COLONIAL TRANSACTIONS

IMAGINARIES, BODIES, AND HISTORIES IN GABON

Florence Bernault

COLONIAL TRANSACTIONS

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THEORY IN FORMS

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Imaginaries, Bodies, and Histories in Gabon

FLORENCE BERNAULT

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TO SUZANNE AND ROMAN, WITH LOVE

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PREFACE

One day in Brazzaville (Congo), witchcraft filled my heart with anger. I was very young and very inexperienced, and this was my first stay in Equatorial Africa. At a dinner with friends, Guy, a young Congolese man, told us that, as a boy, his parents had sent him away to the care of relatives in the big city. He had been a sickly child, and a local diviner had diagnosed his ailment as a result of mystical attacks by a jealous uncle. Guy worked at a local school for students with special needs, managed by Catholic nuns. He was a devout Christian, and a very good friend of ours. That night, my young mind became irritated by these apparent contradictions. I asked Guy, rather brutally, why he and his parents still believed in witchcraft since they were Catholic? I do not remember his response, but I still sense the embarrassment that I later felt about my brash, idiotic reaction. I later came to grasp that, beyond a personal failing, the impulse was also shaped by the colonial past. Historically, I was the descendant of men and women who had invaded Africa and had also, in their time, been baffled and angered by local ways. This study of Gabon is thus written by an outsider coming from the colonizing world, aware of, but not freed from, weighty politics of representation. To a large extent, this book is an effort to stitch together Guy's life story and my multilayered anger—not to smooth over my awkwardness but to use the story to get into the murky space where African and European imaginaries about power, agency, and misfortune clashed, overlapped and combined.

Scholars tend to reflect on the historicity of modern witchcraft by reaching out to precolonial patterns and beliefs and comparing them with contemporary ones. By jumping over the colonial moment, they obscure how colonialism restructured the field of practical and mystical agency. This book offers a thick description of these reconfigurations over the last hundred years. But its main argument is to revisit how domination worked, showing

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that colonial agents *transacted* power, creating *transgressive hegemonic processes* that were shaped, across the racial divide, by *conversant* and *congruent imaginaries*.

While writing this book, I experienced major geographical and intellectual displacements. A few years after the conversation with Guy, the raging civil war in Congo-Brazzaville forced me to switch my research to Gabon. Although I knew the country from my first book, it took me years to appreciate how much it differed from the Congo. In both locales, I retained a close friendship with Joseph Tonda, himself tragically displaced from Brazzaville to Libreville. Our ongoing collaboration has been crucial to conceptualizing this book: for this and much more, I want to thank him. I owe a huge debt to the friends who welcomed and helped me in Gabon: Jeannette Angouang for her hospitality and generous friendship, Lionel Ikogou-Renamy, Florence Ilama, Monique Koumba Mamgoumbi, Raymond Mayer, Guy Rossatanga, Mesmin Soumao, André Fauster, and finally, for guiding me in the city politics of Lambaréné and Mouila, Agathe Nginguena, Daniel Baboussa, and Joseph Massala.

The shift was also analytical. My first book touched only lightly on the moral principles and spiritual benchmarks that informed electoral and ethnic politics. After moving to the University of Wisconsin–Madison, I immersed myself deeper in this history and found a unique mentor in Jan Vansina. Although I cannot give justice to twenty years of friendship in a few words, I want to thank him for all he did for me. Jan's rapid talk in French and English never left one of my ideas standing still. In 2004, I bought a house just a few blocks from his, and visited often. I came out of these meetings shaken, dizzy with possibilities, and strangely satisfied. Part of it was Claudine's tea and cakes, perhaps, and her way of joyfully standing her ground with her husband, while I lay beaten to a pulp. Countless times, nimbly taking the phone to ask Jan about a vocabulary issue, I felt what privilege it was to be able to benefit from his greater mind. In 2017, he left us, and things will never be the same.

In switching to the English-speaking world, I learned to use important analytical devices, especially from Peter Geschiere and *The Modernity of Witchcraft* (1997), a seminal book that opened entirely new views on the moral economy of African politics. I had the fortune to befriend Peter and benefit from his constant inspiration and generosity. Then a residence at NIAS, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in 2013–14, procured many a wonderful time with him in Amsterdam, while I was writing the first draft of the book. Birgit Meyer and Nico Besnier invited me to present my hypotheses at

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the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, as did Stephen Ellis at the African Studies Center at the University of Leiden. At NIAS, I formed a close friendship with Kenda Mutongi and Laura Fair, whom I thank for being such a source of fun, mischief, and companionship. I am also grateful to Natalie Scholz (Amsterdam), who shared her house and her work on objects and politics of postwar Germany. At many crucial junctures, Nancy Hunt gave me incomparable intellectual support.

In Europe, colleagues and friends helped and encouraged me: John Parker (London), Joost Fontein (University of Edinburg), and the late Jan-Georg Deutsch (Oxford). After gracing the History Department at UW-Madison with a semester of teaching, Patrick Harries (Basel) became an important presence in my life before he passed away, too soon, in 2016. Across the Atlantic, and throughout the years, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch (Paris) and Luise White (Gainesville) have remained constant inspirations.

Despite the difficulty of adapting to a new language and a new scholarly environment, the move to the History Department and the African Studies Program at UW-Madison offered unique resources, with the collegiality, friendship, and support of Tom Spear, Teju Olanyian, Aliko Songolo, Emily Ngo Nguidjol, Jim Sweet, and Neil Kodesh. The Graduate School generously financed the field and archival work on which this book is based. The John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, NIAS, and the Institute for Research in the Humanities at UW-Madison provided me with invaluable time for writing.

Finally, I want to thank the close friends who helped and accompanied me in all sorts of ways: Anne Ruel, Sylvie Couval, Nevine El Nossery, Preeti Chopra, and Kristin Phillips-Court. Isak Niehaus (London) offered unparalleled guidance and love to help me write this book.

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Introduction

In mid-nineteenth-century Gabon, a vortex of bodily assaults and magical warfare brought Europeans and Africans together in strange pursuits of power and knowledge. In the name of scientific curiosity, foreign visitors often snatched human remains from graveyards and shrines. Explorer Paul Du Chaillu so frequently stole decaying limbs and skulls from a village's cemetery that women claimed that "he [was] a leopard coming to eat them."[1] Other white men preserved the remains of exotic animals in arsenic, decapitating monkeys and pickling the heads for curio shops abroad.[2] Such rapacity resonated with African ideas about the agency of human and animal substances, and fears that outsiders could kill and absorb the life force of a person to get empowered.[3] Later on, French colonialists murmured that thieves opened their graves and stole white body parts to compose charms.[4] They also painted grisly pictures of Africans' horrific cannibalism, and their inextinguishable hunger for human flesh.

A hundred years later, in the 2000s, most Gabonese assume that politicians preserve their influence by working with magical charms made with human substances. Articles routinely claim that deputies at the National Assembly can be reelected only if "pygmies," *nganga* (ritual experts and healers), marabouts (West African fetish-men), and other "butchers" deliver human body parts to them in time.[5] A local artist compares the witches who travel today in mystical airplanes to precolonial rulers who crossed the Gaboon Estuary by flying over water: "I am not talking of the physical world here, but of the spiritual world." His grand-daughter jumps in: "When I was eleven or twelve, I saw white people flying in a plane. They got out of it and sat around a table to eat. But when they saw high dignitaries of Bwiti (a local healing cult) approaching with lighted torches, they disappeared." A visitor confirms, "There is God and there is Satan, they sit side by side."[6]

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The first aim of this book is to enrich our knowledge of mystical agency and practical power in West Equatorial Africa, and to explain why, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, witchcraft attacks and the traffic in body parts constitute one of the most powerful ways for the Gabonese to talk about politics and personal affliction.[7] Anthropologists and political scientists approach witchcraft beliefs in contemporary Africa by uncovering the main economic, social, and cultural reasons behind them.[8] I argue here that modern witchcraft is first and foremost a historical phenomenon, and that its contemporary manifestations cannot be understood without taking into account the long and intricate battles between Africans and Europeans over physical and mystical agency.

The second aim of the book is to revisit the history of colonial domination and to wrestle with established ideas that, on the eve of the colonial conquest, Africans and Europeans belonged to "heterogeneous regimes of historicity," and that Europeans did not interfere in the domain of magic and witchcraft.[9] I show that in Gabon, French colonialists did intrude in and profoundly change these realms, including the broader field of political agency. Indeed, they held mutually intelligible ideas, praxis, and symbolic systems with the people they colonized. In turn, the colonial engagement exposed their own contradictory ideas about power and agency (*pouvoir*), tearing apart their practical explanations and speculative philosophies.

Understandings of agency were at the core of the colonial encounter. The ways in which Africans and Europeans thought about power and the ability to act underwrote foreign rule and Gabonese reactions to it, shaping innumerable decisions in everyday life. Far from being reduced to abstract forces or mental drives, these ideas guided people in a myriad of concrete strategies. They served to protect individual capacity, to reproduce communal regimes of choice and opportunity, and to open new channels for action. Yet "agency" is a clumsy term, and one that nobody used in Gabon. In vernacular languages, *ngul*, from the Bantu root *-*gudu*, glosses the idea of force and talent, the capacity of a person to act successfully, and the power of mystical entities such as spirits and ancestors. In this book I concentrate mostly on extraordinary agency, or the ability of individuals or institutions to exert "out-of-the-ordinary," transformative acts over people and things. Equatorial Africans had historically seen extraordinary agency as ambivalent, associating destruction with replenishing.[10] Coming to Gabon, French colonialists also hold specific ideas about extraordinary forms of power (*pouvoir*). They often justified their mission in Africa by boasting about Frenchmen's extraordinary

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moral and political capacities. This relational imaginary needed to confront African forms of agency and denounce them both as hateful and ineffectual. Africans, meanwhile, borrowed the French term *puissance* (power) to express new problems and new possibilities.[11] At the crossroad of these engagements, this book proposes a genealogy of modern power and *puissance*, and the intellectual, linguistic, and practical transformations that made this reworking possible.

Indeed, my purview is pragmatic, contingent, and opportunistic. Rather than providing a definitive translation or definition of agency, or disaggregating the notion into neat sets of relations and causal effects, I take it as the ability to make extraordinary things (if repetitive and predictable) happen, and the causes that people imagine behind unusual action and change.[12] When colonialists and Africans speculated about agency, they employed a rich and complex vocabulary that defies simplification. The Gabonese used older words for "talent" and "capacity" while changing their meaning: for instance, the talent to speak out and to debate (iNzebi: *misaambe*), the ability to curse (iNzebi: *mundoghe*), or to accumulate wealth (iNzebi: *mabwe*; Fang: *nkumkum*) survived in the twenty-first century, but with a host of innovative senses.[13] The Gabonese also started to use foreign terms such as "seduction" (*séduction*), "force" (*force*), "elegance" (*élégance*), and "refined cruelty" (*cruauté raffinée*) to describe the qualities and power of politicians and leaders.[14] To talk about the conquest and its consequences, the French relied on *pouvoir* (power), *force*, and *génie* (genius). They described African ideas about mystical and human agents by comparing them with dark figures of evil borrowed from French mythologies, calling them vampires, fetish-men, and tyrants, and later bringing *charlatanisme* (charlatanism) and *fraud* to the colony. I thus transcribe vernacular and French terms, when appropriate, in combination with English glosses for agency, power, and capacity. The transformation of these ideas was complex and elusive. But following them over time, and the reasons and unreasons that made people turn and twist their speculative views and practical actions, yields rich insights in this history.

Taking vocabularies of power at face value, moreover, allows me to move away from the Western divide between human and nonhuman agency, and look at Gabonese ideas about the actions of spirits, ancestors, or physical charms much as I consider French opinions of the kind hailed by the French governor of Gabon in 1912, when he claimed that "the spectacle of our creative force and our organizational genius" would impress and educate the natives.[15] Indeed, the main divide between African and European representations

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of agency did not pass between the secular and the divine, the rational and the irrational, or the visible and invisible, even though some of the harshest battles in the colony were fought about the very meaning of these words and ideas. It ran along and between the question of the physical or intangible nature of agency.

Westerners glossed the action of spirits and ancestors as "unreal," "immaterial," "invisible," and "supernatural."[16] The Gabonese understood, however, that these entities had a very material existence and interacted with people in both tangible and spiritual manifestations.[17] I thus avoid as much as possible labeling the realm of spiritual agency as "invisible" or "immaterial." Nor do I follow a strict Durkheimian separation between "profane" and "sacred," even when I investigate how colonialists tried to create and enforce a strict separation between these domains in the colony.[18] In rare occasions, I use the adjective "sacred" or "divine" to loosely qualify the domain of extraordinary forces and entities, whether Christian or African.

Disagreement and doubts undermined everyone's views of efficacy and agency. Colonialists could not empirically measure the efficacy of their efforts to "civilize" indigenous people. Nor did most of them understand their own technology, the phonographs and the chemical reactions they used to impress African audiences.[19] Conversely, Gabonese ideas of agency left considerable room for discord. For instance, people believed that an autopsy could reveal whether a witch had cursed and killed a person. But they rarely accepted the diagnosis of the diviner without debates and hesitation. Hence the changing ontologies that helped French and Africans to act and to interpret actions allowed a fair amount of disbelief and suspicion. These doubts belonged in the broad imaginaries of *puissance* and agency that rose throughout the twentieth century, but did not significantly weaken their hold.

Last but not least, this book connects a history of agency and capacity with a discussion of new forms of *value* that emerged at the heart of colonial engagements. When the French believed in the power of civilization, and the Gabonese called on the invisible forces of ancestors and spirits, they assigned considerable worth to the agentive devices (charms, money, human substances) that made these actions workable, and to the hierarchies (of status, possibilities) that derived from them. During the colonial period, both groups increasingly measured these values in money, a process that social scientists usually explain as a by-product of commodification and the breaking down of moral economies.[20] In contrast, I demonstrate how Equatorial Africans and Europeans, independently of these pressures, had long invested

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in the commensurable and transactional value of human beings, objects, and currencies. In the colonial context, domination and power, too, became matters of transaction.

Beyond the Racial Paradigm

Indeed, I argue that *proximate*, *conversant* and *compatible* imaginaries of power existed across the racial divide, and that Equatorial Africans and Europeans situationally relied on rich intellectual, political, and cultural formations that can be compared at deep levels or particular junctures.[21] Africans worked with a cultural and historical legacy often referred to by specialists as the West Equatorial African tradition. Likewise, French colonialists in Gabon came from, and used, specific imperial formations and deep national histories. Yet, in the realm of collective power and individual agency, rulers and ruled not only infringed on and clashed with each other's worlds, but also held mutually intelligible ideas, projects, and fantasies.[22] These imaginaries, and the startling moments of recognition and awareness that colonial agents experienced on the ground, were central to the machinery of colonial domination and the world that came after it.

Imperial ideologies codified the differences between Europeans and Africans in racial and evolutionary terms. In the 1950s, academic historians opened several fronts against these prescriptions, seeking to recover Africa's complex past and to understand it in its own terms.[23] They highlighted colonialism's limited and uneven influence on the ground and, in the aftermath of Jan Vansina's interpretation of colonialism as a moment of "cognitive rupture and cultural breakdown," they insisted on the survival of African worldviews and their fluid combination with colonial repertoires and practices.[24] In the wake of this paradigmatic shift, we relativized the destructive power of imperialism, and learned how cultural mingling went both ways.[25]

Yet the effort to recover African voices and to write narratives from the viewpoint of local societies tends to essentialize "indigenous" and "emic" worlds in opposition to European or Western ones. Indeed, one of the most widely shared assumptions among historians of Africa today is that, at the time of the conquest, colonizers and colonized belonged to starkly disparate worlds, and that even their most intimate interactions engaged dissimilar views, vocabularies, and agendas.[26] By showing how such practices and representations came together in productive processes of hybridization, bricolage, and "working misunderstandings," historians sometimes forget to criticize the dichotomies enforced by colonial racism.[27]

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Critics will perhaps suggest that, misreading or succumbing to the bias of colonial archives, I make up a racial commensurability that, historically, French colonialists often used as a thwarted political agenda.[28] Others might think that talking of congruent imaginaries is another way of positing universals (money, freedom, love) that never existed on the ground.[29] Yet, attention to compatibilities and resemblance does not erase disparities among historical actors, or flatten them into universal "human beings." My point is not to say that considerable historical divergences and asymmetries of power did not exist between Europeans and Africans, but to argue that these differences often obscure deeper and more subtle correspondences. Social actors separated by racial injunctions and historical experiences did not always differ in drives, affects, knowledge, or imagination: this fact is essential to retrieving the history of Africa during colonialism.

The notion of "imaginaries," conceptualized in France by social theorist Cornelius Castoriadis in the 1980s, and widely used on the European continent today, is central to my argument.[30] Far from being confined to mental or abstract manifestations, Castoriadis shows that imaginaries condense social conflicts and cultural representations: they crystallize in embodied norms and tactics that make the prime material of social institutions.[31] In Gabon, converging and conversant imaginaries emerged as much from the colonial context as from propinquities that preexisted it. Neither immobile, stable, nor univocal, they shifted according to historical circumstances and the changing power relations of the colonial situation. Nor were they homogenous and continuous: porous, full of holes and growths, they harbored contradictory meanings and ambivalent images.[32] In the convulsive context of colonialism, the French and the Gabonese experienced muffled concerns and fleeting moments of discernment and recognition, but also denial, projection, and antagonism. Colonialists' fierce racial aversion to the Gabonese, for instance, derived in part from the desire to mask any congruence with the natives and to render racial and cultural contiguity unthinkable.[33] Africans sought to mask and protect their autonomy and political agenda. These strenuous efforts, and the unevenness of power between colonized and colonizers, augmented the volatility of imaginary formations. Both answered, embraced, or concealed a resemblance that they alternatively experienced as alluring or repulsive. Hence the task to trace this history is rarely straightforward.

Marriage, for instance, was hardly a solely French or African preoccupation: both saw it as a central vehicle for social reproduction and economic

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exchange. Nor were patriarchal impulses to aggregate kin and followers for domestic and public influence confined to either side of the racial divide. Again, this is not to say, emphatically, that we should erase the relations of domination and subordination that operated in the colony. On the contrary, a better attention to compatible imaginaries makes us attend to the ways in which the colonial regime enhanced historical and cultural discrepancies between rulers and ruled, and ranked them in racial hierarchies. Simultaneously, we can see how this project kept being altered by myriads of moments and experiences when mirroring concerns and ideas came into plain view. New funerary laws, for instance, tried to address the simultaneous, nervous concern that both Africans and Europeans had about dead human bodies.

Most historical actors did not consciously recognize these similarities. Partly because of the powerful hierarchies imposed by the colonial regime, they positioned themselves relationally as *blanc* (white) or *noir* (black), *européen* (European) or *africain* (African).[34] This is why, keeping in mind their heterogeneity and instability, I often rely on the broad aggregate "French" or "colonialists" when talking of foreign people in position of power, and "the Gabonese" when referring to individuals and communities who experienced colonial domination in the region now encompassed in modern Gabon.[35]

In this book, I track and conceptualize four major congruent imaginaries across the racial divide. Both colonized and colonizers understood that the travail of social prosperity and power was based on *transactions* between people and numinous entities or higher principles (ancestors, spirits, science, and technology; chapter 1). They thought that people, objects, money, and power relations held commensurable value and efficacy and could be exchanged (chapter 2 and 4). In turn, transactional imaginaries encouraged practical fantasies of *kinship* and *affiliation* across races (chapter 1), expressing the new, intractable intrusion of white people in the realm of magic and power, along with fears of intimate betrayal and social death. With the imaginary of *carnal fetishism*, French and Africans reconceptualized human flesh as a fetish, for example, a material entity suffused with self-contained efficacy and agency (chapter 3). Yet carnal fetishism was riddled with deep ambivalence and anxieties, including the possibility that intimate outsiders might capture one's flesh and life force for their benefit: the alarm coalesced in a mutual imaginary of *cannibalism* (chapter 5 and 6). The cannibal imaginary underwrote social reproduction and social interaction, predicting the doom of white domination and explaining the reign of destructive witchcraft.

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Transacting Power

If Africans and the French held congruent imaginaries, then we need to rethink how colonial domination worked. One of the ways in which I propose to do so is by using the heuristic device of *transaction*, a concept that with a few exceptions, has been rarely applied to colonial history, and even less so by historians.[36] Transaction elucidates how singular units of exchange arose on the ground, bringing together colonized and colonialists in active and transformative relations. I use it here as an operative idea rather than a strictly constructed concept: my aim is not to describe all colonial interactions and their causes, but to insist on the ways in which colonial domination made people come together in processual and dynamic moments of exchange and transformation. Transaction, moreover, espouses the field: in Gabon, Africans and Europeans held congruent imaginaries that interpreted the normal labor of social reproduction and exchanges with the spiritual world as so many forms of transactions.[37] Both of them also experienced colonial rule in terms of *transactions gone wrong*.[38]

Since the 1990s, to interpret colonial interactions, historians have used scenarios that tend to privilege unilateral agency with little or no reciprocity, and without the knowledge of the other party.[39] By adopting a Western dress code, for instance, Kuba city dwellers in the 1940s did not need to enter in direct relation with the Europeans who lived there.[40] Many transformative actions in the colony, often glossed as borrowing, appropriation, and reworking, could happen while avoiding close interaction with dominant or subaltern groups. Yet it is useful to think beyond self-actional initiatives of colonial individuals and groups, and to find a language that is able to analyze how reciprocal and co-constitutive relationships worked among people, especially in creating capacity and power. Avoidance, indifference, and planes of life undisturbed by foreign rule were part of the colonial experience. But transactions can retrieve another, crucial dimension of colonial life made of moments of exchange and negotiation in which people came together in singular units of historical agency and transformation.

The word "transaction" comes from the Latin verb *transigere*, "to end a conflict or contestation," and the meaning is particularly apt in the antagonistic context of colonialism, although, as we will see, transactions often embodied and triggered conflicts, instead of settling them. One of the benefits of transaction is that it presumes agency in all partners and the possibility that they enter in effective (and transformative) exchange. While "bricolage" insists

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on unilateral action, transaction describes dynamic and relational operations, whether indirect, illegal, or imposed under duress. Yet the concept of transaction should not sanitize or flatten these moments of contact. In the colonial context, most transactions ended in considerable loss and harm for one party. Colonial troops, for instance, could attack a village, take prisoners, burn houses, and destroy the fields. The result of the confrontation, although forceful and unwanted, opened a transformative relation in which villagers lost political independence, and human and economic assets, and the French gained sovereignty, land, and reputation. Thus colonial hierarchies, rather than preexisting these exchanges, were partly produced and shaped by them. Yet the patterns of exchange were never determined only by cultural, economic, or racial differences. Instead, they occurred between, across, and among races, social groups, genders, individuals, and spiritual entities.

The concept of transaction, moreover, follows the shape and design of local imaginaries that Africans and Europeans used to think about the colonial situation, and the normal labor of social reproduction. As this book will narrate, both rulers and ruled hold transactional imaginaries that applied to colonial interactions. The French imagined that colonialism could improve social and political reproduction among the Gabonese. They saw free commerce, taxes, and forced labor as ways of facilitating individual and collective transactions to augment communities and their material assets. The colonial "mission" was also a transactional affair, one that incited white men to invest their personal life in Africa, and use immaterial forces called science, *pouvoir*, and civilization to bring progress to the natives.[41] Colonialists thus justified the civilizing mission by computing the "sacrifice" of fellow colonialists and the alleged benefits received by the Gabonese. Likewise, the view that Africans should pay for the gift of progress and enlightenment explained the task of extracting labor and taxes. In the eyes of the Gabonese, colonial transactions had darker meanings. By the 1900s, they saw how white colonialists had taken control of economic exchanges, increasingly intruding in the realm of social and domestic transactions. They felt how taxes, male labor, and the criminalizing of polygamy and bride payments were upsetting exchanges between communities, and transactions with ancestors and spirits.[42] Moreover, they experienced the ways in which French targeted power objects that contained agency and sacred forces, destroying shrines, and confiscating human remains and charms as destructive transactions.

Indeed, the concept of transaction brings better attention to the "things" that mediated exchanges. Whether French or African, people believed that

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circulating and exchanging assets (material and immaterial) was instrumental to domination. When a missionary confiscated the charms of a Christian convert, he diminished the power of the convert and attached new value to the object. In this case, the Gabonese believed that stolen charms added to the mystical capacity of missionaries. Here power resulted from the exchange, but was also the transacted item itself. This book will look at a number of instances where people, bodies, currencies, charms, and commodities entered transactions for mobilizing power, agency, and social reproduction.

In the context of colonialism, using the concept of transaction allows to see how, across the racial divide, power and capacity existed as relational realities produced by active or passive forms of exchanges. Colonialism not only worked as a field of power, where people battled for sovereignty and survival, but as a transactional field in which myriad of deals, exchanges, and transfers determined, each day, subtle or major reordering of hierarchies, status, wealth, and knowledge. In its rawest formulation, colonialism was enacted when Africans and Europeans entered in relation with one another, taking something and paying for the cost, or losing assets and survival options.[43] In the colony, more often than not, transactions were suffered as moments of loss and disempowerment.

Indeed, transactional imaginaries took a consistent dark side in colonial Gabon, making the Gabonese and the French experience the power of colonial rule in terms of *transactions gone wrong*. Soon, colonialists and the Gabonese imagined transactional dynamics as contaminated by harmful effects, reversing the flow of exchanges necessary to sustaining and reproducing life, and social orders. By the 1900s, the Gabonese believed that whites had significantly disrupted the normal circulation of spiritual gifts and social investments, and were feeding on the destruction of local charms and relics. They could still attack white people or try to avoid them, moving away from colonial stations, but as colonial forces increasingly saturated physical and social spaces, the Gabonese found themselves trapped in an economy of exchanges that forced unequal and extraordinary transactions upon them. Although spurred by specific historical factors, these dynamics resembled existing representations of destructive magic that blamed greedy individuals intruding in the flux of spiritual exchanges and reproduction. Ancient hopes for exchange and reproduction became fears of physical destruction, spiritual deprivation and social decline. The French (openly or secretly) lamented the deleterious effect of their rule, debating metaphors and projections that staged them, the colonialists, as forcing local people in lethal exchanges.

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Transactions unfolded in the colony as a congruent imaginary: whether French or African, people believed that circulating and exchanging assets was instrumental to domination, to social survival, and to producing power and agency.

Transgressive Hegemony

This book suggests that, in the colony, hegemonic processes did not derive only from normative understandings and explicit opinions. Instead, they stemmed from Europeans and Africans' broken norms and betrayed principles, and their frightened, parallel recognition of them. These transgressions, real and imagined, were crucial for weaving hegemonic dynamics in the colony.

In the 1970s, English-speaking scholars hotly debated the notion of hegemony in the field of colonial history, asking whether any could arise between groups separated by considerable social, cultural, and linguistic differences, and split up by brutal coercion.[44] The Subaltern Studies group articulated the most radical critique of the concept in the colonial context.[45] Yet hegemony retained considerable traction, not least because it offered a relational and dialectical model of power that ask subtler questions in place of diagnosing the "collaboration" or "alienation" of African middle classes.[46] It also deconstructed colonial rule as a monolith, shedding light on the "productive weakness" of imperial domination.[47]

This book bends the idea of hegemonic processes further. Power relations in the colony were not just incomplete and uneven: they were also made of indirect recognitions steeped in the deviant and the transgressive. To my mind, it was precisely colonialists' inability to impose a viable fiction of symbolic authority across the racial gap—in short, to sustain a real hegemony—that left room for vibrant, if concealed and occult, interracial conversations about power and transgression. These exchanges throve in the realm of the unconscious, the inarticulate and the criminal. If some hegemonic formations failed in open alliances or disagreements, some could occur in mirroring feelings of guilt, desire, violation, and fright.

Better than language, lexicon, or idiom, the concept of the imaginary is able to convey how people inject social operations with meaningless, inverted, and sometimes destructive ideas and impulses.[48] This is the reason why, in this book, I pursue the history of power and agency in the "underneath" of domination, a term partly borrowed from Mariane Ferme in Sierra Leone.[49]

Although we know that colonialism worked as "a machine of fantasy and desire," we have failed to pay enough attention to the criminal, the delinquent,

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and the abnormal.[50] Although we study colonizers' and colonized's "regimes of truth," we assume that these programmatic agendas were mostly normative and constructive. As we insist on the projects, competencies, prescriptions, and desires of historical actors, we remain unaware of undercurrents of betrayal and remorse.[51] The forbidden, the faulty, the illegitimate, and the transgressive, whether they linger in people's repressed yearnings or become translated in practical action, remain unseen. Yet in the colony, hidden fantasies and fitful passions were not just abstract speculations; they were also conducive to physical and institutional interventions. Some passionate actions burst out in fleeting impulses, like the one overcoming a Catholic missionary in front of a pile of pagan charms he had ordered Gabonese converts to destroy, suddenly pushing him to steal a few.[52] The extraordinary profits that the French derived in the colony openly corrupted the moral norms that, back home, informed their political tradition.[53]

Africans experienced similar moments of guilt, transgression, and vulnerability. Witchcraft accusations often offer a glimpse into these feelings. One day in 1920, a grown man accused a twelve-year-old boy of cannibalism. He claimed that the boy had offered him a piece of meat from the forest and, allegedly, had asked the man "to give him somebody in exchange," implying that he wanted to taste human flesh.[54] The fate of the young suspect is unknown, but the historian can use his story to track how the language of witch hunger and cannibal yearnings suffused interpersonal tensions and conflicts.

Understanding colonial engagements means that we need to look, underneath everyday transactions and engagements, for the repressed emotions, morbid impulses, delinquent actions, and perverse yearnings that underpinned everyday forms of power and agency. Europeans and Africans also met in these neurotic and painful spaces, and thought fright, desire, denial, guilt, and remorse shaped imaginaries of power.

Terrains 1: Gabon and the Gabonese

In the early nineteenth century, the region now encompassed by modern Gabon was home to small-scale communities of farmers, hunter-gatherers, and traders. Cosmopolitan hubs and trading ports on the coast had been in contact with Atlantic traders since the sixteenth century. Throughout political and social changes, including the slave trade, local societies had long contributed to the celebrated "equatorial tradition," a set of social and cultural traits crafted by inhabitants of the western Equatorial African rainforest

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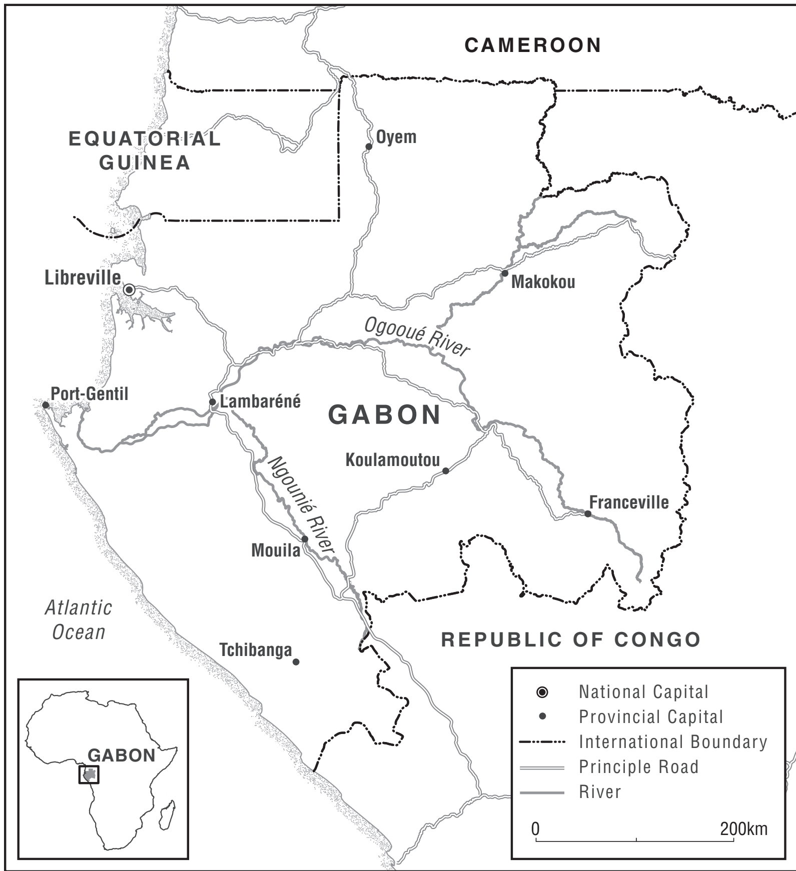

I.1 Map of Gabon, 2018.

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over four millennia.[55] This original reservoir of ideas and strategies preserved people's inclination for decentralized authority and for achieved, rather than inherited, leadership. Nineteenth-century communities enjoyed considerable prosperity through agriculture, trading, and various industries such as iron smelting. Most engaged in the slave trade at a late date, after the decline of the kingdom of Loango in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Despite local rivalries and the flow of imported commodities from the Atlantic, local communities did not coalesce into centralized polities and remained virtually untouched by kingdom formation. Gabon's "egalitarian and open societies," to borrow from James Fernandez's description, lived in large villages of several clans and families (or lineages) ranked by prominence and seniority.[56] Various political and ritual institutions united residential units, such as initiation societies and a meetinghouse (proto-Bantu **bánjá*) for male gatherings. Political life was riddled with debates and disputes, illustrating the social importance of the "house" (proto-Bantu: *-gandá*) in Gabon, a basic unit of residence and production made up by an extended household of family members, clients, dependents, and allies.[57]

By the mid-nineteenth century, local communities still predicated an individual's prestige on the ability to compose a harmonious establishment of kinfolk, clients, and dependents. Rather than the brute computing of dependent labor or reproductive potential, successful leaders thrived on attracting people to their house and nurturing their knowledge, skills, and social stamina.[58] Spirits and ancestors played a significant role in this political economy. Ritual experts (sing. *ganga*; plur. *banganga*) harnessed the mystical agency of these numinous entities in physical objects called charms (proto-Bantu: **bwanga*) and in reliquaries (Fang: *byeri*) that they composed with the remains of remarkable ancestors.[59] These devices provided the larger community with protection and healing. People also believed that an organic/mystical substance (Fang: *evu*; iPunu: *kundu*; oMyènè: *inyemba*) inhabited the body of ritualists and political leaders, enabling them to deal with the dangerous spiritual energy of spirits and ancestors and to "bind" it into charms.[60] Agency thus constantly circulated through both immaterial and physical channels.

From the 1850s until 1960, the region fell under devastating foreign influence. Thousands of Euro-American and West African agents arrived in Gabon.[61] They set up "factories," warehouses and stores full of imported commodities, which they used to buy local palm oil, timber, and wax for international companies. Seeking to trade directly with suppliers, these men cut into the networks of local intermediaries and middlemen. Moreover, budding

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Catholic and Protestant missionary outposts started to attract small groups of converts. After 1885, French military troops invaded and occupied the land, imposing forced labor and tax collecting on the territories they controlled.[62] By the early 1920s, they had managed to crush most of the large-scale armed resistances, executing or exiling local leaders. From then on, opposition to French invaders occurred mostly in isolated attacks and religious initiatives. The Bwiti cult rose in the 1920s as the largest and perhaps the most innovative spiritual movement of the time. Borrowing elements from local ancestors' cults and from Christianity, Bwiti offered healing and social reformation against colonial devastations.[63]

Meanwhile, French colonialists bundled up indigenous healing practices and beliefs under the negative concepts of *sorcellerie* (witchcraft) and *fétichisme* (fetishism). Ad hoc *indigénat* ordinances and decrees indicted healers and ordinary individuals who worshipped ancestors and used therapeutic devices. Although the French never recognized or codified *sorcellerie* (as British colonial legislators did with witchcraft ordinances), their attacks criminalized local beliefs and actions under this umbrella notion.[64] The colonial notion overlapped awkwardly with local ideas about *dogi*, the malevolent use of extraordinary forces that destroyed people for the egotistic benefit of an individual.

In 1910, the French attached the colony of Gabon to the Federation of French Equatorial Africa, and moved the federal capital from Libreville to Brazzaville.[65] The political importance of Gabon diminished. With perhaps 450,000 inhabitants in the aftermath of World War I, the colony had one of the lowest population densities of West and Central Africa. It specialized in products from the rainforest and the ocean.[66] Most white people resided in urban areas, in the capital, or in newly created outposts in the interior. In Libreville, Port Gentil, and Lambaréné, they lived near a majority of African urbanites, pushed to town by poverty in rural areas.

In the 1940s and 1950s, a black political elite schooled in French culture gained jobs in governing institutions, where they compromised on political alliances with white *forestiers* (timber plantations owners) and colonial bureaucrats.[67] After formal independence in 1960, many white expatriates remained in the country and continued to staff important economic firms and the national administration. President Léon Mba's influence, like the compositional tactics of most local politicians, relied on opportunistic deference to French interests, albeit with a dose of anticolonial communist training, the patronage of religious networks (Bwiti and Christian churches) and urban

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migrants, and territorial alliances throughout the country.[68] After 1967, his successor, Omar Bongo, refined the system in unprecedented ways. Hailed abroad for its political stability and relative wealth, the country suffocated in the regime's regional compromises and haphazard alliances to preserve itself, while failing to lift the bulk of the population out of poverty.[69] At the time of Bongo's death in 2009, Gabon was a rich nation with a poor citizenry, and a country ridden with grave social and political tensions.

Yet these tensions often operated below the purview of foreign observers. As sociologist Anaclé Bissiélo said in 2002, "Ideology drives people here. Conflicts are fought and solved in the realm of the ideological. And this is the realm that every Gabonese seeks to conquer."[70] Indeed, to weaken an opponent, defeat a competitor or explain some extreme vagaries of life, many people invoke "the domain of the night" (French: *le domaine de la nuit*) and the intervention of ancestors, spirits, magical experts, and witches.[71] Few politicians shy away from spreading rumors about their own special powers, or from gossiping that their rivals are witches. In 2008, Père Mba Abessole, a well-known opponent of the regime, publicly boasted that he was able to target President Bongo with "Kapa missiles," massive witchcraft attacks. In August 2009, André Mba Obame, a contender for the presidential election, overtly complained that he was the victim of a *fusil nocturne* (English: "nightly gun"; Fang: *eluma*), another mystical weapon that people can use against their enemies.[72]

Such stories are not abstract metaphors or figurative interpretations, alive only in the minds of people, and we cannot approach them as such. Rather, we must listen as people talk of embodied powers, "fetishes" (*fétiches*), and dreadful attacks that redirect peoples' lives, amalgamating long-standing beliefs in spirits and ancestors, witches and their organic-mystical force, new global figures of enchanted power (Mami Wata), the Christian God, its saints and nemeses (the Virgin Mary, the Very Bad Heart of the Devil, vampires), Western technology, knowledge, and money.[73] Neither remnant of precolonial ontologies nor the result of late global capitalism, these stories have been partly created by the Gabonese's engagement with the theories and technologies of power that French colonialists deployed in the colony.

Terrains 2: French Colonialists

At the end of the nineteenth century, Europeans had a long history of mutual interactions with people on the Gabonese coast.[74] The slave trade had brought many disasters in the region, yet they paled in comparison to the co-

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lonial conquest. Colonialists declared the inhabitant savages and the region legally vacant, and they devastated the land to an unprecedented scale.[75] Yet despite their victories and dominant status, white rulers remained quite insulated. The French government discouraged white migration to the colony, giving priority to indirect forms of economic exploitation on the ground. Most administrators stayed in Gabon for only a few years. Racial regulations severely restricted social mingling. From the neighboring colony of Moyen-Congo, the great chronicler Mary Motley recorded her feeling of frustration and restlessness in 1950: "This little white world turned inward upon itself . . . Africa was all around, pulsating, vibrant. But I could not reach it. I was looking at a landscape from behind a glass plate."[76]

Yet Europeans and Africans pursued considerable forms of intimacy and interaction, often in awkward and clandestine moments never free of power hierarchies. Up until World War II, most white men hired a Gabonese *ménagère* (a mixed concept between "housewife" and "cleaning lady") to provide them with domestic and sexual services.[77] Masters and servants, clients and suppliers, managers and workers interacted daily, and these interactions continued after colonialists' families came to the colony in the 1940s. White *forestiers* (timber industrialists), in particular, often came from mixed-race families and lived in close contact with their employees and surrounding communities.[78] In other groups, a range of socially sanctioned venues allowed Europeans to pursue myriad forms of economic and social partnership with Africans. In the 1950s, private settlers increasingly entered into political alliances with Gabonese activists and leaders.[79] In daily life, ideas, objects, dreams, and fantasies also circulated across racial barriers, making an intricate tapestry of conversations, monologues, orders, silences, incidents, thefts, gifts, contracts, hearsay, and performances that, to some extent, made colonial Gabon a single—if uneven—unit of experience and analysis.[80]

The people I call "colonialists" broadly included men and women who derived considerable privileges from their dominant position in Gabon. Because these privileges were based on the color of their skin and a sense of cultural rather than national superiority, these people called themselves Europeans (*européens*), more rarely colonialists (*colons*) or whites (*blancs*), and almost never Frenchmen (*français*). Most were male, and, to borrow from Luise White's expression, highly "peripatetic."[81] With the exception of missionaries, administrators, managerial employees, and settlers, civil and military servants never spent more than a few years in the colony. All together, they remained a tiny, if powerful minority in Gabon. In 1936, the administration

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counted 1,223 Europeans (among approximately 450,000 black inhabitants). They numbered perhaps 3,000 in 1950.[82] Among them, a few dozen white *forestiers*, owners of local lumber and mining companies, born in the colony and often married to Gabonese wives, constituted the most stable and rooted part of "European" families.

Frenchmen in Gabon—and even missionaries among them—thought of themselves as rationalists and secular thinkers, marveling at the scientific progress and industrial discoveries that proved their cultural and racial superiority.[83] Yet, alternative orders of causality and meaning provided rich undercurrents in their imaginary of power and agency. Like their metropolitan counterparts, enormous curiosity about spiritual matters and the capacity of the mind and soul agitated them. Many subscribed to esoteric institutions such as Freemasonry. They revered spectacular inventions equally: the power of steam engines, the magic of electricity, the energy of speaking ghosts, and the turning tables of spiritualists. On the eve of the conquest, in the 1880s, new findings fostered popular fascination with the marvelous and the irrational. Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot's public diagnoses of female hysteria at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris put neurosis at the core of modern identity. In 1894, Gustave Le Bon, who had claimed the superiority of white intelligence based on cranial volume, wrote an influential study that showed how "crowds" were moved by irrational emotions.[84] A few years later, the educated public could read Sigmund Freud's early works on the unconscious.

Life in the colony often forced these intellectual and moral contradictions to surface uncomfortably, sometimes surging in acute crisis. Although colonialists arrived with specific historical and cultural legacies, and a personal story, too, dealing with the Gabonese involved complex processes of recognition, acceptance, invention, refusal, and denial. Power is an ambivalent experience and is not confined to one side only: it is essential to the formation of the historical subjects who occupy various positions in society.[85] Colonialism was a regime of coercion, but also a regime of production of historical agents.

Writing through Gaps and Knots

Historians of Africa, like others, need to work through gaps and holes, tenuous evidence, and the fierce elusiveness of the past. Many of the imaginaries that I track in this book were not audible in open discourses or articulate doctrines. They operated in transient experiences and non-discursive forms, often crystallizing in denial, transposition, and projection. Some laws first

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came to life in volatile dreams and unruly legends: in 1923, colonialists passed a decree against Gabonese cannibalism that reflected a long history of obsessive prejudices, bathed in reminiscences about the witches' Sabbath and the recent European craze for novelistic vampires. Likewise, Gabonese speculations about occult power frequently appeared in accidental and impulsive frights. The increasing role of blood in charms and witchcraft, for instance, appeared in isolated, fortuitous episodes. In 1931, angry parents in Libreville accused a young man of making surreptitious cuts on their baby's knees to collect his blood and put it in a charm to become rich.[86] The scene resonated with earlier animal sacrifice and the use of human substances in charms, yet the blood was an innovation. The position of the suspect was also a new element: a friend of the family who visited daily, he was both an insider and an outsider, a liminal status that increasingly characterized how people imagined witches.

In seeking empirical groundwork for this book, I often found myself teasing out the poetic power of odd sources and eccentric findings. In the colony, imaginaries and the underneath of domination often crystallized in swift moments that left no tangible traces, or only faint ones.[87] Some appeared in fictions, stories, and hearsay, others only in visual representations. As much as I could, I tested my findings by cross-reading written archives (fiction, administrative reports, diaries, trials, and essays), oral histories, objects, and visual sources. Sometimes patterns appeared; sometimes they did not.

Other sources, by contrast, are thick with meanings and outbranchings. They seem to conceal a deeper idea, like a bulging lump of rope hiding a single, precious treasure. Yet in these lumps of time and reveries, no unique or absolute meaning exists, one that we could reach by cutting through. The knot is the meaning, one that we can extricate only by re-forming it, creating new ties of interpretation and sagacity. Look, for instance, at the following vignette (figure I.1) in Paul Du Chaillu's *Lost in the Jungle* (1875).[88]

Although the artist's drawing closely followed the explorer's narrative of the incident, that of a male gorilla killing an African hunter, it also built on the expectations of the European public. The vignette thus reflects broad cultural constraints that spanned across Africa and Europe. Yet local colonial imaginaries are present as well, and their layered and contradictory meanings show through.[89] Working like a primal scene, the vignette shows the fallen huntsman watching the wild beast bite apart his gun, an obvious symbol of emasculation and a representation of homoerotic desire for the lying figure of the black man.[90] Maintaining Africans at a distance, white people often depicted them as infantile and feminine. And yet they often projected their ego

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I.1 "Gambo's friend killed by a gorilla." Engraving in Paul Du Chaillu, *Lost in the Jungle. Narrated for Young People*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875, 133.

upon them, and upon the great apes of the rainforest. Hence the engraving expressed at least three different fantasies: the desire to castrate Africans (the gorilla standing here for colonialists), the fear that Africans could emasculate and destroy Europeans (the gorilla standing for the Gabonese), and an ambivalent lust for lethal sexual intercourse.

The Gabonese archive abounds with similar scenes of transgressive domination and magical power, ripe with images and ideas, in which we can sometimes read the congealing of new imaginaries. The 1968 emblem of the ruling party (Parti Démocratique Gabonais), for instance, reveals how governing elites violently ensnare mystical power by destroying the life of other Gabonese. The image in figure I.2 reputedly features the hand of a murdered Catholic priest, complete with the ropes that had restrained him and captured his miraculous powers.[91]

The Gabonese tell the following story about the emblem: one day in 1968, Father Jacques, a Catholic priest of Fang origin stationed in the mission of Saint Francis in Lambaréné, went on a tour on the Ogooué River. In the house of an

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I.2 Emblem of the Parti démocratique gabonais (P.D.G.), featuring a disembodied hand.

agonizing patient, a group of men jumped on Jacques and asked him to relinquish his priestly power so they could use it for their own agenda. After he refused, the men killed him, brought his body to the forest, and dismembered it. The investigation failed to indict any suspect, although the police found the priest's left hand in a smoking house. A few weeks later, Omar Bongo accepted the presidency of Gabon, soon changing the name and visuals of the ruling party. For the public, his promotion to the highest charge in the country could have been made possible only by securing the higher magic of the priest's tortured body. The party's emblem thus pointed at a changing imaginary of sacred power and severed body parts.

In this rich tapestry of fantasies and fears, full of chasms and knots, I have found that interpretative devices from psychoanalysis provide a helpful hand. I am not the first to use the method, or to ruminate about the risks and benefits of the approach.[92] An open, pragmatic use of such learnings does not flatten historical agents into undifferentiated psychic subjects: rather, it reveals the creative work of the unconscious (whether individual or collective) in circumstantial moments, as well as social pathologies, strategies of enchantment, and repressive modes of action.[93] Transgressive imaginaries often worked as desires and experiences "too shameful for words."[94] In chapter 6, for instance, I use the idea of "projection" when studying the cannibal and gorilla imaginary among colonialists. Similar methods suggested rich interpretations of debt and loss among the Gabonese (see chapters 2 and 7).[95]

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A final word about the geographical and temporal scope of my sources: evidence for this book comes from the whole extent of modern Gabon, with occasional forays out into the broader region, specifically Congo-Brazzaville and Southern Cameroon. Between 1998 and 2012, I consulted archival materials in Aix-en-Provence, in Libreville, and in various missionary deposits, and I conducted six summers of field research in Gabon for up to seven weeks at a time. This tactic augmented my findings while letting me compare a wide range of symbolic patterns, social actors, and parallel histories. Focusing on a particular locale might have yielded a richer and more consistent harvest, but it would have run the risk of essentializing bounded cultural and historical entities. Nonetheless, the possibilities of localized history attracted me so much that I made four extensive visits to the province of Ogooué and Ngounié in 2002, 2006, 2007, and 2012. Chapter 2 presents the results of this work, mostly based on oral sources and field research in Lambaréné, Mouila, Fougamou, and Sindara. Many of my insights into the intimate textures of power came from media: watching TV, listening to the radio, and reading the local press, along with conversing with friends about the latest scandals and urban legends that never fail to spice up life in Gabon. I made extensive use of oral histories and interviews, and of multisited ethnographies in Libreville, the estuary region, central Gabon, and Ngounié Province.

Because imaginaries evolve unevenly and unpredictably, and because they are often traced in unusual clusters of sources and evidence, the book is not organized along a strictly chronological timeline. Instead, each chapter focuses on a particular stepping-stone in the history of power and agency from the 1860s to the 2010s. Chapter 1 traces how colonial technology replaced a water spirit in providing riches and power to communities in southern Gabon. Chapter 2 focuses on the power of fetishes, and looks at the ways in which the French and the Gabonese charged agency in physical containers, while investing them with multifarious value. Chapter 3 concentrates on the body as a key ingredient of power, investigating how human flesh became reenchanted at the crossroad of French and Gabonese tactics of power. Chapter 4 asks how the power of the body became priced in money, and how French perceptions of the value of the person articulated with Gabonese imaginaries of wealth-in-people. Chapters 5 and 6 delve into the imaginary of "eating-as-power," monitoring how Africans and Europeans reworked it into cross-racial ideas of cannibalism as failed reproduction. Chapter 5 looks at French cannibal discourses as an expression of major anxieties about the nature of domination and the doom of the colonial project. Chapter 6 un-

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covers the transforming of Gabonese power imaginaries of eating, and how procedures of "cooking the bones" of ancestors and kin became progressively replaced by unregulated acts of tearing up the flesh and drinking the blood of anonymous victims.

A Note on Sources

To avoid giving a picture of well-organized, organic empirical sources, I describe here how the materials supporting my narrative and argument came into place. My research seamlessly rose from my monograph on Gabon and Congo-Brazzaville from 1940 to 1964, which provided the empirical groundwork for this new project. I then visited, or worked again, in several archives. Three main sites preserve the written sources for the colonial period in Gabon: the National Archives for Overseas (Archives nationales d'outre mer, or ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence; the French National Archives in Paris (Archives nationales, or ANF); and the National Archives of Gabon (Archives nationales du Gabon, Fonds présidentiel, or ANG/FP) in Libreville. In France, the central archives of the former French Ministry of Colonies (or ANF) contain important documents on World War II in Gabon, including letters from the postal control in 1939–45 (Dossier 2097–2) and African requests for citizenship, as well as on French native policy (*politique indigène*), surveillance of political parties, and elections in the colony since 1945.

Then at independence, French authorities in Libreville triaged, destroyed, and repatriated some of their documents (called *archives de souveraineté*) to Paris. A smaller part of this shipment—mostly concerning elections and political parties—ended up in the French National Archives in Paris and Nantes (ANF). The larger portion, dealing with judicial, economic, political, and social issues, went to the ANOM in Aix-en-Provence. There I worked on the series 5D on French Equatorial Africa, and the H Series on Labor and Work Force (Travail et main d'oeuvre). The most important dossiers for this book included Intelligence on Individuals (dossiers 5D 211 and 214), Racial Discrimination (5D 253), Police and Intelligence (5D 247), Monuments and Commemoration (5D 183 and 254), and General Policy and Administration in French Equatorial Africa (Politique et administration générale). I found the richest material in dossier 5D 64, titled "Secret Societies" (*Sociétés secrètes*), which included fairly complete cases of investigations and trials on poisoning and witchcraft in Gabon.

But the French did not ship everything back to the metropole. Crucially, they left behind the huge archive that, across the entire colony, each district

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officer (*chef de circonscription*) produced about events, statistics, and daily life in their district. Now preserved and cataloged in the National Archives of Gabon in Libreville (ANG), these funds are more detailed than the syntheses the district officers regularly sent to the central colonial government in Libreville, and that were shipped to Paris and Aix-en-Provence after 1960. In the ANG, I consulted the following series in the Fonds Presidentiel (FP): administrators' diaries (*journaux de poste*) from 1924 to 1961, invaluable on the colonial perception of daily disturbances and the local atmosphere; the monthly and annual administrative reports on southern Gabon (Ngounié and Nyanga provinces); dossiers on native policy (*politique indigène*) from 1917 to 1960, rich with notes from police and infiltrators; dossiers on political affairs (*affaires politiques*) from 1904 to 1960; and dossiers on elections, prisons, police, native chiefs (*chefferie indigène*), and native petitions (*pétitions indigènes*). One of the richest funds for this book came from the series 1609 on the Organization of Native Justice (Organisation de la justice indigène). It comprises a significant—if uneven—series of judicial records from 1904 onward, abounding with transcripts on local investigations, interrogations of witnesses and convicts, witchcraft and tiger men trials, and conflicts over mystical attacks. In Libreville, another catalog, called "provincial archives" (ANG/*fonds provincial*), concerns the local documents of some districts that were sent in their entirety to Libreville after independence: I consulted those on Mitzic, Mimongo, Mouila, and Ndende.

The materials at the ANG, however, are characterized by internal unruliness: on paper, each dossier concerns a geographical or thematic issue. In practice, it contains a myriad of archives on various themes and issues. In a file, say, on political affairs in the district of Mouila between 1940 and 1950, one finds a haphazard collection of monthly reports by the district chief next to police notes, trial investigations, letters and petitions from Africans, and questionnaires on nutrition, epidemics, and fertility. During my three years of summer work at the Gabonese archives (1998–2002), I dug as broadly as possible in this rich material, organizing its treasures in thematic folders.

My archive on tiger-men murders in Gabon (chapter 6) shows how I built my own files from heterogeneous sources. First, I compiled judicial transcripts from the ANOM series 5d64, and the ANG/FP 1609 series on Organization of Native Justice (Organisation de la justice indigène). Other documents came from administrators' diaries in southern Gabon (ANG/FP 108), annual reports in the southern districts (*circonscriptions*), a report on a military tour in the district of Mekambo in 1924 (ANG/FP 112), handwritten transcripts

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of trials and the cross-examination of suspects and witnesses in several posts (ANG/FP 8, dossiers 303–4), monthly political and economic reports for the Ogooué maritime (ANG/FP 624), transcripts and papers kept in the dossier on Native Tribunals (Tribunaux indigènes, ANG 27), and prison rolls (ANG/FP 820). A couple of articles published in the *Bulletin de la Société de Recherches Congolaises*, along with documents in the Fonds Pouchet at the Holy Ghost Fathers' Archives in Chevilly-la-Rue (Dossiers 2d60–9a1 and 9a4) completed the file.

Missionary sources complement the official colonial ones. I spent several weeks at the archives of the largest Congregation in Gabon, the Fathers of the Holy Ghost (Pères de la Congrégation du St-Esprit), preserved in Chevilly-la-Rue, near Paris. The rich funds left by Father Pouchet (series 2D60), a missionary stationed in Gabon from 1935 to 1957, concern witchcraft, tiger-men, Gabonese Christians, and catechists. In addition, the Holy Ghost Fathers published an annual bulletin from 1889 onward, full of stories sent by missionaries in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, and destined to parishioners in Europe. Many of the anecdotes in the bulletin came from Gabon. Written as propaganda and often dramatized, these archives need critical reading. They nonetheless provide invaluable stories on daily routines and incidents at the missions, including evangelizing campaigns, the buying of young "slaves" by the fathers, events concerning pupils and schools, local rebellions, and the behavior of European traders and administrators. In Gabon, I also worked in the archives of the Sindara Catholic mission, generously provided by Father Zacharie Péron, and in some of the municipal archives of Mouila. The final portion of my written sources came from the local press: *Liaison*, the monthly review sponsored by the government for the *évolués* of French Equatorial Africa (Afrique Équatoriale Française, or AEF), where African authors published fascinating studies of local customs, generational conflicts, and aspirational stories from 1950 to the early 1960s; the historical journal *La Semaine de l'AEF*, founded in 1955 as a platform for the new African politicians, still running today, and some of the more recent titles in the Gabonese Press (*L'Union*, *Le Bûcheron*, *Le Nganga*, etc.), collected on site during my field research.

If this project starts in the mid-nineteenth century, the cornerstone of the book, emphatically, is the present. It is grounded in my time in the field, and people's current experiences with power and agency. From 1998 to 2012, I spent six summers in Gabon and one in Congo-Brazzaville doing field work. These moments were crucial to my understanding of mystical agency and the imaginaries central to the history of (post)colonial domination. I did

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participant observation, talking with healers, patients, informants, and various local actors, and transcribing information and conversations in notebooks, usually later at night. Not all of these interactions had to do with my research. On the contrary, I learned most in casual conversations with friends and acquaintances about daily life, and the many social, political, and personal grievances that they shared with me. I also worked many hours with colleagues and friends at the Université Marien Ngouabi in Brazzaville, and Université Omar Bongo Ondimba (OBO) in Libreville, including the students that took a graduate seminar with me in 2012. There, my learning was of a different nature, professional and cutting-edge, pushing me to absorb my colleagues' original, provocative, and insightful analyses. The most productive collaboration has been, and still is, with sociologists Joseph Tonda and Patrice Yengo. It has ended up in several publications and ongoing projects, and has nurtured my thinking about many issues tackled by this book. Last but not least, my education came from watching TV, listening to the radio, looking at advertisements and cartoons, and listening to the jokes and puns that people in Gabon delight in sharing. Boredom was a great teacher, too, bending my mind and body to the special rhythms and frustrations of daily life in Gabon.

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NOTES

Introduction

1 Paul Belloni Du Chaillu, *Recent Remarkable Discoveries in Central Africa* (Philadelphia, PA: Barclay, 1867), 63 and 71; and Appendix 1 in Paul Du Chaillu, *A Journey to Ashango-Land and Further Penetration into Equatorial* Africa (New York, D. Appleton, 1867), 439–60. See also testimony by Alfred Marche on stealing three human skulls in northern Gabon in *Trois voyages dans l'Afrique occidentale: Sénégal—Gambie—Casamance—Gabon—Ogooué*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie, 1882), 109.

2 On preserving chimpanzees' heads, see Augustus C. Collodon, *Congo Jake: The Story of My Adventurous Life* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1932), 200. R. B. N. Walker, an agent of the British trading firm Hatton and Cookson, was the first to send a gorilla specimen to the United Kingdom in 1847. The carcass traveled along with two boiled skeletons and the brains, intestines, and body parts of other animals from the rainforest. Richard Francis Burton, *Two Trips to Gorilla Land and the Cataracts of the Congo*, vol. 1 (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1876), 238. Jeremy Rich, *Missing Links: The African and American Worlds of R. L. Garner, Primate Collector* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

3 Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 96–97.

4 Among scholars of Equatorial Africa, the verb "to compose," better than "to build" or "to manufacture," defines the elaborate practices observed by ritual experts to bring together composite ingredients to make a charm.

5 "Les 'honorables' qui siègent actuellement au palais Léon Mba ne doivent leur salut qu'à la livraison des organes que leur ont procuré pygmés, ngangas, marabouts et autres charcutiers d'organismes humains." "Cette affaire-là: Des 'Honorables' et des 'pièces détachées,'" unsigned editorial, *Misamu*, no. 252 (14–28 May 2002): 3.

6 Conversation with Denis Mugoma, his granddaughter Giovanna, and Michelle Musavu, Libreville, 7 July 2012. All names have been changed.

7 I use the English terms "witchcraft" and "sorcery" indifferently to reflect contemporary African usages in French (*sorcellerie*). On a similar theoretical

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stand, see Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 12–14. Geschiere also aptly observed that academic distinctions should not mask the terms' fluidity and people's struggles over them, as they are in practice never self-evident (Peter Geschiere, personal communication, August 2003).

8 In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Peter Geschiere, Stephen Ellis, and Gerrie ter Haar brought spiritual forces and witchcraft into what Michael Schatzberg called the "parameters of the political" in Africa, pressing academics to "recognize the growing relation between religion and politics." Michael Schatzberg, *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 70–110; Geschiere, *Modernity of Witchcraft*; Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

9 Achille Mbembe, *La naissance du maquis dans le Sud-Cameroun (1920–1960): Histoire des usages de la raison en colonie* (Paris: Karthala, 1996), 11. George C. Bond and Diane M. Ciekawy, *Witchcraft Dialogues: Anthropological and Philosophical Exchanges* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001).

10 Joseph Tonda, *Le Souverain moderne: Le Corps du pouvoir en Afrique centrale (Congo, Gabon)* (Paris: Karthala, 2005), 173. Geschiere, *Modernity of Witchcraft*, 17.

11 Nicole Eggers theorizes *puissance* in Eastern Congo in her PhD dissertation, "Kitawala in the Congo: Politics, Religion, Health and Healing in 20th Century Central Africa," (University of Wisconsin, 2013), and in a recent article, "Mukombozi and the Monganga: The Violence of Healing in a Kitawalist Uprising in 1944," *Africa*, no. 85 (2015): 417–36.

12 For a detailed and historicized theory of agency, see Mustapha Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What Is Agency?," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (January 1998): 962–1023. On agency as the master trope of the new US social history on the enslaved, read the important reflection of Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (autumn 2003): 113–24.

13 Paul Missioumbou, "Héritage, contradictions et changements socio-culturels chez les Nzébi: Contribution à l'analyse de la crise de l'institution familiale au Gabon" (Master's thesis, Université Omar Bongo Onbimba (hereinafter UOB), Libreville, 1999), 91–94. People in today's Gabon speak over forty-two languages, and none has a decided preeminence. All belong to classes A, B, and C of the Guthrie classification of Western Bantu languages. Malcolm Guthrie, *Comparative Bantu*, 4 vols. (Farnham, UK: Gregg Press, 1967–71).

14 Guy Donald Adjoï Obengui, "Njobi et pouvoir politique chez les Mbede" (Master's thesis, UOB, Libreville, 2008).

15 Note circulaire sur le Rappel des dispositions de principe qui définissent les rapports de l'autorité locale avec les indigènes, Lieutenant-Gouverneur du Gabon aux Commandants des circonscriptions militaires, Libreville, 9 February 1912, Archives of the district of Mitzic, quoted by James Fernandez, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

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Press, 1981), 611n99. On the importance of invisible agents as "freedom" and "fate," "state" and "law," or "love" and "hate" in Europe and North America, see David M. Gordon, *Invisible Agents: Spirits in a Central African History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012).

16 Gordon, *Invisible Agents*, 2012. But as Gordon and Wyatt MacGaffey show, European societies also understood power partly in magical terms. Wyatt MacGaffey, "Changing Representations in Central African History," *Journal of African History* 46, no. 2 (2005): 189–207.

17 Similarly, white missionaries believed in the invisible and efficient agency of the host, blessed water, and wine. On the material and affective concreteness of the religious experience, see Birgit Meyer, "Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of the Medium," *Social Anthropology*, no. 19 (2011): 23–39.

18 Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, [1915] 1965). For a critique of the sacred-profane dichotomy, see Jack Goody, *Death, Property, and the Ancestors: A Study of the Mortuary Customs of the Lodagaa of West Africa* (London: Tavistock, 1962), 41.

19 Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in* Nigeria (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). On the relation between magic and technology, see Alfred Gell, "Technology and Magic," *Anthropology Today* 4, no. 2 (1988): 6–9.

20 On magic and commodification of the body, see Isak Niehaus, "Coins for Blood and Blood for Coins: From Sacrifice to Ritual Murder in the South African Lowveld,"' *Etnofoor* 13, no. 2 (2000): 31–54. On the traffic of organs for medical transplants, see Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "The Global Traffic in Human Organs," *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 2 (April 2000): 191–224. On moral economies and capitalistic ethics, see Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and* Africa (London, James Currey, 1992); and Parker Shipton, *Mortgaging the Ancestors: Ideologies of Attachment in Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

21 For a powerful indictment of "othering" others, see Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing against Culture," in *Anthropology and Theory: Issues in Epistemology*, ed. Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), particularly 393–96.

22 The concept of "imaginary" remains a newcomer in the English scholarly literature although it has appeared more frequently since the early 2000s. Luise White, for instance, uses it in passing in *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 50–51. For a recent definition, see Lucy A. Suchman, *Human-Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1n1.

23 The subaltern studies were instrumental in this turn. Ranajit Guha, *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986–1995* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). On African history, see Steven Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars, and Invisible

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Histories," in *Beyond the Linguistic Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, edited by Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 182.

24 Jane I. Guyer and Samuel M. Eno Belinga, "Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa," *Journal of African History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 91–120; Phyllis Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Florence Bernault, *Démocraties ambigües en Afrique centrale: Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, 1940–1965* (Paris, Karthala, 1996); Didier Gondola, *Villes miroirs: Migrations et identités urbaines à Brazzaville et Kinshasa, 1930–1970* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997); Christopher Gray, *Colonial Rule and Crisis in Equatorial Africa. Southern Gabon, ca. 1850–1940*, Rochester (Rochester, NY.: University of Rochester Press, 2002); Tamara Giles-Vernick, *Cutting the Vines of the Past: Environmental Histories of the Central African Rainforest* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Rachel Jean-Baptiste, *Conjugal Rights: Marriage, Sexuality, and Urban Life Colonial Libreville, Gabon, 1849–1960* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014).

25 Nancy Rose Hunt's groundbreaking study of the Belgian Congo demonstrated how a new lexicon of power and fertility emerged from the "debris" of colonial and African practical discourse. This lexicon, she showed, was syncretic, creolized, and mutating. It was also often inarticulate and concealed in unexpected places. Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 11 and 12. Ann Laura Stoler takes the point into the realm of emotions and sentiments, that the colonized and colonizers' "affective liaisons" forced colonial hierarchies to be constantly (re)constructed through law and the vagaries of interracial social intimacy. Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 12–13.

26 For instance, Thomas Spear, "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History* 44, no. 1 (2003): 26, writes that "colonial agents . . . shared few if any understandings with their African subjects." The most consistent effort to disentangle the history of slavery and African Diaspora from black ethnocentrism has come from Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

27 Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 247. James Fernandez coined the notion of "creative misinterpretations" in 1982 (against "inculturation" and acculturation) to describe how colonizers and colonized elaborated new meanings out of mutual misguided representations; Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 284. Steven Feierman rethought the term as "working misunderstandings" in his *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). Frederick Cooper elaborated on the idea of "negotiation" in his programmatic

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article "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1516–45. On hybridity and bricolage, see Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon*.

28 See the classic (but misleading) opposition between British indirect rule and French ideas of "assimilation" in African colonies. Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

29 A point addressed in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 88. I am using a "soft" definition of congruent here, as commensurable historical formations, not the mathematical idea of identical or coinciding figures.

30 Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*, 4th ed., revised and corrected (Paris: Seuil, 1975); translated into English as *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987). Castoriadis defined imaginary against the mechanistic Marxist theory of false consciousness and alienation, Freud's emphasis on the individual psyche, and finally "imagination" in the sense of individual, delusory thoughts. Jean-François Bayart first applied the idea to contemporary Africa; Jean-François Bayart, *L'État en Afrique: La Politique du ventre* (Paris: Fayart, 1989). Ann Stoler uses imaginaries as common sense, or "what was unwritten but everybody knew about." Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*: *Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3.

31 Imaginary somewhat overlaps with "collective experience" or "imagination." But few historians define these notions precisely. Benedict Anderson coined the famous idea of "national imaginings" and "imagined communities" but never elaborated on the terms "imaginings" and "imagined." Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, [1983] 1991), 7–9. Ann Laura Stoler talks of "the psychic space of empire" but does not define it. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 25. Even the systematic effort of Susanne Zantop to unearth German colonial "fantasies" and "political unconscious" leaves both notions under-explained. Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies*: *Conquest, Family and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770–1870* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–6.

32 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 7–8, contrasts imaginaries (impersonal) with fantasies (personal), but I take a more flexible approach to fantasies, considering them to be both personal and collective. Imaginaries are not emotions, or sentiments, even if they include them. Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reveries in Colonial Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

33 On this idea, see Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution,* 2 vols. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991 and 1997), 1:195 and

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1:244–46. On the politics of difference applied to the native body, see Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

34 In the vernacular, locals had recourse to many other identities based on linguistic, cultural, and clan-based names: a man could use his given name and also refer to the name of his clan for identification. He could also use the term *mutu* to talk about a person in general.

35 On deconstructing the categories of "Europeans," "whites," and "Africans," see Berman and Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley*; and John Lonsdale: "Kenya: Home Country and African Frontier, in *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons over the Seas*, edited by Robert Bickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 74–111.

36 Jean-François Bayart and Romain Bertrand coined the idea of *transactions hégémoniques* (hegemonic transactions) to study cultural formations and power alliances between colonial actors. Jean-François Bayart and Romain Bertrand, "De quel 'legs colonial' parle-t-on?," *Esprit* 12, no. 330 (2006): 154–60. In Africa, Bruce Kapferer used "transaction," first in an empirical study of relations between workers and managers in a factory in Zambia, and second, in a collected volume on theories of social change and exchange. Bruce Kapferer, *Strategy and Transaction in an African Factory: African Workers and Indian Management in a Zambian Town* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1972); and Bruce Kapferer, introduction to *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behavior* (Philadelphia, PA: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976). Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch, in their illuminating collection on money and exchange, use the term "transactional orders" to talk about the cultural meanings of systems of exchange, but they mostly restrict the term to the economic realm. *Money and the Morality of Exchange* edited by Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 23–30.

37 Better than "exchange," "transaction" broadly applies at the level of individuals and groups, and beyond financial and economic deals. Moreover, transaction skirts around the immense anthropological literature on exchange, gifts, and reciprocity that would detract from the main argument of this book.

38 Anthropologist Fredrik Barth coined the concept of transaction (and transactionalism) to explain cultural changes through individual bargaining and maximizing profits, in part as a critique of structural functionalism. Fredrik Barth, "On the Study of Social Change," *American Anthropologist*, no. 69 (1967): 661–69. On the psychoanalytical school of transactional analysis, see Eric Berne, *Games People Play* (New York: Grove Press, 1964).

39 Frederick Cooper demonstrated how Africans' intimate experience of wage labor, subsistence rights, and leisure encouraged them to craft a new language of labor that featured prominently in negotiations about independence. Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also Greg Mann's study of the shared "political language" of sacrifice and debt that helped

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Frenchmen and West African veterans to dialogue about political rights and citizenship. Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 4–6.

40 Jan Vansina, *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 303–10.

41 For a description of a "transfer of office" in 1987 Cameroon, see Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," *Africa*, 1992, p. 26.

42 Marcel Mauss reads the sacrifice as a process of exchange that brings about simultaneous sacralization and desacralization. Thanks to the destruction of the intermediary (the victim), two worlds interpenetrate and yet remain distinct. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice. Its Nature and Function*, London, Cohen & West, 1964, pp. 91–100.

43 In the proposed example, the missionaries believed that they were "paying" the charms by offering the Christian salvation to the Gabonese. The broader principle derived from the "zero sum game," the belief that people cannot create new things without destroying or subtracting others. Robert Harms demonstrated that this economic and spiritual ethos was ingrained among the inhabitants of the Congo Basin in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and differed from the capitalistic idea that riches can expand indefinitely. I argue that the French in Gabon, when it came to domination, subscribe to similar, pre-capitalistic ideas. Robert W. Harms, *River of Wealth, River of Sorrow: The Central Zaire Basin in the Era of the Slave and Ivory Trade, 1500–1891*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

44 In his initial set of propositions, Antonio Gramsci defined hegemony as "the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group." Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci,* ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, International, 1971), 12. Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks, eds., *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India* (London, British Academic Press, 1994). Only Steve Feierman found that "a substratum of agreement existed between the colonized and the colonizers on the worth of basic institutions and on the distribution of social benefits." Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*, 18–19. This is close to what Jean and John Comaroff theorize in *Of Revelation*, 2:27. Jonathan Glassman reminds us that consent is not equivalent to consensus: hegemony lies in the questions asked, not their content. Jonathan Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), 18.

45 Guha, *Subaltern Studies Reader*, xix. See also Nicholas B. Dirks, introduction to *Colonialism and Culture*, edited by Nicholas B. Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 7–9.

46 Hunt, *Colonial Lexicon*, 11–12, provides a detailed discussion of "middles" as leading translators, readers, and writers of colonial syncretism. She compares them to the "central midwives of colonial mutations." Others insisted on the

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counterhegemonic initiatives of Africans. Pier Larson, "Capacities and Modes of Thinking: Intellectual Engagements and Subaltern Hegemony in the Early History of Malagasy Christianity," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 4 (1997): 969–1002. On "research for hegemonic power" (*recherche hégémonique*), see also Jean-François Bayart, *L'État au Cameroun* (Paris, Karthala, 1979).

47 Ann Stoler and Luise White have insisted on the polysemantic stories and irreconcilable narratives that constitute (post)colonial power formations. Ann Laura Stoler, "In Cold Blood: Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives," *Representations*, no. 37 (1992): 151–89; and Luise White, *The Assassination of Herbert Chipeto: Texts and Politics in Zimbabwe* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003).

48 In contrast, the anthropological concept of "symbolic systems" hardly leaves space for useless or self-destructive ideas. The same applies to Gananath Obeyesekere's concept of "ritualized scenario"; Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1990).

49 Ferme's "underneath of things" describes how Sierra Leoneans believe in agentive forces that activate the visible world beneath the surface of discourse, objects, and social relations, and how people practice everyday tactics of concealment. She argues that some of these concealed meanings were made of sedimented memories of historical violence (the slave-trade, wars, and wealth extraction). Mariane C. Ferme, *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). For another study on embodied memories of violence, see Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

50 I borrow the term from Robert Young, *Colonial Desire*: *Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 98.

51 For studies that do look into the criminal and the transgressive, see Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies*; White, *Speaking with Vampires*; and Hunt, *Colonial Lexicon*. I also agree with, but try to go beyond, Michael Taussig's idea of the "colonial mirror" in his study of red rubber exploitation in the Amazonian rainforest. For Taussig, colonialists imputed their own barbarity to the "savages" they wished to colonize, and sustained a culture of terror that they pretended to enact through mimesis. Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*: *A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

52 "La Défense magique," manuscript signed by Jérôme Adam (future bishop of Gabon), n. d., Archives de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit (Holy Ghost Fathers' Archives) (hereafter Archives CSSP), 271-Dos. B-IV.

53 On colonizers' feelings of guilt and usurpation, see Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé: Précédé du portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1957); translated into English as *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1967). See also Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York, Monthly Review Press,

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2000) (first published in French as *Discours sur le colonialisme* [Paris: Présence africaine, 1955]).

54 Lettre du chef de la subdivision de Mouila au lieutenant-gouverneur du Gabon, no. 25, 14 February 1922; and audience du tribunal indigène de la subdivision de Mouila en matière répressive, 4 November 1920, Archives nationales du Gabon, Fonds présidentiel (National Archives of Gabon, Presidential Fund)(hereafter ANG/FP) 1609.

55 On the West Equatorial tradition and its moving character, see Vansina, *Paths*, 249–63.

56 Fernandez, *Bwiti*, 4 and 12.

57 Vansina, *Paths*, 74–81.

58 Guyer and Belinga, "Wealth in People."

59 Among scholars of Equatorial Africa, the verb "compose," better than "to build" "make," or "manufacture," defines how ritual experts bring together composite ingredients in a charm to charge it with efficacy and power.

60 Bantu terms for "experts" (*ganga;* plur. *banganga*) and for "charms" (proto-Bantu **bwanga*) stem from the proto-Bantu verb **-gang-*, "to tie up." Vansina, *Paths*, 298.

61 After slave trading was abolished by Great Britain (1807) and France (1818), the rise of new industrial factories in Europe demanded large quantities of cash crops and exotic products.

62 Nicolas Meteghe-Nnah, *Histoire du Gabon: Des origines à l'aube du XXIe siècle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), 106; Gray, *Colonial Rule*, 144–46; and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires* (Paris: La Haye, Mouton, 1972), 380 sqq.

63 See chapter 6. Bwiti became by the 1950s the dominant Gabonese religious institution after Christianity. For details, see André Mary, *Le Défi du syncrétisme: Le Travail symbolique de la religion d'Eboga, Gabon* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1999).

64 On the history of this French lexicon and its repurposing by the Gabonese, see Florence Bernault, "Witchcraft and the Colonial Life of the Fetish," in *Spirits in Politics: Uncertainties of Power and Healing in African Societies,* ed. Barbara Meier and Arne S. Steinforth (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Publishers, 2013), 53–74.

65 In the 1930s, the colony extended over approximately 250,000 square kilometers, or 100,000 square miles, roughly the same surface as modern Gabon.

66 The French administration encouraged a fairly successful cocoa plantation economy in the north of the colony among Fang farmers. Gilles Sautter, *De l'Atlantique au fleuve Congo: Une géographie du sous-peuplement: République du Congo, République gabonaise* (Paris: La Haye, Mouton et Cie, 1966). Mining products such as diamonds and gold also brought significant revenues, but they were entirely in the hands of French settlers. Considerable reserves in manganese (1944) and oil (1950) started to be exploited after 1960. Today the production of crude oil (onshore and ultradeep offshore) has been slowly declining from 18 million barrels in 1997 to an average of 12 million since 2002. Gabon is the

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third producer of manganese worldwide, and has significant reserves of uranium and diamond. Gabrielle Hecht, *Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1998). Data retrieved from Alexander Simoes (lead developer), The Observatory of Economic Complexity, The MIT Media Lab Macro Connections group available at http://atlas.media.mit.edu/profile/country/gab/, accessed 27 March 2014.

67 The Gabonese, like most subjects of the French empire, received substantial economic and political privileges after 1945. Bernault, *Démocraties ambiguës*.

68 François Ngolet, "Ideological Manipulations and Political Longevity: The Power of Omar Bongo in Gabon since 1967," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 2 (2000): 55–71.

69 In 2010, the gross national income per inhabitant was $7,760. It increased to $10,040 in 2012. These variations mirror the world price of crude oil (81 percent of Gabon's exports in dollar value in 2013) rather than any real increase in the wealth or disposable income of the population. Data retrieved from World Bank Group, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/datastatistics/resources/gnipc.pdf, and from http://data.worldbank.org/country/gabon, accessed 27 March 2014. In 2014, 47 percent of the Gabonese population was employed in rural activities and farming. According to the World Bank, almost 33 percent of the Gabonese population in 2005 fell under the poverty threshold ($1.25 a day). Data retrieved from World Bank Group, http://data.worldbank.org/country/gabon, accessed 4 April 2014, and from World Bank Group, http://data.worldbank.org/topic/agriculture-and-rural-development, accessed 27 March 2014. The measurement of poverty ratios is notoriously inaccurate and varies enormously according to the criteria used by researchers.

70 "Ce sont des peuples qui fonctionnent à l'idéologique. Les conflits se déroulent à ce niveau-là, et c'est ça que l'on cherche à conquérir." Personal communication, Anaclé Bissiélo, Libreville, 14 June 2002.

71 Although the Gabonese have recourse to biomedicine and doctors when they can afford to do so, few entirely disentangle life's incidents and promises from mystical causes. Many occasionally consult healers and diviners to diagnose illnesses, interpret dreams, or wrestle with and understand unusual series of afflictions and hardships. Only a minority, in my experience, feel that they can entirely neglect the care of ancestors, the Holy Spirit, or other numinous protective entities.

72 A "nightly gun" (French *fusil nocturne*; Fang *eluma*) is the term for a witchcraft attack.

73 Joseph Tonda theorized this constellation as the "Modern Sovereign." Tonda, *Le souverain moderne.*

74 In the eighteenth century, cosmopolitan African families living on the Gabon Estuary and the coast established a tradition of international training, career building, and networking in the Atlantic world. Phyllis Martin, *The External Trade of the Loango Coast, 1576–1870: The Effects of Changing Commercial Relations on the*

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Vili Kingdom of Loango (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); David K. Patterson, *The Northern Gabon Coast to 1875* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). For Cabinda, south of Gabon, see also Phyllis Martin, "Family Strategies in Nineteenth-Century Cabinda," *Journal of African History* 28, no. 1 (1987): 65–86.

75 The only exception concerned the rulers of the Gabon Estuary, who signed a treaty with the French in 1839. In the 1950s, their descendants obtained financial compensation from the French for the occupation of their land. Elikia M'Bokolo, *Noirs et blancs en Afrique équatoriale: Les Sociétés côtières et la pénétration française, vers 1820–1874* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1981).

76 Mary Motley, *Devils in Waiting* (London: Longmans, 1959), 42.

77 Jean-Baptiste, *Conjugal Rights*.

78 The best account of a *forestier*'s life in colonial Gabon is the biography of Jean Michonnet transcribed by Christian Dedet, *La Mémoire du fleuve: L'Afrique aventureuse de Jean Michonet* (Paris: Éditions Phébus, 1984).

79 Bernault, *Démocraties ambiguës*; Jeremy Rich, *A Workman Is Worthy of His Meat: Food and Colonialism in the Gabon Estuary* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

80 Max Gluckman famously argued that a single society can contain several cultures, and that anthropologists should study colonial societies as wholes. Max Gluckman, "Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand," *Bantu Studies* 40, no. 1 (1940): 1–30.

81 Luise White, *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 4.

82 Bernault, *Démocraties ambigües*, 40, 46, and 54.

83 Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). Many defined Republican ideals in stark opposition to African polities. Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

84 Gustave Le Bon, *La Psychologie des foules*, 1895; translated as *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Penguin Books, [1896] 1977). See also his *L'Homme et les sociétés—Leurs origines et leur histoire* (Paris: J. Rothschild, 1881); and *Lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1895).

85 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 28.

86 Affaire Léon Bekale, lettres de demande de libération de prison, 1930, ANG/FP 571. On fears of witchcraft performed by relatives and insiders, see Peter Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

87 Florence Bernault, "Suitcases and the Poetics of Oddities: Writing History from Disorderly Archives," *History in Africa* 42 (2015): 269–77.

88 Paul Du Chaillu, *Lost in the Jungle. Narrated for Young People* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1875), 133. An earlier version of the engraving can be found in Paul

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Du Chaillu, *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa: With Accounts of the Manners and Customs of the People, and the Chace [sic] of the Gorilla, Crocodile, Leopard, Elephant, Hippopotamus, and Other Animals* (London: John Murray, 1861), 297.

89 One needs to confirm these interpretations by cross-reading other colonial texts and sources of the time.

90 Psychoanalysts define a "primal scene" as one exposing a child to his or her parents' sexual relations. The child witnesses or fantasizes the scene, and generally interprets it as an act of violence performed by the father. In the case of the gorilla hunt, both meanings apply: French colonialists often imagined the conquest as a violent act of raping Africa. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, 5th ed. (Paris: PUF, 2007), 432–33.

91 "Le Père Jacques et la légende de la main du drapeau du P. D. G," typescript, n.s. Archives CSSP, Fonds Pouchet 2D 60–9-a-4. Official explanations, instead, argued that the hand referred to Bongo's promise that he would leave office with his hands "white" (pure of any crime), and that the nine ropes represented the provinces of the Gabonese nation. See, for instance, the unsigned article "Bongo-PDG 46 ans: Signification de l'emblème du parti 'ouvrons un secret,'" posted on the website Gabon.libre on 8 March 2013, www.gabonlibre.com/bongo-pdg-46-ans-Signification-de-l-embleme-du-parti-ouvrons-un-secret_a20070.html, accessed 10 October 2015.

92 On imperial Europe, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, Routledge, 1995); and Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies*. Only a handful of scholars have applied psychoanalytical interpretations in the colonial terrain: Johannes Fabian, *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*; and Warwick Anderson, Deborah Jenson, and Richard Keller, eds., *Unconscious Dominions: Psychoanalysis, Colonial Trauma, and Global Sovereignties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). Fewer still have done so to approach the experience of the colonized: besides Ferme, *Underneath of Things*, see Hunt, *Colonial Lexicon*; White, *Speaking with Vampires*; and Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

93 Freud defines "projection" as a defense mechanism that attributes to another person some qualities, affects, and desires that the subject refuses to or cannot recognize as his or her own. Laplanche and Pontalis, "Projection," *Vocabulaire*, 343–50.

94 I borrow the expression from Esther Rashkin, *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 19. A clinician and literary analyst, Rashkin warns that historians must respect the accidental and irreducible originality of the individual psyche. She also provides a useful history of the "vexed' relationship between psychoanalysis and cultural studies. On

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psychoanalysis as a "mobile technology" of colonialism, see Anderson, Jenson, and Keller, *Unconscious Dominions*, 1–18.

95 Achille Mbembe, "La colonie, son petit secret et sa part maudite," *Politique africaine*, no. 102 (June 2006): 101–27.

CHAPTER 1 ⁑ A Siren and a Photograph

1 I also decided against Eastern Gabon; as the native place of President Omar Bongo, the region has received considerable investments from the state, a scientific university in Franceville, and the *Transgabonais* railway to Libreville. My fieldwork in Mouila also benefited from Christopher Gray's masterful study *Colonial Rule and Crisis in Equatorial Africa: Southern Gabon ca. 1850–1940* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester, 2002).

2 Florence Bernault, *Démocraties ambiguës en Afrique centrale: Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, 1940–1965* (Paris: Karthala, 1996), 34, 63–64.

3 Classic books on the Bwiti movement include James W. Fernandez, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); André Mary, *Le Défi du syncrétisme: Le Travail symbolique de la religion d'Eboga, Gabon* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1999); and Julien Bonhomme, *Le Miroir et le crâne: Parcours initiatique du Bwete Misoko (Gabon)* (Paris: CNRS: Fondation de la maison des sciences de l'homme, 2006).

4 By using the hyphenated term "belly-womb," I try to give justice to the multilayered meaning of the French term *ventre* used by informants when they talk about Murhumi as the female ancestor whose womb gave birth to their matrilineage (in iPunu, *divumu*). On the historical emergence of *divumu*, see Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 153. See this volume's chapter 6 for a detailed study of the notion of *ventre*.

5 I borrow the expression from Jean Allman and John Parker, *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 6 and 104.

6 "Dibur-Simbu" literally means "the children of Simbu."

7 Interview with Élise Combila, June 2, 2002, Mouila. Names of informants, unless otherwise noted, have been anonymized.

8 Interview with Élise Combila, Mouila, June 1, 2002. The witness was Élise's sister's boyfriend.

9 One cannot hold somebody by the elbow. Male members of the Mwiri association used the expression of "hitting the elbow" (*taper le coude*) for "to curse someone." Interview with Mr. Anatole Nguimbi, Mouila, June 4, 2002.

10 The national average for the poverty rate was 32.7 percent. Ministère de l'économie du commerce, de l'industrie et du tourisme, *Annuaire statistique du Gabon, 2004–2008*, 53. Since 2015, the World Bank does not give local statistics

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