Ethnography as Commentary

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As soon as I had decided on the title of this chapter I had second thoughts. It may seem reasonable, though not mandated by the succession of topics in our text, to proceed from Kahenga’s practice to the “theory” that guides his work. However, the underlying assumption—that the two can be distinguished or even kept separate—is questionable. Above all, presenting work and thought in succession may give the wrong impression that Kahenga’s practice merely implemented his thought and knowledge—as if he had worked with a set of ideas that, once acquired or accepted, did not need constant work to be workable. Of course, to lump practical skills such as the recognition of medicinal plants, the ability to match illness and cure, and to decide on a treatment, as well as views
regarding causes and agents, judgments concerning good and evil, and ontological concepts under one common heading would mean resorting to a time-honored strategy. It usually consisted of calling, and thereby bracketing all of the above as, belief (with variants such as belief system, worldview, doctrine, ideology).

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

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

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

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

Be that as it may, critique of imposed categories should not make us blind to categorizations if we encounter them in our documents. Even the most
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resolute refusal to press what we get to know about bunganga into familiar categories does not exempt the ethnographic commentator from respecting and presenting categorizations our interlocutors make when they tell us what they think and know.

Thought and Knowledge

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

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

We will get to knowledge presently but first an observation on another conspicuous absence in this text: In Swahili, as in European languages, the phrase (mi)nawaza, “I think,” seldom occurs in the marked sense of “I cogitate.” Most often it introduces statements in the sense that make it synonymous with “it is my opinion,” “I am not sure but . . . ,” in short, “I believe.” But I don’t recall ever having come across a case in conversations I had through the years, many of which were intensely searching and reflex-
ive, where a speaker’s “I believe” was a statement of “belief” in the sense discussed the introductory section above, that is, in contrast or opposition to “knowledge.” The Swahili verb *-sadiki*, to believe (never used in our conversation), always means “to believe in” and is used only in religious discourse; it never means “I believe that.” Kahenga did not qualify any of his statements as convictions. While this does not mean that he had no convictions, it is expressive of his altogether factual attitude to the matters we discussed.

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

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

Since our conversation was in a mode of inquiry it is not surprising that the topic of knowledge was brought up most often in the questions I asked, always with verb phrases, and that Kahenga's answers frequently repeated or echoed my use of *-yua*—lexically. Semantically, a reading of this text with a focus on expressions relating to knowledge and on their contexts produces a picture of great complexity. Here is, first, an inventory of the verb *yua* and its many shades of meaning. Kahenga asserts that he “knows that” or is conscious of (17, 30); that he “knows whether” something is the case (38); he is “known as” (37); he knows the function of an object (70); he knows God (51) and the practices of divination (71). To know can mean to recognize (18, 19) or to experience/feel (20). Another cluster of significations is formed when
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he uses -yua in a diagnostic, technical, professional sense of to recognize, identify, and to “know how to” (6, 9, 15, 16, 17, 23, 29). To know can refer to the ability to identify a person as a sorcerer (29, 30, 31). His apprentice knows what he has been taught (36) and Kahenga knows names of plants “well” by writing them down (33, see also 35), something that is different from the general knowledge of plant names among people of his country (73). Finally, -yua may refer to linguistic competence; one knows (the meaning of) a word (21, 76) and one knows a language such as Swahili (29) or Hemba (54).

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

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

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

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

Almost as an afterthought it occurred to me probe the text for mayele, a word that is common in Katanga Swahili9 and had become part of local French, especially as spoken by long-time European residents who may have
picked it up from the pidginized Swahili many spoke as a work- and command-language. *Mayele*, a noun, has connotations that can approach that of *akili*, intelligence (no occurrence in our text), for instance in the phrase *muntu wa mayele*, a clever person. (I remember my old friend and mentor Kalundi exclaiming *mayele ya bazungu!*—White man’s cleverness—as we were negotiating a maze of freeway crossings on the outskirts of Brussels.) *Mayele* can denote resourcefulness in general but most often it means something like a trick, the solution to a problem, or a specific device used in such a solution.

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

These exercises in epistemic archaeology in the sense Foucault (1973) gave to “archeology”—collecting the results of searches and using (commenting on) the findings to reconstruct Kahenga’s conception of knowledge—do not make easy reading. Nor do they succeed in presenting Kahenga’s thought as a coherent system or “theory,” but they show a metalevel in his thinking. Evidence for this is not as explicit and pronounced as in other kinds of local
discourse where terms like *kuwaza* and *mawazo*, thinking and thoughts/ideas, are deployed in a reflexive manner. This does not mean that Kahenga was not capable of such thought but that we concentrated in our conversation on his work as a *munganga*.

**Thought and Knowledge in Action**

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

**Fansia: Doing Medicine**

What exactly was Kahenga’s “work?” Healing, curing, treating, therapy? More than a dozen times he referred to the effect of what he did as *-pona*, get well; only once does he use this verb in the causative form *-ponyesha*, make well, cure, and that in an indirect statement reporting what people say a charm (*kizimba*) can do (54). Much of what the text can tell us about how he called and presumably conceptualized his work is expressed by the verb *-fanya* whose definition in the dictionary is “cause to do, cause to be useful or of avail, hence make. One of the commonest verbs in Swahili, always implying some result, purpose, or object beyond mere act.” I counted eighty-three occurrences of *-fanya* in Kahenga’s speech, many of them relevant to the present topic (for example *-fanya dawa*, make, prepare a medicine), a daunting wealth of information to comment on. Fortunately a derivative form he also used, *-fansia*, literally: “to cause to make for,” allows
us to get a better grip on the semantics of “making” people well. Admittedly, “to cause to make for” (causative and applicative) does not look promising at first—until one realizes that it packs a kind of double-barreled sense of causation. Examples will show that our own commonsense understanding of medical treatment or therapy does not adequately describe the work of a munganga.

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

**DAWA, MITI, BIZIMBA: MATERIALITY**

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

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

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

Kahenga called himself *munganga wa miti* and we had first consulted him as a herbalist healer. This encouraged me to call “medicine” the substances he used as well as the trade he plied. It was an inescapable categorization, predestined and reinforced by the image of the “native medicine man” that is deeply engrained in our collective popular imagination and does not simply disappear when we relabel such practices in our scientific discourse as traditional herbal medicine or therapy and call their practitioners healers. At times Kahenga himself made statements that seemed to indicate that he conceptualized *miti* as a clearly defined and separate domain. For instance,
when we reconstructed the closing of the house (40) I began asking him about the holes he had prepared and about the “things” deposited there. Guessing what I had in mind he interrupted me: [You think it was] bizimba, charms? Not at all, ilikuwa tu miti, it was nothing but vegetal matter (see also 9).

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

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

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

We came back to bizimba when I asked Kahenga about his apprenticeship, trying to get him to tell me as much detail as possible (33). He described how
he would accompany his grandmother when she went into the bush to collect all sorts of *miti* and would write down the names she told him. I asked whether this meant he had a “book” of *dawa* back home. He confirmed this and then continued with a vivid account of the way they worked together. His teacher, it turned out, was blind and Kahenga described how she would sniff the samples he brought to her, take some time to reflect, and then name them. But why did he, just after we had referred to them as *miti* and *dawa*, suddenly call them *bizimba*? He introduced the term in a parenthesis—“these things they call *bizimba*”—and that suggests that in this instance he may have given a Hemba appellation whose meaning differs from that of the loanword *bizimba* in local Swahili (more on this later). In other words, discrepancies in Kahenga’s use of *bizimba* do not necessarily reflect confusion or inconsistency; they may simply be due to the fact that Kahenga “quoted” them from different languages and communicative practices.

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

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

*Bizimba* is a loan word from Luba. The dictionary by Van Avermaet and Mbuya has one of those long entries that make this work an ethnographic gold mine (1954: 824). For our purposes it may be summarized as follows: *Kizimba* refers to any human, animal, or vegetal substance that may be used to prepare a *bwanga*, the Luba equivalent of Katanga Swahili *dawa*, medicine or charm. “The *bizimba* constitute the element, the essential ingredient, the ‘magic’ substance (“*produit*”) of *bwanga*; it is the *kilumbu* not the *munganga* who procures them; one is convinced that by using these *manga* one appropriates for oneself the vital force of the being whose *bizimba* one possesses.”
Could it be that there is a “temporal” distinction between *dawa* and *bizimba* in that the former (the “medicine”) faces the past, or a given state, diagnosed as already existing whereas the latter (the “charm”) is directed at something to happen or to be accomplished? They seem to have in common that they are addressed to “problems”—but can this be said of good-luck *bizimba*? Or is the notion of fortune, the common element in misfortune and good fortune, part of some deep philosophy of the fortuitousness of everything that happens?

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

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

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

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

**MIZIMU: “SPIRITUALITY”**

After confronting challenges posed by the concepts of dawa and bizimba we can now resume our commentary on the text and turn to another key concept in Kahenga’s thought: mizimu, spirits. In the conversation this notion came up more than once, first when I asked whether mizimu could cause illness (18). Kahenga did not give a general answer to this general question. Repeating the term in the singular and as a question (muzimu?) he offered an example. The spirit of your (deceased) father may be angry and send you an illness because you neglected to make required offerings to him. You should then consult a diviner about the cause of your affliction and he may tell you that the trouble was caused by a certain spirit, in this case your father’s. You would then make the offering (“cook” a goat or chicken) and be cured. This example was followed by a passage about the “mobility” of
ancestor spirits across ethnic boundaries (commented on earlier). When Kahenga later recited the prayer he had said during the closing ritual it turned out that it was addressed to an ancestor of his, also referred to a muzimu wetu, our spirit (41).

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

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

We came back to mizimu when we discussed the prayers Kahenga offered during the closing of the house (41). They were in Hemba and I could not understand them but I thought I recognized invocations of ancestors by
their names. I mentioned this and Kahenga confirmed my hunch and gave a list of names, first those of his deceased father, Mukenge Mbuyi, and of his *mama* Nyange. Then he named Kayembe, “our chief,” and Yagamino “our big spirit.” I take the latter to refer to yet another category of *mizimu*, not his personal ancestors but “ours,” that is, the collective spirits of his country. We talked at some length about Yagamino, whom Kahenga described first as a spirit who has his abode in a prominent rock (much like the spirit-on-the-mountain in the story about the Whites and sleeping sickness) and then, in political terms, as “the chief of all our spirits back home” (42). Thinking that we had ascended in the hierarchy of spirits to a supreme being I asked whether this Yagamino was what is called a *vidye* in Luba. That did not get us very far; Kahenga knew the term gave but gave me the impression that it was not used in Hemba. We had to stop the recording briefly at this point and when we got back to it—he had had a moment to ponder my question—we only caught part of his next statement, ending with “our *vidye*.” I wanted to make sure that this “chief of spirits” was not *Mungu*, God. Certainly not, was his reply, *Mungu* was *Mungu*. Yet, he then cited a short prayer to God in Hemba in which he did use *vidye* in what sounded like a translation or paraphrase of *Mungu*. It is possible, of course, that he just wanted to please me since I had kept asking him about *vidye* (not an uncommon thing to happen to ethnographers).

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

Finally, tucked away in another discussion of the name of God and easy to overlook, Kahenga made a statement containing just the barest hint to yet another kind of spirit: You pray to a *mizimu*, you address the prayer to a *muntu*, short for human ancestor, or to a *nyama*, an animal (50). I let this allusion to possible totemic ideas go without further questioning because I still had the Hemba name for God on my mind, which turned out to be *vilinyambi.* In the theological discussion that followed (51) he made sure I understood that making offerings and praying to *mizimu* did not exclude
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Mungu (or relegate God to a remote place as deus otiosus, the technical term used by historians of religion). After all, who had created the mizimu? The power of mizimu was “God’s power.”

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

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

KIVULI: MATERIAL SPIRITUALITY

When I came to the end of the preceding section I discovered yet another way in which the monograph may encroach on commentary: it may blot out entire passages of the text. This happened when I almost forgot to comment on one of the most intriguing exchanges we had during our conversation. I did report earlier on a statement of Kahenga’s regarding the use of substances other than miti, such as human hair, but then neglected to address what he told me in the remainder of that paragraph (59) because it
did not fit the schema of opposing “materiality” to “spirituality” I followed in the two preceding sections.

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

Kahenga offered yet another “example” that must have left me baffled then and continues to perplex me now. The elliptic story he told, here further condensed, had me as a “dead man walking,” a muzungu, killed by sorcerers in a car accident, *something they accomplished by carrying away, not just the visible person but my vuli.* He had given the key to understanding this when he stated: “uzima wa muntu ni kivuri, the life of a person is (his/her) shadow.” Fifty paragraphs earlier he had told me: “miti njo buzima ya muntu,” the life of a person is *miti,* here best (but not adequately) translated as “plants” (9). What is one to make of the equivalence of shadow and plant in these statements? Both are predicated on (b)uzima, which would not pose a logical problem if we interpret shadow and plant as representations, as signifiers, as symbols, or as figures of speech. They could be metaphors of *uzima,* life (a plant is “alive”; the “tree of life” comes to mind), or metonyms (a living person, his or her shadow, the ground on which the shadow falls, and soil that can be collected from that ground would be links
in a chain of connections). Given the specific context in which Kahenga made his statements—practices of healing and “magic” and the materiality of both—the latter, metonymy, would seem more likely. But would this mean that healing and magic are but figures of speech? Is to bespeak persons and problems all a munganga does?19

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