regarding the importance of race, ethnicity, and politics in his work as *munganga*? The question does not aim at, and what will be discussed does not provide, anything near to a comprehensive account of these dimensions in the Zaire of the mid-seventies. This would be the task of a monograph. Commentary works the other way around and we should direct attention to passages in our conversation in which we talked about these matters, which we did rarely and mostly indirectly. At least that is how I put it to myself when I tried to get a grip on the task. Among the difficulties I faced right away was one that is posed also by other topics treated in this chapter: What do statements regarding race, ethnicity, and politics tell us about Kahenga's world and what about his thought? What may count in our exchange as more or less reliable factual information about a political situation and what was expressed as ideas and reflections, his and mine, on the topics of this section?

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Again, we may begin with some basics, starting with race, a term I used as a heading of notes made during work on the text. As I confront it now I am not even sure why I included it in the list that makes up the heading of this section. Nowhere in our conversation did we use expressions, either in French or in Swahili, unequivocally signifying race.<sup>3</sup> I can find only two words that could be classed as expressions with obvious racial connotations. One of them, *mweusi*, a color term meaning black, occurs a single time (!) in the phrase *muntu mweusi*, a black person (53). I was the one to bring the adjective into our conversation when I wanted to be sure whether Kahenga's reference to *pères*, fathers or priests, included Africans. In contrast, *muzungu*, plural *w/bazungu*, usually translated as "white person" or "European," appears more than thirty times. No question, "Whites" were often referred to but does this mean that race was a topic?

I must admit that this seemingly straightforward question—a question one ought to, after examining the text, be able to answer with a yes or no—stopped me dead in the tracks of this commentary. Attempts to come up with a statement left me vacillating. On the one hand, I should like to, and

could, argue that neither Kahenga nor I thought of *muzungu* as a racial distinction based on skin color or other physical features.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, there is the fact—and here I can speak only for myself—that I did experience my dealings with Kahenga as “transgression” (in a sense I explained in the introduction) and I have reasons to believe that the closing ritual and our conversation are likely to be perceived as extraordinary because, more than in routine research, boundaries were crossed when the European ethnographer became an African *munganga*'s client. Was there not a racial or racist *frisson* involved? And if so, was it any different from the one that has always affected anthropology as a discipline? Not much more comes to mind that would help us to return from introspection to Kahenga's world except a gratuitous conjecture: Inasmuch as race in the sense of racist thought and behavior (and there is no other sense, given the impossibility to come up with a defensible definition of race) was present in the social context in which our meeting took place it must have affected interaction somehow.

What we can do is take a closer look at occurrences of *muzungu*/*wazungu* in our text. These terms came up in our exchange for two reasons. One was simply to designate, or “name,” expatriates as a category of actors. For instance, Kahenga mentioned among clients who might consult him someone who wants to work for *muzungu*, an expatriate employer (6). In the prayers that were part of the ritual of closing the house, *huyu muzungu*, this white man, referred to me, the client who was to be protected (41, 49, 50). Once he called a European missionary *muzungu* (54); the Belgian colonizers were *wazungu* (21) and the expression *dawa ya wazungu* (72) meant Western drugs.

Not quite as often, coming to the second reason, the term was introduced into the conversation by my questions whose purpose was (with one exception, 54) not to identify a person but to steer the discussion toward a theme that was clearly more on my mind than on his: distinctions and differences between Africans and expatriates as patients or clients (18). I wanted to know to what extent Kahenga's world and the one I represented were separate. A result of this line of questioning was that my expectations (not consciously formulated but somehow implicit in our relationship) were not confirmed. Not only could he teach a *muzungu* his knowledge of herbal

medicine (36) but *wazungu* could, and did, cause harm with the help of *dawa* (20, 21) and, most surprising of all (but a matter to be taken up in the next chapter), among the *mizimu*, spirits of the deceased who could be helpful as well as harmful, there were also *wazungu* (19, 59). Only in one instance did Kahenga use a form of the word that made it deprecatory. This happened when he told me that an illness could be God's punishment for a wrong done to another person and gave an example: Someone meets a European and insults him (here Kahenga slipped into the role of that person): *Hooo: angaria kile kimuzungu kile*, something like "Ahh, look at this piece of *muzungu*" (17).<sup>5</sup> Kahenga left no doubt that such expressions of contempt were contemptible.

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Earlier I said that neither I nor Kahenga employed a term signifying race. A careful reader could point to a passage that seems to contradict this. The context was our discussion of causes of illness, in this case *mizimu*, spirits, who can make a person sick and have to be appeased with the sacrifice of a chicken or goat. It must have been my compulsion to look for difference that made me ask whether *wazungu* could be afflicted with this kind of illness. Actually I stated my question in the form of a conclusion, as if it followed logically that African ancestor-spirits could only be harmful to Africans. Kahenga rejected this immediately. No, you people can catch this type of illness; this "has nothing to do with *kabila*" (18). This could be translated as "nothing to do with race" but many other occurrences of *kabila* show that nowhere else it was used in this specific sense. I did not give up my pursuit of difference and pointed out that *wazungu* did not make sacrifices to spirits (implying: how can they have the illness but not the cure?). Kahenga did not accept this, telling me in effect that I should not generalize because among all people, including *wazungu*, there were different *kabila*, kinds. I had this nonspecific sense in mind when I began to interrogate him about kinds of illness and used *kabila*, a local all-purpose term for difference.<sup>6</sup> I must have sensed or anticipated that Kahenga would find this quaint because I immediately added "as there is a *kabila* of people," which he accepted with a chuckle. Being queried about "tribes" of illness (tribe is the dominant connotation of *kabila*) amused him (16).

Not much later *kabila* in the specific meaning of ethnic identity—to use a neutral sociological gloss—became a topic when my ideas and expectations

once again made me ask an “ethnographic” question (19). I reminded Kahenga that he had learned his trade in the village, hence in his *kabila*, which was Hemba. But didn't he take on clients from “all tribes”? I expressed surprise, pointing out that throughout the country people usually “follow their *kabila*” in these matters. He agreed. So, why do they seek *dawa*, medicine, without regard for ethnic differences?<sup>7</sup> Kahenga saw no contradiction and explained to me that the world of the *mizimu*, the spirits, as agents of illness as well as healing, was not divided by ethnic boundaries. We did touch on ethnic distinctions in this paragraph (our example was the Kongo from lower Zaire) and later on, first when we compared Hemba and Luba words for God (51) and then when he identified a divining gourd I showed to him as Luba (70). In neither case did Kahenga give the slightest indication of using ethnic labels in an evaluative, much less discriminatory, manner. This was remarkable, given the long history of colonial invention and promotion of ethnicity (through the “scientific” and administrative uses of “tribe”), a history that was no less real for being invented as shown in violent outbreaks and endemic presence of ethnic strife, especially in the postcolonial recent past. *Bukabila* or *tribalisme* were constantly talked about in local political discourse and ethnicity was a central issue in analyses of the very situation in which our encounter took place (for instance, Young and Turner 1985). The politics of the day—Mobutu's regime, the bureaucrats, police, and soldiers Kahenga undoubtedly had to deal with in his frequent travels—are not mentioned in the text but they were of course present in his world and the one we shared.

### Religion: The Catholic Mission

When one searches the document for statements about institutions and organizations that affected Kahenga's life and work most directly, then one finds that it was the Catholic mission. He was baptized, educated in a mission school, and his (first) marriage was Catholic. His children, presumably also baptized, attended the mission school, which was convenient because he had his home and his “practice” in a settlement attached to the mission post of Sola. Among the most interesting and lively parts of our conversation were Kahenga's accounts of his relations with the missionaries;

interesting, because they confounded notions I may have had regarding the incompatibility of *bunganga* and Christianity; lively, because Kahenga enjoyed baffling me with the rapport he enjoyed with some of the priests.

Several passages are relevant to this aspect of Kahenga's world and they become rather intriguing, especially when we follow the rule that, as much as possible, the course of our conversation should determine the sequence of comments. Remembering that rule let me notice something that would have otherwise been easy to overlook: Mission and missionaries (*bapères*; later also *missionnaires* or *(ba)padri*) first came up when we talked about Kahenga's life history (25). In our later, more detailed discussion of the topic it was not his daily, mundane, and "modern" dealings with the fathers at Sola that brought up the mission but a "theological" passage in our conversation (51). It began with my asking him about the Hema term for God, *vilinyambi* (*Mungu* in Swahili). Once again, ethnological foreknowledge made me steer the conversation toward a topos in the anthropology of African religion, the relative remoteness of God and the proximity of spirits as addressees of prayer and sacrifice. When I suggested that people may know God but that he is "far away," Kahenga contradicted me, amused by my misconception. Yes, it may be true that prayers are said and offerings are made to ancestor spirits, but who created them and is God not the sole source of *baraka*, blessings? To make sure that I understood the meaning of *baraka*, Kahenga brought up a concrete example, the importance of *mayi ya baraka*, holy water, in his work as a *munganga*. It was a powerful substance "because it had been blessed" and he would get it from the missionaries (54).

Without making him state the connection, this brought him to the person who did the blessing of holy water, the (Catholic) priest (52). Kahenga spontaneously placed him in the frame we had just constructed in our theological discussion of God, ancestor spirits, prayer, and sacrifice and defined him as "a person who is always really close to the dead (*mufu*)." I reacted to the singular form he used (*mufu*, not *bafu*) by asking "which dead?" He did not let himself be distracted by a minor point and continued to make the one that was important to him: It was the priest's closeness to the deceased, in fact his ability to see a dead person "openly (*waziwazi*)" that gave him indirect access to God and made his prayers efficacious. Then



I interrupted his explanation with an image I had stored away in my memory. I knew of the habit of priests to say their breviary while walking up and down in the cemetery that was often close to the church and rectory. I brought this up and Kahenga immediately knew what I was talking about. People had seen missionaries in the cemetery, reading from a book (perhaps moving their lips), and took this ritual recitation of prayers as speaking to the dead, something that he himself could not do, as he told me, because it took learning from “many books.” Such learning from books also gave the priests strength to control (“tie up with a rope”) dangerous spirits of the dead. Talking to the dead “all the time” gets them close to God, who answers their prayers most of the time, and that is “why we need the priests back home.”

Kahenga's remarks in this episode tell us much about the presence of the missionaries in his world. They were more than just representatives of an institution whose foreign, colonial nature could not have been lost on the people. With some imagination, the villagers had found a place for the missionaries' rituals and book-learning in a frame of thought that made sense to Kahenga and his likes.

But there was also the mundane presence of the missionaries in everyday life at Sola. Kahenga had his house and clinic next door to the mission church (54). Were they not against his work? On the contrary, they would come to him with people they had been unable to cure; conversely, he would ask them for help when he had problems making his *dawa* work. Even the fact that he was excluded from communion because of his polygamous marriage did not trouble the good “professional” relations he had with the priests. They might even bring a sick fellow expatriate (*mugonjwa ya kwabo*) and ask Kahenga to prepare a *dawa*, which he would do and the person would be cured. His laconic response to my *c'est vrai*—is that true?—was: “(When they ask for it) are you going to refuse?”

I wanted to know more about this surprising collegial relationship between two worlds, Christianity and Western medicine on one side and traditional *bunganga* on the other, which, at that time, I still could not think of otherwise than as being in contradiction and conflict. How was it possible to keep communications open so that missionaries would like to talk to him the way I did in our conversation? Kahenga's response made me

realize that I was not the first to show ethnographic interest in his work (adding another aspect to “late ethnography”—missionaries had often preceded anthropologists). He told me that he met regularly with a Father Joseph, the Superior of the mission. They would talk at length and the priest would interrogate him about his work, take notes, even give him some money,<sup>8</sup> and encourage him to continue as long as Kahenga called on God to make his *bizimba* work (like ours, their conversations would be in Swahili). One day, he then told me (55), a traveling party of missionaries even filmed him and his patients.

Given his good relations with the missionaries, Kahenga had many Christians among his clients (56). He mentioned some women who were stationary patients at his house and he probably would have given other examples when, taking a guess based on what I knew about Catholicism in Katanga, I asked him whether the movement known as Jamaa existed in his place.<sup>9</sup> It did and had many followers at Sola. Not only that, Kahenga and his wife had been members or candidates (only married couples could join the Jamaa) until he disqualified himself by taking a second wife. He then went on to tell me about conflict between two groups, a typical situation that had the ring of authenticity. Knowing that the movement's doctrine prohibited recourse to “pagan” practices, I asked him whether they did not reject the use of *dawa*. They did, with the exception of strictly herbal medicine (*dawa ya mizizi*) for which he was frequently consulted by them although they would insist that he did not put “anything else” into his preparations.

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### Landscape and Memory

There is one passage, relevant to the topic of this chapter (21), at which I should have stopped for comment earlier, only to skip it repeatedly because I found it difficult to decide whether it should be commented on in this chapter on Kahenga's “world” or in the next one about his “thoughts.” That distinction between world and thought, which at first seemed a convenient and elegant way of ordering what I wanted to present, has by now become a burden. The problems with maintaining it reflect of course a tension between the generic demands and constraints of a monograph and those of a commentary. Facing the recalcitrant paragraph now will not resolve

my problems of presentation but it will make it possible to add another facet to Kahenga's complex "world" and prepare a transition to the chapter that follows.

88 Problems of presentation are not the only ones posed by this passage. Between the extraordinary story Kahenga had to tell and my eagerness to understand what I heard, the conversation turned into a groping exchange, full of multiple starts, repeated questions, and laborious attempts to get matters clarified—with limited success, going on the challenge this part turned out to be when it came to transcription and translation. As we will see, in the end, finding a place for this episode and determining what Kahenga had actually said came down to taking two decisions, one topical, the other linguistic.

We had discussed matters of race and ethnicity (17–20) when it occurred to me to press Kahenga on a question we had barely touched on: Did people here think that *wazungu* bring disease? He set out to deny this when, with a single-mindedness I now find embarrassing, I reformulated my question without letting him finish the sentence: But was this not what people thought in the olden times? With that I changed the focus from a theoretical reflection on causation to memory and history. Kahenga immediately rose to this and began to tell a story that must have been very much alive in popular memory. It began simply enough when he answered my question about Europeans bringing disease. Yes, that is what people thought, and the gist of what followed was that the *wazungu* "of old" ("1918" was his guess) had brought sleeping sickness to the region of Kasongo.<sup>10</sup> Starting with the first sentence, the text contains surprising elements and some vexing ambiguities. It began when Kahenga, in a move that made colonial memories uncomfortably present, asserted something about Europeans and referred to them, not as *wazungu* but as "you:" It was you who "locked up" disease, he began to tell me, then he hesitated and paused as if searching for a better beginning until he got his narrative on the way.

The going, however, was not to be smooth. What was meant by *kufunga maladi*, locking up disease? In Kahenga's story, local presence of the disease was somehow tied to a certain large hill or mountain near Kasongo that had been an abode of spirits. It was there, I understood, that the illness was deposited as a *dawa*. Considering that the issue was whether whites had

caused illness, did his answer mean that they had brought sleeping sickness as a *dawa* by enclosing it rather than locking it up (and thereby controlling it) in that hill and that it spread from there? Much like the question that started the discussion, this interpretation was suggested by colonial history. Connections between colonization and the spread of diseases (involving not just importation but transition from endemic to epidemic occurrence) have been a subject of research and debate in which sleeping sickness had a prominent place (see, for instance, Lyons 1992).

My understanding of history, such as it was, had followed the wrong trail. This became clear only a sentence later when Kahenga removed ambiguity: It was not the disease that was “locked up,” as I had been led to believe by the elliptic phrase *kufunga maladi*, but a *dawa* was deposited and somehow sealed up: “They placed a *dawa* and locked it up” and “there was no more sleeping sickness.” Then (he said *sasa*, now) the Whites left and—was it that the seal was broken (a chuckle indicates that this may be speculation)?—there was a lot of sleeping sickness there in (the region of) Kasongo. I was still confused, so I tried again: There was this huge (*kabambi*) mountain and when the Whites came, what were they looking for? Whatever they were looking for, he answered, they found that many people were dying of sleeping sickness. So then they buried (*banazika*) their *dawa* (against/for? the disease) after having talked at length with the guardians of the spirit who lived on that mountain. I wanted to know the mountain's name but Kahenga did not remember, except that it was near Kasongo. I must have imagined that the Europeans were associated with the mountain because they had built a house (an observation post?) on its summit. There was no house, Kahenga told me, in fact, he began to suspect that I did not know the meaning of *kilima*, mountain. After this was cleared up I wanted to know whether one could see the place where the *dawa* had been deposited. They (the Europeans) used to go there often, he told me, but we avoided the spot out of fear and if you go near it there is a wind blowing that will make you catch sleeping sickness.

Then we talked about the return of the disease after the end of Belgian colonization. The Whites had been “chased away” and their tricks (*mayele*) no longer worked. By now we had been through the story several times but I was still not ready to let go. Didn't the Whites use vaccination (meaning:

rather than *dawa*) to fight disease? Kahenga refused to follow me along that line. Although he undoubtedly had witnessed many vaccination campaigns he stuck to the story of the locked-up medicine. Above all he stuck to a *story*, to a shared memory of the colonial past that had a *place* in a prominent topological feature. Memory, as often is the case, was embodied in a landscape, one that was inhabited by powerful *mizimu*, spirits, to whom the Whites owed their success in fighting sleeping sickness.

90 It hard to resist an allegorical interpretation of the tale: There are the Whites going for the mountain peak to work their power by burying their *dawa* in African soil. Their cleverness had sleeping sickness “locked up.” And there came the evil wind of postcolonization blowing from that mountain, making people sick. But indulging in allegories was not what Kahenga had in mind. At any rate, an attempt at allegorical reading runs into trouble with an account that remains ambiguous to the end. On the basis of the text alone, it is impossible, for instance, to say whether the placing of *dawa* was said to have happened on, in, or at a certain huge mountain that may have been just a big hill. And did the Whites control a disease that plagued the country or had they brought it in the first place, which had been my question in the beginning.

If Kahenga was not engaged in allegorizing what was his intention and what the significance of the story? To me, it was the tie between past history and present landscape, or between memory and ecology, that revealed a dimension of what we have been trying to catch as “his world.” All it took was a change from third to second person (not “the Europeans,” but “you”) to make the disquieting point that the European ethnographer was already part of a world he may have imagined as being “out there,” belonging to his interlocutor.

## Kahenga's Thought

### “Belief in Belief”

**5** As soon as I had decided on the title of this chapter I had second thoughts. It may seem reasonable, though not mandated by the succession of topics in our text, to proceed from Kahenga's practice to the “theory” that guides his work. However, the underlying assumption—that the two can be distinguished or even kept separate—is questionable. Above all, presenting work and thought in succession may give the wrong impression that Kahenga's practice merely implemented his thought and knowledge—as if he had worked with a set of ideas that, once acquired or accepted, did not need constant work to be workable. Of course, to lump practical skills such as the recognition of medicinal plants, the ability to match illness and cure, and to decide on a treatment, as well as views

regarding causes and agents, judgments concerning good and evil, and ontological concepts under one common heading would mean resorting to a time-honored strategy. It usually consisted of calling, and thereby bracketing all of the above as, *belief* (with variants such as belief system, worldview, doctrine, ideology).

92 The effect of such bracketing, at one time considered a theoretical achievement but questioned more recently,<sup>1</sup> has been to constitute certain kinds of thought and knowledge (among them religion and magic) as objects of inquiry by opposing them to scientific thought and "Western reason." This may have kept them in an arena of rational debate; it also made it unnecessary (in fact, impossible) to confront religion, magic, and other "beliefs" at eye level. As someone put it in a formulation whose source I have been unable to trace, anthropology was in the business of showing "why we know and they believe."

That was not all. The function of this strategy (to use a neutral term and avoid getting entangled, at this point, in having to justify terms such as "purpose" or "consequences") was not only to set other kinds of thought and knowledge apart from the ones we call scientific but also to establish intellectual control of what had been set apart and thereby constituted as an object. Following the maxim *divide et impera*, establishing dominion required "dividing," that is, making and defending distinctions within the domain of belief(s), above all the one between religion (itself divided as high or world religion vs. primitive or tribal religion) and magic (usually also divided as white vs. black, benevolent vs. noxious magic, with categories such as sorcery and witchcraft covering much of the latter). At one time, sense was made of these distinctions by placing them at different stages of evolution. Then, under the paradigm of functionalism, more or less the same categorizations were approached as socially "functional," institutional differentiations, and not much changed when functionalism was hyphenated with structuralism. Science, religion, magic, sorcery, and witchcraft were thought of as different configurations of symbols that, in opposition or contrast to other such configurations, constituted a cultural system of beliefs and concomitant practices. More recently the Foucauldian notion of discursive practices, again applied to all of the above, seems to have become the bracketing device *du jour* (though it may be doubted that Foucault himself

intended his radical historicizations of sex, punishment, and other regimes to serve as epistemological sedatives).

Such has been anthropology's "belief in belief,"<sup>2</sup> deployed as a strategy for establishing intellectual control (also called explanation) of scientific objects classed as religion, magic, or sorcery. This almost-caricature of the anthropology of religion and magic is not to be taken as a gratuitous dismissal of the search for reason in the apparently irrational (often it had considerable success<sup>3</sup>). If I still think that the great theoretical treatises and detailed ethnographies our predecessors produced provide little guidance for a project to write ethnography based on a present document of past communicative interaction, this is due to the failure or refusal to recognize the contemporaneity of their objects of study. Such failure may not have been a necessary result of using terms like religion, magic, witchcraft, or sorcery (anthropologists did not invent them and we are as yet unable to do entirely without them) but it was certainly fostered by making these labels technical terms and then turning them into rhetorical devices of an allochronic discourse that kept our interlocutors' practices and thoughts at a safe distance by placing them in a time other than ours with the help of theories of evolution, change, or modernization.

This brief reminder of the history of anthropology's road toward "belief in belief" shows why it is difficult to avoid approaching Kahenga's thought and knowledge without designating what he thinks and knows as "beliefs" and pressing what he says and does into preconceived categories. Are there alternatives that allow us to confront his views and assertions? Of course, no ethnographer should delude himself into being able to start completely afresh. Still, I have come to think that writing ethnography as commentary makes it possible, if not to get rid of our conceptual arsenal then at least to keep it in abeyance often and long enough to make what I call confrontation productive. An immediate consequence of such a position (or project) is that we lose some of our most cherished certainties, among them the ontological distinction between a real world and an imagined, thought-up, or postulated world. But is it not precisely such a distinction that makes me present Kahenga's "world" and his "thought" in separate chapters?

Be that as it may, critique of imposed categories should not make us blind to categorizations if we encounter them in our documents. Even the most



resolute refusal to press what we get to know about *bunganga* into familiar categories does not exempt the ethnographic commentator from respecting and presenting categorizations our interlocutors make when they tell us what they think and know.

## Thought and Knowledge

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Kahenga and I met at a time when I was engaged in projects of ethnographic research that had not started out but eventually came together as inquiry into “popular culture.” In most of the expressions I had studied—popular religion, historiography, painting, and theater—a common denominator was “thought” (*kuwaza*, to think, and *mawazo*, thoughts). In the Jamaa movement, for instance, thought was, as a kind of gnosis, the pivot of their teachings. The painter-historian Tshibumba insisted that a historian *thought* the past.<sup>4</sup> When I searched our text for *-wazo/waza* and related terms the results were striking.<sup>5</sup>

The noun *mawazo* does not occur at all and, with one exception, only I used the verb *kuwaza* four times, twice in questions about what “people thought” (21) and twice when I asked Kahenga to think in the sense of remember (4, 6). Such shifting of meaning from thinking to remembering and back is exemplified in the only instance where Kahenga employs the verb *kuwaza*.<sup>6</sup> We were coming to the end of our conversation and as one of several afterthoughts I asked him how common knowledge of plant names was among people in the village. They knew all the names, he told me, and if a person had forgotten one he or she would just “put it (the plant) there and think” (73). When I transcribed this passage I made a note to myself to look more closely at this semantic constellation of thinking and remembering in Kahenga’s answer to a question about knowledge.

We will get to knowledge presently but first an observation on another conspicuous absence in this text: In Swahili, as in European languages, the phrase (*mi*)*nawaza*, “I think,” seldom occurs in the marked sense of “I cogitate.” Most often it introduces statements in the sense that make it synonymous with “it is my opinion,” “I am not sure but . . .,” in short, “I believe.” But I don’t recall ever having come across a case in conversations I had through the years, many of which were intensely searching and reflex-

ive, where a speaker's "I believe" was a statement of "belief" in the sense discussed the introductory section above, that is, in contrast or opposition to "knowledge." The Swahili verb *-sadiki*, to believe (never used in our conversation), always means "to believe in" and is used only in religious discourse; it never means "I believe that." Kahenga did not qualify any of his statements as convictions. While this does not mean that he had no convictions, it is expressive of his altogether factual attitude to the matters we discussed.

If terms for thinking and believing are conspicuously absent from the transcript, the contrary can be said about the verb that signifies knowing. It has two alternate forms in Karanga Swahili, *jua* and *-yua* with the former counting as more refined (*kiswahili bora*). I don't recall ever hearing the nouns *mjuzi* or *maarifa*, knowledge, listed in dictionaries (though a search of other texts on our web site might prove me wrong). Acquired knowledge, learning or education, is called *elimu*, but that term is also absent from our text.

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First, an interesting linguistic detail that showed up when I looked at the frequency and distribution of occurrences. I used the verb twenty-six times, with one exception always in the *-jua* variant; Kahenga employs it thirty-five times, always in the *-yua* form. Remarkable about this is that the choice of single phonological variant (an allophone in technical terms), of which I was probably not conscious at the time and now only discovered almost by accident, appears with such regularity as a distinctive feature marking questions in contrast to answers.<sup>7</sup>

Since our conversation was in a mode of inquiry it is not surprising that the topic of knowledge was brought up most often in the questions I asked, always with verb phrases, and that Kahenga's answers frequently repeated or echoed my use of *-yua*—lexically. Semantically, a reading of this text with a focus on expressions relating to knowledge and on their contexts produces a picture of great complexity. Here is, first, an inventory of the verb *yua* and its many shades of meaning. Kahenga asserts that he "knows that" or is conscious of (17, 30); that he "knows whether" something is the case (38); he is "known as" (37); he knows the function of an object (70); he knows God (51) and the practices of divination (71). To know can mean to recognize (18, 19) or to experience/feel (20). Another cluster of significations is formed when

he uses *-yua* in a diagnostic, technical, professional sense of to recognize, identify, and to “know how to” (6, 9, 15, 16, 17, 23, 29). To know can refer to the ability to identify a person as a sorcerer (29, 30, 31). His apprentice knows what he has been taught (36) and Kahenga knows names of plants “well” by writing them down (33, see also 35), something that is different from the general knowledge of plant names among people of his country (73).<sup>8</sup> Finally, *-yua* may refer to linguistic competence; one knows (the meaning of) a word (21, 76) and one knows a language such as Swahili (29) or Hemba (54).

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### Knowledge and Power

Among phrases that belong to this cluster I found one, *mwenye kujua dawa*, a person who knows *dawa* (29), that invites further exploration. In the same context Kahenga calls such a person *fundi ya dawa*, a craftsman or specialist of *dawa*. Most often *-enye* is used to form an attribute of a person or to make of a verb phrase the equivalent of a noun (*mwenye kujua* could be translated as “a knower”). But it may also connote regular possession or, more appropriately in the case under consideration, proven competence with an undertone of power. It was this hint of a pragmatic conception of knowledge that made me attentive to the verb *-weza*, whose connotations can range from liberty or ability (an equivalent of the English “I can”) to capability, mastery, and power. I found two examples of compound phrases combining *-weza* and *yua*. In the first one Kahenga said of his teacher that she *anaweza kuyua* a sorcerer (29), which clearly says more than “she can know”; he told me that she had the competence, or power, to identify such a person. Not much later (31), when I asked him whether he, too, “can know” the work (*kazi*) of sorcery—meaning: could he practice sorcery?—he responded (twice) with “I can know” only to negate this apparent admission by making it clear that he did not accept such an insinuation and assuring me that he did not like to exercise his power back home in situations when “the whole village” was out to find a sorcerer, though he would use it in a case such as mine when my house may be threatened by “such people” (*bale benyewe*) who seek to harm us.

The next step in this exploration of “knowledge” was to search the text for

occurrences of *-weza*, which again revealed a wealth of connotations and produced some insights. One of them emerges when we line up uses of the phrase *naweza kufanya*, literally: I can do or make. Kahenga used this expression, sometimes without an object, when we talked about different kinds of illness/problems he was able to treat (4, 5, 7, 11, 16). What is remarkable about this is that he presents his knowledge not as a taxonomy of concepts/terms but as a sort of catalogue of his competences. As far as I can see he never responded to my inquiries about kinds of diseases with only a term or phrase *referring* to a condition; he always got to talk about *treating* it: He can (*naweza*) prepare medicine or dispense it (20, 54, 58), heal a person (19, 20), mend conditions, such as sterility (4, 22), and, as he reminded me, close a house (13). The negative form *siwezi* also occurs (15, 33, 34, 56, 72) but only in the sense of I am not allowed to, I can do nothing about it, it is not possible that; none of them negates what the meaning of *-weza* we are exploring here asserts.

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Concentrating on *-weza* one begins to realize that in Kahenga's thought power as the ability to treat afflictions is closely related, to put this cautiously, to the power to cause them. We touched on this in the preceding chapter (in the sections on race and religion) when we considered the possibility that God, who according to Kahenga is the ultimate source of the *munganga's* power to heal, may also cause illness. He has the power (*anaweza*) to "return, or turn on you, the wrong you committed" and "make you pay for it" by afflicting you with "this illness" (17).

Not only God has this power; *mizimu*, spirits, whom one may implore (19) and who can see to it that a person is richly rewarded (52), may also bring illness (18). A spirit is also able (*anaweza*) to travel to another part of the country (19). Catholic priests can see the spirits of the deceased (*anaweza kumuona*) and converse with them. They get this "strength" (*nguvu*), which Kahenga says he does not possess, from having "learned many books"—a rather surprising attribution of such powers to literate knowledge. Above all, priests have the power to "chain" evil spirits and that, he adds, is why we need them (52).

Almost as an afterthought it occurred to me probe the text for *mayele*, a word that is common in Katanga Swahili<sup>9</sup> and had become part of local French, especially as spoken by long-time European residents who may have

picked it up from the pidginized Swahili many spoke as a work- and command-language. *Mayele*, a noun, has connotations that can approach that of *akili*, intelligence (no occurrence in our text), for instance in the phrase *muntu wa mayele*, a clever person. (I remember my old friend and mentor Kalundi exclaiming *mayele ya bazungu!*—White man's cleverness—as we were negotiating a maze of freeway crossings on the outskirts of Brussels.) *Mayele* can denote resourcefulness in general but most often it means something like a trick, the solution to a problem, or a specific device used in such a solution.

98 Kahenga used *mayele* on five occasions. When I was interrogating him about his work in “labor relations” my question implied that *bunganga* belonged to knowledge *bankambo*, his ancestors, and had developed in a village context. How could it work in a modern factory? He rejected the implication categorically. They had knowledge of such matters *banayua sababu tu ni mayele*, best paraphrased as “because it is simply a matter of finding solutions,” for instance, to conflicts between people, and such problems are the same in a village and factory (7). A similar argument emerged when we discussed the role of the *munganga* in assisting rulers and politicians. He must have sensed that I was going to register this as being limited to politics and the public sphere when he offered an example that “hit home”: You see, here in your house you don't get along with the wife (he knew more than I did at the time). How are you going to go about this? You must find a *mayele* so that you get along with the wife (8). Later we talked about *mizimu* and their ability to work their *mayele* beyond regional and ethnic boundaries. A white person's ancestral spirit could follow you to Africa and make you well. The same goes for people from the Kongo ethnic group in the lower Congo who now live in Katanga (19). And when the Whites managed to “lock up” sleeping sickness (see the preceding chapter) they could do this because they had brought “that *mayele* of theirs” along.

These exercises in epistemic archaeology in the sense Foucault (1973) gave to “archeology”—collecting the results of searches and using (commenting on) the findings to reconstruct Kahenga's conception of knowledge—do not make easy reading. Nor do they succeed in presenting Kahenga's thought as a coherent system or “theory,” but they show a metalevel in his thinking. Evidence for this is not as explicit and pronounced as in other kinds of local

discourse where terms like *kuwaza* and *mawazo*, thinking and thoughts/ideas, are deployed in a reflexive manner.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that Kahenga was not capable of such thought but that we concentrated in our conversation on his work as a *munganga*.

### Thought and Knowledge in Action

We can now go on and direct our attention to statements in which Kahenga articulated contents, objects, or uses (rather than forms) of knowledge and their ties to cultural practices and institutions. Our aim will remain not to bracket his ideas as “beliefs” even when, or especially when, some of the things he told me may seem beyond belief. Come to think of it, has being “beyond belief” not always been what qualified certain kinds of ideas or thoughts as (mere) beliefs? Writing ethnography in the genre of commentary takes away the pressure of constantly having to gauge the truth value of Kahenga’s assertions or of evading this by attributing social functions or symbolic significance to actions that do not easily fit our own habits of thought. Interpretive commentary goes a long way (but of course not all the way) in enabling the ethnographer to respond with a “no comment” to demands for “explanation.”

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#### FANSIA: DOING MEDICINE

What exactly was Kahenga’s “work?” Healing, curing, treating, therapy? More than a dozen times he referred to the effect of what he did as *-pona*, get well; only once does he use this verb in the causative form *-ponyesha*, make well, cure, and that in an indirect statement reporting what people say a charm (*kizimba*) can do (54). Much of what the text can tell us about how he called and presumably conceptualized his work is expressed by the verb *-fanya* whose definition in the dictionary is “cause to do, cause to be useful or of avail, hence make. One of the commonest verbs in Swahili, always implying some result, purpose, or object beyond mere act.” I counted eighty-three occurrences of *-fanya* in Kahenga’s speech, many of them relevant to the present topic (for example *-fanya dawa*, make, prepare a medicine), a daunting wealth of information to comment on. Fortunately a derivative form he also used, *-fansia*,<sup>11</sup> literally: “to cause to make for,” allows

us to get a better grip on the semantics of “making” people well. Admittedly, “to cause to make for” (causative and applicative) does not look promising at first—until one realizes that it packs a kind of double-barreled sense of causation. Examples will show that our own commonsense understanding of medical treatment or therapy does not adequately describe the work of a *munganga*.

100 When a client consults Kahenga he or she simply says *unifansie*, literally: you should cause to make for me, without specifying an object or a “what,” and, as he says, *niko nafansia*, I do it (2, similar forms: 6, 8, 11, 16). In other occurrences an object is named: a *dawa* (16, 67) or *nguvu*, an effort, a strength or power to get well (19, 41, 56) or simply *bantu*, people, elliptic for “making something for people” (27, 33, 71). In sum, when Kahenga expresses what he does as *-fansia* he inserts his activity into a *chain of causation* that he not so much sets in motion but directs toward a purpose or a person, a kind of causation that is multiply mediated, especially if we remember what we found out earlier and will comment on again presently about the role of *dawa* and spirits.

#### DAWA, MITI, BIZIMBA: MATERIALITY

As far as can be told from our conversation, Kahenga did all of his work as a *munganga* with the help of *dawa*. The dictionary defines the term as “medicine, medicament, anything supplied by a doctor including ‘charm, talisman &c.’ used by native medicine men.” Often pronounced *lawa*, it is in Katanga Swahili also a general term for chemical products such as additives, solvents, lubricants, dyes, and the like. Taking into account these extensions (of which Kahenga was of course aware), the basic meaning of the term, therefore, may be said to be that of a material substance used as a means to obtain certain results. “Used” presupposes a user, hence an agent; substances become “means” when they are employed by persons. It has become clear from Kahenga’s statements commented on earlier that he thought of his work as involving other agents: God and *mizimu*, neither of whom were ever said to provide or prepare *dawa*. “Materiality,” it seems, is a characteristic of human agency.

Let us now look at what Kahenga told me about his knowledge of substances and their applications. As a *munganga ya miti* he worked with

vegetal matters—roots, bark, leaves, seeds, and flowers—that he collected himself in the “bush” (*pori*), as land that is neither settled nor cultivated is called. To become ingredients of *dawa* these materials are usually processed; they are pounded, ground up (13, 62), mixed (33, 40), and boiled or grilled for external or internal use. *Dawa* are applied as ointments, given as enemas, drunk as potions or infusions (4, 60), or eaten (23). Knowledge of plants entails more than that of their active ingredients; a *munganga* must know where to find and when to collect them. There are some he can take along wherever he goes but others do not travel (33, 36). Nowhere in our conversation did Kahenga give so much as a hint that he thinks of his *dawa* as commodities that can be sold and circulate; they are always part of the services for which he is paid.

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While Kahenga did not think of *dawa* as merchandise, some of his remarks indicate that they could be regarded as a possession. When I asked how people in the village called him, he said they would talk about him as “the one who has the *dawa* of his *mama* [his teacher]” (29). In a prayer to *mama* Nyange he asked for strength and for the *dawa* to work with because “you gave me your *dawa*, I did not steal it” (41). In other words, he claims legitimate ownership—but of what exactly? *Dawa*, as we have seen so far, is a substance and substances come in kinds or portions, hence the plural *madawa*. Remarkable about the instances just cited is that the term is used in the singular and the context suggests a translation as *the*, not *a* medicine. Is this a figure of speech in the reference to skills he learned from his *mama* or was there something, perhaps some kind of material token (other than an actual medicine), that was passed on along a line of transmission of knowledge?

Kahenga called himself *munganga wa miti* and we had first consulted him as a herbalist healer. This encouraged me to call “medicine” the substances he used as well as the trade he plied. It was an inescapable categorization, predestined and reinforced by the image of the “native medicine man” that is deeply engrained in our collective popular imagination and does not simply disappear when we relabel such practices in our scientific discourse as traditional herbal medicine or therapy and call their practitioners healers. At times Kahenga himself made statements that seemed to indicate that he conceptualized *miti* as a clearly defined and separate domain. For instance,



when we reconstructed the closing of the house (40) I began asking him about the holes he had prepared and about the "things" deposited there. Guessing what I had in mind he interrupted me: [You think it was] *bizimba*, charms? Not at all, *ilikuwa tu miti*, it was nothing but vegetal matter (see also 9).

102 Later I came back to the question of ingredients in his *dawa* and he responded again with a categorical "just plant matter," adding, "I take away from all those things we eat the one that is a *dawa* (59). I kept prodding him with one of my "informed" questions: How about hair (which, like cuttings of nails, is a well-known ingredient of charms)? He said nothing about hair at that point (later he denied using it) but conceded that he would take the saliva of a person to be mixed with soil from his house, presumably in a healing ritual.

Another occasion to present himself as an herbalist came when I asked toward the end of our conversation what he does when he gets sick back home (72). I go get my *miti*, was his answer. Don't you go to the *dispensaire*, I pursued (every mission has a place where Western medication can be bought or is handed out). He didn't but his children would sometimes. What for, I continued to ask, he had *dawa*, could it be that sometimes his medicine failed him? Not often, he assured me, but it could happen that he had to resort to Western medication. He reminded me that I had given him some *quinine* (here used as a general term for pills) when he had a bout of diarrhea but no *miti* available.

Early in our conversation we had an exchange that added yet another dimension to the complex meanings of *dawa* (9). We had concluded that the ones he prepared consisted only of *miti* when he came up with an aside I cannot translate exactly though the general sense seems to be clear enough. Its background must have been that in Katanga Swahili it is often said that the clients of a *munganga* look for *bizimba*. Originally this is a Luba term, signifying generically, and usually translated in French as, *fétiche*. Kahenga rejected this and was at pains to make it clear to me that this designation was a misconception: He worked, as he had said in another context, only with *miti*. "Miti are the *buzima* [life, health, literally: wholeness] of man."<sup>12</sup>

We came back to *bizimba* when I asked Kahenga about his apprenticeship, trying to get him to tell me as much detail as possible (33). He described how

he would accompany his grandmother when she went into the bush to collect all sorts of *miti* and would write down the names she told him. I asked whether this meant he had a “book” of *dawa* back home. He confirmed this and then continued with a vivid account of the way they worked together. His teacher, it turned out, was blind and Kahenga described how she would sniff the samples he brought to her, take some time to reflect, and then name them. But why did he, just after we had referred to them as *miti* and *dawa*, suddenly call them *bizimba*? He introduced the term in a parenthesis—“these things they call *bizimba*”—and that suggests that in this instance he may have given a Hembra appellation whose meaning differs from that of the loanword *bizimba* in local Swahili (more on this later).<sup>13</sup> In other words, discrepancies in Kahenga's use of *bizimba* do not necessarily reflect confusion or inconsistency; they may simply be due to the fact that Kahenga “quoted” them from different languages and communicative practices.

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The passage that followed, incidentally, added another facet to the personality of his teacher. Here he told me that his grandmother had difficulties walking. But it turned out that this was not the reason why she refused to travel to this part of the country. It had nothing to do with her infirmities but was due to prohibitions (*bizila*) imposed on her by her tutelary spirit.

*Bizimba* showed up again when we began to discuss the closing ritual (40) and Kahenga insisted that things he had brought along to be buried on our lot were not *bizimba* but *miti*. When he used the word for a last time during the conversation—he told me about answering a missionary's “ethnographic” questions—it was again in its local Swahili meaning, that is, a “charm,” in contrast to *dawa* (54).

*Bizimba* is a loan word from Luba. The dictionary by Van Avermaet and Mbuya has one of those long entries that make this work an ethnographic gold mine (1954: 824). For our purposes it may be summarized as follows: *Kizimba* refers to any human, animal, or vegetal substance that may be used to prepare a *bwanga*, the Luba equivalent of Katanga Swahili *dawa*, medicine or charm. “The *bizimba*<sup>14</sup> constitute the element, the essential ingredient, the ‘magic’ substance (“*produit*”) of *bwanga*; it is the *kilumbu* not the *munganga* who procures them; one is convinced that by using these *manga* one appropriates for oneself the vital force of the being whose *bizimba* one possesses.”<sup>15</sup>

Could it be that there is a “temporal” distinction between *dawa* and *bizimba* in that the former (the “medicine”) faces the past, or a given state, diagnosed as already existing whereas the latter (the “charm”) is directed at something to happen or to be accomplished? They seem to have in common that they are addressed to “problems”—but can this be said of good-luck *bizimba*? Or is the notion of fortune, the common element in misfortune and good fortune, part of some deep philosophy of the fortuitousness of everything that happens?

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Be that as it may, Kahenga's ways with terminology should not be interpreted as operating fixed taxonomies but as context-specific acts of communication. The task of this chapter has been to extract from our document a reasonably complete account of Kahenga's thought as it was communicated in our conversation. A lesson to be learned from the preceding and other lexical excursions is that in Kahenga's mind, as well as for many of his clients, traditional and modern, rural and urban resources of reasoning are co-present; they interpenetrate, or interact with, each other. The question whether or not they merge to form something like a “symbolic system” cannot be answered on the basis of information given by Kahenga. Still, that they inform a coherent practice, or practices, can hardly be doubted.

Of course, one might ask now, if Kahenga's thought is as little coherent as it appears to be at times, how can it guide a coherent practice? Two ways of responding come to mind: First, in the examples that brought us to this question his statements are incoherent only by strictly *logical* criteria (such as those applied in the construction of taxonomies). Very little is incoherent *rhetorically* in what Kahenga revealed about his thought and knowledge. Second, in these attempts to understand Kahenga's work and thought I let myself be guided by insights gained from a long-standing preoccupation with the critique of culturalism (a position that assumes that culture orients action “as a system”). In my view, culture as practice never simply “enacts” or “reflects” a system of beliefs or symbols. It consists of habits of acting, and “acting” entails working things out by matching intellectual resources with practical tasks in ways that are not systematic or necessary but historically contingent. That, I am convinced, applies even to the “methods” and “rituals” in Kahenga's *bunganga*. Routine is an aspect of practice, not its essence.

Already during the “making” of the text I noted down an observation that

bears on the question of coherence. It regards the fragmentary nature of ethnographic information in this account. What we learn from the text is fragmentary with respect to the urban context and even more so to the Hembra background of Kahenga's work. But what does it mean to recognize a piece of information as a fragment? Fragmentary as opposed to what? To the holistic ambitions for which anthropology prided itself in its "modern" phase and that became a target of critique more recently? If fragmentariness is a characteristic of the object of inquiry ("patchwork" is the metaphor en vogue), how can ethnographic information be other than fragmentary? Not only this, one could also point to specific, text-internal, topical fragmentation caused by the many turns and starts in our conversation.

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When one sets aside, for a moment, holistic ambitions as well injunctions against holism and thinks about the concept of fragment itself, it begins to lose its negative aura. Fragments may be seen as the rubble that results from the destruction of a whole; unless one can put the pieces together again fragments remain meaningless. But "reconstruction" (what archaeologists and paleontologists do with pot shards and bones) is not a good metaphor for ethnography if one has given up holistic ideas. Reified or essentialist holism should not be confused with dialectical approaches positing that knowledge is produced and should be presented in a field of tension between particulars and a totality.

#### *MIZIMU: "SPIRITUALITY"*

After confronting challenges posed by the concepts of *dawa* and *bizimba* we can now resume our commentary on the text and turn to another key concept in Kahenga's thought: *mizimu*, spirits. In the conversation this notion came up more than once, first when I asked whether *mizimu* could cause illness (18). Kahenga did not give a general answer to this general question. Repeating the term in the singular and as a question (*muzimu?*) he offered an example. The spirit of your (deceased) father may be angry and send you an illness because you neglected to make required offerings to him. You should then consult a diviner about the cause of your affliction and he may tell you that the trouble was caused by a certain spirit, in this case your father's. You would then make the offering ("cook" a goat or chicken) and be cured. This example was followed by a passage about the "mobility" of

ancestor spirits across ethnic boundaries (commented on earlier). When Kahenga later recited the prayer he had said during the closing ritual it turned out that it was addressed to an ancestor of his, also referred to a *muzimu wetu*, our spirit (41).

106 *Mizimu* were again mentioned when we continued with the list of different kinds of disease and their causation (20). Did people think that Whites cause illness (21)? I had asked this with some vague knowledge of connections between colonization and the spread of diseases. As we saw in the preceding chapter, Kahenga did not want to speculate about this in general and responded with a "case," the story of how the Whites in his country dealt with sleeping sickness (see above), in which a *muzimu* of a different kind plays a role. This spirit lives in, or on, the mountain and he or she is approached for help through *bamizimu*, people who are spirit-attendants (see also an oblique reference to sorcerers who work with *mizimu* in paragraph 31). Given the association with a feature of landscape and the allusion to a cult, such a *muzimu* would probably be classified as a nature-spirit. However, to Kahenga, it appears, this kind of spirit is of interest as a historical rather than "natural" agent.

It was when we talked about Kahenga's biography and apprenticeship that we came to the first of two sequences I titled "Spirits and spirit associations" (27–28, 34–35) in the outline of our text. They look like intrusions into topics we were discussing and they could be regarded as interludes, mere asides, until one realizes that they are highlights in Kahenga's thinking. In the first passage he revealed that his teacher was not only a *munganga* but a medium, "possessed" by a *muzimu*, a tutelary spirit (to use an ethnographic label). He first called it *bubira* and then, correcting himself, *bugembe* (27). It was to *bugembe* that she owed her (knowledge of) *dawa*. Upon further questioning it turned out that *bugembe* was not her personal spirit and that his teacher was a member of one of several spirit associations practicing possession and performing dances. Others he named were *butembo*, *bulungu*, *bumbudi*, *nyambe*, all of them "large groups" (28).

We came back to *mizimu* when we discussed the prayers Kahenga offered during the closing of the house (41). They were in Hembra and I could not understand them but I thought I recognized invocations of ancestors by

their names. I mentioned this and Kahenga confirmed my hunch and gave a list of names, first those of his deceased father, Mukenge Mbuyi, and of his *mama* Nyange. Then he named Kayembe, “our chief,” and Yagamino “our big spirit.” I take the latter to refer to yet another category of *mizimu*, not his personal ancestors but “ours,” that is, the collective spirits of his country. We talked at some length about Yagamino, whom Kahenga described first as a spirit who has his abode in a prominent rock (much like the spirit-on-the-mountain in the story about the Whites and sleeping sickness) and then, in political terms, as “the chief of all our spirits back home” (42). Thinking that we had ascended in the hierarchy of spirits to a supreme being I asked whether this Yagomino was what is called a *vidye* in Luba. That did not get us very far; Kahenga knew the term gave but gave me the impression that it was not used in Hemba. We had to stop the recording briefly at this point and when we got back to it—he had had a moment to ponder my question—we only caught part of his next statement, ending with “our *vidye*.” I wanted to make sure that this “chief of spirits” was not *Mungu*, God. Certainly not, was his reply, *Mungu* was *Mungu*. Yet, he then cited a short prayer to God in Hemba in which he did use *vidye* in what sounded like a translation or paraphrase of *Mungu*. It is possible, of course, that he just wanted to please me since I had kept asking him about *vidye* (not an uncommon thing to happen to ethnographers).

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When we returned to our exchange after another short pause (I was checking the cassette recorder) Kahenga clarified the issue: Yagamino was a “regional” spirit. Every *inchi*, country or region, in Hemba land had one and he named two others, Muhona and Mulamba. Yagomino’s and Kayembe’s territory (I had used *territoire* in my question) was called Nkuvu (43).

Finally, tucked away in another discussion of the name of God and easy to overlook, Kahenga made a statement containing just the barest hint to yet another kind of spirit: You pray to a *muzimu*, you address the prayer to a *muntu*, short for human ancestor, or to a *nyama*, an animal (50). I let this allusion to possible totemic ideas go without further questioning because I still had the Hemba name for God on my mind, which turned out to be *vilinyambi*.<sup>16</sup> In the theological discussion that followed (51) he made sure I understood that making offerings and praying to *mizimu* did not exclude

*Mungu* (or relegate God to a remote place as *deus otiosus*, the technical term used by historians of religion). After all, who had created the *mizimu*? The power of *mizimu* was "God's power."<sup>17</sup>

108 Given my aim to write ethnography in the genre of commentary, the presentation of materiality and "spirituality" in Kahenga's thought turned out embarrassingly "monographic." We encountered this problem earlier and I can only reiterate that the choice I made is not a (re)lapse but the inevitable outcome of working within a frame of tensions between modes of representation. However, we should be able to do better than that. Another look at both themes, *dawa/bizimba* and *mizimu*, can bring our commentary back "on track" by reminding us to approach the text as the document of a communicative event, not (only) as a depository of information. This means that we should pay attention not only to *what* Kahenga imparts but also to *how* he chose to present himself. More than once he insisted that, far from simply enacting what he had learned about *bunganga* from his teacher and Hemba "tradition," he had made decisions and taken positions when he formed his professional identity. Decisions and positions are historically mediated (or context-specific) acts.

We spent some time discussing his choice to define himself as a *munganga ya miti*, an herbal specialist. Admittedly, the result was ambiguous, reflecting the complex meanings of each of the three concepts, *dawa*, *miti*, *bizimba*, as well as the equally complex semantic relations between them. Eventually it emerged that Kahenga had taken his distance from employing nonherbal substances or objects and especially from getting drawn into affairs of *buloz*, sorcery. Though he provided protection he would, other than his teacher, not get involved in finding out agents of *buloz* (31).

#### KIVULI: MATERIAL SPIRITUALITY

When I came to the end of the preceding section I discovered yet another way in which the monograph may encroach on commentary: it may blot out entire passages of the text. This happened when I almost forgot to comment on one of the most intriguing exchanges we had during our conversation. I did report earlier on a statement of Kahenga's regarding the use of substances other than *miti*, such as human hair, but then neglected to address what he told me in the remainder of that paragraph (59) because it

did not fit the schema of opposing “materiality” to “spirituality” I followed in the two preceding sections.

Kahenga had told me that he did not “cut hair” to be used as an ingredient of *dawa* but that he would “carry off” a person’s *kivuri*. I was not familiar with the word and it took a demonstration (Kahenga got up from the table and took a few steps) before I caught its meaning: *kivuri* is your shadow that appears to sit still until it follows you when you move. In asides to myself I translated this to a Swahili word I did know, (*n*)*giza*, and then into French as *ombre*, shadow or shade. Kahenga let this go without comment and gave as another example the shadow cast by a tree. “That is what you carry away, its shadow.” Of course, my next question had to be: How does one do this? His answer began with “It is not just to carry,” which could mean “not literally carry,” but then he elaborated: What one can take away, literally, is soil from the ground on which a shadow has fallen.<sup>18</sup> The locative phrase *mu bulongo*, on or in the soil, not only locates the shadow, it also puts it “inside” a substance that can be picked up. When I repeated the phrase (trying to understand it), Kahenga offered an explanation that took me by surprise. Literally translated, he said: “A person must die: he/she changes into dust.” “And the shadow . . .” I began to ask, whereupon he completed my question or, rather, made it a statement, saying “it (the dust) makes it stay on.”

Kahenga offered yet another “example” that must have left me baffled then and continues to perplex me now. The elliptic story he told, here further condensed, had me as a “dead man walking,” a *muzungu*, killed by sorcerers in a car accident, \*something they accomplished by carrying away, not just the visible person but my *vuli*. He had given the key to understanding this when he stated: “*uzima wa muntu ni kivuri*, the life of a person is (his/her) shadow.” Fifty paragraphs earlier he had told me: “*miti njo buzima ya muntu*,” the life of a person is *miti*, here best (but not adequately) translated as “plants” (9). What is one to make of the equivalence of shadow and plant in these statements? Both are predicated on (*b*)*uzima*, which would not pose a logical problem if we interpret shadow and plant as representations, as signifiers, as symbols, or as figures of speech. They could be metaphors of *uzima*, life (a plant is “alive”; the “tree of life” comes to mind), or metonyms (a living person, his or her shadow, the ground on which the shadow falls, and soil that can be collected from that ground would be links



in a chain of connections). Given the specific context in which Kahenga made his statements—practices of healing and “magic” and the materiality of both—the latter, metonymy, would seem more likely. But would this mean that healing and magic are but figures of speech? Is to bespeak persons and problems all a *munganga* does?<sup>19</sup>

110 This would hardly be satisfying as a comment on the specific statements we are trying to understand. They were not pronounced (or recited) as examples of magical formulae but as attempts on Kahenga's part to help me understand why or how he thought healing works. He formulated premises of his reasoning. When that is recognized, it turns out that, in the phrase *uzima wa muntu ni kivuli/miti*, it is not the predicates, *kivuli* and *miti*, shadow and plant, that challenge understanding but the seemingly familiar subject, (*b*)*uzima*, life, health. As far as I can see, nothing was said indicating that (*b*)*uzima wa muntu*, the health/wholeness of a human being, could be “contained,” like a material substance, in a plant or a person's shadow. On the other hand, *miti* and *kivuli* (much as *dawa* and *bizimba*) are not mere symbols, perhaps metaphors (plants for vitality, shadow for wholeness). It is almost as if thinking as practiced in *bunganga* took the inverse direction of reasoning that ascends from sensual, material experience to the realm of ideas. *Bunganga* works by objectifying, materializing thought; to prepare *dawa* is to give to afflictions, conditions, or events, conceptualized as threatening wholeness, a material presence.

## Endings and Ends

**6** One would think that to end a commentary should be easy; you just stop when you feel you have exhausted the text—or yourself.<sup>1</sup> A general conclusion is not needed because there was no general argument and for a resounding ending we lack a single, absorbing story. What is it, then, that makes such an easy way out all but inconceivable? It must be that, contrary to what I just glibly stated, this particular commentary turned out to have been full of arguments and stories that cry out, if not for conclusions and endings (which most of them had when they were made or told), then for assessing the claims of this project. The most ambitious and encompassing among them was that commentary is a viable genre of ethnography based on virtual text archives. “Viable” means

that this particular form is suitable for producing and communicating ethnographic knowledge such that findings can be evaluated as contributions to anthropology. Whether or not our experiment has been successful will be for critical readers to decide. Meanwhile I would like to offer some points for consideration.

### Once Again: Presence and Representation

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Long before I began to work on this project I had conceived it, or one like it, as an “experiment”—without giving much thought to the meaning of the term. Undoubtedly “experimentation with genres,” one of the proclaimed outcomes of anthropology’s literary turn, was on my mind. Yet it was not a playful and tentative choice of form, a wish to try something different, that made me write the book. A desire for experimentation alone would not have carried me through the travails of commentary. The undertaking was triggered and its momentum sustained by the document of an event that might have been forgotten or stayed buried among stacks of tapes and papers had it not taken on a new kind of presence in a virtual archive on the Internet. Even now, with memories that had worn off in the course of many years refreshed, I cannot easily state what made me select the conversation with Kahenga. For a long time our exchange had little interest or urgency for me as “ethnographic material” because it did not seem to be directly relevant to research topics I was working on. Yet as soon as I took the first step and began to listen to the recording I was captivated by the immediacy and nearness of our exchange. This experience of presence created by a document from the past rather than by current concerns and theoretical preoccupations was the encouragement I needed to put to a test thoughts I had formulated in a programmatic essay on the ethnographic potential of virtual archives (Fabian 2002b; reprinted in 2007: chap. 9)

There is something intensely personal about experiencing presence through a document of past events. Listening to voices and sounds fills one with the pleasure of recognition; it feels good to be able to understand the language, and one cannot wait to exercise old skills of transcribing and translating. It does not take long, however, before delight becomes mixed with pain, enthusiasm with strain, and play turns into work,

perhaps not necessarily but whenever we want to re-present what we experienced.

Personal and private as the first impetus may be, re-presentation that counts as ethnography is a public undertaking; it must, in its *form*, be recognizable and it must offer *content* and discuss questions that are on the agenda of the discipline. Form—commentary as a genre—has been at the center of attention in almost every part of this book. Its demands and possibilities, as well as its limits, were discussed and demonstrated. With regard to content—matters talked about, topics discussed, domains of knowledge contributed to—my commentary stayed as close to the text as was feasible and did little to relate information and insights systematically to past ethnographic research and current theoretical questions.

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Long before I came to this final chapter, I wrote a note to myself thinking it could help to explain (if not excuse) a conspicuous absence of references to “the literature” in this commentary:

When I wrote drafts of the preceding chapters I consulted dictionaries (always also sources of ethnographic information) and let myself be guided (as I had done when I talked with Kahenga) by what I remembered from my readings and many conversations on Luba culture. Rare visits to the excellent library at Stanford University left me staring at shelves full of books on magic, and witchcraft. Leafing through some of the anthropological classics, among them ethnographies based on research in regions outside of Katanga and the Congo but closely related culturally and linguistically, gave me, I must admit, attacks of anxiety that reminded me of my student days. What could this commentary possibly add to existing knowledge of these practices and their attendant conceptual and linguistic apparatus? But then, I consoled myself, such had never been its purpose. What *was* the purpose? To re-present the document of an event in the past so as to make it possible to confront it in the present. Ethnographic knowledge of magic and witchcraft may have been cumulative to the point of diminishing returns from further research; our understanding, not only of the practices we witnessed but also of the documents we made of them, is not cumulative. Like contexts of inquiry, contexts of understanding and interpretation change and require (or justify) new efforts every time we confront our archives.

I see no reason to retract this statement now but it would be a disservice to this project to maintain the stance I took without compromise. Therefore, as much as it can be done without compromising the experiment by burdening the commentary on a conversation with commentary on the commentary (or reducing the commentary to a monographic presentation, after all) I will, in the remainder of this final chapter, attempt to show the significance of our findings about Kahenga's world, work, and thought before I end with reflections on the idea of ethnography as "confrontation."

### **Kahenga and the Contemporaneity of Luba Tradition**

In the chapter on Kahenga's work we asked whether he was idiosyncratic as a *munganga*. Going on text-internal evidence alone we concluded that such a characterization made little sense. True, there was much in his life history, training, and current work that expressed an emphasis he put on personal choices and cultural preferences. But—a point made before and worth repeating now—that was precisely what made him a successful, modern, and certainly nonmarginal practitioner of his trade in a part of contemporary Africa.

Among the threads that kept the questions and topics of our conversation together were Kahenga's conscious identification with his background in Hemba tradition and, as I noted more than once, the "foreknowledge" of Luba ethnography I brought to our encounter. To start with the latter, I should now state why and how familiarity with Luba culture came to be part of my intellectual biography. The story began half a century ago when I first read Placide Tempels's *Bantu Philosophy*, a treatise in which this Belgian friar summarized his understanding of the deep ("ontological") principles guiding the life and thought of the people he had come to convert to Christianity, the Luba-Shankadi of Katanga, southwestern neighbors of the Hemba.<sup>2</sup> By the time his book reached an international public in the 1950s Tempels had turned from missionary ethnographer to charismatic prophet and leader of the Jamaa, a Catholic movement that became the subject research for my dissertation (Fabian 1971). Just before I left for the Congo in 1966 I had a memorable meeting with Tempels in Belgium and later became acquainted with several of his confreres who were similarly steeped in Luba

language and culture, which, they insisted, was the key to understanding Tempels's message and the success it had beyond Luba country in the multiethnic settlements of miners and railway workers where the Jamaa emerged. They also made me aware of the ethnographic literature that had accumulated since the beginning of Belgian colonization.

During fieldwork I realized that the Luba past was present in the movement I studied and, after returning to my university, I spent much time and effort reading the sources. Most of what I learned I filed away as "background" material to be used as examples of the survival of traditional African culture in the contemporary scene of religious enthusiasm. This was a misunderstanding it took many years to overcome, quite likely because these writings seemed antiquated compared to, say, Victor Turner's magisterial works based on his research among the Ndembu of Northern Zambia, a subgroup of the Lunda whose close kinship with the Luba was somehow obscured by political borders between (former) British and Belgian colonies and probably even more so by linguistic barriers between English and French/Flemish ethnographic scholarship.

Work on this commentary made me remember all this. I went back to one of the classics almost immediately when I started to transcribe the recording (see the many notes citing Van Avermaet and Mbuya's *Dictionnaire Kiluba-Français*). Later I reread two important works, one a two-volume summary of Luba ethnography published early in the colonial period (Collé's *Les Baluba*, 1913), the other an equally comprehensive monograph, *De Luba-mens* by Theuws, published soon after Independence in 1962.<sup>3</sup> To consult once again other authors I remembered as authorities cited by the authorities just mentioned (Burton, De Clercq, Van Caeneghem and others, more or less the bibliographic list in Theuws 1962) I would have needed library resources I do not have in this final phase of writing. At any rate, for present purposes such an effort would not be justified.<sup>4</sup>

What are these present purposes? They concern answers to questions about the representativity (1) of Kahenga as a *munganga*, (2) of his discourse and practices as Luba, and (3) of his work as part of modern, contemporary culture in the region where we met. I am prepared to answer the first and second questions indirectly by affirming that, checked against written sources, what Kahenga did and later explained in our conversation,

can be traced generally, and often quite specifically, to information given in these classical ethnographies. At times it was tempting to demonstrate this in the commentary by notes filled with quotations and references. With the exception already mentioned (the Luba dictionary) I decided not to follow this convention of displaying scholarship mainly because it would have amounted to yet another relapse into the monograph, the genre for which commentary should be an alternative. In other words, I am asking the reader to accept an all-inclusive claim for representativity (risking being proven wrong).

116 One could point out that the second question—how “Luba” was Kahenga’s work?—takes a shortcut because it skips an issue that should be addressed first. Is it really justified to subsume his Hemba identity under Luba? The claim I just made implies the short answer (yes, it is justified). The long answer would be an involved and complicated account of confusion between linguistic and sociopolitical categories that brought about the colonial invention of Luba, first as one, later as two major and numerous “related” ethnic groups. An important (and politically fateful) distinction between Luba-Kasai (speaking tshi-Luba) and Luba-Katanga (speaking ki-Luba) was based on linguistic criteria defined at a level above local variation that suited the missions and colonial administration. For at least a century the people thus labeled have, on the one hand, accepted (and developed) these colonial categorizations (at times with tragic consequences not unlike the genocidal Hutu-Tutsi distinction in Rwanda) and, on the other, often ignored them on the local level and in interpersonal relations, especially in urban contexts, only to revert to them in situations of political and economic strife.

The third question—how representative was Kahenga’s work as part of modern, contemporary culture in the region where we met?—could also have been answered by detailed annotations culled from studies based on field research in Zaire/Congo conducted in the seventies during the same decade when I met with Kahenga. I should mention two works on medical anthropology, *The Quest for Therapy in Lower Zaire* (1978) by John Janzen and *Death in Abeyance: Illness and Therapy among the Batabwa of Central Africa* (2000) by Christopher O. Davis.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, aside from noting the scant use of the sources of ethnographic

information just mentioned, readers may wonder why I did not discuss older classics and contemporary writings on the anthropology of magic and witchcraft such as Marwick 1970 or Tambiah 1990.<sup>6</sup> The subject is a timely one, to say the least, especially also in African studies (Moore and Sanders 2001, Pels and Meyer 2003), but our task has been to comment on a text, not to mine it for evidence or arguments in current theoretical debates.

### Commentary and Confrontation

While timeliness has not been my concern in this late ethnography, reflections on time—on temporal aspects of research and writing—got the project started and moved it through every phase of its realization. To recapitulate these steps will be a convenient way to pass our work in review. Before I get to this, however, I should say more about ethnography as “confrontation,” an idea that has occupied me ever since my first object of research, the Jamaa movement, made me think critically about a key concept of its teachings: encounter.<sup>7</sup> My first African interlocutors left me little choice but to assume a stance that was, at about the same time, emerging as “ethnography of communication.” As a theoretical (re-)conception of practices of research it offered anthropology an alternative to naive positivism, until then the dominant epistemological position that had equated empirical scientific inquiry with observation and data collection (a view obfuscated rather than clarified by “participant observation,” a seemingly irrepressible ghost of a concept that keeps haunting pronouncements about ethnographic method).

This reorientation had political reasons and implications, responding, as it did, to changed postcolonial conditions of research, and it prepared the ground for, among others, dialogical and feminist approaches and a host of other critical revisions of anthropological theory and discourse. About some of them I have critical reservations, others I accepted or may have helped to bring about; more thinking needs to be done, especially about interactive, communicative, and interpretative conceptions of ethnography that appear firmly established. One critical notion that has been guiding my own work, the present project included, is the idea of *confrontation*. What I have in mind is not only an intellectual mode or attitude that makes one



inclined to be polemical in reasoning and arguing but an agonistic, dialectical view also of phases of ethnography that have been thought of as being merely preparatory to theoretical debates.<sup>8</sup>

118 Fieldwork is not only the subject of controversies once it is done; it should be recognized as being confrontational *while* it is done and the same goes for each of the steps we take when we document, interpret, and present ethnographic knowledge. Descriptively or programmatically, “confrontation” occurred in every chapter of this commentary. In the introduction I announced that the conversation with Kahenga and the text will be confronted; in chapter 1 I discussed reasons why; in chapter 2 transcript and translation of our text were said to confront each other; chapter 3 prepared the ground for confronting Kahenga’s thought, and examples were commented on in chapter 4; and in chapter 5 confrontation was introduced as an alternative to relativist bracketing as “beliefs” of other ways of thinking and other kinds of knowledge.

In some academic cultures being confrontational does not count as a social virtue; it is considered bad style if not actually unethical. Cultural preferences, however, should not be allowed to determine epistemological positions we need to take when we reflect on the nature of ethnographic knowledge based on intersubjective exchanges, on meeting those whom we study “at eye level.” Furthermore, and this is the reason for invoking epistemology, what counts is not only factual encounters we have in our work (those we have come to recognize as dialogical) but our understanding of their “conditions of possibility.” Pointing to confrontation as such a condition, however, will serve its purpose only when its static connotation, that of a face-off, as it were, is not allowed to dominate. We can avoid this if we think of confrontation as action and event.

Before I summarize how this view informed the current project I would like to turn one more time to the text, as a relief from these abstract reflections and as a last fling at commentary. It occurred to me to search the conversation with Kahenga for linguistic evidence of a confrontational mode (or mood) by looking at the incidence of negation in this generally relaxed, amiable, and seemingly nonconfrontational exchange. To simplify matters I decided to concentrate on (*h*)*apana*, no.<sup>9</sup> The first and most remarkable finding was that *hapana* occurred most often and most emphat-

ically when Kahenga took his turn in the conversation (ninety times as opposed to about a dozen occurrences when I spoke). Granted, higher frequency may in part reflect that Kahenga's speech occupies more space in this text than mine but a glance at just a few examples will show what I mean by emphatical negation: He disagreed when I suggested his ancestors could not have known about labor problems (7). He denied use of *bizimba*, magic charms, and insisted that he only works with *miti*, plant material (9, 40). He contradicted my suggestion that Whites may have brought illness to the country (21). Negation as resistance was expressed when he spoke of his "mother's" opposition to the plans the missionaries had for his education (25). He told me that he refused to work with a tutelary spirit and spirit associations (27, 28, 34) and denied practicing sorcery (31). He rejected my suggestions that his knowledge was purely oral (33) and that the missionaries might be against his work (54, 56).

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In what way is this significant? First, these and many other statements suggest a distinction to be made between the *mood* of a conversation (I called ours amiable) and its *mode*, which attention to negation reveals as confrontational. Second, it should be remembered that negation and confrontation are not the same. Negation may appear to be one-sided (as it does in this case) but it takes two to confront each other and that condition was fulfilled by the stance I took in my contributions to the exchange. Grammatically, most of them may have been questions, quite a few were statements, yet all of them were ways of confronting my interlocutor. Perhaps this is what makes me think of commentary as a continuation of our conversation.

### Co-presence and Contemporaneity

A key issue in all this is presence; there is no confrontation without presence. Recalling how this idea informed the writing of commentary from start to finish should allow me, if not to formulate a definitive conclusion (that was already ruled out) then to extricate myself from the infinite possibilities of this experiment.

It all began with the thesis that a technological development, the virtual archives of texts that can be made available on the Internet, changes condi-

tions of writing because it gives a new kind of presence to documents on which we can base our ethnographies. The amenities of word processing and document storage, however, only make us keenly aware that the presence of a text becomes more, not less, problematic (or demanding) when it is easily retrievable.<sup>10</sup> Ethnographers who have conducted research, recorded speech, labored over representing recorded sound graphically and translating their transcripts into another language remember too much to think of the documents they produced as being simply there to be deposited (and disappear) in archives. All that work would have been wasted if it had not served the purpose of making these texts yield “ethnography.” Hence the question that must be asked: *What* is it a document makes present?

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Our way of answering that question was to retrace the genesis of our document to *something that happened*: a conversation, a speech event that was occasioned by another event, the performance of a ritual. With that the problem was no longer one of presence vs. absence but of presence vs. past, and from then on we tried to show how remembering and re-cognition are involved at all stages, including those (chapters 1 and 2) that may seem merely preparatory but are in fact at the core of commentary as a genre of ethnography.

Both events, ritual and conversation, required copresence of the participants. This is not the truism it appears to be when we recall the idea of coevalness. Other than factual synchronicity, which may be predicated on actions or events occurring in physical time, coevalness means sharing of time as a condition of intersubjective relations without which communication and joint performances could not occur. In intercultural even more than in ordinary situations where participants already share knowledge and habits we are made aware that sharing of time does not “come natural” and is always a precarious undertaking, depending on linguistic and other cultural skills. Without them copresence in action, or communication as performance, could not happen—not to forget the element of serendipity, sheer luck, that most ethnographers have learned to appreciate in their work. Had I not taken up Kahenga on his casual offer to “close” our house, had he not been willing to talk about the ritual after it was performed, and had I not thought of recording our conversation—a series of “accidents”—we would have had nothing to comment on.

Apart from presenting, making present, what the text contains about Kahenga's work, world, and thought, the chapters that followed addressed above all issues of copresence. We commented on the coexistence of elements that made up the context of practicing *bunganga*: Kahenga's clientele was rural, urban, and multiethnic; the problems for which he was consulted included illness, fertility, marital and labor relations, security, and power politics, which he tackled with a gamut of "therapies" running from herbal medicine to magic, ritual, and practices that (despite his denial) came at least close to sorcery. We repeatedly denounced these terms and the distinctions they posit as imposed and inappropriate but do not seem to be able to avoid them entirely. In my view, this is yet another way in which the essentially confrontational nature of ethnography comes to the fore. Playing games of classification is one thing, letting what we classify disturb our peace of mind is another. A disturbed mind is a mind alive. Likewise, the purpose of commenting on text is to show that it is alive. In anthropology, to extract explanations from texts or use them for analytical exercises, the business of scientific inquiry, should not depend on treating them as corpses.

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### Ends of Commentaries and Archives

Let me close chapter and book with attempts to answer two simple questions: Who needs commentaries on texts deposited in archives? Who needs virtual text archives? It may be surprising that I ask them in that order—after all, logically, texts come first, commentaries "are extra," to paraphrase a statement about symbols attributed to Woody Allen. But then, foremost on my mind has been a *practical* issue: writing ethnography in the form of commentary. An obvious reply to the first question could be that readers need help if they are to understand the form and content, the social and political aspects, and the historical significance of the text the ethnographer puts before them. However, this would miss the specific purpose of our study, which was to respond to changed conditions for representing knowledge due to the virtual presence of texts on the Internet. Above all, such a commonsense answer remains vague as long as it is not clear who those readers who need help are. One thing is certain, the potential readership of

texts in virtual archives is not the same as the one that conventional ethnographic publications address and reach. The ethnographer who has relinquished control of his “data” by conveying them to an “open source” cannot be sure what—in the sense of topics treated, problems posed, solutions offered—readers, who may have found a text just by surfing the Internet, were looking for, much less what kind of help they need (or want). It is safe to assume that they are more interested in the content of virtual documents than in questions of form and representation. Conversely, the audience the ethnographic commentator *can* anticipate, most of them colleagues and students from his or related disciplines, may read a commentary such as this one without consulting the text on the Internet. All this can put a damper on the enthusiasm for the “new kind of presence” of ethnographic texts that made me conduct this experiment.

Whether or not ethnography as commentary is worth the effort will depend on our answer to the second question: Who needs virtual archives? What such archives are good for, how they enable the ethnographer to make research documents widely available, as single texts or as part of a corpus, and how they provide evidence the reader can check—all this should be clear by now. One could also point out that setting up virtual archives can be a step toward meeting not only demands and expectations to “return” our research results to the people we study but to initiate discussion of our work as well as additions to the corpus. That documents created by blogs and chat groups devoted to themes anthropology is interested in deserve our attention is by now widely recognized; Internet-based ethnography has become accepted as a legitimate alternative for, or complement of, traditional fieldwork and the concomitant literature on research methods is bound to grow. At the same time it becomes more urgent to engage in reflections on epistemology and theory. I should like to conclude by formulating a thesis for debate: What “writing from the virtual archive” could entail for anthropology may become clarified if we consider the difference between a database and an archive.

Databases, conceived and established long before the advent of the computer and the Internet, belong to the conceptual arsenal of a positivist and essentially ahistorical (some would call it “modernist”) view of anthropology as a science that, to put it mildly, is no longer generally accepted. Any

depository of information may of course be called a database—metaphorically. Strictly speaking, the term should be reserved for stores containing discreet, quantifiable bits that are amenable, at least ideally, to statistical operations requiring random sampling. There is no need further to elaborate on these characteristics to make the point of my thesis: A virtual archive of the kind envisaged here is never a neutral storage device. Given the communicative practices involved in producing ethnographic texts, it is inevitably a partial, personal, and, again ideally, communal creation. An archive's historical contingency is its strength if its purpose is to mediate between (recorded or otherwise documented) *events*, the presentation of *evidence*, and our aims and claims to produce anthropological *knowledge*.



## Notes

### 1: An Event

- 1 This is a possible translation I chose for the phrase in the text on the website. He said *niko napita nabo*, literally: “I (regularly) pass, go along with, them,” or “I keep their company.”

### 2: A Text

- 1 How this position emerged and how it relates to developments in anthropology (and related disciplines) is discussed in an essay on ethnographic objectivity (Fabian 1991a, reprinted in Megill 1994:81–108 and Fabian 2001: chap. 1).
- 2 The text shows not a single instance of code switching as well as an extraordinary absence of French grammatical words and fillers that infiltrate the language of most Swahili speakers in this region. As far as I can see, Kahenga made copious use only of one such filler, French *bon* (fine, all right), though others occur (for instance, *chose*, 17). He was not influenced by my constantly using *mais* (but). Most of the French loans



he did use were numerals for dates and grade levels in school, terms like *certificat*, *examen*, and *pères* for missionaries. On the “poetics of lexical borrowing” in Shaba Swahili, see Fabian 1982 and de Rooj 1996 on stylistic functions of code switching.

- 3 Rereading this I feel I should add a qualifying note. It must have occurred to me at the time that this exchange contributed to my project “Language and Labor” (see Introduction) as did the many conversations I had with painters and actors. We always touched on work and conceptions of work. Later on I will comment on work and labor relations among the problems treated by Kahenga. Still, the text shows that I did not follow a schedule of topics and questions.
- 4 See, for example, Cook (1990) and Ashmore, MacMillan, and Brown (2004).
- 5 When I searched the Internet for “ethnography of listening,” most of the roughly seventy results were related to Bendix’s article, but see the online essay Hill n.d. with further references. A search for “ethnography of hearing” did not bring up a single entry (!) in spite of the obvious connection between “listening and hearing,” which resulted in more than 25,000 hits.
- 6 As far as recording goes, this has by now been recognized and the same goes for taking field notes. Excessive claims have been made for translation as the essence of ethnography. Transcribing still seems to rank lowest in critical examinations of ethnographic knowledge production.
- 7 To give just one example, Kahenga often pronounces the negative prefix *ha-* without initial {h} (but initial {h} may—because of hypercorrection?—also be omitted in other cases, such as in the demonstratives (*h*)*ii*, (*h*)*uyu*). Since this is not consistent I opted for using the standard form *ha*. This also goes for aspiration and palatalization of {s}, {z}, and {j}.
- 8 This view of transcription contradicts claims structural linguists made when they took pride in being able to decode, without recourse to semantics, the phonology and morphology of a language from a small sample of text.
- 9 On the document, see Fabian 1990a; on reading such texts, 1993. The original of the *Vocabulary* in facsimile as well as the oralized version and the English translation can also be found online in Archives of Popular Swahili.
- 10 Recognition as re-cognition has been a theme I explored in several essays which may be consulted as background to these remarks (for instance, Fabian 1999, reprinted in 2001: chap. 9). The thoughts on transcribing and remembering that follow were first formulated in a paper, “Ethnography and Memory” (Fabian 2007: chap. 10).
- 11 Strictly speaking: not marked morphologically. In *baba*, father, vs. *mama*, mother, gender is of course marked semantically, but this is not the case with many other kinship terms, such as *mukubwa*, elder sibling, or *nkambo*, grandparent or ancestor.

- 12 In standard Swahili the present marker is *-a-*; *-na-* is usually called “progressive,” the tense of continued action. In Shaba/Katanga Swahili the two seem to have merged.
- 13 Though much progress toward such an aim was made by the work of a Congolese linguist who grew up in the region; see Kapanga 1991.
- 14 For a social history of Shaba Swahili up to the mid-1980s, see Fabian 1991b.
- 15 I found little evidence in this exchange of two other kinds of avoidance or omission that may result in elliptic speech: politically sensitive or dangerous subjects (see the remarks on “vociferous silence” in the conversation with Tshibumba, Fabian 1996:306–9) and the effects of forgetting (see the conversation with Baba Ngoie, Fabian 2003). Both texts can be consulted online in Archives of Popular Swahili.
- 16 I make a similar argument with respect to the literature on Luba culture and medical anthropology in the concluding chapter.

### 3: Kahenga’s Work

- 1 This term and concept is crucial in Kahenga’s work and will be illustrated by examples that follow; for a more comprehensive account see chapter 5, “Kahenga’s Thought.”
- 2 According to Sacleux (1939:497), the term *malari*, alternate *maladi*, now generic for illness, originally referred to *maladie du sommeil*, sleeping sickness.
- 3 Kahenga must have thought of his practice at home in his village. The question never came up, but it is unlikely that his wife accompanied him on his travels. On the road he most likely was assisted by a female relative.
- 4 The Swahili dictionary confirms this (under *dudu*, dim. *kidudu*): “Also used for various diseases caused by, or attributed by the natives to, parasites and other insects on the body.” Unless another source is cited, the “Swahili dictionary” refers to my edition of Johnson’s classic (1963, orig. 1939).
- 5 He said *naweza kufanya*, lit. I can do, which is elliptic for “I can treat diseases with remedies I prepare.”
- 6 There is an unexplained discrepancy between “Mukonkwa,” taken from the inscription on the tape recording, and “Mukonkole,” transcribed from the tape.
- 7 A person may have secret names, may take or drop additional names or altogether change public names, and names one is called by may differ from those that show up on documents.
- 8 In my translation I have them down as belonging to the order of the White Fathers, officially *Missionnaires d’Afrique*, usually *Pères Blancs* for short (“White Fathers” in English). I checked this because *pères blancs* could also mean “white missionaries” but it proved correct for the time specified.

- 9 Achille Mutombo, a friend (and contributor to Archives of Popular Swahili), confirms that *mufumu* is a current term in Katanga Swahili. However, its principal meaning is “diviner.” Only in contexts where *mufumu* is opposed to *munganga* can *mufumu* mean sorcerer, i.e. a practitioner whose power is based on means other than herbal medicine.
- 10 The term “idiosyncratic” was used by Janzen to designate *banganga* who did not fit distinctions of specialists recognized in what he calls the “traditional system” (1978: 23, 24, 45–46).

#### 4: Kahenga’s World

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- 1 Katanga Swahili *mukini*, or *mugini*, is a locative form derived from East Coast Swahili *mji* (analogous to *mutoni*, course of water, from *mtu*). *Mji*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means “village, hamlet, town, city, i.e. a collection of human dwellings irrespective of number,” and this apparent lack of precision may well be an accurate terminological reflection of coastal Swahili culture and society.
- 2 The latter depends on whether there is matrilinear or patrilinear reckoning of the relationship, something that kinship terms in Katanga Swahili do not specify.
- 3 In fact, I don’t recall any occurrence in Katanga Swahili of such a term. In East Coast Swahili, the meaning of *mbegu*, lit. seed, may be extended to include breed or race but, as far as I can tell from documented speech, that was not the case in Katanga. Of course, had race become a topic, French loans, such as *race* or even *racisme*, would have been available to us.
- 4 One gets tired of repeating this, but *muzungu* is not defined by race if race means skin color. A “black” African American or African European will be called *muzungu* without hesitation while a “white” Greek, Italian, or Portuguese local merchant is understood to belong to a category apart. Nevertheless, it is difficult to shed the habit of translating *muzungu* as “white European” (see on this Fabian 1995) and it may be said that I gave up trying when, in the following and elsewhere in this commentary, I use “white,” “White,” and “European” rather indiscriminately.
- 5 The prefix *ki-* usually marks the noun class of things. When it is used with terms signifying persons it can take on all sorts of meaning, among them contempt, sometimes mixed with respect as in *kimama*, usually applied to a corpulent, powerful woman.
- 6 Katanga Swahili also has *namna* and *ginsi*. In my understanding the former denotes different modes while the latter refers to something like different instances; neither seemed appropriate for eliciting a taxonomy of diseases.
- 7 There is other evidence in our text of his work crossing ethnic boundaries.

- When he took us on as expatriate clients this was upon recommendation from Mwenze Kibwanga, ethnically a Luba-Katanga and also a client (13), and G. Munongo, a prominent Katanga politician of the Yeke group, had sought his teacher's services (33).
- 8 Was this a hint for me? If it was I would not have taken it; I never paid for information (although in some cases—painters who had brought along pictures I bought and Kahenga, who performed a service—interlocutors were remunerated indirectly).
  - 9 The Jamaa had been the subject of my dissertation fieldwork in southern Katanga eight years earlier (Fabian 1971 and numerous later publications).
  - 10 Kasongo is a town north of Kahenga's home country. It always had historical significance as one of the places where Arab and Belgian colonization clashed during the so-called antislavery campaigns of the 1890s.

## 5: Kahenga's Thought

- 1 See for instance Kirsch 2004. In fairness to our predecessors it should be acknowledged that not all of them found comfort in the Durkheimian position; see Engelke 2002 (on Evans-Pritchard and Turner). An essay by R. Firth (1959) may still be the clearest statement of the problem anthropology has had with the study of religion.
- 2 A phrase coined by Bruno Latour in an essay critical of accepted oppositions between science and religion (2001).
- 3 For a comprehensive appraisal of the "rationality debate," see Buchowski 1997.
- 4 A brief comprehensive statement on thought and popular culture in Shaba/Katanga may be found in Fabian 1998, chapter 4.
- 5 Remember, the task I set myself is commentary, not detailed lexical/semantic analysis. Therefore, when I searched this text it was always only with the help of the search function of my word-processing program, not with any of the specialized linguistic software that is available.
- 6 The marked Swahili terms for remembering, the verb *-kumbuka*, with a causative form, *-umbusha*, and the noun *ukumbusho*, all of which were prominent in the examples of discourse mentioned earlier, are also absent from this text.
- 7 I have no explanation for the fact that Kahenga, who came from a region known for "good" Swahili, used the "low" *-yua* form.
- 8 It would seem that "knowledge of names" consists above all of being able to use taxonomic labels. But even the fragmentary information about naming in our text suggests that nomenclature serves identification rather than classification. See van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:827 about the name as essence (of plants, for instance).

- 9 It is not listed in Swahili dictionaries. Most likely it is one of the few loans from Lingala (or other languages from the lower Congo). If so, it would be interesting to speculate about *mayele* as belonging to a colonial vocabulary.
- 10 I briefly mentioned this at the beginning of the section on thought and knowledge; for more thorough treatments, see an early interpretation of *ma-wazo* in the discourse of the Jamaa movement as a gnosis (Fabian 1969) and comments on metahistory (or historiology) in the work of the painter-historian Tshibumba Kanda Matulu (Fabian 1996:309–16).
- 11 From East Coast Swahili *-fanza*, cause to make but also to put in order, to mend. In this and other texts I transcribed the applicative as *-fansia* rather than *-fanzia* because that was how it sounded. I don't remember ever hearing *-fanza* in Katanga Swahili.
- 12 Kahenga used this abstract term for health only three times in this conversation in which health was a central theme. After the example just noted it occurred again as adjective, *muzima*, alive, and then again as a noun, in a context to be commented on later.
- 13 Swahili dictionaries have *ki/bizimba* for birdcage, coop, dovecote, hutch, witness stand—nothing approaching the meaning of the term in local Swahili unless one wants to speculate on a metaphorical sense: something in which power is captured.
- 14 Van Avermaet and Mbuya use phonetic symbols to mark palatalization in Luba; perhaps a more accurate transcription in our text would have been *bizhimba* (or *bijimba* in a French text). In local Swahili both pronunciations, *zh* and *z*, can occur.
- 15 As regards vital force, *force vitale*, the dictionary refers to Placide Tempels's "*Phil. Bantoue . . . p. 58–59.*" The passage can be consulted on the Tempels website, see note 1 in the following chapter. What van Avermaet and Mbuya have to say about *bizimba* may clarify its meaning to some extent, until one consults the cross-references to *kilumbu* (381–83) and *nganga*, under *anga* (24–27) and comes upon semantic fields of stunning complexity that make the difficulties we encounter in our text pale beyond comparison.
- 16 I take this term to be a compound noun made up of *vili*, the Hemba equivalent of Luba-Katanga *vidye*, and *nyambi*, the Hemba term for God. On *vidye*, see the long entry in van Avermaet and Mbuya (1954:783–86).
- 17 Toward the end of our conversation, when I showed Kahenga a Luba diviner's gourd and its contents, he said about several figurines that they were *mizimu* (70). These objects were miniature carvings of well-known ancestor statues (of the kind that would be called *fétiches*).
- 18 In East Coast Swahili the pronunciation is *kivuli*, for which the dictionary has this entry: "(1) a shadow, a shady place; (2) sometimes used to mean a ghost, apparition." In the *mu/mi* class, it becomes *mvuli*: "a shady place, shade of a

- tree." See also Sacleux (1939:634), who has "*photographie, portrait*" as possible meanings of *mvuli*.
- 19 The wordplay speech/bespeak is irresistible, especially when one also hears the German cognate of "to bespeak," *besprechen*, which means something like to treat illness by reciting formulae "over" the patient or the diseased part of his body. A classic comes to mind: B. Malinowski's pragmatic speech-theory of magic developed in the second volume of his *Coral Gardens* (1935).

## 6: Endings and Ends

- 1 Observant readers, I expect, will have noticed that two substantial parts of our text, "Comments and explanations on specimens of plants" and "Looking at a diviner's calabash from Luba country," did not get the attention they deserved. The former (60–69) prompted observations on indexical communication and ellipsis in chapter 2 and examples of Kahenga's work as a healer in chapter 3; a few references to the latter (70–71) were made here and there in comments on ethnic distinctions (chapter 4) and practices of divination (chapter 5). Neither did justice to the wealth of ethnographic information in these parts of our conversation, especially the kind that Kahenga provided when we looked at specimens, photographs taken of trees from which they were collected, and at the Luba divining gourd with its contents of miniaturized statuary. Ideally, the visual material we talked about in these two sections could have been presented together with the text and would have enriched the commentary, but this was not a practical option. The eighteen photographs taken by Ilona Szombati in September 1974 were shown to a botanist at the University of Lubumbashi. On a handwritten list he identified nine plants by their botanical names (three of them by species only). Because this information is not likely to add anything significant to specialist knowledge, to reproduce the photographs and the list of identifications is hardly worth the effort and cost. As to the objects we had before us, the plant specimens were not preserved and the divining gourd is no longer in my possession.
- 2 *Bantu Philosophy* was first written as a series of articles in Flemish and then published as a book in French (1945); it appeared in an English translation in 1959. For comprehensive background information a web site devoted to Tempels's work, including an archive of his writings, may be consulted at <http://aequatoria.be/tempels>.
- 3 Colle was a White Father missionary stationed in Hemba country. His work (1913) was published in a series intended to set up what we would today call a data bank for the colonial government (incidentally, the long introductions by Cyriel Van Overbergh to each of the two volumes are excellent but to my knowledge unused sources for the history of our discipline). The work was a

monograph in the strict sense in that it presented the material in rubrics previously established by standard questionnaires. Theuws, like Tempels a Franciscan missionary but also an Oxford-trained anthropologist, worked among the Luba-Shankadi and wrote a veritable *summa* of Luba ethnography. This monograph was published by the Royal Museum of Central Africa in 1962, two years after the end of Belgian colonial rule. Colle had compiled his own observations and those by other authors who had preceded him; Theuws took a similar approach but his own contributions were based mainly on a vast corpus of texts collected by himself and his confreres, a small portion of which he later published in English (1983).

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- 4 The most interesting result of revisiting the literature was the outlines I began to see of a history of colonial ethnography and the simultaneous construction of its object (in this case the “Luba”), the role of government sponsorship of publications by missionaries (Catholic, with the exception of Burton), and structures of authority among Luba ethnographers, all of this with political consequences up to the present. For a contemporary reading of Van Caeneghem, see Mudimbe (1991).
- 5 Both could be complemented by Hunt’s impressive attempt to document the history of medicalization (of childbirth in this case) in the context of everyday life in the colony (1999).
- 6 See also the interesting work on contemporary magic in India and Europe (Glücklich 1997; Greenwood 2000, 2005).
- 7 See Fabian 1971 and a recent essay, “Inquiry as Encounter” (2007, chapter 12).
- 8 That this is not an idiosyncratic idea may be taken from a collection of essays on “counterworks” edited by R. Fardon (1995).
- 9 Used as a particle, *hapana* is defined in the Swahili dictionary as “a verb-form, there is not there, there is none . . . [c]ommonly used as a simple negation.” The prefix *ha-* generally marks negative verb forms, which are not considered in the following.
- 10 Some time ago Don Handelman had thoughtful though rather pessimistic things to say about the presence of ethnographic texts (1993).

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The Internet allows ethnographers to deposit the textual materials on which they base their writing in virtual archives. Electronically archived fieldwork documents can be accessed at any time by the writer, his or her readers, and the people studied. Johannes Fabian, a leading theorist of anthropological practice, argues that virtual archives have the potential to shift the emphasis in ethnographic writing from the monograph to commentary. In this insightful study, he returns to the recording of a conversation he had with a ritual healer in the Congolese town of Lubumbashi more than three decades ago. Fabian's transcript and translation of the exchange have been deposited on a website (Language and Popular Culture in Africa), and in *Ethnography as Commentary* he provides a model of writing in the presence of a virtual archive.

In his commentary, Fabian reconstructs his meeting with the healer Kahenga Mukonkwa Michel, in which the two discussed the ritual that Kahenga performed to protect Fabian's home from burglary. Fabian reflects on the expectations and terminology that shape his description of Kahenga's ritual and meditates on how ethnographic texts are made, considering the settings, the participants, the technologies, and the linguistic medium that influence the transcription and translation of a recording and thus fashion ethnographic knowledge. Turning more directly to Kahenga—as a practitioner, a person, and an ethnographic subject—and to the questions posed to him, Fabian reconsiders questions of ethnic identity, politics, and religion. While Fabian hopes that emerging anthropologists will share their fieldwork through virtual archives, he does not suggest that traditional ethnography will disappear. It will become part of a broader project facilitated by new media.

"Johannes Fabian is one of the most prominent and original thinkers in anthropology. With *Ethnography as Commentary*, he makes a significant contribution to debates about modes of writing in anthropology and adjacent disciplines and to anthropological knowledge of postcolonial Central African culture and society. Younger scholars especially will find it a very instructive close-up portrayal of intensive ethnographic work."—ULF HANNERZ, author of *Foreign News: Exploring the World of Foreign Correspondents*

"*Ethnography as Commentary* is a timely contribution to contemporary problems of anthropological knowledge-making. It is an argument about what ethnography has come to and an experiment about what it might still become more than two decades after the intense period of critiquing anthropology's emblematic research practices."—GEORGE E. MARCUS, co-author of *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*

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