



GESTURE AND POWER

Religion, Nationalism,
and Everyday Performance in Congo

Yolanda Covington-Ward

GESTURE AND POWER

THE RELIGIOUS CULTURES OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN DIASPORA PEOPLE

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RELIGION, NATIONALISM, AND
EVERYDAY PERFORMANCE IN CONGO

Yolanda Covington-Ward

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DMNA Church, Luozi, 2010. Photo by Yolanda Covington-Ward.

To my grandmother Nene and my sister-in-law Dell Olivia Attoh

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Introduction

Gesture and Power

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

me. He responds that: 'It is God that ordered him to come to meet me in that way and that the bizarre shouts are nothing but his conversation with God. It is God that orders him and his apostles to tremble in this way.'" During Morel's visit to Nkamba, Kimbangu, his disciples, and the assembled crowd largely ignore and openly challenge Morel's orders, probing questions, and authority as a representative of the colonial administration. Consequently, Morel advised his superiors in the colonial government for urgent and immediate action to suppress the movement because "the natives will say they have found the God of the Blacks . . . it is certain that he [Kimbangu] could direct the spirit of the natives toward hostility to the White race."²

October 1, 2005. I am staying in the town of Luozi in the westernmost province of Bas-Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The town is the administrative center of Luozi territory, which is a largely rural area covered with green rolling hills, mountains, and wide plots of cassava, soybeans, and other agricultural crops. I am walking down the red dirt road next to the soccer field that doubles as an airplane landing strip, an area locals jokingly refer to as Luozi's airport. My friend Tanu³ and I were invited to attend an event organized by Bundu dia Kongo (BDK), a nationalist movement seeking to address the political and economic marginalization of Kongo people by combining religion, politics, and cultural revitalization.⁴ The larger goal of BDK was to gain autonomy by restoring the precolonial Kongo Kingdom in the present day. Their members were becoming increasingly active in Luozi and other parts of the Lower Congo, as well as Kinshasa. Because of their emphatic rejection of Christianity as the "White man's religion," and advocating their own religion (called BuKongo) instead, BDK members were often in conflict with local churches. This particular event was to honor members of the group killed in 2004 in a confrontation with both local law enforcement and members of the major missionary-founded Protestant church in Luozi. Tanu and I meet a small group of BDK members on the road to the cemetery, where they are singing and waving small green branches. As we join the group, one of the local leaders tells me a young White missionary wanted to see the ceremony and they denied her access. Looking at me fiercely, he says, "We can't reveal all our secrets. But you, you are our sister, so you can come." After the ceremony ends, I am introduced to another man representing the regional leadership of the group. I reach out my hand for a handshake in greeting, and he just looks down at it, unmoving. I stand there with my hand outstretched, completely embarrassed, until Tanu quickly reminds me to use the *bula makonko* gesture, where the hands are cupped and clapped together three times. I clap my

cupped hands. Finally, the man, who I will call Ne Tatu, physically responds in kind, saying, “This is the proper form of greeting in Kongo culture, dating back to the Kongo Kingdom. That is why in Bundu dia Kongo we greet each other in this way. Kongo people need to let go of the White man’s ways and honor their own culture. That is how things will change for us.”

While separated by more than eighty years, both of these incidents illustrate the importance of microinteractions of the body in framing and staking political claims in the Lower Congo. Nationalist movements for people of the Kongo ethnic group have often taken religious forms over the past century. Different ways of using the body in social interaction, with multivalent meanings, play a large role in these nationalist movements. In the case of Kimbangu, the spirit-induced trembling he experienced (caused by the Holy Spirit⁵) started a region-wide Christian prophetic movement that threatened the hegemony of Western missionaries and Belgian colonial administrators alike. This messianic movement, inspired by prophecies of independence and a reversal of the world order, blended Kongo traditional embodied movements and ritual with mission-inspired Protestant Christianity, including hymns, social conduct, and biblical interpretation.⁶ Looking at the colonial suppression of the movement through arrests, interrogations, violence, and imprisonment in penal labor camps, the Belgians, including Morel, clearly believed their authority, in both religious and political matters, was being threatened. Likewise, my own embodied interactions with Bundu dia Kongo reveal the importance of gesture for fostering ethnic nationalist sentiment and taking an active role in everyday struggles for power and authority. This *bula makonko* greeting has become emblematic of the Bundu dia Kongo movement itself as its leaders try to wed a new religion and revitalization of traditional culture with strategies to capture more political power and representation. Moreover, as an African American woman, my own physical body and embodiment became part of a larger discourse of religious prophecy, Kongo identity, and Kongo nationalism during my time in the Congo, especially in 2005–6.

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

In this book I argue that everyday cultural performances in interpersonal encounters are crucial sites for making political claims used to legitimize and

inspire larger social movements. More specifically, I am interested in how the body is used to bolster religious claims to authority that can either challenge or support existing structures of power. Using the BisiKongo ethnic group in the Democratic Republic of Congo as a case study, I illustrate that performances in daily life at the micro level can have a decisive effect on macro-level systems of power and structures of authority, and also be impacted by those same societal structures.⁷ My monograph blends history and ethnography to explore how everyday cultural performances of the body such as gestures (*bimpampa*), dances (*makinu*), and spirit-induced trembling (*zakama*) are used to create, confirm, and contest authority in daily life. I build on previous studies of power and performance in Africa, but I shift the focus from performances framed as separate events (for example, on a stage) to performances in everyday life. This shift is important because it demonstrates how seemingly mundane interpersonal relations at the micro level can have much larger consequences.

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

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

Over the last few decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in the body in anthropology and the social sciences and humanities more generally (Csordas 1999; Farnell 1999; Lock 1993; Strathern 1996; Van Wolputte 2004). Embodiment is one concept that has received increased attention. Following anthropologist Thomas Csordas, I understand *embodiment* as “our corporeality or bodiliness in relation to the world and other people” (2011, 137). Csordas also privileges embodied experiences as the basic starting point for understanding human culture and life (1993, 135). Embodiment encompasses

perception and engagement; feeling with, being in, and using one's body. I shift the focus in studies of embodiment from affective states and feelings to how bodies are actually used in everyday life. A number of terms could be used to describe how people use their bodies. While *movement* captures the act of moving all or a part of the body,⁸ this term is so general that it groups involuntary twitches along with choreographed dances. A term that better captures the phenomenon of interest in this book is *performance*.

Performance is an "essentially contested concept" that has been used in the humanities and social sciences to describe and analyze a wide variety of human activity.⁹ Theories of performance have emerged from anthropology, linguistics, oral interpretation, theater, folklore, and sociology, among other disciplines, all eventually shaping the field of performance studies. While many related definitions of performance exist, performance as a general concept has proven useful for capturing the ongoing processes of social life. I combine several approaches to define *performance* as restored behavior enacted with a heightened awareness, consciousness, and/or intention, with the capacity to transform social realities. I will examine each of the components of this definition in turn.

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

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

Consciousness and/or intention is another part of my understanding of performance. Performance is always conscious and can be but is not always explicitly self-conscious. The definition of consciousness I am using here draws on the work of philosopher John Searle, who sees consciousness as a biological feature of humans and certain animals consisting of inner, subjec-

tive (what-it-feels-like) qualitative states that are first-person experiences. These conscious states, among other characteristics, always have a content, vary in degrees (have a center and periphery), and are mostly intentional (1992). Here, intention is not just about intending to do something, which is one among many forms of intention. Rather, intentionality is about directness or aboutness, so belief, hope, fear, and desire are also forms of intentionality (Searle 1983, 1–3). Thus, performance is intentional in the sense it is directed toward and in engagement with someone or something. Searle also describes consciousness as having a center and a periphery, so a person's attention can be focused on one thing or task, yet the person still remains simultaneously aware of other sensations, feelings, and stimuli. Thus, many states that other scholars might call unconscious Searle locates at the periphery of everyday consciousness. With his approach, unconscious mental states are always potentially conscious (1992). Intentional conscious states function within what Searle calls the “background,”¹⁰ a set of capacities (assumptions, expectations, know-how, ways of doing things) that are not themselves intentional (175–79). Searle's approach to consciousness, especially as being centered in physical bodies, is echoed by his predecessor, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who defined consciousness as “being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” ([1962] 1981, 138). Thus, the body is the means of acting on, understanding, and engaging with the world.

Embracing a broader definition of both consciousness and intention (Searle 1992) allows us to better understand how Kongo conceptions of the body challenge Western ideas of body, mind, and intentionality. Who is actually moving or affecting the body? Studies of Kongo cosmology and conceptions of the self, along with my own research experiences, support the idea that many (although not all) Kongo people think of humans as consisting of three (or more) parts (Jacobson-Widding 1979, 307–24; Laman 1962).¹¹ In one conversation during my field research, the parts were described as *nsuni* or *nitu* (body), *mpeve* (spirit), and *moyo* (soul) (Ne Nkamu Luyindula, September 23, 2005). *Mpeve* is the metaphysical dimension and also means “wind” or “breath” and is present throughout the body (Laman 1962, 1). The Holy Spirit is a powerful, greater *mpeve* that comes to inhabit the body. As Tata Kizole explains, “it is the spirit that animates the person so that they enter into trance” (July 20, 2010). Here, Kongo conceptions of spirit possession suggest a copresence such that otherworldly spirits (whether nature spirits or the Holy Spirit, among others) move the body with varying degrees of awareness by the person who is possessed (Janzen and MacGaffey 1974, 144–45; W. MacGaffey 1983, 70–71). To further complicate matters, Kongo conceptions of witchcraft (*kindoki*) allow for people to use the nonphysical parts of their

selves to harm others in a social unit with either *conscious* or *unconscious* jealousy; willful intention is not needed (W. MacGaffey 1986b, 161). All of this suggests that Kongo conceptions of the self and spirit possession engender a more expansive understanding of intentionality and consciousness that goes beyond Western approaches and views spirits and spirit selves as actors using and affecting physical bodies in everyday life.

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

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

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

elected to the country's national assembly both in 2006 and 2011. Overall, the transformative potential of performance is the most important defining characteristic for this study.

Additionally, to more fully capture its transformative potential, my understanding of performance incorporates everyday interactions as well as performances that are more clearly bounded or set apart from everyday life (that is, on a stage).¹² In this, sociologist Erving Goffman's studies of performances in everyday social interactions have influenced my approach.¹³ Goffman studied performances in everyday encounters, which are largely enacted according to a "working consensus" (1959, 10). In this regard, Goffman's work largely avoids looking at interpersonal encounters as sites of social conflict, as people for the most part stay within their roles, adhering to well-defined scripts (Denzin 2002, 107). I build on Goffman's ideas but refocus attention on the less often studied moments when everyday interactions veer from their norm, creating ruptures and challenges in struggles for power and authority placing the body at the center.

I am looking at specific types of performances I am calling *everyday cultural performances*, which I sometimes also call *embodied performances*. These interchangeable terms are both ways of defining specific bodily movements enacted with a heightened awareness while drawing on culturally and historically grounded restored behavior. These particular performances are very specific units of analysis because they have cultural relevance and significance for Kongo people over time. What I mean is, these cultural performances are embodied ways of being-in and engaging-with the world that people in this region of Central Africa have been enacting for centuries. They are part of a corpus of body techniques, "ways in which from society to society people use their bodies" (Mauss [1934] 1979, 97). French sociologist Marcel Mauss's study of "body techniques" was one of the first to outline how cultural norms of movement that differ from society to society are unconsciously learned. He discusses differences in digging, marching, walking, and other actions of various societies, concluding that each society has its own personal habits, which have ancient histories and are transmitted from adults to children through the process of enculturation. Csordas's concept of "somatic modes of attention" expresses a similar idea.¹⁴ The cupped hand clapping, *bula makonko*, which I mention earlier in this chapter, is one such example of an everyday cultural performance. It has its origins in the everyday greeting and court ritual practices of the precolonial Kongo Kingdom and continues to be used in modern-day Lower Congo but was redefined as a form of spiritual expression and a symbol of group identity in the context of the Bundu dia Kongo movement. Thus, my focus is not on all possible performances of the

body, but on specific ones rooted in the culture and history of the Lower Congo region.

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

By combining Austin's and Butler's concepts of performatives with Goffman's concept of encounters, I coined the term *performative encounters* to describe situations when the body is used strategically in everyday life to transform interpersonal social relationships in meaningful ways, impacting the social and political positions of the people interacting.¹⁵ For performative encounters then, *doing something is doing something more*. In Goffman's studies of social encounters, most encounters reinforce the existing status quo. On the contrary, performative encounters are transformative—they change the existing social relationship in a manner that did not exist before, such

as when handshakes are rejected and greetings are vigorously negotiated; when spirit-induced bodily trembling interrupts the proceedings of a court trial; when a walk down the street is suddenly interrupted by the expectation that you clap when the presidential motorcade passes. These examples and others that I explore demonstrate that some social interactions have much larger consequences than others, illuminating the multiple ways that everyday cultural performances are engaged in the active construction of social life.

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

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

acts as a conduit and plays a critical role in subjectivity and identity on both individual and group levels.

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

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

While focusing on the BisiKongo, *Gesture and Power* has larger implications for humankind in general. It provides a theoretical framework for understanding how the micropolitics of the body in interpersonal encounters can affect macro-level social and political structures. Such a framework can even be applied to our own society, with examples such as the considerable criticism that followed President Obama’s bow to the king of Saudi Arabia in 2009, or the larger impacts of oppressed Black southerners refusing to step off of the sidewalk for White pedestrians in the 1960s (Berrey 2006; Wesley 2009). This study has broader relevance than just for the United States, but for people in societies across the world as it explores both politicized embodiment and how people use religion to both challenge and create social structures. My work also provides a method for examining the interplay of embodiment, spirituality, and power. An analytical approach that examines performative encounters can be applied to examples ranging from the display of spirit possession by Malay women on the shop floors of Japanese facto-

ries (Ong 1987) to baptism and healing as political acts in the Watchtower movement of colonial-era Malawi (Fields 1985). Overall, the body can be a powerful and effective tool for social and political transformation, especially when buttressed by spiritual claims. Bodies, however, are also vulnerable—to dismemberment, disappearances, arrests, floggings, and other forms of physical violence, and even death. My point here is to show that, regardless of the risks, bodies are often used as tools for social change.

Bodies, Performance, and Embodied Histories

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

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

as a way of remembering. How are memories and histories embodied and passed on to others?

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

Bourdieu emphasizes the importance placed on these values being embodied, because in this Kabyle example, the very principle of feminine virtue seen as appropriate for women is most aptly demonstrated by the way in which a woman uses, orients, and moves her body. In this way, the gendered values of Kabyle society are actually embodied by women and men in everyday posture, movement, and life. The significance of values embodied in such a way explains why embodied practices are targeted when people, organizations, and institutions seek to transform the values, belief systems, and behavior of groups of people and individuals alike. This becomes especially clear in situations where institutions (for example, prisons, churches, governments, and moral reform associations) want to "produce" new subjects. The prime

example within my own study is political animation, forced nationalistic singing, and dancing under President Mobutu. The body is targeted precisely because “treating the body as a memory, [institutions] entrust to it in abbreviated and practical, that is, mnemonic, form the fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of the culture. The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness” (1977, 94). Thus, correctives and etiquette reinforce social values and become forms of “an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as ‘stand up straight’ or ‘don’t hold your knife in your left hand’” (94).

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

Along with Bourdieu’s writing, Paul Connerton’s seminal work *How Societies Remember* (1989) has also been very influential on studies of the body across disciplines. Connerton outlines personal, cognitive, and habit memory as the three classes of memory (21) but emphasizes the role of the body in habit memory especially: “In habitual memory the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body” (72). To further distinguish how the body works in the service of memory and history, Connerton differentiates two types of social practice: incorporating practices—intentional or unintentional bodily activity done in the presence of others—from inscribing practices—devices or media used for storing and retrieving information (for example, newspapers, computers, photos) (72–73). Incorporating practices are transmitted through the body, and habitual behavior reminds us that “all habits are affective dispositions; that a predisposition formed through the frequent repetition of a number of specific acts is an intimate and fundamental part of ourselves” (1989, 94). Thus, through the repetition of certain acts laden with cultural

significance, these acts become a part of one's daily routine and the values and meanings associated with these acts unconsciously become a part of one's cultural ethos. "Incorporating practices therefore provide a particularly effective system of mnemonics" (102), meaning that bodily practices can activate and create cultural memories. Connerton thus supports Bourdieu's own assertions about embodied memory and also categorizes different approaches to passing on and storing memory and history.

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

Thus, Bourdieu, Connerton, and Taylor have all made the case that embodied practices are immensely critical to transmitting and activating social values, ideals, and cultural history. Indeed, many scholars working within Africa have either applied their ideas or made similar claims in studies ranging from Anlo-Ewe conceptions of bodily senses in Ghana (Geurts 2002) to bodily comportment in Sierra Leone (M. Jackson 1989) to masked and danced histories in Nigeria (McCall 2000). Attention to embodiment offers another perspective on collective memory, with larger implications for how the history of Africa is written (Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe 1993). My own research in the Congo also supports the importance of embodied performances in everyday life in the Lower Congo. The ways of moving that I learned through my interactions with others are similar to the embodied per-

performances children in the Lower Congo learn in their everyday lives. Along with explicit correctives and directions, children unconsciously imitate the behaviors of adults in their households, schools, markets, community gatherings, and churches. *Gesture and Power* builds on the existing literature by also advocating for the importance of embodied performances in understanding Kongo culture and history. However, I push the research even further by looking not just at what the body represents, but at what the body does, by examining performances in everyday life rather than only in “set-apart” events, and by showing how the meanings and uses of these embodied performances have changed over time, while simultaneously scrutinizing the larger social and political contexts in which they are embedded and engaged. My approach privileges African agency, showing that whether the subject is a rural, illiterate farmer who self-identifies as a prophet in the face of European missionaries or a postindependence violent dictator seeking to quell dissent, everyday cultural performances are key to their engaging with and transforming the world around them. Thus, while the body is indeed a means of passing on memory and history, it is also a means of *challenging, creating, and redefining* memory and history.

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

and between different groups of people. It means focusing on individuals in specific performances as they *use* structure and process and then locating that performance within a larger body of performances and in history, society, and politics” (1991, 37). I take up Drewal’s challenge by exploring the interaction between everyday performances and larger social structures, while also charting the historical development of transformations in the uses and meanings of several Kongo everyday cultural performances in struggles for power and authority.

Everyday Cultural Performances in Kongo Culture and History

Everyday cultural performances acts as an umbrella term to encapsulate the three major types of bodily action that I examine: gestures (bimpampa), dances (makinu), and spirit-induced trembling (zakama) (see table 1.1). Robert Farris Thompson is the preeminent trailblazer in studying Kongo bimpampa and makinu and has inspired my own work in many ways.¹⁹ His approach, however, is largely from an art history perspective, usually in relation to static material objects, paintings, and aesthetic concepts, although his studies *African Art in Motion* (1974), *Le Geste Kongo* (2002), and *Tango: The Art History of Love* (2005) are notable exceptions that also incorporate bodily movement and dance. I build on and expand his research by looking at cultural performances in motion and sociopolitical context. In focusing on the performances themselves and how their meanings, uses, and relationship to authority change over time, I hope to provide a socially and historically situated analysis of Kongo performance practice in the Lower Congo. Next, I briefly explore each of these everyday cultural performances in turn.

First, bimpampa are largely understood as gestures.²⁰ Gesture, as a concept, has been described in a number of ways, with a more common definition being “any kind of bodily movement . . . which transmits a message to the observer” (Thomas 1992, 1). For my own work, I embrace Carrie Noland’s definition of gesture as “the organized forms of kinesis through which subjects navigate and alter their worlds” (2009, 4). Her definition is broad enough to embrace gestures both as habit and as intentional strategy, recognizing the importance of culture and social influence on bodily movement while at the same time illuminating human agency and choice. As such, gestures can be voluntary or involuntary, express feelings or ideas, accompany speech, or have aesthetic or instrumentalist aims. The topic of “gesture” has seen a recent resurgence of interest by scholars in a variety of fields, from history to linguistics to cultural and dance studies (Braddick 2009; de Jorio 2000; Noland and Ness 2008).²¹ Notable among this emerging literature is Carrie Noland’s monograph *Agency and Embodiment* (2009), a groundbreaking theoretical