Three Women

Ma Ntima sits with her hands gently clasped in her lap, wearing a simple tailored top and matching pagne, with a piece of fabric tied to cover her head. Her teenage son sits next to her on the sofa, on her left side. She understands my questions in French but is more comfortable responding and clarifying in Kikongo, and so her son acts as the translator. We sit on opposite sides of a coffee table, sipping red Vitalo soft drinks.1 Our interview takes place in Luozi, in the home of the professor with whom I am staying. Ma Ntima was born in Luozi territory in 1959 and continues to reside there. She is married, the mother of six children, and the wife of a pastor of an African Independent church. She has a reserved demeanor, with a calm, serene air about her. In the middle of our interview, it begins to rain heavily, and the sound of raindrops pelting the window provides the ambient backdrop as she recounts her own experiences. After our interview, she continues on to a meeting with other local women of the Protestant churches in Luozi, lifting her pagne slightly as she navigates the puddles created by the rain.

Ma Bangoma greets me with the hearty handshake and genuflection (dekama) used by many of the women in town, and when I respond in kind, she laughs with delight. Our interview also takes place in Luozi,
and we chat briefly and snack on peanuts and soda before Tata Nkolele, a middle-aged man who helped to arrange our meeting, arrives to take part in the conversation with us. A married mother of eight children, she was born in 1953 in Luozi territory and currently resides in the town of Luozi. She works as a functionary of the state. She often responds to my questions with laughter and eagerly demonstrates several songs and dances over the course of the interview, showcasing her expertise as a performer.

Ma Mayazola spent a significant part of her youth back in Luozi territory, where her family is from, but now lives in the Mont-Ngafu neighborhood in Kinshasa. After several rides in crowded taxi buses and a long twisting walk through sand-covered paths, my friend Laurent and I arrive at her small, one-level home. It is situated near some of the urban gardens giving the neighborhood a sense of being a village inside a big city. Born in 1953, she is married, the mother of eight children, and farms for a living. She is also a member of Bundu dia Kongo, a religious-sociopolitical organization (non-Christian) with the goal of rebuilding the precolonial Kongo Kingdom (see chapter 6). She interrupts our interview several times to sharply call out orders to her children as she chops greens over a large pot simmering on an outdoor fire, preparing the evening meal for her family.

While they all have different personalities and life trajectories, these three women have much in common; they are from the same ethnic group (Kongo/BaManianga), all have ties to Luozi territory, all are married, and all have children. However, another tie that binds them is a common experience—in their youth, primarily during the 1970s, they were all dancers in local performance troupes of animation politique during Mobutu Sese Seko’s rule. I examine the gendered dynamics of the interrelationship of power and performance in Zaire through their stories. Using their experiences I specifically ask, what can we learn about the ways that citizenship is gendered by looking at coerced embodied performances? How is the civil religion of Zaire—the worship of Mobutu and his ideas—made real by and through women’s physical bodies?

In this chapter, I seek to recover the voices of women and their experiences as performers in many different settings as subjects of an oppressive nation-state. The sexual exploitation of female dancers emerges as a prominent theme in my interviews. By focusing on the experiences of young Kongo women recruited into local animation troupes in rural Luozi territory, I examine the ways their participation as citizens in Zaire was a form of gendered embodied citizenship that differed from the experiences and expectations of male dancers, and more specifically, was subject to the intimate violence of the state. 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 demanding specific performances from them, both on and off the stage. I argue that the penetrative forms of gendered embodied citizenship that young women experienced in Zaire clearly differed from the experiences of their male counterparts and fostered negative sentiments among local communities, thus undermining the nationalist project. Thus, my investigation of women’s experiences of animation politique in Luozi will illuminate the gendered dimensions of performed nationalisms in everyday life.

**Gendered Nationalisms and Coercive States**

While Achille Mbembe’s work on the banality of power has transformed approaches to subject-state relations in Africa, one critique of his analysis of power in postcolonial Africa has been the lack of attention to gender (Butler 1992, 70), specifically the role of women under an oppressive state. Studies of state power and nationalism more generally, like Eley and Suny’s edited volume, have also called for more attention to the “gendered dimensions and meanings of nationalist discourse” (1996, 27). This can be done by examining the place of women in nationalist movements (such as McClintock’s [1991] study of the role of white women in Afrikaner nationalism) and by looking at how women are socially constructed as citizens in different nation-states (Nira Yuval-Davis 1997, 1999; Olesky, Hearn, and Golanska 2011; Seungsook Moon 2005; Veena Das 2008). Citizenship can be most simply defined as “a form of membership in a political and geographic community [that] can be disaggregated into four dimensions: legal status, rights, political and other forms of participation in society, and a sense of belonging” (Bloemraad, Korteweg, and Yurdakul 2008, 154). The idea of citizenship has always been gendered, ever since its origins in ancient Greece, where citizenship was based on the exclusion of women (McEwan 2000, 630). Thus, to understand the full complexities of how citizenship is realized in daily life, studies of gendered citizenship explore how men and women live and experience citizenship differently.

There is a need for further analysis in existing discussions of gendered citizenship of the varied ways the bodies of male and female citizens are used to further nationalist aims. The concept of embodied citizenship deals with the interaction between bodies and citizenship, the private and the public, examining subjectivities both political and material, and thoroughly social in nature (Bacchi and Beasley 2000, 350; 2002, 325). In this chapter, I put forward a conception of “gendered embodied citizenship” to capture the everyday imposition of coercive states on women’s bodies in ways that dif-
fer from the expected activities of male citizens. This concept also tries to describe how within a discourse of inclusive citizenship, women's individual choices and obligations to self, family, and local communities are superseded by the needs and wants of the coercive state. This differs from other studies of gendered citizenship that tend to focus on ideologies of women as reproducing mothers within families (Moon 2005) rather than examining at the micro level how women actually perform with their bodies in everyday life in the service of the state. Gilman's study of the role of performing women at political rallies in Malawi is one of the few to examine gender, politics, nationalism, and embodied performance (2009). Through my analysis of animation politique and other required performances as manifestations of gendered embodied citizenship, I hope to do the same for Kongo women in Zaire. Moreover, although both men and women were performers in Zaire, the voices of women remain marginalized in the few existing studies of animation that exist presently (Huckstep 2005; Kapalanga 1989; Thassinda 1992; White 2008). To fully understand how citizenship was both gendered and embodied in Zaire, I center women's experiences in this chapter.

O Linga, O Linga Te: How They Came to Perform

Returning to the stories and experiences of the three women introduced at the start of the chapter, one aspect of animation politique illuminated by interviews with women ex-performers in Luozi is the different opinions that exist between people who were part of the animation machine, and others who felt as though the performances had been forced on them. In my interview with George Matadi in Kinshasa, who as I previously stated played a founding role in animation politique, I inquired about the nature of participation in animation groups. The exchange follows:

Y.C.-W.: Were people paid for animation?
G.M.: nooo! (insistently)
Y.C.-W.: But, was it by force?
G.M.: No, it wasn’t by force. Not forced. . . . We say because of spontaneity, enthusiasm.
Y.C.-W.: It was a voluntary choice?
G.M.: Voluntary! Voluntary! Free! . . . It was free. They came in droves. They sang! They sang! They sang! Everyone was having a good time. From young mothers, to young girls, to young men. No, everyone was having a good time. When Mobutu had power, everyone was having a good time. (July 16, 2005)
While Matadi’s response paints a picture of happiness and choice, the portrait that emerges in recollections of women performers in animation troupes in Luozi territory presents a direct contradiction. When each woman was asked about the objectives of political animation, their responses were very similar. Ma Mayazola said people danced for the glory of Mobutu, and Ma Ntima reiterated the same notion with her response of “during the time of Mobutu, it was obligatory to dance for Mobutu whether you wanted to or not” (Ma Ntima, October 10, 2005, and Ma Mayazola, October 5, 2005). Ma Bangoma responded with, “You were obligated . . . to go and sing political songs. . . . It was animation” (Ma Bangoma, October 14, 2005).

In discussing how they came to perform in these troupes, all three women mentioned the importance of coercion, although some described this in greater detail than others. When asked how she came to be a dancer in a group of political animators, Ma Mayazola explained she was chosen from her village in the sector of Kivunda by virtue of her age and marital status: “They took the young men and women from the village to go; it was obligatory, to go and sing and dance for the head of the sector. . . . They took the youth that were single and who were not students in school, women who had one or two kids but were not married, and young men who were not married, people who were unemployed. If you refused to go, they would send soldiers to get you and take you by force, and they would take you to the sector town, and you would pay a fine” (Ma Mayazola, October 5, 2005).

Ma Mayazola explained this group of selected youth formed the JMPR for the village. The state’s focus was largely on youth who could be thought of as unproductive and idle—unemployed, unmarried, and not enrolled in school. Ma Mayazola was about eighteen years old when she began to dance with the troupe. What is clear here is the importance of coercion in recruitment, such that one’s refusal to participate would lead to intervention and force by soldiers.

For Ma Ntima, who was chosen to dance while living in her village in the sector of Mbanza-Mona, the story is similar: “They would choose single people, those whose marriages were not recognized by the state, girls who left school. I left the school because my mother was sick, and for this, I was chosen. . . . The chief of the village helped to choose people because he knew whether they were married, studying, or not” (Ma Ntima, October 10, 2005). Ma Ntima’s account reiterates the state’s focus on pursuing “idle” youth for the dance troupe. Her response also demonstrates the complicity of village chiefs in selecting youth for recruitment. Similar to Ma Mayazola, Ma Ntima was eighteen years old when she was recruited to dance.
Although Mama Bangoma did not go into detail about how she specifically was initially chosen to join the animation troupe, coercion still emerges as a general theme. “Because I sung very well, and I danced very well, I was chosen as an animatrice. . . . Whether male or female, it was obligatory [to dance]. O linga, o linga te” (Ma Bangoma, October 14, 2005). Rather than being a completely voluntary activity, as Matadi suggested, a person’s age and educational and marital status determined whether he or she would be conscripted to dance in local animation troupes in Luozi territory. The expectation that both male and female “idle” youth place their bodies at the service of the state for performances as a matter of public policy and service reveals the ways that their citizenship was in fact embodied. These women were chosen by others and did not join the troupes of their own volition. The fact that they felt coerced to dance against their will and saw it as an “obligation” reveals the ways Mobutu’s political authority was enacted in the lives of these women, and moreover, was in fact legitimized by their coerced performances. Moreover, gender also seems to impact the likelihood of being recruited into an animation troupe, especially in rural settings. During the 1970s and even today, girls are disproportionately more likely than boys to not be enrolled in either primary or secondary school or to be disenrolled in the case of financial exigencies, for example.5 They are also less likely to find employment in the formal sector. Thus, girls and young women were structurally disadvantaged and very likely to be targeted as an “idle” subset of the population.

Conditions of Dancers and Rehearsals
One theme emerging from the interviews was that the conditions in which the dancers were obligated to perform for visiting officials and public functions were not ideal and often downright exploitative. For example, I asked a question about compensation for dancing and singing, since these women had been pulled away from their other duties to perform for the state. All three of the women said they were not paid. Yet, differences in their points of view began to emerge when they gave details on other types of conditions such as the transportation to performance sites. Ma Mayazola relayed the following story about transportation from her home village when her group had been told they had to perform: “You leave the village in the morning around 7:00 AM to arrive around 5:00 in the evening, on foot. You yourself had to prepare and bring your own food. . . . To sleep, the people slept on the floor in the compound of the head of the sector. . . . Because the head of the sector was from my home village . . . my group could have the advantage of sleeping inside his home on the floor or in front of his home” (Ma Mayazola, October 5, 2005).
Mama Ntima depicts similar circumstances in her story of the typical, deplorable transportation conditions she endured while a member of her troupe: “When an authority came to our village to tell us we had to perform in another place, for example if we had to go to Nkundi, we would go from the village to Luozi, and from there to Nkundi. . . . They would take the car of a man that they saw as having a lot of money and use it to transport us. . . . We walked from the village [six hours of walking] to Luozi, and from there the truck would take us to Nkundi. . . . Even if you were in the fields . . . you must stop work and leave. . . . There were no words to say. . . . When we came to Luozi we slept on the floor in the compound of Hotel Madou” (Ma Ntima, October 10, 2005).

Both Ma Ntima’s and Ma Mayazola’s narratives reveal that animation was a disruptive force in their lives. They had to stop whatever work they were doing and heed the call to dance in faraway parts of the territory. While they were expected to fulfill their duties as citizens performing in these local animation troupes, the state did not consistently uphold its part of the bargain to transport, feed, or lodge the performers.

While Ma Ntima’s story was similar to Ma Mayazola’s, the situation was rather different for Mama Bangoma, since she was an animatrice for the entire territory and was called to travel often to other cities and towns in the district to learn new songs and dances that she in turn would teach to the animation groups of each sector in the territory of Luozi upon her return. The state took care of her needs: “They gave transportation. There were state vehicles. . . . There was food brought by the state itself . . . housing also by the state . . . clothes also” (Ma Bangoma, October 14, 2005). Clearly, while Ma Bangoma was not paid, she received many other benefits for her services to the state.

Thus, the position one held in the overall hierarchy of political animation affected the performance conditions, accommodations, and the types of gifts (if any) that the person received. Some women clearly benefited more than others from their participation as performers in local animation groups in Luozi territory. These multiple perspectives and experiences of animation politique relate directly to Achille Mbembe’s notion of conviviality in subject-state relations in postcolonial Africa, as everyday relations cannot be simply defined as collusion or resistance. The fact that individuals were able to benefit socially, politically, and even economically from animation while others saw their participation as negatively impacting their lives complicates a simple black-white perspective on animation.6

The rehearsal schedules each woman reported also reveal great differences in the time allocated in their lives to these animation troupes as well as their
opportunities to travel to perform. For Ma Mayazola, practices were done based on an upcoming event; besides that there was no set schedule. Ma Ntima explained that all the members of the animation groups in the sector of Mbanza-Mona practiced for one or two weeks, learning the dances together in the sector capital of Kinsemi. Ma Bangoma, as an animatrice for the entire territory, confirmed these weeklong or lengthier practices when she said she would teach the new dances and songs to the groups in each sector, and these practices could last a day, two days, or even a week. Moreover, Ma Bangoma also remembers traveling to many places to perform outside of Luozi territory (but still in Bas-Congo), including places like Inkisi, Mbanza-Ngungu, Kimpese, and Matadi. On the other hand, Ma Ntima recalls performing only in Luozi territory. This difference in performance venues suggests that higher-level performers had greater opportunities for travel sponsored by the state. This would also affect their perspective on the benefits and detriments of animation in their lives.7

Performing the Nation in the Bedroom

While coerced dancing in animation politique groups was the main way that loyalty and support for the Mobutu led government was expected to be performed, one of the more unsavory details about the era of animation politique deals with performances that were required in yet another area: the bedroom. A theme that emerged over and over again in regards to the conditions of performing in these animation troupes was the potential sexual exploitation of the female members of the groups. Ma Mayazola recounts the following: “There are [were] sisters that were called for example to go and drop off paperwork or food or dossiers or whatever, and there they [the male authority figures] did tricks in order to take them, and then there were sisters who became pregnant” (Ma Mayazola, October 5, 2005). Ma Mayazola’s recounting seems to suggest many women did not expect or understand that the errands they were sent on, delivering various items to visiting authorities, were in fact a ruse to get them to engage in sexual activities.

Mama Ntima reports seeing similar occurrences in her experience as a dancer for JMPR: “When you arrived where you were going, they chose the beautiful girls to sleep with the people who came from MPR, the superiors. It was stupidity, really. The authorities, the chiefs, the leaders would choose. . . . When we came to Luozi we slept on the floor in the compound of Hotel Madou, and they chose beautiful girls to sleep with the authorities in the rooms” (October 10, 2005). During my time in Luozi, I walked past Hotel Madou numerous times, unaware that the crumbling and dilapidated
building had once been a site for both vibrant performances of animation politique and the sexual exploitation of young women during Mobutu’s era. Both of the women volunteered this information about the sexual exploitation of female dancers (one very early on in the interview), which leads me to believe that it was very important for them to clearly state that such a practice existed and was commonplace. However, neither woman went into a lot of detail about their experiences in this regard. It makes one wonder about the personal impact of such policies on these women and others that they knew and danced with during the time in question. Perhaps they wanted to avoid memories of past experiences, or just didn’t feel comfortable sharing further information with me at that time. In both cases, at least one other person was present at the time of the interview, and that likely also influenced the depth of their responses. Seeking to respect their privacy, I did not delve any further, intuitively feeling that it was not appropriate to pry. Such an approach, where researchers simply “point toward silences” out of respect for interview participants is also characteristic of a feminist approach to social research (DeVault and Gross 2007, 184). The sexual exploitation of young women during Mobutu’s era was, however, an “open secret.” Bob White mentions people talking about the common practice of “offering the sexual services of female singers and dancers to visiting politicians and dignitaries” (2008, 78), while Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja refers to women who could better their fortunes and careers if they surrendered body and soul to the MPR (2002, 167). This practice was also confirmed by Dr. Mbala Nkanga, who directed theater productions during Mobutu’s regime and observed similar practices (July 19, 2007, Michigan). The state’s expectation that female performers should have sexual encounters with politicians and other powerful male figures (regardless of the women’s consent) makes their engagement with the state unique and different from the duties required of male performers. This is the gendered embodied citizenship defining how these female performers thought about their relationship to the state. Similar expectations of sexual performances were also held for girls and women attending secondary schools and universities (Mianda 1995; Schoepf 2002). While the three women I interviewed did not give extensive details at the time, other people in the community (specifically men) had explicit opinions about such practices and their impact on local communities. Before exploring their perspectives, however, I would like to examine the types of social and political discourse that were used to justify this sexual exploitation that, while not openly discussed, was endemic during Mobutu’s regime.
Intimate Tyranny and Sacrificed Bodies: Nation, Family, and Moral Disorder

When the MPR was created as the sole national party in 1967, all inhabitants of the country were automatically made members. Along with this political transformation, Mobutu and leaders in his government began to shape political ideology as well, metaphorically using the language of family to describe Mobutu's relationship to average Zairian citizens. This became especially prevalent during the economic deterioration of the 1970s. Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja captures this sentiment when he writes, “He [President Mobutu] was given titles such as ‘father of the nation,’ ‘father of the revolution.’ . . . Compared to a household head and a village chief, he and his wife were presumably father and mother to all citizens” (2002, 166). In his book exploring political authority and the relationship between the state and civil society in former Zaire, Michael Schatzberg quotes a government official in Zaire who says, “The MPR presents itself as a large family to which all Zairians without exception belong. All Zairians are born equal members of the MPR. . . . This characteristic of familial organization distinguishes the MPR from classical political parties” (1988, 71). Mobutu himself also used the metaphor of family in his speeches, such as in a May 1983 speech marking the sixteenth anniversary of the MPR: “Sixteen years ago, we created the People’s Revolutionary Movement. We defined it before as being just a big family within which everything in national life had to be achieved. . . . During sixteen years, the party mobilized, spread awareness, persuaded, and succeeded in reconciling and uniting ethnic groups, tribes, regions. . . . The large family of the People’s Revolutionary Movement today numbers close to thirty million souls” (Mobutu Sese Seko 1983, 60–61).

This selection from Mobutu’s speech demonstrates that the metaphor of family was supposed to unite a fractured nation—giving the inhabitants of Zaire a common sense of belonging existing across ethnic, geographical, and linguistic lines, shaping their subjectivities as citizens. In his analysis of political imagery under Mobutu, Schatzberg further explains that the family metaphor in Zaire had a larger cultural significance that was part of what Schatzberg called a “moral matrix” of legitimate governance: “The imagery of father and family and the moral matrix on which it is based provide, first of all, an implicit promise of nurturance and paternal care. . . . Second, the metaphors create an intimacy between rulers and ruled and thus succeed in representing complex political realities in a simplified form. . . . Third, the images are ‘natural.’ . . . Furthermore, such symbols and imagery mask an
exploitatively unequal flow of resources with authoritarian overtones” (1988, 89–90).

In sum, when Mobutu invoked “family” (from the point of view of a citizen of Zaire) it created a more natural and personal relationship. Achille Mbembe echoes Schatzberg’s findings when he writes that “an intimate tyranny links the ruler with the ruled” in postcolonial Africa (Mbembe 1992, 22), suggesting that citizens in Zaire expected President Mobutu to take care of them and guide them as a father would. However, he was a father on two levels; father of the nation, and father of each citizen. This led to a treacherous ambiguity that allowed Mobutu and his government officials to manipulate this relationship at their convenience: “Since all he does is, by definition, for the benefit of the corporate family, he can assert his actions always place the good of the whole uppermost . . . If then, an unlucky or disadvantaged citizen should invoke his personal relationship with the father and request or expect nurturance, Mobutu can claim he has acted for the good of the entire clan” (Schatzberg 1988, 91). Thus, ideas of “family” as applied to nation also served to ideologically justify behaviors and actions that often negatively impacted the individual citizens.

The numerous propaganda outlets that promoted Mobutu as a “Father” to the nation also presented a discourse of feminine liberation and equality to the masses. However, the state’s larger discourse on women and their role in society had many contradictions. Speaking at the conclusion of a symposium on women in Zaire on May 20, 1975, President Mobutu proclaimed that his takeover of the government in 1965 had liberated the women of Zaire: “November 24, 1965, was not only the date that marked the beginning of our total independence . . . but equally the start of the liberation of women in all forms” (1975, 587). The concept of liberation was given short shrift, however, just seven years later in another speech given at the third regular conference of the MPR: “We want to recognize in the Zairian mother the rights that give her the quality of equal partner to men. But it remains understood that . . . there will always be in each family one boss . . . The boss . . . is he who wears the pants. Our female citizens must also understand that, accepting it with a smile and a revolutionary submission” (Mobutu 1983, 693). These two quotes reveal a stark contradiction; while the buzzwords of liberation and equality are used in state discourse, the president himself sees limits in the authority and decision-making power of women in their own households and families. He is clearly promoting a patriarchal system in which women (who he largely refers to as mothers and wives) are to remain subservient to their husbands.
The president’s personal ideas about the limited role of women explain why throughout his presidency, there was much more political rhetoric and discourse rather than significant transformative gestures in regards to the status of women (Mianda 1995, 59). There were three major phases of government action in relation to women in Zaire: propaganda starting in the 1960s promoting the idea of “new” men and women emancipated from the inferiority complexes of colonialism; the creation of a department dedicated to women and family in 1980; and the family code of 1988 (Mianda 1995). However, the discourse promoting women’s equality belied the reality.

A 1988 World Bank report revealed that 63.6 percent of girls in Zaire attended primary school versus 88.3 percent of boys, while at the university level, women made up only 13 percent of the student population. Further, women were a small minority in public sector jobs, making up only 3.82 percent of public service personnel in 1982, 17 percent of national bank employees, and only 21 percent of the personnel in the department of primary and secondary education in 1985 (Mianda 1995). Within secondary schools, like in animation troupes, there was widespread sexual abuse of girls by teachers and a common practice of older men having secondary school girls as mistresses outside of school. Legislation like the family code of 1988, among others, also set women’s rights backward considerably. While the legal age of marriage for males was eighteen, the age of marriage consent for girls was lowered to fifteen. This further facilitated the exploitation of teenage girls by older men. The code also legislated that wives had to get their husbands’ permission to engage in any legal matters, and their husbands had the right to manage and even take their wives’ property, money, and goods, even if the wives had earned the money or purchased the property themselves. Husbands were declared the heads of their families, and wives were legally obligated to obey them. Alimony was eliminated, and limits were placed on bride price payments as well. One woman in Lubumbashi lamented the impact of the family code on her life: “We lost our dignity. We lost our status in society. The code says we have no rights as women or wives and our husbands can do anything with us, even take our property or just abandon us and take up with other wives” (McGreal 1997). Overall then, the everyday realities for women were far from equal in regards to men, both within and outside of their households.

Returning the discussion to the specific case of young women dancing in animation troupes in Luozi, the national “family” metaphor used by the state was explicitly undermined by the negative impacts of national policies on local families, communities, and moral order more broadly. For example, men in Luozi repeatedly spoke of sexual impropriety and the disruption of
local communities, a theme that also tied into some of the information provided by the female interviewees. Tata Nkolele, the program director for a local NGO, had this to say:

There are certain girls for example, who were incorporated into these groups, who weren’t old . . . who weren’t old enough to be able to be carried in front of the general public. . . . For the population, it wasn’t a good thing that all of these girls were exposed to presenting shows. . . . There was a certain exaggeration because the girl who danced . . . it was pleasing for the politico-administrative man. . . . In fact, it distanced the people who sometimes were horrified to watch all these dances, which were considered as obscene. . . . These youth that were recuperated for the needs of the party, sometimes for two weeks to learn songs, slogans, to please . . . the revolution. For two weeks they are absent from their work environment. Look what it does to the economy of their area and to them themselves. It is this that makes it so that many young girls found themselves pregnant as a result of all of these absences. . . . There were young girls who discovered their sexuality too early. (October 14, 2005)

One of the first observations Tata Nkolele makes about girls dancing in JMGR troupes was that some of the girls who performed in public were not old enough for such activities. This indicates that the performative duties of the nation are disregarding local concepts of age-appropriate conduct. He also notes that some of the dances were considered by those watching (the parents and families of the girls) to be obscene, and this led to them distancing themselves from the dances—this sentiment very clearly contradicts with the goals of national animation policies, which seek to use performance to create unity and a sense of national belonging. He also indicates that there was an economic impact from the absence of youth who were recruited to perform—in Luozi territory, a largely agricultural community, the physical labor of large numbers of young men and women who are removed for several weeks would have a detrimental impact on harvesting and other agricultural activities. Removing this population for animation activities also undermined Mobutu’s policy of salongo—obligatory collective work—which in Bas-Zaire, was largely based on agriculture. Moreover, Tata Nkolele also discusses unintended pregnancies, which can impact local families and communities in a number of ways, such as disrupting prearranged marriages; leaving the girl’s family without bride wealth; and leaving the dancer, her family, and larger community responsible for the child, without the benefits of marriage. This is further complicated by the fact that the majority of the Congolese popu-
lation during Mobutu’s era was estimated to be Christian (50–65 percent in 1979 [Kaplan 1979, xiii]), suggesting that there was some social pressure to have children within marriage or at least sanctioned by bride wealth payments. All of this, in addition to the negative emotional and psychological consequences for the girl herself, belied the expected role of Mobutu as a protector of his “children.” Rather, sexual access to young women was something that government officials expected as their right, following their leader Mobutu. The second translation of Mobutu’s name, “invincible warrior, cock who leaves no chick intact,” is quite relevant here as Mobutu was well known for expecting sexual access to many women, including the wives of some of his officials (Schoepf 2002; Zagorin 1993). Such illicit and immoral behavior came to define everyday life under Mobutu’s regime, so much so that the “sexualization of politics” in Zaire came to symbolize the corruption of the regime and the authenticity project (White 2008, 78–79). As Mbembe states in his analysis of the state in Cameroon, an “anxious virility” is performed by the state’s president and officials, such that “pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, with sexual rights over subordinates, . . . the keeping of concubines, and so forth” (1992, 14). Such an observation also applies well to the case of postcolonial Zaire and relates further to civil religion. If Mobutu was to be seen as powerful and godlike, the sexual consumption of large numbers of women aided to confirm his strength, masculinity, and virility.

Ne Mosi, a farmer in Luozi territory, also discusses concern for the sexual morality of young women and the compromising positions that they were placed in during this era: “Generally, I can say that the dances of the female animators were especially dances that consisted of rotating the hips really well. It is during this dance that, the chief or the animators choose them . . . those who must spend the night with the chief or else with this person, with that person. Animation consisted of a display, if you will, of women or else young girls, for the selection of chiefs and animators. . . . Because you can’t say anything, because you are a female animator, they take you; they say there you are, we are going to see the chief” (October 10, 2005). His conceptualization of performances of animation politique as displays of young girls for sexual selection hints at yet another layer of the moral disorder, that their families and loved ones were also watching them be chosen for sexual services. This is further supported by Tata Nkuku, a middle-aged school teacher who considers the impact of political animation on youth and social morality: “I think that it was there in order to deform the youth especially because . . . there are sometimes dances that were very exaggerated, gestures and dances were going too far, that one couldn’t even allow in the presence
of one’s parents” (September 29, 2005). All these interview excerpts express several interrelated themes that recur in people’s remembrances and assessments of animation politique: moral corruption, sexual exploitation, and disruption of families and local communities. For unmarried women who were not enrolled in school, animation presented a threat to their very bodies. As another interviewee explains, “it was a danger for girls” (Ne Tatu, October 10, 2005). This danger was not only moral but a physical one as well. What justification can be given for young women expected or even forced to give the most intimate part of themselves to complete strangers? Returning again to the metaphor of father and family, Schatzberg notes that one aspect of acting as a “big-man” and “father-chief” for Mobutu is generously distributing wealth in gifts to his subjects. In return, Zairian citizens are supposed to morally reciprocate his generosity (1988, 80–81). However, in the case of these young women dancing for Jmpr, they are the gift—one that is being freely “given” to other government officials and even visiting politicians (White 2008, 78). Thus, kinship and sexuality intersect, which, if one accepts the family metaphor, not only allows for “incest” between Mobutu as father and female citizens as children, but justifies it as good for the well-being of the national family.

There seem to be conflicting understandings of morality in this instance. For Mobutu and other government officials in Zaire, the “right” thing for female citizens to do was to willingly comply with requests for sexual services, for the good of the nation. However, in a majority-Christian nation, these acts of sex, outside of marriage, were not seen by most of these women or their families as “right” or “good.”

While some women used these sexual liaisons as opportunities for improving their lot through connecting to wealthy politicians and state officials, for others the moral repercussions and potential negative impact on their families and own lives loomed large (for example, pregnancy, diseases such as HIV, and psychological trauma. One scholar, in explaining how AIDS became a huge public health problem in the social context of the large-scale sexual exploitation of girls and women in Zaire, called it “Mobutu’s disease” (Schoepf 2002). What cannot be lost in the larger discussion of the situation of female performers is the elimination of choice, whether the coercion was explicit or subtle. The consequences of saying no to Mobutu or his representatives—imprisonment, fines, outright rape, and even death11—likely guided the decisions and the actions of these women. Forced sex is rape, even if the women cannot explicitly say no. With the aforementioned examples, the sexual exploitation of women in the service of the “nation” during Mobutu’s era is likely the most extreme exercise of political authority and state control.
over the very bodies of the citizens of former Zaire, and in particular, the bodies of women. These young women served, in the words of Foucault, as both “object[s] and target[s] of power” ([1977] 1995, 136). Thus, Mbembe’s concept of intimate tyranny needs to be extended beyond subjects reproducing state behaviors in their everyday lives. The other type of intimate tyranny that needs to be considered is the forceful penetration of the state into the most private parts of one’s own body, all in the name of the national family. These performances in the bedroom are performative encounters that dramatically transformed the relationship between the state and individual female dancers. These women were expected to sacrifice their personal bodies for the national body, not just once (as a soldier killed in combat would for example) but over and over again. Moreover, continuing with the comparison of these women with soldiers sacrificing their bodies in war, a soldier’s death brings honor to the country and family. A young woman forced to have sex with government officials or visiting dignitaries is not seen as a source of pride; rather, as the previous comments of the other interviewees show, it was a source of community discord, shame, and frustration. A young woman who dies of AIDS-related complications following from numerous sexual encounters is not seen as honorable. Thus, an additional layer of the duties and meanings of gendered citizenship is exposed by placing women’s experiences at the center of our analysis of animation politique. The everyday performances these young women were expected to carry out and embrace as a part of their service to the nation had decidedly negative moral, physical, economic, and social consequences for themselves, their families, and their local communities.

Political Animation and Its Impact on the Community: Women’s Perspectives

Discussions of the value of animation politique for the country reveal that many people saw it as undermining core values and morals of society, whether by interrupting holy worship, teaching sexually suggestive dances that offended Christian decorum, or placing young girls in situations where they were taken advantage of sexually by powerful men. However, not all the responses characterized animation as negative; people who clearly benefited from their role in animation politique often saw it as much more positive. In response to a question about what they thought about animation overall, and whether or not they thought it had been good for the community, the responses of the three female interviewees varied once again. Mama Bangoma responds in the following manner: “It was good for the population . . . because in that time . . . the young girls and the young boys . . . if they
received word that an authority was coming... everyone went down, they attended... It was good for the dancers... It was obligatory” (October 14, 2005). Mama Bangoma’s overall assessment of political animation is quite positive, which reflects her past higher status in the animation hierarchy. This is not surprising since she gained social mobility and status and was able to travel and more than likely was able to use her position as an animatrice to get an even better job with the regime. Thus, it is probably not a coincidence that it is she, among the three women, who currently has a civil service job with the government.

On the other hand, Mama Ntima disagrees. Mama Ntima says that “it was bad because... like here in Luozi, people wanted to pray, and when they [other people] were dancing stupid dances, it was obligatory, and it wasn’t good for the people” (October 10, 2005). For her, dancing and singing for JMPR clearly violated her ideals and values as a Christian woman whose church explicitly bans participation in secular dancing. In fact, Mama Ntima chose to escape by getting married early, since couples in state-recognized marriages were not forcibly recruited into these local JMPR groups to dance for the regime. She was in the group in 1977 and got married in 1978.

Mama Mayazola also seemed to view political animation as a negative social phenomenon: “For me it was torment. I was tormented... To take this long journey... to leave your work in the fields and all that you have as an occupation, you must drop it to go and dance for someone, without being paid, without being given food, without being lodged. It was practically a punishment... This movement created disorder... in the village, for the fact that there was obligatory traveling... In the songs there was nothing else but the glory of Mobutu” (October 5, 2005). Ma Mayazola’s comments highlight the economic consequences of animation. In an area where the vast majority of the population makes its living through agriculture, unexpected rehearsals and performances depleted the area of an important source of labor.

Ma Mayazola’s overall assessment of animation as negatively impacting her life was also reflected in the ways she sought to avoid her embodied national service. She ran away when her animation group was traveling out of the sector to the town of Luozi. She also often feigned sickness to evade performing obligations. Others who were caught dodging their dancing duties were taken to the chief of the sector to be punished by paying fines or doing hard physical labor. Ma Mayazola was in the group from 1971 to 1973, until she, like Ma Ntima, was married.

The varied responses from these women support Mbembe’s statement that “the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resis-
tance or of collaboration, but is rather best characterized as a promiscuous relationship: a convivial tension” (1992, 5). This is clearly shown in the differing assessments of political animation. Under the pressures and threats of a coercive state, all the women felt obligated to perform. However, they did not necessarily all see themselves as having to resist the impositions of the state. In general, one’s position in the hierarchy of animation performers affected one’s opinion about political animation and its impact on the population. Mama Ntima and Mama Mayazola, the two women who were simply dancers compelled by force, did not see political animation as a good thing for the country or themselves and in fact used different strategies (marriage, fleeing, and so on) to avoid having to perform. This clearly contrasts with Ma Bangoma, for whom political animation seemed a great benefit in comparison to other women lower in the hierarchy of performers. Their responses show each of them evaluated their own gendered embodied citizenship through animation politique in different ways.

Conclusion

State-scripted nationalism through public performances was hugely important as a tool of creating (or attempting to create) nationalist sentiment in many nations in postcolonial Africa. The specific case of animation politique in Zaire reveals the importance of constant and omnipresent public performances for spreading the ideologies of Mobutu’s government, whether people agreed with it or not. Moreover, animation politique impacted people in both urban areas and rural and marginalized parts of the country; thus, it can be considered an extreme form of the banality of power in the former Zaire. My interviews with three different Kongo women about their experiences with animation politique, as well as interviews with men in the community in Luozi, suggest that a more complex understanding of engagement with the state at the level of the body needs to be considered in studies of performed state nationalism. Specifically, different citizens engaged with the state through animation politique in different ways. An analysis that privileges gender and embodiment reveals the complex and multifaceted meaning of citizenship through performance in Mobutu’s Zaire. Following from overt sexual exploitation of female ex-performers, their experiences of animation reveal a gendered embodied citizenship differing considerably from how male performers engaged with the state. The performative encounters that these women had with government officials in the bedroom made the state a very intimate presence in their lives and in their bodies. The expectation of sexual performances also goes along with the deification of Mobutu as a leader as he was the model par excellence in his own sexual exploitation of
women during his regime. While the stated intention of animation was to inculcate the messages of Mobutu into the very bodies of Zaire’s citizens, the actual outcome, specifically in regards to the sexual exploitation of young women in rural animation troupes, was quite different. Animation politique led to moral disorder and disengagement from the nationalist project by not only some of the female dancers, but also their families and communities. However, even these negative outcomes were not shared by all—men and women who were able to benefit from animation politique largely saw it as a positive experience. These findings suggest that the banality of power in postcolonial Africa cannot be fully understood until the diverse experiences of all citizens—both men and women—are taken into account. The intimate tyranny Mbembe discussed must be expanded to include the unique experiences of girls and women who were forced to engage, by and through their bodies, with a coercive state seeking to consume them sexually.