Gesture and Power

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Published by Duke University Press


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May 11, 1921. Léon-Georges Morel, the territorial administrator for the Southern Cataracts Territory in the Lower Congo of colonial Belgian Congo,¹ is heading to the town of Nkamba. He is investigating the activities of Simon Kimbangu, a man who local Kongo people are calling a prophet. Many people are flocking to Nkamba, leaving jobs, carrying sick relatives for healing, and rapidly increasing the anxiety of Belgian colonial authorities. Morel arrives at Nkamba in the company of two soldiers, estimating the crowd in Nkamba at around eight hundred people. As he continues on the road into town, he encounters Kimbangu, who is accompanied by two men and two women. Kimbangu is wearing red pants and a white flannel shirt and is carrying a stick shaped like a bishop’s staff. Morel observes his behavior. “The person of interest,” he writes, “was agitated by a general trembling of his body.” His companions, Morel notes, were “all agitated by the same trembling and making bizarre shouts.” They make a circle around him, and Morel tries to speak to the group, but they do not respond. After the trembling subsides, Morel sets up his tent in the town. Simon Kimbangu approaches the tent and, after reading the story of David and Goliath from the Bible, comes forward to shake Morel’s hand. “I notice that his hand is icy,” Morel writes, “a reaction following the period of nervous shaking. I take advantage of this period of calm to ask Kimbangu the reason for this not very suitable and grotesque manner of receiving

Introduction

Gesture and Power
October 1, 2005. I am staying in the town of Luozi in the westernmost province of Bas-Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The town is the administrative center of Luozi territory, which is a largely rural area covered with green rolling hills, mountains, and wide plots of cassava, soybeans, and other agricultural crops. I am walking down the red dirt road next to the soccer field that doubles as an airplane landing strip, an area locals jokingly refer to as Luozi’s airport. My friend Tanu and I were invited to attend an event organized by Bundu dia Kongo (bdk), a nationalist movement seeking to address the political and economic marginalization of Kongo people by combining religion, politics, and cultural revitalization. The larger goal of bdk was to gain autonomy by restoring the precolonial Kongo Kingdom in the present day. Their members were becoming increasingly active in Luozi and other parts of the Lower Congo, as well as Kinshasa. Because of their emphatic rejection of Christianity as the “White man’s religion,” and advocating their own religion (called BuKongo) instead, bdk members were often in conflict with local churches. This particular event was to honor members of the group killed in 2004 in a confrontation with both local law enforcement and members of the major missionary-founded Protestant church in Luozi. Tanu and I meet a small group of bdk members on the road to the cemetery, where they are singing and waving small green branches. As we join the group, one of the local leaders tells me a young White missionary wanted to see the ceremony and they denied her access. Looking at me fiercely, he says, “We can’t reveal all our secrets. But you, you are our sister, so you can come.” After the ceremony ends, I am introduced to another man representing the regional leadership of the group. I reach out my hand for a handshake in greeting, and he just looks down at it, unmoving. I stand there with my hand outstretched, completely embarrassed, until Tanu quickly reminds me to use the bula makonko gesture, where the hands are cupped and clapped together three times. I clap my
cupped hands. Finally, the man, who I will call Ne Tatu, physically responds in kind, saying, “This is the proper form of greeting in Kongo culture, dating back to the Kongo Kingdom. That is why in Bundu dia Kongo we greet each other in this way. Kongo people need to let go of the White man’s ways and honor their own culture. That is how things will change for us.”

While separated by more than eighty years, both of these incidents illustrate the importance of microinteractions of the body in framing and staking political claims in the Lower Congo. Nationalist movements for people of the Kongo ethnic group have often taken religious forms over the past century. Different ways of using the body in social interaction, with multivalent meanings, play a large role in these nationalist movements. In the case of Kimbangu, the spirit-induced trembling he experienced (caused by the Holy Spirit) started a region-wide Christian prophetic movement that threatened the hegemony of Western missionaries and Belgian colonial administrators alike. This messianic movement, inspired by prophecies of independence and a reversal of the world order, blended Kongo traditional embodied movements and ritual with mission-inspired Protestant Christianity, including hymns, social conduct, and biblical interpretation. Looking at the colonial suppression of the movement through arrests, interrogations, violence, and imprisonment in penal labor camps, the Belgians, including Morel, clearly believed their authority, in both religious and political matters, was being threatened. Likewise, my own embodied interactions with Bundu dia Kongo reveal the importance of gesture for fostering ethnic nationalist sentiment and taking an active role in everyday struggles for power and authority. This bula makonko greeting has become emblematic of the Bundu dia Kongo movement itself as its leaders try to wed a new religion and revitalization of traditional culture with strategies to capture more political power and representation. Moreover, as an African American woman, my own physical body and embodiment became part of a larger discourse of religious prophecy, Kongo identity, and Kongo nationalism during my time in the Congo, especially in 2005–6.

Gestures and spirit-induced trembling are two of several important types of everyday cultural performances that are sites of struggles for power and authority in daily life in the Congo. But how can the physical body do so much? What is the relationship between everyday embodied cultural performances and power, and what role do these performances play in legitimizing competing forms of spiritual and political authority? How are these claims then used to support nationalist movements?

In this book I argue that everyday cultural performances in interpersonal encounters are crucial sites for making political claims used to legitimate and
inspire larger social movements. More specifically, I am interested in how the body is used to bolster religious claims to authority that can either challenge or support existing structures of power. Using the BisiKongo ethnic group in the Democratic Republic of Congo as a case study, I illustrate that performances in daily life at the micro level can have a decisive effect on macro-level systems of power and structures of authority, and also be impacted by those same societal structures. My monograph blends history and ethnography to explore how everyday cultural performances of the body such as gestures (bimpampa), dances (makinu), and spirit-induced trembling (zakama) are used to create, confirm, and contest authority in daily life. I build on previous studies of power and performance in Africa, but I shift the focus from performances framed as separate events (for example, on a stage) to performances in everyday life. This shift is important because it demonstrates how seemingly mundane interpersonal relations at the micro level can have much larger consequences.

I also take a chronological approach to show the importance of daily performances in shaping the social and political lives of the BisiKongo, and the connections between these performances and larger social changes. Other studies have fruitfully used nontraditional sources such as language, objects, or foods to analyze historical transformations (Appadurai 1988; Fields-Black 2008; Mintz 1986). My focus on everyday performances from the early twentieth century to 2010 illuminates the agency of Kongo people in engaging with and redefining themselves in relation to transformative events such as European colonialism and the expansion of Christianity, postcolonial dictatorships, and present-day social and political marginalization.

In analyzing these periods of social change, I am not attempting to write a complete and exhaustive history. Rather, I place the body at the center of my analysis and focus on specific and significant “performative encounters” that best illustrate how everyday cultural performances are affected by and have an impact on larger social transformations. Before going any further, let me clearly define how I am using several terms while also situating my work within existing scholarship.

Over the last few decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in the body in anthropology and the social sciences and humanities more generally (Csordas 1999; Farnell 1999; Lock 1993; Strathern 1996; Van Wolputte 2004). Embodiment is one concept that has received increased attention. Following anthropologist Thomas Csordas, I understand embodiment as “our corporeality or bodiliness in relation to the world and other people” (2011, 137). Csordas also privileges embodied experiences as the basic starting point for understanding human culture and life (1993, 135). Embodiment encompasses
perception and engagement; feeling with, being in, and using one’s body. I shift the focus in studies of embodiment from affective states and feelings to how bodies are actually used in everyday life. A number of terms could be used to describe how people use their bodies. While movement captures the act of moving all or a part of the body, this term is so general that it groups involuntary twitches along with choreographed dances. A term that better captures the phenomenon of interest in this book is performance.

Performance is an “essentially contested concept” that has been used in the humanities and social sciences to describe and analyze a wide variety of human activity. Theories of performance have emerged from anthropology, linguistics, oral interpretation, theater, folklore, and sociology, among other disciplines, all eventually shaping the field of performance studies. While many related definitions of performance exist, performance as a general concept has proven useful for capturing the ongoing processes of social life. I combine several approaches to define performance as restored behavior enacted with a heightened awareness, consciousness, and/or intention, with the capacity to transform social realities. I will examine each of the components of this definition in turn.

Restored behavior conveys the idea that what we do with our bodies is never for the first time, as these movements are “twice behaved behavior” based on past actions and observations, learned both consciously and unconsciously in our social environments (Schechner 1985, 35–41). For example, the vigorous trembling that came to define the prophetic movements of the colonial era in the Lower Congo region had its origins in the embodiment of traditional priest-healer-ritual specialists (banganga) in and near the Kongo Kingdom before the arrival of Europeans. Trembling of the body that signified the presence of territorial or other spirits in the precolonial era was embodied in a similar manner yet redefined as an index of the Holy Spirit in the Kongo Christian prophetic movements in colonial-era Belgian Congo.

Another component of performance is heightened awareness, which demonstrates that performance is reflexive and involves manipulation of behavior, based on the awareness of being observed (Bauman 1989, 266). As Marvin Carlson states, “performance is always performance for someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when . . . that audience is the self” (1996, 6).

Consciousness and/or intention is another part of my understanding of performance. Performance is always conscious and can be but is not always explicitly self-conscious. The definition of consciousness I am using here draws on the work of philosopher John Searle, who sees consciousness as a biological feature of humans and certain animals consisting of inner, subjec-
tive (what-it-feels-like) qualitative states that are first-person experiences. These conscious states, among other characteristics, always have a content, vary in degrees (have a center and periphery), and are mostly intentional (1992). Here, intention is not just about intending to do something, which is one among many forms of intention. Rather, intentionality is about directedness or aboutness, so belief, hope, fear, and desire are also forms of intentionality (Searle 1983, 1–3). Thus, performance is intentional in the sense it is directed toward and in engagement with someone or something. Searle also describes consciousness as having a center and a periphery, so a person’s attention can be focused on one thing or task, yet the person still remains simultaneously aware of other sensations, feelings, and stimuli. Thus, many states that other scholars might call unconscious Searle locates at the periphery of everyday consciousness. With his approach, unconscious mental states are always potentially conscious (1992). Intentional conscious states function within what Searle calls the “background,” a set of capacities (assumptions, expectations, know-how, ways of doing things) that are not themselves intentional (175–79). Searle’s approach to consciousness, especially as being centered in physical bodies, is echoed by his predecessor, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who defined consciousness as “being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” ([1962] 1981, 138). Thus, the body is the means of acting on, understanding, and engaging with the world.

Embracing a broader definition of both consciousness and intention (Searle 1992) allows us to better understand how Kongo conceptions of the body challenge Western ideas of body, mind, and intentionality. Who is actually moving or affecting the body? Studies of Kongo cosmology and conceptions of the self, along with my own research experiences, support the idea that many (although not all) Kongo people think of humans as consisting of three (or more) parts (Jacobson-Widding 1979, 307–24; Laman 1962). In one conversation during my field research, the parts were described as nsuni or nitu (body), mpeve (spirit), and moyo (soul) (Ne Nkamu Luyindula, September 23, 2005). Mpeve is the metaphysical dimension and also means “wind” or “breath” and is present throughout the body (Laman 1962, 1). The Holy Spirit is a powerful, greater mpeve that comes to inhabit the body. As Tata Kizole explains, “it is the spirit that animates the person so that they enter into trance” (July 20, 2010). Here, Kongo conceptions of spirit possession suggest a copresence such that otherworldly spirits (whether nature spirits or the Holy Spirit, among others) move the body with varying degrees of awareness by the person who is possessed (Janzen and MacGaffey 1974, 144–45; W. MacGaffey 1983, 70–71). To further complicate matters, Kongo conceptions of witchcraft (kindoki) allow for people to use the nonphysical parts of their
selves to harm others in a social unit with either *conscious or unconscious* jealousy; willful intention is not needed (W. MacGaffey 1986b, 161). All of this suggests that Kongo conceptions of the self and spirit possession engender a more expansive understanding of intentionality and consciousness that goes beyond Western approaches and views spirits and spirit selves as actors using and affecting physical bodies in everyday life.

My study presents a varied array of concrete examples of these aspects of performance, all of which exhibit heightened awareness and different degrees of consciousness. Reflecting the explicit self-consciousness of performance, rural Kongo women forced to dance in local animation troupes in the 1970s during President Mobutu Sese Seko’s regime consciously manipulated their movements under the watching eyes of visiting government and provincial officials. However, the trembling of many Kongo prophets and their followers is also an example of conscious performance because while the Holy Spirit is causing the physical trembling, people are often aware of their subjective feelings and sensations when the Holy Spirit possesses them.

The last major characteristic of performance, as I define it, is its potential to transform social realities. In general, when people think of performance, especially staged performances, they see them as representing or reflecting reality. “From Plato and Aristotle forward, theorists have agreed that theatre ‘imitates,’ ‘reflects,’ ‘represents,’ or ‘expresses’ individual actions and social life. As Hamlet told the Players, the purpose of theatre is ‘to hold the mirror up to nature.’ Representational art of all kinds is based on the assumption that ‘art’ and ‘life’ are not only separate but of different orders of reality: life is primary, art secondary” (Schechner 2013, 131).

However, many scholars of performance now recognize that performances can also transform reality as well. Victor Turner, the most influential pioneer of studies of performance in anthropology, described the possible power of cultural performance in the following way: “cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change” (1987, 24). Edward Schieffelin best elaborates on this idea when he writes, “performance deals with actions more than text: with habits of the body more than structures of symbols, with illocutionary rather than propositional force, with the social construction of reality rather than its representation. . . . Performances, whether ritual or dramatic . . . alter moods, social relations, bodily dispositions, and states of mind” (1997, 199). The vignette about Bundu dia Kongo and its emphasis on using specific greetings to recreate the former Kongo Kingdom in the present is an illustrative example of the transformative capacity of performance. Their efforts created an influential movement that led to their spiritual leader being
elected to the country’s national assembly both in 2006 and 2011. Overall, the transformative potential of performance is the most important defining characteristic for this study.

Additionally, to more fully capture its transformative potential, my understanding of performance incorporates everyday interactions as well as performances that are more clearly bounded or set apart from everyday life (that is, on a stage). In this, sociologist Erving Goffman’s studies of performances in everyday social interactions have influenced my approach. Goffman studied performances in everyday encounters, which are largely enacted according to a “working consensus” (1959, 10). In this regard, Goffman’s work largely avoids looking at interpersonal encounters as sites of social conflict, as people for the most part stay within their roles, adhering to well-defined scripts (Denzin 2002, 107). I build on Goffman’s ideas but refocus attention on the less often studied moments when everyday interactions veer from their norm, creating ruptures and challenges in struggles for power and authority placing the body at the center.

I am looking at specific types of performances I am calling everyday cultural performances, which I sometimes also call embodied performances. These interchangeable terms are both ways of defining specific bodily movements enacted with a heightened awareness while drawing on culturally and historically grounded restored behavior. These particular performances are very specific units of analysis because they have cultural relevance and significance for Kongo people over time. What I mean is, these cultural performances are embodied ways of being-in and engaging-with the world that people in this region of Central Africa have been enacting for centuries. They are part of a corpus of body techniques, “ways in which from society to society people use their bodies” (Mauss [1934] 1979, 97). French sociologist Marcel Mauss’s study of “body techniques” was one of the first to outline how cultural norms of movement that differ from society to society are unconsciously learned. He discusses differences in digging, marching, walking, and other actions of various societies, concluding that each society has its own personal habits, which have ancient histories and are transmitted from adults to children through the process of enculturation. Csordas’s concept of “somatic modes of attention” expresses a similar idea. The cupped hand clapping, bula makonko, which I mention earlier in this chapter, is one such example of an everyday cultural performance. It has its origins in the everyday greeting and court ritual practices of the precolonial Kongo Kingdom and continues to be used in modern-day Lower Congo but was redefined as a form of spiritual expression and a symbol of group identity in the context of the Bundu dia Kongo movement. Thus, my focus is not on all possible performances of the
body, but on specific ones rooted in the culture and history of the Lower Congo region.

But the body is not just a means of learning or expressing social norms or conventions; it is also a means of doing, creating, and transforming the world around oneself. This is reflected in Mauss’s assessment that “the body is man’s first and most natural instrument” ([1934] 1979, 104). In my research, I start with the premise that control of the body is always already a site of struggle in social conflict and political negotiations. Performances, like many other forms of embodied movement, can thus prove a critical site of inquiry for examination of struggles for power and authority in multiple settings. Moreover, performances can also play a key role in the constitution of self and larger group identities. A number of theorists have used linguist J. L. Austin’s (1962) concept of performative utterances (where saying something is actually doing something) to describe situations where performances are in fact performative—where performing something brings it into being. Gender theorist Judith Butler applies Austin’s idea to argue that gender is constituted through daily, repetitive, performative acts, so one is not born a woman but becomes a woman through many performances (2004, 154). Building on Butler’s ideas, anthropologist Paulla Ebron discusses gender as both consciously and unconsciously performed in West African contexts, constituting subjects but also providing a means of understanding other social distinctions such as age and lineage (2007). Anthropologist John L. Jackson Jr. argues for understanding race as performative, even within Black communities where “whiteness” and “blackness” are enacted as behaviors in everyday life (2001, 188–89). Performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson echoes the importance of racial performativity but also urges a focus on the real, everyday consequences of race and the dialogic relationship between race and performance in the construction of identity (2003, 9). In his many studies of performances in everyday life, Erving Goffman defined the basic unit of study as the encounter, which he defined as “the natural unit of social interaction in which focused interaction occurs” (1961, 8).

By combining Austin’s and Butler’s concepts of performatives with Goffman’s concept of encounters, I coined the term performative encounters to describe situations when the body is used strategically in everyday life to transform interpersonal social relationships in meaningful ways, impacting the social and political positions of the people interacting.15 For performative encounters then, doing something is doing something more. In Goffman’s studies of social encounters, most encounters reinforce the existing status quo. On the contrary, performative encounters are transformative—they change the existing social relationship in a manner that did not exist before, such
as when handshakes are rejected and greetings are vigorously negotiated; when spirit-induced bodily trembling interrupts the proceedings of a court trial; when a walk down the street is suddenly interrupted by the expectation that you clap when the presidential motorcade passes. These examples and others that I explore demonstrate that some social interactions have much larger consequences than others, illuminating the multiple ways that everyday cultural performances are engaged in the active construction of social life.

Four main points frame this book: First, I advocate placing the physical, moving body at the center of analysis—an approach I call the body as center. The human body is our first and most important means of engaging with and impacting the world around us. Critical insights can be gained if we pay attention to what people do with and through their bodies in their everyday lives.

Second, the human body is an important site for affecting group and individual subjectivities and identities, and everyday performances such as gestures and other movements of the body can be used to strategically engender social action—either to unify groups of people in concerted action, or even to foster dissent. This is what I call the body as conduit. While subjectivity and identity are terms often used interchangeably, subjectivity refers more so to inner states, emotions, feelings, and thoughts, while identity is based not only on how you see yourself but also on how others see you. My interest centers on how individual and subjective embodied performances become shared by members of a group and then become the foundation for a shared group identity. So, for example, while spirit possession by the Holy Spirit during the colonial-era prophetic movements was an individual experience, it was also an experience that many people shared in common, even in the same space and time as shown by Léon Morel’s account of his first encounter with Simon Kimbangu. Moreover, the colonial state similarly persecuted people possessed by the Holy Spirit, who shared experiences of harassment, imprisonment, violence, and exile—all of which impacted their growing nationalist sentiment. However, it is also because of the potential transformative power of moving bodies that they are specifically targeted to both create and maintain the status quo (Bourdieu 1977; Mitchell 1988). By this I mean that the process doesn’t move just from individual subjectivity to group identity, but also from a larger group identity down to individual embodiment. This is best shown with the example of political animation in postcolonial Zaire, based on a forced, shared, and embodied group experience that was to impact the individual subjectivity of each participant. Indeed, in both instances the body
acts as a conduit and plays a critical role in subjectivity and identity on both individual and group levels.

Third, performance, as the “social construction of reality rather than its representation” (Schieffelin 1997, 199), what I call body as catalyst, is a process that takes place not only in set-apart events onstage, but also in bodily encounters in everyday interactions. These encounters could be with other people or even spiritual entities. Thus, even spirit possession can then be seen as an everyday cultural performance rather than a special event occurring only in ritual spaces. Such an assertion is supported by the work of scholars such as Adeline Masquelier (2001) in her study of Mawri spirit possession in Niger.

Fourth, as one particular dimension of the social construction of reality through performance, authority is both made and unmade through these everyday performances. Authority is a term that evades any set, agreed-on definition.16 For the purposes of this project, I define authority as the ability to influence or determine the conduct of others within a hierarchy of statuses in a group, in which that authority may be more or less legitimate, and the members of the group may or may not recognize the rights of this authority to exercise power. The recognition and reception of others in everyday interactions (following Erving Goffman) are necessary for relations of authority to function but also present a site for resistance and challenge. The spiritual realm often provides access to an alternative form of authority through which people can upset the prevailing social order through effective use of their bodies.

While focusing on the BisiKongo, Gesture and Power has larger implications for humankind in general. It provides a theoretical framework for understanding how the micropolitics of the body in interpersonal encounters can affect macro-level social and political structures. Such a framework can even be applied to our own society, with examples such as the considerable criticism that followed President Obama’s bow to the king of Saudi Arabia in 2009, or the larger impacts of oppressed Black southerners refusing to step off of the sidewalk for White pedestrians in the 1960s (Berrey 2006; Wesley 2009). This study has broader relevance than just for the United States, but for people in societies across the world as it explores both politicized embodiment and how people use religion to both challenge and create social structures. My work also provides a method for examining the interplay of embodiment, spirituality, and power. An analytical approach that examines performative encounters can be applied to examples ranging from the display of spirit possession by Malay women on the shop floors of Japanese facto-
Ong 1987) to baptism and healing as political acts in the Watchtower movement of colonial-era Malawi (Fields 1985). Overall, the body can be a powerful and effective tool for social and political transformation, especially when buttressed by spiritual claims. Bodies, however, are also vulnerable—to dismemberment, disappearances, arrests, floggings, and other forms of physical violence, and even death. My point here is to show that, regardless of the risks, bodies are often used as tools for social change.

Bodies, Performance, and Embodied Histories

November 2005. After an extended stay in the town of Luozi, I came back to Kinshasa briefly before heading back to the United States for a week for Thanksgiving. However, Luozi remained with me, not only in the red dirt hiding in the creases of my suitcases and in the soles of my sneakers, or the *madeso* (beans) that I brought back to my host family to cook and eat, but also in the genuflection of my knees that happened almost involuntarily when I greeted someone, or the *bula makonko* that accompanied the greeting, along with a slight bow of the head and the feedback sound that came from my throat to indicate that I was actively listening. My host family and neighborhood friends in Gombe, a high-end residential neighborhood in Kinshasa, remarked that I had become a girl of Luozi in my mannerisms, moving in a way they considered *très poli* like Ma Josephine, the MuKongo domestic worker who prepared daily meals and cleaned the home of my host family.17 When I later returned to the United States, I had to retrain my body as I often unwittingly found myself continuing to exhibit these same embodied practices, ways of moving that had not been a part of my body before my time in Luozi.

I open this section with this story to demonstrate the importance of bodily movement for carrying cultural ideals and histories and acting as a type of performance in everyday life. The genuflections and hand clapping that I first imitated and then unreflexively embodied reflect a long history of hierarchical societies in the Lower Congo, going back to the precolonial Kongo Kingdom and also encompass the embodiment of gender and age. Both consciously and unconsciously, the body plays a huge role in capturing beliefs, values, categories, and histories that have deep meaning for members of a cultural community. Although most historical studies continue to privilege written texts, many scholars now recognize that history also exists in the body through embodied practices (Shaw 2002; Stoller 1995). Scholars have been interested in not only the body as a way of knowing, but also the body
as a way of remembering. How are memories and histories embodied and passed on to others?

In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu addresses memory through embodied practice, where practice can be understood as anything people do. He defines habitus as a set of generating principles that produce practice based on the structures within itself, which were passed on from previous generations (72). Moreover, these generating principles, based on both past action and the objective conditions of the present, guide practice. Bourdieu connects the habitus to the body with his concept of the body hexis, one of the many ways that the habitus is passed on and reproduced, most often by children imitating the actions of adults. “Body hexis speaks directly to the motor function, in the form of a pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic, because linked to a whole system of techniques . . . and charged with a host of social meaning and values” (87). In his discussion of habitus and body hexis, Bourdieu points out that embodied practice is a form of mnemonics as well, invoking social and cultural values. Bourdieu demonstrates this point in his discussion of male and female embodiment in Kabyle society in Algeria: “Body hexis is political mythology realized, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing speaking, and thereby of feeling and thinking. . . . The manly man stands up straight and honours the person he approaches or wishes to welcome by looking him right in the eyes. . . . Conversely, a woman is expected to walk with a slight stoop, looking down, keeping her eyes on the spot where she will next put her foot. . . . In short, the specifically feminine virtue, lahia, modesty, restraint, reserve, orients the whole female body downwards, towards the ground, the inside, the house, whereas male excellence, nif, is asserted in movement upwards, outwards, towards other men” (94).

Bourdieu emphasizes the importance placed on these values being embodied, because in this Kabyle example, the very principle of feminine virtue seen as appropriate for women is most aptly demonstrated by the way in which a woman uses, orients, and moves her body. In this way, the gendered values of Kabyle society are actually embodied by women and men in everyday posture, movement, and life. The significance of values embodied in such a way explains why embodied practices are targeted when people, organizations, and institutions seek to transform the values, belief systems, and behavior of groups of people and individuals alike. This becomes especially clear in situations where institutions (for example, prisons, churches, governments, and moral reform associations) want to “produce” new subjects. The prime
example within my own study is political animation, forced nationalistic singing, and dancing under President Mobutu. The body is targeted precisely because “treat[ing] the body as a memory, [institutions] entrust to it in abbreviated and practical, that is, mnemonic, form the fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of the culture. The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness” (1977, 94). Thus, correctives and etiquette reinforce social values and become forms of “an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as ‘stand up straight’ or ‘don’t hold your knife in your left hand’” (94).

According to Bourdieu, for all societies, emphasis is placed on embodying its core values because of the subtle persuasiveness of ideologies that become so embedded in one’s body that they seem natural. As a result, “every group entrusts to bodily automatisms those principles most basic to it and most indispensable to its conservation” (1977, 218n44). This becomes even more important for societies without an extensive history of writing or inscribing. While Bourdieu’s work on the habitus and body hexis is highly influential, some criticisms and lingering questions remain. First, the habitus that structures practice seems so restrictive that individual agency and creativity seem to disappear. What is the role of human agency in the habitus? Second, what happens to the habitus in periods of massive social transformation and in the context of encounters between different groups? Third, if the habitus is outside the realm of consciousness (or, in Searle’s terms, at the periphery of consciousness), how can it be intentionally targeted for change? It is in these areas of inquiry that Bourdieu’s theory can be expanded on and improved.

Along with Bourdieu’s writing, Paul Connerton’s seminal work How Societies Remember (1989) has also been very influential on studies of the body across disciplines. Connerton outlines personal, cognitive, and habit memory as the three classes of memory (21) but emphasizes the role of the body in habit memory especially: “In habitual memory the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body” (72). To further distinguish how the body works in the service of memory and history, Connerton differentiates two types of social practice: incorporating practices—intentional or unintentional bodily activity done in the presence of others—from inscribing practices—devices or media used for storing and retrieving information (for example, newspapers, computers, photos) (72–73). Incorporating practices are transmitted through the body, and habitual behavior reminds us that “all habits are affective dispositions; that a predisposition formed through the frequent repetition of a number of specific acts is an intimate and fundamental part of ourselves” (1989, 94). Thus, through the repetition of certain acts laden with cultural
significance, these acts become a part of one’s daily routine and the values and meanings associated with these acts unconsciously become a part of one’s cultural ethos. “Incorporating practices therefore provide a particularly effective system of mnemonics” (102), meaning that bodily practices can activate and create cultural memories. Connerton thus supports Bourdieu’s own assertions about embodied memory and also categorizes different approaches to passing on and storing memory and history.

In her influential work *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), performance studies scholar Diana Taylor makes an argument that is very similar to Connerton’s in regard to the modes of transmission and storage of communal memories. “Archival memory,” she writes, “exists in documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change. . . . Archival memory works across distance, over time and space.” On the other hand, the repertoire “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. . . . The repertoire requires presence” (19–20). Taylor’s archive is very similar to Connerton’s idea of inscribing practices, while the repertoire seems to have much in common with incorporating practices. However, she takes theories of memory even further with her idea of the scenario, which is a recurring plot, storyline, or framework derived from either the archive and/or the repertoire. Taylor uses the scenario to highlight how social knowledge is both constituted and transmitted (the scenario of European “discovery” of indigenous Americans for example). By analyzing many examples of scenarios in the Americas in multiple genres, from performance art to graffiti, and how scenarios are both reinforced and challenged, Taylor provides a fruitful starting point for the examination of embodied memory in the context of performances.

Thus, Bourdieu, Connerton, and Taylor have all made the case that embodied practices are immensely critical to transmitting and activating social values, ideals, and cultural history. Indeed, many scholars working within Africa have either applied their ideas or made similar claims in studies ranging from Anlo-Ewe conceptions of bodily senses in Ghana (Geurts 2002) to bodily comportment in Sierra Leone (M. Jackson 1989) to masked and danced histories in Nigeria (McCall 2000). Attention to embodiment offers another perspective on collective memory, with larger implications for how the history of Africa is written (Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe 1993). My own research in the Congo also supports the importance of embodied performances in everyday life in the Lower Congo. The ways of moving that I learned through my interactions with others are similar to the embodied per-
performances children in the Lower Congo learn in their everyday lives. Along with explicit correctives and directions, children unconsciously imitate the behaviors of adults in their households, schools, markets, community gatherings, and churches. Gesture and Power builds on the existing literature by also advocating for the importance of embodied performances in understanding Kongo culture and history. However, I push the research even further by looking not just at what the body represents, but at what the body does, by examining performances in everyday life rather than only in “set-apart” events, and by showing how the meanings and uses of these embodied performances have changed over time, while simultaneously scrutinizing the larger social and political contexts in which they are embedded and engaged. My approach privileges African agency, showing that whether the subject is a rural, illiterate farmer who self-identifies as a prophet in the face of European missionaries or a postindependence violent dictator seeking to quell dissent, everyday cultural performances are key to their engaging with and transforming the world around them. Thus, while the body is indeed a means of passing on memory and history, it is also a means of challenging, creating, and redefining memory and history.

With my work, I am also trying to challenge notions that a focus on performance is very limited in what it can tell us about a society, and that performances themselves have an insignificant impact on the world around us. Some past critiques of both studies of performance and microsociological studies caution that focusing on individual performances (both as bounded events and as interactions in everyday life) can lead to a lack of historical context and minimal attention to the relationship between performances/interactions and larger social structures (Bronner 1988; see also list of critiques in Adler and Adler 1987).\(^{18}\) For example, in his work on performances in daily life, Goffman does not analyze the potential impact of these everyday performances on larger social structures or organization; in fact he argues for seeing the interaction order (the domain of activity of face-to-face interaction) as a completely separate sphere of activity (1983, 2). Further, Goffman believes that in the vast majority of cases, the interaction order is not “somehow prior, fundamental, or constitutive of the shape of macroscopic phenomena” (9). I seek to challenge this assertion by showing that such a perspective decontextualizes performances from larger social and political moorings—rather, the micro and the macro mutually influence each other. In her review article “The State of Research on Performance in Africa,” Margaret Thompson Drewal advocates analyzing performance as part of temporal processes to address some of these shortcomings. She writes, “Adopting a temporal perspective means following repeated performances of the same kind by the same people..."
and between different groups of people. It means focusing on individuals in specific performances as they use structure and process and then locating that performance within a larger body of performances and in history, society, and politics” (1991, 37). I take up Drewal’s challenge by exploring the interaction between everyday performances and larger social structures, while also charting the historical development of transformations in the uses and meanings of several Kongo everyday cultural performances in struggles for power and authority.

Everyday Cultural Performances in Kongo Culture and History

*Everyday cultural performances* acts as an umbrella term to encapsulate the three major types of bodily action that I examine: gestures (bimpampa), dances (makinu), and spirit-induced trembling (zakama) (see table 1.1). Robert Farris Thompson is the preeminent trailblazer in studying Kongo bimpampa and makinu and has inspired my own work in many ways. His approach, however, is largely from an art history perspective, usually in relation to static material objects, paintings, and aesthetic concepts, although his studies *African Art in Motion* (1974), *Le Geste Kongo* (2002), and *Tango: The Art History of Love* (2005) are notable exceptions that also incorporate bodily movement and dance. I build on and expand his research by looking at cultural performances in motion and sociopolitical context. In focusing on the performances themselves and how their meanings, uses, and relationship to authority change over time, I hope to provide a socially and historically situated analysis of Kongo performance practice in the Lower Congo. Next, I briefly explore each of these everyday cultural performances in turn.

First, bimpampa are largely understood as gestures. Gesture, as a concept, has been described in a number of ways, with a more common definition being “any kind of bodily movement . . . which transmits a message to the observer” (Thomas 1992, 1). For my own work, I embrace Carrie Noland’s definition of gesture as “the organized forms of kinesis through which subjects navigate and alter their worlds” (2009, 4). Her definition is broad enough to embrace gestures both as habit and as intentional strategy, recognizing the importance of culture and social influence on bodily movement while at the same time illuminating human agency and choice. As such, gestures can be voluntary or involuntary, express feelings or ideas, accompany speech, or have aesthetic or instrumentalist aims. The topic of “gesture” has seen a recent resurgence of interest by scholars in a variety of fields, from history to linguistics to cultural and dance studies (Braddick 2009; de Jorio 2000; Noland and Ness 2008). Notable among this emerging literature is Carrie Noland’s monograph *Agency and Embodiment* (2009), a groundbreaking theoretical
treatise examining how bodily sensations created through gestures are constitutive of the individual subject. Noland views gestures as performative in the sense that they help individuals to come into existence. I take a complementary approach in this book by focusing on gestures in the context of social interaction and struggles for power. I am interested in how gestures are used both for the creation of and as the result of group identities, and how they are used to transform social realities. In exploring the real-life consequences of the intersubjective uses and meanings of gesture in everyday life, I am building on anthropologist Thomas Csordas’s approach to intercorporeality (2008). Gail Weiss (1999) captures the importance of intercorporeality in interaction when she writes, “the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies” (5). Moreover, because my work also examines spirit possession, I add an additional layer of complexity to the study of gesture. Thus, while individual subjectivity is important, gestures in interactional contexts and in the constitution of group identities are the focus of my own intellectual endeavor.

While a few scholars such as anthropologist Adam Kendon (1997, 2004) have vigorously explored the study of gesture, gesture in anthropology remains marginalized and continues to focus mainly on sign language (Farrell 1995) or the relationship of gesture to verbal expressions and language (Haviland 1998, 1999; Kendon 2004; McNeil 2000). Thus, the study of gesture in anthropology that has not received much attention, similar to the study of dance, which, although less marginalized than gesture, remains on the fringes of anthropological inquiry (Reed 1998, 504). I believe this is the

### Table 1.1 Comparison of Characteristics of Kongo Everyday Cultural Performances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Performance</th>
<th>Voluntary or Involuntary</th>
<th>Set apart from or existing within daily life</th>
<th>Secular or Sacred</th>
<th>Public or Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bimpampa (gestures)</td>
<td>Both voluntary and involuntary</td>
<td>Within daily life</td>
<td>Both secular and sacred</td>
<td>Usually public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makinu (dances)</td>
<td>Usually voluntary</td>
<td>Usually set apart from daily life</td>
<td>Both secular and sacred</td>
<td>Usually public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zakama (spirit-induced trembling)</td>
<td>Usually involuntary</td>
<td>Both set apart from and existing within daily life</td>
<td>Sacred</td>
<td>Both public and private</td>
</tr>
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</table>
case because, like many other disciplines that have grown out of Western thought, anthropology remains haunted by the Descartian dualism that privileges the mind over the body and often posits the body as the site of irrationality and emotion. In the Kongo cultural context, bimpampa are always understood in the context of communicating something to someone. Art historians have been the most engaged in studying Kongo gestures, including Robert Farris Thompson and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz (2013). Martinez-Ruiz, in his groundbreaking study of Kongo body language and graphic writing, presents physical evidence from cave paintings that support his assertion that the gestural history of this region of Central Africa goes back for several thousand years (2009). With such a history, gesture is a critical everyday form of communication and interaction for BisiKongo people. “Far more than aesthetic additions to verbal communication,” Martinez-Ruiz writes, “gestures among the BaKongo are a form of language and a mode of communication in their own right” (2009). Thus, bimpampa are a crucial part of being-in-the-world for the BisiKongo. Moreover, bimpampa as a term doesn’t usually stand alone, as the part of the body being used is often indicated (Professor Mbala Nkanga, July 19, 2007). Thus, bimpampa bia moko would be gestures of the hands, for instance.

The second everyday cultural performance that I examine is makinu—dances. Makinu comes from the Kikongo verb kina, to dance, although music and singing accompanies these dances. Like bimpampa, the term makinu is usually used with another term describing the context. Thus, renowned MuKongo scholar Fu-Kiau kia Bunseki describes elders talking about the dances of the Kongo Kingdom in the following way: “They mentioned makinu ma bakulu (dances for the ancestors), makinu ma mfumu (dances for the king), the related makinu ma nsi (dances of the nobility), makinu ma nkisi (dances in honor of healing spirits) and makinu ma soonga (ecstatic dances, climaxed by the descent of the spirit, from the realm of the ancestors)” (quoted in Thompson 2005, 63). Another type of makinu not mentioned here, but very important in Kongo cultural performance, is makinu ma luketo (dances of the hips), which interviewees often called kisi nsi (of the land, tradition). This book explores various contexts where dances are politicized in the Lower Congo, from when makinu became a site of contention during the prophetic movements of the colonial period, to how they are again redefined as part and parcel of the nationalist project under Mobutu.

Last, spirit-induced trembling (zakama) is another cultural performance with deep salience in Kongo history, dating back to the precolonial era. The vigorous trembling that would overtake the bodies of different banganga was a sign of territorial or other spirits entering their bodies (Cuvelier 1953b, 135;
Dapper 1686, 336–37). Knowledge of these historical embodied practices led some Western missionaries to quickly categorize Kimbangu’s trembling in 1921, in the context of a Christian movement, as “pagan” (Andersson 1958). However, this spirit-induced trembling provided Kongo people with an alternate source of authority from the spiritual realm that enabled political challenges to Belgian colonial hegemony while also shaping a nascent Kongo nationalism. This study aims to demonstrate the usefulness of a focus on everyday cultural performances to the disciplines of anthropology, Africana studies, religious studies, and the field of performance studies, and the unique perspective that such an approach provides to studies of society and history.

Nationalism, Performativity, and Power on and off the Stage

March 17, 2006. After dressing and eating a quick breakfast, I announce my departure to my host mother and close the blue security gate behind me. I step carefully as I walk along the uneven road until I arrive at a busy intersection. I join a small group of people already standing there and begin to move my right hand in a sideways waving motion, indicating to the passing improvised taxis (which are no more than people’s personal cars being used for business purposes) that I want to go down Kinshasa’s main road, Boulevard du 30 Juin. Kinshasa, Congo’s capital city, is a bustling metropolis of an estimated eight million people. However, one of the major infrastructural problems of such a rapidly expanding city, one still recovering from civil war and neglect, is the lack of public transportation. When a taxi slows, I run quickly to grab the door handle so I am one of the first inside the vehicle. Regardless, I end up squished in the backseat with three other people. When I finally arrive at my stop, I pay the driver, cross the boulevard, and walk two blocks to enter the security screening area of the building that houses the American Cultural Center. After running a number of errands over the course of the day, I end up in the information resource library. I am sitting at one of the computers, checking e-mail and generally surfing the Internet. Suddenly, I begin to hear very loud singing outside of the building. When it continues, I become curious and try unsuccessfully to peer through the window. Not able to see much, I leave my spot since the room is basically empty, exiting the library, passing through one set of doors and entering another into the security screening area. One door is held open as several people look outside at the activities across the street. I join the group of curious onlookers. Taking a quick estimated count, I see a group of about 160 people in front of the building of the independent electoral commission. I ask one of the security officers at the door about the event, and he explains that Antoine Gizenga, an eighty-year-
old politician, is coming to the building to submit his nomination as a presidential candidate. All the people are singing, and some of them are dancing as well. Many are waving either a cloth or a small branch back and forth in the air, and most of them are dressed in similar party cloth displaying the face of their candidate. As I continue to watch, and even after I eventually collect my belongings and leave the building for another appointment, the crowd of supporters shout slogans and sing song after song together, performing their loyalty and support for their presidential candidate. Although I had only seen examples of it on videos, read about it, and heard about it from people I had interviewed, it seemed political animation, which dated to President Mobutu's era, had resurfaced in the multiparty state.

During President Joseph-Desiré Mobutu Sese Seko’s thirty-two-year regime in the Congo (1965–97), he instituted a policy that forced citizens to dance and sing in demonstration of their allegiance to a coercive state. At political rallies and parades, but also in school classrooms and in places of business, movement and song brought people of different religions, ages, and ethnic backgrounds together under the flag of the renamed nation of Zaire. Political animation was clearly an example of state power being imposed through performance. But how can we understand the relationship between power, performance, and individual bodies? Subsequently, what role, then, does civil religion play in the relationship between citizens’ performing bodies and political states?

Following Michel Foucault, I see power as something not held, but rather exercised, acting on the actions of others (2000, 340). I differ, however, in how I conceptualize the relationship between power, society, and individual bodies. Foucault recognizes the importance of the body for power relations and the constitution of subjects. He writes, “Let us ask, instead, how things work . . . at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors, etc. In other words . . . we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc.” (1980, 97). Here, then, Foucault presents individual subjects as shaped by larger social forces and relations of power to such an extent that even the “material,” the biological, is socially constructed. He reinforces this when he writes, “The body is molded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through habits or moral
laws. . . Nothing in man—*not even his body*—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men” (1984, 87–88, emphasis mine).

However, both Foucault’s and Bourdieu’s approaches (as previously discussed), place so much emphasis on the constitutive constraints of society—on people acting according to previously established rules, customs, and generative principles—that there is little room for human creativity, especially by and through physical bodies. Indeed, as Brenda Farnell notes, for such social theorists, the body “usually remains a static, more or less passive cultural object of disciplines and representations, separate from the mind” (1999, 348), or in other words, “a mindless, unconscious repository and mechanistic operator of practical techniques” (2000, 409). Farnell advocates understanding the body as a locus of embodied and intentional human action, where human agents produce meaning through actions both “out of awareness through habit or skill or [through] highly deliberate choreographies” (1999, 348). Performance, once again, is the most useful concept for capturing the idea of this intentional embodied action. As Johannes Fabian notes, “performance . . . certainly is action, but not merely enactment of a pre-existing script; it is making, fashioning, creating” (1990, 13). In short, while power is exercised and clearly impacts how we use our bodies in the world, people are not robots following commands. In our everyday performances, we can take preexisting behavior and shape it to meet our needs in that moment; ways of moving and their associated cultural values can also be resignified.

Performances as explicitly intentional acts can be strategically used to try to shape group belonging and affiliation in particular ways and have been useful in shaping sentiments of nationalism especially. I follow Anthony Smith’s definition of *nationalism* as “an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of a population some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation.’ (In this sense, one can, and does have nationalism without nations, just as more rarely we can speak about nations without nationalism)” (2006, 175). There is now a burgeoning literature on the relationship between performance and nationalism, and struggles for power between and among citizens and states. Kelly Askew’s ethnography *Performing the Nation* (2002) focuses on the role of performance in actually constructing the heterogeneous nation of Tanzania. Using J. L. Austin’s (1962) concept of performative statements, Askew successfully shows that the production of a “nation” and national imaginaries through performance is crucial in Tanzania, especially since the nation is composed of two formerly separate countries with different identities (2002, 6).24 Thus, Askew emphasizes the need for governments and states to con-
tinuously perform to solidify national identity. Attention to performance then “can expose the continual performance not only required by states but required of states. . . . Saying and, notably, performing the nation brings it into being. Words alone are insufficient” (292). Singing a national anthem, chanting slogans, and performing in a band at a state-sponsored rally are some of the many ways in which, “through their shared performances, the citizens of a state congeal and bring the nation—however variegated—into being” (290–91). By emphasizing the constant need of states to perform their power and citizens their allegiance, Askew reveals the importance of performances in constituting nations as “imagined communities.”

In his groundbreaking work on power and the politics of performance, anthropologist Johannes Fabian shows the inner workings, micro-level decisions, and state interventions that shaped one particular theater performance for a troupe in Shaba, Zaire (1990). His work laid the foundation for scholars who followed, as within the last decade in both anthropology and performance studies, there have been a number of studies of what Jay Straker calls “state scripted nationalism” (2007, 209) in postcolonial Africa. What each of the authors does well is explore the multifaceted relationship between power, performance, and national identity, providing insights that I build on in my own study. For example, in her study of theater troupes in Tanzania, Laura Edmondson goes beyond a resistance/complicity binary and highlights the multiplicity of responses and interpretations of theater performances connected to the Tanzanian state. Such an approach informs my own work on the nuances of citizen-state relations in my examination of political animation in Zaire. Likewise, Bob White’s highly relevant study of popular musicians in former Zaire (2008), and other studies of dancing women at political rallies in Malawi (Gilman 2009) and “militant theater” in revolutionary Guinea (Straker 2009) all explore how citizen’s bodies were used, both voluntarily and by force, to represent particular ideologies and conceptions of the nation-state. These investigations provide an additional lens on my analysis of state-scripted nationalism in postcolonial Congo. Moreover, Francesca Castaldi’s work on national ballets in Senegal (2006) brings attention to the role of ethnicity in state-sanctioned performances of the nation, another relevant theme in my own work.

While all these analyses complicate our understandings of performed nationalisms in Africa, they focus on staged, public performances in spaces usually set apart from everyday life. I argue that nationalism in everyday life settings is just as important for creating a sense of belonging. Inspired by Askew’s (2002) observations of the use of taraab musical performance to negotiate local social relations, my own focus on everyday cultural per-
formances, with and without music, allows us to examine multiple levels of politics in daily life, so that individual tactics and collective action as well as evolving ideas of BisiKongo ethnicity and ethnic nationalism are all implicated in the performative encounters that are the focus of this study.

Moreover, in this book I discuss the importance of coercion in certain performances of nationalism in Africa—a topic that has been understudied, with some exceptions (for example, Gilman 2009; Mbembe 1992; White 2008). I use the term *coercion* in the sense of one person or group of people using physical force, threats, or sanctions to control the behavior of another person/group such that they act in a manner that they would not have without the coercion. While political animation under President Mobutu is the strongest example of coerced performances of nationalism in the book, other instances (such as a colonial administrator’s policy of using forced dancing to combat Kongo prophetic movements) reveal how forced embodied performances were expected to have an effect on group subjectivity and identity. I discuss political animation in postcolonial Zaire as part of a larger “civil religion,” a public religious dimension that is expressed through a set of rituals, symbols, and beliefs” (Bellah 1967, 4). If we embrace Emile Durkheim’s definition of religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” ([1912] 1995, 44), then it is clear that both colonial-era spirit possession and postcolonial civil religion in the Lower Congo qualify as forms of religion. Both are systems of rites, symbols, and beliefs shared by a collective, and while the sacred entity in the *bangunza* movement was the Holy Spirit, the sacred entity in Zaire’s civil religion was Mobutu himself. Indeed, gods and spirits are not absolutely necessary in order for a religion to exist (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 27–33). What both religions share is an important emphasis on the body; what differs is who or what is moving that body—from an external spiritual force animating your body, to you yourself animating your body to satisfy the demands of an external force (the political state). Thus, I am interested in understanding the mechanisms and consequences of civil religion and its workings on the body. A focus on everyday encounters reveals that emerging national identities and ideologies in the Congo were often expressed through the embodied performances of the population, by force, a sense of loyalty, and other means.

**Performance, Authority, and the Spiritual Realm**

July 26, 2010. I am in Luozi, meeting with Ma Kudada for an interview about her experiences in a local African Independent Church. My research assis-
tant Kilanda and I take turns asking her questions. Ma Kudada is a short, slender woman in her late thirties, demure and a bit reserved, wearing a headscarf, tailored top, and long skirt that she made herself using a colorful fabric. As the conversation continues, she becomes more animated. “When I was born, my mother had me baptized in the Catholic Church.” She was raised on a Catholic mission in another part of Luozi territory, but her life was completely changed when she underwent her confirmation ceremony as a teen. “When the bishop touched my forehead with the oil, I noticed something had happened in me; a big change as if I saw a big, ferocious animal at the altar that was going to devour me; immediately I fled the church. I trembled, I couldn’t see anyone around me.” She then explains that the Holy Spirit had descended into her, and this experience led her to eventually become a member of the Luozi DMNA congregation. DMNA (Dibundu dia Mpeve ya Nlongo mu Afelika) is one of many churches of the Holy Spirit with origins in the Kongo prophetic movements of the colonial era, which began with the visions and trembling of the prophet Simon Kimbangu in 1921.

The cultural embodiment of zakama, spirit-induced trembling, dates back to the banganga of the precolonial era. Whether learned explicitly or observed through other experiences, embodied trembling was historically used among the Kongo as an index of the presence of a spiritual force in the body of the trembling person. The uncontrollable trembling that Ma Kudada experienced parallels the embodied trembling of the prophet Simon Kimbangu, who started a region-wide prophetic movement in 1921 that threatened the hegemony of Western missionaries and Belgian colonial administrators alike. Numerous incidents when trembling prophets and their followers openly challenged, publicly defied, or even physically assaulted Europeans in the Lower Congo, demanding that they leave the country, demonstrate the seriousness of such bodily comportment. Zakama allowed access to a spiritual authority that superseded the claims of Belgians and others who sought to legitimize their rule over their African colonial subjects. Spirituality, then, had very significant political consequences, especially as a competing source of authority and power.

In this study, I examine how bodies are used in religious contexts to create a site of authority that undermines existing relations of power. What role do everyday cultural performances in religious contexts have in constituting, confirming, and contesting authority? A clue in the relationship between religion and authority may be found in Max Weber’s classic study, where he identifies three major claims to legitimacy made in relation to authority:
traditional, based on belief in the sanctity of traditions; rational, based on legal means and laws; and charismatic, resting on exceptional characteristics of individuals, often based on their connection to the spiritual realm (1968, 215). The supernatural realm (from ancient Egyptian pharaohs to women possessed by Catholic saints in the Kongo Kingdom) was often the source of claims to a special status that set one apart from others. Like power itself, which is continually challenged, legitimacy is disputed as well, leading to contestations over authority. In this project, I use cultural performance to question the fixedness of authority, which is always shifting.

The relationship between religion and politics in modern Africa is an area of study needing further research (Meyer 2004), and one useful approach is to examine the intersection of the body, politics, and authority. In addition, in religious studies more generally, there has been a scholarly shift to examining how religion is embodied and lived in everyday life (P. Brown 1988; Hall 1997; McGuire 1990, 2008; Weisenfeld 2013). A part of this shift is renewed attention to power relations in practices of religion (Edgell 2012). The body plays a significant role in religious practice and can be the foundation of larger claims to power. Paul Stoller’s ethnography (1995) of the Hauka movement and spirit possession in a Songhay town in the Republic of Niger explores how spirits of Europeans (called Hauka, a name applied to the spirit mediums as well) possess devotees who then mimic various colonial personages, particularly the military. Through gestures, language, improvised uniforms, wooden guns, and other implements, the Hauka mediums utilize embodied practices to express cultural memories of European colonization. These practices also served to constitute a tranethnic, cross gender, transnational group identity of Hauka mediums who resisted the demands of colonization: they refused to pay taxes, trained for guerilla warfare, refused to work, moved their villages into the bush, and advocated subordination of the French. “Through the power of embodiment,” Stoller writes, “the Hauka stutter-step over the border separating ritual from political practice” (1995, 7). Similarly, in her study of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, Ruth Marshall highlights the importance of the body in conversions: “the focus of born-again conversions is individual conduct, expressed in the tropes of personal mastery through a variety of techniques of the self, such as bodily ascetism, fasting, prayer, assiduous Bible study, permanent self-examination and public witness” (2009, 12). While in the early decades of the Pentecostal revival in the 1970s, Pentecostal leaders avoided participation in secular politics, by the 1990s Pentecostal churches and their leaders became very politically influential in Nigeria, with pastors elected to government positions and even running for president of the country (214–17). Adeline Masquelier’s ethnography (2001) of bori possession in
a Hausaphone Mawri community in Niger also makes connections between religion and larger political struggles. She describes bori as a site of resistance to some of the major transformations in Mawri society, particularly Islamic suppression and scorn. People possessed by bori spirits present an alternative spiritual authority that clearly challenges the larger religious narrative rooted in Islam. Moreover, bori spirits can appear in everyday life—in markets, on public transport, and so on—outside of ritual contexts (128). An additional key point that Masquelier makes is that bori spirit possession is a means by which Mawri people engage with and impact the world: “Mawri understanding is often embedded in praxis—that is, enveloped in bodily attitudes—rather than enunciated through words, concepts, or formulas. Spirit possession, in general, is a mode of understanding and acting upon the world that is based on bodily practice rather than verbal performance” (185). Likewise, zakama is an embodied mode of understanding, being-in, and transforming the world among Kongo people in the Lower Congo region. All these ethnographies, then, demonstrate how spirituality and religious practice, expressed through physical bodies, can be an important resource for creating new forms of authority.

There is something special about spirits and the supernatural realm. Spirits are elusive—they can be neither shot nor arrested. Because they cannot be physically touched, they often cannot be controlled. It is perhaps this elusiveness that inspires both fear and awe in cases of spirit possession. But religious power also comes from conduct, gestures, and other forms of embodiment outside of spirit possession. My work extends this discussion to look at embodied religion more broadly; considering spirit possession but also civil or secular religion in terms of the worship of political leaders such as President Mobutu Sese Seko; and examining rituals in churches but also in cemeteries, forests, schools, and everyday encounters on the street. Ruth Marshall argues for seeing religion as a site of action, rather than just as a means of creating meaning (2009, 22). Following Marshall, I focus on how religion has been strategically used to motivate and unite large groups of people, moving beyond analyses of meaning and symbolism, to illuminate social transformation caused by concerted action. Further, religious discourse, beliefs, and rituals can be both a weapon of the weak and a tool of those in advantageous sociopolitical positions. Spiritual and political authority can both engender and challenge one another through moving and feeling bodies.

In sum, the study of everyday cultural performances can provide a different perspective on the role of religion and spirituality in struggles for power in the Lower Congo. Most recent studies of performance and power miss the elements of spirituality and religion, partially because of their focus
on performance as events set apart from daily life. My study places the body at the center of analysis to help us better understand the role of religion in struggles for power and the creation of nationalist sentiments in everyday life.

There is a need for more anthropological studies of religion that address larger-scale politics and also examine religious practice outside of structured ritual contexts. Attention to performances in everyday life can reveal the countless ways that both authority and nationalism are configured, showing the importance of the body for staking claims that stem from the spiritual realm and are transforming group consciousness and action. Embodied performances can be strategically associated with certain values, beliefs, and ideas—from the Black power fist to the Heil Hitler salute—and because of these associations embodied performances can both challenge and support existing social and political structures. Moreover, social positions are made and unmade through everyday interactions with others; authority depends not only on who you are, what position you occupy, or what you have, but it is also based on your own cultural performances and others’ responses to them.

**Methods and Travels**

My approach to my research project was rooted in anthropological methods such as participant observation and individual interviews, combined with archival documentation. While I left for the Congo with an interest in “Kongo traditional dances,” most of the themes that appear in this book arose through an emergent, inductive process rather than being imposed from the start. This is a qualitative study, based on fifteen months of ethnographic and archival research in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Belgium, the United States and the UK between 2005 and 2012, with most of the data collected during a year-long research trip in the Congo from 2005 to 2006 (funded by a Fulbright grant) with a follow-up trip in 2010. To fully research the politics of everyday performances, I employed three main methods.

The first method was based on examining archival materials such as missionary diaries, state reports, travel narratives, accounts of literate Congolese, and performance programs, among others, to illuminate the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial histories of makinu, bimpampa, and zakama. I approached my use of these multiple archives with an awareness of archives as political institutions and products, in which, as Jacques Derrida notes, “the archivization produces as much as it records the events” (1996, 7). In what anthropologist Ann Stoler calls the “archival turn,” scholars in multiple disciplines over the last few decades have begun to see archives not as impartial collections of truthful documents, but as sites of knowledge production, state power, and ethnographic projects in and of themselves (Arondekar 2005;
Mbembe 2002; Stoler 2002). In the particular instance of Western writing about African religions and spiritual practices, V. Y. Mudimbe cautions Africans themselves against the “colonial library,” a body of knowledge created by European explorers, travelers, missionaries, anthropologists, and colonial administrators based on negative representations of African practices and beliefs, which were largely seen and defined by the West as “deviant” (1994, xii; 1988, 175–89). Thus, my strategy for engaging with archives was to try to read them both against and along their grain, in order to recognize patterns of misinformation, omission, and negativity that shaped the products—indeed, I tried to remain cognizant of “the power in the production of the archive itself” (Stoler 2002, 101). I consulted multiple archives and libraries in the Democratic Republic of Congo including: the National Museum, the National Archives, the Main Library of the l’Université Pédagogique National (UPN), the National Library, the National Institute of Arts, CEPAS (Centre d’Études pour l’Action Sociale), Pere Bontinck’s personal library at Scolasticat, Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa (FCK), the library of College Boboto in Kinshasa, the Jesuit Canisius Library at Kimwanza, the Mayidi Grand Seminary in Bas-Congo, the Library of Luozi, and the museum of the CEC (Communauté Evangelique du Congo) Protestant church in Luozi. In Belgium, I consulted the African Archives of the Minister of Foreign Affairs (which houses the majority of documents from the colonial period in the Congo) in Brussels and ethnographic images and documents of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, in Tervuren. I also collected documents from the archives of the American Baptist Historical Society at Mercer University (Atlanta, Georgia) and the archive of the Baptist Missionary Society at Regents Park College (Oxford, UK).

The second method was based on conducting interviews to investigate the significance and function of makinu, bimpampa, and zakama in both past and contemporary life, the beliefs and worship practices of the DMNA church, personal experiences of political animation, and the mission and practice of Bundu dia Kongo. Like archives, interviews are also influenced by power dynamics. As a federally funded graduate student from the United States, I was in a considerably better financial and social position than most (but not all) of my interviewees. As anthropologist Katherine Ewing notes, interviewing is much more than the collection of information; “an utterance is an index or sign of the relationship between speaker and hearer” (2006, 91). The difference in social position, as well as anxiety about my intentions (especially with regard to my interactions with members of Bundu dia Kongo, who were being persecuted by the local government and law enforcement authorities), surely shaped the responses that interviewees gave to my ques-
tions. However, since my larger focus on gesture, dance, and other forms of embodiment was not typically seen as a threatening or invasive subject (with the exception of political animation under Mobutu), most people were eager and willing to speak with me and share their knowledge and experiences. As my topic also focused specifically on embodiment in Kongo culture, many people saw my study as a positive project that valorized Kongo culture within a larger context of BisiKongo political and economic marginalization in the broader country. My topic attracted interest and cooperation because of the role my study could play in the process of staking political claims, especially in the context of the nationalist fervor that groups like Bundu dia Kongo were creating in Luozi at the time. Thus, whether I wanted to be or not, I was implicated in the everyday power dynamics that defined the lives and struggles of my interviewees and interlocutors.

I conducted and recorded sixty-two interviews of dancers, musicians, professors, audience members, pastors, church members, and other people, in both Luozi and Kinshasa, and one interview in Mayidi (all in the Congo). I used nonprobability sampling (Bernard 2011, 145) to select interviewees with the expertise and life experiences most relevant to my research questions. I found participants most often through suggestions from my contacts, who were usually Congolese professors, performing artists, or religious leaders; in this way, I was able to avoid, for the most part, people who did not have the knowledge to answer my questions. I also depended quite a bit on several people with whom I engaged in many dialogues over the course of my stay, including Tata Kimpianga Mahaniah (founder of the Free University of Luozi); Tata Ndundu Kivwila (professor at the National Institute of Arts); and my friend and key cultural consultant, Kikongo teacher, and occasional research assistant, Ne Nkamu Luyindula. I also arranged many interviews myself based on seeing people perform or hearing about their knowledge and skill in particular areas of performance that interested me. I compensated all my interviewees for their time and their travel as well, especially if they came far to do the interview. I conducted my interviews in French, which many people did seem at least moderately comfortable with, especially in Kinshasa. In Luozi, although I used French there as well, I occasionally had to ask a friend or my research assistant to interpret Kikongo for me, especially with a few of the older interviewees. My Kikongo was still not advanced enough to do interviews in, and although I did try to learn as much as I could in everyday interactions, people would sense my weakness in the language and switch to French, which helped me to communicate, but frustrated my developing Kikongo. For most of my interviews, if I was not accompanied by a friend, one or more research assistants were present, helping to take notes
or translate as necessary. The study is limited in this regard, as some of the dialogue may have been lost in translation. I worked with four research assistants mainly, three of whom were young men (David, Philippe, Mathieu) and one of whom was a young woman (Kilanda), all in Luozi.

The third method I used was participant observation of performance events. These included weddings, funerals, the construction of tombs, the cleaning of cemeteries, worship services in churches every Sunday and throughout the week, cultural festivals, performance group rehearsals and presentations, rallies and parades, community theater, and other events. For the most part, I depended on friends and others associated with my work to let me know when events were happening, although I did find some events of my own accord. I attended and videotaped many events during my ethnographic field research, to retain records for further analysis. I always asked permission before recording and was usually granted permission, especially after I began to burn vcds for the performing groups or participants in the performances as a token of appreciation for their participation.35 If the events were funerals or weddings, I always brought a small donation in an envelope as well to give to the family. Much of my observation and participation in bimpampa also occurred on a daily basis, as I walked the roads and encountered other people, embodying the proper greetings I had learned.

The BisiKongo, also known as BaKongo, are the ethnic group one finds throughout the Lower Congo, where people speak varying dialects of the same language, Kikongo. While exact estimates are difficult, nearly six million people in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, and Angola speak Kikongo or one of its dialects as a first language (Lewis 2015) (see map 1.1).36

Over the course of my research, I divided my time in the Congo between two main sites, including Kongo communities and interactions with Kongo people in the urban metropolis of Kinshasa, and those in Luozi, a rural, agricultural town located in the western province of Bas-Congo. As a brown-skinned African American woman conducting research in post-colonial Congo (a country that lacks a vibrant tourist industry), the position I occupied, not by any choice of my own, hovered in between “native” and “stranger.” Because of my skin color and features, I was often seen as one of the “skinfolk,” to use a term popularized by Zora Neale Hurston ([1942] 1991, 168). This enabled me to experience many aspects of daily life as many Congolese did, as I was not explicitly marked as a foreigner. Thus, interwoven throughout the manuscript is the narrative of my own experiences. This approach is significant because my social location as a female African American ethnographer shaped unique interpersonal interactions tied to
perceived identity, connected to both past and present nationalist movements in my research site, and informed a more nuanced understanding of daily life in postcolonial Congo.

Chapter Overview

Part I of the book, “Performative Encounters, Political Bodies,” continues with chapter 1 to describe my research methodology and my two primary research sites—Kinshasa, the capital city, and Luozi, a small town on the rural periphery of Bas-Congo province. Approached reflexively, this chapter explores how a young woman from the South Bronx ended up in the Congo, and how my own history and body both intersected with and diverged from the experiences and beliefs of the BisiKongo people I interviewed and interacted with on a daily basis.

Part II of the book is “Spirits, Bodies, and Performance in Belgian Congo.” Chapter 2 uses documents from the Baptist Missionary Society, American
Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, and Belgian colonial archives, as well as personal interviews to examine spirit-induced trembling (zakama) as a site of moral and political contestation between the church and colonial state, and the indigenous population in the Lower Congo. The chapter focuses on the kingunza movements that swept the Lower Congo with the emergence of the prophet Simon Kimbangu in 1921. Through performative encounters, the kingunza movement used a type of spiritual legitimacy gained from the religious realm to subvert Belgian colonial authority, using Kongo bodies as the key weapons of resistance. Chapter 3 examines the kingunza movements after the arrest and imprisonment of Simon Kimbangu, as well as colonial discourses on secular Kongo dances (makinu). Makinu were seen as “indecent” threats to public morality. As the kingunza movements gained strength and Kongo people continued to participate irrespective of persecution, colonial agents visualized the potential of using one form of Kongo embodied practice, makinu, to combat another, kingunza.

Part III of the book, “Civil Religion and Performed Politics in Postcolonial Congo,” opens with a chapter that considers the relationship between performance and authority during the postcolonial period under the dictatorial regime of Mobutu Sese Seko. State-scripted dancing and singing, most commonly known as animation politique, became part and parcel of daily life for average citizens of Zaire. The adoration of Mobutu became a civil religion as the ideologies of his regime were reinforced through the everyday performances of the citizens, and through Mobutu’s own attempts to supplant everyday religious practice with performances in his own honor. This chapter examines yet another shift in the relationship of embodied cultural performances to political authority, in particular from the early 1970s to the 1990s. Using interviews in Kinshasa and Luozi and archival documents retrieved in Kinshasa, I examine the connection between Mobutu’s policies and ideologies, ordinary Kongo citizens, dancers and musicians, and their embodied practices. Specifically, I look at the impact of animation politique in three major areas of everyday life in rural Luozi territory: schools, businesses, and churches.

In chapter 5, I examine the localized effects of national policies of animation politique on women from the Kongo ethnic group living in Luozi territory in postcolonial Zaire. My focus on the lived and gendered experiences of animation politique allows me to posit coerced performance as an often overlooked but quite potent governmental technique that not only seeks to shape individual and group subjectivities, but also disrupts the moral order of local communities. I build on Achille Mbembe’s work on the banality of power by examining the experiences of women in their engagement with a
coercive state—one that demanded specific performances from them, both on and off the stage. Specifically, I illuminate the impact of performative encounters in the bedroom. My interviews show that the sexual exploitation of female dancers, even in the most rural areas, largely created moral disorder and fostered negative sentiments in local communities, thus undermining the nationalist project. I argue the complex engagement of these women with the state under Mobutu was a form of gendered nationalism that differed from the experiences of male performers.

Part IV of the book is called “Re-creating the Past, Performing the Future.” Chapter 6 focuses on the movement of Bundu dia Kongo to explore the importance of embodied performances in the current post-Mobutu era for making explicit political statements and mobilizing large groups of people for concerted action. Bundu dia Kongo is a Kongo politico-religious-nationalist group that is fully engaged in a struggle for the political representation and governance of Kongo people, with the ultimate goal of establishing a separate Kongo nation-state. Because of their intense and aggressive activism, the Congolese government has intensely persecuted members of Bundu dia Kongo, leading to the deaths of over two hundred BDK members in clashes with authorities in 2008 and, ultimately, the banning of the group. The chapter examines their ideological beliefs and political goals and then focuses on the ways that Bundu dia Kongo uses the body and the reformation of bodily habits, both in everyday interactions and spiritual worship, as a means of unifying Kongo people around cultural memories of the former Kongo Kingdom. This chapter also considers attempts by the leadership of Bundu dia Kongo to control forms of embodiment that may act as sites from which others may challenge the growing but tenuous authority of the movement.

The conclusion of the book summarizes the major findings, emphasizing the multivalent meanings and uses of bimpampa, zakama, and makinu over time and in different contexts, and noting the importance of embodied performances in everyday social interactions for both constituting and challenging secular and religious authority and supporting nationalism. The chapter returns to three themes in regards to the body in studies of religion and power: the body as center, conduit, and catalyst. I also provide suggestions for future research and lines of inquiry by discussing the significance of this study for research on embodied practices across the Atlantic in the New World.